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# Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: *Guidelines for Pastoral Care*

## INTRODUCTION

The mission of the Church is to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ to all people and to minister to all people in his name. In our time and culture, special challenges are faced by those Church members who carry out this mission among persons who experience same-sex attraction. 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.

To offer guidance in the face of pervasive confusion, the Catholic bishops of the United States find it timely to provide basic guidelines for pastoral ministry to persons with a homosexual inclination or tendency. These guidelines are intended to assist bishops in evaluating existing or proposed programs and ministerial efforts and to provide direction and guidance for those engaged in this ministry.

## GENERAL PRINCIPLES

### **Respecting Human Dignity**

The commission of the Church to preach the Good News to all people in every land points to the fundamental dignity possessed by each person as created by God. God has created every human person out of love and wishes to grant him or her eternal life in the communion of the Trinity.

All people are created in the image and likeness of God and thus possess an innate human dignity that must be acknowledged and respected.<sup>1</sup>

In keeping with this conviction, the Church teaches that persons with a homosexual inclination “must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity.”<sup>2</sup> We recognize that these persons have been, and often continue to be, objects of scorn, hatred, and even violence in some sectors of our society. Sometimes this hatred is manifested clearly; other times, it is masked and gives rise to more disguised forms of hatred. “It is deplorable that homosexual persons have been and are the object of violent malice in speech or in action. Such treatment deserves condemnation from the Church’s pastors wherever it occurs.”<sup>3</sup>

Those who would minister in the name of the Church must in no way contribute to such injustice. They should prayerfully examine their own hearts in order to discern any thoughts or feelings that might stand in need of purification. Those who minister are also called to growth in holiness. In fact, the work of spreading the Good News involves an ever-increasing love for those to whom one is ministering by calling them to the truth of Jesus Christ.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Place of Sexuality in God’s Plan**

The phenomenon of homosexuality poses challenges that can only be met with the help of a clear understanding of the place of sexuality within God’s plan for humanity. In the beginning, God created human beings in his own image, meaning that the complementary sexuality of man and woman is a gift from God and ought to be respected as such. “*Human*

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<sup>1</sup> See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana–United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000), nos. 1700-1702.

<sup>2</sup> CCC, no. 2358.

<sup>3</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* (October 1, 1986), no. 10, [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19861001\\_homosexual-persons\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19861001_homosexual-persons_en.html).

<sup>4</sup> See Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *On Evangelization in the Modern World* (*Evangelii nuntiandi*), no. 79 (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB], 1975).

*sexuality is thus a good*, part of that created gift which God saw as being ‘very good,’ when he created the human person in his image and likeness, and ‘male and female he created them’ (Gn 1:27).”<sup>5</sup> The complementarity of man and woman as male and female is inherent within God’s creative design. Precisely because man and woman are different, yet complementary, they can come together in a union that is open to the possibility of new life. Jesus taught that “from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother [and be joined to his wife], and the two shall become one flesh”” (Mk 10:6-8).

The purpose of sexual desire is to draw man and woman together in the bond of marriage, a bond that is directed toward two inseparable ends: the expression of marital love and the procreation and education of children. “The spouses’ union achieves the twofold end of marriage: the good of the spouses themselves and the transmission of life.”<sup>6</sup> This is the order of nature, an order whose source is ultimately the wisdom of God. To the extent that man and woman cooperate with the divine plan by acting in accord with the order of nature, they not only bring to fulfillment their own individual human natures but also accomplish the will of God.

### **Homosexual Acts Cannot Fulfill the Natural Ends of Human Sexuality**

By its very nature, the sexual act finds its proper fulfillment in the marital bond. Any sexual act that takes place outside the bond of marriage does not fulfill the proper ends of human sexuality. Such an act is not directed toward the expression of marital love with an openness to new life. It is disordered in that it is not in accord with this twofold end and is thus morally

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<sup>5</sup> Pontifical Council for the Family, *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality* (December 8, 1995), no. 11, [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/family/documents/rc\\_pc\\_family\\_doc\\_08121995\\_human-sexuality\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/family/documents/rc_pc_family_doc_08121995_human-sexuality_en.html).

