

## On Including Gays

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### **'Homosexuality is unnatural.'**

'Nature' is a loose peg on which to hang a theology of human relationships. The word has multiple meanings: the Concise Oxford Dictionary lists nine for nature and fourteen for natural. In Victorian times, Europeans spoke of Africans as 'children of nature', meaning they were brutal, primitive, and savage, in need of the wise, firm and civilizing hand of the colonial master; this was to justify European exploitation of Africa. For centuries, slavery was regarded as natural; it had a long and virtually universal tradition behind it, as had the subjection of women to men. It was natural, too, for gentlemen of quality to rule the lower orders. The word has been pressed into the service of several racial, political, social and cultural agenda. Today, people like food to be natural, meaning free from artificial chemicals. But mildew, ants, aphids, cockroaches and rats are natural, and will happily occupy food. Is it natural to have them on it?

Some argue that the natural purpose of sexuality is procreation, and that, since homosexual relationships are not procreative of life, they are therefore unnatural. The argument draws on teleology (ends) or finality as seen from one viewpoint, and seems to imply that since procreation is the principal purpose, then it's the only legitimate purpose of a sexual relationship. Where does that leave non-procreative heterosexual love, or sexuality simply as play? Does it not also mean that the non-use of genital sexuality, as in celibacy, is likewise unnatural?

Is anatomical structure the determinant of what is normative in human behaviour? If the natural purpose of nipples is to give milk, why do men have them? The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) states, 'The human person, made in the image and likeness of God, can hardly be adequately described by a reductionist reference to his or her sexual orientation.' (Letter on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons, 1 October 1986; CTS, London, n.16.) A teleological argument from biological nature is no less reductionist. Homosexuals find it natural to engage the body as it is in sexual relationships, and consider it suited for the purpose.

Throughout history, and across the globe, as art, history and literature testify, same-sex attraction and acts have been a consistent feature of human life. In that sense, they cannot be called unnatural or abnormal. Same-sex attraction is simply a facet of the human condition.

As is often the case, our use of language is not helpful. The word 'straight' implies that someone who does not fit that category is crooked, deformed, or queer. It's a by-product of a culture of contempt and repression towards homosexuals on a par with calling black people niggers, and it helps perpetuate prejudice. In this article, I use the word homosexual to describe same-sex attraction, whether between women (lesbians) or men (gays). And homosexuality is not just about what goes on between the sheets, or in clubs or the 'gay scene.' The latter is often as far removed from a committed, loving relationship as the activities of a brothel are from a committed, loving marriage. Homosexuality is about the way human beings relate to each other in their totality.

Does homosexuality exist objectively - clear, cut-and-dried - like Plato's forms, regardless of

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<sup>1</sup> I have taken it from <http://boundless-salvation.blogspot.com/2010/03/inclusion-is-sexuality-final-frontier.html> and reassembled it, from the parts into which the blogger had split it, into one document. This is the blog of JDK a Salvation Army officer currently serving as Social Program Secretary of the Melbourne Central Division. He is living in Richmond, Melbourne, Australia.

relationships? According to the president of the Northern Ireland Gay Rights Association, between eighty and ninety percent of Northern Ireland's wider gay community are married with families. In Latin America, the "active" (top) male partner in sex between men is not regarded as gay, only the "passive" (bottom) partner. Gays estimate that between one-third and two-thirds of men who frequent gay clubs or bars live in a heterosexual relationship. And it is not uncommon to find lesbians who have had a child. There is some of the straight in every gay, and some of the gay in every straight. (If all the gay people in society came out, it would banish homophobia overnight.) Some of what is included in the ideas of homo- and hetero- are cultural constructs, such as our ideas of beauty, for instance. It might be nearer the truth to think of homosexuality more in terms of what one does, or how one relates, than of what one is.

