SPECIAL ISSUE: RELIGION AND SEXUALITY

Celibate Priests, Continent Homosexuals

What the exclusion of gay (and gay-friendly) men from priesthood reveals about the political nature of the Roman Catholic Church

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In 2005, for the first time in the history of the Catholic Church, the Vatican explicitly excluded homosexuals from its holy orders. Why now? And why extend the ban on homosexuality, despite the distinction drawn in the Catechism, from acts to tendencies? The logic of this Instruction is clearly political. It reveals that while pedophilia may be a burning social issue, homosexuality is considered the real ecclesial problem. Reading the various pronouncements of the Vatican on homosexuality since 1975 and the 'sexual liberation' shows how and why, with the rise of 'gay marriage', this became a defining issue for the Church. Sexual democracy is the key, with its rejection of any transcendent foundation of norms. The Vatican’s answer is a naturalization of the sexual order that explains its attacks on ‘gender’: man is made for woman. At the same time, the Church maintains the ‘unnatural’ definition of its priests as celibate males. While heterosexual Catholics are thus encouraged to marry, continence is now expected only from priests and from homosexuals. In the end, the risk that the latter should fill the ranks of the former accounts for the 2005 Vatican Instruction.

On November 29, 2005, L’Osservatore Romano, the official daily newspaper of the Vatican, published a text by the Congregation for Catholic Education (2005) called ‘Instruction Concerning the Criteria for the Discernment of Vocations with Regard to Persons with Homosexual Tendencies in View of Their Admission to the Seminary and to Holy Orders’. For what seems to be the first time in the history of the Church, homosexuals, defined by their tendencies rather than
solely by their acts, were henceforth to be excluded from ordained ministry. To be more precise, the document listed who the targets were: ‘the Church, while profoundly respecting the persons in question, cannot admit to the seminary or to holy orders those who practice homosexuality, present deep-seated homosexual tendencies or who support the so-called “gay culture”’ (Congregation for Catholic Education 2005).

This paper offers a genealogy of what may be called the ‘homosexual problem’ in recent Vatican theology. Why should it be defined in such broad terms, encompassing not only homosexuals themselves, whether defined by acts or mere tendencies, but also advocates of ‘gay culture’? Moreover, why should homosexuality become such a crucial issue not only for the Church, but also within it? The centrality of sexual issues in contemporary Vatican theology and politics is not always taken seriously by its critics—as if it merely betrayed that the Catholic authorities are out of step with modernity. However, as we shall see, this is a more fundamental issue: what is at stake is the place and role of the Church within modernity: the current reliance on a natural (or naturalized) order of gender and sexuality is but the sign of this confrontation with today’s democratic societies.

It might seem that the genealogical approach adopted in this paper runs contrary to the logic of theology, which relies on the authority of Scripture to develop what may seem a timeless anthropology. However, the Instruction, just like all the documents that have been published by the Vatican on the subject of homosexuality since the 1970s, insists on the urgency of the current context: Biblical anthropology is thus presented as a response to a political history that might undermine it. Vatican theology claims to provide timeless answers to timely questions: the genealogical method is here an attempt at dealing with this tension through a close reading of the contexts of the various pronouncements on homosexuality. This calls for special attention to the reformulations of the ‘homosexual problem’, in particular since the 1980s, under the responsibility of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, later to become Pope Benedict.

The Political Life of the Psyche

The broad exclusion pronounced in the Instruction is all the more remarkable if one considers the teachings of the Church, most clearly summarized in the Catechism published (in its second and final version) in 1997. These are actually recalled in the previous paragraph of the 2005 document:

The Catechism distinguishes between homosexual acts and homosexual tendencies. Regarding acts, it teaches that Sacred Scripture presents them as grave sins. Tradition has constantly considered them as intrinsically immoral and contrary to the natural law. Consequently, under no circumstances can they be approved. Deep-seated homosexual tendencies, which are found in a number of men and women, are also objectively disordered and, for those
same people, often constitute a trial. Such persons must be
accepted with respect and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust
discrimination in their regard should be avoided. They are called to
fulfill God’s will in their lives and to unite to the sacrifice of the
Lord’s Cross the difficulties they may encounter. (Congregation for
Catholic Education 2005)

The distinction between ‘acts' and ‘tendencies' is evoked only to be
revoked, as both are cause for exclusion (or what is considered by the
Instruction ‘just discrimination’) — through a qualification: ‘deep-seated’
tendencies, by contrast to what is considered a mere phase:
‘Different, however, would be the case in which one were dealing with
homosexual tendencies that were only the expression of a transitory
problem – for example, that of an adolescence not yet superseded.
Nevertheless, such tendencies must be clearly overcome at least
three years before ordination to the diaconate’ (Congregation for
Catholic Education 2005).

