

Human Sexuality... or Ecclesial Discourse?

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Thank you very much for inviting me to come and share some thoughts with you today as part of this consultation. The thoughts are, I'm afraid, going to be somewhat disjointed, but I hope that one or other of them helps open up the possibility of some sort of discussion. I can't pretend to any expertise in any of the areas I will be talking about, especially in the presence of so many who legitimately can. Nor can I pretend to a breadth of experience in all the possible areas which we might visit. What I will do instead is to try to share some of what I have been coming to understand, as recent rows which touch on the Catholic Church and matters gay, or gay-related, have rumbled on.

The first point I would like to make is a little provocative, setting up a distinction between the thought of Freud and the thought of René Girard, whose disciple I am. Imagine a Freudian or a neo-Freudian looking at a rugby scrum. We can hear such a person commenting, after a bit: "Hmmm, lots of latent homosexuality around here". Now imagine a Girardian or neo-Girardian gazing at the goings on at a gay sex club. Such a person might say, after a bit "Hmmm, an awful lot of latent rugby playing going on here".

Funnily enough when I have talked to gay male audiences on retreats and made this comparison, they've always smiled and got it immediately. The Girardian comment rings much truer to our experience than the Freudian. And this is not, I think, because it is ideologically more flattering to us. But because you can't hang around in such circles for very long without realising how much of the apparently sexual activity which is going on is to do with touching, with bonding, being with the tribe, with affection and with playing games.

Now I think that this is more important than meets the eye, because it is suggesting that the sexual drive is not, if you like, the key psychological impulse, the key drive, the centrepiece of desire, as a good deal of our discourse implies. Rather it suggests that the sexual component of desire is comparatively symptomatic of other things which precede it and inflect it this way or that. Or to put it another way: it is not the sexual drive which makes us into rivals. It is dealing with rivalry which shapes how we are sexual.

My assumption this afternoon is that Girard has it basically right. And one of the consequences of this is that I'm not sure that it is appropriate to spend much time discussing human sexuality. For to do so is to go round and round forever discussing a very malleable, rather fluid set of symptoms, rather than engaging in the real discussion about their prior socialization. The real discussion involves, therefore, our looking at how we talk about things, which is a very large part of how they are humanised and lived.

If you are with me on this, you may not perhaps be surprised when I say that it gives a quite different reading of the controversy surrounding the systemic failure of the clerical culture of my own Church in dealing appropriately with the 1.7% of its own members in the United States who perpetrated sexual abuse against minors. One of the readings we heard, and which was common enough, was that the problem was clerical celibacy. In this view, clerical celibacy leads to emotionally repressed, sexually immature, males who are then at a particular risk of acting out inappropriately with the children or youths who come into their responsibility.

This emphasis on the sexual, and the chance of a swipe at celibacy, seems to me to do no service to understanding at all. It ignores the fact that the percentage of clerical offenders against minors is pretty much exactly the same as in any other profession or walk of life. The trouble with the clerical culture was not in the greater percentage of offenders, but in the greater success in the cover-up. It was the extent of the cover-up, not the incidents of abuse, which caused real scandal to the faithful. And it is here, it seems to me, that you have the bitter fruits of an obligatory celibate culture (and this is not a criticism of celibacy itself at all, but of the culture formed by its obligation): the bitter fruits are not in the sexual acting out, but in the group-think and the club culture which couldn't talk about these things in an adult way, and so which went into knee-jerk group shame-avoidance mode.

Think of it this way: one of the curious things about the Catholic Church, with the hugely homophobic public discourse of its central officials, is how very few and far between are the genuinely, personally, homophobic members of the Episcopate (as opposed to those who will occasionally make publicly homophobic utterances to signal their suitability for higher office). And this I suspect is for a fairly simple reason. There are hardly any Catholic Bishops in the English speaking world, if any at all, who haven't been socialized since their youth into a significantly, but discretely, gay culture. Whether or not they are themselves gay, they have grown up in a world where the presence of gay people, and the malaise concerning honest talk about them, has been thoroughly normal. Furthermore, and properly, part of their socialization into that world has been learning not to throw stones in the glass house.

