

REASON, FAITH AND HOMOSEXUAL ACTS

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Discusses Catholic teaching about homosexuality. Explains the philosophical rationale for that teaching. Argues that homosexual activity is wrong, along with all other non-marital sexual activity, because it undermines the goods of marriage.

What the Church Teaches about Homosexual Inclinations

The Church “refuses to consider the person as a ‘heterosexual’ or a ‘homosexual’ and insists that every person has a fundamental identity: the creature of God and, by grace, his child and heir to eternal life.” Each person also has a “sexual identity”: either male or female, man or woman. The Church does not use the term “sexual identity” as some people do, who claim that people have “sexual identities” as homosexuals, heterosexuals, bisexuals, and so forth. Instead, the Church teaches that each male should accept his sexual identity as a man, and each female her sexual identity as a woman; and that means accepting that one is *different* from and *complementary* to—and equal in dignity with—persons of the opposite sex (gender).

The Church has sometimes spoken of “homosexual persons.” Anyone who has a “more or less strong tendency towards” sexual activity with a person or persons of the same sex can be so described. Of course, as is well known, most such persons are *also* “heterosexual persons.” That is to say, most people who engage, or have an inclination to engage, in homosexual activity also engage, or are more or less inclined to engage, in sexual activity with a person or persons of the opposite sex. Very many homosexual persons—persons with homosexual inclinations—marry and have children by their spouse. Not all do, and there are some, relatively quite few, who have a sexual urge but lack the psychophysical capacity for marital intercourse.

The Church observes that in some homosexual persons the homosexual inclination (orientation) comes, it seems, “from a false education, from a lack of normal sexual development, from habit, from bad example, or from other similar causes, and is transitory or at least not incurable.” But the Church also observes that “the number of men and women who have *deep-seated* homosexual tendencies is not negligible,” and that some homosexual persons may be

“definitively such because of some kind of innate instinct or a pathological constitution judged to be incurable.” Acknowledging the last-mentioned class of persons, the Church is well aware of people who “conclude that their tendency is so natural that it justifies in their case homosexual relations within a sincere communion of life and love analogous to marriage, insofar as such homosexuals feel incapable of enduring a solitary life.”

But the Church, today as always, rejects that way of arguing from “nature.” The Christian teaching from the outset has been that no homosexual acts are ever justified, even the acts of someone whose inclination to engage in them is “innate” (that is, present at birth) and, in one sense of the word, “natural.” Accordingly, the Church’s *Catechism* reaffirms that every such inclination, whether innate or pathological, incurable or curable, permanent or transitory, is an *objective disorder*, an *intrinsically disordered* inclination.

The reason why even the most deep-seated homosexual tendency must be called disordered is straightforward. Every such tendency, inclination or orientation “is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil.” Of course, “the particular *inclination* of the homosexual person is not a sin” —for a sin is committed only in a choice. But the inclination is precisely an *inclination to choose* a homosexual act—a sex act with a person of the same sex. And, like every other kind of non-marital sex *act*, any and every homosexual act is a seriously disordered kind of activity which, if freely and deliberately chosen, is a serious sin. An inclination which one cannot choose to pursue without serious moral evil is obviously a disordered inclination. So: “the particular inclination of the homosexual person...is a more or less strong tendency ordered [i.e., directed] toward an intrinsic moral evil, and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an *objective disorder*.” The definitive edition of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* first points out that homosexual *acts* are always “intrinsically disordered” (para. 2357) and then goes on, in the following paragraph, to describe the *inclination* in precisely the same terms: “intrinsically disordered.”

Why the Church’s Teaching about Homosexual Acts and Inclinations is Right

The Church’s teaching about homosexual inclinations is proposed with ample awareness of modern psychological and biological research into the origins of these inclinations. But it does not rely on the judgment of those researchers who are convinced that homosexuality is a “psychiatric disorder.” Nor is it contradicted or challenged or unsettled by the opinion of those who hold that it is *not* a psychiatric disorder. The Church’s teaching about these inclinations rests instead on the Catholic doctrine about the *choice* to engage in homosexual *acts*. This is a *moral* doctrine, a teaching about what is right (or wrong), good (or worthless and harmful), and choice worthy (or sinful).

From its earliest years, the Church has understood its moral doctrine as not only a matter of faith but also fully in line with human *nature*. St Paul teaches clearly about this in his letter to the Romans (*Rom. 2: 14-15*). But Jesus has already made the point by his profound teachings on human sexual identity (*Matt. 19: 4*), and on the marital communion of man and woman which, on the basis of that complementarity of identities, was established “*from the beginning*” (i.e., in the intentions of God the creator of nature) (*Rom. 19: 8*). As Jesus makes clear, this natural communion requires for its integrity not only the sexual intercourse of the spouses (*Matt. 19: 5*), but also the complete and unwavering mastery and overcoming—by everyone, married or unmarried—of every desire for sexual contact or enjoyment outside marriage (*Matt. 5: 27*). To look on anyone with lust is “adultery,” that is, an offense—even by the unmarried—*against marriage*, a relationship both profoundly natural and sustainable only by *moral* aspiration. I shall show, below, why this must be so.

