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Conflicting Voices: Ethical and Moral Considerations

In the United States, we live in a pluralistic context with a diversity of races, cultures, and religions as well as secular-humanist traditions. Not surprisingly, we find a significant divergence in approaches to values, ethics, and morality—the right way to live. In matters of same-sex orientation and relationships, the divergence becomes dramatically evident. In fact, more than divergence and simple difference, the various ethical and moral conclusions contradict each other. Then, contradiction becomes opposition, and opposition becomes stridency in the public forum. Stridency, in the end, makes us unable to hear each other. Civility suffers and so does the public dialogue that belongs to a democracy. In the end, we live uneasily with each other in a situation that generates anger, fear, and mistrust. Sadly, some of the voices of those who represent religion in its various forms have aggravated the situation.

No matter where we stand on the issues, we all benefit from a clear understanding of the different ethical and moral positions. I will propose some ways that people variously come to terms with homosexuality and persons with homosexual inclinations, and how they make determinations about what is right and good and about how life ought to be lived.

I am the source of value and direction for my life.

For many, the source of value and the determination of moral directions for their lives begin and end within themselves. They read their inner state and the consequences of their actions and find there the basis for determining what is right and good and how they ought to live. This process of determining value and morality does not begin with philosophical musings. Rather, persons couple their experience of themselves—in this case, as homosexually inclined—with a strongly supported cultural value of self-determination. The inner monologue runs like this: "I know who I am. I accept who I am. I will live as I am. Living this way will yield for me the best set of outcomes that I can expect."

Later we shall see that the logic of this inner monologue may not hold up well. It assumes that homosexual inclinations give a full definition of "who I am." In fact, they represent a feature or characteristic, not a full-blown identity of the whole person. This way of thinking, nevertheless, appears to be valid for many people who experience same-sex attractions and who develop a framework for deciding values and directions. This process has three notable characteristics. It is subjective, relative, and closed-end. It is subjective in the sense that it belongs to the subject or person making the determination. "I decide what is right and good." It is relative, because with shifting circumstances or a shifting sense of self, the values and directions can also shift. It is closed-end, because it begins and ends within the world of the person who makes these decisions.

Because persons engaged in this kind of a reasoning process stay in the realm of their own experience, they feel that their ethical-moral conclusions are unassailable. After all, how can *you* tell *me* who I am and how I should live? In this framework, experience is absolutely personal. Anyone outside of this experience who suggests alternate values or directions for me is usurping my experience as well as my personal autonomy and self-determination.

Alternative positions (that claim truth) are met with dismay and sometimes outrage at the personal intrusion that they represent. In this process, truth is not an objective and stable quantity. Truth is my truth or your truth but not truth in itself or our truth. And in my truth, I find my values and a morality or direction for living.

I discover and receive the truth that is given to me.

Although this statement, "I discover and receive the truth that is given to me," does not necessarily imply a faith context, I will explore it from a Catholic faith perspective. And in that perspective, to receive the truth first means to accept something that is not of my making. In faith, I accept the most fundamental truth of my existence: God has created me and, indeed, God has created me in his very image and likeness.

The imprint of the creator in the created, the imprint of God in me, precedes everything. This reality does not depend on my subjective determination. This is something that I discover. And the process of discovery is self reflection, a process that is similar to the subjective determination of truth ("I am the source of value and direction") but also very different. The objectivity or givenness of what I discover within me and its stability apart from my subjective state makes all the difference. Additionally, when I journey within, I meet myself but not just myself. At the deepest levels of my own interiority, I discover that I am established in a relationship that takes me outside of myself, beyond myself. If I bear within me the imprint of the creator, then I am not alone in coming to terms with who I am. As I come to terms with who I am, it is always with the twin coordinates of my fundamental sense of self and the relationship that prior to all else has given me being and life.

Although this truth of who I am is given to me, it is not imposed on me. There is a dimension of self-determination that is real. I must receive what is given to me. That act of reception means that

I accept myself as I am both created by God and related to God, truly myself but oriented beyond myself.