Now I suggest that it is this combination of a discretely but thoroughly gay socialization, and a malaise about open speech which has contributed to the systemic failure surrounding the child abuse issue. It has meant that the clerical group was significantly slower than the rest of society in being able to make the distinction between "gay" and "paedophile", because "gay" was all around, but as something not to be talked about, and yet as something towards which the clerical culture was, and is, generally rather merciful. I wonder whether part of the problem wasn't that the all-male, obligatory celibate culture with a strong gay element set itself up for a failure of intelligence: it was the fact of being accustomed to turning a blind eye to others' indiscretions and trying to avoid scandal for them and for the group which led people to be unable to tell the difference. The difference in question being that between adults who had occasional consensual sexual relationships with other adults which may or may not have led to mutual flourishing, and adults whose occasional "falls" were part of a pathology which could lead to no flourishing at all, only repetitive damage to their victims and themselves. Group-think, and a defective official definition which

maintained the culture of that group-think, meant that too often its members couldn't tell the difference until it was far too late.

If you want to check this out, just ask yourself how much more difficult it would have been for the culture of cover-up to flourish if there had been a significant number of married women in positions of real responsibility in the personnel offices of Diocesan chanceries.

Well, so much for my first point, which is to explain why I am scarcely going to be talking about sexuality at all, and consider it something of a red-herring. How we humanise desire has very little to do with talking about sex *per se*, but a very great deal to do with how we socialise talking. And that is what I want to major on.

So my second point is about shifting patterns of discourse in the Catholic Church. And again, I can only be provocative rather than exhaustive. As you all know, the clerical culture within the Catholic Church is an all male affair. Until fifty years ago, it was, and had been for over a millennium, an all male affair whose members were socialised into thinking in a language other than the maternal language of any of them, and who learned to debate and to discuss things in that language. Elaborate rules regarding the agonistic structure of discourse were observed. Debates were syllogistic fencing matches and so on. I don't think we have any clear idea of our current difficulties in the Catholic Church if we don't have some sense of the consequences of the astoundingly speedy collapse of Latinity in the west¹.

One of these consequences is, I think, that we don't yet know how to talk as Catholics. Latin is a splendid legal language stressing objective reality in a way that is useful for governing. It came into its own as a language of Empire. It is much poorer at a whole lot of the forms of discourse which have become common since the late middle ages. In particular, it can't begin to match up to the languages which have flourished since the novel appeared and began to make available to people another way of truth telling and story-sharing. It helped shore up a world, long past its sell-by date, in which a strong distinction was made between the objective (good, reliable) and the subjective (bad, prone to error). But it has become increasingly clear that too strong a distinction in this area is unhelpful. Our subjectivity is an objective fact about us, and we cannot be objective except in such a way as works through our subjectivity. And our subjectivity comes from what is outside us and precedes us. We ourselves are largely functions of public desire.

One of the key factors relating to the collapse of Latinity and the world of discourse which came with it has been the emergence of women as protagonists in the same world of discourse as men, on a greater and greater level of parity, everywhere except the clerical culture of the Catholic Church with its monosexual priesthood. But now, that monosexual priesthood is without a special language, and the deliverances of those formed in the world of Latin and its supposed objectivity, even when they appear in a vernacular tongue, are increasingly incomprehensible to a younger

¹ The best guide to this that I know is Walter Ong's book, *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality and Consciousness* (University of Massachusetts Press 1989).

generation². In other words, our monosexual priesthood is without a language of its own, and has had very little access to ease and fluency with the changing shape of the language of everybody else, given how much of that language has developed over the last century or so precisely in the areas of emotional and sexual honesty.

This I think has been part of the problem in being able to talk about these things at all in my Church. There is a huge stress for people caught between two entirely different ways of talking, the one corresponding to the clerical culture, where an ability to avoid emotional and sexual honesty and the language of subjectivity is necessary for survival, and certainly for promotion, and one where an ability to be transparent and honest, to be seen to be vulnerable and to be able to tell a story, are the *sine qua non* for being thought convincing.

