

Letter of response to friends in the aftermath of the Vatican Instruction¹ of 29 November 2005

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Cari amici,

Various of you have asked me for a considered reaction to the recently released Vatican instruction concerning the non-admission of gay people to seminary formation. I accept your challenge and am putting a few thoughts down. Please allow me to reply first as someone who aspires to be a theologian and then later as a priest. I hope that the reasons for my making this distinction will become clear.

My reaction on first reading the text was complex. I was relieved by how short and clear it is, much pared down from whatever has been going the rounds of the Roman Congregations these last eight years; I was moved to giggles of fond sympathy as I thought of priests I know, both straight and gay, in the light of the wish list of desirable qualities concerning affective maturity, ability to relate well to both women and men, and capacity for spiritual paternity; And I was struck by how much effort had gone into making the tone softer and more muted than in other recent Vatican pronouncements on gay-related matters.

Nevertheless, the text is quite straightforward. It wisely sets out that it is basing itself on what has been the normal public expression of Church teaching on matters gay in the years since the Second Vatican Council. It then gives a very brief précis of the key points of that teaching as represented in John Paul's Catechism. These are first: that all gay sex acts are gravely sinful; and secondly: that being gay is an objective disorder.

Having set this out, the instruction then makes a distinction between men who are gay, and those who are not gay but have engaged in same-sex acts at some time or other. This is a perfectly reasonable distinction easily grasped by common sense (and usually especially clear to gay people): the same-sex horseplay of adolescents, or the circumstantial "homosexuality" of long-term same-sex confinement in prison, on shipboard, or during military service is not the same thing as being gay.

The document then goes on to indicate that the fact of such transitory episodes in the life of a straight male should not be an impediment to admission to seminary provided it is clear that the candidate has long given up being involved in such things. However, those who most of us would nowadays call "gay" are not to be admitted.

Because the instruction refers to people with "deeply-rooted homosexual tendencies", rather than saying "gay people", or "homosexuals", some commentators have claimed that the authors are only referring to a particular sort of troubled or obsessive gay person, but this is, in my view, disingenuous. The terminology is the logical extension

¹ "Concerning the Criteria for the Discernment of Vocations with Regard to Persons with Homosexual Tendencies in View of Their Admission to the Seminary and to Holy Orders" issued by the Congregation for Catholic Education

of the view that there is no such thing as being gay. From this point of view, it is merely the case that some ontologically heterosexual people live with deeply rooted homosexual tendencies which constitute an objective psychological disorder. These are what you and I would call gay people.

The remainder of the document is taken up, as it should be, with comments directed at those responsible for priestly formation. The accompanying letter to Bishops, which was not released at the time of the Instruction's publication, makes clear that this is really where the emphasis of the text is: all religious superiors must apply these norms. No gay men should be admitted to the seminary, and nor should any gay men be teaching those who are in formation in seminaries or religious houses.

The instruction is clear, straightforward and logical and I don't think any service is done by anyone attempting to represent it as saying other than what it does. If they are tempted, then Cardinal Grocholewski's elucidations on Vatican radio and Msgr Anatrella's commentary in L'Osservatore Romano should give them pause for thought.

So let me set out what I think is the way forward in receiving and interpreting this text. First, it is an administrative document from a mid-level Roman dicastery. It chooses to set forth its instructions within the current ordinary teaching of the Church. To that end it bases itself on the Catechism, which is, in this sphere, a mutable compendium of recent teaching rather than anything more authoritative.

I think it does this for two reasons. In the first place, the teaching about who is to be admitted to the seminary has obviously got to be in line with what can clearly be understood to be the ordinary teaching of the Church as it applies to everybody else – this is not a discussion of an arcane teaching reserved to a priestly caste.

And secondly, the Catechism is not supposed to be part of a theological argument. There is a proper sphere for theological argument, and a rather more significant Vatican dicastery which oversees its development. However it is not the proper place of an administrative instruction from a lower office to be other than a reflection of the current doctrinal status quo.

The Instruction's reference to the Catechism is interesting. It resumes its teaching that same-sex acts are always wrong (a very traditional teaching) and then it paraphrases the Catechism to the effect that deep-seated homosexual tendencies are objectively disordered (a very recent teaching). It doesn't bother to quote the link phrase from previous documents to the effect that it is *because* the acts are intrinsically evil, that the inclination *must be considered* objectively disordered. The two teachings are quoted in un-coupled form, and the second, more recent, teaching is quoted without any attempt to back it up.