Some of the greatest theologians and philosophers have explained the relationship between human nature, the natural world as a whole, and the truths of morality. Morality concerns not what simply is or is deep-seated or usual, but rather the *good*, and the various kinds of good (goods), which should be sought, chosen, and done. Everything that *should be*, and is choice worthy, is natural and grounded in the givens of human nature. But not everything we find in our nature is a pointer to what is good, choice worthy and reasonable. For example, as St Thomas Aquinas, the master theorist of natural law morality, points out, we all have “a *natural inclination* to follow our bodily feelings and desires even against the good of being reasonable.” This is one of many “natural”—i.e., innate, deep-seated, typical—inclinations which should *not* simply be followed!

Others are found more in some people’s nature than in others’: some people are more inclined to anger, including immoral anger, than others; some are more inclined to greed, some to crippling fear, and so forth. So, as Pope John Paul II teaches, “natural inclinations take on moral relevance only insofar as they refer to the human person and the person’s *authentic fulfillment*...” Aquinas, following a lead from Aristotle’s research and reflections, reminds his readers that homosexual inclinations—e.g. the desire of some men to have sex with other men—arise in some cases from pleasure-seeking which has initiated and sustained a corrupt taste for this sort of behavior, a bad habit, but in other cases from a defective psycho-physical constitution (i.e., from inclinations incipiently present even from conception). The way these inclinations originate in a particular person does not affect the fact that, just insofar as they incline that person towards sex acts with persons of the same sex, they incline not towards but away from authentic fulfillment.

Human fulfillment consists in the actualizing, in the lives of persons and their communities, those basic human goods towards which the first

principles of practical reason—the very foundations of conscience—direct us. Among these basic human goods is the good of marriage. The Church often speaks of the goods of marriage: (1) loving friendship between wife and husband, and (2) procreating and educating any children who may be conceived from the spouses' marital intercourse. They are interdependent goods: this is a friendship sealed by a commitment to exclusiveness and permanence, a commitment of a kind made appropriate by marriage's orientation to the procreation and education of the children of the husband/father and wife/mother; and that raising of children is most appropriately undertaken as a long-term, even lifelong commitment of the spouse-parents. Being interdependent, these goods can also be properly described as two aspects of a single basic human good, the good of marriage itself. In the Church's most explicit teaching on the foundations of its moral doctrine, in which Pope John Paul points to the basic human goods as the first principles of the natural moral law, this single though basic good is called: "the communion of persons in marriage."

The whole Christian teaching on sex has, from the beginning, done no more, and no less, than point out the ways in which *every* kind of sex act, other than authentic marital intercourse, is opposed to the good of marriage. The more distant a kind of sex act is from the marital kind, the more seriously disordered and, in itself, immoral it is.

How do non-marital sex acts oppose the good of marriage? The next few paragraphs sketch one kind of answer to that question. It is only one of many ways in which the question has been answered. It is suggested by one of Aquinas's central teachings about the morality of marital intercourse, an often misunderstood but important and true teaching which the Church itself also upholds.

In Christian marriage the personality, individuality and equality of the spouses is fully respected. The marital communion is not a submerging of the two persons into one. But it is a communion, a bringing-together of their wills in their mutual commitment; of their wills and minds in shared understanding and faith and hope; of their wills, minds and feelings in shared joys, cares, and sadness; and of their wills, minds, feelings and bodies in sexual intercourse. That intercourse, when it is truly marital, enables them to experience and actualize their mutual commitment and communion at all levels of their being: biological, emotional, rational and volitional. It is only truly marital when it has the characteristics of the two-sided good of marriage itself: friendship and openness to procreation. A sexual act is marital only when (1) it is an act of the generative *kind*, that is, culminates in a union of the generative organs in which the wife accepts into her genital tract her husband's genital organ and the seed he thereby gives her; and (2) it is an act of friendship in which each is seeking to

express commitment to and affection for, and the desire to benefit and give marital pleasure to, and share marital pleasure with, the other spouse as the very person to whom he or she is committed in marriage.

