

Good-faith learning and the fear of God

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The virtue of *fear of God* is little mentioned nowadays¹, but I would like to bring it back into our discourse. I invoke it because typically those who enter into some sort of moral discussion imagine that we are starting off from the standpoint of the good guys. Those who are moved by *fear of God* fear lest our own irresponsibility, our own hardness of heart and defect of vision perhaps be carrying us down a route that is too easy, one that is ever more free of voices which question and challenge us. So *fear of God* obliges us to a certain athletic tension with respect to our own way, lest it lead us into disaster.

In order to situate more exactly the reason for this invocation at this time, I would like to bring to your attention Gitta Sereny's book *Into that darkness: from mercy killing to mass murder*. In this magnificent text Sereny shows the slow route to moral corruption undergone by a local Austrian policeman, Franz Stangl, who went on to become the Camp Commander of the extermination camp at Treblinka. Stangl would preside over the death of about a million people without committing a single act of personal violence, convincing himself that he had no other option owing to the harshness of the situation. However, it is not because of the interviews with Stangl that I indicate this text now, but because of the author's study of what happened in Germany when Hitler was planning his programme of murdering mentally and physically handicapped people².

A former priest, who had become a Nazi official, was charged with obtaining from a distinguished Catholic moralist a formal written opinion concerning the probable reaction of the Church towards the policy of forced Euthanasia which was to be introduced by the government. The opinion, whose five copies have disappeared completely, was written by the very distinguished moralist, Professor Mayer of Paderborn. According to the sworn testimony of those who read it, it gave to understand that the killing of the mentally handicapped might be admissible. Apparently, knowledge of the tenor of this document reached high within ecclesiastical spheres. From the silent reaction of those spheres, Hitler deduced that his programme of the killing of such patients would not provoke an enraged reaction from the Church. Having feared that the Catholic population, at the instigation of their hierarchy, would rise up against these measures, he saw that this wouldn't happen, so he could begin his programme. Which he then did.

Of course, after the war, when there was an attempt to clarify the circumstances of the opinion and of who knew what before the introduction of the Euthanasia policy, there were many cases of amnesia and declarations of not having known what was going on. Such forgetfulness and ignorance were difficult to believe, because there had in

¹ For greater clarification of the relationship between *fear of God* and the virtue of Hope of which it is a formative part cf. Josef Pieper's *Hope* and especially section V, *Fear as Gift*, in *Faith, Hope, Love* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1997).

² I refer to pages 60-77 of the London edition (Pimlico, 1995) of *Into that darkness*.

fact been a few brave and isolated voices among the hierarchs of the time who preferred to go to prison rather than keep quiet.

Thus, seduced by the possibility of a *détente* with a hostile regime, some notable Catholic figures felt it appropriate to drop some links from the hermetic chain of a moral doctrine which had been implacably opposed to allowing any exception to the prohibition of the murder of handicapped people. The result of this seduction was the murder of thousands of utterly vulnerable and unprotected people, the loss of credibility on the part of ecclesiastical authority, and, at the end, the absolute professional shame of those who had allowed themselves to be seduced.

The reason for invoking *fear of God* is because of the possible symmetries which exist with what is going on currently. If I had been in Germany at that time and in those circumstances, it would be very rash of me to think that I am, or that we are, better than our brethren in the faith who let the links drop. That is to say, it is much more probable that I would have been of the conformist party, and not of the brave party whose members were, over the long term, fully justified. Well, here we have something similar. Nobody doubts the Church's traditionally implacable opposition in the face of any attempts to legitimize sexual and affective relationships between same-sex couples. Yet behold, encouraged by the growing good will shown by the civil governments in our own and other continents, some of us, amongst whom I count myself, are proposing that we let drop a link in the chain of that implacable opposition, and are suggesting that it is quite possible that the Church can, without any damage to its divine doctrine and mission, change its characterization of gay and lesbian people, and, changing its characterization, change also its position with relation to the civil laws which normalize the lives of such people.

Well, I would be very stupid if I were not to ask myself whether, should I reach the age of 81, like Professor Mayer of Paderborn at the time of the 1967 Frankfurt euthanasia trial, I am not running the risk of being found to be in the most absolute shame and discredit through having made myself an accomplice and a partisan of something which might, over time, come to be seen as a moment when our societies headed off down an insidious and sinister pathway.