The hope some people have is that a homosexual gene will be found; it would let them off the peg on which they've hung themselves. Homosexuality could then be considered natural. (How do you persuade people who think they have to be right in order to be credible that their credibility would be enhanced by an admission that they could be wrong?)

Is there a 'homosexual gene'? I don't think anyone knows. I hope not; it might lead to homosexuals being treated 'compassionately' as freaks. But surely the question is irrelevant. Whether a homosexual orientation is genetic or environmental, inborn or acquired, from nature or nurture, it's there, and that's what counts. Most homosexuals experience it as a given, no more a choice than the colour of their eyes.

A more important question is, 'What sort of human being is this?' 'What sort of relationships does s/he engage in?' And the great challenge is for people to be true to themselves. Shakespeare wrote: -

'This, above all,  
to thine own self be true,  
and it must follow,  
as the night the day,  
thou canst not then be false to any man.'  
(Shakespeare,  
Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 3, lines 78-80.)

Is homosexuality unnatural? Yes, it is - if you're heterosexual.

### **'Why don't they just keep quiet about it?'**

Homosexuality is not a problem; the denial of it is, especially if one denies it to oneself. Good human relationships (or good health) can never be founded on the basis of suppression or denial of the truth. The 'problem' of homosexuality may be resolved in one word – truth, or, if you prefer, reality. If you live a lie, you're lost. Wholeness is linked to soul and body; cutting one off from the other is divisive. It is a sad thought to know that you've hated your body, been unable to face the truth about yourself.

If homosexuals feel valued only when they live a life that is less than whole, a half-life, they may well feel that such a life is worthless, and suicide may follow. A survey in Northern Ireland of gay men aged between 16 and 25 showed a level of attempted suicide five times that of their straight counterparts. The US Department of Health and Human Services states that rates of attempted and actual suicide among homosexuals are 50% higher than among heterosexuals, and that 30% of all teen suicides are among homosexuals.

There are lofty souls who respond to this by saying that, in formulating doctrine, they do not allow

themselves to be influenced by considerations of psychological or sociological data. That sounds like saying, 'We don't need to take account of reality,' or, 'Don't bother us with facts; we know what God thinks!'

As members of Alcoholics Anonymous say, 'We are as sick as our secrets.' In this case, the secrecy is the sickness. It's the denial, the secrecy and the lies that are damaging, not the fact, the reality. Jesus said, 'The truth shall make you free.' (John 8.32)

### **'It's not wrong to be gay, but it is wrong to act gay.'**

Is a homosexual, by reason of that fact, called by God to lifelong celibacy? The church says yes.

Imagine someone saying to a group of Irish people, 'There's nothing in itself wrong with being Irish. I'm not saying there is. But that doesn't mean you may act on it. So, no more Guinness, going to Croke Park, singing rebel songs into the early hours of the morning, waving tricolours, no more craic. Close the pubs as occasions of sin, and, while you're at it, would you please do something about your accent: it's suggestive - of Irishness. I'm not asking you to deny your Irishness, far from it, just not to act on it.' Would you consider the speaker to be nuanced, respectful and compassionate, or pedantic, patronising and arrogant?

Being homosexual and trying to be faithful to church teaching - is it a cruel joke? Would God tie a starving person in a chair, put a plate of food in front of them, and say, 'Your self-denial... will constitute for you a source of self-giving which will save you'? (See CDF Letter, n.12.)

The church requires abstinence of the homosexual. To abstain from the physical expression of sexuality means, for the homosexual, abstinence from the truth, from reality, from identity, from recognition, perhaps also from family, and surely from love. Sexuality is not an optional extra to our humanity; it's an integral part of it. An alcoholic is invited to abstain from alcohol - yes. But alcohol is not an integral part of anyone's humanity; it's an optional extra.

Official teaching invites a homosexual to a strange limbo-like existence where being and doing are required to be separated. It says there's nothing in itself wrong with being a homosexual - as long as you don't act like one. There's nothing in itself wrong with being a bird, as long as you don't fly. How can that be an honest or a healthy way of living?