<sup>6</sup> CCC, no. 2363; see *Code of Canon Law* (CIC) (Washington, DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1998), c. 1055 §1.

wrong. “Sexual pleasure is morally disordered when sought for itself, isolated from its procreative and unitive purposes.”<sup>7</sup>

Because of both Original Sin and personal sin, moral disorder is all too common in our world. There are a variety of acts, such as adultery, fornication, masturbation, and contraception, that violate the proper ends of human sexuality. Homosexual acts also violate the true purpose of sexuality. They are sexual acts that cannot be open to life. Nor do they reflect the complementarity of man and woman that is an integral part of God’s design for human sexuality.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, the Catholic Church has consistently taught that homosexual acts “are contrary to the natural law. . . . Under no circumstances can they be approved.”<sup>9</sup>

In support of this judgment, the Church points not only to the intrinsic order of creation, but also to what God has revealed in Sacred Scripture. In the book of Genesis we learn that God created humanity as male and female and that according to God’s plan a man and a woman come together and “the two of them become one body.”<sup>10</sup> Whenever homosexual acts are mentioned in the Old Testament, it is clear that they are disapproved of, as contrary to the will of God.<sup>11</sup> In the New Testament, St. Paul teaches that homosexual acts are not in keeping with our being created in God’s image and so degrade and undermine our authentic dignity as human beings. He tells how homosexual practices can arise among people who erroneously worship the creature rather than the Creator:

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<sup>7</sup> CCC, no. 2351.

<sup>8</sup> CCC, no. 2357.

<sup>9</sup> CCC, no. 2357. See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics (Persona humana)* (December 29, 1975), no. 8, [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19751229\\_persona-humana\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19751229_persona-humana_en.html).

<sup>10</sup> Gn 2:24. See Gn 1:27; Mt 19:4-6; Mk 10:6-8; Eph 5:31.

<sup>11</sup> See Gn 19:1-19; Lv 18:22, 20:13.

Therefore, God handed them over to degrading passions. Their females exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the males likewise gave up natural relations with females and burned with lust for one another. Males did shameful things with males and thus received in their own persons the due penalty for their perversity.<sup>12</sup>

St. Paul listed homosexual practices among those things that are incompatible with the Christian life.<sup>13</sup>

### **Homosexual Inclination Is Not Itself a Sin**

While the Church teaches that homosexual acts are immoral, she does distinguish between engaging in homosexual acts and having a homosexual inclination. While the former is always objectively sinful, the latter is not. To the extent that a homosexual tendency or inclination is not subject to one's free will, one is not morally culpable for that tendency. Although one would be morally culpable if one were voluntarily to entertain homosexual temptations or to choose to act on them, simply having the tendency is not a sin. Consequently, the Church does not teach that the experience of homosexual attraction is in itself sinful.

The homosexual inclination is objectively disordered, i.e., it is an inclination that predisposes one toward what is truly not good for the human person.<sup>14</sup> Of course, heterosexual persons not uncommonly have disordered sexual inclinations as well. It is not enough for a sexual inclination to be heterosexual for it to be properly ordered. For example, any tendency toward sexual pleasure that is not subordinated to the greater goods of love and marriage is

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<sup>12</sup> Rom 1:26-27.

<sup>13</sup> See 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tm 1:10.

<sup>14</sup> See CCC, no. 2358.

disordered, in that it inclines a person towards a use of sexuality that does not accord with the divine plan for creation. There is the intrinsic disorder of what is directed toward that which is evil in all cases (*contra naturam*). There is also the accidental disorder of what is not properly ordered by right reason, what fails to attain the proper measure of virtue (*contra rationem*).<sup>15</sup>

It is crucially important to understand that saying a person has a particular inclination that is disordered is not to say that the person as a whole is disordered. Nor does it mean that one has been rejected by God or the Church. Sometimes the Church is misinterpreted or misrepresented as teaching that *persons* with homosexual inclinations are objectively disordered, as if everything about them were disordered or rendered morally defective by this inclination. Rather, the disorder is in that particular *inclination*, which is not ordered toward the fulfillment of the natural ends of human sexuality. Because of this, acting in accord with such an inclination simply cannot contribute to the true good of the human person. Nevertheless, while the particular inclination to homosexual acts is disordered, the person retains his or her intrinsic human dignity and value.