And of course, none of us knows now what exactly will be the effects of the proposed changes to the law or the civil code in our countries. Ecclesiastical voices, with prophetic tones, predict severe damage to our social life, and consider, along with the highest representatives of Islamic thought, that the very foundations of society are threatened by the extension of the category of civil marriage to same-sex couples. Other voices point out that there is no sign of any such damage being produced in those countries or states where the law has already been changed. Instead these voices affirm that not to extend the right to full civil recognition is to carry on producing an evil in the degree to which people are being condemned to the category of second-class citizens without any objective basis. And of course, where there is discrimination without objective basis, and those who do the discriminating begin to be aware of the baselessness of their discrimination, they have ever less excuse for the evil they are perpetuating. Whatever the case, should the ecclesiastical argument be right, we would need much more time to measure the social consequences of the

extension of civil marriage, although it is very difficult to say how these consequences would be measured.

That's why *fear of God* is so important. Whether we like it or not, we are in new territory, and the one thing that is certain is that, whatever we do, there will be consequences. None of us knows what the consequences will be, nor which of us will emerge at the end like our poor brethren in the faith, Dr Mayer of Paderborn and the Bishops and Cardinals whose silence was death for some of the smallest and weakest of their brethren.

It is for this reason that I would like to work very slowly, showing step by step the links in my argument so that, where what I say is crazy, this be rectifiable before it is too late. That is to say: mine is an attempt to talk about matters gay in the midst of the Church in such a way that what I say is capable of discussion and of being contested.

I consider it important to signal in advance what it is that I think I am doing, since it is notorious that if the characterization of gay and lesbian people upheld by the Vatican Congregations be true, then it is to be doubted that gay or lesbian people who accept themselves as such would be capable of rational discourse about the matter. According to the official characterization, such a person would have accepted as part of their "I" something which is nothing but an objective disorder. This would have corrupting consequences in their self-presentation and in their capacity for reasoning. A parallel would be trying to talk to someone who is drunk. While someone is in that state, none of us would think that that person is capable of reasoning or of moral responsibility. In fact, we would show a marked lack of sanity ourselves if we were to speak "to" such a person, trying to engage his "I". Rather, while the drunken state lasts, his "self" is temporarily beyond being engaged by us, and we would do well to talk "about" him so as to work out who gets to swipe his car keys, and who will take him home and put him to bed.

So I know in advance that seen from such a perspective, this attempt of mine to speak in the midst of the Church is no more than an attempt by a drunk driver to show the traffic cops that he's able to walk in a straight line. Normally the very fact of having a go is a sign that the driver is not altogether there. I would merely ask those who maintain the perspective of the Vatican Congregations that they take my attempt to walk in a straight line as a sign of good faith, and treat it as some sort of cry for help. That is to say, I'm asking that I not be considered an enemy of the faith, or an infiltrator who is sapping the foundations of the Church, introducing weird heresies. In the worst case scenario, I'm a deranged fool attempting a piece of reasoning, but at least with nothing hidden, all in the full light of day. And if the perspective of the Vatican Congregations turns out to be true, then I dare say that there are many of us who are similarly deranged and we are going to need very well-developed pastoral help so as to enable us to return to our right minds.

Thus to my first premise in this attempt. Currently the Church, including its gay and lesbian members, finds itself in a situation where there is a serious conflict between two elements of Catholic doctrine which hadn't appeared to be in conflict before, but which for a few years now have been producing a very strong disturbance in the life of many of the faithful. The two elements are as follows: on the one hand the

Church's traditional teaching about Original Sin and Grace, and on the other, the traditional teaching about sexual acts between people of the same sex.

The first element is well known. The Church teaches that at the Fall, and therefore in the real living out of all of us, our human nature was very seriously damaged, but that this damage did not destroy our human nature. The distinction is important. If our nature had been destroyed, that is, if we are radically depraved, as is taught by some of the churches which are heirs to the Protestant Reformation, then salvation would come to us as something without any continuity with our nature, with our past, and there would be no organic continuity between "who I was" before accepting salvation and "who I will turn out to be" when all is revealed. However, since our nature was seriously damaged, but continues to be human nature, salvation does reach us in the form of a process of the perfecting of our nature. As a result of this, "who I will turn out to be" has, according to the most traditional Catholic teaching, reaffirmed at the Council of Trent, an organic continuity with "who I was".

