Homosexuality – An Evaluation and Pastoral Approach

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Homosexuality, or Same Sex Attraction (SSA), is an issue commonly encountered in pastoral situations. A correct evaluation is indispensable for a correct pastoral approach. Theories proposing that one is “born that way” have now been largely discredited. The most recent scientific data reveals that it is much more likely to be caused by nurture or environment than genetics. Medical research also highlights the grave dangers of an active homosexual lifestyle. Church teaching clearly delineates the difference between the homosexual orientation and the homosexual act. The latter is always objectively disordered whereas a man may have a homosexual orientation and be living a chaste life. Chaste friendships are vital for the homosexual person and a support group such as Courage can provide valuable assistance. Reorientation therapy has given positive results for those determined to change. A priest who is properly informed about same sex attraction is thus able to offer invaluable pastoral support.
Homosexuality is an important pastoral theme being variously encountered in apostolate, counseling, spiritual direction and the sacrament of reconciliation. Ignorance about its cause, incidence and aetiology is often coupled with a lack of knowledge of Church teaching. This article will give the reader a broad grounding in the latest scientific research on homosexuality, provide a moral evaluation and finally outline some useful pastoral strategies to assist those ministering to homosexual persons.

DEFINITION

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that “homosexuality refers to relations between men or between women who experience an exclusive or predominant sexual attraction toward persons of the same sex.”¹ It is noteworthy that the sexual attraction needs to be exclusive or predominant not simply a passing or fleeting phase. Also being attracted in a non-sexual way and enjoying the company of male friends does not signify homosexuality as the attraction must be of a sexual nature.

HOMOSEXUALITY AND “SAME SEX ATTRACTION” (SSA)

Homosexuality is also known as same sex attraction (SSA).² The terms will be used inter-changeably here but increasingly the term same-sex attraction is preferred. Cardinal Ratzinger reminds us that “the human person, made in the image and likeness of God, can hardly be adequately

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2357. (Henceforth cited as ‘CCC’). Homosexuality is usually recognizable by three signs: “(1) a persistent erotic tendency to persons of the same sex [a temporary or transient attraction is also possible—but SSA and the term homosexual are usually used of an enduring attraction]; (2) an insensitivity to persons of the other sex as far as physical attraction is concerned [sometimes the insensitivity extends to the broader psychological order]; (3) a positive distaste for physical relations with persons of the other sex.” (Fr John Harvey, O.S.F.S., Same Sex Attraction: Catholic Teaching and Pastoral Practice, General Editor Father Gabriel B. O’Donnell, O.P., Director of the Catholic Information Service, Knights of Columbus Supreme Council, 2007).

² This article will focus on male same-sex attraction. Same-sex attraction in females, commonly termed as “lesbianism,” is another important pastoral theme but is sufficiently distinct to merit a separate appraisal.
described by a reductionist reference to his or her sexual orientation.”

We do not normally call a person “a heterosexual” neither should we label another “a homosexual”. Every person, regardless of their sexual orientation, is first and foremost a child of God and much more than just their sexual orientation.

HOW SHOULD WE TREAT PEOPLE WITH HOMOSEXUALITY?

They must be accepted with ‘respect, compassion, and sensitivity.’ Respect because they are our brothers, compassion as the homosexual orientation is often a heavy cross to carry and sensitivity because at times they are victims of discrimination, injustice and even violence. For this reason the Catechism states that ‘every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided.’ Ridicule is often common and perhaps finding their situation amusing can be a sign of indifference and a lack of real concern for our brothers.

INCIDENCE OF HOMOSEXUALITY

Just how many people are homosexual? The figures are not always readily available and in most countries such as the Philippines no reliable data exists. An educated guess would tend to over-estimate the true incidence. An accepted figure in the United States of America is that 2-3 % of the male population is gay.

WHAT IS THE CAUSE OF HOMOSEXUALITY?

In many conditions there is the so-called ‘nature or nurture’ debate with nature implying that homosexuality is in the genes and one is ‘born that way’ and nurture referring to a condition being caused by our nurturing and the situation in which we grew up. Scientific evidence shows that the homosexual person is not born that way. There is no single genetic cause for homosexuality and the elusive “gay gene” has never been found

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4 CCC, n. 2358.
5 Ibid.
despite many claims to the contrary.\textsuperscript{7} Such attempts to prove the existence of a gay gene may be politically based because people are more likely to respond positively to demands for changes in the laws and religious teaching when they believe sexual attraction to be genetically determined and unchangeable. If homosexuality was in the genes then we would expect to see monozygotic twins identical in their sexual attraction but this is generally not so. No obvious hormonal cause has been identified. Overall there is no scientific consensus on the cause of the homosexual inclination.

