

**Following the still small voice:
Experience, truth and argument
as lived by Catholics around the gay issue.**

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It is a very great honour for me to have been asked to address you this evening as part of this pioneering space for discussion in your University and our Church. It is an ever greater honour that any of you should turn out to participate in this discussion this evening, the evening of the day when your own Supreme Judicial Court recognised that gay and lesbian couples are included in the equality and liberty provisions of the constitution of your Commonwealth, and are thus free to marry. What I hope to do this evening is to fulfil part of what Fr Brian Hehir called for when he talked about adult discussion in our Church. One of the things about adult discussion is that it presupposes people who are both capable of being wrong, and yet who take responsibility for what they say. One of the things about Catholic adult discussion is that, in addition to those two dimensions, it should be charitable and generous-spirited towards differing opinions within the discussion. Please forgive me in advance if I fail to live up to these demanding criteria, but I will certainly try to attend to them, and will expect to be held to them.

My first intention is to try and create a sense of “we”. I am not by my words seeking to create party spirit, but rather to work out who the “we” is when we say that we are Catholic. For this reason I am deliberately not setting out to talk uniquely about experience, truth and argument as lived by gay and lesbian Catholics. That rather assumes that there is a certain sort of “we”, a gay and lesbian Catholic “we”, which has a special sort of experience and that I am some sort of privileged exponent of the experience of this “we”. To start in this way would be to start by setting up sides for some sort of confrontation. I would be delivering to you a set of arguments which you could use to wield against other Catholics, and this would be, from my perspective, a failure of charity and of Catholicity.

Instead of this I want to take a step back from experience, truth and arguments as lived by gay and lesbian Catholics, and raise instead the more ecumenical question of these matters as lived by Catholics, period. In other words, as something lived by all of those of us who are Catholics independently of our sexual orientation.

Now it is of course impossible to be comprehensive about the experience of Catholics as regards the gay issue, but there are some suggestions which I can make which point to what I would hope we can all consider to be elements of shared life which are ours by virtue of being Catholics who have been alive in the last twenty to fifty years, give or take a few. The first of these is the emergence among us of the phenomenon which we might now call “the gay thing”. Fifty years ago, the word “gay” was only occasionally used with its current meaning, and the idea that there might be public discussion of loving relationships between people of the same sex except in the most shocked or whispered terms would have been incomprehensible. Yet, now, fifty years later, this is

increasingly normal at every level of society, and indeed is being legislated for in more and more countries with fewer and fewer objections.

Fifty years ago there were hardly any figures who were publicly known to be gay, and such gay characters as existed in the media tended to be either heavily coded, as in the plays of Tennessee Williams, or depicted as depressive, self-hating and prone to suicide. Now we have a major musician and his same-sex partner walking up the aisle of Westminster Abbey to play for the funeral of Princess Diana, with the BBC commentator's recognition of the partner being beamed throughout the world, while over the last ten years, programmes broadcast all over the planet like *The Real World*, *Will and Grace*, *Queer as Folk*, and most recently *Queer Eye For The Straight Guy* have introduced a different set of images: good, bad, risible, provocative, gentle and so forth, but definitely different, into the public consciousness.

And of course this has affected Catholics just as much as anyone else. In fact, as far as we can tell from surveys, practising Catholic lay people are significantly more likely to be completely relaxed about gay people than their practising Protestant counterparts. For reasons which may be interesting, and which I may have a go at suggesting something about later.

Fifty years ago, if someone had suggested that as many as half the men serving in the priesthood were homosexuals, that person would be assumed to be a bigoted anti-Catholic agitator who might be expected to go on in their next breath to claim that nuns regularly ate droves of the small babies who had been illegitimately born in their convents. Yet now someone who claimed that fifty percent of men currently in the priesthood are gay would not be considered mad, or anti-catholic. Many, myself among them, would hazard that fifty percent seems a conservative estimate, at least in major metropolitan dioceses.

Whatever the figures were fifty years ago, and whatever they are now, one thing is certain: an angry denial that half the priesthood was gay fifty years ago and an angry denial of it now would be greeted by Catholics with entirely different reactions. Fifty years ago, an angry denial would have been expected, now an angry denial would be regarded as a sign that the denier was either ideologically driven or was suffering from some sort of extraplanetary mind warp.

