

Yes, but is it true...?

James Alison

The Roman Catholic Caucus of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement held a meeting in St Anne's Church, Soho on Sunday 3rd August 2003 to respond to the UK government's proposals concerning same-sex partnership rights. The following was an impromptu theological/pastoral contribution by James Alison, put into writing after the event.

Thank you for inviting me to speak as part of this panel. Initially I turned down the invitation for two reasons: in the first place I've just come back from a week's teaching and so haven't got my act together; and secondly, I felt that it would be more appropriate if the theological issues were addressed by someone who is themselves in a partnership, which I am, alas, not. Nevertheless the invitation resurfaced, and so, at the risk of the classic clerical trap of a straight celibate priest giving untested marriage advice to straight couples, I find myself, an unpartnered gay priest, speaking to this issue from a position of similar ineptitude.

Since the government announced its proposals, and this meeting was set up, the Vatican came out with its document last Thursday¹, which was supposed to cast light on, or a shadow over, any deliberations such as these, so I'd like to start by asking us to consider our reactions to this intervention.

In the first place, I would like to say this to you: Don't allow yourselves to be provoked. This sort of document and the language it uses hits us in the gut, and then we find ourselves reacting in ways which are not reasoned. In fact, part of the provocative nature of such documents is that they tend to take people out of their capacity for reasoned response, and then we lose it, and any subsequent argument becomes heated and hateful. Let us take a little time to stand back from the intervention and allow ourselves to be set free from being knee-jerked into reaction.

In order to do this, I would ask you to accompany me on an imaginative exercise which might help us put things in perspective. Let us imagine that we are in Germany in 1933, and the Vatican has just come out with a document full of just such absolutist language. It tells us that there are certain legislative proposals afoot to discriminate against Jewish people; that however mild and benign they seem, these proposals are in fact a grave moral evil which attack the root of the possibility of a just human society; and that if the proposals flourish, untold damage will occur to the fabric of our humanity. Bishops are to speak out against such proposals, no Catholic politician is even to contemplate supporting them, since that would be to approve evil. Where such legislation exists already, Catholic politicians must work for its abolition, and may only support legislation which does not abolish it in as far as this tends to reduce its scope.

¹ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. *Considerations regarding proposals to give legal recognition to unions between homosexual persons*. Vatican City, 31 July, 2003.

I put it to you that if such a document had come out in 1933 or 1934, rather than the somewhat muffled statements which did emerge, we would all be very proud of it now. At the time, various people might have said that this was an unwarranted intervention in democratic process and so on, others might have commented unfavourably on the harshness of the tone, the absolutist language, or the infelicity of the translation. But in retrospect, it would have turned out to be exactly right.

I say this because I have absolutely no objection in principle to the Vatican coming out with a document such as the present one. I have no objection to the Vatican shouting at us or our Bishops or our elected officials, nor to the harshness of tone, nor to the infelicity of the translation. It is not stupid to imagine that we may need such a shout. The appropriate reaction on our part to a document of this sort concerning the Jewish question in 1933, if we had been blessed with such a thing, would have been “Yes, but is it true?” And would God that we had found it within us to ask such questions, to answer them affirmatively and to prevent our society from going to hell in a handcart.

The Vatican officials who published this letter clearly think that the movement towards legislative proposals for same-sex partnership or marriage which is growing all over the world is a sign that we are going to hell in a handcart. And the only response that is worthy of us is not to get worked up about the tone, the style and so on, but simply to ask “Yes, but is it true?”

So that is what I would like to look at with you. Is it true? In the first place the intervention has no new doctrinal point in it. It is an entirely logical intervention, starting from a familiar *a priori* position. This is the view of the Roman congregations that there is no such thing as gay and lesbian people as a class, merely individually defective heterosexual persons with a more or less strong tendency towards certain gravely immoral acts. Starting from this point, the position of the intervention is entirely logical and correct. If there were no such thing as gay and lesbian people as a class, then of course any legislation which tended to treat those deluded enough to think they are such people as though they really were, would be compounding madness and would represent a grave social threat.

Just because a number of regularly hard-drinking motorists were to get together and form a lobby demanding specially permissive driving licenses and elastic speeding laws for their group would not mean that there is a class of people called “alcohol-fuelled drivers” with special rights and responsibilities. We would all agree in treating alcohol-fuelled drivers as defective sober drivers, and would all agree that legislation, far from making life more permissive for them, ought, while extending compassion to them, to make what they do illegal, and to protect society from the consequences of what they are inclined to do.

So, the only question before us is: “Is it true that lesbian and gay people are defective heterosexuals”? According to how we answer this question, everything else follows. I myself, and I guess all of us here, take it for granted that it is not true, and that we are discovering that there just is such a thing as being lesbian or gay, in itself a matter of no great significance, something capable of properly human flourishing or of dehumanising corruption – you can be a good gay man or a bad gay man, but it is not that you are gay, but how you live your life including how you develop and exercise

being gay, that determines your goodness or badness. In this I am quite simply in disagreement with the Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith on a question of truth.

