

The full text of the interview which Brett Salkeld conducted with James Alison and whose abridged version has been published by Commonweal Magazine (<http://www.commonwealmagazine.org>). The full interview will also appear in instalments on <http://vox-nova.com/>.

Part I – questions relating to personal background

- 1. So, who is James Alison? What aspects of your life do you consider most central to your identity? What should people who are curious about you know?**

James Alison is English, and therefore ontologically incapable of answering a question of this sort about himself.

- 2. You were not born a Catholic. What drew you into the Catholic faith? What drew you to religious life? What drew you to academic life?**

*I was brought up in a hard line Evangelical Anglican family – the sort of ambience that would be familiar to US readers as “The Religious Right. For those to whom such names mean something, I was baptised as an infant by John Stott, while family friends included Billy Graham, Chuck Colson and Doug Coe. I wrote about what drew me into the Catholic faith in my most recent book, **Broken Hearts & New Creations**¹:*

What brought me into the church was a mixture of two graces. The first was having fallen in love with a Catholic classmate at school some years earlier. He was and is straight, but I perceived a certain warmth of personality in him which seemed untypical of the world of Protestant schoolboys in which I lived, and I associated that warmth with his being Catholic. The second was a special grace at a time when I was at a very low ebb, having just started to “come out” as a gay man in a very hostile conservative evangelical environment, shortly before going to university. This grace I associate absolutely with the intercession of Padre Pio, since it came at a time when I glimpsed something of the link between his stigmata and the sacrifice of the Mass; and I then knew, and have always since known, the Mass to be no mere memorial supper. This grace, which was accompanied by an astounding joy, literally blew me into the church.

I’m not sure, at this stage, what led me to attempt to join a religious order. On the positive side: the lucidity, intelligence, and serenity of the Dominicans I encountered,

¹ Page 1, also to be found on <http://www.jamesalison.co.uk/texts/eng27.html>

the legacy of St Thomas, the lack of fussy piety – all these gave me some hope that maybe I could emerge from the sense of annihilation which came with my background. On the negative side, I've come to see that in my case, joining a religious order was a decorous way by which someone who considered himself worthless could throw himself away without in fact committing suicide. I had come very close to doing just that while an undergraduate in the late 1970's.

I'm also not sure that I've ever been drawn to the Academic life as such. Theology has been a matter of survival for me. If I have a carapace of academic presentability, it is thanks to the wonderful teachers I had, both among the Dominicans in England and the Jesuits in Brazil. Even more than these, it is the thought of René Girard and that of some of his closest followers and friends which has given me, and continues to give me, something big to gnaw on, something organic from which to work out an intelligence of Faith.

3. You live in Brazil. How has Brazil come to be your home?

I did my theological studies here in the 1980's, and spent long enough in the country to be given a permanent resident visa. When, in 2008, I was given a fellowship grant which set me free to choose where I might live, I opted to return here, knowing that I could do so with no visa hassle, and hoping that I would be able to get involved in helping to set up some sort of Catholic LGBT Pastoral work as well as disseminating the thought of René Girard by writing and teaching. Little by little, these things seem to be developing.

4. You are a theologian, and a fairly influential one at that. Can you tell us a little about your work in theology? What excites you? What questions do you pursue?

Thank you for the "fairly influential" – you must know more than I do! As to my work...what has excited me ever since I came across his thought has been the fecundity for theology of René Girard's mimetic insight concerning desire and violence. The bulk of my work has been an exploration of Girard's view that we desire according to the desire of another, a small insight with formidable consequences both for theology (of God and of grace) and for theological anthropology. Thanks to Girard's insight into the scapegoat mechanism at work throughout human culture it has also become possible to make sense of Jesus' death as being salvific for us in a way which is entirely orthodox and takes us away from imputing any vengeance or retribution to God. Girard has also opened up for me a very rich hermeneutic for Scripture, one which avoids the temptations to Marcionism on the one hand and Fundamentalism on the other. These three areas: God, Salvation and Scripture are the areas which I pursue most relentlessly. The paradigm shift which Girard enabled for me has led me to develop an Adult Introduction to the Christian Faith, a course of twelve sessions that some friends are working to make available to a wider public. I hope this will be a contribution to the New Evangelisation to which we are called. One that is genuinely Good News and not bogged down in moralism.

In addition to these matters, I've been trying, for some time, to make a case for why the Church can indeed, from within its own resources, move out of a false, and often a hateful, characterization of, and set of attitudes towards, gay and lesbian people. I'm convinced that no new evangelisation will get very far while its principal proponents, apparently unaware of the power of the Gospel they preach, remain hobbled by this sacralised taboo. More and more young people seem to pick this up very quickly.

5. What is your current canonical status? What does that mean in practical terms? How does this relate to your status as an “out” homosexual? How does it relate to your public views about homosexuality?

My current canonical status is anomalous. I am a validly ordained priest in good standing, with no penalties or disciplinary matters hanging over me. Although it is many years since I have been associated with the Dominicans, I have not been laicized. So I am not attached to any religious order, and I am not incardinated into any diocese, though I am in principle available to be so incardinated, should a Bishop want to have me. Apparently this is a legal situation which, like limbo, doesn't exist. But yet, I'm in it (and with the paper trail to show how the situation arose)! It leaves me without an Ordinary. And it's not clear to me (and it was not clear to an experienced Cardinal with whom I recently spent 90 minutes analysing my status) what can be done to rectify this anomaly.

