GARETH MOORE OP

a Question of Truth

CHRISTIANITY AND HOMOSEXUALITY

continuum

A Question of Truth

Christianity and Homosexuality

GARETH MOORE OP

To MARCUS
who will probably disagree with most of what I have written

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'If ever it comes to a choice between Jesus and truth, we must always choose truth, because disloyalty to truth will always prove in the long run to have been disloyalty to Jesus.'

Simone Weil

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Foreword

Until he began the long struggle against cancer, and despite his profound understanding of the world in which he lived, Fr Gareth Moore OP, who died on 6 December, aged 54, remained somewhat mistaken in two important aspects: how much he was loved, and by how many people. During his last few months, however, he was finally persuaded by the existence of a great crowd of friends, and their deep love of him both as a priest and a person.

From a very early age, Gareth Moore was set apart by his outstanding intellectual abilities. The first pupil from his London grammar school to gain a scholarship to Oxford, he seemed destined for a long career as an academic, and was clearly groomed for this by his college, Corpus Christi. On completion of his postgraduate degree of B. Litt., however, he felt the irresistible call of the cloister and joined St Mary's Abbey, Quarr. The shift from university to Benedictine life was perhaps too abrupt for him at this stage, so he wisely left the monastery to spend two years teaching mathematics in Zambia.

On his return to England, Moore once again felt the call of religious life. This time he turned to the Order of Preachers, the Dominicans, joining the novitiate in 1977. Though he never turned his back on the Benedictine way of life (and indeed always maintained the superiority of their monastic chant over the perhaps simpler Dominican plainsong), there was never any doubt that in joining the Blackfriars he had at last found his true home.

It was clear from the start of his life in religion that his temperament and virtues were in total accord with the aims and, indeed, the motto of the Order of St Dominic – *Veritas* (truth). Gareth Moore demonstrated above all one particularly important aspect of truth, that of honesty. Indeed, not only did he strongly disapprove of falsehood of any sort, even if it were assumed to be for someone's benefit, but he was also frankly quite incapable of it. And as he had a tendency to be brutally honest with others, so he was with himself. He was always the first to point out any perceived weakness in his own character and personality, sometimes to the

embarrassment of his closest friends, but this self-knowledge, coupled with a deep humility, gave him an enormous capacity for sympathy and understanding. During the many years he spent in Blackfriars, Oxford, he always had a stream of visitors seeking his counsel and pastoral care.

His thirst for truth was at its strongest in his intellectual and academic endeavours. He never once shied away from serious controversy and debate. His writings, lectures and sermons, which covered a wide range, from theology and philosophy to music and photography, may have sometimes worried his ecclesiastical superiors but never failed to stimulate his audience into careful consideration as he invited them to join him in the search for the truth – however painful and risky it might turn out to be. His extensive work on the difficult and currently dangerous subject of human sexuality was typical of the brave approach he brought to his work. His many publications include the two well-received books *Believing in God* (Edinburgh, 1988) and *The Body in Context* (London, 1992).

It would never have occurred to Moore to seek out public recognition or office, and so, when he was elected prior of the Belgian Dominican Couvent de l'Epiphanie, Rixensart, in 1995, nobody was more surprised than he. During his two terms as prior he radically reformed the nature of the institution.

He decided to return to university life and to his beloved Blackfriars in Oxford in 2001. Less than a year after his return, he was diagnosed as having kidney cancer. He was for the last time honest and true in facing death. He often expressed his fear of dying, but through his personal integrity, he found the strength both to endure his distressing illness, and, in the end, to find a clear path through the difficulties of dying.

As death approached, he was greatly surprised by the sheer fortitude and endurance of his own personal faith. His characteristic honesty often misled people into thinking that he might be at odds with the Church, and sometimes, indeed, he even beguiled himself. Yet he died as he had wished, at peace, surrounded by dear friends, fully fortified by the rites of the Church, a true and faithful son of his Order.

Marcus Hodges

Obituary published in *The Tablet*, 14 December 2002. Reprinted by kind permission.

Preface

The Christian debate about homosexuality has been short, energetic and sometimes violent. It has already given rise to too many books. Not all of these have been illuminating or have justified the use (or waste) of resources that have gone into their production. This, even though the authors of all of them sincerely thought that their particular book was necessary and justified. I think the same of mine. Whether it is in fact worth adding to the pile only the reader can judge. While I go over much – perhaps too much – familiar ground, my hope is that even those widely read in this area may find something new and worth pondering.

When I first began to write, my aim was to do a critical survey of the arguments about homosexuality most often deployed in the mainstream Christian churches in their debates on the subject. It soon became evident not only that the task would be way beyond my patience but that the result would be indigestible and of doubtful value. While argument remains a central concern for me, I have almost exclusively limited myself to such arguments as are current in the Roman Catholic Church.[1] I have paid particular attention to the document *Homosexualitatis Problema* issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) in 1986. I have done this not because I think it a particularly fine document, but because it looks like becoming the basis of the Catholic Church's approach to the subject. The restriction to Catholic arguments not only cuts down the size of the task, but is also natural in more than one way. First, as a Catholic myself my interest is naturally drawn above all to the debates within my own church. Second, the debate (sometimes row) is often louder and more heated than in other churches. Third, the arguments deployed cover broadly two great areas: the Bible and natural law. There can be few churches which do not, in general, consider at least one of these areas to be vital for an understanding of theological and moral questions. My hope is that in concentrating on the Catholic Church I shall at the same time be saying something of interest to members of other churches.

