

*Where and how is it appropriate to tell gay adolescents of their 'intrinsic disorder' and 'inclination to moral evil'? And how do we respond when they ask of God, 'Why did you do this to me?'*

## What About Our Church's Children?

---

By PAUL GIURLANDA

---

**R**UBY KNEW THAT ONLY WHITE people can eat vanilla cookies. Years ago as a high school student, I discovered, in Robert Coles's *Children of Crisis*, a perspective on the civil rights struggle that was both new and intuitively obvious. Coles's famous study showed how heartbreakingly soon African-American children internalized the inferiority to which society assigned them: "She drew white people larger and more lifelike. Negroes were smaller, their bodies less intact. While Ruby's own face lacked an eye in one drawing, an ear in another, the white girl never lacked any features."

Delicate and wondrous creatures, children. They know what matters, who's important, what's unmentionable.

Now think of an 11-year-old boy sitting at a yellow kitchen table leafing through the dictionary: *homopterous, homorgan, Homo sapiens, homosexual*. . . He reads the definition ("characterized by sexual inclination toward those of the same sex") and begins to feel his face burn. He begins to cry, so loudly that his parents and older brother rush from various parts of the house. "What's wrong?" What, indeed.

The child Ruby had one advantage over this child: She could speak about her fear and pain. And her mother could hold her in her arms and tell her that the obscenities the white people shouted at her on the way to school were not true. But what if the hurt is so shameful that even your father would throw you out of the house if he knew? (Recently a young man told me that his mother shamed his little brother out of crying by calling him a "fag." How excruciating to hear your own mother use who you

---

PAUL GIURLANDA is associate professor of religious studies at St. Mary's College of California in Moraga, Calif. His *Faith and Knowledge* was published by Univ. Press of America.

are as a term of abuse and be unable to say anything about it.)

Furthermore, while he knows that he is on the very bottom of the grammar school heap—a "fag"—at the same time, he feels himself to be "the only one." And when he prays, as we teach our children to do, what does this "different" child say? "Why have you cursed me?" Indeed, when John Cort wrote offhandedly in a recent *Commonweal* article that gays must feel cursed by God, he was describing this boy's experience exactly. But what effect must feeling "cursed" have on young minds?

"Being cursed" is a religious and theological category with practical consequences, and one of these consequences, far too often, is the desire to kill oneself. Statistics on youth suicide are difficult in many ways—difficult to read about without pain, and difficult to interpret. Those who say that gay youth are three times as likely as others to commit suicide may be right, but once someone is dead, he or she cannot be quizzed about why. Still, that statistic "feels" right if one has worked with gay youth or if one reads (in a remarkable June 1989 series in the *San Francisco Examiner*) the following diary entry from a young man named Bobby Griffith who did indeed take his own life: "Feb. 19, 1982. Why did you do this to me, God? Am I going to hell? That's the gnawing question that's always drilling little holes in the back of my mind. Please don't send me to hell. I'm really not that bad, am I? . . . Life is so cruel and unfair."

**B**OBBY'S PARENTS, devout evangelical Christians, had taken him to a "Christian counselor," whose advice had the advantage of fundamentalist clarity. His mother now says, "Looking back, I realize how depraved it was to instill false guilt in an innocent child's conscience, causing a distorted image of life, God and self, leaving little, if any, feeling of personal worth." Mary Griffith found herself faced with a theological question of

the most practical kind, and she worked her way to a different answer than the one she had been taught. One wonders what Robert Coles would have written about the moral and spiritual life of Bobby Griffith.

It would be simplistic to say that Christian fundamentalist teaching on homosexuality alone caused Bobby's death. Moreover, Catholic teaching differs from the fundamentalist view in a significant way. Both fundamentalists and Catholics say homosexuals are objectively "sinners," but then so are we all. Fundamentalists generally end all analysis there. Catholic teaching, however, becomes paradoxically harsher, for it seeks to incorporate contemporary theories about homosexual identity or "orientation," along with condemnation.

