

LGBTQ Issues & Catholic Doctrine

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After my Values Clarification post on July 3rd, a number of people have asked me for a clarification about Catholic teaching about LGBTQ issues past and present. By way of response, here is my brief summary...

The document *On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* was a pastoral letter authored by the Catholic Church's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) and delivered in Rome on October 1, 1986 by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (1927 - 2022), who became Pope Benedict XVI in 2005, and Archbishop Alberto Bovone (1922 - 1988), then Undersecretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Here are the key affirmations in the CDF document: "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."

Six years later, the Catechism of the Catholic Church was promulgated by Pope John Paul II (1920 - 2005) on October 11, 1992, the 30th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council (1962 - 1965). The Catechism states that sexual activity between members of the same sex is a grave sin against chastity and that homosexual attraction is objectively disordered. However, the Catechism also states that homosexuals "must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity."

On November 14, 2006, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) issued their own document *Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care*. "Because of both Original Sin and personal sin, moral disorder is all too common in our world," the document stressed and continued, "there are a variety of acts, such as adultery, fornication, masturbation, and contraception, that violate the proper ends of human sexuality. Homosexual acts also violate the true purpose of sexuality. They are sexual acts that cannot be open to life. Nor do they reflect the complementarity of man and woman that is an integral part of God's design for human sexuality."

In March 2021, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith said that the Church cannot bless same-sex relationships because "God cannot bless sin". On January 25, 2023, in an interview with the Associated Press, Pope Francis stressed that "being homosexual is not a crime. It is not a crime." But he then clarified his statement by adding "but it is a sin" because sexual actions outside of a heterosexual marriage are sinful actions.

Then on December 18, 2023, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published *Fiducia supplicans*, a declaration allowing Catholic priests to bless people who are not considered to be married by the Church, including same-sex couples. In a later clarification, it was made very clear that same-sex marriage is not considered a marriage.

Well, although not everyone in the Church may appreciate it, our understanding of human sexuality – with its biological, emotional, psychological, relational, and spiritual dimensions — has

developed historically and it continues to develop. Official Church teachings, sooner or later, must also be adapted to new understandings. We observe. We judge. And then we must act.

Fortunately, not everyone in Church leadership is theologically time-bound in an old anthropology. A number of Western European Catholic bishops have clearly begun to call for changes in Catholic doctrine about human sexuality. Some examples: Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, S.J. (born 1958) of Luxembourg argues that "the sociological-scientific foundation of Catholic teaching on lesbian and gay people and acts is no longer correct." It is, he believes, "time for a fundamental revision of the doctrine." Bishop Helmut Dieser (born 1962) of Aachen, Germany said in an interview with the German paper Deutsche Welle on November 8, 2022: "Same-sex feelings and love are not an aberration, but a variant of human sexuality." Similar statements have been made by Cardinal Reinhard Marx (born 1953), the Archbishop of Munich and Freising and head of the committee for social issues at the German Bishops' Conference. "The catechism is not set in stone. One may also question what it says," Cardinal Marx told the weekly magazine Stern in an interview published March 31, 2022. He stressed that "Homosexuality is not a sin.... LGBTQ+ people are part of creation and loved by God, and we are called upon to stand against discrimination."

These bishops insist that Catholic leadership must acknowledge and accept historical and scientific understandings of human sexuality and formulate doctrines that reflect such an understanding.

Large majorities of Catholics in Western Europe support legal same-sex marriage. In the United States, according to the Pew Research Center, more than 60 percent of U.S. Catholics now support same-sex marriage. U.S. Catholics, in fact, have supported same-sex marriage since 2011. I know a few U.S. bishops who are not at all happy about that. But then, a May 2022 Gallup poll found that 71% of Americans supported same-sex marriage, and the 2022 American Values Atlas by Public Religion Research Institute found that 69% of Americans supporting same-sex marriage. And in fact, a growing number of organized religious groups in the United States have issued statements officially welcoming LGBTQ people as members and extending marriage rites to them.

Sharing these thoughts with a friend, he said "OK but what does the Bible say?" Well, I suggested that biblical texts need to be interpreted in an historical-critical fashion: interpreting biblical documents in the light of their contemporary environment when they were first composed. Historical-critical scholars stress today that the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament texts never really understood something that today is called the "homosexual orientation," because it was simply taken for granted that EVERYONE was heterosexual.

I would suggest that searching for biblical texts about what today is called the "homosexual orientation" is an anachronism. It would be just like searching for biblical texts about the best kind of cellphone or computer one should buy.

Biblical passages often used to condemn homosexuality were actually based on the old and false assumption that all human beings are naturally only heterosexual. That biblical assumption is now scientifically proven to be incorrect. Contemporary sexual anthropology recognizes sexual orientation as an intrinsic dimension of human nature.

What is "natural" in sexual activity will vary depending, for example, on whether a person's natural sexual orientation is heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual.

Homosexual acts are natural for people with a homosexual orientation just as heterosexual acts are natural for people with a heterosexual orientation.

We do grow in our knowledge and understanding about human identity, and that growth has major theological, anthropological, and ethical implications.

For further reading, I recommend two books by my Leuven-educated friend Todd A. Salzman and his colleague Michael G. Lawler from Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska. The first came out in 2015: *Catholic Theological Ethics: Ancient Questions, Contemporary Responses*. Todd and Michael's most recent book has just come out: *Pope Francis, Marriage, and Same-Sex Civil Unions, Foundations for the Organic Development of Catholic Sexual Doctrine*. Excellent books for your local or parish library.

- Jack

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