I point this out not because I want to claim that it is a particularly Catholic thing, but rather because there is no evidence at all that being Catholic makes any of us less likely to have been affected by this huge change in social perception which has worked its way through English speaking society, and, at different speeds and in different ways, through at least those other societies with whose languages and cultures I am familiar.

So here is the first point. In the first place what I call "the gay thing" is something which has just happened, and is just happening, to all of us, whatever our own sexual orientation is. You can be as straight as you like, but being straight is no longer the same as it was when there was no such thing as "gay". Our picture of what it is to be male or female has undergone, and is undergoing, huge changes which affect us not only from without, but from within. We find ourselves relating, whether we want to or not, with each other, and with ourselves, in new ways as a result of something which is far bigger than any of us and which is just happening.

Now please note that none of this makes any claim about whether this change is good or not, nor does it make any claim about what, if anything we should do about it. It merely notes that it has happened and is happening to all of us, Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

Now our experience as Catholics is not only that we have experienced this change, but we have also experienced our religious authority reacting to this change in particular ways. And this is not a matter of merely noting that religious authority has, from time to time, spoken out on these matters in the years since 1975, and that their pronouncements have reached us. We have all, religious authorities, lay people and clergy, undergone the changes together, and we have lived with each others' reactions to those changes. One of the things which it is worth pointing out, given the passions which this subject raises, is how few and far between have been the public pronouncements of Catholic religious authorities in this area, until very recently, especially if we compare them with the abundance of such pronouncements emerging from Protestant churches. There has been much more reticence to speak about the gay issue than might have been expected. And this for two obvious reasons: it has not been a particularly important matter for the Catholic laity until recently; and the clerical world has been, in this area, a glass house in which it was not wise to throw stones, and discretion seemed the least scandalous option.

This too is part of the Catholic experience: our undergoing the change which has permeated society has been mediated to us not only through television and so on, but also through a discretely, but nevertheless, thoroughly, gay-tinted clerical system. In other words, unlike many protestant groups, as Catholics we have never really had the option available to us of seriously pretending that we didn't know any gay people, or that there weren't any gay people in our Church. The result is that for us, part of the experience of "the gay thing" as Catholics has been a set of reactions provoked not so much by the official pronouncements of the Church as by the way the clergy live in relation to those official pronouncements: whether they have reacted by being honest, dishonest, frightened for their jobs, open about their partners, leaving, staying, being blackmailed or whatever. This "living with the change" by living with the way in which the clergy are coping with the change is very definitely part of the Catholic experience of this issue. It too is entirely independent of the ideological slant or the moral position taken by Catholics who are reacting to all this: some such Catholics may excoriate the dishonesty, some may lambast a modernist plot to infiltrate seminaries and go on to demand that the gays be weeded out, some may be puzzled that there should be so many, or that so many should stay despite everything. Nevertheless, the comparative discretion with which this matter has been treated by Catholic religious authority over the last thirty or so years, and the clear presence of a clerical caste in which dealing with "the gay thing" having come upon us, usually rather quietly, is going on all around us, has been an ineluctable part of the Catholic experience in this area, whether we have been aware of it or not.

Now, here I want to say the obvious thing: that our access to the question of truth in this area has not been independent of this experience. Indeed it has only been through this experience that the issue has gradually begun to crystallize into questions of truth. And this is because one of the ways in which "the gay thing" has come upon us has not been merely that outsiders, non-catholics, start to agitate about this issue; it is not something which is merely felt from outside pressure. Rather, "the gay thing" of its nature, happens within us. And I don't mean merely within the Church considered as a

numerical body in which a similar percentage is gay to that found in the rest of society. I mean within the lives of people within the Church. It has become an ineluctable part of how we find ourselves coming to be adult humans at this period, whether or not we are ourselves gay or lesbian, that some of our number find it increasingly important, and at a younger and younger age, to identify themselves as gay or lesbian, aware that this is something they find themselves to be, that the label makes sense to them and is going to be an important dimension of their lives: it is going to be one of the ways they find themselves articulating their relationship with each other, family, friends, employers, and of course, Church. And of course, they are aware, as are their contemporaries, that it is a word which is associated with a certain moral courage.