As I understand it, the situation is as follows: I have made public a reasoned disagreement with the current third order teaching of the Roman Congregations concerning the “objectively disordered” nature of the “homosexual inclination”. The logical consequences of my view are many, but include the consequence for me personally that my religious vows (since dissolved by the appropriate authority at the conclusion of an amicable process) and my public commitment to celibacy are null. This is because, at the time of my ordination – whose validity a Roman Congregation has confirmed to me - I still believed the Church's characterisation of who I am (a defective heterosexual with an automatic non-negotiable obligation to celibacy) to be true. Thus I made a public commitment while under what I later discovered to be a falsely bound conscience. Such a commitment would be null, in the same way as a forced marriage is null.

Well, either my publicly stated position is false, and my consequent claim of the nullity of my vows is simply the self-deceived convenient thinking of a bad man, in which case, why would any Ordinary want to have me on his books? Or my publicly stated position is true. In which case it is also true that I have no valid vow or promise of celibacy.

In other words, any Ordinary who took me on would not only be accepting that my public position on matters gay is at least defensible by a priest in good standing without any demand for retraction. He would also be taking on board, with full

knowledge of what he was doing, someone whose public commitment to celibacy is null, since taken under a false conscience. Indeed, he would be taking on board someone for whom such a commitment could not validly be made for as long as the Church's current characterisation is in force. It's not clear to me how any Ordinary could do this unless he received some sort of dispensation to do so from the highest authorities in the Church. For, were he to take the responsibility on his own shoulders, he would pretty quickly be liable to reprisals.

I should say, in case it is of interest to your readers, that at no stage since I exposed my conscience in this area to a Roman Congregation in 1996, has any Church authority made any attempt to persuade me of the falsity of my position.

In practical terms, with no one responsible for me, I have to work out for myself how to exercise a priestly ministry without any juridical backing. So I only preside at sacraments when invited to do so by the appropriate authority (which does happen from time to time), or when those present are in a situation of some irregularity themselves (e.g. when I'm leading retreats for gay priests or laity), or know about, and are not scandalised by, the anomaly of my own situation.

6. Most theologians work in a university setting, but you do not. Can you tell us a bit about where and how you work? What factors have led to this situation?

I have been honoured, on two occasions, by being offered Chairs in Universities in the USA. In both cases, the plan fell through owing to factors outside my control. And I should say here that in neither case was the falling through the result of ecclesiastical interference. I work from home, in São Paulo, very much "to order" – planning the next talk, paper or retreat. As to the factors leading to this situation, I would guess that the sort of places which would welcome an openly gay religious teacher would not be much interested in so obviously and straightforwardly Catholic a theologian as myself; while the sort of places which would like a straightforwardly Catholic theologian would find it difficult to contemplate having an openly gay one.

7. Would you prefer to work in a university? What are some practical (social, economic, etc.) implications of not working in a university? What is life like as a kind of freelance academic openly gay Catholic priest?

At this stage, I'm not sure. In one sense, yes I would. I enjoy teaching, and would love to have colleagues, and a sense of belonging to something. I'm also finding myself approached by people who tell me that they would like to study with me, or be supervised by me, and am ashamed that I'm unable to offer them any sort of institutional cover. Some sort of pension plan would be nice too! On the other hand, little that I have seen of my life so far encourages me to think that I would have the staying power to be a responsible faculty member over time – I'm not much of a multi-tasker, and when I'm in productive mode, organisational things suffer. Amongst the

implications of not working in a university is that of living with the realisation of the worthlessness of my discipline in raw economic terms. Trying not to run away from the precariousness that ensues has been quite an asceticism. As my publisher once pointed out to me: "Theology is only for those who have nothing else to fall back on. Those who have something else to fall back on, do". At the moment, and thanks to the generous, no-strings-attached fellowship I have been receiving for the last several years from Imitatio², the organisation set up by the Thiel Foundation to help disseminate the thought of René Girard, life is good!

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Part II – theological questions relating to matters gay

- 1. In reading you, I find you to be a very traditional theologian. You remind me of Joseph Ratzinger because both of you manage to say very traditional things in very fresh ways. But on the question of homosexual acts, you disagree with the teaching of the Church. Can you tell us what you believe about the morality of homosexual acts?**

Thanks for the flattering comparison! But, to the area of our difference: I think you are mistaking me for a moral theologian, or someone who is professionally interested in sexual ethics. I'm honestly not sure that I've ever tried to talk as a theologian about "homosexual acts" per se. My disagreement with the current teaching of the Roman Congregations is about what I consider to be their fundamentally flawed premise of the objectively disordered nature of the inclination. I don't think it's even worth beginning to talk about what acts might be appropriate before there is a recognition that we are talking about people whose way of being cannot properly be deduced negatively from other people's way of being. To do so would be like discussing different moves within a game of rugby while agreeing to hold the discussion under an enforced misapprehension that those moves are somehow defective forms of soccer playing.

- 2. As a traditionally-minded theologian, how do you think your views line up with the tradition on this question? Do you see your views as radically different from the tradition or as a slight modification that maintains the basic principles of Catholic sexual ethics?**

² <http://www.imitatio.org/>

Again, you will have to ask someone else about the sexual ethics angle. I think that my views on Original Sin, Grace, and the real, but difficult nature of we humans actually being able to learn something true about being human that we didn't know before, are very traditional. And yet the consequences of this traditional view are really quite radical, in that they oblige us to face up to a question for which we have no precedent in the tradition. Given the most traditional Catholic understanding of the relationship between nature and grace, I wonder whether it is genuinely possible to defend the following thesis: "The comparatively recent human realization that there is no objective psychological or physiological disorder that is intrinsic to people who we now call gay, makes no difference to our understanding of the forms of flourishing to which such people are called by virtue of being what they are". But that seems to me to be the real question here: is it compatible with Catholic faith to claim that an authentic human discovery of this sort makes no difference to the shape of the flourishing of the people involved?