These two conditions are also inter-linked. Only an act of the generative kind (in the sense just specified) truly *unites* the spouses at all levels, biologically as well as at the level of feelings and intentions. This is a real biological unity (even if, as is usually the case, the couple in fact cannot, at the time of intercourse, bring about actual generation of new life). For in reproduction a mating pair functions as a single organism. In respect of all other organic functions, from thinking to digesting, each human being is an entirely individual organism. But neither the male nor the female can reproduce; it takes their union in an act of the generative kind to bring about reproduction (if the background conditions of their bodies are in the state required for actual generation). So in an act of the generative kind, whether or not it results on a particular occasion in actual generation, there is more than merely a particular juxtaposition of members and sequence of movements. There is also, and fundamentally, a real (albeit in itself temporary) organic/biological uniting of the pair, so that then and there, in respect of the reproductive function, they constitute one organism. This is the one-flesh unity which Jesus, recalling Genesis, makes foundational to his teaching on marriage, and on sexual desires, choices, and actions in their relation, right or wrong, to marriage understood as the two persons, male and female, in one flesh.

That, in short, is why in marital intercourse a married couple can express their commitment, and can really, not merely in imagination, actualize and experience their marriage. The conditions under which a sexual transaction between spouses can amount to *marital* intercourse are, to repeat, of two kinds. Their chosen behavior must be an act of the generative kind (taken on each occasion as a whole sequence of preparatory, consummatory and confirmatory), and their intentions and wills must also be united in service of the marital good instantiated in their exclusive and permanent commitment to each other in marriage. So a married couple's sexual act is not truly marital if, for example, one or both of the spouses is wishing he or she were doing this with someone else, or is imagining doing so, or is willing to engage in this activity with any attractive person who could bring him or her to orgasmic release.

Think of someone whose frame of mind is: I am willing to do this with some other attractive person, but the only available person at present is my spouse, so I'll do it with him/her. Such a person is disabled by that frame of mind from making and carrying through a truly marital choice to engage in intercourse. In the technical phrase of the theologians, this person is engaging in intercourse for *pleasure alone*. His or her act of intercourse is depersonalized, not an act of marital friendship. That is why the Church teaches that such a

choice is always morally flawed; and in some kinds of instance it is a serious sin against the integrity and authenticity of marriage and marital life.

The good of marriage is an intrinsic good, not a mere means to any other end. But it is also true that the well-being of children greatly depends upon the marital commitment of their parents. As that commitment tends to be strengthened by marital intercourse which respects the integrity and authenticity—the purity—of their marriage, so too it is weakened at its heart by intercourse which is not truly marital, but rather expressive of self-indulgence. So anyone who thinks clearly, has the well-being of children at heart, and recognizes the good of marital communion, will judge wrongful every kind of sex act which is not truly marital.

And there is another, not unrelated, kind of reason for the very same moral judgment. One cannot engage in truly marital intercourse if one is willing, even conditionally willing, to engage in this sort of behavior (deliberate sexual stimulation towards orgasm) outside marriage or in one or other of the non-marital ways. Unless and until one reverses it by repenting of it, such a willingness so deforms one's will that one is disabled from engaging in a free, rational, sentient and bodily act which would *really* express, actualize, foster, and enable one's spouse to experience the good of marriage and of one's own commitment (self-giving) in marriage. Of course, one may imagine that one's act, though performed with this divided, impure willingness, is still an expression and experiencing of the good of marriage. But this can be no more than an illusion, which rational reflection punctures. And a spouse who knows or senses that the other spouse is *willing*—even conditionally or hypothetically—to do this kind of thing outside (before, during, or after) marriage is likely to experience the act as *not* an expression and actualization of *marital* commitment. That is why such a willingness saps marriage at its core.

So: nobody who is or wishes to be a spouse, and no one who considers it reasonable for people to become spouses, can judge it reasonable for human beings to seek sexual satisfaction in an extra-marital way. For approval of extra-marital sex acts, even of other people's acts or of the sex acts of people who could never marry, has two implications: (1) It implies that anyone and everyone *should* approve of such acts, i.e., should regard them as kinds of acts not excluded by reasonableness; and (2) it is a form of conditional willingness to engage in such acts. Therefore, it entails (necessarily implies) also (3) that married couples, spouses, should approve of and be conditionally willing to perform non-marital acts. But such a conclusion is directly opposed to the good of marriage, of the spouses as committed friends, and of any children who may have resulted from their marital union and be dependent upon the purity which is near the heart of its stability and its appropriateness as the context for nurture and education.

Homosexual sex acts, even between people who could never consummate a marriage and who wish, at the time, to be committed to each

other in a lifelong friendship, can never be marital. To judge them morally acceptable—to condone them—is opposed to the good of marriage, a basic human good. So they cannot reasonably be judged morally acceptable.