I guess that everyone knows that the kid who comes out at high school, or the student at university is being to some extent brave. I think that this point has much more importance than is usually attached to it. For most gay people, as for an increasing number of their straight contemporaries, “the gay thing” is not in the first instance anything to do with sex. It comes upon us as something to do with how we relate to other people in our peer group – whether we stand up for the effeminate kid who is being bullied by the jocks in the class, or whatever. And this kind of group dynamic through which “the gay thing” comes upon us is extremely important for our moral and spiritual development. It is here that we learn to stand up for the weak, or, in my case, to my shame, how to hide myself, join in the crowd of haters and “pass” for straight until a later time. And the interesting thing is that in this sense “the gay thing” comes upon straight kids as well – they too make moral choices, know what is right and wrong here. More and more adults and kids are reporting that straight kids are increasingly reluctant to go along with gay bullying, whether they see it being done by fellow students or by adults. This is not because they have become hedonistic, oversexualised decadents. It is, on the contrary, because they seem to sense that such behaviour is unworthy of them: they are less than straight if they need to beat up on the gay kids.

But part of the Catholic experience has been that alongside the way in which this process of moral and spiritual growth is happening as young people start to react to the way “the gay thing” is erupting into our midst, has also been the way in which Church authority appears to regard “the gay thing” as exclusively an issue to do with sex. And simultaneously to ignore the experienced moral dimensions that “the gay thing” has in the lives of those who are undergoing it. This leads to a disjunction being lived by us as, on the one hand we learn all about good Catholic values like solidarity, refusal to beat up on the weak, respect for the other. On the other hand, we perceive that in order to handle “the gay thing” themselves, Church authorities, which often enough includes such lay authorities as run Catholic educational enterprises, reduce the whole matter to sex. They are often enough notoriously bad at dealing with any of the lived moral issues which those not dependent on the clerical system for their employment have perceived to be psychologically and spiritually central to dealing with the whole gay thing – being brave, coming out, putting friendship at risk, being socialised transparently, and so on.

And this of course leads to one of the further disjunctions which is part of the Catholic experience of “the gay thing” which is the disjunction between the different sorts of truth-telling which “the gay thing” has brought upon us. On the one hand we have people who can be “out” as gay people, who can say “I am”, and who are in all our parishes, neighbourhoods and so forth, and for whom truth-telling involves a certain form of sincerity, and desire to be transparent in their dealings with others, often quite pacifically so, sometimes infuriatingly and provocatively so. And on the other hand we

have people who cannot say “I am”. At least in public. And for whom truth-telling in this area involves talking about a “they”. It involves an attempt to give an objective description of who “they” are who are being talked about, even when a considerable number of people suspect that the person saying “they” would be more honest to say “we”. Yet, and this is important, the official characterization of the “homosexual person” in the recent documents of the Vatican Congregations is something which can only be applied to a “they”, because even when the person talking is referring to himself, he is accepting the need to treat part of his “I” as a “they”, as something that can never be brought into a personal relationship, can never become part of an “I” or a “we”, never be addressed as “thou”. That’s what saying that an inclination “must be considered to be objectively disordered” implies.

This too is part of the experience of living as a Catholic as we undergo the “gay thing” – that there is a disjunction between two different sorts of truthfulness, neither of which seems quite adequate: the one because it suggests that sincerity is really all it takes to be honest, and that one can grasp an identity as gay and then “be” that thing, be wholly implicated in it, and the other because it suggests that truthfulness – holding fast to an official definition of what is true - requires dishonesty, makes self-knowledge the enemy of truth, and removes someone from the ordinary demands of charity, and solidarity.

I’ve tried to deal elsewhere with the subject of honesty in the Church, but here I would just like briefly to indicate that it seems to me that the challenge for us as Church now, and as Church widely perceived to have an honesty deficit, is to understand that honesty is not the same as either sincerity or “holding to objective truth” because both of those involve a certain grasping onto something. Honesty is something undergone as a gift of being brought into truthfulness by being given a self-critical faculty, and it can never be grasped. It is precisely appreciated by others when they see someone undergoing an experience of dealing with something which is making them more truthful. I don’t want to major on this now, merely to point out that my choice of approach to this talk, which may or may not have been successful, is because it seems to me that we are more likely to reach truthfulness if rather than battling each other with incommensurable forms of truth, we start to learn to tell the story of what we have been undergoing together.

What I would like to do now is point out that we have, as Catholics a number of resources to help us work our way through some of these disjunctions, resources which I think we are in fact using already. I’d like to try and highlight how just one of these comes into play. Curiously, I’m going to look at an unlikely resource, which I consider to be absolutely central to our finding our way through this particular upheaval, which is the Catholic Doctrine of Original Sin.