In this truth that is objective and stable, I find value and a direction for living. The various capacities, drives, and aspirations of my life have a stable organizing center in this truth about me. This includes my desire for knowledge and love, my aspiration to connect with others and to live out ideals, and my drives to survive and meet basic needs. In the context of our considerations here, it also includes my sexuality, which, no matter its particular configuration, inevitably encompasses dimensions that are relational (involving intimate connection), affiliative (belonging), and generative (creating, sustaining, and nurturing life). Human sexuality demonstrates a potentially bewildering complexity of physical, psychological, social, and spiritual elements. As well, one must be mindful of the variations that mark individuals, including: developmental stages, gender, the shaping effects of personal history especially in one's family of origin, physical and hormonal patterns, and the diversity of the objects of sexual attraction. Because of sexuality's potential for "bewildering complexity" and its subjection to the effects of original sin (which we will consider in greater detail later), we stand in great need of careful discernment and honest vigilance in living out our sexuality.

If the fundamental truth of who I am (which includes my sexuality) comes to me as gift, something given prior to my choice or action, then I need to accept it. If I accept it, then I am affirming my responsibility and stewardship for that gift. I am not determining what to do with myself and my sexuality on the basis of my subjective judgment but on the basis of who I am and what my sexuality is.

In making these affirmations, we stand at a significant distance from the first position that says, "I am the source of value and direction for my life." Divergence is evident. There are, however, at a subtler level, some points of connection. Obviously, we all share a common human condition that is, in part, shaped by the experience

of human sexuality that moves us to connect with others, to belong in some form of communion of life, and to bring new life to the world. Another point of connection has to do with where we find the foundation for the way we live out our sexuality. Moving inward and reflecting on ourselves seem essential for everyone, although the results of that introspective movement may differ significantly. When we do land on the values that will shape our sexual morality—however those values are shaped and determined—we want to choose what we hold to be "the good," even if it later turns out to be an apparent good and not a real good. No one chooses what is bad. Finally, there is a common note for all of us about our experience of sexuality. We all experience its complexity in its many dimensions, in its pervasiveness, and in its serious consequences.

We have identified two different positions that claim to be fundamental: (1) I am the source of value and direction for my life; and (2) I discover and receive the truth that is given to me. We have also noted the subtle but real and important points of connection between these two foundational moral positions. The most evident divergence rests in whether one accepts that moral values are constructed on the basis of one's experience, or if they are given prior to experience and are there for one to discover. Another very significant difference emerges in a faith context. The first position—*I am the source*—stands outside a larger historical narrative. The second position—*I discover and receive the truth given to me*—when coupled with a faith context includes a determining historical narrative: human sexuality is created good by God, then marked by sin and its attendant struggles, and finally redeemed in Christ who gives us hope. We will consider this historical narrative in greater detail later. For now, it is sufficient to note how it stands in contrast to a personal-subjective foundation for sexual morality.

The one who is not like me is my enemy.

The word "homophobia" means the fear and hatred of people who self-identify as homosexual or are perceived as such. Some suggest that there is no such thing as homophobia. In fact, violence perpetrated against those who identify themselves as homosexuals or who are seen as being homosexual is a sad fact of life. It is acknowledged as a reality in authoritative statements of the Catholic Church.[1] In 1998 in the United States, a galvanizing moment occurred when the details of the murder of twenty-one-year-old Matthew Shepard came to light.[2] Shepard's murder vividly linked gay identity with brutal and violent reaction against it. This dramatic instance substantiated the claim that violence and disregard for people with homosexual inclinations is a feature of our society.

Historically and in our own day, a considerable number of people have made the judgment that difference *in* others and the difference *of* others is an evil that deserves our negative response. Most often, that difference has to do with race, religion, and sexual inclination. Initially, difference represents or is taken to represent an affront to one's own identity, and so it may seem to merit distancing or separation. This distancing can lead to hatred of the one viewed as the "enemy." In its extreme form, this escalating process arrives at a decision to annihilate the one who is different. We know this process happens, and we ourselves may have been perpetrators or victims. Still, it remains mysterious. How exactly does difference acquire such power to move people down a path of segregation, then discrimination coupled with hatred, and—ultimately—destruction?

