

Can My Son Be Gay and Catholic?

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Can Jim be gay *and* Catholic? That became the big question for me after I got over the initial shock and confusion of learning our son is gay. While Mary Ellen (my wife and Jim's mother) rode the emotional guilt/doubt/grief roller coaster typified in many stories about parents' journeys, I logically stepped my way through the theological mine field. That's what you do when you're a theology junkie (Vatican documents are beach reading), and nearly fall off the thinker side of those thinker-versus-feeler scales.

"Dad, I'm gay." Those words from Jim were unthinkable for me. All I could say was, "Are you sure?" I didn't know any gay people (so I thought). I knew virtually nothing about homosexuality. And my vague understanding of church teaching was: homosexuality was wrong. Period. So wrong--you couldn't even talk about it. Like osmosis, this silence surrounding homosexuality seeped into my consciousness and left me with the notion that no sin was worse than homosexuality. As a thinker, I was forced to bring some rationality to this irrational belief, and to the feelings that were there, though unacknowledged. I had to know: Can Jim be gay and be Catholic?

My first logical step was to think back to the day when I decided whether I was going to be homosexual or heterosexual. I never made such a decision, nor did Jim, nor anyone else I've talked with about this. And I discovered that church documents support the unchosen, fixed nature of sexual orientation. The US Bishops refer to "*those persons for whom homosexuality is a permanent, seemingly irreversible sexual orientation,*" [HS, p. 54-55] and their Committee on Marriage and Family says, "*Generally, homosexual orientation is experienced as a given, not as something freely chosen.*" [AOC, p. 6]

Learning that Jim didn't choose his homosexuality was a giant first step for me. But, I wondered, "Why does Jim have this orientation?" I readily dismissed a 19th century theory that said homosexuality was caused by the habitual drinking of English tea and the pernicious influence of Italian opera! How ill-informed we've been! Yet that's understandable,

considering that scientists didn't start studying this concept until the mid 1800's, and the Catholic church didn't officially acknowledge sexual orientation until 1975.

"OK, that helps," I thought. But I was sure my next step was going to be into quicksand! Is homosexuality a sin? Surprise! The Vatican unequivocally states: *"The particular inclination of a homosexual person is not a sin"* [PCHP, #3] Of course! A homosexual orientation can't be a sin if it's not a choice. In fact, church teaching says sexuality is a gift, and *"Sexual identity helps to define the unique persons we are, and one component of our sexual identity is sexual orientation."* [AOC, p. 7]

But what about what these feelings might lead to? What about homogenital acts? As I expected, the Vatican says: *"It is only in the marital relationship that the use of the sexual faculty can be morally good."* [PCHP, #7] And the U.S. Bishops say: *"Homosexual activity . . . , as distinguished from homosexual orientation, is morally wrong."* But, they continue: *"Like heterosexual persons, homosexuals are called to give witness to chastity, avoiding, with God's grace, behavior which is wrong for them, just as nonmarital sexual relations are wrong for heterosexuals."* [ICJ, #52] Whoa! What hit me, probably because I'm heterosexual, is the part that says: "just as nonmarital sexual relations are wrong for heterosexuals."

This tells me if Jim has sexual relations outside of marriage, he violates church-established moral norms; just like my heterosexual son Andy, if he has sexual relations outside of marriage; just like my married daughter, Linda, if she uses artificial birth control; and just like me if I masturbate.

OK, but logically I thought: "Since church law restricts marriage to a man and woman, doesn't this mean homogenital behavior is always a sin?" Well, the Vatican says: *"In fact, circumstances may exist, or may have existed in the past, which would reduce or remove the culpability of the individual [engaged in homosexual activity]. . . in a given instance."* [PCHP, #11] Wow! The Vatican says homogenital acts are not necessarily for mortal sin: 1) the thought, desire, word, action or omission must be seriously wrong 2) the person must know it's seriously wrong, and 3) the person must fully consent to it. And only God knows how knowledgeable and how free we really are.

Along with all this I learned the church recommends a pastoral approach. For example, a Vatican theologian and author of one of its documents, in a newspaper interview, said: *"When one is dealing with people who are so predominately homosexual that they will be in serious personal and perhaps social trouble unless they attain a steady partnership within their homosexual lives, one can recommend them to seek such a partnership and one accepts this relationship as the best they can do in their present situation."* [JV] I later learned this is based on the moral principle that no one is obliged to do what is impossible for them to do.

