

The Church, Homosexuality and AIDS

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There are a number of ways in which HIV, the virus responsible for AIDS, is transmitted, but still by far the most important worldwide and in particular in the West is sexual transmission. In America and Europe a major and growing route of infection is needle-sharing among drug abusers, but in the past, and still now, it has spread mainly, though far from exclusively, through homosexual contact between men. It is this sexual aspect of AIDS, and its connection with homosexuality, that has made it so controversial, and which has made it so problematic for the Church to find a proper response to it. So it is on AIDS, sex and the Church that I shall focus.

What is the proper attitude of the Church to AIDS? One thing to be said first of all is that the Church's ministry is one of word and deed. As a body we seek both to proclaim the Gospel and to bring ordinary human comfort to those in need, whoever they may be. We not only preach, teach and defend a message; we also tend the sick, feed the hungry, visit those in prison, and so on. We lay before people the possibility of a fuller life and help them to share in the life that we ourselves have received. The two belong together; ours is a practical Gospel. We cannot, as Church, preach the commandments of Christ without being committed to obey them; we cannot preach his love for us and for all without letting that love reach others through us. In the particular case of AIDS it is up to us both to speak and to act in ways that communicate the Gospel, that bring life and comfort. This will include on the one hand teaching people how they can avoid contracting HIV and on the other caring for those who have contracted HIV and may have gone on to develop AIDS, as well as for their families, friends and lovers.

There can be no doubt that, despite some initial hesitation in the face of the unknown, the Church is and will be willing to care as best it can for the physical and spiritual needs of those with AIDS and HIV infection. The physical care of the sick and dying has always been an important part of the Church's task, as has the bringing of comfort and the assurance of the love of God to the distressed and those faced with imminent death. AIDS is no exception, and laity and clergy alike, as individuals and in groups, are already doing much work in this area, bringing comfort to those sick at home or in hospital, or giving education, advice and practical help through AIDS-related charities.

But there is a problem in giving full rein to this willingness. The

problem is at the level of what the Church says, of teaching and moral theology and of traditional attitudes in the Church to sex in general and to homosexuality in particular. It appears to me that in a number of ways the Church has been and still is in danger of failing in its mission, failing to contribute what it can to the problem of AIDS.

First, and this is a relatively minor shortcoming, there has been a certain amount of what might be called theological opportunism, a tendency to make theological capital out of people's suffering. There have been those who have tried to conscript AIDS into the service of some particular theological or moral viewpoint. Some have gone so far as to call AIDS divine punishment on perverts, or in general a judgment from heaven on the corruption of earth. Thankfully, less has been heard of late from the wrath-of-God brigade, but more subtle variations on the same theme continue to be sounded: AIDS is a warning that there is a sickness in Western society, or a reminder from God that the proper place of sex is in marriage, a divine vindication of Catholic or Christian teaching. But there is little purpose to be served by making these claims; they sound too much either like Christians scoring points off unbelievers or like Christian self-flagellation, and do little to help the Church evolve a practical response. And they are in any case inherently implausible. There is no reason why we should see AIDS as a sign from God of the moral degeneracy of our times. Nor is it a divine warning in particular against deviant or unchristian sexual practices. We should not forget that there has always been a fair amount of moral degeneracy, and there have always been deviant sexual practices; and most of this has gone on in safety, without catastrophic consequences for those involved. What has caused this tragedy for so many people is not their depravity but a novel and deadly virus, which we hope to be able to deal with before too long. (And even in the age of HIV, much deviant sex still goes on without fatal consequences; the spread of safer sex information has been a help here.) The idea that God might use such a deadly but blunt instrument as AIDS to convey his message, as well as being repulsive, is not consonant with what we know of Him from Christ. What God wants to convey to us, He does so not through catastrophe but through the Gospel.

