

## **Collapsing the closet in the house of God: opening the door on gay/straight issues**

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In Disney's 1933 classic "*The Three Little Pigs*", the Big Bad Wolf comes along and he says "I'll huff, and I'll puff, and I'll blow your house down". Which he then proceeds to do. First, the house of straw, and then the house of wood. Finally he meets his come-uppance when he tries to blow down the house of bricks built by the wisest of the three pigs, who had doubtless had advice from a horse commissioner employed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Well, there may be some here for whom a talk with a title like the one I have been invited to speak to sounds a bit like an invitation to a Big Bad Wolf to huff and puff and blow a house down. Some of you may be hoping that the closet in the House of God has been built by the wisest and holiest of pigs so as to resist such lupine breath as mine. While others think it quite time that the little pigs in question were either taken to market, or swept along in a Gadarene rush down some escarpment into some suitably accommodating sea. These others are hoping for ringside seats at the collapse.

But I'm afraid that I'm going to disappoint. Big Bad Wolf I may be, but I'm a little out of breath. My huffing and puffing ain't what it used to be. So instead I'm going to try and give space, in what is fast becoming a mad menagerie of mixed metaphors, to a different breath, the breath of the lamb. The lamb standing as one slaughtered, whose breath is commonly known as the Holy Spirit. That, I suspect is the only breath powerful enough for the work at hand. So I'd like to start by reminding you of a fairly basic piece of Christian Theology concerning the giving of the Holy Spirit.

I'm going to look at a rather odd phrase of St Paul's in his Epistle to the Galatians. It comes at Galatians 3:10:

For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written,  
"Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in  
the book of the law."

It appears that some Jewish Christian teachers had been telling the Galatian Christians that now that they have been baptised and have come to know the God of Israel, they should also keep the Law of Moses, since those who don't keep it will be cursed, as it says in Deuteronomy<sup>1</sup>. The chunk of the Law which these teachers probably quoted to their listeners was Deuteronomy 27, 26. Paul, on the other hand, is arguing against this insistence that the newly baptised Galatians should be circumcised, inducted into

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<sup>1</sup> I follow J. Louis Martyn's magnificent *Galatians, in The Anchor Bible, Vol. 33A*. New York: Doubleday, 1997.

the people of Israel and made to obey the Law of Moses. His position is that it is those who *rely* on the Law who are under a curse.

What is curious is that, at first sight, the text Paul quotes seems to be exactly the reverse of helpful to his argument, since his version of the passage from Deuteronomy says quite straightforwardly:

“Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law.”

This presupposes that everyone who *does* observe and obey all the things written in the books of the law will be *blessed*, and only those who *fail* to observe and obey them will be cursed. Paul himself has talked about how he used to be zealously obedient to the Law, so he did not doubt that it was possible to observe and obey all the things written in the books of the law. Why then would he use a verse in which the Law formally curses those who do *not* obey it to back up his claim that those who *rely* on works of the law are under a curse? It does not seem to be a logical argument.

Well, one of the things we mean when we say a text is Holy Scripture is that it knows more than we do, and that when it doesn't fit into our logic, it is good for us to wrestle with it until it yields its logic to us, until, that is, we can allow its logic to open us up, rather than think that we can dominate it. And for me, this is one of those “aha!-moment” texts where we can get an insight into a different order of thinking from the ones we are used to, a moment where that different order of thinking can cast a new light onto a widespread array of concerns.

For Paul is quoting the text not, as we would usually imagine it, as a proof text, a way of saying “you see, the text agrees with me”. It doesn't agree with him. Rather he is quoting it as internal evidence of an anthropological structure. He quotes the verse so as to show that *because it curses those who don't obey the law* the text of the law itself shows that it is part of a system of goodness which divides between good and bad, and thus that even those who uphold it, who are apparently blessed by it, are in fact dwelling in the sphere of a curse. In other words he is quoting the words in a way that stands back from them and says: “Look at what this sentence gives away about the sort of system of which it is an integral part”.

Now this, dare I say it, is a subtle point, and one which, once we begin to get it, makes everything Paul then goes on to say about Jesus becoming a curse for us, and how it is from this that the Holy Spirit flows to us, luminously intelligible. Paul is in fact showing signs of a stunning structural intelligence. If the law curses somebody, then it creates a world of good and bad, and this means that the “good” in that system is fatally dependent on the “bad”. If I rely, for my goodness, on holding onto, and obeying, everything in the system, then that means my goodness is “over against” someone else's badness, and thus, being dependent on it, is part of it.

Furthermore it means that for as long as I am beholden to the system of goodness, I will never in fact be able to obey the commandment which all agree to be a simple summation of the whole law: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Galatians 5:14), because the law as system of goodness will prevent me from recognizing the neighbour who is *as my self* and who needs loving, because often enough it will hide

that neighbour under the veil of being a “cursed other”. In other words, the lived anthropological effect of the system of goodness is, in practice, that of nullifying the goodness towards which the commandment points.