Here an example could well be differing reactions to *Humanae Vitae*. I think that the people for whom Paul VI did the least favours by his 1968 Encyclical were not the married people who were directly affected by it, but rather the celibate caste which was not directly affected by it. Notoriously one of the effects of *Humanae Vitae* on the Catholic laity, especially in Northern countries where a Protestant-style conscience has been pervasive even in the Catholic Church, was a great crisis of conscience as a generation of lay people learned to disregard the papal teaching. And one of the ways this happened was that a generation of the Catholic faithful learned to talk about their experience, their feelings, their bodies, their commitment and so on in a way which simply sidestepped the rhetorical world of the encyclical. In short, it speeded up the effects of the schism of discourse which is currently operative in the Catholic Church, turning even northern Jansenists into something much closer to Italian Catholics in their ability to love the Holy Father and pay very little attention to him especially when he's on about sexual matters.

My point is that an unintended consequence of *Humanae Vitae* was to give the clergy a thirty-five year indult from reality. The encyclical was particularly likely to affect married heterosexual people. These people are scarcely represented at all in the clergy, since hardly any of the clergy are married, and the proportion of the clergy that is non-heterosexual is considerably higher than that in the population at large. Whereas the laity had to work through the issues of conscience and start to develop other ways of talking, including facing up to the demands of honesty and authenticity which the struggle to recover the link between the objective and the subjective brings to the fore, the clergy as a group were able to carry on for thirty-five years with a fictional teaching and without having to work through the issues of conscience for themselves in the same way.

It seems to me that the current malaise over the gay issue in the Catholic Church is more than anything else a malaise produced by a clerical crisis of conscience concerning being able to talk. And more specifically, to be able to talk about being

² If you pray the Office, it is increasingly the case that you need to make an ideological choice *not* to alter “men” to “humans” or “men and women” since the obvious and natural thing is to see “men” as an unfortunate leftover from an earlier generation and change it quite unconsciously. Or then again, take the Vatican’s claim 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”. Now try to explain to someone that this is a clean piece of philosophical language, rather than violent and unchristian name-calling.

gay in a natural and adult way, and to relate as such, whether in a genitally active way or not. I refer to a thirty-five year indult, since that is the time it has taken for what was, as Paul VI knew, implicit in *Humanae Vitae* to come full circle. While he was mulling over preparation for the encyclical, Paul VI was told that if he permitted a separation between the unitive and the procreative function of sex in the case of heterosexual married couples, he would be depriving the Church of any realistic reason for making same-sex acts intrinsically wrong. And so it has turned out to be. The vast majority of the faithful has not accepted *Humanae Vitae*, and sure enough, since we are quite logical animals, over time the percentage of straight Catholics practising some form or other of birth control who are willing to judge gay people negatively for acts which are no different from their own in respect to what the Vatican refers to as their “indispensable finality” has diminished steadily.

The thirty-fifth anniversary of *Humanae Vitae* coincided almost to the day with the Vatican’s release of its document concerning legislative proposals for same-sex marriage last summer. And I suspect that in the future that it will be seen as something of a turning point, because the document was so bad that not even conservative commentators were able to do much to salvage it. Furthermore, it does seem that at last it has had the effect of encouraging clergy to begin to say publicly that they will not go down the route of pretending that this form of discourse is acceptable.

The pain and anguish behind all this in the clerical life of the Catholic Church is, as far as I can see (and I have met many priests from many countries talking about exactly this sort of thing) the anguish of men who want to be honest, but don’t know how to be so without exploding and losing everything, and yet who scarcely dare to be able to say that “the teaching of the Church is wrong and it is wrong to be complicit with it”.

So, my second point has been one concerning the loss of a language and the emergence of different ways of talking from which the members of the clerical culture have been largely excluded. It seems to me that the malaise to do with honest talk concerning sexuality, and in the clerical culture, especially gay sexuality, is a perfect symptom, a flashpoint if you like, of the way these huge linguistic and cultural changes have been working.