One of the principal points of conflict at the time of the Reformation in the sixteenth century was the view of human nature held by either side of the discussion. The Reformed side tended to hold a view of human nature which claimed that after the fall, having been created good we became radically corrupted. We are saved by God imputing to us a counter-factual goodness which is not really ours at all, but which is made available for us to put on, by Jesus’ sacrifice on the Cross. The important thing about this for us here is what it means about our moral and spiritual life. It means that all our “goodness” is so much fakery, not real goodness, and God’s goodness must be given to us through our being ordered to behave in ways which have nothing to do with our natural inclinations. God may order us to go totally against our natural inclinations,

because our natural inclinations have been totally corrupted, and there is no proper analogy between what we think of as good, what we desire, and what really is good, what we should desire.

The sort of life story which this underlying theology asks us to tell about ourselves is one involving a radical conversion: how once I was a sinner (and so behaved in certain ways) but now, very suddenly, I am saved, and I have a completely new life story, one with no real organic continuity with my old life story. One where there is a real rupture. Whoever I was is now dead, and now there is a new “I”, someone totally new.

Now perhaps you can see how this understanding of Original Sin and salvation would affect the discussion concerning “the gay thing” which I have just described as having come upon us, if we were strict heirs of the Reformed tradition. It would, in a sense, make life much easier for us by making it much clearer. Because we could say “Well, this business of ‘the gay thing’ coming upon us is what you would expect in a corrupt and depraved humanity. It is merely another wave of decadence and corruption. Anyone who is given the gift of being saved by Jesus must just obey the biblical commands, however little sense they may make. Given that the Bible, which is God’s Word, and not affected by corruption, clearly teaches that homosexuals are a bad thing, and that God created man and woman for each other, it is quite clear that one of the signs of someone being saved is that they are learning to obey God’s command which includes not being gay, and they should in fact be undergoing therapy to become straight. The new nature which they are receiving from God is certainly straight, so we can expect them to cease to be gay as part of being converted. Homosexual desire is intrinsically evil. Only divinely given straight desire is intrinsically good.”

The reason I say that this would make life easier for us as Catholics is as follows: it would enable us to make a deduction from the teaching of the Church about who we really are, and dismiss any social changes taking place as so much evil. Being Catholic would then be a matter of being on the obedient side of things, not the disobedient, and of course, anyone who agreed that being gay is part of who they really are, rather than the ghastly corrupt former person that they should be leaving behind, isn’t really a Catholic, just a hell-bound sinner. Following this model, we couldn’t and shouldn’t learn anything about ourselves from what is going on around us, from what is just happening to us, because we can’t start from there, it is totally untrustworthy. We can only start from something which comes from God covering us over and giving us an entirely different story. A moral command is good because it is a moral command come from God, not because it causes any sort of flourishing of any sort of inclination of our own.

Now, strange though this may be to some of your ears, this is not the Catholic faith. The Catholic faith concerning original sin and salvation is slightly and subtly different, and because of that, we have the possibility of quite a different way of dealing with “the gay thing”. The Catholic understanding, as set out by the Council of Trent, whose ardent fan I am, is that the word “desire” (ἐπιθυμία), which the apostle Paul sometimes uses in such a way as to give the impression that he considered it a purely negative thing, has never been considered by the Church to be a purely negative thing, to be sin in the strict sense of the word. It is in fact an entirely good thing which is, in the case of all of us, very seriously disordered, so that the way we find it in us is as something which comes from sin and inclines us towards sin, but which is nevertheless capable of being gradually transformed and ordered by grace so that we are brought to a flourishing

starting from where we are. This means that in the Catholic understanding grace perfects nature, takes something which, while good, is severely damaged, and transforms it starting from where it is, whereas in the “radical corruption” account I gave you, grace cannot transform nature, because nature has become intrinsically corrupt. Grace has to abolish the old nature and start again¹.

Now, as you can tell, this means that any story of salvation told by Catholics is of rather a different sort from the one I outlined to you earlier. It means that because our nature is not radically corrupt, just accidentally corrupt, and because grace perfects our nature, and because grace meets us starting from where we are, so what salvation looks like is our undergoing a process of divinely initiated transformation, together, in and as Church. It also means that the whole wave of changes in society which “just happen” and which are bigger and more powerful than any of us, are not simply entirely evil and corrupt, but are part of what enables us to be brought into being, which is in itself something good. Furthermore, these waves of change in society may be, amongst other things, ripples out from the way the leaven of the Gospel and the Kingdom is working in the midst of humanity, destroying our belief in the culpability of our victims and so enabling us to come to learn who we really are and how we can learn responsibility for what is. So, such waves of change need to be worked through, understood, discerned, analysed slowly and carefully, not just written off. It also means that where we are is not an entirely untrustworthy place from which to start, and something of what is true and good can be discerned and learned in the midst of all this mess. And this is something vital: it also means that we can, over time, learn things about who we are as human beings such that what had seemed to be moral commandments turn out to be commandments which are not moral, because they go against our flourishing².