During my journey, I read that Catholic church teaching says six biblical texts clearly say homosexual behavior is immoral. But my journey also led me to Scroggs, Furnish, and many other biblical scholars, who convincingly argue the bible is not really so clear on this.

So at this point in my journey--and it was a meandering 14 year process, not the series of logical steps I've presented it here--I'd learned that it is not a sin for Jim to have a homosexual orientation, and that Jim can be gay and a faithful Catholic, just like any other faithful Catholic who struggles with objective moral norms established by the church. The U.S. Bishops say it well: *"Homosexual [persons], like everyone else, should not suffer from prejudice against their basic human rights. They have a right to respect, friendship, and justice. They should have an active role in the Christian community."* [ICJ, #52; and HS, p. 55]

Through this process, I also learned a thinker has feelings too! Since my son is gay, I'm personally affected by this teaching, and I would like some of it to change. I learned that's OK too. Why? Because none of this teaching is infallible . . . which means, of course, it can change. But will it? Change springs from unresolved tensions. Here are three:

1. The Catholic church says it's OK for gay people to be gay as long as they're celibate, yet the church also teaches that celibacy is a gift. Are all gay people gifted with the ability to live a celibate lifestyle?
2. Catholic church teaching considers homosexual orientation to be a sexual *deviation*, a "disorder." The church also teaches there can be no conflict between faith and reason, yet the American Psychiatric Association and the

American Psychological Association consider homosexual orientation to be a natural sexual *variation*.

3. Not only was church teaching formulated without the participation of openly gay and lesbian people, but the teaching doesn't take into account the lived experience of many faithful, gay and lesbian Catholics--real people--made in the image and likeness of God, who, like all of us, struggle to do what God calls us to do.

Change in church teaching is possible, but the official church tends to move very, very slowly. So, what do I do today? Well, that brought me to another teaching that surprises many Catholics--the primacy of conscience. The Catechism puts it very simply: "*A human being must always obey the certain judgment of his [or her] conscience.*" [my emphasis, CC, #1790] "Wow!", I thought, "That's pretty clear!" Does that mean we can do anything we want? Theologian Charles Curran answered that for me--quite concisely: We *must* obey our conscience, but our conscience might be wrong.

This led me to the concept of moral discernment in the Catholic moral tradition. The church suggests looking at experience, reason (including the sciences), tradition (church teaching), and scripture. Why all four? Because each has been wrong. Consider the flatness of earth (experience), the theory that babies came only from the man (reason), the excommunication of Galileo (tradition), or slavery (scripture). But what if church teaching and our conscience do not agree? Church teaching itself says we should start with the presumption that church teaching is right. Then, consider scripture, reason, and our experience, and return to the ultimate question: Are we responding to the God revealed in Jesus Christ?

Bishop Thomas Gumbleton gave me an example of how to balance church teaching and conscience when he said: "*I don't make judgments about a gay person's conscience any more than about the military man at a SAC air base or on a Trident submarine who would fire a nuclear weapon if ordered to. I think in some ways the church teaching on that is clearer than on homosexuality. . . . Anybody who has the intention of using such weapons is, in my judgment, in a situation that is drastically evil. And yet I cannot judge another person's conscience. If that person comes to communion, I cannot refuse.*" [TG]

Church teaching, personal sin, conscience, discernment. Intellectually, I found Jim can certainly be gay and Catholic. But this discovery was still in my thinker's world of theology and homosexuality until I heard Bishop Kenneth Untener. Speaking to a largely gay and lesbian audience, he said: "*When we die, and as a moral theologian I don't say this lightly, the only thing that will matter is how we treated each other.*" [KU] That's when I realized the final step of my journey was getting to know and love many faithful Catholic gay people who like our son, Jim, are made in the image of God and are loved by God, who love God and love their neighbors as themselves. That's how I really know Jim can be gay and Catholic.

References

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- TG = Tom Roberts, *He's not disordered, he's my brother*, National Catholic Reporter, Nov. 4, 1994, p. 6.

Bio

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