Now here is the crucial point: it is from this premise of the free-standing second teaching concerning the objective disorder of what you and I call being gay that everything else in this document flows. And yet that teaching is here presented in the most muted form I have seen it in a recent Roman document. It is almost as if some of the many higher authorities which have reviewed this document before allowing this particular dicastery to publish it might be saying something rather like this:

“Look, we know that there are a lot of us, priests, Bishops, Cardinals, seminarians, seminary teachers, and religious superiors who are gay; and there are many of us, whether straight or gay, who don’t in fact buy the line that being gay is an objective disorder. We know that there are many of us who regard being gay as no more pathological than being left-handed. Yet the fact remains that the current ordinary teaching is that being gay is more akin to a personality disorder than to left-handedness. There are improper ways of dealing with the disjunction between that widely held, if rarely expressed, opinion and the current teaching, and there is a proper way. We want to close off one of the improper ways of dealing with this in the hopes that we can all move together toward finding the proper way.

The improper way is to pretend in public that you go along with the teaching while in fact, and in your private life, you do not. The result of going down this route has been many of us encouraging people to join the seminary and priesthood just so long as they become inducted into playing the sort of game that too many of us have been playing for too long. That is, letting it be perfectly clear off the record that being gay is fine, just so long as we don’t say in public that we’re gay, and just so long as we agree not to challenge in public the teaching that being gay is an objective disorder.

Well, treating people in this way is to do something terrible to them: it makes them live a lie as a condition for becoming a minister of the Gospel. And it is to do something terrible to the people who we are supposed to be serving: it creates a clerical caste which has its own, tolerant rules and structures for life within the club, the price for whose maintenance is that its gay members agree not to challenge those who are publicly harsh and intolerant about matters gay whenever these surface in the public arena. In other words, the Catechism teaching is for the plebs, while we have our own hidden teaching, our own safe space, for the elite.

Even a cursory acquaintance with the Gospel reveals that if this is how we have been living, then we should fear for our salvation, and we should be deeply penitent for having gone along with and contributed to this mess. So let us please close down this culture of dishonesty and agree only to accept candidates and form them in the light of the current teaching of the Church rather than in the light of what we think the current teaching of the Church ought to be, but are not brave enough to say so.

For this to happen we have to agree that there is a proper way to deal with the disjunction between the current definition of gay people as defective straight people and the opinion of many of us that this definition is simply not true. And there is such a proper way: finding constructive avenues of raising the question of whether the teaching as it stands *is true*. This would mean studies and questions being formulated by theologians and by experts in the relevant human sciences concerning what is really true in this field, with the open-ended study process backed up by Bishops and Universities who are brave enough to say that such study is necessary. Such studies and questions would obviously respect and adhere to the major teachings of the Church and yet be able to indicate how commonly held opinions thought to be definitive may in fact be more contingent than was thought, and how perceiving this does not put into danger the integrity of the Catholic Faith or the holiness of life into which we are being inducted.

One such area might very well be the question of whether the characterisation of the homosexual tendency in recent official documents is a matter of faith, or if it is a more or less well-founded opinion based on a currently available anthropological and

psychological understanding which might indeed yield to a more complete understanding of how it is that some people are “that way”. It is certainly extremely unlikely, despite some of our more hot headed curial brothers, that any Church document should be read as trying to make a matter of faith out of a highly contingent empirical judgment – we do remember the Galileo case! But a strongly international Church, with many members in many different cultures, is also unlikely to accept the changes in its anthropological presuppositions which new contingent empirical judgments might provoke until such a time as the case for their objectivity is very well made by those who know how to bring together theological discourse, scientific expertise and the simple ring of truth-telling. And that takes time, and study, and bravery.

So this proper way can only be engaged in by those who are prepared to be in a minority position, not have their views respected initially, and have the faith and trust that if what they say is true, then its truth and value for the life of the Church will emerge eventually, however discouraging things might seem now. There is no shortcut to this way. It is the way that is proper to the Gospel we all seek to live by.

It is only when the case is made in such a way that it is obviously held as normal by the sane majority of the Catholic laity – and this may be fast happening in many countries already - that we can reconsider the question of who is to be admitted to the priesthood. The question before us is primarily an anthropological one, affecting all of us as humans, and only secondarily a clerical one, affecting the life of the clergy. So we must prevent the inevitably scandal-ridden discussion of clerical homosexuality becoming a substitute for the real discussion concerning what is true about humans, and which has obvious consequences for civil legislation in all our countries. What we certainly cannot tolerate is what has happened over the last decades, which is that the priesthood has run ahead and quietly allowed its members to live by a quite different understanding of what is true in this area than that which they are expected to uphold in public as the teaching of the Church for the laity.