Furthermore, it is not only sexual inclinations that can be disordered within a human person. Other inclinations can likewise be disordered, such as those that lead to envy, malice, or greed. We are all damaged by the effects of sin, which causes desires to become disordered. Simply possessing such inclinations does not constitute a sin, at least to the extent that they are beyond one's control. Acting on such inclinations, however, is always wrong.<sup>16</sup>

Many in our culture have difficulty understanding Catholic moral teaching because they do not understand that morality has an objective basis. Some hold that moral norms are nothing

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<sup>15</sup> See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, no. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Circumstances may affect the degree of culpability in individual cases, but to will homosexual acts is always wrong. "In fact, circumstances may exist, or may have existed in the past, which would reduce or remove the culpability of the individual in a given instance; or other circumstances may increase it. What is at all costs to be avoided is the unfounded and demeaning assumption that the sexual behavior of homosexual persons is always and totally compulsive and therefore inculpable" (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, no. 11).

more than guidelines for behavior that happen to be widely accepted by people of a particular culture at a particular time. Catholic tradition, however, holds that the basis of morality is found in the natural order established by the Creator, an order that is not destroyed but rather elevated by the transforming power of the grace that comes to us through Jesus Christ. Good actions are in accord with that order. By acting in this way, persons fulfill their authentic humanity, and this constitutes their ultimate happiness. Immoral actions, actions that are not in accord with the natural order of things, are incapable of contributing to true human fulfillment and happiness. In fact, immoral actions are destructive of the human person because they degrade and undermine the human dignity given us by God.

### **Therapy for Homosexual Inclinations?**

A considerable number of people who experience same-sex attraction experience it as an inclination that they did not choose. Many of these speak of their homosexual attractions as an unwanted burden. This raises the question of whether or not a homosexual inclination can be changed with the help of some kind of therapeutic intervention.

There is currently no scientific consensus on the cause of the homosexual inclination.<sup>17</sup> There is no consensus on therapy. Some have found therapy helpful. Catholics who experience homosexual tendencies and who wish to explore therapy should seek out the counsel and assistance of a qualified professional who has preparation and competence in psychological counseling and who understands and supports the Church's teaching on homosexuality. They should also seek out the guidance of a confessor and spiritual director who will support their quest to live a chaste life.

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<sup>17</sup> See CCC, no. 2357: "Its psychological genesis remains largely unexplained."

## **The Necessity for Training in Virtue**

There is another kind of “therapy” or healing of which we all stand in need, regardless of whether one is attracted to the same or the opposite sex: Every person needs training in the virtues. To acquire a virtue—to become temperate, brave, just, or prudent—we must repeatedly perform acts that embody that virtue, acts that we accomplish with the help of the Holy Spirit and with the guidance and encouragement of our teachers in virtue. In our society, chastity is a particular virtue that requires special effort. All people, whether married or single, are called to chaste living. Chaste living overcomes disordered human desires such as lust and results in the expression of one’s sexual desires in harmony with God’s will. “Chastity means the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being.”<sup>18</sup>

It is sad to note that in our society violation of chastity and the pervasive human suffering and unhappiness that follow in its wake are not uncommon. Many families experience firsthand the human devastation that results when marriage vows are broken, or the human heartbreak that can lie in the wake of sexual promiscuity. Chaste living is an affirmation of all that is human, and is the will of God. It is we who suffer when we violate the dictates of our own human nature.

The acquisition of virtues requires a sustained effort and repeated actions. As the ancient philosophers recognized, the more one repeats good actions, the more one’s passions (such as love, anger, and fear) become shaped in accord with good action. It becomes easier to perform good actions. Unfortunately, the opposite is also true: the more one repeats bad actions, the more one’s passions become shaped in accord with bad action. It becomes more difficult to perform good actions, for the disordered passions provide resistance. If one resolves to follow the path of

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<sup>18</sup> CCC, no. 2337.

virtue, however, one can make progress. By avoiding bad actions and by repeating good actions one can train one's passions so that they become more spontaneously disposed toward good action. One eventually acquires and perfects the basic virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance.

Therefore, merely to experience disordered passions should not be a cause for despair. This is the common starting point for people at the beginning of training in virtue. The passions are not fixed, unchanging obstacles to moral action. They do not simply have to be repressed in order for one to act morally. Repeated good actions will modify the passions that one experiences. In fact, passions that have been properly disposed aid one in acting well.<sup>19</sup> It may not always be possible to reach the point where one's passions are so well ordered that one is always spontaneously moved to act rightly. In such cases, to do what is right and rational will involve a healthy restraining of some desires. Nevertheless, through persistent effort we can at least reduce the resistance of our passions to acting well.<sup>20</sup>

In this effort to train our desires to be in accord with God's will, as Christians we do not have to rely solely upon our own powers; we have the Holy Spirit at work in our hearts. The New Law of Christ, which is principally the power and life of the Holy Spirit, gives us an ability that does not come from nature itself to fulfill the natural law.<sup>21</sup> The natural law shows what we should do (as does divinely revealed law, such as the Ten Commandments). Sin weakens the

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<sup>19</sup> See CCC, no. 1768: "Passions are morally good when they contribute to a good action, evil in the opposite case." Passions are thus to be judged according to their relationship to good and bad acts, which themselves are judged based on an understanding of the human person and of the end of human existence. It is through the exercise of reason and by the gift of divine revelation that the Church can offer a true understanding of the human person and of the end of human existence, providing a criterion by which to judge which acts are good, natural, and thus conducive of human happiness, and which acts lead only to unhappiness.

