

A note on the teaching of the Catholic Church concerning homosexuality

Cardinal Basil Hume

April 1997

INTRODUCTION

1. In 1992 background advice was offered by officials of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to bishops in the United States about how to assess the impact of legislative proposals concerning homosexual people and their housing and employment rights. Some of the expressions used in the subsequently published note of this advice, and quoted without context, caused distress and anger, together with misunderstanding of where the Church stands. In 1993 I prepared 'Some Observations on the teaching of the Catholic Church concerning homosexual people' which was sent to certain organisations and individuals.

2. Since then I have been approached by a number of these groups and individuals seeking further clarification on the Church's teaching on homosexuality, and I have continued to reflect on a bishop's pastoral responsibility in this area. I concluded that it might be helpful to publish an expanded note incorporating the main points made in the earlier 'Observations' document, and I did so in February 1995. In some subsequent press reports, parts of paragraph 9 were quoted out of context and misinterpreted, and I have therefore added some introductory sentences to the beginning of this paragraph, to emphasise its true meaning.

3. In what follows I quote on a number of occasions from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's "Letter on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons," published in 1986 (PC). I also quote from "An Introduction to the Pastoral Care of Homosexual People," prepared by the Catholic Social Welfare Commission of our Bishops' Conference in 1979 (IH).

PRINCIPLES

The Dignity of the Human Person

4. The Church recognises the dignity of all people and does not define or label them in terms of their sexual orientation. "The pastor and counsellor must see all people, irrespective of their sexuality, as children of God and destined for eternal life." (IH page 10) The Congregation states this even more fully: "The human person, made in the image and likeness of God, can hardly be adequately described by a reductional reference to his or her sexual orientation. Every one living on the face of the earth has personal problems and difficulties, but has challenges to growth, strengths, talents and gifts as well. Today, the Church provides a badly needed context for the care of the human person when she refuses to consider the person as heterosexual or homosexual and insists that every person has a fundamental identity: a creature of God, and by grace, his child and heir to eternal life." (PC para. 16)

Sexuality and Marriage

5. In upholding the dignity of people who are homosexual the Church is being consistent to its teaching. There are two fundamental principles which determine the Catholic Church's teaching on sexual matters. First, the Church has always taught that the sexual (genital) expression of love is intended by God's plan of creation to find its place exclusively within marriage between a man and a woman. The Church therefore cannot in any way equate a homosexual partnership with a heterosexual marriage. Secondly, the sexual (genital) expression of love must be open to the possible transmission of new life. For these two reasons the Church does not approve of homosexual genital acts. When the Church describes such acts as "intrinsically disordered" (PC para.3), it means that these acts are not consistent with the two fundamental principles mentioned above. It is in this sense that the Church teaches that there can be no moral right to homosexual acts, even though they are no longer held to be criminal in many secular legal systems. No individual, bishop, priest or layperson, is in a position to change the teaching of the Church which she considers to be God-given.

FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

The Homosexual Orientation

6. It is necessary to distinguish between sexual orientation or inclination, and engaging in sexual (genital) activity, heterosexual or homosexual. Neither a homosexual nor a heterosexual orientation leads inevitably to sexual activity. Furthermore, an individual's sexual orientation can be unclear, even complex. Also, it may vary over the years. Meaning of 'objectively disordered'

7. The particular orientation or inclination of the homosexual person is not a moral failing. An inclination is not a sin. An inclination towards acts which are contrary to the teaching of the Church has, however, been described as "objectively disordered." The word "disordered" is a harsh one in our English language. It immediately suggests a sinful situation, or at least implies a demeaning of the person or even a sickness. It should not be so interpreted. First, the word is a term belonging to the vocabulary of traditional Catholic moral theology and philosophy. It is used to describe an inclination which is a departure from what is generally regarded to be the norm. The norm consists of an inclination towards a sexual relationship with a person of the opposite sex and not between persons of the same sex. Being a homosexual person is, then, neither morally good nor morally bad; it is homosexual genital acts that are morally wrong. Secondly, when the Church speaks of the inclination to homosexuality as being "an objective disorder" (PC para.3), she does not consider, of course, the whole personality and character of the individual to be thereby disordered. Homosexual people, as well as heterosexual people, can, and often do, give a fine example of friendship and the art of chaste loving.

Friendship

8. Friendship is a gift from God. Friendship is a way of loving. Friendship is necessary for every person. To equate friendship and full sexual involvement with another is to distort the very concept of friendship. Sexual loving presupposes friendship but friendship does not require full sexual involvement. It is a mistake to say or think or presume that if two persons of the same or different sexes enjoy a deep and lasting friendship then they must be sexually involved.

Human love

9. The word 'love' must never be thought of as being synonymous with the word 'sex'. Love can take many forms. There is the love between parents and children, between relatives, as well as the chaste love of friendship. Of course, for married people their sexual relationship should be an important part of their love. In whatever context it arises, and always respecting the appropriate manner of its expression, love between two persons, whether of the same sex or of a different sex, is to be treasured and respected. 'Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus', we read. [John, 11.5.] When two persons love they experience in a limited manner in this world what will be their unending delight when one with God in the next. To love another is in fact to reach out to God who shares his loveliness with the one we love. To be loved is to receive a sign, or a share, of God's unconditional love.

