

Is it Ethical To be Catholic?: Queer Perspectives
Vincent Pizzuto, Ph.D.
Response to Fr. James Alison, Ph.D.

(Presentation at a discussion hosted by the University of San Francisco “Communities in Conversation” Project, and held in Most Holy Redeemer Parish, 12th Feb 2006)

I grew up in a typical Italian Catholic household, where yelling was a sign of love and affection. “I wouldn’t yell if I didn’t care,” my father never tired of reminding us, “I get angry,” he would say, “because I love.” And as dysfunctional as that may seem in a now more psychologically astute generation, the fact that I never once doubted that I was unconditionally loved by my parents has made up for any number of mistakes they may have made along the bumpy road of parenthood. This is my experience of family, and it has shaped my experience of church. So, understand me when I say today, that *I am angry because I love*, and do not make the mistake of seeing my criticisms of the church as from an outsider looking in. This is a family matter, and I am on the *inside* looking in, and thus my response to Fr. Alison’s reflection is admittedly an emotionally charged one, as well as an attempt at a more intellectual articulation of the question at hand.

So, Fr. Alison, I do wish to thank you sincerely for your reflection which read as somewhat of a prayerful meditation on the church--and a beautiful one at that. It left me coming away with a sense of having been uplifted, hope filled to some extent, yet in the end, not entirely convinced. For, having reached your conclusion, I was left *still waiting* for a response to the question that has been posed to us today. And so I began to suspect that while writing this reflection, you were doing so while wearing rose colored glasses. In fact, I might suggest they were downright fuchsia; and therefore, perhaps somewhat suitable to this particular occasion—but nevertheless a bit out of fashion. I’ll explain.

In a recent letter submitted to the “San Francisco Catholic” newspaper, one disgruntled parishioner wrote in protest of this presentation today, and he said:

Reading the information packet leaves little doubt that the answer to their own question [Is it ethical to be Catholic?] will be an urbane and sophisticated ‘no’ to be followed by ‘...but don’t worry...we’re here to change the faith enough so that it will conform to your idea of ethics.’

Contrary to what this letter suggests, I think a fair hearing of Fr. Alison's paper could naught but prove him wrong. And, certainly, as I will discuss momentarily, I am not here today to demand that the church conform to *my* ethics, but rather to the ethics demanded by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But, regrettably, in having read both Alison's paper and this letter of protest, I have found what I believe to be a common denominator between the two, in that neither of them seems really to have given the question at hand a fair chance.

Fr. Alison began his presentation by noting that he found the question itself surprising, and that it had never crossed his mind as to whether it was *ethical* to be catholic because he had never known someone to *become* catholic for ethical reasons. Fair enough. But what surprises me, is that having drawn this conclusion, Alison made no attempt to inquire further into the question itself, to unpack it or to consider the possibility that his initial reading of the question, which left him confused, may indicate that there were alternative ways of interpreting it. Is the "Catholic Church" the people? The hierarchy? The institution? The *Magisterium*? The invisible "universal" church? Is it always and only to be identified with Rome? The Vatican? The Pope? And so on. Allow me a brief example for clarification.

While it is clear that Alison has legitimately found his experience of catholicism most clearly within the Roman institution; the church, as Alison himself alluded—is far bigger than any structure or institution, and catholicism as such, extends far beyond the walls of Rome as is evidenced by any number of creedal churches professing to be "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic." Among these ecclesial communities one can observe what might be called an ongoing "migration of catholicism"—whereby many Roman Catholics (bishops, priests and laity) have found it necessary to live in conscientious dissent of Rome in order to more fully embrace their catholic faith. For some, this sounds like a strange—if not heretical—phenomenon indeed: Catholic but not Roman? The Old Catholic Church of Utrecht would be a well know example. And, Rome itself recognizes the validity (if not legality) of any number of these churches, whose bishops dissented from Rome *often* because of insurmountable *ethical* conflicts that arose in their own consciences. Similar questions of ethics have also driven faithful Catholics beyond the confines of the Roman church where they might more faithfully live out their catholic faith elsewhere. And I count myself among them.

Time will not permit me to explain the long and complex history of experiences, study, prayer and discernment that have led me to this decision, but from a so-called “queer” perspective, here is the underlying *ethical* dilemma I encountered within the Roman Church:

As a relatively healthy gay man, I had been deeply loyal and committed to an institution wherein my attempts to live honestly, openly, and with integrity of faith were met over and again with an institutional condemnation insisting that I was “objectively disordered” and that my most natural inclinations toward intimate relationships was the manifestation of sin and inherently self-indulgent. Then, several years ago, the world discovered what I had known for far too long through repeated—though thankfully failed—attempts by lonely priests to cross boundaries that should never be crossed. Throughout the unfolding of the scandal, which revealed depths of deception and moral failures of too many priests and bishops beyond even that which I had imagined it became unmistakably clear that the Roman Catholic Church as an institution punishes healthiness and rewards sickness. My attempts for *years* to openly and honestly integrate my sexual orientation and my faith as a Catholic—and to help others do so—were made to be a mockery in light of the discovery that while publicly denouncing my openness, honesty and call for dialogue, this same institution was not just sporadically, but *systematically* protecting sex offenders of the most vulnerable members of society. And *this* is a gross and obscene moral failure not because the gays or lesbians or feminists or liberals say so, but because the Gospel says so.