3. How do questions about homosexuality and homosexual acts relate to other issues in Catholic sexual ethics? In your mind would it be possible, for example, to change Church teaching about homosexual acts while maintaining Church teaching regarding contraception?

The question about acts I'll leave to those whose field of expertise it is, for reasons already mentioned. But as an interested outsider to straight issues, it would seem to me that the recognition of the non-pathological nature of the minority variant in the human condition which you call homosexuality (I dislike the word myself) does inevitably alter the self-understanding of those of the majority condition, affecting how they understand the relationship between the unitive and the procreative dimensions of their loving. It would be very interesting indeed to hear a defence of it making no difference at all.

4. Many Catholics who would be interested to hear more about how the Church could accommodate homosexual persons get nervous because advocates of same-sex relationships and activity tend to have dissenting views on many other questions in sexual ethics. How do you feel about Church teaching on questions like pornography, cohabitation and extra-(including pre-)marital sex, masturbation, contraception and abortion? What are the implications of the fact that many who support a change in Church teaching on homosexual acts would also support change in these other areas?

If you'll excuse me, I'm going to step outside the framing of this question, since it seems to me that to indulge it would be unhealthy. There is an underlying question here, however, which seems to me a very important one, and I'm going to have a shot at saying something about it. This is about the relationship between Catholics, our Teacher, and our teachers. More and more, I sense a need for us, as Catholics, to be able to spell out some of the dimensions of this relationship.

Spending time, as I do, with people on both sides of the Reformation divide, I find strict parallels between the temptations to which either side is prone. Protestantism is tempted to Bibliolatry, and Catholicism is tempted to Ecclesiolatry. Both are forms of idolatry which involve some sort of grasping of security where it is not to be found. This grasping ends up by evacuating the object grasped (whether the Bible, or the Church) of meaning, turning it instead into a projection of the one grasping. The non-idolatrous approach is when we allow ourselves to be reached and held by a living act of communication from One who is not on the same level as either Bible or Church, but of whose self-disclosure those realities can most certainly become signs, of varying degrees of subtlety, and complex normativity. In both the Protestant and the Catholic cases, a sure sign of a pattern of desire locked in grasping is the speed with which we collapse into invidious comparisons such that we acquire our identities over against others in our own group, rather than receiving them together patiently from the one calling us into being.

As a Catholic I am fully committed to the notion that, the Word having become flesh, then the living act of communication is an ecclesial one, made available through bodily signs. In addition, I take it for granted that the Church is prior to me, and that if something is Church teaching, it is true. The presumption is on there being some sort of truthfulness at work in the stated teaching until it becomes clear that this is not the case. The real question for me, as a Catholic trying to think towards the future is this: we know that we have only one Magister, the Incarnate Word of God, and that the authentic teaching office in the Church is not above, but serves, this Living Word. Furthermore, this Living Word has chosen to address us at a level of fraternal equality, making of us his brothers and sisters who have only one Father, God, and are not to call anyone else our father. So as Catholics we are all, at the fraternal level, undergoing the act of communication of the Incarnate word of God, teaching us immediately and in a voice which we know and love. While this teaching is immediate, from the Holy Spirit which has been poured into our hearts, we do have, strictly at the fraternal level, alongside us, not from above us, and as a gift of service to us, prompts from that teaching, and more or less time-sensitive verbal framings of it, mediated to us through those who have been consecrated sacramental signs as Bishops, with a special place in that prompting for Peter's successor as Bishop of Rome. This is a highly sensitive eco-system of communication, one whose salvific flow can very easily be distorted by idolatry.

And here the shocking reality of the last decades intrudes. How do we hold fast to the long, slow, rich experience of Jesus teaching us in and as Church as we become aware of how often the consecrated sacramental signs seem to be, if anything, even more riven by the spirit of this age than we? Even more liable to allowing the richness of the faith to become secondary to culture war imperatives, institutional self-interest and the search for corporate approval? And please notice that this observation is independent of which side of the culture wars anyone is on! One of the things that is coming upon us, and which I don't see us being happy to take on board, is the realization that teaching in the Church is a very rare and wonderful gift in which a person who knows him or herself approved by the only One whose approval counts, is

able to induct people into living out what is true starting from the teacher's own path of having been illuminated, converted, and convinced by the One who is True. More often than this, we get instead those whose sense of approval seems limited to the juridical, scrambling to keep at least that juridical approval alive by repeating, and demanding consent to, a priori positions, while constantly looking over their shoulder. The reason that I say that I don't see us being happy to take this on board is that it leads to the uncomfortable realization that there is no such thing as being taught, and thus being faithful to the Church's teaching, that does not include our resting for ourselves, quietly, in the presence of the One who loves us and gave himself for us, and from that non-invidious and non-rivalrous space, making the effort to test all things, and to hold fast to what is good. I think that re-imagining the ecclesial shape of Christ teaching in our midst, exploring the sort of act of communication genuine Divine teaching is, and understanding better the relationship between the Teacher, those taught, and those charged to be signs of truthfulness, is going to be one of the real challenges of the next generation.