So we have the classic Pauline insight that no system of goodness, precisely because it sets up a world of good and bad, blessing and curse, can be from God, since God is only blessing, only promise, and that the real danger to moral life in any given society comes not in the first place from people who are “bad”, since they are in a sense too obvious to worry about, but rather from systems of goodness, which, since they are dependent on a “wicked other”, are terribly dangerous. They are dangerous in an obvious sense to those who are their necessary bad guys, since goodness becomes a matter of zeal in persecuting such people, as Paul himself had done. But systems of goodness are especially dangerous in a less obvious sense to the “good” guys as well, since the “good guys” are unlikely to perceive that, far from worshiping God, becoming dependent on God and being given their identity by God, who is not over against anything at all, they are in fact being given their identity by that violent “over against” by which they build themselves up. In other words, they are the ones most prone to become violent nihilists, thinking themselves servants of God.

Well, where would Paul’s insight leave us, if there were not more to say? It would leave us in a world in which we only have a religion of law, of belonging to an insider group, and of sacred texts. This anthropological structure would leave us in the terrible situation of being permanently divided against ourselves, since even when we want to be good, we find that our very being good is over against others, and leads us to treat them in a way that makes it impossible for us to be good. In fact it makes us haters of our neighbours, and reduces us to the level of our hatred, however little we want it to. That would be the world of the permanent scandal, the inescapable double-bind, of dangerous goodness, and there would be no escape from the “other” over against whom I define myself so as to receive goodness.

Every system of goodness would be a sacred trap, pronouncing itself a culture of love, of peace, and so on, but in practice building up walls of difference so that it is able to give the impression of being loving and peaceful to those who are within, while being run by a totally different pattern of desires towards those who fall into the category of the necessary wicked other. After all, it is mob action against their “sacrileges” which makes my goodness “sacred”. In fact of course, such a split between “good to those within” and “fierce to those without” never works quite like that, and those nearest and dearest to zealous “insiders” often pay a very high psychological price for their proximity.

However, what has enabled Paul to see how this works is something really very odd indeed, and it is central to every aspect of our faith. Paul has understood something about what Jesus had been doing by going voluntarily to his death on the Cross. And he refers to it in Galatians 3:13 by saying:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”.

Now this is not simply a word game for Paul – as though he’d managed to find a suitable text to quote back at his adversaries who had brought up the question of the

curse of the law. As always with Paul, any debating skill with the words or texts which he had up his sleeve is always used to point to something bigger than the words, bigger at the level of fundamental anthropology.

Paul is indicating that one of the true ways of understanding what Jesus was doing in going voluntarily to his death is to see God as making habitable the space of the cursed one for us. Now let me try and expand that notion a bit, since as it stands it is sometimes understood as though God had set things up so that someone needed to be cursed, then God got Jesus to stand in for being cursed, and now that that has been done, the curse has been lifted.

However, Paul is very far from such a notion. We can tell that, because Paul does not think that the law came from God – in fact he specifically refers to it as given by Angels through a mediator, thus denying it a divine origin (Gal 3:19). For Paul, the promise of a *blessing* came and comes directly from God to all people because of Abraham and has no duplicity, no ambivalence and no double-binds involved in it. The law however was something that was not part of the divine promise, but was an angelic crutch added through Moses to contain violence. The fact that the Law contains violence in both senses of the word “contain” – that is it holds violence back (limiting revenge), and it harbours violence within itself (authorising curses) – is part of the proof that it is involved in ambivalence, and double-bind, and therefore cannot itself come from God.

No, for Paul it was not God who had set it up for Jesus to be cursed at all. The sphere of the curse is what it looks like to live in a world in which good and evil are defined over against each other – in other words, it is a strictly anthropological – human – reality. Occupying the space of the cursed-one for us, which is how Paul depicts Jesus – and Paul always portrays Jesus as crucified, – is an extraordinary anthropological act empowered by God, and one which makes perfectly good sense to us from any number of lived experiences.

The example I use most frequently, because it has resonance with so many people, is the example of the class fairy. Hardly anyone can get through the education systems of our world without coming into contact with groups where someone gets to occupy the space of the class fairy – and this has nothing in particular to do with sexual orientation or gender, though words like “fag” and “sissy” as well as “geek” and others tend to get bandied about a lot in what we might call the do-it-yourself “class fairy” construction kit. Nor is it only boys who construct their unity this way. Several women have shared with me similar stories from within girl-only classes.

Well, we all know how it works: being good, being cool, being on the right side, in with the right crowd and so on depends fundamentally on not being the class fairy. It is as if we all know that the finger is hovering, and is going to point to someone, and we’ll do all the manoeuvring we have to in order for the finger not to point to us. But point it will, at someone, and that means that they get to bear the burden of the curse. And that means that we get to be good and cool and so on, and they get to be miserable and bullied, and maybe traumatised and suicidal, and in some cases armed, murderous and “postal”.

