

## Unbinding the Gay Conscience

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(a British group for LGBT Catholics) and, subsequently,  
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Some of you may have known Benjamin O'Sullivan, a Benedictine monk of Ampleforth Abbey who killed himself early in 1996. As far as I can tell, Benjamin was set up by a reporter from the *News of the World*, and the only thing which prevented his death from being a murder was that Benjamin himself consented to the voice of the lynch mob and became the hand that put him to death. I felt that his death was brought about because this extremely attractive, apparently self-confident, effervescent young man had been unable to stand up as an ordinary gay man to the voice of the lynch mob. And the reason he had been unable to stand up to them was because he was bound in his conscience. Shortly after his ordination he had expressed a fear to me that he wasn't really a priest, because "if they had known" surely they wouldn't have ordained him. That hardly anyone who knew Benjamin well can have failed to know that he was gay is of course not relevant: the person caught in the trap looks at the world through fear-coloured spectacles, and fear darkens rather than illumines what it projects. But this gives a hint of what I mean by a bound conscience: the sort of person who can't stand up and be what they are, who can't trust in the goodness of what they are being given to become, whatever the lynch mob may throw at them, the sort of person who labours instead in a world of half-truths, any belonging being a half-belonging, because always feeling that "if they knew" then "I wouldn't really be allowed here". Which translates into a permanent and deep feeling of "I'm not really allowed here".

It seemed to me, and seems to me, and I told this to Cardinal Hume when I visited him to talk about Benjamin sometime later, that the fact that the Church can no longer easily say, as Peter could to the man lame from birth at the Beautiful Gate in Acts 3, "in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, walk" is, while sad, something I can live with. But if the Church, and by that I mean if *we*, cannot even unbind a conscience like Benjamin's, then we really are fit for nothing more than to be thrown out and trodden under foot like the saltless salt we are become.

I realised, after this, that given that our hierarchs were not going to do

anything, in fact, probably are not able to do anything, paralysed themselves so often by the same bound conscience which afflicted Benjamin, that I had to write something which would contribute to the unbinding of the gay conscience, try to find the other-given authority to be able to say “In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, stand and be”. And the result of my failure to do that in a systematic way is the book called *Faith beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay* which I think some of you have read.

All I could do in that book was come up with some sign posts to my sense that if the Jesus of the Gospels really is alive and in our midst, and if he really is what God’s self-disclosure to us looks like, then unbinding the gay conscience is very much the sort of thing that he finds himself doing here and now. He is God’s pastoring of the sheep whom the shepherds have abandoned, and it does make sense to work out what that looks like.

If the question, then, is not “what would Jesus do”, but “what is Jesus doing” (and I take it that the latter is the authentically Catholic question, presupposing the Real Presence of Jesus in an ongoing project, rather than a textual presence in a receding past), then it makes sense to spend a little time reflecting on the power of the One who unbinds our conscience.

Let me say first that in an ideal world, Peter would realise that he had been given the power to bind and loose specifically so as to be able to open heaven to the gentiles. He would pronounce those words “God has shown me that I should not call any human profane or impure”, and gay people would find themselves with unbound conscience as brothers and sisters in the Church on the same footing as everyone else, that is to say, as sons and daughters and heirs.

But in fact, it seems to me that we find ourselves in a strange moment in that story from Acts 10. We find ourselves in the tiny gap *after* Peter has preached to us about Jesus, whom God anointed with the Holy Spirit and power, *after* we have believed that message, and so realise that Jesus is Good News for us, and *after* the Holy Spirit has come down upon us, so that we are beginning to live the life of loved children and are able to speak well of God. But we find ourselves in the tiny space *before* Peter has found it in him to declare “Can any one forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ’.

If you want a reality check on this, then consider what the current teaching of the Vatican Congregations is: “the homosexual inclination, though not itself a sin, constitutes a tendency towards behaviour that is intrinsically evil, and therefore must be considered objectively disordered”. If you read that phrase in the light of the passage from Acts which I have just recalled, you can see quite clearly that it is a piece of backsliding. Where Peter said “God has shown me that I should not call any human profane or unclean” his modern minions say “While it is true that gay people are not profane or unclean, they must in fact be considered to be so”.

So, we find ourselves living at a time of Petrine backsliding from the Gospel, and yet beginning to be aware that the reception of the Good News, and our own unbinding does not come from Peter, but from God, and that Peter later on gets to understand and confirm this. This is a perfectly understandable biblical pattern which we can inhabit while we wait for Peter.