5. Are there any things that the Catholics who support your view on homosexuality do that drive you crazy? Do you think that some efforts towards change are counterproductive? What do you recommend instead?

Yes. The silence of those in positions of influence in the Church who know, or have a strong suspicion, that being gay is a non-pathological minority variant in the human condition drives me crazy, far crazier than I am driven by any loud-mouthed purveyor of hateful nonsense. Of course I also think that many of the kinds of protests, demonstrations, kiss-ins and so on that we see surrounding Church events in this sphere are counterproductive (though these are only rarely organized and carried out by gay Catholics). Such things feed ecclesiastical delusions of holy victimhood. They effectively give Church leaders an excuse to put off the slow, humble task of beginning to imagine forms of truthfulness of speech. Few people on either side of such rows seem to have enough faith to be able to imagine receiving an identity peacefully, rather than grabbing one through mutually convenient provocation. I don't really have any recommendations instead, at the tactical level. Only prayer and the Holy Spirit can lead those who are afraid to tell the truth into the awkward path of learning to do so.

6. Much of the discussion in Catholic circles about homosexuality revolves around the distinction between homosexual persons and homosexual acts. The Church condemns the acts as disordered (and calls any orientation towards disordered acts disordered), but insists that homosexual persons are not, as such, disordered. What are your thoughts on this distinction? What is the relationship between persons, orientations, and acts?

This does seem to me somewhat of a Ptolemaic discussion in a Copernican universe. Of course there is a notional distinction between talking about what someone is, and talking about what someone does. The question is not "does the notional distinction

exist?” but “what use is being made of the fact that such a distinction can be formulated?” When the distinction is made in the discussion of gay people to which you refer, it is subservient to a conviction brought in from elsewhere – that of the objectively disordered nature of the inclination.

Think of it this way. There is a distinction between left-handedness and the act of writing left-handedly. For most of us the distinction remains exactly that, and has no moral consequences. We would understand that a left-handed person forced to write right-handedly owing, say, to having their left arm in a plaster cast, or a right-handed person forced to write left-handedly for analogous reasons, would, with some difficulty, be able to learn to do so. These people would in some sense be acting “contra natura”. But the use of the hand appropriate to their handedness would be entirely unremarkable, and if we used words to describe it at all, they would be words like “typical” or “natural”. Now, imagine that, involved in a Catholic discussion, you find yourself addressing a left-handed person. You say: “Any left-handed writing you do is intrinsically wrong; and in fact the inclination we call left-handedness must be considered objectively disordered.” The only justification for using the distinctions in this way is if you have received, from quite other sources, the sure knowledge that right-handedness is normative to the human condition, anything else being some sort of defect from that norm, and yet you don’t want entirely to condemn the person who has a more or less strong tendency to left-handed writing.

No, it seems to me quite patent that here we have an unwieldy bid to fit a reality into an acceptable framework, rather than learning from reality how to adjust a now unreliable framework. Any left-handed person, faced with the above logic, would know that the one addressing them really does regard them as a defective right-handed person, rather than a normal left-handed person. Any insistence on the part of the one who is addressing them that they are not calling them “disordered” as a person would be seen to be the humbug that it is.

So the only real question is: is it true that being straight (or right-handed) is normative in such a way that knowledge about being gay (or about left-handedness) should principally be derived negatively from the normative reality? If it is not true, then of course you are left with a notional distinction between being gay (or left-handed), and acts typical to that way of being, but the distinction has no moral significance in itself. What will give the acts their moral value will be a range of other considerations to do with human flourishing.

- 7. Some time ago I engaged in a lengthy e-mail exchange with the editor-in-chief of Lifesitenews because one of their articles had claimed that it was the teaching of the Catholic Church that homosexuality was a psychological disorder. After much wrangling, I was successful in getting them to edit the article. It is not Catholic teaching that homosexuality is a psychological disorder. In fact, my reading of the Catechism is that the official stance on this question is one of**

agnosticism. We don't know the causes of homosexuality. What do you think the Church's position is on this question? What are your beliefs about the origins of homosexuality? What factors strike you as the most important? What are your thoughts about homosexuality that has roots in sexual trauma or other aspects of a broken past?

*I'm so glad that I wasn't involved in your discussion with Lifesitenews! To judge by what you say, I think that I would simultaneously agree and disagree with both of you. Personally I think that the current teaching of the Roman Congregations in this area is of unstable meaning. The Congregations both insist that the inclination itself must be considered objectively disordered, and yet fight shy of committing themselves to a sense in which this claim has incidence in reality. Well, either their claim means something, in which case it enters into the realm of that which can be studied and understood by analogy with other objective disorders, having as its backdrop a clear claim about the proper order by comparison with which it is some sort of defect. Or, on the other hand, the claim has no bite on any reality that can be measured, and is simply the verbally necessary logical ground which the CDF must stake out if it wants to maintain that the acts flowing from the inclination are intrinsically evil. This would be a consequence of their knowing that in Catholic Theology, acts flowing from a neutral or positive inclination could not be intrinsically evil, but would be good or bad according to use. So, in the one case, the claim would be falsifiable by the human sciences, and in the other, we would be obliged to derive our understanding of what **is** from what is **forbidden**, or "**can never be approved**", a voluntarist position smuggled in by the back door, and the claim would be something like a de facto defection from Catholic teaching concerning grace, nature, faith and reason as set out with admirable clarity by Pope Benedict in his Regensburg address.*

Now a teaching of unstable meaning that induces confusion is not of Christ. So I am sympathetic to those who attempt to cash out the teaching by claiming that it does actually mean something straightforward rather than allowing it to sound as though it means something rather ominous without ever allowing what that actually is into the clear light of day. I guess that your interlocutor at Lifesitenews was trying to do the former by claiming that the Church teaches that the inclination is a psychological disorder (and anyone who listened to the Vatican officials attempting to interpret the 2005 document barring admission of gay men to the priesthood would have a hard time denying that at least those officials, who were never reprimanded publicly for their positions, regarded the inclination as some sort of psychological disorder).