Thus, what is normal within the living of the Catholic faith, what is normal in the process of growth in grace, is always starting from where one is, knowing that no part of human desire or living out is *intrinsically* evil, that is to say, incapable of being ordered or healed, only capable of being wiped out. Nevertheless, all our desire is damaged in the way we receive it and live it out: it is seriously distorted. But we can trust that even what is most base within a person's life is capable of being transformed into something which will be a reflection of the divine splendour. What is normal, then in Catholic anthropology, is to regard no human desire, heavily distorted or addicted to evils of various types though it may be, as a radically perverse entity but rather to see it as something which can in principle be returned to flowing towards what is good.

This, I should say, is an essential part of the Catholic Faith. Without this, the whole of Catholic teaching concerning grace, mercy, forgiveness and the sacraments would have to be altered radically. Furthermore, it seems to be part of that *sensus fidei* which Catholics have as an instinct that we understand that the mercy of the Church consists above all, and always, in starting from where one is, and not causing an obstacle to grace by insisting that one has to become something else before being able to receive grace.

The second element in this conflict is the teaching about sexual acts between people of the same sex. Until fairly recently it did not appear that there was a conflict between this teaching and the doctrine of Original Sin and grace, since the teaching about sexual acts was just that: a teaching about acts and nothing else. It was taught that what were forbidden were any sexual acts whatsoever between people of the same sex, with different reasons brought forth, in different periods, to justify the prohibition. However, what all the reasons took for granted was that such acts would be a perversion of a human nature which tended of itself, and always, towards what we would nowadays call some form of "heterosexuality". In prohibiting the acts, nothing was being said about the condition or being of the person, and it was understood that the prohibition didn't affect the *being* of the person, only the acts. That is to say, it used to be possible to say in good conscience to a person who had engaged in such acts that they should desist, and instead seek their flourishing, which

they would only achieve if their desire were to return to its normal river bed. It was, for example, normal to suggest to young men who had confessed acts or thoughts of this nature that they should hurry up and get married so as to be cured. At a time when “gay” hadn’t yet been invented, and there were only “sodomitical acts”, there didn’t seem to be a conflict between the teachings about grace and about those acts.

The problem is that over the last several decades these two teachings do appear to have entered into conflict. And the reason is a change in society which has come upon us all, Catholics or not. The change consists in the ever increased recognition during the second half of the twentieth century that it is really not possible to make such a clear-cut distinction between acts and being as had been traditional. That is to say, it seems that there exist some people, a minority which occurs more or less regularly in all societies and cultures, as well as in the groupings of other animals, who just are “like that”. This doesn’t appear to be an individual aberration, but it just appears to be the case that there is a class of people with the common and recognisable characteristic of a lasting and stable emotional and erotic attraction towards the members of their own sex. At the same time, it seems to be the case that if you remove from the psychological profiles of a hundred people only the detail concerning each one’s sexual orientation, there is absolutely nothing in the profiles which would allow you to indicate in a regular and accurate way what the orientation corresponding to the profile in fact is. That is to say, the presence of an orientation towards a person of the same sex does not appear to bring along with it any emotional or psychological configuration, even less any deformation, which is not found equally among people of the majority orientation.

The conflict between the two elements of Christian teaching raises its head, then, because while the discussion was about *acts* and not *being*, it was thought possible to say to someone at the same time “Don’t do that!” and “Flourish, brother!” because it was thought that the acts didn’t flow from what the brother was. However, it has become ever more problematic to bring together in the same phrase “Don’t do that!” and “Flourish brother!”, since if it is understood that someone is just “like that” then in part, at least, his flourishing will be discovered starting from what he is.

Now this conflict is by no means a merely academic matter. It is lived, very intensely, by many young people for whom working out whether it is a matter of “I’m just like this, and so I must be this in the richest way possible” or whether it is rather a matter of “I’m not like this, but I suffer from very grave temptations which in some way I must overcome” is a gravely tortured experience. Evidence suggests that more and more young people are overcoming this conflict by working out that they just are “like that”, and it is starting from this that they are going to risk constructing a life.

Faced with these conflicts, the Vatican Congregations decided to respond. If they conceded that “being like that” is simply part of nature, which is to say, part of God’s creative project, then it is evident that the acts which flow from that way of being could not be *intrinsically* evil, but that they might be good or bad according to their use and circumstances, as is the case with heterosexual acts. So, they were faced with one of two possibilities: either we recognise that “being like that” is neutral, which means, in the case of everything created, positive, in which case the absolute prohibition of the acts falls; or we deny that “being like that” exists, except as a defect

of a radically heterosexual being, and because of this the traditional absolute prohibition of the acts can be maintained.

