

Honesty as challenge, honesty as gift: What way forward for gay and lesbian Catholics?

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This evening I would like to talk with you about honesty, not as about something obvious, but as about something problematic. This is not merely because it is difficult for me to be honest – and it is as difficult for me as for anyone else, but because I think that the notion is too important for us as Catholics, now, to be left without examination.

That honesty has been important for those of us who are gay and lesbian is something which, while it is resoundingly obvious, has not perhaps been examined as closely as it might. The reason why I want to talk about it tonight is that I think we are so close to finding ourselves in an entirely new space in the life of the Church as gay and lesbian Catholics, that I'm very keen that we don't stab ourselves in the foot, thus slowing down our getting there.

There is a tale told about one of Abraham Lincoln's Generals during your Civil War. The General in question was called, I think, Burnside, and he was, by several accounts famously incompetent. As the Civil war drew towards its conclusion, and in fact shortly before the final victory of the Union, Burnside managed to lead his troops to yet another resounding defeat. Lincoln is reputed to have said "Only Burnside could have snatched one last catastrophic defeat from out of the jaws of victory". My fear is that by treating honesty as something obvious, we may do a Burnside, and I want to avoid that.

Let us start with something which *is* obvious, and then try to examine it. We've reached a stage in the life of our Church where it is not at all unreasonable, or uncommon, for people to say something like this: "Why should we believe our Bishops, priests or Church leaders when they talk about big things which really matter, like God, the resurrection of the dead, or the presence of Jesus in the sacraments, if we can't trust them to talk honestly about little things that don't really matter, like their own or other people's sexual orientation?" One of the reasons for this sort of question is that it is increasingly common for fourteen or fifteen year old kids to be able to "come out" in their High Schools and not only not to be attacked for it, but to earn the respect of their peers as having moral credibility for having come out. These kids, both straight and gay understand perfectly well what moral courage looks like, and understand, as do most people in practice, that the earliest and most fundamental moral questions in anything to do with things gay as they actually affect gay and lesbian people have very little to do with sex and everything to do with peer group honesty, rejection, acceptance, fear, hatred, courage solidarity and friendship. The kids are of course quite right. The contrast between this and the lifestyle of people for whom the gay question is reduced to a discussion about sexual acts in a way which lets these same people off the hook of dealing with peer group honesty about who they

are, and which rewards not courage but cowardice, is as obvious as the Emperor's new clothes.

Twenty years ago it might have been considered scandalous for a priest or a Bishop to speak honestly as a gay man. Now the burden of what gives scandal has shifted. It is vastly more scandalous that such people *cannot* speak honestly when so many others can, given that truth, transparency and coming into the light are central to the Gospel whose ministers many of us are ordained to be.

Well, so far, so obvious. But now I'd like to stand back from this familiar picture of honest gay and lesbian people and dishonest clerical structures and question it a little, not because I think it is basically untrue, but because I think it is basically unhelpful, and pursuing it constitutes a failure of magnanimity, of nobility of soul. If I may use a military image, it is as though some soldiers had, with enormous bravery and in the face of astounding odds forged across an apparently impenetrable river or canyon which was part of their enemies' defences, and once they had got to the other side, rather than carrying on their battle against the enemy, had turned round and sat down on the heroically conquered farther bank and proceeded to jeer at those on their own side for their cowardice in not managing to get over the obstacle. In truth, the point of bravery is not to make cowards feel bad about themselves, but rather so to change the situation that the cowardice of others no longer matters.

As I see it, the problem is this: while I think that it is true that one of the principal problems we have in the Church at the moment is a lack of honesty, this is not, and can never be, a matter of some people who are "honest", for instance, out gay and lesbian people, or straight adults who refuse to beat about the bush, using their honesty as a weapon against other people who are "dishonest" – most notably the denizens of the clerical culture. I think honesty is too important a matter to be allowed to be cheapened by its use as a weapon, as a means of comparison against some other group, or as a form of accusation against others. And the reason that I think it is too important is because honesty is absolutely indispensable for one of the most pivotal realities of the Church, which is the reality of witness. Without the apostolic group giving credible witness to the effects on them of the crucified and risen Lord there would be no Church. And without that witness being kept constantly alive and credible, there will be no Church. Though, as Our Lord indicated, under the circumstances of a mass failure of witness, even the stones will cry out¹. So I'd like to explore how we can move ahead in developing a more honest Church. And this will necessarily be a very tentative expedition, since the pronoun corresponding to the word "Church" is not, in my lexicon, "they", but "we", so the question is how can we be more honest?

