

COURAGE: A CHASTITY PROGRAM FOR PERSONS WITH SAME SEX ATTRACTIONS

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Presents Catholic teaching on homosexuality and discusses the nature and growth of Courage, an orthodox Catholic support organization for people with same-sex attraction to help them to live chaste lives. Also discusses Encourage, a similar group for parents whose children have embraced the “gay lifestyle.”

In this paper, I wish to present a serious program for the practice of chastity. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to state the authentic teaching of the Catholic Church on the objectively grave immorality of all homogenital acts, and on the very inclination to homogenital acts as an objective disorder. This means that persons with same sex attractions ought to remain or to become chaste in their daily lives. This, however, is a real challenge for persons with same sex attractions in our secular culture. In the media one hears and reads accounts of homosexual groups proclaiming that the active homosexual lifestyle is just as natural and normal as heterosexual marriage. Individuals in this way of life call themselves “gay” or “lesbian,” because they believe that their erotic attraction to persons of the same sex is the identifying quality of their personalities. “I am gay” or “I am lesbian” connotes a definite understanding of self and others. It means “I have always been this way,” and “I will always be this way.” The person may also think, “I intend to find a lover with whom to settle down,” or “I will be faithful to my lover as a husband is faithful to his wife, or wife to husband.” The person may also insist that, “I want to promote the gay lifestyle.”

When large numbers of men and women embrace this view of life they become organized into a political movement, the Gay Rights Movement, which makes claims against local, state, and federal governments for the same entitlements as those of traditional marriage.

In many of our cities and states gay rights bills have already been passed; in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and in Western Europe the homosexual lifestyle is increasingly accepted as an alternative way of expressing

sexual desires. Powerful media voices like ABC's *Ellen* or NBC's *Will and Grace* declare that same-sex attractions are just as normal and natural as the attraction one may have to a person of the opposite sex. In the near future we may witness legislation and judicial action that makes so called homosexual marriages legal. It would be foolish, however, to believe that the principal obstacle to the communication of Catholic truth concerning homosexuality was the opposition of the Gay Rights Movement. As Patrick Fagan of the Heritage Foundation writes, "The mainstream of 'heterosexual America' today is now perilously close in its attitudes and its orientations to matching the symptoms that lie at the very heart of the homosexual affective disorder: the inversion into the self."

While refusing to accept responsibility for the meaning and consequences of sexual genital activity, namely, the giving of self to the other in marriage and the procreation of children, many heterosexual Americans consider their contraceptive sexual acts as forms of self-gratification to which they are entitled. Many have adopted the culture of inverted sexuality—inverted upon self. Thus, contracepting heterosexuals are not significantly different in their mind-set than persons engaged in same-sex genital acts. It is not surprising, then, that they view homosexual activity casually as merely a cultural variant of human sexuality.

It is in this social and political climate that I present (1) the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church concerning the condition of homosexuality and the morality of homosexual acts; and (2) the spiritual support system called Courage which was formed in New York City in September, 1980 to help Catholic men and women with same-sex attractions to practice interior chastity, i.e., to seek union with Christ as the goal of all their actions .

The Official Teaching of the Church

The teaching of the Church is found in three documents from the *Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics* (1975); *Letter to the Roman Catholic Bishops of the World Concerning the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* (1986); and *Responding to Legislative Proposals on Discrimination against Homosexuals* (1992). All three documents state that all homosexual acts are seriously immoral by their very nature. The documents of 1986 and 1992 also state that the very condition of homosexuality is an objective disorder, which means in ordinary language that there is something wrong with an inclination which may lead one to an act which is always seriously sinful in the order of reality. To be sure, a person may be free of grave guilt in such an action because of ignorance or lack of due freedom in the will; nonetheless, such an action remains seriously sinful.

The Sources of the Teaching of the Church

The above Vatican documents, however, are based upon the Church's understanding of Divine Revelation and the Natural Moral Law. First, we need to see that Divine Revelation includes more than the books of the Bible. The spoken word of God, Divine Oral Tradition, was the source out of which came the written Scriptures of Old and New Testaments.

To understand Divine Oral Tradition draw a circle in your mind, and name it Divine Tradition; then cut out one portion of the circle for the Old Testament's books and another portion for the books of the New Testament then regard the rest of the circle as representing the Spoken Word of God, some of which is not written down but abiding in the official teaching authority of the Church (i.e., in the pope and bishops of dioceses throughout the world whenever they speak together on matters of Faith and Morals).