You remember that in the picture of the Reformation understanding which I gave you, it didn't matter at all whether something leads to our flourishing or not. What matters is that it is right because it is commanded by God. In the Catholic understanding it is not the case that something is right because it is commanded by God, rather something is commanded by God because it is good for us: this is what you would expect from a good Creator who wants to make something even better out of his good creation, messy though it may look. But this means that in the Catholic understanding it must be possible for us as humans to learn that something which appeared to have been commanded by God can't in fact have been commanded by God, because it goes against what any of us can see leads to human flourishing. And this means that we can learn that we are not rebelling against God, but doing his deepest will when we learn that something which seemed to be holy and sacred is neither holy nor sacred, but a way of diminishing people. This of course lays upon us a huge burden of intelligence and responsibility in working out what really is God's will for us.

The funny thing about this Catholic understanding is that it is one of the parts of Catholic teaching that Catholics generally do really “get”, at a pretty instinctual level. That we are all in a mess together, none really better than the other, but that we are all rescuable, and must be merciful to each other, is a kind of basic default understanding

¹ The Catholic and the Reformed positions are identical in recognising the completely free and gratuitous initiative of God who saves. The difference between them is an anthropological one concerning who we are who are being saved and what that salvation looks like as a human process over time.

² See for instance Exodus 22, 28 and the different reactions to it at Jeremiah 19, 5-6 and Ezekiel 20, 25-26.

of Catholic interrelationship with each other. The notion that the Church is a refuge of sinners, that Our Lady has a soft spot for us in our weakness, and that no one should really be thrown out is kind of written into our souls. And I think that because of this, it is not surprising that one of the typical Catholic ways of dealing with “the gay thing” just having happened among us is to say “Well, of course, it does seem to go against the Church and all that, but, well, if she just is that way, well then, what do you expect, she must just get on and be the very best sort of lesbian, and I hope she finds happiness”. I suspect that the ease with which Catholic lay people have got their heads round the idea of at least some sort of marriage for gay couples is related to this.

In contrast to this, the official teaching in this area has come to seem more and more out of line with the default self-understanding which I have been describing, because it seems to be creating an exception to the general rule of Original Sin, which applies to everybody, equally. It seems to be suggesting that there are some people to whom the Catholic understanding of Original Sin should not be applied, and instead, a Protestant understanding should be applied, but only in their case. This disjunction, I should say, is becoming more and more evident as “the gay thing” has come upon us, and come to be seen more and more to have something to do with “who people are” and not so much with “what they do”.

In the old days, the discussion was entirely about “acts” – there is an undisputedly ancient Christian tradition of objecting to sexual acts between persons of the same sex. And of course, you can condemn acts without saying anything at all about the being of the person. But over the last fifty years or so, this distinction has become ever less tenable, as people we would now call “gay” have begun to say “I am gay, it’s not just that I do certain sexual things which are same-sex acts, but I just find myself being in a way which is best defined as gay, and which is to do with far more of me than sexual acts, furthermore there are other people like me, and we have recognisable traits in common, we can be studied, and we don’t appear to be less healthy, more vicious than straight people” and so on.

Well, here is where Church authority had a problem: while the discussion was about acts, the acts could be prohibited, and yet the person could be urged to flourish and find appropriate happiness. But as it became clearer that the acts and a certain sort of person belonged together, were more or less well bound-up as part of a package, Church authority was stuck with a dilemma: “Can we maintain the traditional prohibition of certain sorts of acts if they are merely natural functions of the being of the person, capable of being exercised well or badly as that sort of person grows and develops? No, we can’t. So we have to make up our minds: either we just concede that the traditional prohibition doesn’t apply to those for whom growing and developing in this way is natural, and only applies to those for whom to engage in such things would be to leave their typical usage; or we have to insist that the traditional prohibition does apply, in which case it must be true that gay people aren’t really what they say they are, but just have intrinsically disordered desire and must obey the commands of the Church even though these don’t seem to help them flourish. But if we do that, we come perilously close to the Reformation position of seeing some part of people as incapable of flourishing, as something which must simply be abolished and covered over by grace, so that they become something different”.