Now what I would like to do today is start to examine the binding and the unbinding. What does it look like? I suppose the first step is to look at what being “bound” means. A bound conscience is one which cannot go this way or that, forward or backwards, is paralysed, scandalized. In that sense it is a form of living death, and those afflicted by it are living dead, and many of us are or have been such people. Let me give some examples of what I mean. We are familiar with the notion of a “double-bind” or a “Catch 22 situation”. A bound conscience is a sense of being formed by a double-bind or a series of double binds. For instance: “My command is that you should love, but your love is sick”; or “You should just go away and die, but it is forbidden to kill yourself”; or “The only acceptable way for me to live is a celibate life, but if they knew who I really was, they wouldn’t allow me to join” or “Of course you can join, but you mustn’t say who you really are” or “You cannot be gay, but you must be honest”. Many of us have been inducted into just such patterns of desire over time. They classically follow the form “Imitate me, do not imitate me”. If you find yourself gravitationally pulled towards someone, and yet the message given to you is “Be like me, do not be like me” you will be scandalised, eventually you will judder to a halt, unable to move forwards or backwards.

What I would like to suggest is that in all these cases we are dealing with a self that has been formed by being given contradictory desires without

being given any ability to discern where they might appropriately be applied. In other words, two instructions are received as on the same level as each other, pointing in two different directions at once, and the result is paralysis. This is what σκάνδαλον – skandalon – refers to in the New Testament – scandal, or stumbling block. Someone who is scandalised is someone who is paralysed into an inability to move. And the undoing of σκάνδαλα – skandala, which means the unbinding of double binds that do not allow people to be, is what the Gospel is supposed to be about.

I want to make it quite clear that we are dealing with something very basic and central to the Gospel here. It is perfectly possible to present the Gospel in such a way that it is a sort of double-bind. Any sort of presentation of the Christian faith which says “I love you but I do not love you”, or “I don’t love you as you are, but if you become someone different I will love you” is in fact preaching a double-bind, a stumbling block, a pathway to paralysis.

Let’s imagine the conversation between a false god and the self:

Fg: I want to love you, but I can’t love you as you are, because you are sinful and objectively disordered.

Self: Well, what then must I do to be loved?

Fg: You must become someone different

Self: I’m up for it, show me how

Fg: Love isn’t something that can be earned, it just is

Self: Well then how do I get to become the sort of person who can be loved?

Fg: If I were you I would start somewhere else

Self: That’s a great help. How do I start somewhere else

Fg: You can’t, because even starting off *for* somewhere else starts *from* you, and you can’t be loved

Self: Well if I can’t start off from somewhere else, and I can’t start off from where I am, what can I do

Fg: Give up on the love thing; just obey and be paralysed.

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That’s how powerful it is to receive our sense of self, our identity, our desire, in imitation of, through the regard of, eyes which give us a mixed message, a double bind.

Now if the Gospel means anything at all it means that the Good News about God is unambivalent, that there are no “if”s and “but”s in God,

God's love is unconditional. And this means, above all, that there are no double-binds in God. That God desires that our desire should flow free, life-giving and untrammelled, because it is in that flow of desire that we are called into being.

Well, if that is the case, imagine then what might be a conversation between the Unambivalently loving God and the self:

UIG: I love you

Self: but I'm full of shit, how can you love me

UIG: I love you

Self: but you can't love me, I'm part of all this muck

UIG: it's you that I love

Self: how can it be me that you love when I've been involved in bad relationships, dark rooms, machinations against other people

UIG: it's you that I love

Self: but...

UIG: it's you that I love

Self: but...

UIG: it's you that I love

Self: OK then, so are you just going to leave me in the shit?

UIG: Because I love you you are relaxing into my love and you will find yourself becoming loveable, indeed becoming someone that you will scarcely recognise

Self: Hadn't I better do something to get all ready for this becoming loveable

UIG: Only if you haven't yet got it that it's I who do the work and you who get to shine. Because I love you, you are relaxing into being loved and will find yourself doing loveable things because you are loved

Self: I think I could go along with this.

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Or to put it in a nutshell, when faced with the standard Irish joke about "How do I get to Dublin?", and being told "If I were you I wouldn't start from here", the Gospel response, that is to say the regard of Christ, tells us: "I will come with you starting from where you are".

Now I put it to you as a question: is the teaching of the Vatican Congregations which I quoted to you before compatible with the Gospel, or is it compatible with the bad Irish joke? I'll quote it for you again: "the homosexual inclination, though not itself a sin, constitutes a tendency towards behaviour that is intrinsically evil, and therefore must be

considered objectively disordered”.

To me at least it is clear. This teaching is interposing itself between the regard of Christ and our own sense of being in a way which tends to pervert the simple regard of one who loves us as we are, and as loved we will find ourselves becoming someone different. It is teaching us instead that God will only love us if we start from somewhere else. That is to say, the teaching is in the technical sense a “skandalon”, a stumbling block, something which compounds a double-bind rather than undoing it. It is because I think that the teaching is incompatible with the Gospel at this very fundamental level that I also think that, despite the protestations of the current office-holders in the Roman Curia, it cannot in fact be the teaching of the Church.