A further important restriction is that the great majority of my

remarks concern specifically male homosexuality. This is a serious limitation and needs at least some justification. This book is reactive. That is, I deal for the most part with arguments others have put forward; and it is a fact that many of those arguments are framed in terms of male homosexuality, and cannot be reframed in terms of female homosexuality or in a way which will embrace both. This tendency is encouraged by the language of the Bible which, where it seems to furnish ammunition for anti-homosexual arguments, is concerned almost always with male behaviour. In addition, as a man I have a greater intuitive understanding of male than of female sexuality, and of the questions that arise in connection with it. This makes it is easier for me to talk in male terms. It would be presumptuous of me to talk, beyond a certain point, about female sexuality. This is a task which is better left to women, to those who really understand. Nevertheless, if my language remains excessively male, I believe that many of the points I have to make are applicable to both men and women. I apologize if my language seems to exclude women; if any women readers feel obliged mentally to alter what I say to make it more directly relevant to women, then I apologize also for the tedium that this involves.

The general thesis of the book, towards which the various subsidiary arguments are supposed to tend, can be stated briefly. It is that there are no good arguments, from either Scripture or natural law, against what have come to be known as homosexual relationships. The arguments put forward to show that such relationships are immoral are bad. Either their premisses are false or the argument by means of which the conclusion is drawn from them itself contains errors. It is of this that I hope to persuade the reader. It is also why the book is in a sense an invitation to be critical: critical both of my arguments and, more importantly and less easily, of the words of important leaders of the churches. If most of the Christian anti-homosexual arguments are bad, this is not only because their authors make factual or logical errors; it is also partly because they do not concern themselves with the social context of sexual relationships. As a result, they fail to ask pertinent and important questions. Indeed, many Christian authors seem unaware that such questions are there to be asked. I have tried to make a small contribution to remedying this in my previous book *The Body in Context* (London, Continuum, 2001). But the important point is that Christian moralists cannot go on writing as if a great deal of work had not already been done outside Christian circles on the social and other aspects of sexuality. Few theologians, for instance,

show awareness even of the existence of such important works as, to name but a few, Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, David F. Greenberg's *The Construction of Homosexuality*, and Jeffrey Weeks's *Sexuality and its Discontents*. While this remains the case, too many theologians and church authorities who attempt to pronounce on the subject of homosexuality simply lack credibility; they have not done their homework. While I do not have space to rehearse the theories of Foucault and others, I hope it will be clear to those familiar with their work that their influence lies behind much of my argumentation; I hope too that the reader will agree that such influence leads to a much more adequate theoretical appreciation of sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular.

I devote much space to the Bible. The biblical translations are basically my own, but it would be disingenuous not to acknowledge that they are influenced by a long familiarity with and appreciation of the excellent Revised Standard Version. It may well be that a translation I believe to be my own is drawn unconsciously from this source, or accidentally identical with the RSV text. Sometimes I have also transliterated biblical words. The transliterations are unscientific, dispensing with diacritical markings that are intelligible only to the experts to whom they are also unnecessary.

My opportunity and ability to write have been severely limited. Thus, should it ever appear in print, I cannot confidently claim responsibility for all the errors it contains. I ask the reader for a certain indulgence towards those that are mere slips and that can be rectified without detriment to the central arguments I am pursuing. But if any of those central arguments themselves are faulty, they should be rejected; for my concern here is, in the end, as I shall explain in Chapter 1, with truth, and the importance of good argument as a guide to it. Bad arguments, however well intentioned, are to be rejected, including my own.

One final word is necessary here. I am a Dominican, and rejoice to be a member of an Order whose motto is *Veritas*. But, while I am sure that, writing as I do in pursuit of the truth, my efforts here are fully in conformity with my Dominican vocation, I must make it clear that the Order has at no stage been involved in the project and bears no responsibility either for the content of the text or for the fact of its publication.

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Introduction

This book is intended as a contribution to the theological debate on homosexuality within the Roman Catholic Church. That debate has had a short life. Before the publication of John McNeill's book *The Church and the Homosexual* in 1977 little had appeared other than more or less cursory statements treating homosexuals as deviants, and homosexuality as a perversion or a quasi-criminal kind of activity. Sexuality was treated as more or less synonymous with heterosexuality, and homosexuality was seen as a marginal aberration. In O'Neill's book, for the first time in mainstream Catholic theology, an attempt was made to consider both homosexual people and homosexual activity in a more understanding and positive light. The history of that book's publication and of subsequent Vatican documents exhibits currents of thinking which run strongly in the opposite direction. This is particularly clear in two documents issuing from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF): 1975 Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics (*Persona Humana*); 1986 Letter ... on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons (*HP*); and 1997 Note on discrimination.

There has been little public theological debate of the positions adopted in these documents. To many, these interventions represent a timely defence and elaboration of traditional Catholic views on homosexuality and a much-needed reassertion of traditional Christian teaching on the nature and purpose of sex in human life at a time when other churches are abandoning the heritage to which they should be faithful and when there is pressure towards infidelity even inside the Catholic Church. On the one hand there has thus been an enthusiastic reception on the part of many who seem to have felt little need to criticize and refine the CDF's statements. On the other hand, these interventions have occasioned much negative reaction. Criticism from sources outside the church was to be expected, especially from those who see the church as a reactionary force inimical to true human freedom. But there have also been protests from within the church, from gay Catholic groups as well as lay people, not homosexual themselves, who are sympathetic to

what they see as gay people's fight for justice and understanding in the church. Many of these feel that the CDF has not thought seriously about the subject but has merely sought to justify a position that is the product of prejudice of bygone ages; a prejudice that is, in at least some countries, thankfully beginning to break down. The CDF is accused of refusing to listen to voices at variance with its own, and in particular of failing to take seriously the voice and experience of gay Catholics who find that the old teaching simply does not reflect the reality of their lives; its documents speak with the harsh voice of a remote and homophobic bureaucracy isolated from and ignorant of the lives of ordinary men and women.