Please notice that there are two logical barriers which the ecclesiastical argument cannot jump without falsifying its own doctrine. The first is this: The Church cannot say “Well, being that way is normal, something neutral or positive, the Church respects it and welcomes it. The Church only prohibits the acts which flow from it”. This position would lack logic in postulating intrinsically evil acts which flow from a neutral or positive being. And this would go against the principle of Catholic morals which states that acts flow from being – *agere sequitur esse*. The second barrier is this: the Church cannot say of the homosexual inclination that it is a desire which is in itself intrinsically evil, since to say this would be to fall into the heresy of claiming that there is some part of being human which is essentially depraved – that is, which cannot be transformed, only covered over.

Faced with these two barriers, ecclesiastical logic did a backward double-flip worthy of an Olympic gymnast so as to arrive at the following formulation: “***The homosexual inclination, though not itself a sin, constitutes a tendency towards behaviour that is intrinsically evil, and must therefore be considered objectively disordered.***” With this phrase, the Vatican Congregations sought to maintain the absolute prohibition of the acts without describing the desire as intrinsically evil. Nevertheless the price of this definition is very high. It obliges its defenders to insist that the homosexual inclination, independently of any acts flowing from it, is something objectively disordered. And the kind of objectivity they have in mind is deduced not from what can be known through experience, but is an *a priori* which depends on the Church’s teaching concerning marriage. That is to say, the *a priori* of the intrinsic heterosexuality of all human beings. In other words, from the presupposition of the intrinsic heterosexuality of all human beings, it is deduced that the person whose inclination is towards those of the same sex is a defective heterosexual.

Well, let us not delude ourselves here. This characterisation of the gay or lesbian person as a defective heterosexual is absolutely necessary for the maintenance of the prohibition, as the authors indicate with the “must be considered” of their phrase. The problem is that, for the characterisation to work properly within the doctrine of original sin and grace, it would have to be the case that the life of grace would lead the gay or lesbian person to become heterosexual in the degree of his or her growth in grace. That is to say, in the degree to which grace makes us more patient, faithful, generous, capable of being good Samaritans, less prisoners of anger, of rivalry and of resentment, just so would it have to change the gender of the persons towards whom we are principally attracted. The problem is that such changes do not seem to take place in a regular and trustworthy way, even amongst the United States groups which promote them with significant funds and publicity. As the senior representatives of such groups indicate: at most, and in some cases, a change in behaviour is produced, but the fundamental structures of desire continue to be towards persons of the same sex.³

³ I am basing this judgment of mine on my own experiences with such groups, on conversations with Jeremy Marks and other leaders of the formerly ex-gay group Courage (UK), and on Wayne Besen’s book *Anything but straight* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2003).

This then is the conflict: for the prohibition of the acts to correspond to the true being of the person, the inclination has to be characterised as something objectively disordered. However, since the inclination doesn't alter, unlike desires which are recognisably vicious, the gay or lesbian person would have a desire which is, in fact, intrinsically evil, an element of radical depravity in their desire. And we would have stepped outside Catholic anthropology. Or, on the other hand, the same-sex inclination is simply something that is, in which case grace will bring it to a flourishing starting from where it is, and with this we would have to work out which acts are appropriate or not, according to the circumstances, and we will have stepped outside the absolute prohibition passed on to us by tradition.

What I want to underline here is that this is a conflict *between elements of Catholic doctrine* lived by many people. That is to say: when people say to gay and lesbian people "You should just be obedient to the teaching of the Church" it is no frivolity to reply "Sure, but which one? To the uninterrupted teaching about grace and original sin? Or to the recent characterization which the Vatican Congregations now consider necessary in order to maintain the traditional prohibition? Because both together, at the moment it's not clear how that can be done." And since all parties to the discussion are in agreement that the teaching on Grace is the most important, the conflict is reduced to one concerning the characterization. Either it is true to affirm that the homosexual inclination is objectively disordered, or it is not.

That is to say, one side has got it wrong, and one side has got it right. And the field of possible error is in the area of what really *is*. The whole argument turns on the veracity or otherwise of the characterization of what is. Either being gay is a defective form of being heterosexual, or it is simply a thing that just is that way.