<sup>20</sup> See CCC, no. 2339: "Chastity includes an *apprenticeship in self-mastery* which is a training in human freedom. The alternative is clear: either man governs his passions and finds peace, or he lets himself be dominated by them and becomes unhappy."

<sup>21</sup> See CCC, nos. 1965-1974.

will, however, so that we choose to do what we know is wrong. The New Law of grace, the Holy Spirit in our hearts, overcomes the power of sin and enables us to do what we should. We are no longer mastered by sin. As Pope John Paul II has encouraged us:

*Only in the mystery of Christ's Redemption do we discover the "concrete" possibilities of man. "It would be a very serious error to conclude . . . that the Church's teaching is essentially only an 'ideal.' . . . Christ has redeemed us! This means that he has given us the possibility of realizing the entire truth of our being; he has set our freedom free from the domination of concupiscence."*<sup>22</sup>

Christ accomplishes in us a healing from the wounds of sin that we cannot accomplish on our own.

### **The Necessity of Friendship and Community**

One way in which the Church can aid persons with a homosexual inclination is by nurturing the bonds of friendship among people. In their analysis of human nature, the ancient philosophers recognized that friendship is absolutely essential for the good life, for true happiness. Friendships of various kinds are necessary for a full human life, and they are likewise necessary for those attempting to live chastely in the world. There can be little hope of living a healthy, chaste life without nurturing human bonds. Living in isolation can ultimately exacerbate one's disordered tendencies and undermine the practice of chastity.

It would not be wise for persons with a homosexual inclination to seek friendship exclusively among persons with the same inclination. They

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<sup>22</sup> Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *The Splendor of Truth (Veritatis splendor)* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1993), no. 103.

should seek to form stable friendships among both homosexuals and heterosexuals. . . . A homosexual person can have an abiding relationship with another homosexual without genital sexual expression. Indeed the deeper need of any human is for friendship rather than genital expression.<sup>23</sup>

True friendships are not opposed to chastity; nor does chastity inhibit friendship. In fact, the virtues of friendship and of chastity are ordered to each other.

The virtue of chastity blossoms in *friendship*. It shows the disciple how to follow and imitate him who has chosen us as his friends (cf. Jn 15:15), who has given himself totally to us and allows us to participate in his divine estate. Chastity is a promise of immortality.

Chastity is expressed notably in *friendship with one's neighbor*. Whether it develops between persons of the same or opposite sex, friendship represents a great good for all. It leads to spiritual communion.<sup>24</sup>

While the bonds of friendship should be carefully fostered at all levels, loving friendships among the members of a family are particularly important. Those ministering in the name of the Church should encourage healthy relationships between persons with a homosexual inclination

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<sup>23</sup> National Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Pastoral Research and Practices, *Principles to Guide Confessors in Questions of Homosexuality* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1973), 11.

<sup>24</sup> CCC, no. 2347. See Pontifical Council for the Family, *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*, no. 17: "Chastity is the joyous affirmation of someone who knows how to live self-giving, free from any form of self-centered slavery. This presupposes that the person has learned how to accept other people, to relate with them, while respecting their dignity in diversity. The chaste person is not self-centered, not involved in selfish relationships with other people. Chastity makes the personality harmonious. It matures it and fills it with inner peace. This purity of mind and body helps develop true self-respect and at the same time makes one capable of respecting others, because it makes one see in them persons to reverence, insofar as they are created in the image of God and through grace are children of God."

and the other members of their families. The family can provide invaluable support to people who are striving to grow in the virtue of chastity.

The local Church community is also a place where the person with a homosexual inclination should experience friendship. This community can be a rich source of human relationships and friendships, so vital to living a healthy life. In fact, within the Church human friendship is raised to a new order of love, that of brothers and sisters in Christ.

### **Growth in Holiness**

While human friendship is indeed necessary for the good life of a human person, friendship with God constitutes our ultimate end. Every human person has been created to share in the communion of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The ministry of the Church to persons with a homosexual inclination must always have the overriding aim of fostering the greatest possible friendship with God, participation in the divine life of the Trinity through sanctifying grace.