Now, nobody goes voluntarily into that space of being cursed. The person who is put there feels all the pain and shame of ostracism, of being cast out, of loss, of different forms of death. It feels like being destroyed, and that's exactly what it is. There is absolutely nothing redeeming about such suffering, pain and loss: the identity which the group is giving that person is one of nothingness and death. Any of us would do anything we could to avoid such a fate, including making damn sure that it's someone else who occupies that space in our group, and if that fails, then we are pushed kicking and screaming into that place and are destroyed by it.

Paul's insight is that Jesus did go voluntarily into that space and occupied it peacefully, knowing full well that it constituted the psychological space which the law, backed by crowd psychology, designated as "cursed by God". And he was seen by his disciples having occupied the space, coming among them still peacefully, not vengefully, and as clearly having achieved something for them which they could pass on to others. He is described in other places in Scripture as standing as a lamb slain (Rev 5:6), or going outside the camp as did the scapegoat from the Levitical rite (Heb 13:13), and we are urged to join him there. It is as if by his living in the midst of the curse and refusing to regard it as a curse, or be run by it as a curse, or react to it as a cursed-one does, the trap door of the trap got permanently stuck just, just, open, so that it could never close again. And with that, the curse lost its power, and the system of goodness became powerless, or moot.

It is as though the class fairy could be glimpsed, unperturbed, glad to have occupied, and to be occupying, the space of shame, and happy to be doing so. He does this because he knows that the class will fatally choose a fairy, because that is the only way they know to keep themselves together, to keep good "good" and bad "bad", which is the only way they have ever structured their bonding, their jockeying for prestige and their playing. But if someone could occupy the place of shame, the place of the curse, without being in reaction to it in any way, then the moment some in the class begin to glimpse him or her doing this, they can see that the place of shame, the place of the curse, is survivable, its toxicity quietly evanescent. From the moment they perceive this, then their system of goodness starts to fall apart, and they are left with the task, both delightful and wrenching, of starting to be given an identity that is not over against any wicked other; in other words, they are given the vocational project of inventing an entirely new way of playing, an entirely new script.

We can imagine the physical elements of the act of occupying the place of the curse, but it is more difficult for us to spend time trying to consider the spirit in which it was done by the one who was moving voluntarily into it. What was the spirit, the attitude, the set of desires, with which this human being, Jesus, was able voluntarily to enter this space of the curse, allowing himself to be killed?

Let us consider the question of power. We all know what power looks like, it looks like being strong enough not to be in the place of the curse, but rather to put others in the place of the curse. Power is to do with winning. But the sense of power behind entering the place of the curse is a power unimaginably stronger than that, since it is the power to be peaceful and creative in the midst of non-being, which is a power no human has. The power to "lose" voluntarily is the power of someone who is so much

stronger than the winner as not even to be in rivalry with them, not even at the same level in any way, not over against them at all.

The spirit with which this was done was one of unconcern about being blessed or cursed by the system of goodness, because not relying on the system of goodness to be given identity, and only concerned with showing that it is possible to be held in a blessing by God that is in no way defined, either positively or negatively, by that system of goodness. In other words, the intention with which this space was occupied was to benefit others who had no notion of how much they depended on the system for their goodness, and therefore were very unlikely indeed to be able to appreciate what someone was doing for them. Imagining that this was done “for me” is one of the most difficult things to be able to grasp. And this is because this sort of gift is not part of some human reciprocity, some give and take, which we can imagine. In fact it is the opening up of an entirely new sort of reciprocity, a capacity for receiving and giving which is not within the normal human parameters of systems of gift.

Let us consider the question of imagination. What on earth must it be like to be a human being for whom everything in every system which gave him identity and strength was telling him that he was a failure, cursed, not going anywhere, was abandoned by God, had been leading people astray, with everything he hoped for crushed and snuffed out, himself betrayed and abandoned by friends? And what was it like yet to have had an imagination empowered by a trust in another “Other”, utterly outside the order within which we live, inviting him to imagine his being a dead man as a place from which he would be given-to-be creative, so that dwelling in the desert of shameful death, dwelling in non-being, peacefully, would become the place of springs for himself and for others?

Well, of course, with every one of these questions we are dealing with something which we can't put into words properly, but we are dealing with the shape, if you like, of the giving to us of the Holy Spirit. When I joked earlier about the breath of the lamb, I was being more serious than I seemed. The breath, the only breath that can bring down systems of goodness, and of course “closets” in our modern sense are parts of systems of goodness, is the breath of the lamb who is standing in the midst of the collapse as one slain. The synoptic Gospels show this graphically, with Jesus on the Cross handing his Spirit back to the Father, in preparation for the Spirit to be breathed on us thereafter.

Now, for Paul as for us, none of this is accidental to, or secondary to, Christian life – something we know about as well as being good Christians. This goes straight to the core of how we come to be Christians at all. The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, was made available to us in the first place by a particular creative human acting out on the anthropological level, a particular human creative acting out that was run, if you like, by a set of attitudes, parameters of desire, which are normally off our screen, but could just about be glimpsed after Jesus had lived out “becoming a curse for us”.