It has been said, too, that a possible divine purpose of AIDS, and one possible beneficial result of it, is to lead people to a rediscovery of chastity. But there is no reason to believe this, either. One thing that AIDS has certainly done in the West is to make many people rethink their sexual attitudes and re-form their sexual lifestyle, and in a direction the Church must approve of. But this is far from saying that AIDS has made people rediscover the Christian virtue of chastity. Chastity as understood by Christians is, after all, not merely a matter of sexual abstinence for the unmarried. It involves an orientation of oneself towards God and valuing of human relationships and of one's sexual faculties as gifts of God. The current AIDS scare may have brought this about in a few cases, though it is not easy to see how. It can be said that

on the whole AIDS does not teach people chastity; it only teaches them fear. It may be that in some cases fear has a certain shock value. The realisation that they are exposing themselves or their friends to danger of death, or the illness and death of those around them, may bring some people to see the emptiness of a way of life based on sex. But we cannot see this as a good side of AIDS. There are better, less painful, more human ways of learning this lesson. And there is no reason anyway to believe that this is the lesson that is learnt in most cases. Most people have reacted not with chastity but with condoms. What they have learnt is only that it is necessary to be cautious for a while, until a successful treatment is found.

That there will eventually be a successful treatment is something to be prayed for and expected. Already considerable advances have been made, and from the amount of research that is going on it seems likely that it will not be many years before AIDS can be cured, or at least made survivable. And until then it can be avoided by safer sex practices, which are, for those in danger of contracting or transmitting HIV infection, much more convenient and attractive than the complete abstinence the Church recommends to them as part of the ordering of their life towards God. In such circumstances it is simply mistaken to say that the Church is *the* key to beating AIDS, that AIDS can only be eliminated by everybody living as the Church would have them live. The Church's teaching on sex may have many things to recommend it, but its effectiveness for avoiding AIDS is not one of them.

But if some theological theorising about AIDS is unhelpful, it nevertheless remains true that, in a certain sense, the Church, in its teaching on sex and marriage, *does* have a key to elimination of AIDS, if only people would follow it. For HIV infection is spread from person to person by means of infected body fluids; and though it can be transmitted in a number of ways—by using infected needles, or from mother to child in the womb or through breast milk—it is mostly through intimate sexual contact that people get HIV into their system. Mostly, you get HIV by having sex with an infected person in such a way that their bodily fluids can enter your body.

Part of the Church's teaching on sex is that genital activity belongs within the bounds of marriage. The Church did not come to this teaching because it makes for hygienic sex. It reflects the belief that sex is ordered by God to the generation of children and to the expression of a love open to embrace children, and that the divinely ordained institution of marriage is the proper setting for such love and for the care of children. Its basis is theological rather than medicinal. Nevertheless, in the context of AIDS the Church's teaching has obvious benefits. If everybody had followed it, AIDS would have spread much less than it in fact has, if at all. And if everybody now followed the Church's teaching on sex, the spread of AIDS would be greatly slowed and the syndrome could eventually be eliminated. It can be argued that by sticking steadfastly to

its teaching the Church is performing an important service. If the Church can get people to listen to its teaching and to follow it, it can persuade the unmarried to remain genitally inactive and the married to confine their genital activity to their marriage partner, it will be protecting them from HIV infection and from possible death from AIDS.

So much is obvious. But it is equally obvious that the Church will not succeed in this. At any rate, it will not succeed quickly enough to be of significant help in combatting AIDS. Not only are there many places where the Church's voice is literally not heard, but even where it is heard its teaching is not heeded. This is partly because of simple individual sinfulness, because people cannot face up to the strains of following a teaching they know to be right. But for many people, Catholics included, things are not so simple. Many people, Catholics included, find the Church's teaching not only incongenial or difficult, but also unconvincing or even straightforwardly wrong. And they may hold this view not because they refuse to listen to what the Church has to say, but because, having listened, they have found the Church's doctrine wanting; in other words, they hold this view not because they won't think, but as a result of their thinking. They may think it perfectly legitimate to have sexual relations outside marriage, perhaps with more than one partner, perhaps with a partner or partners of the same sex.