Integral to friendship with God is holiness. God is holy and all who would come near to God must likewise become holy.<sup>25</sup> The Second Vatican Council made it clear that striving for holiness does not belong only to an elite few within the Church. The Council taught that “all Christians in whatever state or walk of life are called to the fullness of christian life and to the perfection of charity, and this holiness is conducive to a more human way of living even in society here on earth.”<sup>26</sup> The Council also made it clear that this is not simply our own doing but depends on the gift that comes to us through Christ. “In order to reach this perfection the faithful

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<sup>25</sup> See Lv 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7, 26; 1 Pt 1:16. See Mt 5:48; Lk 6:36.

<sup>26</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium [LG])*, no. 40, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, new revised edition, ed. Austin Flannery, OP (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996). All subsequent Vatican II passages come from the Flannery edition.

should use the strength dealt out to them by Christ's gift, so that, following in his footsteps and conformed to his image, doing the will of God in everything, they may wholeheartedly devote themselves to the glory of God and to the service of their neighbor."<sup>27</sup>

The Church seeks to enable every person to live out the universal call to holiness. Persons with a homosexual inclination ought to receive every aid and encouragement to embrace this call personally and fully. This will unavoidably involve much struggle and self-mastery, for following Jesus always means following the way of the Cross. "There is no holiness without renunciation and spiritual battle."<sup>28</sup> The Sacraments of the Eucharist and of Penance are essential sources of consolation and aid on this path. These sacraments invite every person to enter into the dying and rising of Christ, for the Paschal Mystery is at the center of Christian life.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, they also provide us with a constant reminder of the great hope held out for all who follow Jesus with perseverance. Moreover, crucial support for the spiritual struggle is to be found through diligent fostering of the Christian life, including the reading of Scripture and daily prayer.

### **Cultural Obstacles**

All ministry to persons with a homosexual inclination must be guided by Church teaching on sexuality. The basis of this ministry, if it is to be effective, has to be a true understanding of the human person and of the place of sexuality in human life. "Departure from the Church's teaching, or silence about it, in an effort to provide pastoral care is neither caring nor pastoral."<sup>30</sup> Love and truth go together. The Sacred Scriptures tell us that the way to grow more Christ-like is

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<sup>27</sup> LG, no. 40.

<sup>28</sup> CCC, no. 2015.

<sup>29</sup> See Second Vatican Council, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium)*, no. 6.

<sup>30</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, no. 15.

by “living the truth in love” (Eph 4:15). The Church cannot support organizations or individuals whose work contradicts, is ambiguous about, or neglects her teaching on sexuality.<sup>31</sup>

The Church’s teaching on homosexuality is attentive to the natural law imprinted in human nature and faithful to the Sacred Scriptures. This teaching offers a beacon of light and hope in the midst of considerable confusion, intense emotion, and much conflict. Within our culture, however, there are various obstacles that make it more difficult for some people to recognize the wisdom contained in this teaching.

One obstacle is intolerance of those perceived as different. It remains true that some persons identified as homosexual are victims of violence. The fact that homosexual acts are immoral may never be used to justify violence or unjust discrimination.<sup>32</sup>

At the same time, there are features specific to contemporary Western culture that inhibit the reception of Church teaching on sexual issues in general and on homosexuality in particular. For example, there is a strong tendency toward moral relativism in our society. Many do not admit an objective basis for moral judgments. They recognize no acts as intrinsically evil but maintain that judgments of good and bad are entirely subjective. In this view, matters of sexual morality should be left for individuals to decide according to their own preferences and values, with the only restriction that they not cause manifest harm to another individual.

Because Church teaching insists that there are objective moral norms, there are those in our culture who portray this teaching as unjust, that is, as opposed to basic human rights. Such

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<sup>31</sup> See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, no. 17: “All support should be withdrawn from any organizations which seek to undermine the teaching of the Church, which are ambiguous about it, or which neglect it entirely. Such support, or even the semblance of such support, can be gravely misinterpreted.”

<sup>32</sup> See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons* (March 28, 2003), no. 8, [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20030731\\_homosexual-unions\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20030731_homosexual-unions_en.html).

claims usually follow from a form of moral relativism that is joined, not without inconsistency, to a belief in the absolute rights of individuals. In this view, the Church is perceived as promoting a particular prejudice and as interfering with individual freedom.