This is a difficult dilemma: how could they both maintain the traditional prohibition, one which was at least tenable before it had become clear that “some people just are that

way”, and yet not simply declare a person to be intrinsically corrupt? You must remember that shortly before they were dealing with this, Paul VI had maintained the traditional prohibition of any sexual act which separated the procreative from the unitive function of sex. So they could scarcely say “Well, such acts as separate the procreative from the unitive are wrong for straight people, but fine for gay people”. The phrase they came up with is a pretty good compendium of the difficulty they had in dealing with the dilemma.

As you probably know, the phrase says that “the homosexual inclination, though not itself a sin, constitutes a tendency towards behaviour that is intrinsically evil, and therefore must be considered objectively disordered”.

Let’s unpack that a little bit. In the first place, those who wrote it show they are good Catholics by indicating that the homosexual inclination is not itself a sin, for no Catholic can understand someone’s basic pattern of desire to be intrinsically corrupt. That would be a Reformed position. However, they move on rather fast from this recognition that the homosexual inclination is not itself a sin, and I’d like to slow down a bit. For there is more than one way of recognizing that an inclination is not in itself a sin. There is the way, for instance, that would be true of all heterosexuals. All heterosexual humans find that the package of their growing up and their sexual desire is extremely difficult to humanize and to socialize in an appropriate way. Many heterosexual people find that it takes a long time before they are able to find themselves capable of a monogamous relationship in which each is capable of treating their spouse as an equal sharing the responsibility for procreation, if, indeed they are ever able to get there. But in principle, the notion that their inclination is a good thing, but is always encountered by them in a distorted way, referred to in official teaching as “concupiscence”, and that their salvation is, in part, worked out in their creative struggle with their concupiscence, is quite comprehensible.

So, the question arises: is the homosexual inclination, which is not in itself a sin, a subsection of heterosexual concupiscence? Or is it its own sort of concupiscent desire? This is an important distinction. If the homosexual inclination were a subsection of heterosexual concupiscence, then it would be something that couldn’t lead to anything good in itself. It would simply be a symptom of the sort of thing that goes wrong in a basically heterosexual human being, like lusting after someone to whom you are not married, or wanting sexual relationships with as many partners (of the opposite sex) as possible. And of course, the life of grace would gradually lead the person whose heterosexual concupiscence takes the form of a homosexual inclination toward recovering an ordered pattern of heterosexual desire, and this would be public and visible in the relationships of the person concerned

If on the other hand, the homosexual inclination were its own sort of concupiscent desire, then it would be something which does lead to something good in itself. It would have all the capacity for things to go wrong that exist in the case of heterosexual desire, but, just like heterosexual desire, it would also have the capacity for something to go right. That is, the life of grace would lead the person with the homosexual inclination to become less possessive, more merciful, more generous, more honest, more faithful, but without changing the gender of this person’s potential or actual partner(s), and this would be public and visible in the relationships of the person concerned.

Now I would like to point out that both of these are perfectly possible interpretations given the Catholic doctrine of original sin. What the Catholic doctrine of original sin does not allow us to do is simply to refuse on *a priori* grounds the possibility that a long term, persistent pattern of desire, may, after all, be a sign of how the Creators' love for us wills us to flourish. And therefore we cannot simply refuse the possibility that we can come to learn that what seemed like a subsection of heterosexual concupiscence may just be a different thing. In other words, the Catholic doctrine of original sin does allow the possibility that we come to discover, over time and with difficulty, that, in a regular minority of the population, long term stable same-sex desire just is, and is the basis from which they flourish, rather than that which has to be "dealt with" in some way before they can begin to flourish.

Given the possibility of this distinction, you can see why I think that the CDF rushed rather fast into their next claim: that the homosexual inclination... "constitutes a tendency towards behaviour that is intrinsically evil, and therefore must be considered objectively disordered."

The only circumstance in which it would be true that behaviour tended to by a homosexual inclination were intrinsically evil is if it were simply true that there is no other intrinsic human pattern of desire than the heterosexual one, tending towards marriage and procreation, and therefore that the homosexual inclination is a subsection of heterosexual concupiscence. And this is what the CDF is implying is in fact the case, as a deduction from its own teaching on marriage and procreation.