The argument is explicitly couched in psychological terms: ‘The
candidate to the ordained ministry must reach affective maturity. Such
maturity will allow him to relate correctly to both men and women,
developing in him a true sense of spiritual fatherhood towards the
Church community that will be entrusted to him.’ This maturity is not to
be found in homosexuals — whether practicing, or only suffering from
‘deep-seated tendencies’. ‘Such persons, in fact, find themselves in a
situation that gravely hinders them from relating correctly to men and
women’ (Congregation for Catholic Education 2005).

However, the logic of this exclusion is of a different nature: it is
political, rather than psychological. The problem is not just ‘disorderly
conduct’ (acts): homosexuality itself (tendencies) is considered
‘objectively disordered’. This point is made explicit by the third term:
those ‘who support the so-called “gay culture” are in the same way
barred from the holy orders. The problem is not just gays, but also
their supporters. The reason for erasing the distinction between acts
and tendencies is made clear by this extension to gay-friendly allies:
the ‘disorder’ is political. This was made explicit the day after the
Instruction was published, on November 30, 2005, in the comments
written in L’Osservatore Romano by Mgr. Tony Anatrella, 1 who had
earlier been one of the most vocal opponents of the French
Pacs (the Civil Pact of Solidary, or 1999 law on civil unions), and still remained
critical, more generally, of what might be called the ‘gay agenda’—
both within the public sphere, as a psychoanalyst denouncing ‘the
reign of Narcissus’ and the ‘interdiction of difference’, but also as a
priest working for the Pontifical Council for the Family.

Catholic tradition, Anatrella (2006, pp. 27-33) argues, meets ‘the good
common sense of the nations’ (‘le bon sens commun des peuples’):
homosexuality is ‘a disorder’. However, what is new about the
homosexual ‘problem’ today is that homosexuality may not be
perceived as a problem any longer. ‘In the last few years,
homosexuality has become an increasingly disturbing phenomenon,
and it is considered in several countries as a normal “quality,” whereas it has always been a problem in the psychic organization of sexuality, and it has never played a determinant role in the definition of society (“dans les choix de société”). The psychic problem is eternal, according to Anatrella; the political one defines our current condition.

This is why the psychological theory transforms into a political argument. ‘Homosexuality is a fundamental incompleteness and immaturity of human sexuality. While respecting the dignity of the persons, it is unacceptable that this respect be instrumentalized through the implication that equality among human beings involves obtaining the same rights, while it is necessary that everyone should be in the right situation to have access to them. In other words, homosexuals are not in the proper condition to marry, to adopt children, and to enter priesthood’ (Anatrella 2006).

This is also why the argument relies very little on Catholic tradition—only in a paragraph, ‘briefly noting that several councils, in the history of the Church, have condemned and severely punished homosexual practices on the part of the clergy’ (Anatrella 2006). One might point out that the repression of ‘unnatural’ acts has not always focused as much as today on homosexual practices: although the Vatican certainly does not share its concern for heterosexual privacy, its reasoning recalls that of the Supreme Court of the United States in the 1986 Bowers v. Hardwick decision that narrowed the definition of ‘sodomy’ to its homosexual dimension.

Ultimately, the fundamental paradox of the ‘immemorial’ argument against homosexual rights is that it is also ahistorical—if not antihistorical. The reason here is of course that until now, such disciplinary measures only concerned acts (‘practices’, as noted by Anatrella himself)—not tendencies, or what might be called (reversing a title borrowed from Judith Butler) ‘the political life of the psyche’. The question can thus be asked: why has homosexuality become such a crucial problem for the Catholic Church that tendencies should be banned along with acts, despite the distinction drawn in the Catechism, through the publication of an Instruction, for the first time in two thousand years?

The Social Problem and the Ecclesial One

One might think that the answer has to do with the rising tide of scandals concerning pedophilia that have plagued the Church, especially in the years 2000. The Instruction was actually perceived as a response to this crisis—for example, a former Master of the Dominicans, Timothy Radcliffe, noted on November 26, 2005, in The Tablet: ‘When the document says that this has been made ‘more urgent by the current situation’, then presumably it is thinking of the crisis of sexual abuse that has shaken the Church in the West’. But this response immediately raises ‘two questions: does this document
provide good criteria for discerning who has a vocation? And will it help to address the crisis of sexual abuse?’ (Radcliffe 2005).

Radcliffe’s answer is clearly skeptical, albeit respectful: ‘This document tries to identify criteria that will help to discern that maturity and points to issues that are undeniably important. These criteria need to be applied equally to all candidates, regardless of their sexual orientation.’ He even goes so far as to suggest that homophobia may be more of a problem than homosexuality: ‘The Catechism of the Council of Trent taught that priests should talk about sex “with moderation rather than copiousness”. We should be more attentive to whom our seminarians may be inclined to hate than whom they love. Racialism, misogyny and homophobia would all be signs that someone could not be a good model of Christ’ (Radcliffe 2005).