The relationship of same-sex couples can never be marriage. The easiest way to see this is to ask oneself *why* same-sex sex acts should be restricted to couples rather than three-somes, four-somes, etc., or rather than couples or other groups whose membership rotates at agreed intervals. Nothing in the “gay ideology” can, or even seriously tries, to explain or defend the exclusiveness or permanence of same-sex partnerships or their limitation to couples. The practice and experience of homosexual relationships is dramatic confirmation that, once one departs from the institution of *marriage* as a committed, exclusive and permanent sexual relationship between a woman and a man, there are no solid grounds for making one’s sexual relationships even *imitate* real marriage. As careful large-scale studies have shown, and “anecdotal” historical testimony amply confirms, there are practically no homosexual couples, even long-term couples, to whom sexual exclusivity as a principle, and real mutual commitment to it in practice, make any sense.

A Final Word on “Sexual Orientation”

The shifty phrase “sexual orientation” is an important obstacle to clear thinking. It spreads darkness over the law and popular discussions by hiding the distinction between emotional inclinations, dispositions, or interests and actual or conditional *willingness*. Willingness is, or results from, a choice—perhaps a conditional choice (“I am willing to do this if I find someone attractive and a safe opportunity..”), perhaps an unconditional and immediate choice. Emotional inclinations, dispositions, and interests, on the other hand, do not engage one’s moral responsibility unless they result from earlier choices or are allowed to lead one to such a choice.

The phrase “sexual orientation” is radically equivocal. Particularly as used by promoters of “gay rights,” the phrase ambiguously assimilates two things which that [the law] hitherto has carefully distinguished: (I) a psychological or psychosomatic disposition inwardly orienting one *towards* homosexual activity; (II) the deliberate decision so to orient one’s public *behavior* as to express or *manifest* one’s active interest in and endorsement of homosexual *conduct* and/or forms of life which presumptively involve such conduct laws or proposed laws outlawing “discrimination based on sexual orientation” are always interpreted by “gay rights” movements as going far beyond discrimination based merely on A’s belief that B is sexually attracted to persons of the same sex. Instead (it is observed), “gay rights” movements interpret the phrase as extending full legal protection to *public* activities intended specifically to promote, procure and facilitate homosexual *conduct*.

St. Paul's reflections on homosexual vice, in *Romans* 1: 19-28, make it clear that what matters is not inclinations but the will (the debased *mind*) and chosen conduct. With minds darkened, their inclinations mastering their reason, "women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way men...committed shameless acts with men..." (*Rom.* 1: 21, 26-28).

Whether we are hearing Paul in faith, or using reason's own resources to clarify our consciences and rectify our wills, we should be clear that natural intercourse is not simply heterosexual. Rather, it is *marital*. That is, it is sexually complementary (heterosexual), and in each act of spousal intercourse enables the man and the woman, wife and husband, to experience, express and actualize together—physically, emotionally, and intellectually—both of the two essential marital goods: procreativity, and a friendship which is exclusive and permanently committed.

Notes

1. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, 1 October 1986, sec. 16.
2. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (revised edition 1997), 2333, 2393.
3. *Ibid.*, 2333, 2393.
4. *Ibid.*, 2333, 2393.
5. Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration on Certain Questions concerning Sexual Ethics*, 29 December 1975, sec. 8.
6. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (rev. ed), 2558.
7. *Declaration on Certain Questions concerning Sexual Ethics*, sec. 8
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, sec. 3.
10. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (rev. ed.), 2358.
11. The Church's documents on the matter treat all these words as referring to the same thing.
12. *Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, sec. 3.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*
15. See Finnis, *Aquinas* 93.
16. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Veritatis Splendor*, 6 August 1993, sec. 50 (emphasis added).
17. See *Veritatis Splendor*, secs. 13, 48 ("the primordial moral requirement of loving and respecting the person as an end and never as a mere means also implies, by its very nature, respect for certain fundamental goods"); 50; also 78, 79.
18. E.g., *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2333.

19. Ibid. 2201, 2249.

20. *Veritatis Splendor*, sec. 13. St. Thomas Aquinas long ago identified this as a single though complex primary (basic) human good: see John Finnis, *Aquinas: Moral, Political and Legal Theory* (Oxford University Press, 1998) 82, 143.

21. See decree of the Holy Office against the errors of the laxists, 2 March 1679, no. 9.

22. See Finnis, *Aquinas* 149.

23. This line of thought is explored in depth and detail in Finnis, “The Good of Marriage and the Morality of Sexual Relations: Some Philosophical and Historical Observations”, *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 42 (1997) 97 at 119-126. See also pp. 126-134, exploring the reasons why spouses who know that, though they have not tried to prevent conception, they cannot conceive (i.e., are naturally infertile or have become sterile, e.g., as a result of age) can nevertheless engage in authentically marital acts of the reproductive *kind*, i.e., in marital intercourse.

24. See *ibid.*, pp. 123-124, especially notes 108, 131-133.

24. John Finnis, “Law, Morality, and Sexual Orientation,” *Notre Dame Law Review* 69 (1994) 1049-76 at 1053-4.