In other words, from the Church's teaching on marriage and procreation an attempt is being made to reach a deduction about empirical truth concerning what really is. To flesh this out further: an aspect of revelation, here from the moral sphere, is being asked to bear the weight of defining truth in an anthropological sphere, where whatever is true in this sphere might instead be reached by empirical means. This same intellectual pattern did not work well in the Galileo case, and it did not work well with Genesis' account of Creation in six days. We would be wise to be extremely suspicious of it here.

Now it is, of course, perfectly conceivable that we will eventually discover (rather than presume) that all human beings are intrinsically heterosexual. But this is not a conclusion to which we are obligated either by the Church's teaching on Original Sin, or by the Church's teaching on marriage. Yet here a deduction from the Church's teaching on marriage is being used to try and foreclose the sort of process of discovery which is allowed for by the the Church's doctrine of original sin.

And logically enough, if the homosexual inclination were indeed a subsection of heterosexual concupiscence, leading to nothing in itself, then of course it would be true that it must be considered objectively disordered. Here I would like to point out that I have nothing against the notion of an inclination being objectively disordered per se. We would all consider kleptomania to be objectively disordered. But we have come to this conclusion after studying people who are affected by it (rather than those who are just thieves) and seeing what it is that it is a distorted form of, and how those affected can be helped back into a more pacific possession of their own goods and respect for other people's. And this is the point: we can learn what is objectively disordered or not from studying people, their relationships, their habits, their happiness and so on. Our objectivity is gleaned from within the process of discerning experience, of learning. It is

not reached by appealing to an *a priori* deduction from revelation which is supposed to cut short any process of discovery.

And of course, by yoking together, on the one hand, the concession to the Church's teaching concerning original sin and, on the other, an *a priori* deduction about intrinsically evil acts, the CDF does leave us with a *de facto* Reformed teaching regarding the relationship between the homosexual inclination and original sin. What it concedes verbally it removes existentially. Anyone who lives with a homosexual inclination is taught that it is in itself not a sin, but that on the other hand, it can lead to nothing starting from itself, and that if they don't find that the process of grace in their life tends to make them heterosexual, then they must just be paralysed as sexual beings. Existentially, this is no different from the Reformed position that homosexual desire is intrinsically corrupt and must be just covered over. It is, if you like, a piece of Catholic icing perched precariously atop a Protestant cake.

Well, here is our lived disjunction all right, and it is a disjunction between two forces of Catholic doctrine which hadn't been on a collision course before, but have entered into collision as part of the way that "the gay thing" has come upon us all. For the moment, it looks as though the only way to maintain the traditional Catholic prohibition of same-sex acts is to act as though the homosexual inclination were in fact an intrinsically corrupt desire, even though this is something alien to a Catholic anthropology, because the moment you consider that "being gay" is not an individually defective form of heterosexuality, but is just something that is, then the Catholic understanding of original sin would oblige you to regard grace as transforming that way of being, which is as much in need of transformation as its heterosexual equivalent, and as much in need as its heterosexual equivalent of all the help it can get, starting from where it is. A phrase like marriage as a "remedy for concupiscence" comes to mind. And of course, the Catholic understanding of original sin is such that we can in fact learn, with difficulty and over time that certain ways of being just are, are given, are part of being human, and as such are capable of leading to flourishing and sharing the divine life.

This too, is part of Catholic experience: at the moment, it does appear from official discourse that everything to do with being gay is somehow an exception to the ordinary teaching of the Church about grace. The moment you apply the Church's ordinary teaching about grace to any aspect of life as a gay or lesbian person, then it is going to lead to all the things which it is in fact leading to, and most ordinary lay Catholics are aware that it is leading to: growth in healthy self-esteem, creative ways of living together, new forms of religious life, enriched sacramental participation, recognition and respect for different forms of flourishing, including appropriate legal guarantees against mistreatment, discrimination and so forth, some sort of marriage laws and eventually publicly recognised religious blessings of such partnerships.

Well, this point of disjunction is where we are at! Now, I think it very unlikely that any Church authority will suddenly wake up and say "Good Lord, we've been missing the whole point of our own doctrine of Original Sin!". My ambition here is more minimalist than that. I merely want to point out, for the day when Church authority finally gets tired of heading up the dead end of trying to make spiritual and political sense out of its own current teaching, that there is a perfectly good Catholic way out of their cul-de-sac which is available for them whenever they want it. They are not condemned, like characters in a Greek tragedy, to carry on being paralysed by the fatality of their own teaching, just as we are not.