Now I'm not going to start by giving a definition of honesty. This is really because I don't have one. I hope I'll get closer to one by the end, because I hope you will share with me a sense of how much stranger a thing honesty is than we had imagined. I want to start by making a simple contrast between honesty as a challenge and honesty as a gift. As gay and lesbian people we know easily enough that honesty has been a challenge for us. Most of us have had to struggle to be honest with friends, with relatives, with employers and with ourselves. Many of us will have taken long detours

¹ Luke 19, 39-40

prior to coming to some sort of honesty – journeys away from home, flights into depression, sexually compulsive behaviour or some sort of chemical dependency. Many of us may still be circling the airport hesitating about aiming for the runway rather than touching down. So we all sense what honesty as a challenge looks like.

And those of us for whom honesty has been a challenge are highly likely to be those most tempted to want to use honesty as a challenge for others, - the image I gave you of the heroic troops standing on the bank and jeering at those of their own side who hadn't made it across the great divide. And this is scarcely surprising, especially if our experience of coming to honesty has also been an experience of loss – loss of job, of reputation, of security, of friends. However I think we are going to get stuck at a level of honesty as cheap weapon if, when we start to get honest, we also start to be particularly vexed by the dishonesty of others. The real challenge, I want to say, is for us to begin to imagine honesty as a gift, something of which we are so massively the recipients that we can't really be its brandishers as if it were our own.

So, in order to begin to sink into the possibility of imagining honesty as a gift which we are receiving, let me try and say what I think honesty is not. Honesty is not the same as sincerity, and it is not the same as holding fast to the truth. Let me try and explain what I mean. Someone who is sincere believes that they are telling the truth, and the sincerity is supposed somehow to underline the truthfulness of what they are saying. It means that it is not so much what they are saying, but the passionate guarantee of their good faith in saying it which is the point of the communication. They want to get across to you that, whether what they are saying is true or not, they really mean it, and are completely implicated in what they are saying. From the official Catholic perspective, being “out” as a gay or lesbian person is a form of mistaken sincerity, a passionate identification with something which it is a mistake to believe really exists.

And of course, it is not for nothing that sincerity is a virtue particularly appreciated in cultures strongly marked by the Reformation, since it is the virtue of the one who is justified by faith. If you believe it strongly enough, passionately enough, then the belief itself makes you good. The object of the belief is less important than the force of the conviction itself. The danger with this, of course, is that it can reward self-deception. The more conviction we can muster up, the more we can do what we want, and convince ourselves that we are right to do so, and so to want. Even when this requires us to engage in a very selective approach to what we know to be true of ourselves and others, and encourages us to iron out precisely those wrinkles in our own and others' stories which might give us real insight into what is really going on. Those elements are presentationally dangerous for brandishers of sincerity, and so are censored out. For the truth is that we can never really know ourselves well enough to be able to present ourselves as completely implicated in what we hold to be true.

Then there is the traditional Catholic opposite of sincerity, which would be belief in the importance of holding to the truth about what is objectively so, without paying any attention to your subjectivity. And this of course has its cultural consequences as well. Until recently it was taken for granted, for instance, that the very best sort of Catholic prelate was one who was absolutely rigid in his adherence to the teachings of the faith as they concerned moral matters in public, and absolutely merciful and tolerant with those who could not live up to them in private. Just because no one can live up to the

demands of this or that virtue doesn't mean that you try to re-write the rule book. You keep the rule book exactly as it is, and are extremely merciful to all those who can't keep the rules, which probably includes yourself.

You have recently, in this country, been witness to the collapse of this whole way of approaching things. You could not have had a harder line witness to a certain objective understanding of holding to the truth than Cardinal Law, and yet this was accompanied, from what we can gather from such of the legal record as has become available to us, by a private complacency not just with individual cases of evil but with systemic evil, a complacency which seems to have bordered on the delinquent.

Just as, in the case of sincerity, the truth is that we can never really know ourselves well enough to be able to present ourselves as completely implicated in what we hold to be true, so in the case of the "holding to truth" model, the truth is that we can never efface ourselves so completely as to be completely un-implicated in what we hold to be true.

Now, I want to suggest that honesty is neither of these, neither sincerity nor holding to the truth, for an interesting reason. And that is that honesty cannot be possessed. It involves instead a certain being possessed, a certain undergoing. Both sincerity and what I call holding to truth involve an act of possession. The person who is being sincere is taking hold of themselves and aligning themselves with what they see as true as though that act of self-possession was in itself a virtuous thing. I think of Tony Blair's protestations of sincerity in his belief in the pretexts for the war currently underway in Iraq, a display of sincerity which appears to have been supposed to stand instead of any objective evidence which might have justified him making the decisions he did. Given that he didn't have any weapons of mass destruction to brandish, he brandished himself as sincere, as though this were some sort of consolation prize, or perhaps was itself a fact as objective as the objective lack of any other convincing evidence.