What is the Church to do in this situation? The first thing to recognise is that the Church itself must take part of the responsibility if its voice is not heard. The Church already has a bad reputation, both within and without, for its human insensitivity in matters sexual. This reputation is not entirely undeserved. Part of the problem lies with the content of the Church's teaching. It proclaims a lofty sexual ideal, but the predictable effect of this is to make many within the Church feel guilty and to see their sexuality as something essentially problematic. This includes not only those Catholics who fail to live up to the Church's ideal, but also those who cannot even bring themselves to share that ideal. There are the 'weak', those who basically accept the Church's teaching but find themselves all too often defeated by the strength of the temptations they face. But there is also another group: those to whom the lofty ideal of the Church simply does not speak; those who, like many Catholic homosexuals, cannot subscribe to the Church's official doctrine because their sexuality leads them in a different direction, who cannot in all conscience understand why their sexual desires are regarded in the Church as pathological, their sexual activity as sinful and unacceptable. This second group have a deeper difficulty than the first. Not only are they encouraged to see themselves as sinful by virtue of their sexuality, but they are also encouraged to doubt whether, since they are at odds with the Church in such an important area of life, and an area which the Church constantly brings to their attention, they have any genuine place in the Church at all. Many such people end up leaving the Church, sometimes painfully. Those that stay often do so only uneasily,

and they can do little more than maintain a guilty and bewildered silence.

If difficulties are caused by the content of what the Church teaches in this area, they arise too from the style and tone of that teaching. Too often the Church speaks the language of strident condemnation when it comes across behaviour it does not approve of, especially sexual behaviour. The tone of the Ratzinger *Letter on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* is a recent case in point. An obvious remark to be made about such language is that, while it might please the right-thinking and confirm them in their views, it alienates those at whom it is primarily directed, those who for one reason or another do not follow the Church's teaching. Though the *Letter* does in its later paragraphs go on to speak of the Church's concern for homosexuals, the average homosexual—and particularly the average Catholic homosexual—can be forgiven for not being terribly convinced; he or she will not be filled with enthusiasm at the idea of rushing into the consoling arms of compassionate, caring Mother Church. And in fact it has been the experience of many homosexuals that Mother Church, as represented by her ministers as well as laity, is often far from compassionate and consoling. Too often it is only condemnation that they receive.

There are Catholic organisations designed to give support to homosexuals, such as Quest in Britain and Dignity in the United States. These certainly do what they can to make homosexuals feel they have a place in the Church and to give them an opportunity to speak freely and be listened to. But there are many these associations do not reach; many do not know they exist, and it can require a certain courage even to join one. Since the Ratzinger *Letter* life has become more difficult for some of them. For most homosexuals in the Church, the only regular forum they have for discussing their sexuality and their sexual practices is the normally guilt-ridden session in the confessional. Here, though there are sensitive and sympathetic priests, the experience is too often anything but helpful, and the penitent, especially the sexually deviant, experiences only condemnation or an uneasy silence from the other side of the grille.

Thus those whom the Church professes to love it often succeeds only in burdening and alienating. Nobody in such a position is liable to see the Church as a possible helper, a place where he or she can turn in time of need. Still less are such people *encouraged* to seek help from the Church. In effect, the Church ends up denying itself as a source of strength and comfort for those who need it as much as anybody else does, and sometimes more. To the extent to which the Church thus makes itself unavailable to help people, it is failing in its God-given mission to relieve suffering, and may even stand accused of itself causing suffering.

This, regrettable in itself, is an even more serious matter in the age of AIDS. Because, in the West, it is still mostly homosexual men—one of the groups who find themselves most alienated from the Church—who contract HIV and suffer from AIDS. Homosexual men with HIV or AIDS often need material and spiritual help. The Church may be there,

ready to help, as it is always ready to help the sick and dying. But how many will actually *want* the Church's help? Put simply, if you were a homosexual man and had just discovered you were HIV Positive, would the first person you went to tell be your parish priest? For many, he would be the last.

