

Alienated Catholics: Establishing the Groundwork for Dialogue
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In his seminal work, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Thomas Merton noted that, “The biggest paradox about the Church is that she is at the same time *essentially* traditional and *essentially* revolutionary.” He goes on to clarify,

The Living tradition of Catholicism is like the breath of a physical body. It renews life by repelling stagnation. It is a constant, quiet, peaceful revolution against death. As the physical act of breathing keeps the spiritual soul united to a material body whose very matter tends always to corrupt and decay, so Catholic tradition keeps the Church alive under the material and social and human elements which will be encrusted upon it as long as it is in the world.¹

Reflecting on the question about how we might establish a groundwork for dialogue between gay Catholics and the wider church (particularly its leadership, or what is officially called the *Magisterium*), I believe Merton’s fundamental insight into the *nature* of the church itself *could* provide a helpful starting place. For it seems to me that with some introspection, a good many of us will discover that despite alienating voices from Rome, on a much deeper level, homosexual catholics experience the church as radically affirming of us as persons, and as persons-in-relation. I describe this affirmation as “radical” from the Latin “*radix*” meaning “root.” Thus, despite coming up against Magisterial teachings to the contrary, the alienation which homosexual catholics experience is not rooted in that which they believe to be intrinsic to Christian tradition itself, but rather, is associated with an erroneous *interpretation* of tradition imposed by the *teaching* authorities of the church. To put it plainly, we simply disagree with the church’s interpretation of Scripture and Tradition which we otherwise experience as affirming. I suspect that many of us are able to finally endure this dichotomy because we are convinced that at its very *roots* Christianity is most essentially *relational* and thus ultimately rejects nothing which bears the fruit of *loving relationship*.

Allow me to clarify. I am convinced that if Christianity is not about *Relationship* it is about nothing at all. Our most central dogma of the Trinity testifies that the very essence of God is

¹ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, (New Directions: New York, 1961), 142-143.

relational: that is, the unity of the One God is *essentially* a community of divine persons: which we name traditionally, Father, Son, and Spirit. Moreover, at the very heart of Christian faith lies not a particular symbol, or holy book or ritual, but rather a human person, a human heart—that of Jesus of Nazareth. And our theology boldly, even scandalously insists that in the human person Jesus, has been manifested a radical union of enduring relationship between God and Creation. If we are to take these two central doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation seriously there can be no such thing as a private Christianity. Our faith is necessarily communal...relational. Insofar as we profess that this triune God dwells intimately within each of us, then each of us bears the image of that relational God in the very depths of our being.

The theological implications of this are profound, because it suggests that our innate drive toward relationship, toward intimacy, toward emotional, sexual and spiritual union with another *is* every bit a part of our divine nature as it is our human nature. We are relational creatures at the deepest root—*radix*—of our being. And this desire for and engagement in intimate relationships is the greatest testament to our conviction that humanity has indeed been formed in the image and likeness of God. We cannot be otherwise. And it is this basic underlying *premise* in Christianity that I am calling its *radix*—its root—the very core theological underpinnings that I believe the queer community intuitively experiences as life-affirming and relationally-affirming within Christianity. And I believe that it is this core root of faith that continues to sustain us, and which will ultimately prevail because Christian tradition will—as it always does—prevail over traditionalism.

However, for homosexual Catholics in the contemporary church, this realization hardly diminishes the experience of alienation, but more so intensifies it, because we come to experience the prevailing magisterial interpretation as a grave and untruthful injustice against what we know to be a gift of love and grace in our lives. We are met over and again with an institutional interpretation of Christian faith which insists that we are “objectively disordered” and that our most natural inclinations toward intimate relationships are the manifestation of sin and inherently self-indulgent. If the Catholic homosexual community accepted this as a truthful interpretation of Christianity, there would be no need—and indeed no possibility—for further dialogue. Either we would simply accept this assessment as “true” and make every attempt to live accordingly, or abandon Christianity altogether as irreconcilable with our very nature. Indeed, I suspect that the many gay men and lesbians who have chosen this latter option, did so either because they failed to recognize this distinction between tradition and traditionalism, or because they could no longer

thrive spiritually in an ecclesial atmosphere whose authorities were relentless in their claims to know the objective moral implications of our sexual identities without ever attempting to seriously dialogue with those of us for whom it is a subjective reality.