In fact, the Church actively asserts and promotes the intrinsic dignity of every person. As human persons, persons with a homosexual inclination have the same basic rights as all people, including the right to be treated with dignity. Nevertheless “‘sexual orientation’ does not constitute a quality comparable to race, ethnic background, etc., in respect to non-discrimination.”<sup>33</sup> Therefore, it is not unjust, for example, to limit the bond of marriage to the union of a woman and a man. It is not unjust to oppose granting to homosexual couples benefits that in justice should belong to marriage alone. “When marriage is redefined so as to make other relationships equivalent to it, the institution of marriage is devalued and further weakened. The weakening of this basic institution at all levels and by various forces has already exacted too high a social cost.”<sup>34</sup>

Another common characteristic of Western societies that poses an obstacle to the reception of Church teaching is the widespread tendency toward hedonism, an obsession with the pursuit of pleasure. This tendency is closely related to the consumerism of our culture, which promotes an approach to life that is marked by a concern to maximize pleasure. Viewed from this perspective, sexual relations are seen as simply another form of pleasure. Promiscuity is regarded as not only acceptable but normal. The virtue of chastity becomes incomprehensible. It can even appear to be an unhealthy and unnatural denial of pleasure. Moreover, there are many

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<sup>33</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Some Considerations Concerning the Response to Legislative Proposals on the Non-Discrimination of Homosexual Persons* (July 23, 1992), no. 10.

<sup>34</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Between Man and Woman: Questions and Answers About Marriage and Same-Sex Unions* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2003), question 5. See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Some Considerations Concerning the Response to Legislative Proposals on the Non-Discrimination of Homosexual Persons*, no. 9: “In assessing proposed legislation, the bishops should keep as their uppermost concern the responsibility to defend and promote family life.”

in our society, particularly in the advertising and entertainment industries, who make enormous profits by taking advantage of this tendency and who work to promote it by their actions.

Given such strong influences in our culture, it is not surprising that there are a number of groups active in our society that not only deny the existence of objective moral norms but also aggressively seek public approval for homosexual behavior. The message of such groups misleads many people and causes considerable harm. In the face of this challenge the Church must continue her efforts to persuade people through rational argument, the witness of her life, and the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

## PASTORAL CARE

Given the general principles of Church teaching just enunciated, the following guidelines for pastoral care emerge.

### *Church Participation*

- As baptized members of the Catholic community, persons with a homosexual inclination continue to look to the Church for a place where they may live in authentic human integrity and holiness of life. Being welcomed into and participating in their local faith community is the foundation of spiritual support that the Church offers to them. Full and active participation is encouraged.<sup>35</sup> Participation in a worshipping Catholic community is a support for living a life of chastity and integrity and an encouragement to an ongoing personal conversion.

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<sup>35</sup> USCCB, *To Live in Christ Jesus: A Pastoral Reflection on the Moral Life* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1976), no. 52.

- Essential to the success of ministry to persons with a homosexual inclination will be the support and leadership of the bishop and other pastoral leaders. A welcoming stance of Christian love by the leadership and the community as a whole is essential for this important work. This is particularly important because more than a few persons with a homosexual inclination feel themselves to be unwelcome and rejected.
- Persons who experience same-sex attraction and yet are living in accord with Church teaching should be encouraged to take an active role in the life of the faith community. However, the Church has a right to deny roles of service to those whose behavior violates her teaching. Such service may seem to condone an immoral lifestyle and may even be an occasion of scandal.
- Special care ought to be taken to ensure that those carrying out the ministry of the Church not use their position of leadership to advocate positions or behaviors not in keeping with the teachings of the Church. They must not belong to groups that oppose Church teaching. It is not sufficient for those involved in this ministry to adopt a position of distant neutrality with regard to Church teaching.<sup>36</sup>
- For some persons, revealing their homosexual tendencies to certain close friends, family members, a spiritual director, confessor, or members of a Church support group may provide some spiritual and emotional help and aid them in their growth in the Christian life. In the context of parish life, however, general public self-disclosures are not helpful and should not be encouraged.
- Sad to say, there are many persons with a homosexual inclination who feel alienated from the Church. Outreach programs and evangelization efforts ought to be mindful

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<sup>36</sup> See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Notification Regarding Sr. Gramick and Fr. Nugent* (May 23, 1999), *Origins* 29:9 (July 2, 1999): 133-136.

of such persons. In areas where there are larger concentrations of homosexual persons, individuals may profitably be dedicated solely to outreach ministry to them; in other areas, ministry to persons with a homosexual inclination should be included as part of overall evangelization efforts.

- Church policies should explicitly reject unjust discrimination and harassment of any persons, including those with a homosexual inclination. Procedures should be in place to handle complaints.