Old style Catholic protestations of truthfulness also involve an act of possession: given that, in that view, we can't rely on the vagaries of human nature, and given the inability of humans to live up to anything for any length of time, we need to lay hold of a form of truth that is not subject to those vagaries, to that inability, and so we have these objective truths which are held by the Church, and we need to hold firm to them, even if we can't live by them. In doing so, in fact, in holding to them particularly heroically when they most completely contradict who we are and what we do, especially then are we being good. So what is possessed here is possessed by the "Church" which thus becomes an objective form of collective sincerity, and is able to possess truths entirely independently of the lives of any of its members. And of course, under these circumstances, it actually becomes rather important not to know too many truths about the lives of its members, because only while not much is known can manifest failures to live what is claimed to be true be regarded as "so many bad apples" in a barrel of a silent, but heroically faithful majority.

Well, now I am going to try and venture something about honesty. I think that what is particularly striking about honesty is that it is something that can never be laid claim to. When someone presents themselves as honest, we are right to suspect that they are trying to pull a fast one over us. Were I to have made out that my talk this evening was

going to be something like “an honest gay man talks honestly about the Catholic Church”, I very much hope that the aroma of snake oil would have kept you all at home, or sent you to a good honest leather bar, the sort of place where people get their pretence out of their systems and into their uniforms, the sort of place where people can be relaxed and self-mocking about the disjunction between their self-presentation and their reality.

Honesty is something perceived as attractive by the onlooker, and noted by the listener, not brandished by the person who is being so described. And this is for a simple reason: honesty is perceived in someone’s undergoing something in a way which tends towards truthfulness. And it is particularly related to this sense of them *undergoing* something. It is precisely that they are not laying hold of something, but are working through something outside their control having happened to them. In short, they are being possessed by a truthfulness which is coming upon them. It is not the case that they are laying hold of and wielding a form of truthfulness, whether individually or collectively.

What is being undergone is a certain becoming honest, usually in spite of oneself. And this presupposes something rather odd, and which we ought not to have to remember as Catholics, since it is part of our fundamental theology. It presupposes that someone is bringing us into the light from a dark place. Or, if you like, that our normal condition is a certain sort of dishonesty, and that becoming honest is a gift. And it is a gift given to us as we become capable of self-criticism.

This seems to me to be absolutely vital. The frightening thing about someone who is sincere is that they are incapable of self-criticism, and thus liable to be dangerous to themselves and to others. The frightening thing about the holding to objective truth model of Church is that it cannot allow *reality as undergone* to act as a way of learning about who we really are. It sets up self-knowledge to be the enemy of truth.

But it seems to me that what is coming upon us as Church now is precisely the growing inability to be able to regard self-knowledge as the enemy of truth. In other words, we are learning to be self-critical as Catholics. And this is something new and rather remarkable. It is no longer a question of there being the two positions which have informed Church discussions since the reformation: the position of the innocent outsider so scandalized by the awfulness of the institution that they just leave it, shaking the dust off their feet. And on the other hand the position of the heroic defender of the institution, refusing all criticism of it. We actually find ourselves undergoing a refusal to be so scandalized by the institution that we head off into some romantic sunset. We find ourselves actually developing a sense that it is in and through even the corrupt institutionalism that we know that we are capable of being reached, and that this is what it is like to undergo salvation: that God likes us so much that he comes into our midst to undo from within the various forms of enclosure and darkness which we are inclined to prefer to the adventure of living in the light.

In other words, self-critical institutional living, a sense of sociological suspicion towards all and any institutional claims but without a rejection of the way we are in fact dependent on institutions seems to be coming upon us as a normal way of living the faith. What some people have described, somewhat dismissively, as “defecting in place” seems to have a far more positive quality to it than we have attended to.

Now this, it seems to me, is very important for us to consider as gay and lesbian Catholics. Being gay or lesbian is not something we grasp and hold onto, even though we may do just that at a particular stage, when coming out, or whenever. I think it is rather the case that being gay or lesbian is something which we find ourselves caught up in as humans coming of age in a quite particular social climate. That is to say, we are far more undergoers of something than creators of it, let alone protagonists in it. And we don't know where it is going. It does just appear to be a human discovery, being made in our time, that there just are a certain percentage of people of both genders who just are principally attracted at a profound emotional and erotic level to people of their own gender. And that this is not a moral issue, something that should be or shouldn't be, but is much closer to being something which just is.

What is more, we don't know where this is going. It isn't at all clear yet "what gay and lesbian people are for", or if indeed that is an appropriate question to ask. Certainly that question can only be asked when the existence of such people is considered as something that just is, rather than considered to be some sort of moral defect from some norm which *should* be the case. And we don't have to have answers to these questions. We do need to be aware that this discovery which is being made is exactly that: a discovery, which means uncharted territory.