My third point is an attempt to be a little bit more explicitly theological in envisaging a way forward. And to do this, once again, I’ll be a little provocative. I can’t get it out of my head that behind all our rows, our arguments, our passion, our anger and our righteousness is a huge giggle.

I mean, just think of it like this: who on earth would have the temerity to try and save us? Who on earth would think it worthwhile to take us so seriously as to help us to be less serious? The very idea is ludicrous! And yet we are committed to it. Of all the many ludicrous things which we have got up to as humans and as Christians over the last couple of millennia, surely to have got ourselves in a mess over the theological status of gay people must qualify as one of the most ridiculous. I wonder whether all those mediaeval scholastics who we loved to ridicule for their mathematical ability when it came to angels dancing on the heads of pins aren’t splitting their sides in raucous cacophony at our extraordinary seriousness and anger in dealing with something which is rather obviously of limited importance.

And yet, what is behind it all? A huge, risky, audacious, crazy undertaking by God to produce something fun, something that can share in God's life and God's joy, out of nothing at all. But to produce it in such a way as to allow the nothing at all, who have no right to be there, to act like customs officials or immigration officers, filters examining what is allowed in, getting all pompous at supposed breaches of our immigration rules. Taking our tasks terribly, terribly seriously and not noticing the hidden outbursts of radiance and delight from those who escape our vigilant attention and are smuggled into, and become the treasures of, the land whose frontiers we patrol, though we ourselves scarcely ever step beyond the immigration posts which we maintain at such expense.

Well, I wonder whether, if we can concentrate a little on this ludicrous giggle, we mightn't see it disguising its mirth at our seriousness so as not to humiliate us while all along getting us to try and lighten up. So I'd like to say that for me being Catholic is being at a huge and very spacious party at which there are an awful lot of people, most of whom are not at all like me and with whom I don't have much in common. Furthermore this is a party to which I have been invited not because I'm special, or any of the other people are special, but because the host invited me, part of his little joke, a joke whose full sense isn't yet clear to me. And yet I'm beginning to get the sense that it is a good joke, that the intention behind it is benign, and that if only I can let go of taking myself too seriously, then I'll get it and will really enjoy the dance.

One of the things about this party is that quite a lot of us spend quite a lot of time trying to work out who should be at the party and who shouldn't, even when the evidence is that the host is pretty promiscuous in his invitations. Right now we're faced with the growing possibility that a bunch of people who it has long been agreed by almost everybody shouldn't be at the party can take off their masks and be at the party as themselves. And this means facing up to the possibility that a lot of us have been very cruel and nasty to a lot of people over a long time, thinking ourselves quite right to be so.

Well, here's where we are at: there is a fundamental disagreement about an issue of truth. Either the host does welcome gay people into his party, or the host does not. Here is the trouble. The host notoriously gave it into the hands of humans to decide who was in and who was out, to bind and to unbind. And how that power to bind and unbind operates has from the outset been a matter of a squabble. Scarcely surprising when you consider the ludicrous project which the host has, of getting us to become the agents of his party when he knows that we are much better at saying "no" to people who are not like us, than at saying "yes".

Well, it seems to me that the place where we are at is this. The capacity for party seems to be grinding to a halt because of the question of whether, after all, the promiscuous host isn't once again trying to smuggle a new bunch of people past the bouncers and get them into his party; or whether it is not the promiscuous host who's doing the smuggling at all, but some evil agent who wants to destroy the party by infiltrating evil people into it, people incapable of partying.

Now, let me be quite clear: it is one or other of these possibilities. One or other side is deceived. There is a question of truth at stake here. And I personally think it would be

very dangerous if I were to translate that into “One of us is wrong, and it isn’t me”. The question seems to me to be a different one. Given that none of us is the host, and given that all of us are in this by accident, have been invited thanks to the generosity of someone else, isn’t the real issue *NOT* the question of who is right or wrong, but rather how we talk to each other in the interval while we wait for the host to make it clear? This is back to the question of discourse again. What runs the risk of destroying the party is much more *how we talk to and about each other* than it is *what conclusions we reach*. And this is for the obvious reason that the conclusions we reach are entirely dependent on how we talk.