What amounts to a confusion of homosexuality with pedophilia was even denounced by some as a deflection from the real problem: the LGBT Catholic organization DignityUSA (2005) thus argued that ‘the Vatican continues to erroneously focus on gay men as the cause of the Church sexual abuse crisis while neither addressing the root causes of the crisis nor disciplining in any fashion the bishops who share responsibility for it, instead choosing to issue a blanket repudiation of gay priests and gay seminarians’. This made no sense to the organization: ‘Catholic seminaries should be looking at the sexual maturity of the seminarian not the sexual orientation and should apply the same criteria to everyone regardless of perceived sexual orientation’. DignityUSA thus ‘called on seminaries to continue to welcome gay students’, and turned upside down the Vatican’s argument about maturity: ‘The continuing inability of seminary preparation to help our future priests and bishops integrate an understanding of their own sexuality into a mature emotional and spiritual life is another example of the Church’s adolescent understanding of all sexuality’ (DignityUSA 2005).

Indeed, the issue of pedophilia in the Church was very much in the news at the time: for example, only a few months earlier, in August 2005, the Pope himself was accused in a lawsuit of conspiring to cover up the molestation of three boys in Texas, before obtaining immunity from prosecution as a head of State (allegedly through the intervention of then-President Bush). The urgency is felt in the November document: ‘the present Instruction does not intend to dwell on all questions in the area of affectivity and sexuality that require an attentive discernment during the entire period of formation. Rather, it contains norms concerning a specific question, made more urgent by the current situation’.

However, in 2005, there was no statement from the Vatican comparable to the April 12, 2010 declaration by Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Holy See’s Secretary of State, establishing for the first time a connection: ‘many psychologists and psychiatrists have shown that there is no link between celibacy and pedophilia, but many others
have shown, I have recently been told, that there is a relationship between homosexuality and pedophilia’ (Donadio 2010). In fact, no such argument was suggested in the Instruction: ‘that is: whether to admit to the seminary and to Holy Orders candidates who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies’.

While ominous, the conclusion is no more explicit: ‘One must in no way overlook the negative consequences that can derive from the ordination of persons with deep-seated homosexual tendencies’. In fact, one could argue, not so much (as critics generally do) that the Church is trying to obscure pedophilia by addressing homosexuality, but rather, as may have gone unnoticed, that while the Vatican surely acknowledges that pedophilia is a social problem, its most pressing ecclesial problem is today, scandals notwithstanding, that of homosexuality.

From Sinful Acts to Homosexual Persons

It is worth recalling that the ‘problem’ has not always been formulated in the same terms. It was first defined as one that concerns homosexual acts. In 1975, the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued a ‘Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics’. However, in the context of the 1970s, the focus of Persona Humana was sexual liberation in general (‘the unbridled exaltation of sex’), as gay sex was listed between sex before marriage and masturbation. This document presented a vibrant defense of chastity: ‘Individuals should be endowed with this virtue according to their state in life: for some it will mean virginity or celibacy consecrated to God, which is an eminent way of giving oneself more easily to God alone with an undivided heart. For others it will take the form determined by the moral law, according to whether they are married or single. But whatever the state of life, chastity is not simply an external state; it must make a person’s heart pure’ (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1975). Chastity is thus clearly distinguished from abstinence—only for those ‘consecrated to God’ is it conflated with virginity or celibacy.

Regarding homosexuality, a distinction is already drawn:

between homosexuals whose tendency comes from a false education, from a lack of normal sexual development, from habit, from bad example, or from other similar causes, and is transitory or at least not incurable; and homosexuals who are definitively such because of some kind of innate instinct or a pathological constitution judged to be incurable. (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1975)

But the concern is that the latter category might feel entitled to approval: ‘some people conclude that their tendency is so natural that it justifies in their case homosexual relations within a sincere communion of life and love analogous to marriage, in so far as such homosexuals feel incapable of enduring a solitary life’. The Vatican’s
response is unambiguous: ‘But no pastoral method can be employed which would give moral justification to these acts on the grounds that they would be consonant with the condition of such people. For according to the objective moral order, homosexual relations are acts which lack an essential and indispensable finality’ (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1975).

What is striking in this 1975 Declaration, compared to the 2005 Instruction, is the focus. Innate tendencies do not justify homosexual acts; but the problem under discussion is acts, not tendencies. There is no condemnation of homosexuals, and not even of homosexuality itself. While ‘homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered’, homosexual tendencies are pathologized—and thus, homosexual ‘culpability will be judged with prudence’ (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1975). What is at stake is what people do, not what they are. But while this distinction will remain important, as is apparent in the Catechism, it becomes more and more problematic. The same Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, now under the responsibility of then-cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, issued a letter in 1986 that reveals this clearly: the problem has now become ‘homosexual persons’.

