

Homosexuality and the Church

Monica Bexell OP

Within a short space of time two books have appeared, both dealing with a matter of wide current interest but at the same time both treat the issue cautiously and with some timidity. I am referring to the short book edited by Eva Alexanderson, titled *The Homosexual in the Parish* (Verbum, Stockholm, 1973; Swedish title: *De homosexuelle i församlingen*), and to the subsequent report of a study commissioned by the bishops' synod of the Church of Sweden, published under the editorship of Holsten Fagerberg under the title: *The Homosexual and the Church* (Verbum, Stockholm, 1974; Swedish title: *De homosexuelle och kyrkan*).¹ Both of these books provide subject matter for considerable reflection and will hopefully have the effect of helping us abandon a more or less conscious notion that homosexuals are, in general, somehow more sinful or perverse than heterosexuals in general. Eva Alexanderson has brought together contributions of homosexuals, both anonymous and identified by name, all of whom experience themselves and intend to continue living as Christians. To the question whether or not they are justified in this, the Swedish Church's report provides both an historic and current overview with regard to the situation of homosexuals—seen in terms of the medical, psychological, social, theological and ethical perspectives involved. In reading it one is amazed by the abysmal ignorance, prejudice and lack of charity which has so often passed as Christian. At the same time one is delighted to find that everything in the report is taken up objectively and with a genuine desire to show that concern is felt for the right of human beings to respect, love and—in short—to a complete and full life. I don't believe I am exaggerating when I understand the report in this way.

For my part, I would like to begin by posing a question: What is the basis on which we ground our discussions of homosexuality? What are we actually talking about? Shouldn't we be a bit better informed before embarking upon ultimate decisions and judgments? My questions here are provoked by a book review and a recent magazine article, both of which take up the problems of homosexuals. The review is contained in the leaflet 'Christian Unity' (Kristen enhet, nr 3 1974) and is written by Mother Thyra of the congregation of the Sisterhood of Mary Mother of Jesus (Church of Sweden). The article referred to appears in the

¹This report has not yet appeared in English. A comprehensive summary of its conclusions has, however, been made by the translator of this article (Lee Poole jr.). It may be obtained from the Salvatorian Justice and Peace Commission, 1735 Hi-Mount Boulevard, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 53208 U.S.A. The summary is called 'Module 7'.

magazine *Credo* (published by the Jesuits in Uppsala, nr 3 1974). Both review and article contend that happiness does not consist in giving vent at all costs to one's instincts, that continence and an ascetic way of life are values to be striven for since they support and encourage the development of one's personality. I don't take issue with any of this; on the contrary. But why should these admonitions be placed in the foreground with special regard to homosexuals? Are these recommendations not equally valid for heterosexuals? Are they not applicable at other levels than the purely sexual? Accordingly we should wish everyone—and not only the homosexuals among us—that 'incomparable sense of joy and happiness which', according to *Credo*, 'the achievement of continence bestows'. But actually we do not require such a total achievement (nor apparently such an incomparable sense of joy and happiness) of anyone under any other circumstances, except possibly in those cases where one is motivated by a special call or grace.

In order to give ourselves a chance to see the problem from a perhaps less prejudicial point of view than is usual for most of us, it might be of interest here simply to sketch in some of the basic facts which were so painstakingly considered by the Church of Sweden's recent commissioned report. The report does reveal something of the complexity of this problem, and leads to the conclusion that homosexuality cannot simply be dismissed or set aside by labelling it sin or perversion. It would take us too far to go into any great detail here, but an indication of the dimensions of this problem and of the possibilities for understanding it are perhaps in order. Over and above what can be said here, I do of course recommend a study of the report itself.

Studies of an historical and cultural-geographical nature reveal that homosexuality is looked upon in quite different ways depending upon the particular culture in question. We find examples, of course, in ancient Greece and Rome but also in our own day among peoples of differing cultural orientation. Perversion can be found, it is true, at all times and places and equally among heterosexuals. On the other hand one can discover genuine homosexuality, which is, as such, thought to be a normal phenomenon, creating a minimum of problems for the social surroundings in which it is practiced.

Psychological theories regarding homosexuality are, of course, numerous. Among them one can hear references to hormonal disturbance, biological anomaly, inherited factors, disturbed relationships and difficulties of identification from early childhood. Whichever theory is invoked, homosexuality has seldom proved susceptible to treatment (even provided the individual in question is agreeable to such treatment). In most such cases these persons have the sense of living out their homosexual needs in harmony with their own nature and they have accordingly no wish to be changed. To have reached such a degree of self-acceptance involves, of course, long and strenuous effort in opposition to and in the face of negative social and environmental reaction. (In this effort, by the way, it seems to me that psychotherapy should be expected to fill an important helping function).