These people whom the Church alienates are clearly in more danger of contracting HIV than those who practice what the Church preaches, and this is especially true of those of them who do not limit their sexual activity to one partner. There is also more danger of them transmitting it to others. This is a matter of concern for the Church, which is concerned whenever human life is threatened. What can the Church do about it? It is not enough to say that the Church must go on preaching its own chaste vision of sex when we know that there are those who do not share it and are sincerely convinced it is wrong, and when we know that there are those who, though they may be convinced Catholics, are simply weak-willed when it comes to sex. We cannot at this point say that if somebody is determined not to follow the Church's way, 'determined to sin', then the consequences are his or her own responsibility. We cannot be content that the Catholic has done his or her job in presenting the Christian vision of life; that if the people concerned reject it, as they are free to do, then there is no more that we can or should do. It is not enough for the Church to wait ready to show them compassion if and when they come down with AIDS. It is not enough to say that they are at the heart of the Church when they get AIDS, if they have effectively been banished to the margins, alienated and then ignored before they get AIDS. To adopt this attitude is also to neglect our responsibility to any others who may be endangered by their behaviour; it is to abdicate the obvious Christian responsibility to help preserve life. This route is simply not open to us as Christians.

What the Church says and what it does in pastoral practice inevitably hang together. Those who are actively engaged in the Church's caring ministry need not at the same time be moral theologians, and they may not be in a position to keep up to date with pastoral guidelines issued by the teaching authorities of the Church nationally or internationally. But pastoral care cannot simply go its own way. Pastoral practice which deliberately ignores the Church's moral teaching is in danger of being in bad faith. It can also produce confusion on the part of those who are supposed to be helped. No responsible Catholic pastoral worker wants to allow this to happen. But on the other hand effective pastoral work is a prime part of the Church's responsibility. This means that what the Church says in the moral sphere must facilitate pastoral practice. It is not open to us to say that the Church teaches the truth and that it is unfortunate if the truth has disastrous pastoral consequences. A theological approach that makes effective pastoral care more difficult needs to be changed. And it is not only the pastoral side that suffers. (A further point is that by its approach the Church invites failure also in its

teaching and preaching mission. For the Church's duty is not simply to speak, but to speak so that others might hear. The alienated do not listen, and cannot reasonably be expected to listen.)

By what it teaches and the tone in which it often speaks in public and in private the Church cuts itself off from being a resource for people suffering from AIDS or HIV infection. Christ commanded his followers to visit the sick. He made no exception, and neither does the Church make any exception, of the homosexual sick, not even of the promiscuous homosexual sick. But if our visits are to be welcomed then, at the very least, a new tone has to be found.

If there is a problem for those who need help, there is also one for many who would give it. When a priest is unhelpful it is not always because he is lacking in human sympathy and understanding. It can be because he is striving to be faithful to what the Church teaches. He is caught in a bind because any gesture of sympathy on his part can seem like condoning sin, or a betrayal of the Church whose servant he is. Similar problems can arise for those many Catholics who either do work or want to work alongside others to combat the spread of AIDS—in the medical professions, as members of voluntary organisations, etc. Often such work involves giving advice on safer sex practices, practices which may well be, according to the teaching of the Church, sinful. An obvious question is, can Catholics do this and remain faithful to the Church? For instance, can a Catholic give advice, with a clear conscience, to homosexual men on safer sex? However worthy the cause, however desirable it may be to stop the spread of the disease, is this not to condone, even actively to encourage, sin? The Catholic should by all means urge the homosexual to live in accordance with Church teaching, that is to give up all his sexual activity, to stop sinning. But if his advice is not heeded or is openly rejected—and it is very probable that that is what is going to happen—it seems he can do little more. For is not giving such advice and information a matter of telling people how to sin safely? Surely no Catholic can get involved in this sort of thing. In traditional Catholic theology it is never permissible to do moral evil, to sin, that good may come. However good the end may be, if the only means a Christian has of helping to stop the spread of the disease is to sin by encouraging others to commit sin, then he or she may not do so.