The 1986 Letter starts from the 1975 Declaration: as we have seen, ‘the Congregation took note of the distinction commonly drawn between the homosexual condition or tendency and individual homosexual actions. These were described as deprived of their essential and indispensable finality, as being ‘intrinsically disordered’, and able in no case to be approved of’ (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1986). But the new document then goes on:

In the discussion which followed the publication of the Declaration, however, an overly benign interpretation was given to the homosexual condition itself, some going so far as to call it neutral, or even good. Although the particular inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin, it is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil; and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder. (1986)

How is this new concern to be understood? The answer is manifestly political: ‘increasing numbers of people today, even within the Church, are bringing enormous pressure to bear on the Church to accept the homosexual condition as though it were not disordered and to condone homosexual activity’ (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1986). Such tendencies may not be a sin; but this disorder is likely to lead to acts—all the more so if critics of the Church denounce its position as ‘unjust discrimination’, and thus normalize homosexuality. At the time, the political context was that of attacks against anti-sodomy laws perceived as discriminatory—for example with the 1981 European Court of Human Rights case Dudgeon v. United Kingdom. The Vatican Letter also comes only three months after the US Supreme Court decision Bowers v. Hardwick, which can be interpreted as a form of American resistance to the European
evolution towards gay rights—as the Court will make clear by contrast in its 2003 reversal, Lawrence v. Texas, when invoking that very same European example.

Of course, the Church did not condone homophobia in 1986 either: ‘It is deplorable that homosexual persons have been and are the object of violent malice in speech or in action ... The intrinsic dignity of each person must always be respected in word, in action and in law’. The document may call for respect, but certainly not for legal protection: ‘the proper reaction to crimes committed against homosexual persons should not be to claim that the homosexual condition is not disordered’. In fact, homophobic violence is presented as a reaction against claims for gay rights: ‘When such a claim is made and when homosexual activity is consequently condoned, or when civil legislation is introduced to protect behavior to which no one has any conceivable right, neither the Church nor society at large should be surprised when other distorted notions and practices gain ground, and irrational and violent reactions increase’ (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1986). Too much tolerance would only breed intolerance.

Resisting Recognition

In the years 2000, the tone and the logic of Vatican interventions hardened yet again as the political movement for gay rights gained ground in the West, and extended to marriage rights. Indeed, civil unions had already been tested in Scandinavia, starting in 1989; but as same-sex couples were entitled to a specific status, separate from heterosexual ones, marriage did not seem at risk. The battle in the United States, following the 1993 Hawaii decision Baehr v. Lewin, changed the nature of the debate, as it led to what was precisely called the Defense of Marriage Act in 1996. The controversies leading to the 1999 vote of the French Pacs manifested that what was at stake was not so much the normalization of homosexuals as the questioning of the heterosexual norm—at least, it can be safely said that the fear of Vatican theologians was that homosexuality should become normal, rather than normalized.

This logic culminated in 2001, when the Netherlands became the first country in the world to open marriage equally to same-sex and different-sex couples. Even in the United States, the June 26, 2003 decision in Lawrence v. Texas against sodomy laws, in recognizing the ‘dignity’ of homosexuals, paved the way for same-sex marriage, as the November 18, 2003 Goodridge v. Department of Public Health decision of the Massachusetts Supreme Court would soon confirm by opening marriage to gay and lesbian couples. It is in this climate, on June 3, 2003, just a few weeks before Lawrence v. Texas, that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued once more a document on homosexuality signed by Joseph Ratzinger—though not so much on the acts or even the persons any longer, but rather
regarding the legal recognition of same-sex unions (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2003).

This political context is evoked from the start of these Considerations: ‘Homosexuality is a troubling moral and social phenomenon, even in those countries where it does not present significant legal issues. It gives rise to greater concern in those countries that have granted, or intend to grant, legal recognition to homosexual unions, which may include the possibility of adopting children’ (2003). The Congregation can only denounce the shift from tolerance to recognition: ‘Those who would move from tolerance to the legitimization of specific rights for cohabiting homosexual persons need to be reminded that the approval or legalization of evil is something far different from the toleration of evil’ (2003).

Faced with such ‘gravely unjust laws’, ‘everyone can exercise the right to conscientious objection’—starting with politicians. ‘If it is true that all Catholics are obliged to oppose the legal recognition of homosexual unions, Catholic politicians are obliged to do so in a particular way, in keeping with their responsibility as politicians.’ Even ‘when legislation in favor of the recognition of homosexual unions is already in force, the Catholic politician must oppose it in the ways that are possible for him and make his opposition known; it is his duty to witness to the truth’ (2003).