There are three aspects of this negative reaction that call for particular attention. First, it has on the whole not taken the form of a theological discussion and appraisal, albeit negative, of the CDF's position. Those dissatisfied with it have rather developed alternative ways of understanding sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular. There has been no serious attempt at dialogue with what at the moment seems to have become the 'official' position. Second, whatever its justification, this criticism does show that a number of Catholics are alienated from the official teaching institutions of the church, believing that their voice is not heard and that they are confronted with an arrogant and intransigent bureaucracy which claims the right to speak and be obeyed without carrying out its prior and humbler duty to listen. Third, this criticism is in general voiced publicly by those remote from the standard arenas of theological debate in the church. There are many books and articles by active lay Catholics, but those who make their living as Catholic theologians, teaching and writing in universities and seminaries, have started no debate nor responded to lay initiative. This is not because all Catholic theologians are in complete agreement with the CDF's position. But criticism tends to be voiced in private and in muted tones. It is difficult to avoid the impression that a certain fear reigns among theologians when it comes to discussing homosexuality.

The net result of these positive and negative reactions, and of the ways they have been expressed, is that there has been little serious critical discussion of the interventions of the CDF and the views they express. This is a pity, for several reasons. First, the CDF is, for the present, an important voice in the church. The failure to discuss its views, resulting either from too enthusiastic an acceptance or from too categorical a rejection, is a failure to take its views seriously. All serious theological positions take time and

debate in order to be properly assessed and elaborated. The current polarized reactions do not enable this debate to take place. Second, those who are developing their own views are doing so in an atmosphere where these views too cannot be properly debated. The church at large cannot profit from the new insights they claim to offer, and they cannot benefit from a reasoned criticism emanating from other currents in church thinking. While the church remains divided into camps, while each side sees the other as at best mouthing slogans and at worst betraying its Christian vocation, there will be no debate, only a dialogue of the deaf. Third, the church was not founded to be a place of polarization, of mutual hostility and suspicion or of fear. It was founded to be a place where the truth is spoken in love. St Paul asks us all to be of one mind. We are not all to pretend to be of one mind when we are not. Among human beings, unanimity is difficult to achieve. If it is possible at all, it can only be by a long process which demands charity of us all: the humility to listen carefully to others and always to seek the best in what they say, to speak without aggression, respecting the intelligence and integrity of those from whom we differ. What follows is written in the conviction that all members of the church who speak on this subject, as well as those who keep silent, from Cardinal Ratzinger to the most radical of his opponents, are brothers and sisters in Christ, called to live in peace and love with one another. If unanimity fails, that is a pity. If charity fails, if we no longer listen and speak in love, that is a disaster; we deny our fundamental identity as members of the one Body and as children of the one God.

No approach to this subject (or to any other) that simply ignores what the official teaching organs of the church say will have trouble making itself out to be Catholic. In the following pages I do not attempt to break new ground in the theological study of homosexuality. Rather, I go over old ground, in the belief that what is old may still have something to teach us. I am attempting to take seriously, but far from uncritically, what the church has said on this subject in recent years. This will mean looking yet again at, among other things, what the Bible says and what, if anything, the natural law tradition has to teach us. My hope is that by accurate thinking and by careful attention to texts we can discover something sufficiently new and interesting as to make this book worth reading. My commitment to taking seriously what the church has said in recent years means that my approach to what may be familiar questions will often have a particular slant: I shall often be asking, for

example, not simply what a given passage of Scripture might mean, but whether it means what in recent church teaching it has been taken to mean, or whether it supports the specific position the church has taken it to support. In this way I hope to be not merely repeating old arguments but encouraging a critical engagement. Much of what I have to say will be critical of the CDF and those who think similarly. It should not, however, be construed as an attack. We are all engaged in a humble search for truth. If I criticize my fellow members of Christ it is in order to help the church towards the truth. I sincerely hope that what I write may be the object of similar criticism, so that I may discover my mistakes in order that neither I nor the rest of the church may be led astray by them. What is at stake here is not the authority of this or that part of the body of Christ, but the movement of the whole towards the truth, a movement that must be inspired by mutual fraternal concern that does its best to speak the truth in love. The church does not impose a discipline. In any case the church is today incapable of imposing its position either on Christians or on those outside the church. The church must seek to convince homosexuals that her position on homosexual acts is true, that homosexuality is contrary to what God wills for human beings. This is what the modern church in fact does. This means that certain principles have to be followed:

1. Bad arguments need to be avoided. These do not convince, and give the impression that there are no good arguments. This undermines the church's position rather than strengthening it.

1.1 We sometimes have a tendency not to examine too closely arguments that support our own position. We have to be on our guard against this if we are in dialogue with others who do not share our views.

1.2 In fact we need to do this even if we are not in dialogue with people who disagree with us. Bad arguments do not help reveal the truth to ourselves. Bad arguments can be used to make us more comfortable in pre-conceived positions which may be false; they can serve only to reinforce our prejudices. But we are not here to be made to feel more comfortable or to have our prejudices reinforced. We are here for the truth.

1.3 In order to be on the lookout for bad arguments, we need to be aware that we may be prone to accept them. We must be on

guard against ourselves, conscious that we want to be more comfortable, to have our positions reinforced.

1.4 To safeguard against error, we need to accept that our own position is open to scrutiny, both from those sympathetic to us and from those opposed to us. We often learn most from our opponents.

1.5 So we need to accept that we may be wrong. Cromwell wrote: 'I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken' (Letter to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, 3 August 1650, in Thomas Carlyle, *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches* (1845)).

1.6 Not to go on about infallibility. This does not impress people who disagree on a particular question. This does not put infallibility or the authority of the church in question; but the appeal to infallibility is simply not useful.