What happens to us, as Paul was at endless pains to remind people, when we hear this story, when Jesus is portrayed before our eyes as the rejected one, as the destroyed class fairy; and what happens when we believe that God Himself, the Creator of the Universe, was fully involved as the generosity behind Jesus' “becoming the curse”, is

that we find ourselves undergoing being set free from being run by any system of goodness and badness over against others, any system of belonging which blesses by cursing. After all, the Law, the system of goodness, has done its worst, and is survivable; the jaws of the trap are stuck open. We find, that is, that the law has become moot for us, it has no further use, and can just be gently let go. We also find that we are empowered to desire to enter into the same dynamic ourselves, confident that the One who held Jesus in being, not over against anything at all, will hold us in being, not over against anything at all, and give us new being and a new identity as we are so held.

This is why we are baptised into Christ's death, as Paul points out (Rom 6:3). It means that we have agreed to join the party of the cursed one, to swim with the ugly duckling. We have agreed to undergo death in advance, to occupy the place of shame and curse voluntarily, to be forever linked to the class fairy. And enabling us to do that, we find that the same set of attitudes, patterns of desire and imagination that enabled Jesus to do what he did, are given to us. This giving is called the Holy Spirit, and by it we can inhabit, dwell in, the same space of shame, of the curse, of death, but as if these things were nothing, thus contributing to keeping alive the possibility of the goodness and vivacity of God being made available to us humans here on this earth.

Now this is, if you like, the shape of the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is the power and wisdom which enabled Jesus to do what he did, occupying the place of the cursed one, occupying the place of shame, the place of toxicity, so gently, and with such a total lack of rivalry, or of vengeance that all the powers which hold places of toxicity, of shame and of curse together have the sting removed from them, and they gradually begin to deflate like so many paper bags. In place of those frightening simulacra of power and of meaning, there begins to become luminescent, very slowly, quietly and gently, the unfrightening, untrapped, "not-out-to-get us", good-for-us sense and meaning of what the Creator of all things has been bringing into being all along.

The gift of the Holy Spirit to us, transforming our pattern of desire, and enlightening our imagination, empowers us to dwell in the same space, with the same gentleness, thus letting the simulacra gradually deflate and what is real become attractively resplendent, so that we can participate with ever less self-concern in the adventure of making all things new. It is because it is able to move us not from without, as group pressure, and crowd psychology does, but from within, without displacing us, that this Spirit, has properly been recognized as being in no sort of rivalry with us, or with any power in this world, and thus, it too has been recognised and confessed as God.

Well, you didn't invite me here to give you a quick class in catechesis. But instead to open up with you some ways of looking at the collapsing closet and the opening door. And believe it or not, that is what I am doing. The "closet" can be looked at as a literary reality, as a political reality, as a sociological reality, and it is interesting enough under any of those headings, and you could have invited a queer theorist, a political analyst or a sociologist to talk to you this evening. However, you have invited someone who aspires to be a Catholic theologian, and it seems to me that part of the claim of theology is that it has a different, and a more profound and complete, way of telling the truth about even such worldly realities as these. And part of what I consider to be an essential avenue of theological exploration is how we are to learn to

tell the story of what is happening to us in the sphere of matters Gay and Lesbian *as an intrinsic part of the Christian story*. And this means as something which is part of exactly the same dynamic as the opening up of heaven made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Please note that this means something rather different from much of the discourse around LGBT (The now traditional acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered) issues which we often hear in religious circles. Because it means that I am inviting you to consider something which is not the same as saying “LGBT issues are a human rights issue, so the Church must learn to respect human rights”. Nor is it the same as saying “Well, Christianity is tough, particularly tough for gay and lesbian people, and we know that God is merciful, so we want to be let off the tough bit as it applies to us, we want to be given permission to have a “lite” version. Just as Microsoft gives us the option, with its XP operating system, of the “Home Version” or the much heavier “Professional Version”, so we’ll leave the “Professional Version” of the Catholic operating system to the hard disk drives in the Vatican, and we’ll settle for the nice, user-friendly “Homo Version” instead.”

What I am suggesting is something rather different. I am suggesting that the full whack of the Catholic operating system enables us to discern what is going on with matters LGBT *as intrinsic to what Jesus was about*, and thus something which is affecting all believers, and ultimately all humans.

You see, I think that the very existence of, and our awareness of, the “closet” is a sign that the “curse of the law” has been undermined. Before Jesus stepped into the place of shame, thus removing the sting from the system of goodness, showing that the space which it designates as cursed is liveable, there was no “outside” the system of the law, no way of looking at it and perceiving that it was a place of double-bind, of futility, of ambivalence and did no good to those who hoped it would make them good. What Jesus offered, and offers, by being amongst us as cursed-one-made-alive is that view on the system of the law from the “outside”, such that it begins to be possible to deal with it rationally, rather than merely to be driven by it irrationally.

Well, the very fact that we have started to notice that there is something called “the closet” is because of a comparative novelty in our history: people who have started to say “I just am gay, or lesbian. It’s not that big a deal. You can heap on me what you will, but it does no good, since I’d rather be dead than pretend.” In other words, there has begun to be an “outside” from which it can be seen how those who are not prepared to say “I just am” live. And this “outside” has been produced by people who are prepared to occupy the place of shame, from which voices shouldn’t be allowed to be heard, and which tended to be linked to death, depression, dishonour, and loss.