**O**RIENTATION MEANS, in this context, a somewhat stable disposition, a given more or less outside any personal moral choice, that simultaneously remains almost by definition an abiding inclination toward evil. Catholicism's more intellectual approach ushers in pedagogical consequences that, though unintended, inevitably equate "orientation" with "moral evil." Even if one concedes that Catholic teaching is more nuanced and sophisticated than such a bald equation, it results in serious educational/counseling problems. For example, where and how is it appropriate to tell gay adolescents of their "intrinsic disorder" and "inclination to moral evil" (to use the language of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith)? And how do we respond when they ask of God, "Why did you do *this* to me?"

This question, "Why did you do this to me?" is often asked along with another: "Why do they hate me so much?" For along with the inner experience of self-hatred, we have the outer experience of hatred by others. The pastoral task of helping this boy or girl becomes even harder. For it seems that others are, to a degree, theologically *justified* in hating them. Gay adolescents may be struggling against it, but candor compels us to tell them that what dwells inside them is *evil, in a different way from what is true for others who do bad things*. This sense of harboring something evil can only be reinforced when candor again compels us to tell a young man that if he is suspected of being a "fag" by the school toughs, his beating, while not to be condoned, is nevertheless "understandable" (from the 1987 document of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, entitled "On the Pastoral Care of Homosexuals;" see AM. 2/7/87).

What can a young mind make of the fact that, though a condition is not culpable, it is a *moral* disorder that somewhat "understandably" causes others to hate, especially since what is condemned is no hateful, violent or coercive thought or desire, but precisely his or her most admiring, affectionate and positive emotion. (For young people, lest we forget, do fall in love, and the one who is the object of their affections practically defines "good" in their eyes.)

But let us carry the argument further: If the church's

teaching is *internalized*, what kind of a life is he or she likely to have? This youth must recognize that every sexual impulse he or she has is dangerous and evil, and sexuality in general is a genie that must never escape its lamp. There is no possibility of using one's sexuality someday in the service of love, since it is an inclination to evil. What other boys and girls are told, traditionally, is to "wait until marriage." What these teen-agers must be told, is "wait until death." Thus a boy (for example) must be careful in friendships with his own sex, lest they result in sexual excitation. Should he perhaps avoid sports for that reason? Then what is he to do? Join the Boy Scouts? Well, perhaps not. Should he engage in his parish's youth ministry? Possibly, though because of caution about boys and lack of interest in dating girls, he could be in for a lonely time. (What some gay youths who can "pass" actually do is throw themselves into every activity possible, living inside a whirlwind. By becoming the "most likely to succeed," they can keep from getting close to anyone and keep from thinking too much about what must not be thought about.)

Imagine the same boy sitting in a high school classroom. A priest is taking over the religion class today to talk about vocations. He had never listened to these pitches very intently. But now something clicks inside. Of course! This is what God must be calling him to! How could he have missed it! By closing the door on friendship and marriage and a normal life, God must surely be opening another door.

But if he does enter that door, he is now thrust into precisely those dangers of friendship and sexuality that he had so studiously and piously avoided. He may very well have his initiatory sexual experience here; he would not be the first, nor the last to do so. Very likely he will fall in love with another seminarian or find that another seminarian is in love with him. Either way, his pain and confusion will increase.

**B**UT SINCE OUR YOUNG MAN is still consciously accepting in faith the church's teaching, he might wonder why it is that people like him who are "intrinsically disordered" in their affective lives would be the ones chosen by God to serve as religious leaders. Is it an example, perhaps, of God calling those whom the world despises, to sound again a Pauline theme? On the other hand, is such a person likely to be able to provide the affectionate concern we seem to demand these days from our clergy? That is, someone whose moral life is a constant struggle between his orientation (an "intrinsic disorder") and his inclination toward evil?

"How odd of God" indeed. It has never been the teaching of the church that we can presume on the grace of God to cure illness, mental or physical (grace "perfects," lifts up, enhances nature, but it does not obliterate it), nor that such defects can be removed by sheer force of will. Miracles happen, but it is a sin (presumption) to demand

one. And yet most religious orders and diocesan seminaries in this country will accept candidates of homosexual orientation as long as they promise celibacy. That our seminaries will open themselves to people "inclined toward evil" might be a comment on the priestly shortage, or on the incoherence of church teaching, or both.