The difficulty begins, I would suggest, when we perceive difference as a threat. Then, the threat evokes fear, and fear leads to a cascading series of negative reactions and responses. How can difference be threatening? It may happen this way: I may perceive the difference as incompatible with my life or my way of life. There is, I surmise, no room on this planet for my way of life and your

different way of life. That incompatibility then means that your difference threatens my way of life. I grow uneasy and afraid.

The threat level can escalate. I may perceive your difference as not only incompatible with my life but also as maliciously infectious. Your difference can infect me and even absorb me, with the result that I am irrevocably changed and diminished. I can no longer flourish as I am, because I have been absorbed into your reality. Obviously, the perception of difference as being maliciously infectious triggers a high level of threat and consequent fear.

An even more intense sense of being threatened takes hold of us, when we perceive difference as not only incompatible and infectious but, even more so, as destructive. In other words, I perceive your difference as something that can destroy me. This perception of difference leads to a heightened sense of threat, danger, and—of course—fear.

In reality, the difference between "straight people" and "gay people," as we shall later consider, may not be as great as popular imagination would have it. Perception, however, and not necessarily reality shapes the sense of danger and threat. In a more specific way, the perceived danger and threat of gay people (that is, those who publicly identify themselves as such and assume a public stance on the basis of that claimed identity) for straight people (that is, those who perceive themselves as heterosexual) has to do with gay claims for equality and social change. A gay claim for equality in the social and political sphere may well be predicated on the assertion of interchangeability. In other words, I assert that who I am as gay is interchangeable with who you are as straight. Or expressed differently, I am as good as you and you are as good as me. That interchangeability establishes a basis for equal treatment and equal social positioning. Not uncommonly, the straight person in this equation, who may actually be well disposed to social equality, resists the assertion of interchangeability. Differences matter, they might say, and this difference of sexual orientation carries significant weight.

The obliteration of difference, again they might say, presents a troubling threat to my unique and personally important identity.

Gay-straight difference can also foster a sense of threat when acceptance of that difference means making social changes to accommodate the difference. Such changes might include nondiscriminatory policies in employment, housing, and access to public services. Social changes might also dictate how educational programs for young people present differences of sexual orientation or how public communication must work within boundaries that protect the dignity of sexual minorities. On principle, those who belong to the sexual majority in a democratic society should want to foster the dignity and fair treatment of all who live and work in the society. At the same time, these same people may be reluctant to accept or may even feel threatened by the prospect of a social imposition to accommodate what they do not want, like, or approve. The threat, in this instance, is more precisely a threat to their own sense of authenticity. What is imposed on them makes them other than the persons that they are with their values. The threat, in other words, is not in others being treated fairly but in some being forced to live inauthentically.

Differences in sexual identities and inclinations are not neutral facts or simple variances. When differences are brought together in a social setting, they represent a potential source of threat and fear for those involved. As described here, the possibility of difference generating threat have been viewed through the lens of the heterosexual majority. Is there also a way of considering difference and threat from the perspective of the homosexual minority? In other words, is there a "heterophobia" equivalent to the homophobia described here with its elements of difference, threat, fear, and consequent hostile reaction?

It would seem very unlikely that there could be an equivalent heterophobia, since there is little likelihood that gay people would feel that straight people are trying to absorb them into a straight life

style. Among gay people, there can be and, indeed, is considerable resentment, anger, and fear because of a history of discrimination and violence directed toward them. In the end, gay people can experience a fearful and threatening situation because of differences but not in the same way that members of the sexual majority would.

This section began with the statement, "The one who is not like me is my enemy." That sentence expresses a value and a moral stance, albeit a questionable one. Difference can just be difference, a neutral variance that has no impact on me. Difference in sexual identity and the way that identity is claimed and lived seems to have an impact which can be judged to be negative and threatening. That judgment leads to treating the other as an enemy, a hostile presence that invites separation, discrimination, possibly hostility, and perhaps elimination. How does this moral position square with Catholic morality?

In a Catholic context, can sexual difference establish someone as an enemy, a person towards whom hostility is justified? In fact, authoritative teaching responds that this is not acceptable, and it does so in two stages. The first stage is a simple declaration of how those with a homosexual inclination are to be accepted.

