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Human Sexuality (III): Keep It Simple

This article by Fr. Ralston is reprinted from 1994.

The continuing, exhausting, and utterly tiresome debate about sex (or "human sexuality", we are now expected to say) and what the church ought to do and think about it took a delightfully bizarre turn a few weeks ago. A former speech writer for Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, married with two children, finally "came out", announced that he was gay and divorced and proud of it, affirmed his continuing affection for family and family values, including the family he has now established with his male friend, and proclaimed God's love for him and all homosexuals. He is now also himself "ordained" and ministers in a clerical collar to an explicitly and (I take it) exclusively gay church in Dallas, which looks and sounds for all the world like any contemporary New Prayer Book Episcopal Church, although I suppose it is in fact non-denominational. The gentleman spoke about his transition with passion and intelligence, and some wry humor. He was attractive and plausible, and an effective advocate for the gay rights agenda.

With part of this there can be no dispute: Does God continue to love those persons who are openly or secretly homosexual? There are no two answers to this. Of course He does. In the great Ash Wednesday collect we begin: "Almighty God, who hatest nothing that thou hast made..." This is a given part of the Biblical doctrine of creation.

And it is just here, from this unassailable premise, that confusion begins. The old trick that "God loves the sinner, but hates the sin" does not begin to do justice to the identification of the agent with his act, even with an act he despises in his heart, and at some level of his person rejects and deplors. Without this sense of self-reprobation we could not recognize either guilt or innocence, or know the difference between good and evil. But neither does the new trick, "I'm just made this way," justify acting out whatever one has identified oneself as being. Unless one is dealing with some kind of pathology, in which the person literally is controlled by impulses beyond his natural will, we remain responsible for our actions, and never more so than when we have achieved a reasonable measure of self-identification.

For example, I have now lived almost sixty-five years with a very uncertain disposition and an unstable temper. To some degree I "know myself", and the sorts of situations and conditions I must try to avoid. Should I fly into a passion and wreak havoc, as I have unfortunately been known to do, I dare not excuse myself. I have no right—no

inalienable right—to exercise my temper. It is a part of character to investigate and discipline the temperament one is born with, the “given” of one’s birth and genes.

And we come by this to the immense pathetic fallacy of the whole gay agenda. The homosexual apologia rests on the assumption that we have a “right”—an inalienable right—to “our sexuality”. But we have no such thing. Every society on earth, even the most primitive, has known that this particular human energy, or capacity, must be limited and disciplined in some way or other. It is too powerful and too close to the psychological center of the human being to be allowed total license. The restrictions differ widely, but civilization rests on such distinctions and disciplines. The animals have an instinctual and habitual discipline within which they live happily; but even in their case not without danger at “mating time.”

We have no such interior constraints, and for us to imagine that because we are sexual beings we somehow possess our sexuality and are free to express it at will is close to the aboriginal sin of assertion of human power against God. Not for nothing is the first evidence of the result of our envy and avarice the making of aprons to cover our nakedness. What had been no shame became something that must somehow be kept private. St. Augustine is not far off the mark in identifying the prime evidence of original sin as concupiscence.

What we have on our hands right now is an assertion of human freedom to act out our individual sexual identities in the way we choose, or which has been chosen for us from birth (by “nature”). From guilt and sexual modesty we have careened into extreme extroversion and aggression.

The opponents of homosexual behavior are often governed more by questions of taste than principle. It is an aesthetic aversion sometimes masquerading as a moral conviction. The apologists for such behavior are often governed by a shrill necessity to justify themselves. The issues are joined too often therefore on incompatible grounds, and the arguments (or missiles!) just pass by each other. There is willful misunderstanding on both sides.

But underneath is a very simple thing. Like it or not, the Bible does not approve of fornication, of limitless sexual activity, whether between man and woman, or man and man, or woman and woman. The collect for Ash Wednesday proceeds, “and dost forgive the sins of all those who are penitent.” The problem therefore is what one recognizes as sin.

The major sexual sin in the Bible is without doubt adultery. It involves both theft and covetousness, and most of the time false witness as well. Fornication runs the gamut: everything from “gather ye rosebuds” to the hideous violation of the levite’s concubine (in Judges) and the attempted sexual assault on the angels in Sodom. In whatever form, from the playful fun and games of the young (which are not so playful now with the present hazard of the virus) to the desperate bacchanals of the depraved, fornication is rejected in the Bible as an acceptable mode of human sexual behavior.

As a sin, therefore, we know it can run the gamut from the ridiculous to the soul-destroying. Corinth in St. Paul’s time was absolute sewer,

the stink-pot of the ancient world, just as bad as anything in New York or San Francisco or Savannah today. He saw what this mode of indulgence did to people. I used to think his attitudes were odd, even funny, and I certainly got tired of fornication during the Lenten readings. But he was right.

The Church must not, in the name of any ideology or so-called human "rights" argument, authorize and bless sin. Fornication is sin. It is against the integrity of our human nature. No one has a "right" to sex. It is beneath the animal level for us to behave as if we had such a right, under the deceptive canon, "sex is good." Such delusion has depraved and corrupted our society, no matter how plausible and sensible it can be made to seem. God does not hate anyone for what he or she is. But the wrath of God can indeed be terrible for the person who rationalizes his actual behavior on that ground, in order to call evil good, and wrong right.

The petition in the Litany gives the true sense of this: "From all inordinate and sinful affections, and from all the deceits of the world the flesh, and the devil, Good Lord, deliver us."

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