So here is my point: the proper place for the discussion about this issue is where Our Lord told us it is:

Make friends quickly with your accuser, while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison; truly, I say to you, you will never get out till you have paid the last penny. (Mt 5, 25-26)

My own hunch is that God *is* revealing to us that gay people, just as we are, are part of humanity and that it is as such that we are invited to share in the party. But I may be entirely wrong. Nevertheless of this I am sure: that being right or wrong is not so very important. Being so grateful to be invited at all that I am quite determined to be as warm, charitable and friendly as I can learn how to be towards those who completely disagree with me is terribly, terribly important: for it is by this that I will be judged.

If what I am saying is true then it is a fundamental theological point in this discussion that it is not how I defend my own, but how I imagine, portray, and engage with my adversary which is the only really important issue at hand. It may even be important to lose the argument, as only the really serene and confident can, if that is the only way to win him over. After all, our example is One who was happy to be counted among the transgressors so as to get across the power of God and the wisdom of God to those who couldn’t understand it.

Now if this is the case, then the really hard work in Christian theological discourse lies in the ecclesiological sphere: creating Church with those who we don’t like. Or to put it another way: as a Catholic, the only way I could conceivably be right in what is recognisably a new theological and moral position is if I show how that being right is nothing to do with me, and how it includes an account of how we have all been wrong together in which I too am on the side of those with whom I disagree as someone undergoing a change of heart along with them.

Now can I say how one of the things which delight me in my own Church is how much easier this is made by my own Church structure. One of the things which are impossible as a Catholic who thinks about theological matters is to get by for long without thinking about how Church order impinges on creative thinking and activity. Or, in other words, no flights of fancy about heavenly gradations or celestial emanations are ever able to get very far without the sheer fact of the Vatican knocking us back into what I call “Realkatholicism”. And I am utterly delighted by this. It means that I am always going to have to be in communion with fundamentalists as a condition for staying at the party. Any tendencies I might have to belong to a group of

people like me, who think like me, agree with me, and with whom I could form a nice friendly like-minded clique, are constantly being smashed. And the wonderful thing about this is that there are only two ways of dealing with the sheer fact of the Vatican. One is to be scandalized by it, go into rivalry with it, let it be the hidden or not so hidden “double” in all my thinking – perpetually there as the bad guy over against whom I make myself good: in short a stumbling block.

And the other is to regard it as an extraordinary grace to have such a large and visible mirror over against which I can gradually learn to let go of my self-importance, my need to be right and so on. It is as I gradually undo my own paranoia, my own fear of my own fundamentalism, my own dictatorial tendencies, all of which it is terribly easy to project onto the Vatican and thus think of myself as good by contrast, that I become able to see what it is really like to be at this extraordinary party. In short, the Vatican becomes something much closer to being a rock on which there is built a hugely spacious edifice where others are burdened about responsibility so that I can be free to experiment, confident that between us we won't get it too wrong over time.

If I may make this point: now, at this time, in all our Churches one of the things which the “gay” issue has exposed is gaps between so-called liberals and so-called fundamentalists, and about the near impossibility of dialogue between them. I want to say, as a Catholic: never, ever let go of your fundamentalists if you wish to stay at the party. It is of course terribly dangerous for them to be left to a world of their own creating. But it is no less dangerous for those who do not share their expressed opinions to leave them. Because we are almost invariably run by the same patterns of desire and so forth, but displaced onto something else. If you want an example, then think of this, told me by an Episcopalian in the US the week after the consecration of Gene Robinson. He said “Well, it's simple. They're wrong, and we've got the money”. In fact, this was told to me by someone who was in favour of Bishop Robinson's consecration. But you can easily see that exactly the same sentiment could have been uttered by someone opposed to the same consecration. Down this route lies the mutually incorrigible umbrage of mirror-image sects.