The interesting thing, of course, is that it was not necessarily to be expected that there *is* a survivable place of shame that can be lived in this sphere. It might have been the case, as was certainly thought when our societies’ definitions presumed the intrinsic heterosexuality of all humans, that the attempt to stand in the place of shame and just “be” gay or lesbian was a completely fatal and mad move, since if someone claimed to be gay, rather than merely repenting of their evil behaviour, over time the manifest wickedness of their ways would catch up with them. An alcoholic who claimed that

being alcoholic meant that, in his case, as opposed to that of occasional social drinkers, heavy consumption of alcohol was good for him, would eventually find that his liver gave the lie to his claim. Someone who thought that the fact that she had lost feeling in the nerves of her hands meant that she was the sort of person who could stir-fry manually, or put her hand in flames with impunity would fairly quickly discover the disadvantages that attached to her belief.

However, the curious thing is that while societies tended to treat being gay as some form of objective disorder, and some similarly self-destructive outcome was expected, in the degree that people started to occupy the place of shame, it did indeed begin to become evident that it was survivable, and that being gay is just something that *is*, more comparable to left-handedness than to alcoholism. Or, if you like more Biblical Language, the society which threw gay people into the fiery, fiery furnace, as Nebuchadnezzar did with Daniel and his two companions, began to sense to their amazement that the fire was not consuming the gay people, and some wicked theologians began to point out that there appeared to be a fourth man walking with the other three, in the midst of the fire:

“and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods.” (Dan 3:25)

This for me is one of the reasons why I am delighted to be Catholic, because the Catholic operating system allows for exactly this reality to become clear. The Holy Spirit is what enables us in the Church to live through the collapse of the system of goodness and yet find that what emerges, refined as if by fire, is what we really are becoming. Or, in more classic language, the collapse of the extrinsic religious Law is accompanied by the painful emergence of the discovery of the Natural Law, inscribed into our very being by our Creator who calls us to himself.

And I notice that this is exactly how the Holy Spirit seems to have been operating as it collapses the closet, and opens the door. What for many long years was a characterization of people as necessary “bad guys” within a system of goodness, has been collapsing with astounding speed over the last fifty years or so. What has enabled it to collapse has been people living and dying, often enough with enormous bravery and through great loss, in the place of shame. And the result of this has been twofold, the beginning of the discovery that there just are people who are what we now call gay and lesbian, and that who they are to become will start from, and work with, what they are, that the Natural Law is our friend. And that all this is a genuine anthropological discovery about what it is to be human, and one which once discovered, can never be gone back on in good conscience.

At the same time, this increasingly peaceful occupying of the place of shame has created an “outside” from which some look back at the system of goodness and see those who rely on it as trapped within double-binds and scandal. This place of double-binds and scandal affects all who depend on it for their goodness, whatever their own sexual orientation. Just think of all those hard-line straight people who have lined up in recent years with the most closeted of gay political and religious leaders to shore up the system of goodness against necessary enemies, apparently in ignorance of the sort of company they are keeping. However those who are most directly affected are those who the peacefully occupied place of shame reveals as wedded to their own destruction, wrath and double-binds not by their nature, but by a cultural system

which only fear prevents them from leaving. These are the denizens of what we call “the closet”, and of course, more than anyone else, these people have a stake in trying to keep alive the system of goodness and its wrath against those who dare to survive the “outside”.

The question, then, before us, is: what can we discover of our vocations as we dwell in the midst of this process of collapse and recreation, discovering our new being as the Holy Spirit brings us to life?

Now, curiously, I don’t want at this point to rush in and give you definitions and political projects. I want to say something very old fashioned and apparently inappropriate. Because our vocations, our life projects within the calling into being of the “Ecclesia”, are such a serious matter, our new direction is inseparable from our undergoing. It is only in the degree to which we find ourselves slowly dwelling in the undergoing which I have been describing that we will find ourselves able to construct patterns of living in the midst of what seemed until recently to be impossibility.

It is as we find ourselves empowered by the Holy Spirit to dwell peacefully, and without resentment, in what is slowly becoming a space of evanescent toxicity, but which is still for some a powerfully dangerous place of shame, that new vocational directions will become clear. In other words, it is by prayer and contemplation over time, that we will discover ourselves on the inside of what we are to become.