The Collaboration of Man and Woman

In the last three decades, the lines of battle have moved considerably, and the Vatican has kept losing ground—as becomes apparent if one compares the 2003 Considerations to the 1975 Declaration and even to the 1986 Letter. Obviously, resisting change did not prove sufficient. The Church thus needed a more positive discourse, which would logically focus not on homosexuality, but instead on heterosexuality. This was the 2004 ‘Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World’, yet again written by Cardinal Ratzinger for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

The letter opens with a claim: ‘The Church, expert in humanity, has a perennial interest in whatever concerns men and women.’ Yet, once again, the ‘perennial’ is mobilized in the present: ‘Recent years have seen new approaches to women’s issues’, namely, two brands of feminism. ‘A first tendency is to emphasize strongly conditions of subordination in order to give rise to antagonism: women, in order to be themselves, must make themselves the adversaries of men. Faced with the abuse of power, the answer for women is to seek power.’ But the Vatican theologians seem less worried about what might be called a war of the sexes than about the denaturalization of sexual difference: ‘A second tendency emerges in the wake of the first. In order to avoid the domination of one sex or the other, their differences tend to be denied, viewed as mere effects of historical and cultural
conditioning. In this perspective, physical difference, termed sex, is
minimized, while the purely cultural element, termed gender, is
emphasized to the maximum and held to be primary' (Congregation

The latter ‘tendency’, apparently apprehended through a (somewhat
hasty) reading of Judith Butler’s work, is obviously of utmost concern
in the Letter:

This theory of the human person, intended to promote prospects for
equality of women through liberation from biological determinism,
has in reality inspired ideologies which, for example, call into
question the family, in its natural two-parent structure of mother and
father, and make homosexuality and heterosexuality virtually

Hence derives the need to find a foundation to sexual difference, not
only in Scripture, starting with Genesis, but also in ‘feminine values’.

The nature of women is the foundation of sexual difference:

Among the fundamental values linked to women’s actual lives is
what has been called a ‘capacity for the other’. Although a certain
type of feminist rhetoric makes demands ‘for ourselves’, women
preserve the deep intuition of the goodness in their lives of those
actions which elicit life, and contribute to the growth and protection
of the other. (2004)

Womanhood is thus the key to the preservation of otherness
embodied in sexual difference. This is true in particular through their
role in the family. While it certainly should not exclude them from the
workplace, ‘the interrelationship between these two activities – family
and work – has, for women, characteristics different from those in the

Why should women be any different, and care for others? Not
surprisingly, ‘this intuition is linked to women’s physical capacity to
give life’ (2004). Of course, the Letter does not reduce women to
motherhood—in a Catholic tradition, it even extols virginity, which
‘refutes any attempt to enclose women in mere biological destiny’. But
conversely, ‘this means that motherhood can find forms of full
realization also where there is no physical procreation’. Motherhood
defines women, even in the absence of maternity. Women thus
provide the precious counterpoint of sexual difference to modern
individualism. But ‘the feminine values mentioned here are above all
human values’: ‘in the final analysis, every human being, man or
woman, is destined to be “for the other”’ (2004).

Sexual difference is thus also, somewhat paradoxically, the
cornerstone of our common humanity, defined through life ‘for the
other’. As a consequence, rejecting the erasure of sexual difference is
the best way to avoid the war of the sexes.
Without prejudice to the advancement of women’s rights in society and the family, these observations seek to correct the perspective which views men as enemies to be overcome. The proper condition of the male-female relationship cannot be a kind of mistrustful and defensive opposition. Their relationship needs to be lived in peace and in the happiness of shared love. (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2004)

Man and woman are made for one another: as an ‘expert in humanity’, the Church reminds us of the heterosexual nature of humankind, which is ‘the immutable basis of all Christian anthropology’ (2004).

How does sexual difference affect the Church itself, as an institution? For as its title makes clear, the subject of this new Letter is not just ‘the world’ any longer, but also, more specifically, ‘the Church’—which will become the main object of the 2005 Instruction. The recognition of same-sex couples manifestly touches upon issues that are not solely pastoral, but equally, and as will soon be made explicit, even more urgently, ecclesial. The paradox is that this ecclesial dimension should emerge in the context of what can be read as a celebration of heterosexuality in the form of ‘collaboration between men and women’ (or, in other languages such as Italian, Spanish, German, or French, ‘man and woman’ in the singular)—while priesthood is restricted to men, and defined by celibacy.

The 2004 Letter makes it clear: ‘the reservation of priestly ordination solely to men does not hamper in any way women’s access to the heart of Christian life’. On the contrary, ‘women are called to be unique examples and witnesses for all Christians of how the Bride is to respond in love to the love of the Bridegroom’. This is due to their nature, best illustrated by ‘Mary, with her dispositions of listening, welcoming, humility, faithfulness, praise and waiting’. These feminine values should be human ones: ‘While these traits should be characteristic of every baptized person, women in fact live them with particular intensity and naturalness’ (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2004).