But we'll never work through our own fundamentalisms and our own anger and small-mindedness, our own longing to be safe in a group of people like us, and so come to all truth, unless we find ways of hanging in with those who we think of as unlike us. Especially since their “unlikeness” is usually a projection of the bits of ourselves we don't like onto someone we feel safer about fearing than ourselves. It's only when we can relax about God wanting *them* at the party that we really will be able to get over our hidden fear that he can't really want *us*.

So, my third point is about how the gratuitous nature of the party should nudge us into seeing the importance not of being right, but of being reconciled.

My fourth point attempts to develop from this. If what I have been saying is true, then we will be judged not by how excellent we were at putting forward our own rightness and the wrongness of others, but by how excellent we were at creating space for those we consider to be wrong. By how easy, in fact, we made it for them to repent.

I take it for granted that we would agree that the whole purpose of repentance is not God wanting to humiliate people because of our pride and wickedness, but God

wanting people to be able to be in on the party, which means having all that stuffy narrowness of heart and self-righteous heroism which makes us stand-offish at the prospect of such a common and plebeian festivity, undone. And that means our learning to lose face, and not to mind losing face. Well, it is extremely difficult and unpleasant to lose face, and often enough we have a queasy feeling somewhere just beneath the surface of things, upon which we can't lay our finger, that we are going to have to lose face in order for things to get better, and we both long for it and dread it at the same time. The one thing we hope is that, however it happens, it will be less dreadful than we fear, and we will not be completely humiliated by it. We hope that whoever, or whatever the agent of our uncovering is, they will be a great deal more merciful than we sometimes imagine – the sort of person who will be able to chuckle afterwards and say something like “There, that wasn't so bad after all, was it!”

Well, if that is what we hope for, for ourselves, then it is obviously the case that we will be fulfilling the law and the prophets if we act towards others as we wish others would do to us.

I may well be wrong on the gay issue. That is to say, wrong in my belief that the discovery that there is just such a thing as being gay, is part of how the Gospel has worked in our midst, teaching us to discover what God's creation really is by teaching us how to detect our lies and violence in ganging up on scapegoats. I may well be wrong about this. But I do not think I am wrong to trust that God wants to make it easier for me to discover how wrong I am, not more difficult; and he longs for me not to head up paths that do me no good, rather than capriciously leading me into them.

But this means that there is a very serious obligation on *me* to make it easier for those I consider to have got it wrong, not more difficult. To reach them, not to provoke them. It means, for instance, that it is a very grievous ill when I use what I regard as their wrongness in a self-indulgent manner, to make me feel better about myself.

And this means that a considerable part of the theological effort which I think is called for is the courtesy of constructing bridges for the benefit of others, being vulnerable on their turf, exercising magnanimity towards foes. It is for this reason that I think that the patient work is not engaging in debates in the here and now, since the agonistic structure of such things almost invariably seduces us into the need to win, but slowly trying to construct ways of talking into which people will be able to relax when they tire of the current fights.

This is why I have concentrated on the Doctrine of Original Sin. It seems to me that, within the framework of Catholic doctrine, this is the way those who may need to save face will be able to. If I were speaking to a Catholic audience on the subject of a way ahead in this area, it would be the Doctrine of Original Sin which I would major on. Where I have had the opportunity of doing this, I have tried to emphasize how what this doctrine does in its Catholic version is make room for us all to be wrong together, and yet all able to be rescued together, and all able to learn together.

Of course, neither I nor anybody else can force people to come to the table and talk about things. What we can do is help to create ways out of their current situation such that they may be less afraid to go down that route when they finally lose confidence in their current rhetoric and way of doing things. And this creation of loopholes for

others is perhaps best done by people who don't need to be in the front seat at the banquet, who don't need approval, recognition and so forth. Only those who are at the lower seats at the banquet and whose absence won't be noticed can take time out to run off and start to plan the menu and fetch in the provender for the next banquet, since the food for this one seems to be running low.