For instance, any discussions about “Family” in current cultural circumstances are marked by toxic attempts to designate the family as a system of goodness, and gay and lesbian people and their needs and aspirations as somehow the enemies of this system. Typically we fight the political battles of votes and causes first, and the real battles of psychological involvement and pain only later. I would urge us to keep our minds on the real battle at the same time as we find ourselves, whether we want to or not, involved in the political battle. In the real battle, many of us have found that the very notion of “family” is a frightening reality, something which threatened us, and within which we would have no space because of finding ourselves to be gay. But now, as we discover the Holy Spirit empowering us to live in the place of shame, without reactivity, without resentment, at last we can begin to imagine that even our own experience of undergoing family, which has sometimes been an experience of having to live in dependence on a hostile reality, is being shifted, such that both our families and we can begin to work out what it is to live together, be for each other, support each other, correct each other, take care of each other starting from what we really are, rather than from false premises about what we should be. Those premises diminish us all, and create as much misery among those heterosexuals who find that the system of goodness condemns them to a deep ambivalence towards their gay children and siblings, as it does among those children and siblings for whom “family” is turned by the system of goodness into a synonym for “annihilation of being”.

It has been, as some cultural commentators have begun to notice<sup>2</sup>, the particular strength of the Catholic family, and the family in majority Catholic cultures, that it has proved relatively resilient in the face of hierarchical attempts to shore up systems

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. the August 2005 column by Michaelangelo Signorile entitled “Could Catholicism be Good for the Gays?”, [www.signorile.com/articles/nyp144.html](http://www.signorile.com/articles/nyp144.html).

of goodness, and has typically opted for the hard work of learning how to love its gay and lesbian offspring over time, including being pleased with and protective of the legal protections which their offspring and siblings are beginning to receive, rather than go along with the easy morality of absolute definitions and consequent hatred and separations which the system of goodness has sought to reinforce.

The same pattern can be seen with the question concerning the proper shape in the public sphere of same-sex coupledness. There is the political battle, concerning access to civil marriage and its rights and responsibilities, and there is the real vocational battle which goes along with, underneath, and beyond that, which can only be dwelt in over time by those undergoing it. This looks something like: “What on earth is the shape of healthy socialization into the possibility of courtship, of adolescence lived at the same time as my heterosexual peers instead of put off until much later? What forms are to be taken by adolescent hopes, fears and dates shared with family and friends instead of hidden or skirted around out of a surfeit of delicacy, shame and fear? What is it going to look like as those who “just are that way” become able, from their childhood on, to aspire uninterruptedly to a shared life with a same sex partner without having to go through the huge psychological battles of wondering whether this would ever be possible, whether such happiness was even imaginable at all, and thus without the scars of a long battle with impossibility being etched into their soul?

Even more than this: what sort of gift to family, Church and society are same-sex couples going to be? What sort of sign of divine blessing and creativity are they going to be? In what ways are gay and straight couples and families going to be “for” each other in the future, beyond the little hints offered by “*Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*” of a heretofore unimagined outpouring of fabulosity and fashion sense among straight males? It seems that gay couples find themselves having to create, imagine, and negotiate every area of their togetherness, because they cannot rely on some tradition of what seems “natural”. Just so, might not such couples be found to have something to offer those for whom the very fact of the apparent naturalness of their heterosexual togetherness actually makes it more difficult for them to become viable creators of coupledness and family? This seems to be happening as it becomes clearer all over the world how much less “nature” has to do with forming the basis of opposite-sex coupling than was thought to be the case, and how much more it is shifting patterns of power, desire and money, that are at work. It will, I suspect, be only over time that, by dwelling in the place of shame without reactivity, and without resentment, letting go of superficial bids for approval and short-term solutions, that we will begin to glimpse the shape of our vocations to create living signs for each other in this sphere.

Finally, let us turn to the issue of vocations to the presbyterate. As many of you know, there has been some controversy in the last few weeks over two different things which have, in some minds, been conflated into one: first, the beginning of a visitation of US seminaries where questions to be asked about “homosexuality” figure prominently both in the draft visitation document and in the reasoning behind the visitation being conducted at all; and secondly, the alleged leaking by an anonymous official of the Roman Curia to the New York Times of some details of a proposed document from the Congregation for Catholic Education which would affirm a worldwide ban on the admission of gay men to the seminary that has supposedly been in force since 1961. This latter document, the preparation of which has been known about for some years,

is either about to be signed by the Pope, or has just been signed, depending on your rumour of choice.

Now, as you would expect given what I have been telling you, I approach the matter of gay men and the presbyterate in a slightly different way from many commentators. In the first place, I would like to indicate that in dealing with the current state of the clerical formation system in regard to the gay “thing” it is not a matter of “It ain’t broke, so don’t fix it”. It is broke. It does need fixing. The clerical world, and its seminary feeders, are a classic example of what it is like trying to live a double-bind in the midst of a collapse of a system of goodness, with all the fear of shame, and the outbursts of wrath that you would expect. The clerical world is deeply structurally dishonest concerning the gay issue. And I don’t think that I am being an apologist for right-wing pressure groups when I say that I wouldn’t encourage someone I like and value as an honest gay man to enter the seminary at the moment. The chances of them being able to develop as a mature human being without having to play absurd and demeaning games of pretence, emotional blackmail and worse are, I would guess, minimal. Until the whole issue of being gay is able to be dealt with publicly and honestly in the Church (and that will depend on those who are already in the clerical system being a great deal more courageous in standing up for what they know to be true about being gay than they have been heretofore), I don’t think that there is much mileage in making out that it is hurtful to gay men to ask them not to join the seminary for the moment.