1.7 Being aware that one can make mistakes is not incompatible with a belief in the infallibility of the church, either. An a priori assurance that one is right is one of the surest ways to argue badly and to make mistakes, because one does not examine sufficiently closely what one says. One of the best ways to be right is to be vigilant against the possibility of error.

2. The only way to be listened to is to show that one is ready to listen.

3. *Omne quod recipitur secundum modum recipientis recipitur.*

4. Argue with the best of homosexual practice, not with the worst. The church wants to show that homosexual practices are *as such* contrary to the will of God, and so contrary to human well-being, not simply that the worst excesses of homosexuality are contrary to human well-being.

Closeted queers in the Vatican

Do not impute disreputable motives or characteristics to opponents as a way of discrediting them. Opponents of official church teaching not uncommonly ascribe to its proponents, particularly to the originators of official documents, a variety of uncomplimentary motives and qualities. They are only interested in power, suggest some, and react to squash anything that may be seen as a threat to that power. They are homophobes governed by prejudice rather than by reason. They are careerists, time-servers intent on sup-

porting the establishment through whose ranks they are climbing, ready to deny the truth for the sake of preferment. They are closet queers, taking refuge from their own sexuality by devoting themselves to a power structure, frightened of the personal challenge posed by their more honest and liberated brothers and sisters. And so on. Stories circulate about this or that cardinal, this or that secretary. Of course some of this may be true. It would be surprising if there were no careerists and time-servers in the Vatican and in bishop's offices, as there are in any human institution. Given the distribution of homosexuals in the general population and in the clergy, it would be surprising if there were no homosexuals in the Vatican and its congregations. Given the pressures on homosexuals to keep quiet in church circles, it would be surprising if some of these were not very scared indeed of making themselves known. It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that some of this influences the way Vatican documents are produced. But to say this kind of thing in the context of an argument about the rights and wrongs of homosexuality is precisely a failure to argue. This kind of personal abuse directed against opponents in debate serves only as an excuse not to hear their arguments and take them seriously. It risks giving the impression, to an unbiased onlooker, that those arguments are not being answered because they *cannot* be answered. More importantly, the strength of an argument does not depend on the character of those who propose it, or on their motives for proposing it. An argument against homosexuality is no stronger and no weaker for being proposed by a sincere heterosexual or by a fearful, closeted homosexual. It is no better for being proposed for the highest motives, no worse for being proposed for base motives.

Such a reaction to church teaching and to arguments produced in its support is, then, a refusal to take part in rational debate, and it is as such also a failure to treat those who propound such arguments as rational human beings, worthy of respect and so worthy to be listened to. It is a failure of charity. This is a serious failing in any debate; in a Christian context it is a failure of our vocation. We need to replace a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' with a 'hermeneutic of charity'. We are after all brothers and sisters engaged together in the following of Christ and the service of God. We all finally have a common purpose and a common destiny, and are to be bound together by love. This does not mean that we have to be unaware of the weaknesses of those with whom we disagree, but it does mean that we should do our best to refrain from attacks upon them and upon their motives. Though they may say and do things from base

motives, we should do our best to assume that this is not so. We should assume that they too, and not only ourselves, are engaged in an honest search for truth and a sincere presentation of the truth as they see it. Attacks on people should not replace an attempt to listen to them and engage with what they say, however much we may disagree with it.

Suppose for the sake of argument that it is true that the people who produce these documents are indeed all time-serving, power-seeking, closeted, homophobic homosexuals. What then? This assumption might amount to no more than a reminder that people at all levels of the church are dissemblers, that they say one thing and think another; or that they are hypocrites, that they say one thing and do another; or that they are morally weak, that they say what they believe but sometimes, perhaps regularly, do things they think they ought not to do. Such a reminder would be important. But our assumption is surely theologically interesting for our purposes only if we also assume that, if these people's circumstances were different, they would not take a negative view of same-sex relations. We have to assume that fundamentally they think same-sex relations are a good thing, and would say so were it not for the web of silence they find themselves caught up in. And behind that must be the further assumption that it is pretty evident that same-sex relations *are* a good thing, and that it is only being caught up in this web that prevents the people concerned from seeing it or saying it.

Behind the accusations of dishonesty, hypocrisy and weakness lie convictions about the moral acceptability of same-sex relations. The important question is whether those convictions are right. Church functionaries can be as dishonest, hypocritical and weak as you like. If they are, and we know it, then we will not be persuaded by their advocacy; but the doctrine they promulgate might still be true. And it is moral truth that has to be our main concern in this area. Are same-sex relations potentially a good thing or not? To that question assumptions about the personal *mores* of officials in Rome or Canterbury are finally irrelevant.

Materialism of pro-gays

If suppositions about the lives of church functionaries do not show same-sex relations to be morally good, generalizations about the mentality of those who openly approve of same-sex relations do not

show them to be morally evil, either. The traffic in personal accusations is not all one way. For example, the 1986 Letter (*HP*)[1] argues in the following fashion:

> increasing numbers of people today, even within the Church, are bringing enormous pressure to bear on the Church to accept the homosexual condition as though it were not disordered and to condone homosexual activity. Those within the Church who argue in this fashion often have close ties with those with similar views outside it. These latter groups are guided by a vision opposed to the truth about the human person, which is fully disclosed in the mystery of Christ. They reflect, even if not entirely consciously, a materialistic ideology which denies the transcendent nature of the human person as well as the supernatural vocation of every individual.
>
> The Church's ministers must ensure that homosexual persons in their care will not be misled by this point of view, so profoundly opposed to the teaching of the Church. But the risk is great and there are many who seek to create confusion regarding the Church's position, and then to use that confusion to their own advantage. (§8)