And this brings us to the next step. If it were the case that the homosexual inclination truly were a disfiguration of a fundamentally heterosexual structure of desire, then there would be no conflict between the two teachings. There would only be a conflict between the truth and the grave disfiguration of desire in people who don't want to recognise their perversity, a very deeply rooted conflict, of course. However, if it were the case that the homosexual inclination is simply a thing that just is "like that", and is not a disfiguration of anything, in that case the official characterization, and along with it the absolute prohibition, is false. And the deeply rooted conflict would be one between the truth and the grave disfiguration of the intelligence and desire of the forces which do not want to recognise this emerging truth.

And here I return to the fear of God. I consider that it is very dangerous to say "One of us is wrong, and since it is certainly not I, it must be you". Instead of this I would like to delineate a position which would allow us to seek the truth together and in good faith. I propose it for your consideration, so that it can be seen whether or not what it postulates be legitimate. I do this through some theses, along with some accompanying observations.

My first thesis is this: **I consider that the Catholic Doctrine of Original Sin offers in principle the possibility that, over time, we come to learn something about our being human in such a way that a change is undergone *not by the doctrine of***

grace but by its anthropological field of application. Let me explain: if we were to follow the position which Trent regarded (rightly or wrongly) as the Reformed one, human beings are so depraved in our nature that we cannot learn anything true from ourselves, from what is around us, or from waves of change in society. The unique access we have to truth is through Revelation, and wherever there is a conflict between the apparent truth known naturally and Revelation, then it is Revelation which wins out, since our corrupted nature cannot serve as a criterion for truth.

If we were to follow the Catholic position, however, then even though human beings are gravely damaged in our natures, yet something can indeed be known, even though it be with much difficulty and by sorting through many misconceptions, concerning what is true starting from ourselves and what surrounds us. Furthermore, when there is a conflict between apparent truth known naturally, and Revelation, the apparent truth known naturally is indeed capable of acting in the role of criterion for our knowledge of divinely revealed truth. It is for this reason that Catholic theology speaks of a “natural law”, because we consider that Creation and the New Creation have an organic continuity between them which is in principle knowable by the exercise of reason.

From this we deduce the following: if the teaching of the Church were the position labelled “Reformed”, then there would be no possibility of our learning anything authentic concerning, for example, whether the homosexual inclination is a defect in an intrinsically heterosexual being, or whether it is something which just is like that. The only thing we could do would be to insist on the characterisation deduced from revelation. However, since the Church’s teaching is not this, but is subtly different, then in fact we cannot reject, on purely *a priori* grounds, the possibility that we human beings might reach, through a difficult path, one interwoven with many false leads, the understanding that what seemed to be a defect in something is not. Rather it is merely a normal occurrence within created matter, with its own tendency to flourishing.

This means that there are no reasons *of faith* which stand in the way of our carrying on in our search for which of the two positions be closer to the truth, and both parties can participate in the discussion and in the process of learning in good faith.

My second thesis, which follows on from the previous one reads thus: **Authentic objectivity about what human beings are can be reached by means of careful study and discernment of the lives of people over time.** Since what is *now* is not totally bereft of continuity with what we *shall* be in the New Creation, then in principle, and with due attention to circumstance, the tendency to corruption or to flourishing which can be detected by means of study and discernment of the lives of people over the long term, does indeed point towards what the person really is. That is to say, if it were true that all humans are, by the mere fact of being human, intrinsically heterosexual, then there would be detected in those who, not recognising this, live as if they were gay or lesbian, a growing corruption of their human nature which would affect all the areas of their lives. In the same way there would be detected in people who are apparently of homosexual inclination, but who hold fast to their intrinsic heterosexuality, a growing flourishing in all areas of their life.

Given that we are questioning pathologies of desire, let us take an analogy from the same field: By means of study, we have come to distinguish between people who steal, and people who are kleptomaniacs; between people who take measures to slim, and people who suffer from anorexia; between people who consume alcohol and people who are alcoholics. In each case we know how to distinguish between those acts which, good or bad as they may be in themselves, are not part of an objectively disordered inclination, and those acts which are part of an inclination which we would call objectively disordered. We punish the thief, but we seek treatment for the kleptomaniac; We congratulate the person who goes on a diet, but we seek to help the anorexic. And we know, furthermore, that our distinction is *objective*: that kleptomania, anorexia and alcoholism are not only minority behaviour patterns, but conditions which, if they are not controlled, put the health and flourishing of the person into danger. In the same way it should be possible to detect if self-acceptance as gay tends to put in jeopardy a person's health and flourishing, or if, in the case of people who have these desires but do not accept them as part of their being, it is rather this non-acceptance which puts their health and flourishing into danger.