One might thus say that their role in the family is similar to their role in the Church: ‘women play a role of maximum importance in the Church’s life by recalling these dispositions to all the baptized and contributing in a unique way to showing the true face of the Church, spouse of Christ and mother of believers’. Their ecclesial part may be marginal; but the ‘mystical identity’ of women makes them crucial: ‘in the Church, woman as “sign” is more than ever central and fruitful’ (2004). Women are thus considered by the Vatican theologians as ‘signs’—just as Claude Lévi-Strauss argued in the theory of exchange he developed in The Elementary Structures of Kinship.
The Political Threat of Sexual Democracy

Why is the Vatican so worried about homosexuality? And why so nervous about feminism? The answer can be found a year later in a critical dictionary issued by the Pontifical Council for the Family (2005): the Lexicon of Ambiguous and Controversial Terms on Family, Life, and Ethical Issues. As I have argued elsewhere (Fassin forthcoming), the main target is the concept of gender, addressed in three separate articles. According to the editors of this volume, during the 1995 UN conference on women in Beijing, Vatican representatives came to realize the importance and the dangers of ‘gender’ as a social construction of sexual difference: they understood very well that this notion could imply an ‘unacceptable program that includes toleration for homosexual orientations and identities’. Gender, as illustrated by a quotation from Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble, whose distance from ‘common sense’ makes the definition of gender sound like ‘science-fiction’, suggests that ‘there exists no such thing as a natural man or a natural woman’, and questions ‘to what extent there exists any “natural” form of sexuality’ (Pontifical Council for the Family 2005).

The Lexicon proposes in conclusion ‘a revised definition of gender that is acceptable for the Catholic Church’: ‘Transcendent dimension of human sexuality, compatible with all aspects of the human person, comprising body, thought, spirit, and soul. Gender is thus permeable to influences exerted upon the human person, be they internal or external, but it must conform to the natural order that is already given in the body’. This new, Catholic version of gender is in explicit opposition to gender feminism, in which ‘the reality of nature disturbs, troubles, and thus must go away’ (2005). In a word, the response of Vatican theologians to the feminist ‘gender trouble’ is a ‘nature trouble’ (formulated as: ‘quand la nature derange’). The social order has a natural foundation in sexual difference—and this anthropology requires that God be identified with Nature: hence the privileged role of sexual politics in the politics of Catholic theology.2

What is at stake is the very foundation of the social order in democratic societies, and specifically in what I call ‘sexual democracy’.3 A democratic society can be defined, not by (allegedly) democratic institutions, but by its claim that laws and norms are not imposed by some transcendent authority (whether it be God, Nature, Tradition, or any other principle that is meant to escape historical change and political critique): they result from the immanent logic of public deliberation and private negotiations. As a consequence, the order of things is explicitly presented as a social order, not a natural one, steeped in history and thus subject to change, fundamentally political and thus an object of critique: liberty and equality become legitimate claims, whose very definitions are at stake in these political struggles concerning both gender and sexuality.
Sexual democracy can be understood by its proponents as the ultimate frontier of democratization, while sexual difference appears to its opponents as the last refuge of transcendence—a natural reservation immune to history and politics, protected from the turmoil of democratic critique. The importance of sexual politics today throughout the world (from gay marriage to violence against women, from the Islamic veil to prostitution, etc.) is to be interpreted in this context: these are battles about the limits, or on the contrary about the continued extension of the democratic logic (as defined here). Is everything social, historical, political—or is there still at least one (sexual) domain that is truly, essentially natural, escaping history and politics? This helps understand what theologians mean when they talk of a ‘transcendent’ principle ordering sexual difference, in opposition to gender—and more generally, why they feel the need to devote three whole articles to undermine this notion. This is not just a question of vocabulary: what is at stake is the status of transcendence, if any, in the definition of laws and norms within democratic societies as defined here. The political status of religion in democratic societies is at stake in the definition of the sexual order.

**Celibacy, Continence and Chastity**

While the concern about the politics of homosexuality has been unfolding since the 1970s, and more recently regarding gender, in the wake of the 2004 ‘Letter on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the World and in the Church’, the 2005 ‘Instruction Concerning the Criteria for the Discernment of Vocations with Regard to Persons with Homosexual Tendencies’ confirms a new attention to ecclesial (and not simply pastoral) consequences of sexual democracy. We have just seen how the social authority of the Church is questioned by the democratic logic along with any transcendent definition of social norms. But why is the internal definition of the Church itself, as an institution, at stake?