And thus, on this issue at least, the teaching authority of the church is given no credence by so many gay and lesbian catholics because it has not demonstrated its own credibility. To the contrary, its teachings on homosexuality are so disengaged from reality as to render them utterly ridiculous.

And make no mistake, this is not a judgment, it is an observation, evidenced by the fact that the overwhelming majority of homosexual catholics simply ignore the church's teaching on this issue, and find no inconsistency between the practice of their sex lives and the practice of their Catholicism. And this is as telling as it is problematic—a point to which I will return momentarily. But allow me first, by way of comparison, to contextualize this observation in the larger perspective of church teaching on *heterosexual* relations. As is well known (cf. *Humanae Vitae*), any married couple who is in the habit of practicing any artificial means of birth control is guilty of a depravity on the same order of any homogenital acts because those heterosexual relations, not being open to the possibility of biological life, are deemed inherently disordered.

And the evidence suggests that if every Catholic—gay or straight—whose sexual practices were not in accordance with church teaching left the church entirely, its size would be reduced to a mere shadow of what it is today. Thus, my point stands: the state of the *ecclesia* would indicate in no uncertain terms that the church's teaching on this issue have simply and plainly lost all credibility with a vast majority of its faithful. It is what so many of our theologians admit in private conversation, it is what so many priests know to be true of so many of their own parishioners, and it is what an overwhelming number of our parishioners know to be true in the privacy of their own bedrooms. And while I am convinced that the *Magisterium* does have a responsibility to provide moral guidance on matters sexual, they have essentially abrogated this responsibility by failing to offer legitimate and relevant guidance on complex issues which—by contrast to other areas of faith and ethics—they consistently attempt to define in simplistic black and white terms. And this seems to me a tragic and exceptional lacuna in church teaching which more often than not speaks richly and eloquently to the complexities and mitigating circumstances of so many other moral issues with which we are confronted in our day.

What then, might be the purpose of establishing a groundwork for dialogue between the Church and homosexual Catholics? Certainly, for the sake of the gay community, it may well be to consider how we might move toward a more supportive ecclesiology of same-sex relations by specifically examining some of these deeper complexities around the appropriateness and inappropriateness of human sexual expression. But more importantly, it seems to me, it is the *Magisterium* which stands to gain the most. For only in such an honest and carefully considered dialogue might the teaching of the church ever begin to regain for itself any of its guiding authority in matters of human sexuality.

As previously noted, the fact that so many of the faithful—gay and straight—simply ignore the sexual ethics espoused by the church, is both telling and problematic. Telling because it makes clear the fact that the Church (i.e., the people) has not ultimately *received* the teaching, and problematic because without any meaningful guidance it has become all too easy for the faithful to abandon sexual responsibility altogether. It would appear that the church is missing out on an opportunity to develop a rich and meaningful theology of human sexuality, which an honest dialogue among church leaders, theologians and homosexual Catholics could help to foster.

I am not suggesting that the church should either “catch up” with the modern world, or “cave in” to the demands of modern society. But rather, that it should enter into meaningful dialogue with both, and more specifically, with members of the church itself. Such a dialogue is not an affront to church authority or an indication of its dissolution, but is very much a constituent element of it. In fact, the Second Vatican Council’s *Constitution of the Church in the Modern World*, gives an unprecedented place of honor to the People of God, characterized by the council’s renewed self-understanding of the church as first and foremost the people that comprise it. Furthermore, the *Code of Canon Law*, revised in light of Vatican II, makes clear the role of the *sensus fidelium* or “sense of the faithful,” which we might summarize concisely as the responsibility of the faithful to discern the concrete meaning that revelation and Christian faith have in the contemporary world.² The commentary on Canon Law notes that the “...the *sensus fidelium* plays an important part in finding and determining the elements of the Church’s authentic traditions...[and]...this instinct of the faithful should not be distrusted; it should rather be encouraged.”³

² Cf. James Bretzke, *Consecrated Phrases: A Latin Theological Dictionary*, (The Liturgical Press: Collegeville, Minnesota, 1998), 114.