I rather think that here we need to be honest as gay and lesbian Catholics. We are not making a piece of special pleading concerning human rights treatment by Church authorities. We are not asking people who have traditionally been nasty to us to be nice to us. We are not brandishing incontestable scientific facts against some bunch of obscurantist ideologues. We are finding ourselves caught up in taking part in an adventurous creation of something which has never been done before: something like a redefinition of being human, for which words like gay or straight are insufficient, but which affects both gay and straight alike. As silly as the notion of "*Queer eye for the straight guy*" is, its stereotypes and its humour mask something very remarkable: a suggestion that straight and gay are *for* each other in some way yet to be understood as mutually enriching, as leading to flourishing.

Now that sounds like a red rag to the bull of conservative commentators: "You see, the wicked faggots are out to change human nature, which is impossible, and they know very well what they're trying to do". But it isn't, because the point is not that we are out to do anything, but that we find ourselves involved in something which is bigger than us, and which is just happening, at a greater or lesser speed, all over the planet. Other commentators have indicated that the possibility of regularly effective and cheaply accessed means of contraception has in fact produced a huge change in human understanding of what it is to be human. And I suspect that the developing understanding of what it is to be gay is part of the same change.

The old way of talking about what was true or not true made a distinction between objective and subjective, such that truth was objective, and self-perception was subjective, and was therefore inclined to be wrong. But we are gradually learning that people's subjectivity is an objective fact about them, that the pattern of desire which forms how we relate to each other is not, and can never be, simply an individual mistake. It is always the starting point from which it becomes possible to make mistakes or not. In other words, whatever being gay or lesbian is, there is a reality here

which is bigger than us and of which we are more or less symptomatic, and which we can't simply avoid by some intellectual sleight of hand, or some act of will. To attempt to avoid it feels more like a refusal to undergo being created than it feels like a bearing of a heroic witness to an unreachable form of sanctity.

Because of this sense that we are undergoing something, we can also begin to be quite honest about the various forms of life which this change has spawned which aren't so wonderful, or are of limited usefulness. While we were under attack, and felt ourselves having to be defensive, we were very incensed when people attacked our health record, our higher than average smoking, our higher than average use of "party drugs" and so on. Well, we needn't be. These are not things that are to do with "being gay", they are a sign that we haven't yet allowed ourselves to be so reached by the One who loves us that we can take responsibility as gay people for each other and start, self-critically, to create new forms of community and social life. I think David Nimmons' book "*The Soul beneath the skin*"² is quite right to be trying to get us to change our typical message to ourselves about ourselves, which is an adolescent message, rather buying into the picture of ourselves as hedonistic sex pigs, and being both proud of and ashamed of this at the same time. Instead, as he shows, we have good reason to be becoming aware, at a sociological level, of the changed nature of our societies. Particularly our large urban societies, where hints are beginning to emerge of what positive contribution being gay might make to the wider human landscape.

But here is the truth of this: it is in learning to do this honestly, to develop this self-critical reception of who we find ourselves becoming, and not being dependent on the approval or the disapproval of others, and both the need for approval and the need for disapproval are equally strong drugs, that we are in fact going to be more Catholic, and more capable of helping to create and sustain Church in the century which is beginning.

It seems to me that one of the major problems we face as gay and lesbian Catholics is that we live in a puritan society. By a puritan society I don't mean one which is morally restrictive, I mean one which is morally schizophrenic. It is world where good is boring and where naughty is fun. But this is the reverse of the Catholic world, where sin is boring and we are being summonsed into becoming something much bigger, more creative and fun than we can imagine.

And yet this puritan world diminishes us all. What would it be like for us to find ourselves creating, together, as gay and lesbian Catholics, ways in which good is creative and playful, if you like, where we are able to refuse the fears of those who linger on the bank we have left, and take forward the creation of a safe space for others to nest in. What would intentional communities of care for each other, starting from where we are, look like? What would the setting up of places which could be multipliers of volunteering and the invention of new apostolates? In short, what would "parish" look like? Curiously, I think that this quiet re-imagination of parish is in fact happening all around us, and will continue to happen, though many of us won't even

² David Nimmons, *The Soul beneath the skin: The unseen hearts and habits of gay men*. New York: St Martin's Griffin, 2003.

notice that it is this that is being Catholic. And that it is this that is creating the future of urban living for the Church.

What I would like to ask us to avoid is stabbing ourselves in the foot! Stabbing ourselves in the foot looks like refusing to believe that we could possibly be being pushed into being a gift for the renewal of the church simply by learning how to respect and love each other as gay and lesbian people, and instead engaging in perpetual sniping with those of our brothers whose approval we do not need, but who will depend on us creating gentle bridges for them to be able to join us in this adventure.