> The number of men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies is not negligible. This inclination, which is objectively disordered, constitutes for most of them a trial. They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. (*CCC*, 2358)

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms that the homosexual inclination is a condition that does not constitute a reason for disassociation or shunning in any form. On the contrary, "They must be accepted."

The second stage of the Church's teaching on the acceptance of those with homosexual inclinations comes to a surprising conclusion that seems to shrink the difference. Again, in the *Catechism*,

we read: "Homosexual persons are called to chastity. By the virtues of self-mastery that teach them inner freedom, at times by the support of disinterested friendship, by prayer and sacramental grace, they can and should gradually and resolutely approach Christian perfection" (*CCC*, 2359). In other words, homosexual persons have both the possibility and the calling to attain the fullest and highest potential of the Christian life—to become saints. Whatever the meaning of the sexual difference of homosexuality and whatever might be the specific challenges to the virtue of chastity that it constitutes, that difference is no justification for setting homosexually inclined disciples of Jesus Christ apart from anyone else in the Church.

In addition to this particular teaching about persons with a homosexual inclination, the Church echoes what is contained in the Word of God about the ways that we should deal with differences. In the parable of the good Samaritan, for example, the highly charged differences between Jews and Samaritans melt away in an act of compassion and mercy, which bonds the two men as true neighbors (see Luke 10:25–37). A more lengthy reflection on the reconciling work of Jesus Christ demonstrates how he brings us beyond our differences and hostilities to be united to one another. This teaching forms an important part of the letter to the Ephesians:

> But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. (Eph 2:13–16)

At this point, it may be good to do a reality check. We began with a statement that expressed a value and a moral position: "The

one who is not like me is my enemy." This statement or others like it have underwritten negative and even hostile stances toward those of other races, religions, and expressed or perceived sexual identities, specifically homosexual identity. Difference—and in our consideration, sexual difference—can initiate a decidedly negative dynamic in human relationships. Authoritative Catholic moral teaching on the call to accept homosexual persons and their vocation to holiness coupled with biblical teaching on the reconciling work of Jesus Christ clearly deny the premise: "The one who is not like me is my enemy." Still, for many who belong to what they call the "gay community," there is an adversarial relationship with the Catholic Church. The two neuralgic issues seem to be: (1) the Church's characterization of homosexual genital activity as disordered; and (2) the Church's opposition to campaigns to introduce legislation to protect such activity as a human right.

The essential teaching about homosexual genital activity can be found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

> Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity, tradition has always declared that "homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered" [Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Persona Humana*, (December 29, 1975), 8]. 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. (*CCC*, 2357)

Furthermore, attempts to introduce legislation to protect homosexual activity as a human right are identified as the source of anti-homosexual violence. In this line, we read in the letter from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* (1986):

> But the proper reaction to crimes committed against homosexual persons should not be to claim that the homosexual condition is not disordered. When such a claim is made and when homosexual activity is consequently condoned, or when civil legislation is introduced to protect behavior to which no one has any conceivable right, neither the Church nor society at large should be surprised when other distorted notions and practices gain ground, and irrational and violent reactions increase. (n. 10)

In a later section, we will consider in greater detail the understanding of homosexual acts and the homosexual condition itself as "disordered," a characterization that stems from a technical-philosophical framework but also a characterization that carries significant negative—and some would say, insulting—connotations in contemporary popular sensibility. In a later section, we will also consider in greater detail the implications of civil legislation for homosexual persons and for the freedom of the Church to function in society.

For now, the notion of "disordered acts" and "disordered condition" as well as the negative assessment of any attempt to legislate "gay rights" explains in large measure the adversarial relationship between the Catholic Church and many homosexual persons. When we put together the rather benign, even positive picture of homosexual persons in the teachings of the Catholic Church and the pointedly contentious statements about homosexual disorder and civil legislation for gay rights, what are we to conclude? For all the trouble of our reflection and analysis, have we simply arrived at the familiar shibboleth: love the sinner, hate the sin? If we stop here, we have indeed arrived at this religiously inspired commonplace. In fact, the complexity of the questions calls for further reflection, which we will pursue. For example, is it possible to have a positive presentation and assessment of the sexuality of homosexually inclined persons and do so within the framework of