The distinction between being homosexual and doing homosexual acts is phoney. It's like saying, 'Your sexuality is part of you; but you must not be part of your sexuality.' Have we forgotten that the Incarnation brings matter and spirit, body and soul into one in the human-divine body of Jesus? The Incarnation is God's answer to dualism.

Being and doing are not as separable in life as they might seem in a lecture hall. But, even in a lecture hall, Saint Thomas Aquinas said, 'Agere sequitur esse in actu.' (Summa contra Gentiles, 3.53, 69.) If my Latin is not too rusty that means, 'Doing follows being in action.'

Homosexuals who try to be faithful to church teaching are in danger of distorting themselves, like left-handed people forcing themselves to use only their right hands; they are in danger of developing a Jekyll-and-Hyde mentality, suppressing what is true about themselves. The statement of the CDF that, 'Only what is true can ultimately be pastoral' applies here. (Letter, n.15)

The pastoral rhetoric about respecting homosexuals is meaningless at best when the associated moral rhetoric undercuts a homosexual's personhood. It means that homosexuals are neither in nor out, neither persons nor non-persons, but tolerated somewhere on the border.

### **'Homosexuality is objectively disordered.'**

Saying that homosexuality is objectively disordered presumes that sexuality can be evaluated outside of the context of persons and their relationships. Context matters. In the context of a loving, committed relationship, sexual acts have a different significance from what they have outside it. To ignore the context is to ignore the person, to ignore the full truth. To ignore the person is the pharisaism that Jesus condemned in the Gospel. Human relationships, like human beings, are so diverse that a one-size-fits-all approach to morality does justice neither to them nor to itself.

In the days before the church changed its teaching from support for to opposition to capital punishment, we heard the metaphysical argument that the dignity of natural law, outraged by the act of murder, required the death penalty as fitting punishment. When someone shifts the ground of moral debate from the inter-personal (e.g. human relationships) to the biological (e.g. objective disorder), it sounds like an admission of defeat. It's a materialistic argument which elevates the biological to the metaphysical. There's more to humanity than the biological. Quasi-metaphysical arguments about moral behaviour acquire a (bogus) aura of irrefutability because, like Saint Anselm's metaphysical proof of God's existence, they involve a jump from the speculative to the real order. But such a jump is invalid.

In this debate, to say that serious account must be taken of the quality of relationships between people is to leave oneself open to a charge of subjectivism. But its opposite pole, objectivism, is as fallacious; it is distorting and incomplete, as if everyone else had an axe to grind while the objectivist is a privileged person with a detached view from nowhere, above all personal considerations. Objectivism posits a reification of relationships, as if they could be considered 'in themselves,' apart from the human beings involved. This 'dispassionate' approach has its head in the sand, afraid of what it might see. The best authorities in sexuality are those who lead loving, committed, healthy, integrated sexual lives; the authority of experience trumps the experience of authority any day.

To homosexuals, the pastoral rhetoric about respect is dishonest, because it is not possible to respect a person while hating the actions that express what that person is. A frequent comment by homosexuals is that they believe they have become better human beings by coming out and entering into a committed relationship. If you have to suppress your sexuality, can you develop as a balanced human-being with feelings of self-worth? What is it like to live with your soul split from your body and your mind? Reality wins every time; reality is truth.

### **What's wrong with saying "Do your best"?**

What's wrong with saying to the homosexual, 'Being a homosexual is not sinful; performing homosexual acts is. So do your best. If you fail, go to confession, ask for forgiveness, and try again. God will help you'?