This distinction between Divine Oral Tradition and Holy Scripture is all important, because it was the living teaching power of the pope and bishops that determined which books were truly inspired by the Holy Spirit, and which were not. In the first few centuries of Christianity there were writings which some thought were inspired, like the Gospel of Thomas and the Epistle of Paul and Thecla, but the Church did not number them among the books of the New Testament. Since the Scriptures belong to the Church, she claims the right to interpret them whenever there is a matter of Faith and Morals. Accordingly, I present scriptural references concerning human sexuality and homosexuality as they have been understood by the Divine Oral Tradition within the Church.

In the first chapter of Genesis it is recorded that God created man and woman, and blessed them, and told them to increase and multiply. (vv 27-28) In the poetic description of the creation of Eve in the second chapter it is said that a man should leave father and mother and cleave to his wife, and they would become two in one flesh. (18-24) In the New Testament Jesus reaffirms the two meanings of the passages in Genesis, namely, the two in one flesh union of man and woman, and the procreation of the human race through marriage and family. (Matthew, 19: 1-9) The same two in one flesh theme is found in Ephesians (5: 21-33) which reveals the nobility of marriage by comparing the union of man and wife with the union of Christ and his Church.

The meaning of marriage as having two purposes, the permanent commitment of man and woman and the procreation of children, is found from Genesis to Revelation; it is also reaffirmed in the writings of the Fathers of the Church, particularly in St. Augustine. It is significant that whenever the major prophets and Hosea desired to express God's love for Israel and for the individual they used the symbol of man's love for woman. This theme is also expressed in the New Testament, particularly in Revelation and Ephesians 5: 21-33.

Anyone who accepts the above teaching of the Church on marriage may use it as an argument against homosexual unions. That is what I intend to do. The major premise may be expressed in this way: From Divine Oral Tradition and Holy Scripture it is clear that the two purposes of human sexual activity are the two in one flesh union of husband and wife and the procreation of children. But homosexual activity, as such, cannot fulfill either of the two purposes of human sexual activity. Therefore, it is always seriously immoral.

Natural Moral Law

I turn now to the need for an argument based upon our human nature, because many have rejected Divine Revelation. The most persuasive argument that I have found is that of Michael Pakaluk. He holds that sex is special, because it is a sign of the union of the “*persons* who engage in sex. The sign is the union of bodies, and the sign signifies the union of persons.” Thus, it can be said that “when a man and a woman engage in sex, the union of their bodies signifies the union of their very selves.”

The meaning of sexual intercourse as signifying a union of persons is based upon objective reality; it is independent of our human choices. One may not ignore its meaning, as many unmarried couples do. Heterosexual intercourse expresses a union of persons in two ways: (1) the complete bodily union of man and woman, in which each is within the body of the other—something not possible in any kind of homosexual genital intercourse; and (2) the reproductive character of such intercourse, which tends to produce offspring who combine the characteristics of husband and wife, and thus promotes the unity of the spouses. Homosexual intercourse has no such power.

Personal Responsibility For Same-Sex Genital Acts

So far I have summed up the arguments from Divine Revelation and Natural Moral Law concerning the grave immorality of same-sex genital acts. The question now arises concerning the knowledge and freedom of a person who engages in homosexual activity. Generally, persons engaging in homogenital acts are aware that these acts are contrary to the virtue of chastity, although some may be in inculpable ignorance because of the degrading culture in which they live. Some, however, may be guilty of not willing to learn the truth concerning the moral evil of such behavior because they are afraid of living the chaste life. Still others refuse to accept the teaching of the Church because they regard it as no longer relevant to our contemporary world.

Another important factor contributing to the failure of many to move away from an active homosexual lifestyle is sexual addiction, particularly among

men. Sexual addiction has many expressions, both heterosexual and homosexual. When one reads in periodicals or newspapers about individuals having hundreds or thousands of homosexual encounters the reader may surmise that the person is addicted to such behavior, i.e., he has lost control over such behavior.

Since I will suggest a pastoral program to help such persons, it is sufficient to note here that usually persons with same-sex attractions are responsible for their actions and for using the means necessary to develop the virtue of chastity.

Objective Disorder

There is, however another issue that enters into our understanding of homosexuality, and that is how Church documents consider the inclination itself, as distinct from acts. In the 1986 statement of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith concerning the pastoral care of homosexual persons it is said that “although the particular inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin, it is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil; and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder.”

The reasoning of the Sacred Congregation is based on the truth that the inclination leads the person to do an act which is always immoral, and that is why it is called an objective disorder. An example will explain why it is called such. In a public forum it was objected that when a man lusts for a woman, or a woman for a man, that is also an objective disorder. I responded that such lust was a serious sin, but not an objective disorder, because the inclination of man toward woman, *et vice versa*, is natural, good, and God given. It is one of the elements that leads to marriage, and in marriage it finds its proper place, becoming an expression of the sacrament of matrimony.