A dimension of this which I have brought out more or less strongly, and which may not be obvious when people talk about conscience, is the importance of understanding that our conscience is *always* related to and formed by what is other than us, prior to us, outside us. It is not as though there is a “real” private voice somewhere inside us which gives us infallible deliverances which are right. On the contrary, what constitutes our “inside” is a more or less well-managed conversation between different voices which have called us into being one way or another, through parents, education, Church, politicians, and which often enough have tied us up. We are called into being as bodies acting in the world through those voices. This means that when it comes to the unbinding of conscience, it is not ever a question of searching back under all the voices for some innocent voice which I know to be a “good conscience”. That is merely a terrible form of self-deception. No, both the being given a self and a sense of self through language, and the unbinding of the conscience are always the work of someone else, outside us, and the most important thing is “to which other are we listening”? Who is the “other” who can unbind our conscience, who can induct us into desiring without double-binds?

I rather suspect that this helps to bring out part of the impression which Jesus left on those to whom he spoke, and is therefore rather the impression that he leaves when he speaks to us: “for he taught them as one who had authority, not as the scribes” or “my sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me”. Speaking with authority means speaking from within the power of the author, the beginner, the creator and can be recognised precisely because it unbinds double-binds and stumbling blocks which cannot be from God because no good Creator

could possibly treat his creatures in this way.

I would like to dwell a little more on the effects on us of this regard, the one which looks at us and says “I love you, and as you discover yourself loved you will find yourself becoming something else”. I want to say something apparently rather banal here, but I think it is rather important. I think that we would be wise to send the word “love” to the laundry and use the word “like” instead. I say this for the following reason. You have probably met people, as I have, who tell us that they love gay people, and that is why they are so keen to change us. In other words their “love” does not include the word “like”. It means something like: “I feel that in obedience to God’s love for sinners I must stop you being who you are”.

But in fact the word “like” is rather more difficult to twist into a lie than the word “love”, because we know when someone likes us. We can tell because they enjoy being with us, alongside us, want to share our time and company. Well, what I would like to suggest is that if our understanding of love does not include liking, or at least being prepared to learn to like, then there’s a good chance that we’re talking about the sort of love that can slip a double-bind over us, that is really saying to us “My love for you means that I will like you if you become someone else”.

Well, it seems to me that the doctrine of the incarnation of Our Lord, the image of God coming among us as the likeness of humans is a strong statement that the divine regard is one of *liking* us, here and now, as we are. Glad to be with us. And this means that the one who looks at us with love is not just looking at us with a penetrating and inscrutable gaze of utter otherness, but is looking at us with the delight of one who enjoys our company, who wants to be one with us, to share in something with us. Sure, as we learn to relax into that being loved we are going to find that we are quite different from what we thought we were, and that our patterns of desire will become quite different, which is what it means to find that the Holy Spirit has come to dwell in us in and through the reformation of our desire. But the regard does not first knock down so as then to build up, as we so often imagine it, rather as though Jesus was a sergeant-major whose job it is to give hell to the recruits and make them feel awful so that later, after they’ve lost their identities, they’ll start to feel good new identities as soldiers, and then they’ll discover he has a heart of gold.

No, our faith is that the eyes of God that are in Christ, and thus the divine

regard through which we can receive new being, are eyes that like us, from alongside, at the same level as us. Which means, do not control us, do not try to “know better than us” who we are, but want to participate in a discovery with us of who we are to become.

And that means that there is no plot to lose. There is only an adventure of trusting in the goodness of the one who loves us and seeing what we would really like to do.

Our Lord put it this way:

For it will be as when a man going on a journey called his servants and entrusted to them his property; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them; and he made five talents more. So also, he who had the two talents made two talents more. But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money. Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me five talents; here I have made five talents more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master.' And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me two talents; here I have made two talents more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master.' He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not winnow; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' But his master answered him, 'You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sowed, and gather where I have not winnowed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to every one who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the

worthless servant into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.'

The key feature of this parable is that it is the imagination of the servants as to what their master is like which is the determining factor of their conscience and thus the wellspring of their activity. The first two servants clearly imagined their master being away as an opportunity to do something delightful. Because they trusted that their master was the sort of daring fellow who would do rash and crazy things for which there was no script, would dare, would experiment, would risk losing things and so would end up multiplying things greatly. In other words, they perceived their master's regard for them as one of liking them enough to be daring them and encouraging them to be adventurous, and so, imagining and trusting that abundance would multiply, they indeed multiplied abundance. The third servant revealed exactly what regard he had laboured under: his imagination of who the master is comes out in his own words:

Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not winnow; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground.