Because we all know that this is a particularly difficult and delicate area, in which so many of us are involved, so many of us have skeletons in our closet, and so many of us are frightened of blackmail or of being “outed”, we are going to bend over backwards to lower the barrier on this one. So we are setting out the current teaching in its most muted form in the hope that some of you will dare to raise the truth question in a way that will enable us all to move forward. We are also publishing a commentary by a psychologist (with whom we do not expect you necessarily to agree) to underline the fact that the truth in this area is one which is ultimately going to be worked out with relationship to what is empirically true in the disciplines of the human sciences. Please remember that one of the signals we are all getting from the pontificate of Papa Ratzis is that things can be talked about. John Paul’s bar on adult discussion has gone. So we beg you, don’t run and try to protect the old dishonest “don’t ask don’t tell” game we’ve all been playing, and which has had such catastrophic results. Instead, obey the instruction and find ways of enabling us to advance in truth.”

This is how I make sense of the document as a theologian, regarding it as a small-scale administrative intervention within a much broader argument concerning what is true, the proper parameters of which are only now beginning to become imaginable.

Many people will now have to work out for themselves whether to obey the instruction or not, and if so, in what way. My own sense (and I am no ethicist) is that there is a circumstance which would justify a gay seminarian not leaving or a gay seminary professor, or formator within a religious congregation, not resigning. This is if the Bishop of the Diocese with his priestly council, or the religious superior along with the support of his provincial officials, were to state publicly that they will not apply this instruction. And this is because, as a matter of conscience, they do not believe the anthropological premise of current Church teaching in this area to be true. And until the truth of the matter is more clearly elucidated by the proper study of the human sciences they are not going to put the future of the portion of the Church which has been entrusted to them in jeopardy by mortgaging it to such uncertain science as underlies this instruction. Some recent public statements made by Bishops and religious orders seem to be heading this way.

However, there will no doubt be Dioceses or religious congregations which are not prepared to take such a public stance, but merely want the gay seminarian or professor to stay. These will say something like this: “Whatever the document may say, we think that what is important is affective maturity, not sexual orientation. So those gay seminarians or priests who we judge to be affectively mature, capable of celibacy, and upholders of the teaching of the Church are welcome to stay”. They are apparently unaware that they are inducing the seminarians and professors into duplicity. Such Bishops and religious congregations are effectively saying “We don’t really believe in the Church’s teaching in this area, but are not prepared to subject it to rational public questioning, so you are welcome, provided you grow up to be like us, and learn to say in public that you uphold the Church’s teaching in this area, which we all know that you, like we, do not”. Such apparent kindness without courage and conviction leads to the death of souls. In such a case the seminarian or teacher would do far better to heed the Vatican instruction, leave that particular institution and find a more honest sphere in the life of the Church within which to pursue their ecclesial vocation. The Vatican instruction has the merit of clarity and consistency, even if it is entirely mistaken in its empirical evaluation.

Now, if I may turn to my personal response to the Instruction as a priest. For me, as for many of us, this document was long expected. Many priests were severely buffeted by the deeply irresponsible public remarks of papal spokesman Dr Joaquín Navarro Valls a few years back claiming that gay priests were invalidly ordained. This seemed to me a nonsense at the time, and I am glad to see that that issue has formally been laid to rest: being gay does not impede the validity of ordination. I am also somewhat relieved by the obvious statement of reality, implicit in this document and explicit in the accompanying letter: that there are priests who are gay. It is not so long ago that it was thought to be the gripe of weird troublemakers to say so. I hope that this will have the effect of giving a certain freedom to those priests who are psychologically strong enough to be able to say, at last, that this is who they are. After all, there’s not much that can be done about it any more.

I should say that I am not remotely offended by the obvious implication of the document that I should not have been ordained. All those involved in my ordination knew me to be gay, and yet I was ordained during a period when we as a Church were weighed down by a systemic inability to raise the question of whether the anthropological premises of the teaching were true. This obviously had deleterious consequences for the ability of many of us to make psychologically valid vows or promises of celibacy. Official teaching was (and is) that gay people had no choice but

to be celibate anyhow, so what did it matter if I had any sense of calling to be celibate or not. It is of course true that the systemic weight of dishonesty is not merely the fault of dishonest individuals, but has a dishonesty-producing dynamic of its own. Yet, even so, we are many, many men who went along with this system, benefited from it, and bear guilt and confusion through it. And I am one such and in no position to complain if someone says I shouldn't have been ordained.