I think that the Archbishop of Brussels, Mgr Léonard, was trying to do something similar when he claimed recently that being gay is analogous to being anorexic. We would all agree that anorexia is a pathology of desire, one that can appropriately be described as an objective disorder. The local press jumped on the Archbishop for producing this analogy, a little unfairly I thought. While I consider him to be entirely mistaken in his view, he should nevertheless at least be commended for attempting to treat the official position as if it were in the business of trying to say something true. For if that position means anything from which real decisions about life-choices, acts

and so forth can be made, it means that being gay must be regarded as analogous to something like anorexia, and must not be regarded as analogous to something like left-handedness. (I take this latter to be a paradigm case of a regularly occurring non-pathological minority variant in the human condition). When someone makes a clear affirmation about something, the docile conscience can then say: "A truth claim is being made in an area which is available to study. Is it true?" By contrast with this, the refusal either to confirm or to deny that a truth claim is being made, while allowing a negative pall to hang over many people's sense of identity, as if coming from God, suggests to me the presence of a spirit other than the Holy.

My own belief is that being gay is a regularly occurring non-pathological minority variant in the human condition, and that an appropriate analogy is left-handedness, which also, as it happens, used to be regarded as some sort of defect in a normatively right-handed humanity. I've arrived at this position having, as an educated amateur, followed the studies and arguments back and forth over many years, and notice that this position is tending to be confirmed massively the more that we know and see of gay people who are able to live their lives openly. I hope I would be open to any emerging evidence that my view was wrong, though I'm aware how easily any of us can become locked into convenient self-deceptions and self-reinforcing ideological cocoons. Like all other educated amateurs gathering what I can from disciplines in which I have no expertise, what I know about the aetiology of same-sex desire is regularly being updated as the field advances, and I'm sure that we are in the early days of scientific knowledge about such things.

As part of my personal history, I should say that I remember my own relief on realizing that not all searches for causality are helpful. Part of my motivation in the search for a cause of being gay earlier in my life was the need to find "something that has gone wrong that I can put right", and it was good, spiritually fruitful, to discover that the question: "what went wrong in where I came from?" is actually not a useful one. More helpful is to ask: "how can I enrich where I'm going starting from where I am, however this has come about?" I wish I could find the reference, but I remember a quote from St Augustine, tired of nit-picking arguments about the finer details of Original Sin, insisting that "it's not where we come from that is important, but where we are going" or words to that effect.

*As to the Church's "having a position" on the aetiology of same-sex desire, I can't imagine it having one, or wanting to have one, other than that of being available to learning from what is true in whatever field that truth emerges. What I imagine the Church will want to develop, as it is able to take on board what we are learning to be true about gay and lesbian people, is some sense of "what is being gay or lesbian **for**?" A sense of the way that something that genuinely **is** has some sort of capacity to point up the glory of God by a flourishing that is appropriate to it. I take it that consideration of this is indispensable for us as Church, given our faith that our Creator and Redeemer are one, and that there is an organic link between the Creation and the New Creation.*

As to the current “status quaestionis”, I’m pretty much convinced by the evidence of the last fifteen or twenty years of research which show that the biological configurations that will manifest in a person being gay or lesbian are in place pre-natally. Having spent time in the late eighties and early nineties of the last century flirting with “ex-gay” ministries and their literature, it now seems to me a mistake to think that sexual trauma, abuse, or any post-natal psychological factors are causative of a same-sex orientation, though I think that such things can indeed affect the way any of us receives into our lives, and are able to live out, that pre-natal configuration of our capacity for love.

8. What is your view of bisexuality? What are your beliefs about its origins? How is it related to homosexuality?

I find it useful to distinguish between bisexuality as orientation and bisexuality as observation of practice. Many people seem to use the term loosely to refer to people who, on the face of it, appear to be either straight or gay, and yet who have, at one time or other, engaged in the sexual practices typical of the other orientation. So, for instance, a person within an opposite-sex marriage or relationship either leaves that relationship for a same-sex relationship or is found to have been having same-sex relationships concurrently with the opposite sex relationship. While such people are clearly functional in bed with both sexes, I don’t think that this automatically counts as bisexuality, any more than do the same-sex experiences of straight prisoners, or sailors, for instance, while in enforced confinement from the opposite sex, and who revert to type the moment an opposite-sex partner becomes a possibility. As far as I can tell from more or less keeping abreast of the studies: entirely independently of all the factors which might lead to situational bisexual behaviour, there is a small minority of people who are genuinely bisexual by orientation, and who get scant comprehension from those of either of the more obvious orientations. From what I have read, there is a gender imbalance in this, with more women than men being bisexual. But here, as in all these fields, I am nothing more than a slightly informed amateur – and have no beliefs or knowledge at all about aetiology or how that relates to other orientations.