In order to understand this new urgency, it is worth going back to the 1997 Catechism, referred to (as previously mentioned) in the 2005 Instruction. The sixth commandment is read in the light of the Gospel: ‘You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery.” But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart’. (Mt 5:27-8). From this prescription derives the human ‘vocation to chastity’. ‘Sexuality, in which man’s belonging to the bodily and biological world is expressed, becomes personal and truly human when it is integrated into the relationship of one person to another, in the complete and lifelong mutual gift of a man and a woman. The virtue of chastity therefore involves the integrity of the person and the integrality of the gift’ (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1997).

Chastity is not to be confused with continence. Indeed, ‘all the baptized are called to chastity’, but not all to continence. There are differences in the specific implications of this general vocation.
'People should cultivate [chastity] in the way that is suited to their state of life. Some profess virginity or consecrated celibacy which enables them to give themselves to God alone with an undivided heart in a remarkable manner' (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1975). Married people are called to live conjugal chastity; others practice chastity in continence. Sexuality can be chaste, not only if reserved to married couples (by contrast to 'fornication' in particular), but also when distinct from 'lust' (even within marriage): ‘Lust is disordered desire for or inordinate enjoyment of sexual pleasure. Sexual pleasure is morally disordered when sought for itself, isolated from its procreative and unitive purposes’ (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1975).

The point is not, however, to demean heteroerosexual pleasure—but to exalt it: ‘They are no longer two, but one body’ (Mt 19:4-6). In fact, in contemporary Vatican theology, chastity is emphasized at the expense of continence, and thus marriage instead of celibacy. This is a far cry from the sexual renunciation advocated by the early Church (Brown 1988). St. Paul only conceded that it was ‘better to marry than to be aflame with passion’ (1 Cor. 7:9): priesthood was then the highest calling—not marriage. But the same quote takes on an entirely different meaning in Persona Humana: the Pauline authority is now invoked to defend marriage against premarital sex: ‘Sexual union therefore is only legitimate if a definitive community of life has been established between the man and the woman’ (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1975). Henceforth, sexuality will be promoted for its own sake, or rather for the sake of marriage, and not as a lesser good: heterosexual chastity thus matters more than consecrated continence.

The question remains: since it concerns all, how does chastity apply to homosexuals in particular? Of course, as we have seen, ‘basing itself on Sacred Scripture’, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity, tradition has always declared that ‘homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered’. They are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. ‘Under no circumstances can they be approved’. However, the difference with tendencies is not forgotten: ‘The number of men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies is not negligible. This inclination, which is objectively disordered, constitutes for most of them a trial. They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided’ (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1997).

How are these homosexuals ‘to cultivate [chastity] in the way that is suited to their state of life’? The question was raised by the 1986 ‘Letter on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons’. The answer is already familiar: ‘Christians who are homosexual are called, as all of us are, to a chaste life’. But they are not exactly like all of us: ‘Fundamentally, they are called to enact the will of God in their life by
joining whatever sufferings and difficulties they experience in virtue of their condition to the sacrifice of the Lord’s Cross. That Cross, for the believer, is a fruitful sacrifice since from that death come life and redemption’ (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1986). In practice, this means continence.

What is remarkable, however, is that neither the 1997 Catechism nor the 1986 Letter mention the term when talking about homosexuals. ‘Chastity in continence’ is used only to speak about ‘virginity and consecrated celibacy’—not homosexuality. This may have to do with the difference of status: the disorderly tendencies could not mingle with such elevated callings. But this also reveals what may be the ultimate problem underlying the 2005 Instruction. ‘What, then, are homosexual persons to do who seek to follow the Lord?’ The answer to this 1986 question could imply more than mere continence.

Indeed, what are Catholic homosexual men to do? Since continence is required of all in ordained ministry, why should they not become priests? The Conference of Swiss bishops immediately reacted against the 2005 Instruction, on November 23, in those terms: ‘We have decided to live in chastity regardless of our sexual orientation’. Sexual practices are not compatible with priesthood—whether heterosexual or homosexual. Why then exclude gays, based on their tendencies? Timothy Radcliffe, in a text discussed earlier, while agreeing that ‘it is extremely urgent that we form priests who are “affectively mature,” and able to relate easily to men and women’, also raised the issue: ‘These criteria need to be applied equally to all candidates, regardless of their sexual orientation’. If continence is expected of homosexuals on the one hand, and priests on the other, why exclude the former from the ranks of the latter?