Emotions and life experiences are thought to play a role in the formation of the normal sexual identity although it is not known exactly in what way. Typical experiences of homosexual males may include:\textsuperscript{8}

1. \textit{Sexual abuse by an older homosexual male}
2. \textit{Poor relationships with fathers and/or mothers}
3. \textit{Peer labeling during a formative childhood period}

\textbf{MORAL EVALUATION OF HOMOSEXUALITY}

After briefly reviewing the current data on homosexuality, it will be helpful to attempt a moral evaluation of homosexuality to enable us to make suitable pastoral proposals. The evaluation of homosexuality presents a special challenge in our world of today as “there are many forces in our society that promote a view of sexuality in general, and of homosexuality in particular, not in accord with God’s purpose and plan for human sexuality.”\textsuperscript{9} Even many ‘Catholic’ groups would present that homosexuality is completely harmless, if not a good thing, representing a legitimate sexual alternative and that the teaching of the Catholic Church is oppressive and unscientific. Such groups promote the fundamental freedom of the person to live according to their sexual orientation, an

\textsuperscript{7} Catholic Medical Association, “Homosexuality and Hope”, Considerations I, 1. Hereafter ‘CMA, “Homosexuality...”’ available at www.cathmed.org/publications/homosexuality.html. In its correspondence to the American Medical Association, the NARTH group reported that “there is no recognized researcher in this field who claims that homosexuality is simply inborn” (See www.narth.com/docs/correctionletter3.html).

\textsuperscript{8} NARTH database, www.narth.com

orientation ‘they were born with’. Joseph Ratzinger, the then Prefect for the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, wrote that concerning homosexuality the Church’s teaching “does not limit but rather defends personal freedom and dignity realistically and authentically understood.”

**CHURCH TEACHING ON HOMOSEXUALITY**

There is a difference between the homosexual *orientation* and the homosexual *act*. A person may have the homosexual orientation through no fault of his own and strive to live a chaste life. Here the homosexual orientation or inclination is obviously not in itself sinful. However the homosexual act is objectively sinful. It is always disordered as it is not open to life, and does not respect the complementarity of the sexes. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that “tradition has always declared that homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered. They are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved.”

This distinction between orientation and act is a very helpful one. It should be born in mind in pastoral work. A man may have the homosexual orientation but may be living a chaste life. Alternatively, where a male is pursuing an active homosexual lifestyle it would be useful for them to know the risks inherent in such activities.

**HEALTH RISKS OF HOMOSEXUALITY**

The health risks of gay sex are well documented although scarcely mentioned in the public debate. They can be characterised as follows:

- Increased risk of infections- including HIV/AIDS, Human Papillomavirus (HPV), Viral Hepatitis B & C, Gonorrhoea and Syphilis.

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10 CDF letter 1986, n.9.
11 CDF letter 1986, n.7.
12 CCC, n.2357.
• Increased risk of cancer - anal cancer, Kaposi’s sarcoma and HPV related malignancy.

• Higher incidence of physical injuries – anal trauma, haemorrhoids, anal fissures and retained foreign bodies. Domestic violence.

• Mental health disorders – increased suicidal tendency, depression and anxiety.

• Increased rates of substance abuse including drugs and alcohol.

Homosexual activity can endanger a person’s life, not only his own but also that of others as often homosexual behaviour is associated with promiscuity. One study involving 1,500 gay men and women concluded that 45 percent of white male homosexuals had sex with 500 or more partners, with 28 percent having 1,000 or more sex partners.\textsuperscript{14} The medical data shows that the active homosexual lifestyle is a dangerous one. Being aware of the real dangers would help us understand why the Church labours to save homosexuals from “a way of life which constantly threatens to destroy them.”\textsuperscript{15}

PASTORAL APPROACH TO HOMOSEXUALITY

We have attempted to understand the condition of homosexuality as a first step in our pastoral approach. Misunderstanding the condition or being ignorant about it would undermine any pastoral strategy no matter how well intentioned. With a firm base, it can be a platform on which to build our approach. The question is now addressed “what can be a suitable pastoral approach to homosexuality?” It should be born in mind that we are dealing with a broad spectrum of cases such that the help given in the case of a male who desires assistance to live a chaste life will be largely different from the approach to an actively homosexual male who is closed to advice. Despite the plethora of possibilities some pastoral proposals may still be offered.