9. Would I be right to assume that you advocate for Church recognition of same-sex marriage? Do you see any value in maintaining that same-sex marriage and opposite-sex marriage are, in fact, two different kinds of relationships?

Well, let’s make some distinctions! I am greatly pleased when I see the Church, in its members, if not yet in its hierarchy, coming to recognise that there is no good reason to deprive same-sex couples of access to civil marriage. However, I think it is far from obvious how we, as Church, should celebrate these acts of union liturgically: whether in a rite that is similar or analogous to that for the sacrament of matrimony, or with something rather different. And I don’t think it will be obvious for some time.

As you might guess from what I’ve said previously, I’m not sure that this is a discussion that is even worth having until the basic parameters can be agreed upon. Those who

are committed to the notion that the people about whom they are talking are indulging an objective disorder, are impenitent practitioners of grave sin, and thus would be seeking to sanctify something that can never be approved, are not useful conversation partners if we are in fact dealing with people who are acting appropriately in seeking a form of flourishing that is an entirely legitimate option given who they have found themselves to be. Once we've agreed that we can talk at all, then I would say that from my perspective, the appropriate liturgical shape by which we bless God for the gift of the love between two same-sex spouses, and beseech God's blessing to incarnate itself in their lives for us as Church, is something for which we have little jurisprudence as yet! And the same is true for our understanding of the analogies and differences between the relationships of same-sex married couples, and those opposite-sex couples who choose to live out the sacrament of matrimony (with its concomitant implications of the "munus" of the "mater"). It is the protagonists of these relationships who will, by lives lived publicly over time, yield for us knowledge of what is of their essence. No sense trying to hurry what is necessarily going to be a process of learning over several generations.

What is certainly true is that no useful purpose is served by seeing these realities as in principle in rivalry with each other, as though same-sex marriage somehow cheapens opposite-sex marriage. Likewise, should it indeed turn out that marriage between two baptised persons of the same sex is not sacramental in exactly the same sense as opposite-sex marriage, then whatever form of sacramentality does turn out to be proper to same-sex couples would certainly not be "second best" to the sacrament of marriage. God's summons to flourishing involves people being called in tailor-made ways, not forced to endure invidious comparisons. There are many mansions in God's house, and he invites each of us to discover what is his plan for each one of us – we are called by name, not by category.

10. You have expressed the belief that Pope Benedict is slowly preparing the way for change in this area. What do you expect such change actually would look like? Before giving such an interpretation, do you consider whether or not "blowing his cover" helps or hinders the Pope's aims in this area?

As you request: to your last point first. Talk of "blowing his cover" might be thought to impute a certain deviousness of aims to the one whose cover is at risk of being blown. Now there certainly are, and have been, highly devious ecclesiastics of all stripes, but I have no particular reason to think Pope Benedict is one such. Subtlety and deviousness are not the same thing. And the sort of change that might be made in this area is one which could only be made by allowing a variety of apparently unrelated things to come into the open. Each step of bringing something into the open is an honest step, defensible on its own terms, and not necessarily, though maybe, tied to a particular overall "aim" by a particular individual. Yet in any institution, especially one with a juridical self-understanding, small changes towards openness in apparently unrelated

fields can have the effect of together producing rather unexpected changes whose true dimensions are perhaps only understood thereafter.

Let me have a shot at explaining a little why I take the view that you mention. And let me start by saying that I have never met Benedict in person, and am not the recipient of privileged information about him. It is as a long-time reader of his books and a distant outsider to the inner counsels of those involved in the governance of our Church that I attempt to understand what's happening, from a mixture of prayer, hope, and gut. I'm moved in these by the conviction that since the Church is inspired by the Holy Spirit, and since everything that is true, whatever its apparent source, comes from the Holy Spirit, therefore there must be a way in which the Church can find its way into truthfulness in this area. This, despite the formidable fears and anger which come to the surface as authentic new knowledge emerges in whose light it becomes clear that previous views were based on taboo, and thus are not from God.

There is, however, a personal element to this for me. Since I first read it, many years ago, something from the CDF's document "Donum Veritatis"³, has resonated deeply with me. I've emboldened the part which most touched me.

It can also happen that at the conclusion of a serious study, undertaken with the desire to heed the Magisterium's teaching without hesitation, the theologian's difficulty remains because the arguments to the contrary seem more persuasive to him. Faced with a proposition to which he feels he cannot give his intellectual assent, the theologian nevertheless has the duty to remain open to a deeper examination of the question.

For a loyal spirit, animated by love for the Church, such a situation can certainly prove a difficult trial. It can be a call to suffer for the truth, in silence and prayer, but with the certainty, that if the truth really is at stake, it will ultimately prevail.

I take it that Ratzinger was the author of this, and, if you will forgive the perhaps delusional subjectivity, I have always felt since then, as I have tried wrestling with the gay issue in the Church, no doubt in bungling ways, that I was somehow in spiritual communion with him by remembering this formulation.