With this I am discounting the following possibility. This would be to affirm that, "however much we study, human opinions are always so relative that we will never be able to demonstrate anything, so we must stick with revelation, which is the only source capable of objectivity. Besides, revelation in this area would concern a future created heterosexuality which would only be brought to fruition in the heavenly wedding banquet, so any signs of homosexual flourishing now are not revelatory of anything at all." To discount this is to accept *in principle* the possibility of saying that belief in the intrinsic heterosexuality of all the members of the human race does not form an obligatory part of the foundations of the Catholic faith, however much it may have been a common presupposition until recently⁴. This is because we are in principle capable of reaching objectivity about the matter without depending on a doctrinal *a priori*. We may indeed discover over time that all human beings are intrinsically heterosexual, and that any appearance to the contrary is an illusion. But should we find this not to be the case, then there would be no problem for Catholic doctrine as such, since Catholic doctrine doesn't depend on what might turn out to be a false or uncertain anthropology.

And of course, if it were the case that not all human beings are intrinsically heterosexual, then extending the opportunity to marry to same-sex couples would present no threat to the existence of heterosexual marriage, and there would be no logical reason why same-sex couples should be deprived of that opportunity.

Well, I think that both parties could come to accept these theses *in principle*. Which would allow me to advance a third thesis: since we are in a field where reality is greater than the positions which are currently held as certain, that is to say, where truth is ahead of all of us and obliges all of us to allow our perceptions to be expanded by study and knowledge, **There remain to be established the criteria which would allow a common agreement concerning what might constitute flourishing in the case of people of homosexual inclination.**

⁴ This is not of course, to question that as a matter of common sense, human *reproduction* is intrinsically dependent on the biological complementarity of the sexes.

For example, there are things which are no longer in question. There is no sort of empirical evidence to suggest that a person of homosexual inclination be, for that reason, either more or less capable of exercising whatsoever profession. A person's excellence as pilot, gardener, nurse, teacher, surgeon, accountant, postman or priest seems to be in no way affected by their sexual orientation. Nor is there any evidence to suggest that the habitual sexual practices corresponding to the inclination affect those exercises of excellence except in cases of compulsive behaviour, which are certainly no monopoly of those of homosexual inclination.

One would have to say that the fact that "the children of this world", normally so astute at perceiving the sort of excellences which would allow them an advantage over others, have not detected that the presence of gay people in their companies, their armies, or their professions, lessens their competitive advantages begins to speak strongly in favour of "being gay" making no difference at all in the field of professional, economic and social viability. This would suggest that there begins to be a strong probability that the homosexual inclination of itself does not lead to any diminishment of human flourishing. However it would, in my view, be insufficient to allow the matter to be considered resolved on this evidence. It might be the case that social and economic forces were happy to use a characteristic, let us say, of personal instability, or a habit of maintaining appearances, so as to have a strong and loyal employee who could be used in the service of a profession for a certain time, but who could finally be sacked as he or she burns out through lack of a healthy basis of personal living.

For it is not only social and economic flourishing which must be considered, but personal flourishing. And it is here that we would have to work out what are to be the criteria for flourishing. My suggestion, some more or less adequate questions, would be of this sort: Does a person of homosexual inclination who accepts himself as such tend, because of this, to be more capable of personal responsibility, of developing interpersonal relationships in a serene manner, of truthfulness, of compassion, of acting in a non-possessive way, of overcoming rivalries, and of generosity extended over time, or less?

There would be two fields of comparison. The first would be between those of undoubted heterosexual inclination on the one hand, and those of a homosexual inclination, whether accepted or not, on the other. If it could be demonstrated as a stable, repeated and consistent result that people of homosexual inclination tend to be less capable of responsibility, of serene interpersonal relationships, of truthfulness, of compassion, of acting in a non-possessive way, of overcoming rivalries, and of generosity extended over time, then, given equality of social circumstance (a big "if" for a group which will always and inevitably be a minority group), there would at least be a strong suspicion that there is something defective in the inclination itself. Up till now, I have not seen a serious study which demonstrates this, but this should not rule out the possibility of closer examination.