\textsuperscript{15} CDF letter 1986, n.12
CHASTE FRIENDSHIPS

There is a celebrated song by the British band called the Beatles. One line goes “I get by with a little help from my friends.” We all need friends and we all need a helping hand in life especially when we fall down on the way. Friendship is a great good and one benefit of healthy friendships is that they help one to live chastity well. It is not wise for a person who is confused about their homosexuality and searching for their true sexual identity to only have friends with the same homosexual inclination. Many older homosexual males will offer friendship to a younger homosexual but with sexual intentions.

Ministers to homosexual persons may offer them healthy and ‘disinterested’ friendship, which helps the latter come to know themselves and to know Christ more. The overwhelming majority of men experiencing same-sex attraction report a poor relationship with their fathers – so part of our pastoral help as priests can be to be a good father figure to them.

SUPPORT GROUPS

No man is an island and the homosexual male will be greatly assisted through joining a support group. Various organizations exist such as Courage, Ichthus, Gentlemen of the Lord (GOLD) and Aftercall. The 5 goals of Courage are:

1. **Chastity** - Live chaste lives in accordance with the Roman Catholic Church’s teaching on homosexuality.

2. **Prayer and Dedication** - Dedicate one’s life 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 Reconciliation and Holy Eucharist.

3. **Fellowship** - Foster a spirit of fellowship in which all may share thoughts and experiences, and so ensure that no one will have to

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16 There is also a support group for parents and loved ones of those with SSA known as Encourage.

17 Chastity is concerned “with integrating our sexual and affective loves and pleasures into our person with the loving and intelligent ordering of our sexual desires and longings, of our need to touch and to be touched” William E. May, *The Nature and Meaning of Chastity*, (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press Synthesis Series, 1976), 36.
face the problems of homosexuality alone.

4. **Support** - Be mindful of the truth that chaste friendships are not only possible but necessary in a chaste Christian life and in doing so provide encouragement to one another in forming and sustaining them.

5. **Good Example** - Live lives that may serve as good examples to others.

The spiritual means are emphasized as all of us need to pray and need the help of the prayers of others. A strong sacramental life will help the person live a life of grace and the sacrament of reconciliation can help when one falls. A good spiritual guide and confessor can give valuable assistance on life’s rocky road. Often teenagers can find themselves confused about their evolving sexual identity and can greatly benefit from wise counsel to help channel and focus their sexual energies in the correct way. Involvement in parish work and the mission of the Church can help. Fr John Harvey comments “the actual performance of apostolic and charitable works is an element of proven worth. In view of the frustration of homosexual liaisons, some means of serving God must be found which will prove to the person with same-sex attractions that he or she is making a contribution to life. Everyone needs that sense of achievement.”

**THERAPY**

Re-orientation therapy may be an option to help the man re-orient his sexual desires. Dr. Robert L. Spitzer reports that “many patients, provided with informed consent about the possibility that they will be disappointed if the therapy does not succeed, can make a rational choice to work toward developing their heterosexual potential and minimizing their unwanted homosexual attractions.”

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18 Fr John Harvey, O.S.F.S., ‘Same Sex Attraction...’
19 “Spitzer Study Published: Evidence Found for Effectiveness of Reorientation Therapy” in NARTH website, http://www.narth.com/docs/evidencefound.html. We note that as there is no consensus about the cause there can be no consensus about the therapy either. Interestingly Dr. Robert Spitzer was once an ardent supporter of gay activism and successfully campaigned for the removal of homosexuality from the psychiatric manual of disorders in the early 1970’s. Later he changed his views when in his research he encountered men who following therapy had experienced a marked change towards heterosexual attraction.
Considering therapy, prevention is always better than cure and it is important for growing boys to be allowed to be boys. In pastoral work one may encounter families where the father or father-figure is absent for work-related or financial reasons, perhaps working overseas. The growing boy actually needs to be able to identify with his father (or a significant father-figure like a relative) to discover his masculine identity. The mother should also avoid over-mothering or smothering the child and not try to over-protect him from the rough and tumble of play and life. In the apostolate of the Church one overall aim is to work for the promotion of families as “very few persons with SSA come from homes where the parents, by mutual love, have created an atmosphere of caring for each child.”