10. To love another - in the sense explained in paragraphs 8 and 9 above - is to have entered the area of the richest human experience, whether that love is between persons of the same sex or of a different sex. But that experience of love is spoiled, whether it is in marriage or in friendship, when we do not think and act as God wills us to think and act. Human loving is precarious for human nature is wounded and frail. Thus marriage and friendship will never be easy to handle. We shall often fail, but the ideal remains.

RESPONSE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

11. The Catholic Church is called to present to all ages a demanding understanding and ethic of marriage and sexuality, one that is often difficult to realise in practice but which all should continually strive to make their own. The Church is also aware that people may fail to live consistently what she teaches. Pastoral understanding is brought to bear on such failure; the Church does not reject such people but wishes to walk with them in order to guide them to a fuller understanding and realisation of the teaching she holds to be God-given.

Defence of Human Rights

12. The Catholic Church advocates and defends the fundamental human rights of every person. The Church cannot, however, acknowledge amongst fundamental human rights a proposed right to acts which she teaches are morally wrong. Nevertheless, it is a fundamental human right of every person, irrespective of sexual orientation, to be treated by individuals and by society with dignity, respect and fairness. The document produced by the Social Welfare Commission for the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales in 1979 (IH) summed up the Church's obligations in this country in words which apply equally today: "The Church has a serious responsibility to work for the elimination of any injustices perpetrated on homosexuals by society. As a group that has suffered more than its share of oppression and contempt, the homosexual community has particular claim upon the concern of the Church." (IH page 13)

Social Policy

13. Given the complexity of the issues of social policy which can arise, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has indicated that judgments about legislation and responses which may be made by the Church can be left to the bishops of the country concerned (L'Osservatore Romano 29 July 1992). The Church does have a duty to oppose discrimination in all circumstances where a person's sexual orientation or activity cannot reasonably be regarded as relevant.

However, in making any response to proposed changes in the law which are designed to eliminate injustices against homosexual people, there are a number of criteria which have to be kept in mind. Among the most important are the following:

are there reasonable grounds for judging that the institution of marriage and the family could, and would, be undermined by a change in the law?

would society's rejection of a proposed change in the law be more harmful to the common good than the acceptance of such a change?

does a person's sexual orientation or activity constitute, in specific circumstances, a sufficient and relevant reason for treating that person in any way differently from other citizens?

These are matters of practical judgment and assessment of social consequences, and thus must be considered case by case - and this without prejudice to Catholic teaching concerning homosexual acts. It may well be, however, that Catholics will reach diverse conclusions about particular legislative proposals even taking into account these criteria.

Condemnation of Violence

14. The Church condemns violence of speech or action against homosexual people. This was made very clear in the first part of paragraph 10 of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith's 1986 letter which dealt with this specific issue: "It is deplorable that homosexual persons have been and are the object of violence in speech or in action. Such treatment deserves condemnation from the Church's pastors wherever it occurs. It reveals a kind of disregard for others which endangers the most

fundamental principles of a healthy society. The intrinsic dignity of each person must always be respected in word, in action and in law" (PC para.10). Any systematic failure to respect that dignity needs to be tackled, if necessary by appropriate legislation.

15. Nothing in the Church's teaching can be said to support or sanction, even implicitly, the victimisation of homosexual men and women. Furthermore, 'homophobia' should have no place among Catholics. Catholic teaching on homosexuality is not founded on, and can never be used to justify, 'homophobic' attitudes. Even if homosexual people are unwisely tempted to act in a provocative or destructive manner this does not justify 'homophobic' attitudes or reactions.

Pastoral Response

16. The Church's pastoral response to homosexual people will involve a respectful attitude and a sympathetic understanding of their situation, in addition to sacramental life, prayer, counsel and individual care, so that the "whole Christian community can come to recognise its own call to assist its brothers and sisters, without deluding them or isolating them" (PC para.15). The Church acknowledges that "a homosexual person, as every human being, deeply needs to be nourished at many different levels simultaneously" (PC para.16). Furthermore the Church in this country has stressed that "Homosexuals have a right to enlightened and effective pastoral care with pastoral ministers who are properly trained to meet their pastoral needs" (IH page 13). Those who exercise pastoral care recognise that human nature is frail and subject to temptation. They are particularly concerned to be understanding and to help those who find it hard to live in accordance with the Church's teaching. Furthermore, although homosexual genital acts are objectively wrong, nonetheless, the Church warns against generalisations in attributing culpability in individual cases (PC para.11).

CONCLUSION

17. All are precious in the eyes of God. The love which one person can have for and receive from another is a gift from God. Nonetheless, God expects homosexual people, as indeed he does heterosexual people, to keep his law and to work towards achieving a difficult ideal, even if this will only be achieved gradually (cf Familiaris Consortio N.34). God has a love for every person which is greater than any love which one human being could have for another. In all the circumstances and situations of life, God calls each person, whatever his or her sexual orientation, to fulfil that part of his created design which only that person can fulfil.