He acted according to his imagination. And his imagination was one of a double bind, perfectly captured in the phrase "reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not winnow". His perception of the other was of one who did not like him and thus had put an impossible burden on him, and so all he had done was simply sulk. He had been bound, the living dead, moving neither forward nor backward. It is no wonder that in Luke's version, the master says "Out of your own mouth I will condemn you your wicked servant", because it is in fact the servant's own perception that has bound him.

Now I put it to you that the Eucharistic presence of Jesus in our midst is the way God constantly reminds us, calls us into mind, of his regard, one of liking us, encouraging us to be daring with him, during the time of the "absence of the master", and that our having our conscience unbound means our becoming able to trust in the regard of one who likes us and so is delighted that we will come up with crazy new daring schemes which didn't seem to be part of the programme at all. And it is according to our conscience that we will act. If our conscience accepts the regard of, and wants to be like, someone who likes us, who is daring, creative, innovative, effervescent, unafraid, risk-taking and so on, then we will find ourselves behaving like that, being able to stand up and take the rap, delighting in finding ways of getting people off the hook, never taking no

for an answer, refusing to believe that something is impossible for God; and that is who we will become.

Someone of unbound conscience can dare to get it wrong, because they don't have to get it right. If you have to get it right, that means that you don't dare to get it wrong, which means that you are afraid of what will happen to you if you do get it wrong. But the Catholic and Christian understanding of conscience is that because we know that we are liked we can get it wrong, and it doesn't matter, because we are not frightened of punishment, but able to learn from our mistakes. In fact, if we can't dare to be wrong, then we can't truly get it right, because our being right will be a form of protection against what is other than us, what is unknown, exciting, big and causing us to be bigger-minded, magnanimous. A good conscience is not a feeling of self-satisfaction at having got it right; it is much more the underlying excitement of knowing yourself on the way somewhere, which is perfectly compatible with a deep sorrow of realisation at having got something wrong. This is the excitement of being a son or daughter who is on an adventure, not the contractual precision of a slave who has to get something right because he has no sense of being on the inside of the project of whoever is in charge, and merely senses the other as arbitrary and capricious, as someone who will glower at what is not perfect.

Well, what does it mean to you that God does not merely "love" us gay people in a clinical, arms-length sense, but likes us, enjoys our company, wants to be in on the adventure with us, see where we can take the adventure of being human? Is it not true that the mere phrase "I like you" gives permission to be, is creative of space, suggests "I'm curious to accompany you", means delight? And if that is the case, why don't we dare to imagine that God does actually want us to be free and happy, starting exactly from where we are; that our desire for a loving partner, or to build a crazy community project full of eccentric queens making a difference to society and Church, is something which could well lead to fulfilment, a fulfilment much bigger than we could imagine. Just because Peter hasn't yet got it, doesn't mean that the Spirit can be stopped from unbinding our desire. Just because our hierarchs seem unable to dare even to offer us the sort of eucharistic space which is our baptismal new-birthright doesn't mean that our consciences need be bowed down by, bound by, all that heaviness of decline management, that defensive bureaucratic inability to negotiate as adults with adults. For that heaviness and that inability says something about them, and need say nothing about us.

Consciences are unbound for a doing and a becoming, and that, I think is where we find ourselves now: given that the only judgment we will receive will be that of freedom, what do we want to dare to do, starting now? What would it be fun to present our master with on his return?

One final point. I think we are very privileged to be gay and lesbian Catholics at this time, and this is in part because of the growing sense that we are in on the inner dynamic of the project which is the sharing of the Good News about God with the world. I want to point out that one of the features of the texts of the apostolic witnesses in the New Testament is that they are marked to a very strong degree by the notion of a sort of “coming out”, a leaving behind something which while theoretically good in itself, had turned into a trap. Sometimes this is presented in a moralistic way as people leaving something bad to join something good. Well, I think it is much closer to the mark to see it as people leaving something apparently “good” – whether the “Law” or the decencies of Roman civil religion, and instead becoming free. Paul is keen that the freedom not turn into licentiousness, but he is much, much more keen that people don’t go back into “goodness” with its bound consciences and its comforting dependency on group approval. Which of the following two propositions do you think is closer to the witness of the New Testament?

A gay Catholic holds that “not going back like a dog to its vomit” means, first and foremost, not going back to gay meeting places, relationships, places where there is a risk of sex;

Or:

A gay catholic holds that “not going back like a dog to its vomit” means, first and foremost, refusing the lure of the ecclesiastical closet which binds conscience and makes people unfree, leading to dysfunctional relations and an inability to love and to tell the truth.

What does the teaching about not putting new wine in old wineskins, or about avoiding the leaven of the pharisees, mean if it isn’t part of the way the author of all things speaks into being a daring conscience?

So, where shall we take it?

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