Fr. Alison, you said yourself in your presentation, that under John Paul II, “the Catholic faith did seem to become associated with a sort of totalizing moral ideology in which we [gay men and lesbians] were simply a *source of evil* to be denounced and criticized.” I urge you to heed the ethical implications of your own assessment. Is it acceptable for the church, with all the moral authority that it wields in the world, to view *any* group of people whatsoever as a *source of evil* (*even implicitly*)? The church had done this for centuries to the Jews: a tragic mistake which ultimately helped to pave the way for sentiments that gave rise to the unimaginable horror of the Holocaust.

Your further reference to the church’s condemnation of same-sex relationships as “simply a category mistake,” smacks to me of the current US Administration’s use of terms like “collateral damage” to whitewash what is really the murder of hundreds, even thousands of innocent lives in Iraq. Unlike our critics who have the luxury to speak of homosexuality as just another moral

issue, for those of us who are gay and lesbian this is not about issues it is about *people!* There is nothing “simple” about the church’s “category mistakes” because they too are like weapons that wreak death and destruction in the lives of gay and lesbian Catholics who may not have your experiential, intellectual, or theological ability to distinguish between the voice of God in their own conscience from what you call the “defamation of love and the hatred espoused by so many whose job it is to speak in God’s name.” Those whose job it is to speak in God’s name have an *ethical* responsibility to do so in a way that is life-giving and not death-dealing, and if we faithful Catholics permit them to fail in that task without dissenting from their authority in the name of the gospel from where it derives, then who will be left to preach the compassion of God?

This issue is not a matter of the Church conforming to a homosexual “agenda,” but of the church conforming to the highest demands of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And it is this gospel that demands the church take the *lead* in this struggle on behalf of the outcast, not cling and claw to a presumed authority that remains, in fact, vacuous as long as it continues to put both church-law and long standing tradition (for their own sakes) in the way of human compassion. The church is called to stand upon tradition, not become buried by it. But *Tradition*—the life-breath of the church, constantly renewing and being renewed—is all too often mistaken for *traditionalism*—those barnacles which cling to it as to the hull of a ship, and thereby mar its beauty because they are vestiges of a bygone era, mistaken for the ship itself.

Was this not the criticism Jesus leveled against the religious authorities in his own day in the telling parable of the Good Samaritan? The religious authorities, both priest and Levite passed by the wounded man on the road *not* because they were cruel or evil, but because their laws and traditions led them to the mistaken conclusion that to touch him would have rendered them ritually unclean. They denied this dying man compassion because religiously they believed this was the right thing to do. They mistook long standing Tradition for ultimate Truth. However, it was the Samaritan, counted among the most immoral members of society, whose very existence stood in contrast to the purity demands of institutional Judaism—it was through him that God worked grace, mercy and compassion. Where our leaders will not exercise compassion, it is all the more urgent that we do so, even if this requires dissent.

But for whom must we exercise compassion? Who in the modern church is analogous to the wounded man on the side of the road? Perhaps for the gay community, it is first and foremost the innumerable children who have been sexually abused within the church. For as long as the

church continues to erroneously scapegoat homosexuality as the culprit and source of pedophilia, our lives and theirs will remain inextricably interwoven. For it is the children's voices, that in the midst of all this clamor, have been lost and forgotten or completely unheard. The gay community may justifiably be angered by the fact that the church has irresponsibly scapegoated us as the root of the pedophilia scandal, but in our own preoccupation with our anger let us not forget that it is the children who suffer all the more. Suffer, because once again, by failing to examine the real source of the problem—deeply embedded in many facets of the Roman institution—the problem is not really being addressed, but rather once again avoided and deflected so that our children remain at risk of terrible abuses. And more so than our own demonization, therein lies the tragic ethical dilemma in which we find the church today.

But I conclude as I began, with the acknowledgement that *I am angry because I love*. Therefore, let our compassion as modern day Samaritans extend even to our church leaders. Let our catholicism be pure and our dissent clear, educated and respectful. Let us not over indulge ourselves in our collective sense of victimization, or allow our anger to diminish our experience of Christ in our midst, the power of the Gospel and the sacraments in our lives, indeed that which is most true and good about catholicism itself. And let us always remember not to be content with being enemies of catholicism, for the church extends far beyond its many leaders who misunderstand us. In other words, if you will permit me, “let us **love** the **sinners** but **hate** the **sin**.” Although the gay political agenda may not advocate that we act with such compassion, for those of us who would be faithful catholics, the gospel of Jesus Christ demands it.