So, my fourth point turns out really to have been a question: what forms of discourse can we engage in which will make it less difficult for others to lose face, bearing in mind that if we are wrong, what we most hope for is that someone will make it easy for us to lose face, give us a soft landing?

My fifth and final point is the beginnings of a sketch in a direction of a way of talking about this, and I don't want to pretend that this is anything other than extremely tentative. It is what I call: "navigating wrath". If it is true that what Jesus did was to knock out the centrepiece of the mechanism by which humans make anything sacred, that is, by offering himself up to death in a typical sacralised lynching so as to show that the victim is innocent, and that what appeared to be sacred had nothing to do with God; if that is true, then it is not surprising that one of the consequences of the arrival of the Gospel in our midst is, as Jesus predicted, "wrath". If you take away something sacred from people you are taking away part of the principle by which they have identity, togetherness, security, life. And one of the natural reactions of people who have lost, or are in the process of losing their identity, their security and their togetherness, is wrath, scrabbling about for a new victim to give them a new unity, identity and togetherness.

I take it that the reason behind giving us the Christian Church is to enable people to navigate the wrath that has been released by the gradual loss of belief in the violently sacred. If this is true, then one of the things we should expect at a time like this is an outburst of wrath. After all, another piece of how a violently sacred world was held together is being taken out of circulation – gay people are just becoming ordinary humans. And we are indeed getting the outburst of wrath. The wrath is nothing to do with God, and it is not desired by God. It is how the beast reacts to losing another bit of his prey, and we are all caught up in it to a greater or lesser extent.

I rather think that part of the way that the mercy of the Gospel works is by making available a safe place, especially to those who feel most threatened by the shifting of order, togetherness, goodness, the loss of a world where the good is good and the bad is bad. This place, the Church, is where we can work through our wrath over time. It is for this reason that it would be terrible if the Church were not structured around something apparently and immovably part of the world of wrath. That is to say, if Church authority did not give comfort to those who are distressed by the loss of the sacred by apparently offering a bulwark to hold onto in the midst of their loss of identity, then it would make salvation possible only for those of strong conscience, which would be elitist and un-Catholic. It is not that Church authority is part of wrath. It is that it is a shock absorber for wrath. Part of what a rhetoric of immovability, of the impossibility of change, achieves is the creation of a safe space for the brethren of weak conscience.

In this sense I would like to share with you my naval theory of the papacy. My view is that the Pope's job is to be the figure of unity by being the last man off the sinking

ship. It is only when everyone else has moved on, has accepted that change has happened irreversibly, and is happy with it, that the Pope can leave that old world behind, with no one left to scandalize by doing so (though more and more people will have been scandalised by his refusal to give it up, but they will be doing so from a position of strength, of growing confidence in the new world they inhabit). Then Peter can declare that episode over.

Well, where I would like to take this, but cannot do so now, is in the direction of re-imagining Church history in the way that the book of Revelation seems to suggest: as something which is to do with being saved from wrath, and which therefore includes how we learnt to be wrong. But this, in the book of Revelation, is a synchronous, liturgical account of history, which is very, very difficult for us to grasp. This seems to me to be the real challenge for us now: what account can we have for how we have been wrong, and are still wrong now, and are yet being saved infallibly by One who loves us and is much more merciful than we?

How can we learn to talk about the discovery of things which show quite clearly that strictures which we once regarded as sacred are not so, but which respects the fact that in just the same way as we must be reconciled with our brothers and sisters now with whom we disagree, so we can show no superiority to our brothers and sisters of past generations who we regard as having got something wrong, because we hope that others yet to come will extend the same bridge of merciful discourse to us? The rhetoric of immutability has its place, but is obviously not a true description. The notion of development of doctrine is a nice try, but cannot cope with the fact that the Church has held diametrically and exactly opposed teachings at different times. I wonder whether “navigating wrath” doesn’t offer us a better chance of creating the Catholicity of being saved together across time, which is what our host is trying to give us.

London, February 2004