

The Catholic Homosexual

Lee Poole

In his recent article 'Where are the Simple Faithful'? Fr Anthony Archer wrote recently (May 1975) for *New Blackfriars*: 'Opening the Church has allowed all sorts of groups to find their inspiration within the Church, for the gospel is a very potent source of new ideas' (p. 203).

Anyone sufficiently in touch with the actual range of such post-Vatican II Catholic pluralism is aware of the fact that a growing Catholic gay movement is finding its place too on the scene. Impulses of the past few years have been particularly strong in Holland¹ but perhaps even more so in America and Australia, where DIGNITY and ACCEPTANCE movements have recently joined hands to form an international fellowship of self-accepting gay women and men who profess openly their homosexuality and their Catholicism.²

These groups are not so much interested in debate with what they refer to as straight-society. Primarily they are interested in reaching other Catholic homosexuals with their message of self-acceptance and their positive evaluation of responsible sexual relations between gay persons. The very label 'gay' is preferred to 'homosexual' since it implies explicit awareness of and positive willingness to accept oneself thankfully for what one is, rather than to go on bemoaning one's fate as second-class citizens in a world of straight values and oppression.

Setting a priority on self-acceptance and mutual help within the gay community and only secondarily concerning themselves with trying to influence opinion within the straight establishments of church and society, Catholic gay activists have, for the most part, taken a very realistic stance. In this they have received warm support from priests, nuns and Catholic theologians who sympathise with their struggle but who can give them little hope of massive or startling changes of official position from the Church they love and with whom they wish to retain communion while professing gay orientation and values. An example of this kind of realistic support was given by Fr Gregory Baum in his

¹The 'Open Deur' in Amsterdam is a Roman Catholic centre run by Dr M. Gottschalk. The work done there and by those connected with it is well known in Holland and highly thought of by those who value the spirit of the endeavour. The 'Pastorale werkgroep Homofilie' in Berg en Dal is an ecumenical group comprised of Catholic priests and Protestant ministers dedicated to a ministry among and for gay people. It too is well known and highly valued.

²At the time of my writing this article (June 1975) DIGNITY has 33 local chapters in American cities across the entire continent. The national headquarters are located in Boston: 755 Boylston St., Room 514, Boston, MA. There are currently three new chapters in the process of formation.

ACCEPTANCE has local chapters in Adelaide, Canberra, Melbourne and Sydney. The address of the chapter in Canberra is: P.O. Box 381, Dickson 2602, A.C.T., Australia.

article entitled 'Catholic Homosexuals' (appearing originally in the February 15, 1974, issue of *Commonweal* and reprinted subsequently in the March, 1974, newsletter issue of *Dignity*). After writing extensively in support of the Catholic gay position as expressed in the Dignity movement, Fr Baum sums up his article as follows :

While the arguments in these pages may have a good deal of persuasive force, it is not likely that the Catholic Church is about to change its traditional teaching. Since the organisational centre of the Catholic Church is situated in a country with social and cultural conditions that differ greatly from those of North America, official Catholic teaching is often less concerned than are some other churches with the problems that emerge in our society. Thus the strict views on birth control and on remarriage after a broken union still prevail in the official teaching. It would be a mistake, it seems to me, if Dignity made an appeal to the Catholic hierarchy for special recognition. A realistic strategy, in my view, would be to create a moderate and well-founded minority position in the Catholic Church. The arguments in this article supporting the Dignity standpoint are to a large extent based on contemporary Christian witness. It would be useful to collect more pastoral experience and continue theological reflection. While the minority position adopted by Dignity will be able to help vast numbers of gay people at this time, a new approach to homosexuality by the entire Church is a matter of the distant future.

Thus, whether one finds himself on the side of sympathetic supporters with Fr Baum or on the traditional side of non-acceptance when it comes to admitting 'consenting adults' to the fold of bona-fide church communion, one shares a very clear understanding of the fact that we are concerned here with a basic moral issue. It is not an issue which can be 'smoothed over', because it touches a moral tradition which has deep roots and a very long history in Catholic moral theology. Traditionalists are quick to remember the Pauline condemnations of homosexuality (cf. Romans 1, 26ff; I Cor. 6, 9-10; I Tim. 1, 9-10) and even the more lenient of moral theologians in our day are often forced into a negative position³ by the centuries-standing Catholic conviction that certain human actions are immoral under any and all circumstances. Bestiality, murder, rape and active homosexual behaviour, for example, are all assigned to this category. However much you may sympathise with the personal difficulties of individuals who commit acts of these kinds, the acts are themselves—according to the tradition—'intrinsically evil' and as such can never be condoned or approved.