### *Catechesis*

- Catechesis ought to reflect the fullness of the Church's teaching on human sexuality in general, and homosexuality in particular. "Moral conscience requires that, in every occasion, Christians give witness to the whole moral truth, which is contradicted both by approval of homosexual acts and unjust discrimination against homosexual persons."<sup>37</sup> In tone, catechesis ought to be welcoming yet challenging, charitable but firm in the truth.
- The work of catechesis is exercised first in the family by parents of children. The Church should assist parents as the first teachers of their children regarding sexual and affective development as well as their children's understanding of divine and natural law in matters of human sexuality.
- Catechesis starts with the formation of those who so generously engage in this essential ministry. Care should be taken in their selection and training; individuals who do not support Church teaching should not serve in this ministry. Sponsoring

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<sup>37</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons*, no. 5.

training days and days of reflection conducted by theologically sound and pastorally wise ministers is an important component of this formation.

- Moral choices ought to be based on sound moral teachings. Ongoing catechesis and conscience formation for persons who experience same-sex attraction should be an important part of this Catholic ministry, counteracting some prevalent societal mores and providing the basis for making informed moral judgments.
- The Church's teaching in its fullness ought to be presented by the clergy especially from the pulpit and in other appropriate venues. Catechesis should also involve the entire parish community. Ignorance of the fullness of Church teaching is often the greatest barrier to an effective ministry to persons with a homosexual inclination. Catechesis in the parish should also teach the virtues that are needed to live out the call to chastity, e.g., selfless love, fortitude, temperance, etc.
- Catechesis for the community ought to denounce unjustly discriminatory and violent behaviors against homosexual persons and to seek to correct misinformation that can lead to these behaviors. Parish social justice ministries integrally formed in the moral and social teachings of the Church may be one venue for promoting just behaviors and opposing unjust discrimination towards persons with a homosexual inclination.
- Local bishops should oversee material used for catechesis to ensure that the information contained is accurate and that nothing is contrary to Church teaching.

- Catechesis, especially for young people, should explain the true nature and purpose of human sexuality and should promote the virtue of chastity, which has been both little understood and little valued in contemporary society.<sup>38</sup>

### *Sacraments and Worship*

- Catholics who are living in accord with the Church’s moral teachings are invited and encouraged to participate fully and regularly in the sacramental life of the Church. The importance of frequent reception of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, for one’s ongoing strengthening and sanctification should be emphasized.
- The Christian life is a progressive journey toward a deepening of one’s discipleship of Christ. People do not all move forward at the same pace, nor do they always proceed in a direct line toward their goal. Those who stumble along the way should be encouraged to remain in the community and to continue to strive for holiness through conversion of life. In this regard, frequent reception of the Sacrament of Penance is of great importance. Ongoing, sound spiritual direction is of significant help.
- The Church recognizes that “marriage exists solely between a man and a woman, who by mutual personal gift, proper and exclusive to themselves, tend toward the communion of their persons. In this way, they mutually perfect each other, in order to cooperate with God in the procreation and upbringing of new human lives.”<sup>39</sup>  
Consequently, the Church does not support so-called same-sex “marriages” or any

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<sup>38</sup> A useful resource is Pope John Paul II’s *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997).

<sup>39</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons*, no. 2.

semblance thereof, including civil unions that give the appearance of a marriage.

Church ministers may not bless such unions or promote them in any way, directly or indirectly.

- Similarly, the Church does not support the adoption of children by same-sex couples since homosexual unions are contrary to the divine plan.<sup>40</sup>
- Baptism of children in the care of same-sex couples presents a serious pastoral concern. Nevertheless, the Church does not refuse the Sacrament of Baptism to these children, but there must be a well founded hope that the children will be brought up in the Catholic religion.<sup>41</sup> In those cases where Baptism is permitted, pastoral ministers should exercise prudential judgment when preparing baptismal ceremonies. Also, in preparing the baptismal record, a distinction should be made between natural parents and adoptive parents.<sup>42</sup>

### *Pastoral Support*

- Many virtuous people who experience same-sex attraction are ardently striving to live their faith within the Catholic community so as not to fall into the lifestyle and values of a “gay subculture.” The Church’s ministries are to encourage them to persevere in their efforts through teaching, guidance, and fellowship. Primary among these is spiritual direction from a priest.
- Young people, in particular, need special encouragement and guidance, since the best way of helping young people is to aid them in not getting involved in homosexual

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<sup>40</sup> See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons*, no. 7.

<sup>41</sup> See CIC, c. 868 §1, 2°.