My suggestion for us as Catholics at this point is this: if the Vatican congregations really want us to believe that there is something so wrong with being gay that it in fact constitutes an exception to the ordinary teaching of the Church about grace and original sin, then they must try a great deal harder to make their case. Or alternatively, they must demonstrate, not just to those whose livelihood depends on their publicly agreeing to it, but especially, as an urgent pastoral priority, to ordinary gay and lesbian Catholics, that there is no such thing as being gay; that what we call “being gay” is a mistake, and is simply a severely defective form of heterosexuality. If the Vatican congregations can do that, then they stand a chance of being able to show that the intrinsic heterosexuality of the falsely gay person can flourish, and thus that their own teaching is compatible with the ordinary teaching of the Church about grace. However, if they can’t do that – if they can’t produce regular and sustained witnesses to heterosexual flourishing emerging without violence from the life stories of people who had assumed they were gay on something like the same scale as there are regular and sustained witnesses to gay and lesbian flourishing emerging without violence from the life stories of people who had been taught that they were heterosexual, then they should reconsider their definition.

However until they come up with their demonstration, and the burden of teaching effectively is surely on the teachers who have insisted so loudly on their unique role as teachers, then, faced with the disjunction, any ordinary Catholic should stick with the ordinary teaching of the Church, held uninterruptedly and reaffirmed by a major Church Council, about grace and original sin, and learn to apply it to their lives and the lives of those around them. And this means, starting where we are, and not where someone else tells us we must be considered to be. One of the geniuses of the Catholic doctrine of Original sin is that rather than it being a form of general accusation of how wicked we are, it is in fact a recognition of how we are all in the same boat as regards wickedness, and that it is a really terrible thing to do to judge others, because in doing so we become blind to the way we are judging ourselves³. Any way of characterising people which makes them an exception to the general rule, by suggesting that they have a different kind and degree of Original Sin than others is of course a defection from the Catholic faith, because it is giving permission to judge them, when the whole purpose of the doctrine is to make such permission impossible.

You may have noticed that the title of my lecture this evening was “Following the still small voice”. And you may also have noticed that I have got to what must surely, please God, be the end of the lecture without making any reference to the title. So I would just like to make explicit that the title is a reference to what I hope to have been hinting at all along. I take it that one of the joys of being Catholic is that we are not a group united by an ideology, nor a group who adhere to a text, nor a group under the command of a leader or set of leaders, but a group being brought into being along with an ordered way of life as we undergo a certain form of listening, listening to a crucified and risen victim as he shows his forgiveness of us and undoes our ways of being together, which tend to be judgmental, violent and so on, so that we can share God’s life forever. What keeps us as Catholics, and what is the central element of experience and truth as lived by Catholics in the gay issue, is that we can count absolutely on the crucified and risen Lord, present in our midst especially in the Eucharist, who is gradually teaching us how to reinterpret our world in such a way that we build each other up, and do not fear the truth which will set us free. The presence of the crucified and risen Lord teaching us,

³ See, among other places, but here particularly poignantly, Romans 2,1.

together, as Catholics to inhabit Words like “Go and learn what this means, I want mercy and not sacrifice” or “the Sabbath is made for humans, not humans for the sabbath”, His Presence *is* the still small voice that is at work through and in all our debates and disjunctions, and will always be opening us up to being made anew starting from where we are. As we heard in last Sunday’s Gospel,

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away⁴

Those words are the living interpretative presence of One who loves us starting exactly where we are, One who reaches us in the midst of all the collapses of what seemed sacred, and the coming upon us of new dimensions of ourselves which seem terrifying until we learn to look at them through the eyes of One who loves us so much that he longs to be us, and longs for us to be free and happy with him, forever.

That we are learning to relax, together, through hearing His words, into being loved, is, surely, the central Catholic experience.

* The present version contains significant modifications which are much indebted to the lively discussion following the lecture on that occasion, and in particular to the responses and questions with which Professors Lisa Cahill, Jim Keenan SJ, Stephen Pope and John Baldovin SJ honoured me. It has also benefited greatly from a critical reading by Professors John Ranieri and Andrew McKenna. Needless to say, the fact that all these respondents agreed to engage me critically does not imply their agreement with my conclusions.

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⁴ Mark 13, 31.