I would like to point out how everything else in the document flows from the same starting point: all the observations about the common good of human society make no claim to be reasoned deductions drawn from the evidence of what we have learned in places where same-sex marriages or partnerships have a track record capable of being studied. They are the necessary outworking of the view that, since their protagonists would be self-deluded defective heterosexuals, same-sex partnerships can't contribute to the common good, or help build up human society.

There is one place in the document where, curiously, reference is made to experience, to empirically measurable fact. I say "curiously" since, although evidence of experience is absolutely indispensable for any real "natural law" argument, such appeal to experience is very rare in Vatican documents in this sphere:

"As experience has shown, the absence of sexual complementarity in these unions creates obstacles in the normal development of children who would be placed in the care of such persons. They would be deprived of the experience of either fatherhood or motherhood. Allowing children to be adopted by persons living in such unions would actually mean doing violence to these children, in the sense that their condition of dependency would be used to place them in an environment that is not conducive to their full human development."
(*Considerations* 7,3)

Well of course, all the attention has been directed to the word "violence", with some condemning it and others alleging an unfortunate translation. In fact the word "violence" is instantly qualified in a perfectly proper way, and going on about it is a complete red-herring. The important point here is that an empirical claim is being made. At last!

Yes, but is it true? Is it true that experience has shown that kids brought up by same-sex partners fail to flourish appropriately because of this? There are long-term studies concerning this. As far as I am aware, most such studies have indicated that there is no measurable defect in flourishing in such children. I have read that children brought up by lesbian couples are particularly likely to be stable and well-balanced. But I may be wrong about this: there may be a wealth of evidence to the contrary, to which many of us may have been blind. In which case the Vatican certainly should bring it forward and make a fuss about it. If it were true that experience (measured study over time, undergoing proper peer review) has shown it to be the case that to entrust infants to the care of same-sex partners has a deleterious effect on their upbringing, and is thus a form of violence, then of course we should fight tooth and nail to prevent this from happening. But is it true? (I note that there is no footnote at this point in the Vatican's document to indicate the source of the claim "As experience has shown...". Should not someone expressing serious concern about what might happen to infants do better than that?)

Another point worth mentioning here, is that, completely in line with their own logic, the Vatican officials do not treat us, lesbian and gay people, as subjects who can be addressed, or who are capable of reasoned speech ourselves. In this document we are only a "they", objects referred to. Again, this is not simply a cosmetic failure. In the

official view, people like us, gathered here to discuss our government's proposals concerning partnership legislation, are not strictly speaking reasonable subjects who might have something to say on a matter affecting us. We are not capable of being subjects by virtue of our having "come out", our having come to regard being gay or lesbian as part of our lives to be welcomed. The only "homosexual" persons who might be subjects in such discourse are those who accept that their inclination is a more or less strong tendency towards acts which are intrinsically evil, and must therefore itself be considered objectively disordered.

Well, several weeks ago, before this document came out, and before we even knew that it was in the offing, the steering committee of the Roman Catholic Caucus of the LGCM came out with our own initial response to the UK government's proposals and to the cautious and moderate statement of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales. Half way through our response we said:

"The Bishops' Conference statement prompts us to ask, at this stage, a fundamental question: Is the Church's hierarchy able to recognise unambiguously that lesbian and gay people exist as a class of people with rights and responsibilities just as we are? If the Bishops are not able to do this, for whatever reason, then any attempt to make the civil sphere adjust itself to their a priori non-recognition of lesbian and gay people as a class of people with rights and responsibilities just as they are, must be coherently challenged."

So, our question has been answered quite unambiguously by the Vatican document. The Church's hierarchy does not recognise lesbian and gay people as a class of people with rights and responsibilities just as we are. It can recognise us as humans, but not as humans who are humans *as gay or lesbian*. Let me explain why this is important. If someone were to say "Do you believe that Muslims in Britain should have human rights" you could say "Yes, of course they should have human rights, as humans, but not special rights as Muslims. So they should be protected from being attacked, harassed, and so on, as any human should, but on the other hand, they shouldn't be allowed to set up Mosques, madrasas, practice marriage according to their laws, or follow their own dress or dietary regulations, including specific animal slaughter techniques. That would be to treat them as a class just as they are. Allowing them to live according to Muslim tenets and customs would not contribute to the good of society". You could of course have asked the following question in Seventeenth or Eighteenth-century England: "Do you believe Catholics should have human rights?" And received just such an answer.

So, our hierarchy can say "Yes of course we recognise gay and lesbian people as humans, and they should be protected from attack, harassment and unjust discrimination, but, No, we can't recognise them as a class capable of living in a way which might suggest that they have typical patterns of behaviour and living which are either no threat to society, or may, given peace and development, be positively beneficial." In fact, the hierarchy cannot recognise us as a class of people with rights and responsibilities just as we are without *in that act* showing that they do not agree with the truth claim underlying the Vatican document.