<sup>42</sup> See USCCB complementary norm on the recording of Baptism of adopted children at [www.usccb.org/norms/877-3.htm](http://www.usccb.org/norms/877-3.htm).

relations or in the subculture in the first place, since these experiences create further obstacles.

- There are particular temptations for those who experience homosexual attractions. For some, these attractions may be short-lived or situational, but for others, they may be part of a lifelong experience.<sup>43</sup> Pastoral support and counseling services ought to be made readily available for persons who experience such attractions and for the families to which they belong.
- It can be helpful for persons who find themselves with homosexual attractions to gather together in mutual understanding and support. This can be particularly the case because persons with a homosexual inclination may feel “different,” which can lead to isolation and alienation, which are risk factors for an unhealthy life, including unchaste behaviors. Support groups, noted for their adherence to Church teaching, for persons who experience same-sex attraction continue to be an important part of Church ministries and are to be encouraged.<sup>44</sup> Persons with a homosexual inclination should not be encouraged to define themselves primarily in terms of their sexual inclination, however, or to participate in “gay subcultures,” which often tend to promote immoral lifestyles. Rather, they should be encouraged to form relationships with the wider community.
- Pastoral and psychological care for adolescents who struggle with sexual attraction issues is of particular importance. Adolescents with homosexual attractions can be at serious risk for personal difficulties, including suicidal tendencies and attempts as

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<sup>43</sup> See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics*, no. 8. “A distinction is drawn, and it seems with some reason, between homosexuals whose tendency . . . is transitory . . . and homosexuals who are definitively such.”

<sup>44</sup> Examples of such ministries whose principles are in accord with Church teaching are Courage and Encourage.

- well as enticements to promiscuity and exploitation by adults. Every effort should be made to ensure that adolescents have access to age-appropriate professional counseling services that respect Church teaching in matters of human sexuality.
- Professionals providing counseling services for persons who experience same-sex attraction and the families to which they belong should be chosen carefully to ensure that they uphold the Church's understanding of the human person. Efforts should be made to identify and publicize those services that conduct their work in a manner that accords with Church teaching.
  - Pastoral support should include care for people who become ill with sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS.
  - The discovery that a family member has homosexual tendencies can pose a serious concern for parents, siblings, and spouses. The Church reaches out to them, seeking to help ensure that the bonds of love among the family members remain intact. A helpful way of addressing this issue is through the formation of support groups for individuals and families, where they can also learn the full truth of the Church's teaching regarding the human dignity of persons with a homosexual inclination and the moral principles regarding chastity that lead to the fullness of authentic human living.
  - Other organizations in our society devoted to persons with a homosexual inclination can be of support—or a hindrance—in living a chaste and holy life. Each should be evaluated on its own merits using Church teachings as a guide and participation should be encouraged or discouraged accordingly, as appropriate.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS: A RESPECTFUL DIALOGUE

The pervasive influence of contemporary culture creates, at times, significant difficulties for the reception of Catholic teaching on homosexuality. In this context, there is need of a special effort to help persons with a homosexual inclination understand Church teaching. At the same time, it is important that Church ministers listen to the experiences, needs, and hopes of the persons with a homosexual inclination to whom and with whom they minister. Dialogue provides an exchange of information, and also communicates a respect for the innate dignity of other persons and a respect for their consciences. “Authentic dialogue, therefore, is aimed above all at the rebirth of individuals through interior conversion and repentance, but always with profound respect for consciences and with patience and at the step-by-step pace indispensable for modern conditions.”<sup>45</sup> Such dialogue facilitates an ongoing, interior conversion for all parties truly engaged in the exchange.

We extend a word of thanks to our brothers and sisters who have labored so patiently and faithfully in pastoral ministry and outreach to persons with a homosexual inclination. They have done so at times under adverse and difficult conditions. They have set an example for this important service to the Church.

### **Our Communion in Christ**

The Church is charged with the mission of preaching Christ in order that all people may be saved. In her ministry, the Church preaches the Good News of Jesus, the message of joy and peace that the world cannot give. This message provides the foundation for all her ministries. In the measure that we authentically preach Christ, we will build a healthy and holy communion of

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<sup>45</sup> Pope John Paul II, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliation and Penance (Reconciliatio et paenitentia)*, no. 25 (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1984).

sisters and brothers, diverse in gifts but one in the Spirit. As Jesus Christ came and died for us in order “to gather into one the dispersed children of God” (Jn 11:52), so we must all work for unity among God’s people,

with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another through love, striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace: one body and one Spirit, as you were also called to the one hope of your call; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Eph 4:2-6)

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General Secretary, USCCB

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