Nevertheless, my starting point in my reading of Benedict is hypothetical. I take it that part of any Pope's job description is enabling the Church to remain in and indeed advance in, the route to ever-greater truthfulness, and to do so in a way that maintains the unity of the Church and doesn't scandalize the faith of the weaker brethren. From what I have read by him, I consider Benedict to be particularly well suited to the subtleties and complexities of this task. Though this is, maybe, a theologian's pleasure at that comparative rarity: a theologian on the Papal throne! Given the job

³ On the Ecclesial vocation of the Theologian (para 31)
http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19900524_theologian-vocation_en.html

description, and supposing, as I do, that we are currently hobbled by an area of untruthfulness in matters gay, with a range of consequences for the lives of all of us, then what "route to truthfulness" in this sphere might be imaginable as being congruent with the life of the Church? Let us remember that there is absolutely no mechanism obviously available to the Church by which it can move on here. Anyone who thinks that a Pope might just get up and announce a change of teaching of this sort gives too much credit to the mirror delusions of Protestant or Ultramontane polemic. So a first consideration might be "what sort of change are we talking about?" It seems to me that we are talking not about a change of doctrine, but about a changed understanding of the anthropological field in which the traditional doctrine has to produce its fruit. My claim would be that the strict maintenance of existing doctrine concerning grace, nature, faith and reason leads us to absorb without fear the full dimensions of authentic new learning about being human. This has inevitable consequences for our understanding of what forms of living are capable of bearing witness to God's glory.

A second consideration might be this: any real change in this area is going to be voluntary. It's only going to take place if we want it to. By which I mean that those who want to hold on to an entirely negative view of gay people and their lives will always be able to, and they will always be able to use Jewish and Christian sources, both Scriptural, and historical, as back-ups for their positions. The question is not whether it is legitimate for Christians to hold to such positions. The question is whether Christians have to hold to such positions as intrinsic to being Christian. And the answer to that question is going to be found in a journey of discovering for ourselves what is true, one where that which is true is attractive to us, draws us in, because it is true, so that we end up wanting to be able to live truly, and are prepared to undergo the hard work of wading through the debris of what seemed to be true but isn't. The One who loves us desires in us, and strengthens our desire to want to live truthfully, so that our aliveness is His glory. The end result will not be our simply knowing something true, but our enjoying the greater richness of life which loving being truthful brings.

The most that Church authority can do, in such circumstances, it seems to me, is gradually to allow the contingent elements of Church teaching in this area to come to be seen for what they are: contingent. If you suddenly tell some one, as if from a position of authority, that a belief they used to hold as in some sense sacred, is wrong, and they are no longer to hold it, you run a grave risk of scandalizing them. It is both much kinder, and a much richer exercise in persuasion when new knowledge is socialized for us in such a way that it gradually becomes clear to us that we can, without loss of faith or integrity, move into the new understanding. A positive demonstration of what things look like "now that you don't have to hold that view any more" is a much better exercise in teaching than the negative instruction "You must no longer hold that view".

Let me give you an example: It has been traditional, at least in the last millennium, to read Romans 1 as referring negatively to what the CDF now calls "homosexual acts". Curiously, I think that the verses often read as to do with "homosexual acts" have had

less of a stranglehold on the ecclesiastical psyche than the very last verse of Romans 1 where the text says:

Though they know God's decree that those who do such things deserve to die, they not only do them, but approve those who practise them.

If you see how often the notion of "approval" comes up in ecclesiastical discussions about anything gay, you get a sense of how this verse haunts, with a charge of emotional blackmail, those who might want to have honest discussion. The blackmail works by making a huge distinction: between on the one hand the doing of "such things" (understood to be "homosexual acts"), about which ecclesiastical culture prefers, and is capable of, considerable discretion; and, on the other hand, any attempt to talk about this matter with other than condemnation. The result is that any attempt to verbalise that maybe there are legitimate forms of relationship in this sphere is considered automatically to fall foul of a clear stricture of the Apostle, which is beyond appeal.

*Well, for us, and especially for our hierarchs, to be able to move on here, it would have to become clear that while you **can** read Romans in this way if you want to, you are not obliged to. And there are two ways in which an apparent obligation to read a passage in a certain way can be undone. One is positively, by showing that the passage can entirely convincingly be read in such a way that gives a rather different take on what is being described. And one negatively, by refusing, for good reasons, to allow certain categories in ancient texts to be read as strictly equivalent to modern realities. As it happens, we have permission to make both of these moves with Romans 1, if we want to, in documents which have appeared under the signature of Joseph Ratzinger. As prefect of the CDF he signed the Pontifical Biblical Commission's 1993 document on the interpretation of the Bible in the Church. In this admirable document's section on fundamentalism we are told that the Catholic reader of Scripture should reject any attempt at "actualisation" of the text in a direction contrary to justice and charity, and a non-exhaustive list of examples is provided. So, no easy homologization of ancient and modern realities.*

Then, in his first encyclical, Benedict gives a very fine reading of Romans 1 which models for us a way of talking about the realities described: as functions of the falsely eroticized and idolatrous ancient pagan world. This reading makes no necessary linkage to any understanding of "homosexual acts as such". It is entirely compatible with the following observation: the fact that some, or many, of the falsely eroticized and idolatrous behaviours in question may have included sexual acts between people of the same sex, has no more relevance to a discussion of "homosexual acts as such" than a disapproving description of the mass rapes in the recent war in Bosnia has to a discussion of "heterosexual acts as such".

Now, no one I know is saying that these two recent Church texts, separately or together, force us no longer to read Romans 1 as it has been read. However, taken together, they do offer the person who is looking for it, the chance to break out of what

seemed like a form of ecclesiastical emotional blackmail – the watertight link between “homosexual acts” and the “horror at approval”.