Given this, I would like to make some suggestions for reading current events positively. I should make it clear that I have no privileged information here, I have seen nothing other than the documents in the public domain, nor do I have any highly-placed friends in the Roman Curia who might give me a tip. I do, however, believe fervently in the Ignatian principle that one should read all Church documents in the best possible light – seeking to imagine a benevolent intention even where there may not be one. And this is not only for reasons of mental hygiene. It is because imagining and interpreting something positively is actually a creative act which tends to make it more likely that things develop that way.

So, let me proceed. In the first place, I think that it is very important to distinguish the two initiatives, especially here in the United States where it is natural that they get conflated and spun as some sort of Vatican-inspired witch hunt against gay people. The Seminary visitation is not, as far as I know, Vatican inspired. It was insisted on by some of the more driving members of your own beloved hierarchy and their ideological outriders as part of being seen to be doing something in the wake of the scandal caused by so many Bishops’ covering up for paedophile priests, and as such is driven by typically US cultural and political concerns. As I understand it, the Vatican called in a group of internationally recognised specialists in the field of child abuse, none of whom is a Catholic, and asked them whether there is any causal link between homosexuality and paedophilia. On being assured that there is not, the Vatican indicated that it had no special interest in pursuing the matter of homosexuality in the seminaries. It was at the insistence of some US Bishops that the issue was put back into the questionnaire.

Now, obviously, as a foreigner, I would be more than usually arrogant to comment on an American initiative to conduct a visitation in American seminaries within the well-known parameters of American moral, political and cultural imperatives. I'm afraid you've got to work out how to negotiate that one yourselves. However, I think that it would be fair to point out that the extremely stringent structure for the visitors' reporting of this visitation seems to be designed to make sure that no one, except a very few people in Rome, get to collate the reports, see the results, and work out what, if anything, to do with them. I would suggest to you that this is probably the Vatican trying to protect some of you from your more zealous and narrow-minded compatriots, and that typically, short-staffed Vatican congregations with many more important things to do, can be relied on to make sure that due process takes an eternity during which the whole matter will be pronounced to be "receiving serious consideration".

I think it important to separate this visitation from the rumoured document some of whose alleged details were leaked to the New York Times. Because that latter document, which is to be worldwide in scope, may well be something close to having (and I would guess deliberately), the reverse effect of what it is being interpreted as aiming to do. I take it that well-intentioned people in the Vatican have worked out for themselves that the current official characterization of homosexuality espoused in recent documents is not a matter of faith, is open to change, and indeed, appears to be changing such that while in the old characterization, homosexuality was assumed to be a serious personality disorder, and this remains the default position, it is certainly not heretical to imagine that modern understandings of same-sex attraction, as being no more of an objective disorder than left-handedness, may well turn out to be right.

The moment that it becomes clear that what has up till now been the official position is fast *en route* to becoming an "opinion" alongside other possible opinions, then in fact we are a long way down the road towards the ability of the Church to live rationally with reality in this sphere. However, such a change can't be promoted from on high without causing scandal to those of weak faith, typically those who hold most rigidly to an un-nuanced image of Church Teaching as absolute and immutable. So the change must be allowed to permeate through gradually, as in fact is already occurring. However, with this there comes a realisation that what is essentially good news for the laity, as the possibility of honest life and straightforward pastoral initiatives open up, may come over as rather bad news for the clergy, and especially those clergy who, over the last thirty or forty years have been socialised into a culture of dishonesty which was cemented in place by the old official characterisation.

Please remember that the old official characterisation effectively made a big distinction between "being" and "acts" such that clergy were encouraged not to come "out", not to accept themselves as gay men, but to agree that they were severely defective heterosexuals and all would be well so long as they were chaste. Under cover of this officially favoured distinction, many closeted priests could conduct witch hunts, whether ideological or, in the case of seminary formators and bishops, actual, against gay people more honest than themselves, talking about how terrible "those homosexuals" were and so on. One of the least edifying dimensions of the whole clerical world is the frequent presence of anti-gay persecutors whose own homosexuality, furtively acted out on, appears to be known to everyone except

themselves. Yet these people can scarcely ever be effectively confronted, since their own pathology has up till now been backed up by the “teaching of the Church”.

Well, one of the first of the alleged points in the NYT leak is precisely that the Vatican is dropping the gulf it had erected between being and acts, to which I can only say “hooray”! That gulf has been one of the biggest bulwarks against honesty and mental and spiritual health in clerical life. Of course the dropping of the distinction is cast in terms of the Vatican having reached a negative opinion about gay people, such that they have such a serious personality disorder that they can’t really be expected to live celibacy properly, and therefore have no place in the priesthood. But this negative *opinion* shouldn’t be allowed to overshadow the more significant fact that at last the *distinction* which launched a million lies is now being laid to rest. It is “who we are” that is the real question, not in the first place “what we do”.