Some Catholic homosexual organizations, however, like Dignity, have objected to the idea that sexual inclinations toward persons of one's own sex should be regarded as a disorder, because they consider the inclination natural, and so called monogamous unions by persons of the same sex as a normal variant of human sexuality.

Having given the teaching of the Church on homosexuality, I turn now to Courage as a practical program for living a chaste life.

Courage

Aware as we are that many persons have difficulty living a chaste life in a sex-saturated culture, it becomes even more difficult for individuals with same-sex attractions to avoid the enticements of the gay milieu, especially when

such persons have little or no support from their environment. Realizing that such was the case, the late Terence Cardinal Cooke from the Archdiocese of New York suggested to Father Benedict Groeschel, CFR, that a spiritual support group should be formed to help men and women with same-sex attraction to lead a chaste life. The Cardinal asked me to organize and direct a group initially of five men in September, 1980.

The new group grew very gradually during the first two years. During this period it was proposed that the men write out their goals and purposes without any clerical intervention. The result was the "Goals of Courage," which are essentially a spiritual program for the practice of chastity. It was at this time that the little group received a name from one of its members who subsequently died of AIDS: "Courage."

By 1982, thanks to a feature article by Anne Buckley in *Catholic New York*, the membership of Courage increased significantly. About the same time Philadelphia formed a group, and in quick succession groups in Boston, Toronto, Vancouver, B.C., and Washington, D.C. came into existence. By 1989, Canada and U.S.A. Courage had the first annual Courage conference in Riverdale, a suburb of New York City.

To have more effective communication among the units in Canada and the United States a newsletter began in New York in 1986. In the nineties, Courage continued to expand in both North America and overseas. By spring 1999 Courage was found in thirty dioceses of the United States and six in Canada, with small groups in England, Northern Ireland, Ireland, Poland, the Philippines, New Zealand, and Australia. In other American dioceses things are in the planning stage.

Encourage

As Courage became better known through the annual conferences, newsletter, and e-mail, it began to receive urgent calls for help from distressed parents whose grown sons or daughters had embraced the gay lifestyle, or were determined to do so. These parents were concerned about the welfare of their grown children who in most instances resist their parents, and often abandon the Catholic Faith. Thus, a spiritual support group for such parents and relatives came into existence about ten years ago. Called Encourage, it exists in seven regions of the United States and Canada.

While parents in Encourage pray that their sons or daughters will abandon the homosexual life style and return to the practice of their Faith, they are conscious of their own need for spiritual support. They need to share their sorrow concerning the paths taken by their grown children with other parents suffering in the same way. Those parents who have teenage sons or daughters

who claim to be homosexual should take a different approach. They should not assume that their child is already deeply entrenched in a homosexual lifestyle. Professional counseling in accord with Church doctrine is called for, together with spiritual counseling by priests who support magisterial teaching. Again, all the parents in Encourage need help for themselves, as well as their children. Since 1996, moreover, Courage/Encourage has made use of the internet and e-mail to bring its message of hope to all parts of the world. Since 1998 Courage has had a web page in Boston: <http://world.std.com/courage>. More recently Courage members have formed what may best be described as an internet e-mail chapter, involving our web page and communications among the members. For further information contact Christina Nair, Courage Central Office e-mail: NYCourage@aol.com

Notes

1. John Harvey, O.S.F.S. *The Truth About Homosexuality* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1996), Chap. 8.
2. "A Culture of Inverted Sexuality," *The Catholic World Report*, Nov. 1998, 63.
3. *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, Section 9, in Austin Flannery, O.P., ed., Vatican Council II: *The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Northport, N.Y.: Costello, 1975).
4. See *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, Sections 48-51, in Flannery, *ibid*.
5. Michael Pakuluk, "Why is Homosexual Activity Morally Wrong?" in "Homosexuality: Challenges for Change and Reorientation," *J. of Pastoral Counseling*, Vol. 28, 53.
6. Harvey, 26-28, concerning spiritual support systems for sexual addicts.
7. Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration on Homosexuality*, Section 3.

Appendix

The Five Goals of Courage:

1. To live chaste lives in accordance with the Roman Catholic Church's teaching on homosexuality.
2. To dedicate our entire lives to Christ through service to others, spiritual reading, prayer, meditation, individual spiritual direction, frequent attendance at Mass, and the frequent reception of the sacraments of Penance and the Holy Eucharist.
3. To foster a spirit of fellowship in which we may share with one another our thoughts and experiences and so ensure that none of us will have to face the problems of homosexuality alone.
4. To be mindful of the truth that chaste friendships are not only possible but necessary in celibate Christian life and to encourage one another in forming and sustaining them.
5. To live lives that may serve as good examples to others with homosexual difficulties.