Nor am I offended by the implication that I am deficient as regards affective maturity. As it happens, this is clearly true. One of the advantages of having been living as a priest who is a juridical non-person over the last ten years is the increased sense of the gap between the generosity of the One calling and the inappropriateness of the ones called. It is quite clear to me that the sacrament of Orders is from God, and works relatively independently of both the affective adequacy and the canonical systems of those upon whom it is bestowed, and I've learned to trust that more and more. I've also been aware that when people have reported a flow of power through my ministry, this has scarcely been related to personal qualities of my own, let alone to any canonical approval of my role. Like most priests, I am experientially aware that the weight of glory is carried in earthen vessels. So I must confess that the instruction's meditations concerning psychological appropriateness for the priesthood did seem to me to emanate from *la Ruritanie profonde*.

However, as a priest thinking of my brother priests, I must say that I am most struck by something about which I've seen little comment. The instruction appears to regard "deep-seated homosexual tendencies" not only as an objective disorder (with which empirical judgment I disagree). Much more strikingly, and I think rightly, its authors appear to regard such tendencies as an objective *fact* about a person. But this means that someone who hides the fact that he is gay, instead loudly proclaiming his undying loyalty to the current magisterium of the Church, is no more suitable to be a seminarian or a seminary rector or instructor than the visibly gay person who expresses some reservations as to the sanity of agreeing with everything the magisterium says all the time.

In other words – and this does seem to me to be important – the document has bitten the bullet of the fact that we are talking about what people *are* and not about *their ideological position*. This means that the instruction cuts at least as far to the right as it does to the left. I'm rather afraid that in recent years many, many young men of a conservative bent have been swept up into places of very conservative formation where piety and an ability to hold and defend implausible magisterial positions were the true hallmark of the John Paul seminarian. Such people were given the impression that the rigorous maintenance of ideological correctness would trump inconvenient details concerning who they might be.

Well, that impression was false. Who you are is an objective truth about you which, irrespective of your ideological standpoint or your delicacy of conscience in admitting to it, bars you from being a seminarian or teaching in a seminary. Heretofore a capacity for a certain dissemblance about who you are was a sign of suitability in conservative circles, as though being gay were properly a subjective matter of the internal forum. But that is no longer tenable. Now that same dissemblance about who you are merely compounds an already insuperable and objective unsuitability.

As a priest, my concern is this: I had the good fortune, ten years ago, to lose everything I held dear, to work through the sense of being stabbed in the back by the

Church of my love, to learn that the consequence of thinking it worth telling the truth in this area is to lose all rights, and somehow to begin to make sense of it all and survive with faith intact and strengthened. But this is a devastating process, and it has taken me several years of clinical depression, unemployment and emotional paralysis to begin to work through it. This process is not something I would wish on anyone else at all.

Since then, I very much hope that many other gay priests of a more flexible mindset than my own will have had plenty of opportunity to think about what they should do, how they should respond, work through issues of “coming out” and so on – they will have lived, after all, through the wall-to-wall news coverage of the priest paedophilia cover-up. They will have become boringly used to hearing that it is all the fault of the gays, or the liberals or dissenting theologians. And they will have had some chance to make psychological adjustments to the new realities that they are facing, and develop the new sort of capacity for honest discourse whose birth within them is a sign of great grace. I have had the privilege of meeting a good number of such priests and sharing retreats with them as they work through precisely these issues for themselves.

Those who will have had no chance to be properly prepared are those who were given the impression that the gay issue was an ideological one, part of a culture war, something to do with what people did (sex acts) or what people said (“coming out”, challenging Church teaching), not what people *are*. Seminarians and seminary professors in this situation, who are going to be among the least able to voice their pain and their protest, are the people who will have the hardest time dealing with feeling stabbed in the back by this Instruction’s recognition that “having deep-rooted homosexual tendencies” is a fact, a fact they have been given no encouragement or vocabulary to deal with; and that, if they are honest, they must therefore go.

I hope to God that proper financial and psychological resources for the long term care and accompaniment of these exiled sheep, many of whom will not have even begun to discuss these issues with their own families, are going to be provided by those who, at least as much as the dishonest liberals they so ardently and publicly despise, have led people up the garden path of unreality. That too is a salvation issue.

Thank you for accompanying me through these ruminations. Let us pray for each other as we accompany each other through this surprisingly hopeful episode in the life of our Church.

Your brother,
James