What's wrong with it is that it ignores the full truth, and nothing worthwhile in human relationships can be founded on half-truths. There's an analogy here with *Humanae Vitae*. That document states, in effect, that a man should love a woman in her totality, and not implicitly say to her, 'I love you – but not your fertility; I don't want that.' The church says to homosexuals, 'We love you – but not your homosexuality; we don't want that.' In effect we say, 'What a pity you're not normal!' We 'respect and love' them – except for what is a most precious and important part of what they are. All the talk in the world about loving the sinner while hating the sin rings hollow: how can you respect or love a person while repudiating something they see as central to their self-understanding? Sexual orientation is central to that.

Jesus - who is not recorded as having said anything about homosexuality - went about including those the religious authorities of the day excluded on the grounds that they did not fit the

established pattern of behaviour. Should we not consider the possibility that we might be wrong? It wouldn't be the first time!

Think, too, of the Gospel parable of the ten talents: one man, motivated by fear, wrapped up his talent, buried it, and then handed it back intact. Jesus had strong words for him. (Matthew 25.14-30; Luke 19.12-27) For homosexuals, is the gift of their sexuality meant to be wrapped up, buried, and returned unused? Why did God make people sexual, if not for them to give expression to it?

### **Our theology of sexual relationships**

We have the commandment, 'Thou shalt not kill,' but have developed an elaborate theology around self-defence, just war, capital punishment, and indirect killing. But, where the sixth commandment is concerned, a blanket disapproval covers everything outside the marital bed, and much within it. Some theological language around sexuality is so spiritualized and out-of-the-body that it becomes a way of avoiding the truth that God created people sexual. Is there not much in our tradition that is anti- the human body, despite the Incarnation and Resurrection? We are not far from thinking, if not actually saying, that people should have as little sex as possible, and ideally - as in celibacy - none at all.

We wish that eros be safely tucked away and put to sleep in the bed of monogamous heterosexual marriage. But re-awakening it could help us to see our relationship with God as a love affair, with emotion. All our theology, not only of sexuality, is so deeply pervaded by exclusivism, by either-or instead of both-and, that we are probably not capable even of imagining such an awakening. In the Septuagint Song of Songs, the word used for love is *agapein*; this includes the sexual. Yet the church is afraid of sex; it's our Pandora's box, better kept locked. Why is the church so afraid of erring on the side of love? Jesus had no such fear. The difference between being open, or not, to questioning your prejudices is what Christian tradition calls conversion.

### **'In the end we will be judged on how we have loved.'**

Many of the passengers on the 9/11 flights, when told they were going to die, phoned their families to say that they loved them. In former times, we might have thought that a better response would have been to beg God for forgiveness of their sins. I prefer the first, and I dare to think that God would, too.

If God is love, and if sex is loving, then sex between two people of different or the same gender can only be looked upon lovingly by God. The real sin would be to live without ever having had this contact with another human being.

Sacraments are places where God's story and the human story meet. Not only do we need to tell the human story, but we need to tell it first; that was Jesus' way of doing things and of teaching. The human story of some homosexuals is that awakening to their sexuality has meant taking responsibility for themselves and growing up. They say they have grown into better people for having taken the risk of giving and receiving love. A gay man said that, in experiencing being despised and rejected for being gay, he found that, 'The ultimate sign of a person's love is the figure of Jesus on the cross. The wound of homosexuality is not unrelated to Christ's presence in the Passion. Through suffering, rejection and pain, people grow, change, and are transformed.' Another said simply, 'God wants us to be the people he created us to be.' This echoes the saying of Saint Clement of Alexandria that, 'We ought not to be ashamed of what God was not ashamed to create.' Where is the Good News for homosexuals? Is it in the Wisdom of Solomon, 'You [God] love all things that exist, and detest none of the things you have made, for you would not have made

anything if you had hated it. How would anything have endured if you had not willed it? Or how would anything not called forth by you have been preserved? You spare all things, O Lord, you who love the living. For your immortal spirit is in all things.’ (Wisdom 11.24-12.1, NRSV)

### **Are homosexuals showing church and society a way forward?**

There is a long history in the Christian community of the stone which the builders rejected becoming the corner stone, the ‘sinners’ being preferred - as in the Gospel - to the holy huddle of the mutually approving who follow the official line.