Is it possible to say anything useful here without abandoning traditional teaching on sex? There are many who would argue that it should be abandoned or at least modified. But it is unnecessary to get into that argument when we are concerned with AIDS. In fact, even from the most traditional standpoint, it is not necessary to encourage sin to save lives. It is possible for a Catholic to give, in good conscience, the advice that might be essential to saving life, however much the Church may disapprove of particular sexual practices. It has traditionally and rightly been held in Catholic moral theology that you should not sin at all, but that if you are resolved to perform a sinful action it is still

incumbent on you to minimise the evil that your action involves. You may, despite all advice or entreaty to the contrary, be resolved to commit murder, which is an evil. But your moral responsibility does not end with your decision to commit an evil act. It is still up to you to sin in the way that causes least evil, not to kill by a method that causes your victim unnecessary suffering, not to kill indiscriminately in order to get at your target, say, by blowing up a bus or an airliner; and so on. This same principle applies here. If, for example, a man is resolved, perhaps in good conscience, to continue in a sexual relationship with his male lover, and if we, in line with the Vatican and traditional teaching, regard that as an objective moral evil, it is still up to him to minimise the evil of his act. If he is going to continue his relationship (in which there may be much good), it is important that as little evil as possible should result from its sexual side. That is, it is morally important that he should not act in such a way as, among other things, to contribute to the spread of AIDS. He should, for example, be sure to remain faithful to his partner. If there is danger that one of them be already infected, he should perform those kinds of sex acts with his partner that minimise the chance of HIV passing between them. Since any Catholic can be concerned to minimise the evil consequences of other people's behaviour, it is perfectly in order to give advice on how this can be done, or give information on how such advice can be got. It is also good to encourage the stability of the relationship and sexual fidelity within it. This is not to encourage homosexual relationships; it is only to say that *if* people form such relationships *then* it is better that they be stable.

The point can be put another way. It is possible to speak of a fully human life lived in accordance with the virtues. Homosexual practices, like all sex outside marriage, have traditionally been seen as a way of failing specifically to live out the virtue of chastity. With the advent of AIDS the moral picture has changed somewhat. At a time when sex can be fatal, the Church cannot speak about it simply in terms of chastity. The man or woman who has multiple sex partners and exchanges body fluids with them multiplies his or her chances both of picking up HIV and of infecting others. The risk can be much reduced if precautions are taken. To fail to take those precautions is to show extreme lack of concern for one's sexual partners. It is to lack charity. For to put the life of somebody else in danger is to sin against the virtue of charity, which involves, among other things, cherishing the life of others. It is also to show a lack of proper concern for oneself. It is to sin against the virtue of prudence, which involves, in ordinary circumstances, taking sensible precautions to preserve one's own life and health. It is not possible now, if it ever was, to regard chastity as the only consideration in sex. Now, what people do sexually is not just a matter of how far they keep themselves pure and live up to an exalted ideal, but of the most elementary love for others and for themselves.

If somebody is resolved to act in a way that the Church regards as

unchaste, it is still his responsibility as a moral agent not to act uncharitably or imprudently. If modifying his sexual behaviour in certain ways reduces the risk of catching or of passing on HIV, to do so would be an exercise of charity and of prudence, so even if he will not abandon his sexual activity altogether he should modify it. Indeed, most people, Catholic or not, if they become properly aware of the dangers involved in what they are doing will want to modify their behaviour.

Anybody who helps people to do that, for instance by giving advice on safer sex, is assisting in the exercise of virtue. To give advice on safer sex is not to give advice on safer sin, and in no way involves condoning or approving any activity condemned by the Church as unchaste and therefore sinful. It is on the contrary an attempt to prevent sin, and as such is something that any Catholic can do with a clear conscience, part of the work of the Church. Indeed, to refuse to give such advice, should the opportunity present itself, might well itself be regarded as sinful, since it is shirking the Church's mission to protect life and promote virtue, to preserve bodies and nourish souls.



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