There is a wide tendency today to give the word 'sexuality' a much

too narrow interpretation when considering homosexuality in a number of contexts (for example in the classroom). The word should not be limited in this way to the idea of sexual intercourse but rather extended to include everything that has to do with love, tenderness, respect, care and friendship in the relationship between two human beings. What right have we then to exclude one of our fellow human beings from all or any of this? (We have, by the way, several examples of just this kind of deep relationship among the contributions appearing in Eva Alexanderson's book.)

In his writing of the report Holsten Fagerberg has taken up some of the arguments which formerly were used primarily against homosexuality and has let them serve instead in favour of the homosexual's right to live in accordance with his own nature. In the name of the committee researchers whose work lies behind Fagerberg's authorship, the report attempts to summarise the various points of view and in the process reaches certain conclusions.

A number of arguments have been taken from the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. Referring to what it calls 'deontological' forms of argumentation, the committee summarises as follows :

The 'homosexual act', in both Old and New Testaments, is a manifestation of human perversity and of man's departure from obedience to God. In opposition to the First Commandment, such a person is an idolator. Even in our day there are homosexual acts of such nature as to make them correspond with this biblical description. They are comparable to deviant forms of heterosexual love such as fornication and infidelity.

For many a critic of homosexuality human nature was fashioned in accordance with norms and values laid down in the Bible. Such norms and values are, in turn, according to this way of thinking, quite the same as those which people in general consider to be 'normal'.

Supporters (of a different position) have proceeded more empirically. If one has an open eye for the many-sidedness of creation, one cannot avoid reaching the conclusion that homosexual behaviour *is* in accord with the nature of some. Proponents of this way of looking at human nature do not consider the homosexual disposition to be perverse when manifest in its genuine form. To be obedient to his homosexual nature seems as inevitable to such a person as it is for the heterosexual to be obedient to his. . . . But no one has the right to invoke his own particular (experience of) nature in such a way as to have harmful consequences for his neighbour.

The committee's conclusion thus follows :

If the deontological form of argumentation is interpreted in such a way as to concentrate the burden of its criticism upon *all* forms of sexual perversity, it becomes forceful and coherent. What it condemns is infidelity, evil lust and perversity of every kind. But it would still leave room for a genuine kind of homosexual behaviour, which finds expression in authentic emotion, full personal engagement and the yearning for fidelity. In terms of that kind of interpretation, the statements of the Bible thus become reasonable while at the same time

enabling us to take seriously what we now know to be true of homosexuality.

One argument claims that social acceptance of homosexuality would be harmful not only to youth (because of the supposed incitement to seduction) but also to the very idea of lawful cohabitation since, it is argued, homosexuals are incapable of making anything like a marriage relationship really work. First it must be pointed out that the likelihood of being able to seduce anyone to a genuine and lasting homosexuality is very small (granting, though, that young persons of unstable disposition could suffer harm from casual homosexual liaisons). As far as genuine homosexuals are concerned, Fagerberg speaks of there being therapeutic justification for the assumption that such persons *are* capable of developing into harmonious individuals, particularly if they receive the help they need in forming the lasting relationships they so desire.

Finally, the committee takes up arguments of an ethical nature in favour of homosexuality :

. . . (in view of) the homosexual person's legitimate need to make real such values in his life as humanness, warmth, companionship, tenderness and love as well as with regard to the now widely accepted fact that the objective goals of sexual companionship are ones of personal fulfilment as well as of procreation. . . . The intention of having children is not the only legitimate reason for sexual companionship. Equally legitimate is the desire for fidelity, mutual consideration, and love—along with the intention of simply strengthening the personal relationship itself.

Near the end of her essay Eva Alexanderson complains :

. . . And the Church remains silent. Officially. But no problem is solved in this way. The Church must be concerned about the whole person, living in the present, rather than with abstract arguments bound to the past.

The report of the Swedish Church comes to a close with a similar passage :

It would of course be much easier for the Church to be able to avoid speaking out on the very involved question of homosexuality. And even we are of the mind that judgments of (a personal and) ethical nature are always reserved to the individuals in question. But the Church does have an obligation to let herself be heard, for the sake of troubled consciences. This responsibility cannot be shirked since the bases for value judgments are contained in the Bible and the Church has in former times always voiced an opinion with regard to this matter. If the Church were to remain silent now, she would thus seek to avoid the making of a difficult but necessary commitment.

Has the time come then for us too to think this all through again ?