In adolescents where the sexual identity is still evolving, care should be taken to stereotype or permanently label the young man as ‘a homosexual.’ It may be that with correct help and guidance he may be able to re-orient his sexual desires.

CORRECT FORMATION OF CONSCIENCE

The sound formation of conscience is part of the mission of the Church. It is important to be correctly informed on the issue of homosexuality. There are many good web resources such as the NARTH website (National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality) as well as helpful documents such as “Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care” produced by the United States Bishop’s Conference. An excellent resource is a book called Same Sex Attraction: Catholic Teaching and Pastoral Practice by a renowned expert in the field, Fr John Harvey, whose work is variously cited in this article. A correct formation of conscience is necessary especially for those involved in expounding Church teaching. The Catholic Medical Association of the United States comments on the role of teachers in Catholic institutions that they have a “duty to defend the teachings of the Church on sexual morality, to counter false information on same-sex attraction, and to inform at-risk or homosexually involved adolescents that help is available.”

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20 Fr John Harvey, O.S.F.S., ‘Same Sex Attraction...’
21 CMA, “Homosexuality...,” Part II, n.4.
CONCLUSION

In ministering to homosexual persons we should remember first and foremost that they are always our brothers. The homosexual condition is usually a cross for the person and they will need much help and support to live a chaste life. A correct pastoral approach relies on a sound evaluation of the condition. As Cardinal Ratzinger stated “departure from the Church’s teaching, or silence about it, in an effort to provide pastoral care is neither caring nor pastoral.”\textsuperscript{22} Same-sex attraction represents a special pastoral challenge. Most priests will not have this as an exclusive ministry but will still encounter various homosexual persons in their apostolic work as the priest may be approached by the homosexual person asking for advice and counseling. It should never be assumed \textit{a priori} that a homosexual person is actually sexually active as they may be living a chaste life. In accompanying the homosexual person a solid and chaste friendship can be an invaluable help as well as the support of a community or support group. The possibility of reorientation therapy should be borne in mind although not all will have access to such a service.

The priest himself can provide invaluable help to the homosexual person, listening to him, perhaps also advising him when appropriate. They should never exclude homosexuals from the believing community but instead should welcome all those who feel rejected or on the margins. Sacramental confession can provide a grace-filled opportunity for the penitent to experience God’s mercy and love. This may be the only moment when the homosexual person has a chance to open up, to share his difficulties, perhaps his shame and guilt and hurtful experiences from the past. Many homosexual men report a poor relationship with their father, and the priest, as a father figure, can help to heal the person and direct them towards the mercy of God the Father. The priest is to be pastorally sensitive but also firm, imitating as always the compassionate Jesus who healed and forgave but also guided the wayward “\textit{Go and do not commit this sin again}” (John 8:11).

The catechetical role of the priest is also important as he can be instrumental in educating others, particularly the young, about the beauty

\textsuperscript{22} CDF letter 1986, n.15.
of human sexuality and in the promotion of chastity. Church ministers are advised to learn more about homosexuality and church teaching so that their preaching, teaching, and counseling will be informed and effective.\textsuperscript{23} Obviously the recent scandals have dinted the perception and perceived power of the priest’s role in this regard and many would ask that we practice what we preach. Nonetheless the duty to share the Good news is a Divine one and part of the mission of the Church. Let us implore the Lord’s grace for all those involved in pastoral ministry to the homosexual person, that we will not be overawed by their shortcomings or the challenges ahead but inspired by the love of Christ who loved us and gave his life for us (Cf. Galatians 2,20). May Christ, the Good Shepherd, teach us how to seek out and save those who are most in need. Amen.

RESOURCE MATERIALS

\textit{Support groups}

\textit{Courage} \hspace{1cm} www.couragerc.net

\textit{Ichthus} \hspace{1cm} http://ichthuscommunity.blogspot.com/

\textit{Aftercall} \hspace{1cm} http://www.freewebs.com/aftercall/

\textit{Useful websites}

www.narth.com (North American Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality)

\textit{Articles}


Books

“Same-Sex attraction: Homosexuality and the Catholic Church” by Fr. John Harvey. This book is promoted by the Episcopal Commission on Family and life (ECFL) of the CBCP. For more information contact Rev. Fr. DAvid J. Clay (Columban missionary), Asst. Exec. Secretary of the ECFL at “frdaveclay@yahoo.com”.

The author would be happy to hear from anyone interested in this article. He can be contacted at jamesmctavishfmvd@yahoo.co.uk”

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