

Comment

Living as we do in a homosexual community, as do all the more traditional religious in the Catholic Church—heterosexual religious communities are a relatively modern experiment—it might be thought that our experience may be of some value to those who are trying to re-think the morals and theology of this kind of relationship. Of course we are not a closed community and all of us have important friendships outside the priory, but the place to which we return, the place where the major, and mostly unnoticed, emotional satisfactions are to be found is this single-sex community; this is our *home*. Unfortunately this is not always true of religious houses and, as Vincent McNabb remarked, a priory which is not a home will speedily become a Home—full of neurotics in need of therapy. But in this respect I should say we happen to be fairly successful or lucky.

It should be of interest, then, to notice exactly why it would be destructive of this home life if people in the community went to bed with each other. There is not the slightest doubt that it would be utterly destructive—and not simply because of the violation of a powerful taboo; it would, I think, be even more destructive if it became acceptable behaviour. It would be destructive because it would *privatise* the emotional relationship upon which the community depends. It would reduce the homosexual community to the relatively private world of the heterosexual relationship and the family. Two people would become so involved with each other that neither would be open and available to the rest of the group. This, surely, is the wisdom behind the traditional warning against ‘particular friendships’ in a religious community. In the past it has, of course, often been used to repress any kind of emotional relationship amongst religious, to convert the monastery or convent into a cold inhuman institution constituted by law instead of friendship. (Law is essential to community life but it cannot serve as the basis; it can only function humanly as an expression of a fundamental friendship.) But if we mean by ‘particular friendship’ substituting an intense private relationship of the kind appropriate to marriage for the normal warmth and mutual emotional exchange of the homosexual community, then it is easy to see why it is dangerous.

It may be that both the Straight and the Gay have erred in seeking to define homosexuality by reference to this privatised physical relationship. I would be quite happy to describe myself as a homosexual, for I look for the central emotional satisfactions of my life amongst this community of men and not in a heterosexual family, but I have never had the remotest inclination to get into bed with any of the

community whereas I have often wanted very much to do this with women.

The traditional case against the various physical expressions of what I have called 'privatised' homosexuality has to do with the perversion of a natural sexual act. It is not easy to spell this out: Professor Anscombe, for example, has argued that the argument in these terms against sodomy would also rule out contraception. (Her own case is that to permit contraception leaves one no rational grounds for ruling out sodomy, but the logic remains the same either way.) A good many of us would feel that in that case we ought to look once more at the terms.

Perhaps we could say that the heart of the traditional argument is that in such acts we are engaged in a kind of *pretence*. We are engaged in behaviour whose natural significance is generative, we are pretending to be generative when we are not so. In these terms it is possible to argue, and I would argue, that contraceptive intercourse, used for example to space out the children in a family, *can* be generative: it is part of the business of generating not indeed one fertilised ovum but a family. It is generative in so far as it preserves the stable emotional relationship between the parents that the children need, even though it does not increase the number of the children. The same justification could only be claimed for sodomy if the normal homosexual relationship were comparable to that of parents—two people engaged in a privacy that is of itself creative and other-directed. It seems much more probable that homosexual relationships belong normally in a wider community.

In a society in which homosexuals are objects of contempt, discrimination and oppression, it would not be surprising if attempts to liberate them fell into a trap familiar in the political world, that of imposing on homosexuals 'respectable' patterns of living that belong to heterosexuals. We remember Liberal imperialists imposing bourgeois 'freedoms' on the natives, we remember Captain Terence O'Neill saying that if only you treat Catholics kindly you will find that they will behave just like Protestants. Maybe the most subtly oppressive attitude to homosexuals is betrayed by those Dutch clergymen who conduct 'homosexual marriages'.

Homosexuals might ask whether what is thought of as the defining physical expression of the homosexual relationship (so that we speak of 'latent' and 'practising' homosexuals according to whether they engage in it or not) is not to a great extent conditioned by the sexist ethos of our society, a matter of imitating the heterosexuals—in traditional terms a 'pretence'. Could it be that this privatised homosexual activity is unreasonable not because it offends against the generative function of heterosexual sex, but because it is destructive of the normal communal expression of homosexual love?

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