One wonders, of course, how the self-accepting and actively 'consenting' gay Catholic responds to the tradition of 'intrinsic evil' and 'un-

³E.g., The Dutch Catechism: 'Lack of frank discussion has allowed a number of opinions to be formed about them which are unjust when applied generally, because those who have such inclinations in fact are often hard-working and honourable people. It is not the fault of the individual if he or she is not attracted to the other sex. The causes of homosexuality are unknown. In their human isolation, they look for friendship. But even where they find true and loyal responses, the perfect fulfilment of their human longings is not granted them. Ultimately all homosexual (or rather, homo-erotic) tendencies come up against the discovery that the sexual in man can only find its natural fulfilment—as may be deduced from human structure—in the other sex'. *A New Catechism*, London, 1967, pp. 384-385.

natural human acts' in his Catholic heritage. How does he or she get around the consistent and unflinching moral theological tradition of the Church that there simply are certain bodily things you must not do, regardless of your motives and overall attitudes? Can attitudes of love and self-giving cancel out the elements of selfishness and lust which seem intrinsically attached to acts which the tradition labels as 'unnatural'? Could murder or rape ever lose their intrinsically evil character simply by the fact of their being subjectively motivated by love or a desire to give of and express one's deepest needs?

Does the ordinary gay Catholic who has learned to accept himself and to give expression to his needs with a gay partner simply deny straight away the existence of intrinsically evil moral actions? And if so, how can he continue to consider himself in contact with the tradition? After working closely with gay Christians—both Catholic and non-Catholic—for five years, I am personally convinced that the majority would claim that this kind of problem is really imaginary and one of straight society's own creating. Most would not deny the existence of intrinsically evil acts. Nor would they be likely to deny that bestiality, murder and rape properly and objectively belong to that category. But straight society's problem here, by including the homosexual act automatically on the list, consists simply in its not having taken the trouble to check out or *empirically* tests the thesis that homosexual love is any less natural than heterosexual love. *Empirical observation*—not logic and theological argumentation—is what we miss here. The fact that homosexual behaviour is less frequent (as are blue eyes in a native African tribe) or the fact that it is distasteful to the heterosexual majority (even as it is distasteful and unnatural for 'outdoors' people to spend their leisure hours in book-shops and libraries) does not in itself render it evil or unnatural in absolute terms. Evil and unnatural for the majority perhaps. But does this then logically or necessarily imply the entire human race? Given the historical fact that straight persons have always been in the majority and have thus always been in a position to interpret the 'law of nature' for the rest of society on the basis of their own experiences and deepest convictions (rather than on the basis of empirical investigation), it is perhaps no wonder that this self-created problem is still with us.

But in pointing to the tradition's procedural error in reaching the conclusion that homosexual behavior is unnatural or 'intrinsically evil', the gay Catholic does not deny in principle the existence of unnatural and intrinsically evil human sexual acts. When he thus admits to this category 'anything which for me would be experienced as basically repugnant and unnatural', he is not simply raising subjective experience to an objective and general (situation-ethical) norm. Rather, he is bearing testimony to the empirical fact (not yet adequately or empirically tested by straight establishments in church and society) that those kinds of 'bodily things' which you may never do, 'regardless of your motives and overall attitudes' can be and are objectively different 'bodily things' for different kinds of people, at least in matters of sexual behavior.

According to the Church's moral tradition, it is not in and of itself a

sin to be a person of homosexual orientation. But it is simultaneously asserted that all physical homosexual acts wilfully committed are grievous sins. The reason given is basically that such acts involve the unnatural or improper use of physical organs intended by God for the begetting of children.

Commenting upon this logic, the Anglican, Fr Michael De-la-Noy writes :

This line of reasoning seems to me to perpetuate appalling ignorance about human sexuality, for our sexuality permeates our whole personality, and to try to differentiate conclusively between physical sexual activities and primary sexual and emotional orientation is unrealistic; homosexuality, like heterosexuality, is a way of thinking. If you accept that somebody is primarily homosexual it would seem that his or her sexual organs are never going to be put to procreative or any other kind of heterosexual use anyway. Churchmen who stick to the 'misuse of sex line' are really denying the homosexual condition . . . ('Homosexuality', *Christian Renewal*, December 1971).

That a 'misuse of sex' at the personal and individual level is clearly possible nearly every gay Catholic would readily admit. It is a misuse of one's sexual nature, for example, when a person of dominant homosexual orientation tries to 'solve' his social difficulties by entering a heterosexual relationship or marriage. To struggle thus against one's 'whole personality', against one's global 'way of thinking' and feeling is experienced as perverse by self-accepting gays. This can seem shocking to self-congratulating heterosexuals only in the degree that they are unwilling to apply the same barometer for detecting perverse movements of their own nature (feelings of disgust and disinclination, coupled with a persistent drive or desire to do it anyway) to the homosexual and his/her capacity for moral judgment. Indeed it can be a real temptation for the homosexual man or woman to yield to such perversity, to experiment and dally with a sexual phenomenon (the heterosexual phenomenon) which goes against everything within his or her deeper inclinations and needs. How many problems at the social and economic levels of such a person's existence would not be solved, if he/she could somehow make a go of it and thus be accepted by straight society? In this sense the 'temptation to perversity' is indeed much more frequent and much more serious for the homosexual person than the temptation to homosexual perversity ordinarily is for straight persons in a world of straight values. And if accordingly sins of perversity are committed more often by homosexuals than by heterosexuals, it is because the world in which they are forced to live gives them far fewer viable options.