The second field of comparison would be between people of homosexual inclination who *accept* that their inclination is part of their being, and that their flourishing flows from this, people who in a certain technical language were referred to as "egosyntonic", on the one hand; and on the other, people who *deny* that their

inclination is part of their “I”, being rather a heavy yoke to be borne and the cause of severe temptations which must be overcome, people who in that same technical language were referred to as “egodystonic”. If it could be demonstrated as a stable, repeated and consistent result that the former tend to be less capable in all the previously described areas than the latter, then we would have very good evidence to suggest that the homosexual inclination, far from being a thing which just is “like that”, is instead some sort of defect, and when it is treated as such, then the true nature of the person tends to flourish. And if not, not.

Now of course there may be other suggestions about the type of criteria which should be employed, and I welcome their being raised. My thesis is precisely that the appropriate criteria **are yet to be established**.

What is clear, however, is that for anyone who is interested in the truth, this matter can no longer be put off. It seems that even now the Vatican Congregations are discussing among themselves the criteria for admission to seminaries, and one of their points of interest is exactly this one. If it is true that those who are “egodystonic” are those most capable of flourishing, because they correspond more closely to the reality of being human, then it would be worthwhile to undertake a massive education campaign concerning this among young people, clearly demonstrating all the evidence so that those who have allowed themselves to become “egosyntonic” either become dystonic or do not present themselves as candidates for the priesthood. But if it is not true, if it is the case rather that the egosyntonic are more likely to flourish, then it is very much in the interest of the whole Church, which traditionally has a considerably higher proportion of men of homosexual inclination among its clergy than that which appears in the general population, that its own employees dwell in truth.

So my fourth and last thesis is simple. It is that **we can no longer put off seeking the truth of this matter in the Church**. I turn for support to some words of John Paul II:

[Many] cases of ‘social’ sin are the result of the accumulation and concentration of many **personal** sins. [...] It is a case of the very personal sins of those who cause or support evil or who exploit it; of those who are in a position to avoid, eliminate or at least limit social evils but who fail to do so out of laziness, fear, or the conspiracy of silence, through secret complicity or indifference; or, of those who take refuge in the supposed impossibility of changing the world, and also of those who sidestep the effort and sacrifice required, producing specious reasons of a higher order.⁵

Now the validity of this teaching is independent of what turns out to be the truth about the homosexual inclination. If the inclination is an objective disorder, then those who are certain that it is must consider that the fact of hiding this reality, going along as if it were not the case, tends to produce a very grave social ill. They should provide both funds and human resources in setting up a convincing educational programme, starting from well-elaborated and well-trusted empirical data which demonstrate the

⁵ John Paul II. *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation*, 1984, par. 16.

truthfulness of their position and make it more and more difficult to ignore. They will have, as a matter of urgency, to exclude from seminaries and houses of religious formation all those people, whether “formators” or “formandi” who are not fully convinced by the true characterization, since it would be very cruel to allow people who believe that their way of being is compatible with Christian living to remain in their delusion, wasting their time and their life uselessly. The traditional ecclesiastical ambiguity in this sphere, the usual “don’t ask, don’t tell”, will have to be changed into something much more rigorous. The fact that there seems to be a growing conviction everywhere that this position is wrong should encourage rather than discourage the desire to make truth resplendent in the world.

If, on the other hand, the homosexual inclination is something that just is “like that”, nothing more, the late Holy Father’s phrases are no less urgent, and have a special field of application within ecclesiastical structures. For there can be very clearly detected within them dishonest social realities which are the fruit of many personal sins, situations of evil where many people have failed to tell the truth through fear of its consequences. People who have more than a strong suspicion that being gay is not an objective disorder, and who might well have committed themselves to building up the common good in their respective societies, but who fail to face up to the lie “*out of laziness, fear, or the conspiracy of silence, through secret complicity or indifference;*” the attitude “*of those who take refuge in the supposed impossibility of changing the world, and also of those who sidestep the effort and sacrifice required, producing specious reasons of a higher order*”⁶

The enemy of the truth in this matter is not so much the stridency of voices opposed to change, but the silence of those who have more than a strong suspicion that the official position is nothing more than the production of a “specious reason of a higher order”. I pray that we be gifted with both fear of God and with mercy towards the cowardice in our own and others’ hearts so that we may have the courage to seek the truth together, and the charity to leave no one in the place of shame in which Professor Mayer, and the ecclesiastical superiors who knew his opinion, dwelt in complicity and silence.

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⁶ *Ibid.*