Let us imagine a Bishop, called to Rome to answer for an “overly benign” LGBT pastoral work in his diocese, and from whom is demanded a public “disapproval” of “homosexual acts”. This Bishop can now, in good conscience, and with no fear that he is stepping outside the Catholic Faith, indicate, following on from Benedict’s encyclical, that he disapproves of all the things that Paul disapproved of in the relevant passage. The Bishop can acknowledge that while a reading of this passage as referring to “homosexual acts as such” is compatible with tradition, it can no longer be obligatory to read it in this way. For a conscience formed by Catholic teaching about how to read the Bible can no longer regard it as obligatory to “actualise” ancient categories in such a way as to have an impact contrary to justice and charity on the lives of real modern people. Thus it must be perfectly possible, in good conscience, and with firm support from Catholic sources, to refuse the link between the things “never to be approved” and “homosexual acts as such” which has been a structuring element of that haunting ecclesiastical emotional blackmail.

The Bishop in question can now go on to say, in good conscience, and with the reasonable expectation of being appreciated for saying it, that the question of the approval, or disapproval of the acts in question need no longer depend on sources extrinsic to the matter at hand (like a possible, but no longer a mandatory, reading of Romans 1). Instead, the evaluation can properly be derived from what turns out to be true about the people and the acts in question. In other words, the way has been opened for Catholic ecclesiastics to do two things which up until now have been held to be incompatible. On the one hand, to talk about what forms of same-sex relationship might or might not be appropriate given what we are learning about the non-pathological minority variant status of such people. And on the other, completely and honestly to go along with the traditional attribution to the Apostle of a horror of people “approving” the things he had in mind when he wrote Romans 1.

I should say, for the record, that I myself have a rather different take on what is being said by Paul in the Romans passage, and his reasons for saying it⁴. I would like to make clear here that I am not trying to push my particular reading of Romans 1. I’m trying to indicate the consequences for ecclesiastical life of an approach to a traditional reading. This approach has been made available by two modern teaching documents of irreproachable Catholicity, both of which appear under one man’s signature.

*Well this is just one example of two small, separate, openings, each one true and honest in its own terms, creating ecclesiastical space **if someone wants to go through it**. We could go on in this vein, but I’ve already gone on far too long!*

⁴ To be found here: <http://www.jamesalison.co.uk/texts/eng15.html>

11. One reason that many people find such a reading of Benedict implausible is because of his stance on not ordaining gay men to the priesthood. What is your take on Vatican arguments against ordaining gay men? What role do you think Benedict himself plays here? How does your own status as a gay priest impact your reading of this?

I think Church authority is probably right, for the moment, to warn honest gay men away from entering priestly life, though my reasons for thinking this are far from those publicly put forward by the Vatican. I do not think that the Church is able, at this time, to offer an honest gay man a limpid context for vows or promises; it will require him to maintain in public and as being in some sense from God, a characterisation of who he is that he very probably knows to be false. Should he fail to maintain that façade, he will find himself vulnerable to violence of different sorts from seriously disturbed closet cases. The pathology of such people can only rarely be faced down by diocesan or religious superiors, since all involved are beholden to a "Church teaching" which plays to just that pathology. Furthermore, until such a time as the Church can recognise publicly that it is not true that all gay people are obligated, by virtue of being who they are, to celibacy, then there will always be a question mark over the genuinely voluntary nature of their promises or vows. A genuine promise of celibacy involves leaving a good (the possibility of marriage) for a good (celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom), but current ecclesiastical wisdom has it that a gay man would be leaving an evil (a possible same-sex partnership) for a good (celibacy) which it is his obligation to pursue anyhow.

I found it interesting that while the Letter sent to Bishops accompanying the 2005 document did not put into question the validity of ordination of gay men in the past, it did allow it to be understood that there is considerable room for uncertainty regarding the validity of their vows or promises of celibacy (hence the very gentle request to such men that they should "remember" their promises or vows). Naturally, the uncertainty was the result, in the Congregation's eyes, of the objectively disordered nature of these men's inclinations, a disorder rendering the fulfilment of the vows too heavy a burden for such people. My view is that the genuine room for uncertainty as to the validity of the vows is more properly related to the ecclesiastical culture kept alive by the false characterisation at the root of the teaching. Nevertheless, as to the uncertainty, we are in agreement.

As to the relationship of Benedict to the document, here I was told by a CDF insider that the document which left the CDF, after its then Prefect's editing, was very considerably toned down by comparison with the draft that arrived at the CDF from its authors in Catholic Education. This feeds into my oft-stated sense that Benedict is by instinct a temperature-lowerer in this area. I interpret the document as one of the last blasts of the previous pontificate, a particularly sad period in the Church's dealing with gay people.

As to my own take on all this, talking as a priest who is an out gay man, well, I commented publicly on the matter at the time, and it's "in the record" as it were⁵. What I noted at the time of the 2005 document, and continue to think to be true, is that the issue to be dealt with here, is in the first place a truth issue about being human, and only way down the line is it an issue about the clergy. Only when, as a normal part of Church life, we have got used to what is true about being gay and lesbian, what relationships are good, and so forth, will it make sense to revisit the issue of the clergy. Since only then will there be a limpid context for promises or vows; will there be a proper presumption of the validity of free choice in pursuing a particular lifestyle; and will the priest in question be able to live transparently, with that stable characteristic which is sexual orientation being of little significance. Except it be noted as part of that particular person's giftedness for serving Christ's people.

Until all this is resolved, people like me find ourselves, I guess, muddling along through a messy transitional period in the life of the Church, resting in Our Lord's good cheer!

Lent 2012

⁵ Chapter 14 of *Undergoing God* and <http://www.jamesalison.co.uk/texts/eng23.html>