All of this points perhaps to a realm of fact and feeling with which ordinary protagonists of straight values are totally unfamiliar. This unfamiliarity renders them easy prey to their own imaginations and wishes when it comes to the question of what is natural or unnatural, acceptable or unacceptable in human sexual behavior. This would be more understandable and accordingly less reprehensible if there were not already reams of empirically controllable fact in terms of which one

could begin to re-think the issues involved. In this connection De-la-Noy writes :

So long as the causes and true nature of homosexuality remained unexplored there was some excuse for the Church to exhibit natural fear of the unknown, but it is a disgrace that today the Church should be refusing to test its own ill-founded assertions against the yardsticks of scientific and psychological research. It is disgraceful because on the subject of homosexuality the Church is not concerning itself with some abstract theological nicety but with the very fibre of millions of men and women.

As genuinely 'concerned' Christians we must begin to concern ourselves genuinely with the world of empirical fact—rather than with the imaginative world of the majority's personal and prejudicial inclinations, rather than with the theoreticians' closed deductive systems which are capable of proving anything they choose as long as they do not have to concern themselves seriously with the facts. The reason for this is clear. It is in the world of his/her own concrete experiences and needs that every human being does in fact live. This is no less true for homosexuals than for heterosexuals. In the question of birth-control we have begun to learn a great deal about how concrete human experience and need begin to replace abstract norms and arguments when the latter are no longer concerned with the concrete terms of human existence. One feels instinctively that it is now time for gay Catholics to be accorded the same right implicitly given those Catholics who for serious reasons practice contraception. To label birth-control and murder in one breath as intrinsically evil human acts was once possible within our Catholic moral tradition. There are few Catholic theologians today who would be able to muster the same certainty on this question as theologians of only a generation ago. To many a gay Catholic the time has now also come for a general questioning of that theological mentality which would continue to see homosexuality linked up immediately with such concepts as sickness and sin. Certainly its days on the list of 'intrinsic evils' are numbered.

Debate and argumentation are of little use or interest in this connection. But serious investigation and a willingness to reassess traditional stances in the light of what is most fundamental to the gospel message is what we now need. It could perhaps be argued whether or not the apostle Paul was himself always wholly consistent with this message. But he could give expression to it in no uncertain terms: 'Help carry one another's burdens, and in this way you will obey the law of Christ. . . . For the whole law is summed up in one commandment: Love your neighbour as yourself' (Gal. 6, 2, 5, 14).

If we take this passage of Paul as our initial point of reflection, Fr De-la-Noy provides us with an ideal occasion for examination of consciences :

To be homosexual is to be human. If a homosexual feels compelled, as most human beings do, to create a platform for his or her life through the building up of a unique personal relationship with another human being, he or she requires as much encouragement as

anyone else, if not in fact a good deal more. But by a constant harping on the automatically sinful nature of all homosexual relations the Church has denied to homosexuals the Christian gift of hope, and it is small wonder that so many homosexual men and women feel unwanted, unworthy, unclean and unloved. I am constantly amazed that homosexuals, other than the very repressed ones, remain loyal to an organisation that is so cruel to them.

Yet hundreds and thousands are finding the strength and encouragement to do just this. Concerning the position adopted by the American Catholic gay movement DIGNITY, Fr Baum writes :

Dignity holds that it is the call of Catholic homosexuals to affirm their sexual orientation in faith, to regard themselves as equal members of the believing community, and to express their sexuality in a manner consonant with Christ's teaching of love. . . . This association hopes that through the trusting dialogue within the believing community, gay people will find the necessary guidance. There are unsolved questions about homosexuality and the viability of various forms of homosexual life, for which no one has definitive answers. Should gay people imitate the forms of heterosexual love? Or should they find their own responsible way of sharing and mutuality? Dignity trusts that the guidance granted by the Spirit within the Christian community will lead to greater insight. . . . The centre of the new Catholic association is faith in Jesus Christ. Dignity holds that the Christian faith offers a special strength to gay people . . . the Christian message proclaiming God's acceptance of all people in Christ initiates men and women into a new self-acceptance and creates a new sense of dignity in them. This self-affirmation in faith, then, becomes the source of more positive, generous and joyful life (loc. cit).

May one be permitted to hope that God will allow this spirit of Dignity to continue to grow and bear fruit, not only for gay Catholics themselves, but for all who in any way are touched by them and their lives—as we are all touched by every 'abrahamitic minority'⁴ in our midst whose stigma in some way is our own.

⁴'Abrahamitic minority' is the general term used by Archbishop Helder Camara (Recife, Brazil) for all groups oppressed by society at large. The term appears frequently in his book *Espiral de Violencia* (Ediciones Sigueme, Salamanca, 1970).