Forty years ago, in Ireland as in other countries, homosexuality was a subject that ‘decent people’ didn’t talk about. But homosexuals found the honesty and courage to come out, to declare themselves, and to share their thoughts and feelings, often in the face of derision, hatred, violence or the threat of hell. They began to organize, to challenge the system, and to go political. They have brought about a 180 degree turn in public attitudes, exemplified by the Civil Partnerships Bill now going through the Oireachtas (legislature), something unimaginable forty years ago. Would that the church had so re-invented itself in the same forty years! Maybe the missing ingredients were the same: honesty, courage, openness, dialogue, challenging the status quo.

One finds a similar process at work among the ‘Anonymouses’ – alcoholics, gamblers, narcotics- and sex-addicts. They are at the bottom of the heap. By coming out, facing the truth, revealing their feelings, supporting and challenging each other, they have built communities which reflect what the church is meant to be – but often isn’t. Leadership is from the bottom up, the despised and rejected at the bottom of the hierarchical pyramid showing the way to the wise and learned at the top.

And recently we have seen how it was the suffering of the most helpless in society – children – which eventually led to the exposure of much of what was rotten in the church.

Will homosexuals help us to re-discover new/old ways of doing theology and developing pastoral practice, where human experience is the starting point? That has happened already with other teachings that didn’t tally with human experience or meet human needs. Will they help us to read scripture with one eye on the page and the other on life? They are equally parts of one process. Perhaps they will show us that human experience is as valuable as scripture, as Saint Ignatius Loyola, for one, affirmed. ‘The word became flesh...’ (John 1.14) - God still speaks.

Perhaps, too, homosexuals are showing men a way forward out of self-imposed isolation, out of individualism built on machismo, and a way of dealing with personal issues such as men’s identity, men’s spirituality, addictions, domestic violence against men, male suicide, how abortion affects men, bereavement, paternity and parenting, access to and custody of children in a separation, and care of one’s health. The issues are different, but the qualities needed to face them are those that homosexuals developed in recent times.

### **Some of what the Scriptures say.**

A few quotations: -

‘God saw all that he had made and indeed it was very good.’ (Genesis 1.31)

‘God does not see as people see; people look at appearances but the Lord looks at the heart.’ (1 Samuel 16.7)

‘Anyone who is not against us is for us’. (Mark 9.38-40; Luke 9.49-50)

‘Why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?’ (Luke 12.57)

‘Whoever comes to me, I shall not turn away’. (John 6.37)

‘God has no favourites.’ (Romans 2.11)

‘We belong to each other.’ (Romans 12.5)

‘Each must be left free to hold his own opinion.’ (Romans 14.5)

‘You should never pass judgment on another or treat them with contempt.’ (Romans 14.10)

‘Do not let what is good to you be spoken of as evil.’ (Romans 14.16)

‘Your bodies are members making up the body of Christ.’ (1 Corinthians 6.15)

‘By the grace of God, I am what I am.’ (1 Corinthians 15.10. See also 12.18-21, 26)

‘Your body, you know, is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you since you received him from God.’ (2 Corinthians 6.19)

‘You are, all of you, children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. All baptized in Christ, you have all clothed yourselves in Christ, and there are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, but all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3.26-28)

‘We are what God made us’. (Ephesians 2.10)

‘Everything God has created is good.’ (1 Timothy 4.4)

The Letter to the Hebrews speaks of ‘the whole church in which everyone is a “first-born” and a citizen of heaven.’ (12.23)

Or read 1 John 4.7-21.

## **Conclusion**

For those who don't like the above, the great consolation is that it's all God's fault. Why? For creating in diversity instead of uniformity, as we see all around us in - guess where? - nature, for making some people different from others. Or did God make a mistake?

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