

She Helped Me Hear the Truth

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February 18-24, 2007 Issue

Unfortunately, there are some publications by sources that fail to present Catholic teaching in a charitable light, and there are others written by ostensibly Catholic bodies that try to circumvent the issue or surround it in so many ambiguities that it becomes difficult to tell that the Church actually condemns it at all.

It is best, therefore, to rely on the documents and statements put out by the Vatican. The Church's recent writings on sexuality, and particularly on homosexuality, are extremely rational and extremely charitable — and they're not what most people expect.

When I was writing a column for my local newspaper, there happened to be a debate in the letters to the editor over whether or not PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) should be invited to speak in Catholic schools. I set out, intending to criticize the Catholic school system for being intolerant and homophobic — only before I began to write I decided to phone the school board and ask them if they had any statements explaining their position.

They sent over a copy of a little book printed by the Pontifical Institute for the Family called *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*. By the time I finished reading it, I was firmly convinced that Catholic sexual teaching was coherent and reasonable, and that it was not motivated by fear or hatred. I still didn't believe in it, but I no longer resented the Church's position on homosexuality, and I wrote my column defending the right of Catholic school boards to teach Catholic sexuality in Catholic schools.

Once you've familiarized yourself with Church teaching, you're going to need to be able to present the teachings in a charitable and compassionate manner. It is tremendously important that you use the right language.

I avoid the use of "gay" or "lesbian" unless I am discussing a person's choice to identify themselves as such (e.g. "Those who consider themselves 'lesbian'"), or if I am referring to the sub-culture that has been developed in order to promote same-sex sexuality (e.g. "The gay community," or "the gay rights movement"). I do this because "gay," "lesbian," "queer" and so forth are the terminology used by the homosexual community, to denote a permanent and fundamental state.

The term "homosexual" has the same sort of connotations, only they are not quite so strong. The Vatican, in documents on sexuality, tends to use the term "homosexual persons," in order to draw a distinction between the person and the tendency. This is perfectly acceptable. I tend to prefer "person(s) with same-sex attractions," because that is the language used by Courage — a Catholic group for people struggling to live a chaste life in spite of temptations to homosexuality.

In dialogue with people who identify themselves as homosexuals, it is important to make it clear that you don't identify them with their sexual inclinations, while remaining charitable.

It is advisable to avoid using terms like "unnatural" or "objectively disordered." They are perfectly accurate, and if they are understood properly they are not at all offensive. The problem is that they sound offensive even though they aren't, and they're easily misunderstood.

It simply isn't worth the time and effort that it takes to explain the terms and defuse any negative connotations they may have in the mind of the person you are talking to. It is much simpler to paraphrase — rather than saying that homosexual acts are unnatural, say that they contradict the purpose for which God ordained sex. Both phrases mean the same thing, but because the second spells it out, it is subject to less ambiguity and won't evoke erroneous associations.

You need to keep in mind that the theology, taken on its own, can seem tremendously cold and theoretical — it doesn't, for obvious reasons, take into account the feelings of the people to whom it applies.

It is important to point out that reason, and not feeling, must ultimately be the compass of morality — otherwise it would be perfectly legitimate to beat a child if you feel angry, or to kill a lover if you feel jealous.

Still, there is a more human face to the Catholic view of homosexuality and it is important to allow that to show through.

On a practical level, we believe that God has ordained all things in order to serve the good of his creatures. Therefore, regardless of what we might feel at any given moment, when we use things in accord with God's design, they will ultimately serve our good.

When we reject God's design and try to use things for our own purposes in violation of his plan, they always work out for the worst. Someone who is involved in a homosexual relationship is, by virtue of the fact that they are pursuing a lifestyle that God cannot sanction, frustrating God's plan for their vocation.

If they are called to a life of chastity, to bear their homosexuality as a cross, then they are turning away from that cross, and therefore also turning away from a deeper union with Christ and from the means of their salvation. If they are called to accept God's healing, and to eventually enter the married state, then they are rejecting the gift of a spouse which God wants to offer them.

When I converted to Catholicism, I thought that my sex life was over. I still believed that homosexuality was fundamental and immutable, and that I was a lesbian. I had no expectation that when I turned my sexuality over to God that he would be able to heal it. And yet, many people have, through the power of prayer, and sometimes with the help of

psychological therapy, been able to overcome the psychological factors that have produced homosexual tendencies.

The experience is one of incredible liberation: I began by believing that I was confined to a homosexual lifestyle by factors beyond my control, and ended by discovering that God had something more wonderful than I imagined possible in store for me.

The Church offers all of those who experience homosexual feelings the chance to seek this healing, not because she hates them or wants them to deny themselves, but rather because she knows that in doing God's will and discovering the incredible depths of his mercy, they will find their life immeasurably enriched.

It is very important, though, that people dealing with same-sex attractions — especially if they have recently come to the Church — realize that the process of healing can sometimes take a long time. For some, it is not a process that will be completed in this lifetime.

I know that in my case, the single most valuable thing was prayer to the Virgin Mary.

Before I entered the Church, I had a great deal of difficulty identifying myself with most of the maternal virtues, because I identified them as weaknesses. Devotion to Our Lady helped me to realize that humility, obedience, compassion and submission are not fueled by weakness, that in fact they are impossible without a tremendous amount of faith and inner strength. Only when I saw how she gave herself entirely to her family and her God, and saw that in doing so she didn't lose herself but became herself completely, was I able to embrace these virtues and seek them out as a part of myself.

Through this I became more willing to be weak, more willing to take the risks involved in loving a man — and so it became possible for me to do so.

Obviously, for a male dealing with same-sex attractions the situation would be a little bit different. While I would still recommend devotion to Our Lady, it is also tremendously important to seek out a healthy relationship with God the Father.

Many men in this position find God the Father intimidating — they are accustomed to thinking of him as a judgmental and disapproving old man, and so they are afraid to approach him, especially if they have been failing in their attempts to be chaste. This is why Our Lady is so important — because she often seems much more approachable, and yet we can pray to her to grant us the courage to approach God the Father, and the insight to realize that he is a God of love and of forgiveness.

Once this relationship is established, it can provide the basis for a renewed understanding of what masculinity is, and the foundation for healing.

In my own case, I was blessed with a very rapid healing process. Once I had given up my homosexual practices and embraced Mary as an ideal of femininity, I very quickly ceased to find other women attractive.

Within a few short years, I have been blessed with a husband whom I love tremendously, and with two wonderful children on whom to practice those maternal virtues that I once eschewed.

Of course, there are many people whose wounds run deeper than mine did, and it is to these that we are called to reach out — with charity, with compassion and the good news of a God who offers healing and forgiveness.

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