I began with a reference to self-esteem and human happiness for a reason. It seems to me that the traditional spirituality of the Augustinian and monastic model, the spirituality of the *fuga mundi* (flight from the world), a spirituality that is absolutely suspicious of *all* sexuality, even human happiness in general, and that sees human earthly existence primarily as a testing ground for the next, continues to live an odd half-life in the church.

**W**HEN POPE GREGORY THE GREAT, in a famous letter to Augustine of Canterbury, pointed out that "since even the lawful intercourse of the wedded cannot take place without pleasure of the flesh, entrance into a sacred place should be abstained from, *because the pleasure itself can by no means be without sin,*" he was merely repeating the Augustinian (the other Augustine, from Hippo) and the late medieval consensus that passion in general makes one less human. Augustine of Hippo had argued, against those who derided marriage, that, "in marriage, intercourse for the purpose of generation has no fault attached to it," though if a married couple have sex for pleasure, they are committing sin, a sin very difficult to avoid. Indeed, "they are better in proportion as they begin the earlier to refrain by mutual consent from sexual intercourse." The only good thing this tradition could find about sex was that it was procreative, which seemed just barely to justify it, and celibacy was always the loftier and better choice, even within marriage itself.

So consistent and coherent was this once-traditional view of sex that it is hard for some to understand just how thoroughly the church has rejected it in its official teachings. Any pope today would shrink from arguing, as Pope Gregory the Great did in his work of advice for pastoral counselors, that marriage is for the second-best, for the weak who cannot help themselves.

One could endlessly debate the sources of such similar changes, in which the Western world definitively embraced what were once thought the peripheral goods of liberty, equality and democracy as the only truly legitimate bases for government. What is not debatable is that this world-historical wave has reached Catholic shores. Where the church once argued passionately against such things as freedom of the press and of religion (as in Pius IX's *Syllabus of Errors* a century ago), it now *presupposes* them in papal documents. Surely the spirit of that old anti-democrat Gregory XVI must have been astonished at a successor who invoked democratic values in his fight against Communism.

And when Pope John Paul II, in *Familiaris Consortio*, praises the sexual act in marriage as a way of communi-

cating love (its "unitive function") and of not just making babies ("procreative function") or of providing a remedy for concupiscence, he is implicitly rejecting a restricted view of the sexual act that made sense to the Christian tradition for more than a millennium.

But herein lies the difficulty for the church. It has already gone far down the road in its acceptance of the vocabulary of modernity and of modern psychology. But since it has, the church must also accept the principles undergirding most of contemporary psychology and spirituality—that, for example, taking pleasure in the giving and receiving of affection is part of ordinary human happiness, and that, for most of us, sexuality and affectivity are intimately intertwined. Consequently, professional support for the church's position on homosexuality becomes increasingly difficult, unless one wishes to revert to the narrowest kind of ahistorical scriptural proof-texting, in the manner of fundamentalists. Certainly, the community of mental health professionals (as opposed to a maverick here or there) would not support it, and solid social-scientific research has been done to demonstrate that homosexuals are not "sick" in any way identifiable to the psychological profession. (See the famous declaration of the American Psychiatric Association to that effect almost 20 years ago.)

Nevertheless and oddly enough, from a practical point of view, homosexuals are now just about the only people left in the church who are expected to follow a monastic spirituality based on Stoic and neo-Platonic principles, principles the church has quite explicitly abandoned elsewhere, even though they still maintain an odd half-life where homosexuality is concerned. The result: Catholic gay people must struggle not only against the grosser versions of sexuality, but against most forms of human intimacy. And they must do this with almost no institutional support, in a kind of social blackout. (One psychologist-religious of my acquaintance pointed out to me that there could not be "support groups" for homosexuals, where they could talk over their problems and give each other help, for the obvious reason that such groups would allow homosexuals to find each other, and thus bring them into occasions of sin. I found his logical impeccable, given his principles.)

**I**BEGAN THIS ESSAY with a question: What is the effect on a young person of believing the church's teaching on homosexuality? I suspect my own answer is clear enough. The next question obviously follows from it: *Why do we continue to impose this burden on them?* Let us pray a convincing answer may soon emerge. But before it does (perhaps as a condition of its emergence), I challenge us—individually and as a community—to listen to the stories of gay and lesbian young people. For, perhaps more than any other topic I can think of, this is an area where those who don't know speak, and those who do know find themselves voiceless. ■