I think it was no accident that the anonymous curial official went on to indicate that “the very definition of homosexuality is not fixed”. He was as good as saying that what used to be *the* characterisation, trumpeted by many as the unchanging teaching of the Church, has become an opinion. This means that in time, as the new understanding becomes commonplace, and honesty and balanced socialization from childhood upwards become normal for gay Catholics, so the current negative opinion can be changed, and there will turn out to be a place for that very small proportion of gay men, as for that very small proportion of straight men, for whom celibacy is a gift and a calling, rather than an obligation forced by a mixture of taboo and pre-scientific psychology.

My view then is that, in the case that the alleged leak does turn out to have some basis in reality, and not merely to have been a trial balloon, or an attempt by a curial discontent to bounce the Vatican into saying something it doesn’t want to, the document is probably best regarded as an administrative intervention marking a proper pause in a system which it knows to be in deep trouble precisely because of the systemic dishonesty which has characterised the living out of this issue. It is not even clear how rigorously those proposing it expect the document to be applied: the moment a Vatican document spells out that there is room for exceptions to its own rule – an assumption which is normally very much there, but not stated, - you can take that as a green light to those who will drive no mere coach and horses, but entire cavalry divisions, through the doors of the exception. However, the main point is that the Vatican effectively recognises that it cannot yet offer gay males an honest home within its own structures, so it would be immoral to tempt them to join the seminary. It can’t say publicly, but merely hints, that of course, as the definition of homosexuality shifts, and the shape of healthy gay lives becomes clearer and more visible, so the question can be looked at again.

Now, personally I think that this process, awkwardly handled as it no doubt will be, is very good news for the vast majority of gay Catholics. But I should indicate that at least initially, it will be seen as devastating for some, and we should prepare to give them help. It will, I suspect, be most devastating for those who have bought most heavily into the old official line of the distinction between “being” and “acts”. These are the ones, and they are mostly of a conservative bent, for whom the collapse of the distinction will in fact mean their closet being emptied and closed, with them left on

the outside, and maybe without the psychological strength to deal with being plunged into having to forge a new identity. After all, if the Vatican itself collapses the previously held gulf between “being” and “acts” in the case of gay people, it will no longer be improper for an interviewer to say to any cleric assumed to be gay, “Father, would you like to tell us about what it’s like being a man with a severe personality disorder trying to cope with celibacy?”, and even the most chaste of clerics will no longer be able to hide behind celibacy to avoid answering questions about being gay. I very much hope that it is in the mind of the proper authorities to provide help for such people as they struggle, and help their families struggle, with the new realities which they have so long avoided dealing with.

I would also have thought that some priests living in some civil jurisdictions will find that the alleged document’s claim that the official position barring gay people has been in force since 1961 gives them a strong case for a civil proceeding against their diocese or religious congregation for having led them up the garden path, allowing them to think that they could be properly employed in the Church, when in fact they could not. Only those dioceses and congregations which had either made it publicly clear that gay people were barred from entering, or those which had made it publicly clear that gay people were not barred from entering, where these latter public statements had been left unchallenged by Rome, would be exempt. I would hope that those dioceses and religious congregations which have played the “don’t ask don’t tell” game would be noble in recognising the culture of dishonesty they have bought into, and react by offering appropriate compensation to those who wish to leave. To those, that is, who can reasonably claim having been misled into giving up significant years of their lives under false pretences.

However, it does seem that the Vatican doesn’t want them to leave. Instead, it urges such priests to recommit to celibacy, and, faithful to its own new awareness of the link between “being” and “acts” it must obviously now urge Bishops to offer a much more spacious treatment of those who have found that they cannot keep celibacy, and have partners. Those gay priests who do stay will, I suspect, find that the old world of emotional blackmail starts to collapse, and they need be much less frightened of people denouncing them to the Bishop. After all, what is known and accepted and not criminal no longer has any power over them, and even their indiscretions appear to be expected.<sup>3</sup>

In short, I rather suspect that the emergence of this document, at least as it has been presented, is a sign that the changes which have been happening in society are at last beginning to be dealt with rationally by Church authority, and that we are on the cusp of very significant developments. The principal beneficiaries will be gay and lesbian lay people, since it will become possible to implement pastoral work that is not run by the weird double bind of the old characterization, and eventually the fruits of this will feed into a healthier clergy. But we should not be surprised if things appear to be going backwards rather than forwards. The captain of a very large ship turns the wheel a very few degrees, and the prow swings into the new direction. The stern however, appears to swing in the opposite direction. However, all the stern is doing is aligning itself with the new direction of the prow as both move forward.

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<sup>3</sup> This and the previous paragraph were omitted in the original presentation at Creighton University.

And with this swing, any number of impossible, taboo issues in the Church may suddenly find themselves the subjects of rational discussion! So let us, as we discover ourselves on the inside of our callings, allow ourselves to receive the Spirit of One who, able to imagine the joy which he was going to bring about, gave himself to undergoing the Cross, occupying the place of shame as if it were nothing, and because of this makes alive the place of unimaginable honour and approval given by God the Father, Creator of us all (Hebrews 12:2 – *my rendition*).

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