Pro-gay ministers, writers and activists within the church are often, it is alleged, linked to groups outside the church which are materialistic and opposed to true spiritual values. They constitute, even if unwittingly, a kind of fifth column. There is much unclarity here. When it is said that 'they reflect, even if not consciously, a materialistic ideology', who are 'they'? Are they the groups outside the church, or those inside the church who argue for the acceptability of same-sex relations? If those outside the church are meant, then pro-gay Christians inside the church are simply being convicted of guilt by association; they have links with materialists, so they are not to be listened to. If this is what is meant, it looks very much like an unworthy attempt to smear pro-gay Christians. If the sentence refers rather to those inside the church, they are accused of being fundamentally unchristian. They may not know it themselves, of course; we may charitably suppose that they have not reflected deeply enough to see the materialistic implications of their own position. But no justification is offered for this grave accusation. No evidence is offered that pro-gay Christians are fundamentally unchristian, or that they have not reflected on the spiritual implications of their position. What seems to lie behind this section of

HP is the implicit assumption that all this *must* be true, because nobody who acknowledges the transcendent nature of the human person and the supernatural vocation of every individual could regard same-sex relationships favourably. But this is not true. While some who call themselves Christian are perhaps materialists at heart, there are certainly many Christians, largely homosexual themselves, who are very conscious of the importance of spiritual values and of the spiritual truths expressed in Christianity and who nevertheless find a positive place for homosexual relationships within the Christian way of life.

That is, in a way, precisely the problem. The reason why there are still such people within the church, despite the regular official attacks on them from within, and at a time when many others are leaving the church, is that they recognize the truths contained in the gospel and are profoundly attached to spiritual values. As well as being homosexual, and perhaps living in a same-sex relationship, they insist on being Christian and on being members of Christ's church. Nor is it true that pro-gay Christians have not reflected deeply on the implications of their own position. There is ample evidence that they have. For example, nobody who reads Eugene Rogers's *Sexuality and the Christian Body* with any attention can fail to be impressed by his deep seriousness and reflectiveness, even if they do not in the end agree with him. This is in any case only what we should expect. Any reasonably thoughtful homosexual worshipping in a church which is largely and volubly anti-homosexual is almost bound to question himself and his sexuality, to reflect on the relationship between his faith and his sexual behaviour, to meditate on what God wants of him, and to wonder about his place in the Christian community. People who are not homosexual are sometimes confronted with similar questions; for a thoughtful homosexual such questioning can be constant. On the whole we can expect homosexual Christians to have reflected longer, more deeply and more urgently on the subject than their heterosexual brothers and sisters. It is those who want to change prevailing attitudes and challenge prevailing certainties, rather than those who are content with them, who probe them more deeply. It is those struggling for a voice where they have had none, trying to formulate and articulate a position in the face of an audience that does not want to hear, who need to think deeply, not those who already have the right to be heard. This was true of feminists not so long ago; it is true of gay Christians now.

Ministers are to 'ensure that homosexual persons in their care will not be misled by this point of view' – the materialism, conscious or unconscious, which *must* be at the root of any favourable assessment of homosexual relations. But many of these homosexual persons will have thought and prayed longer and harder about these questions than their minister – unless he too is homosexual. They will also quite simply know more about homosexuality. In what way are they in danger of being misled? *HP* claims, again without offering evidence, that there are many who wish to sow confusion concerning the church's position, and then to use that confusion to their own advantage, whatever that might be. This gives the impression that what the Christian homosexual has to be protected from is confusion about what the church teaches. This would be in line with what is said earlier in the same document:

> special concern and pastoral attention should be directed toward those who have this [*sc.* homosexual] condition, lest they be led to believe that the living out of this orientation in homosexual activity is a morally acceptable option. It is not.
>
> An essential dimension of authentic pastoral care is the identification of causes of confusion regarding the Church's teaching. (§§3,4)

Here we see a view, prevalent throughout the document, of the homosexual as a more or less passive recipient of influences. He or she is one to be cared for, and is in danger of being misled by materialist opinions.

CHAPTER ONE

A Question of Truth

The fortune and misfortune of gay Christians

Gay Christians are very fortunate people. Their life is not vain; they do not go from dust to dust. They are created by the God whose love is the source of all things, and are sustained by that same sure and unalterable love. And God has made them for himself. Their destiny is to return to their origin, to be forever united in bliss with God, gazing on him in ecstasy and wonder, giving love for love. Not only are gay Christians surrounded by this love, not only are they destined for this happiness, they also have the happiness of knowing it. While all human beings are created through the love of God and all are made for God, there are many who do not know it, and who believe, wrongly, that they and their lives are of little present and no final worth, that their story is merely one of emergence from dust and return to dust. Not so gay Christians. Through the grace of God and through the communities to which they belong – their family, friends, school, church – they have been given and have received the message that they are precious in God's eyes. They know that Christ lived, died and rose again for them, and that nothing can separate them from the love of God. As St Paul says: 'I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, neither things present nor to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom 8:38–39).

This is good fortune and a source of happiness. It is not, of course, a fortune and a happiness confined to gay Christians; it is shared by anybody who has accepted the love of God as revealed in Jesus, by all Christians, gay or straight. Gay and straight Christians can rejoice together on account of the love with which God loves them, on account of their common origin and destiny, and because through God's grace they have all come to know God's love and have been made members of one people by baptism. Despite this common joy, there are many homosexual Christians who account themselves less happy than their heterosexual brothers and sisters.

This is in part because of the way they are often regarded and treated in the wider society beyond the church; while gay men and lesbians can now readily find acceptance in parts of large towns in western Europe, North America and elsewhere, in many societies ridicule, rejection, discrimination, physical violence, harassment and even official persecution are still the lot of many homosexuals. But some of those who treat homosexuals in these ways are themselves members of the church, the brothers and sisters of those whom they mistreat, and they claim – often, no doubt, sincerely – that by their violent malice they are defending and affirming Christian teaching and values. While at an official level most churches condemn such behaviour,[1] there is still, at that level, often a very negative evaluation of homosexual relationships. Gay Christians find their Christian communities telling them that their desires for intimate sexual relationships are aberrant, contrary to the will of God as expressed in Scripture and tradition, to be struggled against, a source of danger rather than a potential element of that genuine human happiness which heterosexual Christians may find in marriage.