³ James A. Coriden, Thomas, J. Green, Donald E. Heintschel, eds., *The Code of Canon Law: A Text and Commentary*, Paulist Press: Mahwah, 1985), 40, Canon § 27.

But herein lies the dilemma: given the moral convictions of each, the Magisterium will no sooner condone homosexual relationships, than homosexual catholics will remain obedient to an authority that contradicts their conscience, and which they do not believe is an essential element in their practice of Christian faith. For a Church that expects faithful adherence to its teaching authority and yet honors the supremacy of conscience within each person, the only approach that respects both tradition and personal conviction is one which advocates a dialogue between church leaders and the faithful. Thus, the Catholic faithful have a responsibility to contribute to the development of the church's teachings through dialogue with the *Magisterium*. This seems nowhere more appropriate than in areas where the very experience of intimate sexual relationships of lay Catholics differ significantly from that of its celibate hierarchy.

I would like, then, to propose what we might envision as essential elements to a dialogue that is genuine, respectful, honest and constructive. In the interest of time, I will make two short recommendations: one aimed at the *Magisterium*, and the second aimed at the homosexual Catholic community.

Firstly, the church leadership must make a concerted effort to listen. Just for a time, stop pontificating and listen. Not just for days or weeks or months, but years. Form committees and study groups, invite open listening sessions within various diocese, examine the many cultural taboos against homosexuality in countries where Catholicism is prevalent. Listen intently to what the gay Catholic community is saying, read what gay theologians are publishing on this issue, lay to rest your assumptions and look at what gay and lesbian Catholics experience as true and good and beautiful about Christian faith. Humanize the gay and lesbian community by encouraging us to be "out" within our local parishes, and provide a safe space within seminaries for gay priests to be open and honest about their sexual identities. Put an end to secrecy and lies and become a safe haven where truth might set us all free. And above all, listen to the stories we can tell of Christ's presence in our lives, not despite the fact we are gay, but because of it.

Secondly, homosexual catholics must take the *Magisterial* claim seriously that the Church does not have the authority to teach on matters of faith and morals perceived to be in contradiction to Scripture or long standing tradition. Thus, homosexual catholics must commit themselves to a discussion based on theological and pastoral grounds, not one rooted in political activism. As sons and daughters of the church, we cannot neglect concerns over ecclesial unity or the supra-national structure of the church which is present in cultures who have their own taboos against

homosexuality even apart from church teaching. And we must be willing to commit to a patient process of education. Through sound exegetical and theological study it is essential we are able to demonstrate that the Scriptures are virtually silent and Tradition is largely ignorant about what we have come to understand today as an exclusive homosexual orientation in a consistent percentage of the world's population. We must demonstrate that this reality is not spawned of sin and depravity but is an occurrence of natural diversity within God's creation. If our dialogue is to be fruitful and respectful, we must consider that no matter how difficult, unjust or alienating we believe current church teaching may be on this issue, we must trust that the Magisterium is not simply acting out of an intentionally oppressive hostility, but out of a conviction (however mistaken) of moral correctness and pastoral concern.

In conclusion, I do not expect that a dialogue of the kind I am suggesting will happen any time soon. But it is nevertheless a topic worthy of our consideration as we might slowly consider ways to prepare for, or even encourage the opportunity in hopeful anticipation. And in the meanwhile, as those of us who are queer and Catholic continue to face years, possibly even lifetimes of alienation, let us at least take comfort in Merton's understanding of the distinction between tradition and traditionalism, and know that any alienation we do experience is rooted ultimately in the latter, which is tending always toward corruption and decay. And finally, do not allow your experience of alienation to leave you content with being *moderate* Catholics, but settle for nothing less than being radically so—*radically*, to your very roots, faithful to the tradition of the Gospel whose truth will always remain a constant, quiet, peaceful revolution against the spiritual death that is wrought by ignorance.

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