The answer is precisely to be found in this unnerving proximity between homosexual disorder and the holy orders. The Pope himself was to explain it in Light of the World, a book of interviews published in November of 2010. Upon recalling the 2005 Instruction, published only six months after his election, Benedict justifies it in those terms: ‘Homosexuality is incompatible with the priestly vocation. Otherwise, celibacy itself would lose its meaning as a renunciation’. Since gays are already expected to be continent, contrary to heterosexual men, they are not sacrificing anything upon entering priesthood. But there is more at issue than mere individual renunciation. ‘It would be extremely dangerous if celibacy became a sort of pretext for bringing people into the priesthood who don’t want to get married anyway’—or rather who cannot. The same paragraph reveals the peril ultimately threatening the Church itself: ‘The greatest attention is needed here in order to prevent the intrusion of this kind of ambiguity and to head off a situation where the celibacy of priests would practically end up being identified with the tendency to homosexuality’ (Benedict XVI, p. 152).
The logic now appears clearly: gay Catholics, if they are to take seriously the prescriptions of the Vatican, could, more often than not, embrace priesthood. The distinction between tendencies and acts would thus lead to the possibility of sublimating continence into celibacy, a sexual vocation into a religious one. At the same time, as the Vatican also insists, in order to counter political claims of gay marriage, on the value of heterosexuality, with the new reading of the Pauline tradition, heterosexual Catholic men could feel that, since man is made for woman, and woman for man, their vocation is marriage, rather than priesthood. Logically, the Church could thus be defined simultaneously by its discourse against gay rights and by its largely gay composition—the former paradoxically accounting for the latter.

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An Unnatural Church against the Denaturalization of the Social World

The only justification for the focus on homosexuality in the 2005 Instruction was a rapid claim about 'spiritual fatherhood'—if not implying that gay men could not be real fathers, at least suggesting that 'their sexual orientation estranges them from the proper sense of paternity, from the intrinsic nature of priestly being' (Benedict XVI, p. 152). This spiritual exclusion is revealing: the Church is not simply trying to protect itself, and not just the family as seen in other documents discussed in this paper, against homosexuals. What is at stake is the preservation of a natural order which has become, in reaction to sexual democracy, the last resort of a transcendent definition of social norms. Kinship metaphors should thus be taken seriously: the family is not apprehended merely as an institution that
ought to be protected against democratic modernity. More fundamentally, it functions as a synecdoche for a natural (or naturalized) social world—at the risk of conflating the family as a social institution with a biological model of reproduction.

Instead of acknowledging this foundational dimension, the same Timothy Radcliffe in his humorous response emphasizes the absurdity of the Vatican’s argument in the context of the Catholic Church:

This is not a concept with which I am familiar. Can only heterosexuals offer this? This is the view of the Bishop to the American armed forces, who said recently: ‘We don’t want our people to think, as our culture is now saying, there’s really no difference whether one is gay or straight, is homosexual or heterosexual. We think for our vocation that there is a difference, and our people expect to have a male priesthood that sets a strong role model of maleness’. I cannot believe that this is what is intended by the document. There is little evidence of muscular Christianity in the Vatican. If the role of the priest was to be a model of masculinity, then he would be relevant to less than half of the congregation and one could therefore argue that women should also be ordained as role models of femininity. (Radcliffe 2005)

Indeed, the absurdity is quite revealing: it shows the lengths to which the Vatican is willing to go to preserve two contradictory tenets of the Catholic Church as we know it today. On the one hand, it is defined by the exaltation of a natural order of the world premised on the ‘collaboration of man and woman’ in heterosexuality. This implies a rejection of feminist as well as queer movements, in so far as their politicization of gender and sexuality denaturalizes the sexual order of things. It has led Vatican theologians to a naturalized rewriting of natural law. On the other hand, the Church itself is supposed to be an exception to this vision of the world, as priesthood is reserved to men, and consecrated to (and through) celibacy. The Church thus appears as the unnatural counterpart to a naturalized world. The fate of homosexual men within the Church, after the 2005 Instruction that excludes them for the first time in the history of this institution, just makes visible what has become, today, a radical contradiction.

Michel Foucault famously argued, in the second volume of the History of Sexuality, and in particular in the second chapter of The Use of Pleasure devoted to ‘Forms of Problematization’, that Greek homosexuality was anything but unproblematic. ‘Since there is an important and large literature about loving boys in Greek culture, some historians say, “Well, that’s the proof that they loved boys.” But I say that proves that loving boys was a problem’ (Foucault 1997, p. 257). The proliferation of Catholic theological discourse on homosexuality (albeit obviously less indulgent than Ancient literature) also delineates a problem. However, one could simultaneously argue that the silence of the Vatican today on continence, in its uncomfortable relationship with chastity and celibacy, speaks loudly of the same problem, whose nature it confirms: it has to do with the
‘unnaturalness’ of the Church at the time of its political reaction against the denaturalization of the world.

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Notes

1 The quotations are here translated from the original French version.

2 See Danièle Hervieu-Léger (2003), especially chapter 6: ‘Quand la nature n’est plus un ordre’.

3 See my first attempt at defining this concept (Fassin 2005).

4 The Declaration is published in La documentation catholique (2006, p. 33-4), after Mgr. Tony Anatrella’s comments.

5 See my article, Fassin (2010).

6 See the article by Michel Feher (2004) on the importance of such erotic ‘problems’.

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