This sense of being specially disadvantaged, of being less happy than heterosexual Christians, is justified, and it is worth pausing a while to see why. It is sometimes argued that, though homosexual Christians do face difficulties, these are similar to and no more serious than those faced by many heterosexuals who seek to live a genuine Christian life. For example, the New Testament scholar Richard B. Hays finds that New Testament texts and a proper hermeneutical response to those texts imply that the church should neither sanction nor bless homosexual unions. He then poses the question: 'Does this mean that persons of homosexual orientation are subject to a blanket imposition of celibacy in a way qualitatively different from persons of heterosexual orientation?' and offers this answer:

> While Paul regarded celibacy as a charisma, he did not therefore suppose that those lacking the charisma were free to indulge their sexual desires outside marriage. Heterosexual persons are also called to abstinence from sex unless they marry (1 Cor. 7:8–9). The only difference – admittedly a salient one – in the case of homosexually oriented persons is that they do not have the option of homosexual 'marriage'. So where does that leave them? It leaves them in precisely the same situation as the heterosexual who would like to marry but cannot find an appropriate partner (and there are many such): summoned to a difficult, costly

> obedience, while 'groaning' for the 'redemption of our bodies' (Rom. 8:23). Anyone who does not recognize this as a description of authentic Christian existence has never struggled seriously with the imperatives of the gospel, which challenge and frustrate our 'natural' impulses in countless ways.[2]

The position of gay people is, for Hays, essentially no different from that of would-be married heterosexuals, as they both have to hold their natural sexual impulses in check. But this analysis is hardly plausible, for it glosses over too many important distinctions. It is like saying that a person who dies serenely after a long and happy life, a teenager sadistically and senselessly tortured to death, a mother who dies in childbirth, and her baby who dies as it draws its first breath, are all in the same position in that they are all dead. It cannot be denied that they are all dead, but the reasons why they died, the time of their death and the manner of their death are important to us, and the similarity of their state should not be used to blind us to the diversity of their fate. So it is with homosexuals and unmarried heterosexuals. Take two Christians, the unmarried homosexual Christopher and the unmarried heterosexual Paul. Of course, as far as the habitual Christian position on homosexuality is concerned, Christopher and Paul are in the same position in the sense that neither of them can legitimately enter into a sexual relationship, even if they should both wish to. But there are important differences between them that this comparison glosses over. Christopher is not in the same position as Paul in that Paul can hope to find a partner in marriage. In the habitual Christian understanding of sexuality, Paul has a place in the sexual scheme of things, only he is not at the moment in that place; marriage is made for people like him and, if he desires to live in an intimate personal relationship with another, he can hope to marry one day. Paul's sexual instincts, which make him look forward to and perhaps actively seek marriage with a woman, are a good thing; they are a spur to forming a loving relationship which will have a sexual aspect and which will be an image both of that love with which Christ loves the church[3] and of that love with which the human soul naturally loves its creator.[4] If and when he finds the woman whom he loves and who loves him, and with whom he is willing to make an irrevocable, lifelong commitment, he will enjoy the blessing of the church, and his love, his relationship and his sexual activity with his wife will hold an honoured place within the Christian community.

Paul's hope of marriage may of course not be realized. We are all sometimes the victims of circumstance; bad things do happen to people which mean they cannot have what they want. But he can have hope; his hope is, in the eyes of the Christian community, not only a natural hope but a legitimate and a good one. Christopher, if he is to be a good Christian, cannot have this hope; while his hope may be in some sense natural to him, it is neither legitimate nor good. There is, then, an important asymmetry between the two cases. The real homosexual Christian parallel to Paul would be the gay man who is without love, who seeks it and may or may not find it; but that position, according to many Christians, is one which no truly Christian homosexual can be in. If Christopher does not find a partner, he can be described as an unfortunate victim of circumstance. But Christopher is not the victim of a circumstance that prevents him from enjoying the good he seeks. While Paul can hope to occupy his place in the sexual scheme of things, Christopher cannot hope to find his place, for he has none. If he does hope to find a partner whom he loves and who loves him, and with whom he is prepared to make an irrevocable, lifelong commitment, this amounts to a betrayal of his Christian calling. If he already has such a partner, the fact is not to be celebrated as would be Paul's marriage. It is shameful; the domestic intimacy he shares with his partner is not a source of innocent joy but an occasion of sin. Whatever his actual way of life, his sexual instincts are not to be spoken of in the same way as Paul's, as a spur to and an expression of love. They are a perversion, or a malady. He cannot fulfil them, but only indulge them, and any such indulgence is unchristian.

Homosexuality is sometimes spoken of as a symptom of the fallenness of humanity.[5] In reality what is meant is that it is a sign of the fallenness of homosexuals. Christopher's sexual instincts are a sign of his fallenness as Paul's are not a sign of his fallenness. It would hardly be intelligible to point to Christopher's homosexuality as an indication that Paul is fallen. Paul's sexuality may express itself in disordered ways: he may, for instance, seek and have sex with a woman outside marriage. But, in the right context, and approached in the right way, it becomes an aspect and an expression of that love which redeems us from the Fall. Christopher's sexuality, on the other hand, does not express itself in disordered ways; it is intrinsically disordered.[6] It is in itself an aspect of that Fall from which we need redeeming. In short, Paul's sexuality is a good thing, and that is how he is to regard it; only, he must seek out the right circumstances in which to have a sexual relationship. If

he feels sexually attracted to a woman he may hope that this is the beginning of a love that will blossom in marriage. Christopher's sexuality on the other hand is a bad thing, and that is how he is to regard it; for him, there are no right circumstances, no hope. If he feels sexually attracted to a man, he is to see this as a danger. While Paul may constantly look out for love, Christopher must constantly watch against himself. Paul's sexuality is his friend, Christopher's is his enemy.