This means, I'm afraid, that the Vatican has boxed in our Bishops, who, as many of us know from experience, are a thoroughly decent, moderate and warm-hearted bunch of people many of whom, off the record, are at least sympathetic to the notion that the

underlying Vatican truth claim in this area may simply be wrong. But they have been boxed in because any intervention they make in the political arena without distancing themselves from the underlying Vatican truth claim is instantly open to the charge that they are only fictionally a part of the debate, since their starting point is the *a priori* one that gay and lesbian people don't really exist as a class with rights and responsibilities just as they are. After all, why should any elected representative, or body of Whitehall mandarins, pay any attention to the details of a contribution to a discussion when the contributor's underlying principle is that the discussion shouldn't be happening in the first place?

Part of our role as Catholics in this will be helping our Bishops, informally, get out of this embarrassing position in which they have been put. Though we must probably recognise that they cannot even openly ask for our help in considering these matters since to do so would be to recognise us as reasonable participants in discussion, something which they can only do at their peril in relation to their own command structure. Any approaches from them should be treated as the friendly advances of brave men.

However, I'd like to suggest that we should treat this business of our not being considered reasonable subjects of discourse not as a burden to be groaned about resentfully, but as an opportunity. It is, indeed, our place of freedom. Given that from the official point of view, we are simply not reasonable people, they cannot of course object to this or that bit of our unreason, but must simply treat us as "they". In fact they have fallen into the age-old trap of being able to say to us nothing at all since "where everything is a sin, nothing is a sin". So now we have an enormous freedom to develop our understanding of what a specifically Catholic culture of same-sex partnerships might look like. And this is what we should be doing. After all, no one else is going to do it for us.

May I suggest that instead of arguing about "Should the Church allow gay marriage?", we should instead be asking a more classic question. Given the existence, present and future, of committed, long term, partnerships recognised by civil law between adults of the same-sex who happen to be baptised, what should we call these? To what forms of flourishing can they contribute? What might their relationship be to the creation of forms of hospitality to the vulnerable, whether children or other precarious people? Please remember that in the classic understanding of marriage, it is the fact that the two partners are baptised which is what gives the marriage its sacramentality. They are living out a secular reality, marriage, in a way which is elevated by the fact that each is acting out the role of Christ loving his Church by giving his life, even unto death, for the other.

What is that going to look like for us? We are going to have to develop rites and forms of ceremony to mark important moments in such lives within extended communities of Catholic friends. And again, may I suggest that we take our lesson from many centuries of history. We can develop forms of ceremony and rite entirely without clerical intervention: let us remember that in the marriage ceremony it is the couple who marry each other, and only since the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century has Church authority insisted on the presence of an ecclesiastical witness, a priest or deacon, and that was to protect the freedom of couples who might make their vows in private, consummate them and declare them, only to be dragged promptly apart by angry relatives – think of the role of Friar Laurence in "Romeo and Juliet".

That the clerical witnesses to our ceremonies are likely to be invited friends rather than official signatories should not put us off from developing the rites. We are also in a much freer position from which to start than many straight people. They are not able, legitimately, and officially, to cohabit for several years before coming up to the Altar. Officially, they should not have cohabited or had intercourse before marriage. Yet the whole question of what an appropriate culture of courtship looks like in our society is currently up for grabs – the whole process of socialization and emotional development by which people of whatever sexual orientation reach sufficient maturity to be able to make partnership commitments in which the sexual element has its proper place.

So, we have both a *carte blanche* and a lot of work to do in developing our understanding of what seems like an appropriate period of solidification of partnerships, creating the space in which people who may not have had a chance to develop the habits of fidelity which make commitment possible, are empowered to do so before their partnership is celebrated in a liturgy. And this is of course relatively independent of whatever civil celebration might have been undergone. But this is an area where we, lesbian and gay Catholics, can slowly develop a culture over time, together. And that, I think is what we should be thinking about: what will it look like to create and nourish a strong and responsible culture of same-sex partnerships, including the elements of ongoing care for each other, and availability for the vulnerable, which will be specifically Catholic?

I have a fanciful suggestion here, my own name for what some of us are looking for. I would like us to talk about not a marriage, but a “Pax”. I thought of this word from the French term PACS which as you know was set up a couple of years ago as their form of civil partnership available to same sex couples (but not them alone). But I want to spell this with an “x” so that it is the Latin word meaning “peace” and at the same time a reference to the passing of a symbol of peace amongst the congregation during the mediaeval rite of Mass. May I suggest that what we look at are ways in which same-sex couples can form and develop a “Pax”. This would not be matrimony, but a way of creating and sustaining little outbreaks of peace and creativity. Can we develop a culture of same-sex partnerships which is a flourishing of myriad paxes?

I’d like to conclude by going back to the beginning. We are all of us, over the next few weeks and months, likely to be in conversations with friends, family, press, Church officials and others about this issue. May I beg you not to yield to the temptation of being provoked, not to allow yourselves to be fascinated by the violence of the language in the recent document, not to indulge in the easy critique of the Vatican which our culture and our press offer us, but instead to keep raising this little question: “Yes, but is it true?” The only issue at stake for the Church in discussions of gay and lesbian anything is the issue of truth. Thank you.

Note to the written edition:

I would like to thank the several friends whose comments have helped me put this into writing. This final draft is very much improved thanks to them. - J.A.