If Paul can hope to find somebody whom he loves erotically, he can also hope that his love will be returned. He can hope that another will seek him out, delight to be near him, look upon him with pleasure, embrace him with joy. He can hope to be wanted by another, united to another, intimate with another. He can hope to know, not merely that others wish him well in a disinterested sort of way, but that another is attracted to him, and that he is an important part of that other person's happiness. All that joy and that intimacy is part of erotic love; to want it is a standard human desire, and its fulfilment is a standard component of human happiness. It is the joy that Adam expresses on seeing Eve, the intimacy he knows when he cleaves to her. Christopher is not to have this. He is never to have that natural human erotic joy of delighting in another and knowing himself wanted. And he is never to hope for it, either. For in his case that hope is perverted. Any relationship he could hope to form is a sinful one, and to desire it is to desire an evil. Any erotic delight he might feel in another man is a trap, any intimacy an occasion of sin.[7] Nobody is to be erotically interested in him, and he is to be erotically interested in nobody else; the only human relationship he can hope for is 'disinterested friendship'.[8] While Paul's natural erotic desire may spur him to find happiness in another, Christopher must renounce his own erotic desire, which is as deep in him as Paul's is in him. He must resist it, fight against it; and because this desire is no passing whim, no idle caprice, but is profound, insistent and lasting, he must in effect fight against himself. If he wins, his victory is solitude; he finds himself, in Andrew Sullivan's words 'alone again, naturally'.[9] If Christopher is to see the erotic side of his nature as a menace, if his most intimate experience of the erotic is negative, then this will have consequences for his life of faith too. All the erotic imagery of the Bible will be closed to him as a vehicle of faith. All the language of marriage between God and people, of Israel as the beloved of God, of God seducing his people, and the allegorical expression to be found in the Song of Songs of the loving intimacy between God and the soul

– all of this will be foreign to him. It is not simply a matter of this imagery being, as we would say, heterosexual; he can always transpose the imagery into homosexual terms. The real problem is that as soon as he understands and feels the erotic force of this imagery it will become repugnant, if he takes seriously the idea of his own sexuality as a threat. He will of course be able to see that for others this central theme of the Bible speaks positively, but it can never be positive for him.

Truth

So things can indeed be hard for gay Christians, if they take their faith seriously, in a way that they are not for their heterosexual brothers and sisters. This should not be minimized; the suffering of gay Christians can be real and terrible. But it should not be exaggerated, either. Whatever their hardships on earth, Christians look for a happiness which is not of this world, and many have been prepared to undergo terrible hardships for the sake of fidelity to Christ. Fidelity to Christ can demand, and has demanded, of Christians that they consecrate their lives to the service of others in difficult circumstances, or that they die bloodily for witnessing to Christ. People who are made to suffer like this, though they really do suffer, can be happy and victorious in their suffering, because they know they suffer for Christ, and they have a hope of a happiness to come. Their suffering is a result of their Christian living, and shows that they live well as disciples of Christ. Many of these people have suffered much more than the general run of Christian homosexuals. If fidelity can demand that some people give up their lives, it can demand of homosexuals not only that they live lives of complete sexual continence, but also that they be at odds with themselves, even deeply so, because of their sexuality. People like Christopher may have to suffer, but they can understand their suffering as a part of what Christ demands of them in the particular circumstances in which they live. They may even understand their own suffering as a share in the suffering of Christ himself. In this way that suffering becomes part of their Christian witness, and they can be genuinely happy in their suffering.

This is just how the Catholic Church at present teaches that homosexuals who try to remain faithful to Christ should see any suffering they may endure as a result. The first Vatican document

dedicated to the subject of homosexuality, *Homosexualitatis Problema* (henceforth *HP*), puts it thus:

> What, then, are homosexual persons to do who seek to follow the Lord? Fundamentally, they are called to enact the will of God in their life by joining whatever sufferings and difficulties they experience in virtue of their condition to the sacrifice of the Lord's Cross. That Cross, for the believer, is a fruitful sacrifice since from that death come life and redemption. While any call to carry the cross or to understand a Christian's suffering in this way will predictably be met with bitter ridicule by some, it should be remembered that this is the way to eternal life for all who follow Christ.[10]

This is how the Catholic Church teaches that Christian homosexuals should live, and the spirituality to which it appeals – joining one's suffering to the cross of Christ – has long held an important and honourable place in Christian thought and life. It is no objection to the church's teaching on homosexuality that it entails suffering. If it is true that fidelity to Christ demands of homosexuals their particular kind of suffering, then, tough though it may be, homosexuals must suffer, and should be prepared to suffer. And this brings us to the real questions: Is it actually true that fidelity to Christ demands this of homosexuals? Is it true that the will of God is that they should abstain from the kind of intimate relationship for which it seems most people are made? Is it true that they are suffering from some kind of moral malady, that they should recognize this and struggle against their condition?

Now it is a plain fact that many Christians, among them many Catholics, do not believe this at all. They do not believe for a moment that fidelity to Christ and to the will of God demands of homosexuals either that they abstain completely from all sexual relationships or that they struggle against their own sexual nature. This is evident not only from what many individual gay Christians, including Catholics, say and do, but also from the existence of Christian groups, such as the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement in Britain and Dignity in the United States, part of the programme of each being to uphold the goodness of homosexual desire and relationships and to assert that being gay and enjoying a sexual relationship is fully compatible with being a faithful disciple of Christ. These are groups which are either specifically designed for Catholics or which have a sizeable Catholic membership. Whether

they belong to any such formal grouping or not, many Catholics, homosexual and heterosexual, lay people and clergy, do not believe what the church currently teaches in this area. How has this come about? *HP* puts much of this down to ignorance. Referring to the then recent discussions of homosexuality in Catholic circles, it complains that some people have given an 'overly benign' interpretation of what it calls, in common with other Catholic documents, the 'homosexual condition'; such interpretations do not recognize that this condition is an objective disorder. Therefore,

> special concern and pastoral attention should be directed toward those who have this condition, lest they be led to believe that the living out of this orientation in homosexual activity is a morally acceptable option. It is not.[11]

It is part of the purpose of *HP*, addressed as it is to the bishops who have responsibility for the pastoral care of the Catholics in their dioceses, to make sure that Catholic homosexuals get this attention, that they be not led astray into thinking either that it is morally acceptable to enter into sexual relationships or, more particularly, that the church thinks it is.

Now it is plainly a reasonable concern that Catholics should know, at least in outline, what their church teaches, and so it is reasonable also that Catholic homosexuals should know, at least in outline, what their church teaches about homosexuality. But it is very likely that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (henceforth referred to as CDF), in taking this approach, does not put its finger on the true problem. While there are no doubt some Catholic homosexuals who are completely ignorant about what their church teaches about homosexual relationships, there surely cannot be many who think their church does not disapprove of them, let alone actually approves of them. Even if there were some when the document was issued in 1986, despite the appearance of *Persona Humana* some years earlier, and despite public attitudes in the church being in recent centuries universally hostile to same-sex sexual relationships, few could have been in any doubt after the publication of *HP*, and yet there still remain many sincere practising Catholics who do not believe that fidelity to Christ and to the will of God demands total abstinence from homosexual relationships. The real problem confronting the Catholic Church is that many Catholics do indeed know, at least in outline, what their church teaches about homosexuality, and they simply do not

believe it. Some, indeed, have studied the Catholic Church's position in considerable depth, as is only to be expected given that the teaching concerns them intimately, and from the depth of their knowledge they still do not agree with it; indeed, their study will probably have led them to articulate one or several quite precise points on which they believe their church has simply got it wrong,[12] such errors, in their view, either weakening or completely vitiating the church's position. That this is happening is clear from *HP* itself.

There are Catholics who believe that the church has got it wrong in this area because of a faulty understanding of biblical texts. For example, *HP* claims of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 that '[t]here can be no doubt of the moral judgement made there against homosexual relations' (§6). But not a few scholars have come to the conclusion that there is a great deal of doubt about whether this text expresses, or even can express, such a judgement. And similar questions have been raised about other biblical texts sometimes adduced in support of the church's teaching on homosexuality. These questions have been raised by those who have actually studied the Bible; it is not simply ignorance of Catholic teaching that has led them to raise them. Indeed, *HP* itself recognizes this, and one of the reasons the document was written was to repudiate such doubts. It complains about

> a new exegesis of Sacred Scripture which claims variously that Scripture has nothing to say on the subject of homosexuality, or that it somehow tacitly approves of it, or that all of its moral injunctions are so culture-bound that they are no longer applicable to contemporary life. (§4)

Again, there are Catholics who believe the church has got it wrong in thinking that what *HP* calls 'the homosexual condition' is disordered, and this is not through ignorance of what the church teaches, as again the document recognizes:

> [I]ncreasing numbers of people today, even within the Church, are bringing enormous pressure to bear on the Church to accept the homosexual condition as though it were not disordered and to condone homosexual activity. Those within the Church who argue in this fashion often have close ties with those with similar views outside it. These latter groups are guided by a vision opposed to the truth about the human person, which is fully disclosed in the mystery of Christ. They reflect, even if not

> entirely consciously, a materialistic ideology which denies the transcendent nature of the human person as well as the supernatural vocation of every individual. (§8)

Whether the accusation that *HP* brings against these people – that they are influenced by a materialism opposed to the truth about the human person – is justified is another matter, but it is clear that even *HP* does not think that the real problem is ignorance of church teaching. There are also Catholic homosexuals who think the church has got it wrong because what the church says on the subject of homosexuality simply does not seem to them to tally with what they know of homosexual practice and the life of homosexuals. For example, *HP* asserts that 'homosexual activity prevents one's own fulfilment and happiness by acting contrary to the creative wisdom of God' (§7). No Christian believes that their final fulfilment and happiness is to be found on this earth, and homosexuals surely have difficulties in their intimate relationships as much as heterosexuals; but to anybody who has found any substantial fulfilment and happiness in a homosexual relationship – and one only needs to look around one in the right places to see that this is so – this assertion can hardly but appear to reveal a deep ignorance on the Vatican's part of the subject on which it pretends to pronounce with authority.[13]

The fundamental problem for these critics is not that the teaching is hard to follow, that it is old or outmoded, or even that it is unjust, but that it is untrue. They are not ignorant of what the church says; they have considered it and found it wanting. This position of informed disagreement involves a certain personal difficulty. Anybody who is led by study and personal experience to think that what the church says is false is liable to feel an amount of discomfort as a member of the church; a church which regularly denigrates them and their sexuality. Some have found this discomfort so acute that they have had to leave the Catholic Church and live as members of another Christian communion. Apart from this kind of difficulty, there is a certain more theoretical tension inherent in such a critical position. Most Christians who take this more positive view of homosexual desire and relationships received their faith through the very community with which they now find themselves in disagreement. They heard the gospel and came to faith in Christ through the words of others; they took their word for it that Christ was the saviour of all humankind. But now, when that same community tells them that following Christ entails a rejection of same-sex