



The “Communities in Conversation” 2006 Project: Talking about Christianity and Sexuality

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Until recently, issues at the intersection of homosexuality and religion have been primarily – if not exclusively – examined from the standpoint of the religious right. More voices need to be included during these debates in order for people to be fully informed. When high-placed administrators in the Catholic Church made empirically falsifiable statements regarding the ordination of gay men and of same-sex adoptions, many of us in the USF community thought that it was time to examine the gay Catholic experience. The USF LGBTQ Caucus and the Lane Center decided to join together to create a series of events discerning the role of gay and lesbian Catholics in church and society. Eventually this series evolved into a broader discussion about Christianity and sexuality, including the topics of women and divorced persons in the Catholic Church and issues of sexuality in African-American communities.

For our first event on February 12, 2006, we partnered with Most Holy Redeemer Church in the Castro. Almost 300 people came on an unusually warm and sunlit Sunday afternoon to listen to Fr. James Alison address the question: “Is It Ethical to Be Catholic?” James was puzzled by our question and I am sure others were, too. He began his talk:

The question you have asked me to address is, to my mind, a somewhat surprising one, one which has had me scratching my head. You see, it would never have crossed my mind to wonder whether it is ethical to be Catholic, and I'm not at all sure that I understand where the question is coming from. I guess that the reason for my bafflement is that I've never met anyone who became a Catholic for ethical reasons.

Alison went on to provide a very thoughtful and entertaining discussion of the pain and joy of being gay and Catholic, focusing on the importance of grace and faith. (All the talks mentioned in this article are posted on the Lane Center website, www.usfca.edu/lanecenter.)

I would like to answer Fr. Alison's initial question from the standpoint of a gay individual. Why ask if it is ethical to be Catholic? For a while, one could read negative statements made by religious leaders about homosexuality every day in the newspaper. What does a gay Catholic do when Catholic Church officials are actively discriminating against them? Of course, gay Catholics can — and often do — leave the Roman Catholic Church to join other religious institutions. Others, both gay and straight individuals, simply ignore statements by Church officials.

But is it really that simple? It may not be easy to be passive when Church officials are not only telling you to refrain from an activity (e.g., premarital sex), but are also saying that — as a human person — you are fundamentally “disordered.” Is it ethical to ignore what these officials are saying? Is it ethical to pretend that it does not matter?

James Alison is the voice of the practicing gay Catholic who does not want to leave the Church — and so we asked him. Many of the audience members told us that they found Fr. Alison's response very comforting. We also asked Vincent Pizzuto, Ph.D., a USF faculty and LGBTQ Caucus Board member, and Julie Henderson, USF student and Queer Alliance member, to respond to Fr. Alison. Their presentations gave voice to those who believe that Fr. Alison is too positive and optimistic about the gay Catholic experience. The combination of voices made for an inspiring and thought-provoking afternoon.

For our second event on March 26, we partnered with St. Agnes Church in the Haight-Ashbury district to present the forum: “Alienated Catholics: Establishing the Groundwork for Dialogue.” The event examined the experiences of Catholics who, though deeply committed to their faith tradition, feel an ongoing sense of alienation from the Church leadership and the larger community — as women, as gay persons, and as divorced persons. Almost 100 people listened to three presentations addressing marginalization.


Catherine (Kitty) Murphy, Ph.D., a professor in the Department of Religious Studies at Santa Clara University, laid out the conflict she sees between women's experiences in the world and those in the Catholic Church:

At the same time that more and more women were working outside the home and professionalizing their work within the Church, at the same time in other words that women's options in at least this country were expanding by

necessity and by choice, at the same time that the Church hierarchy itself was expanding the ministerial roles available to women in the 1983 revised Code of Canon Law, the Pope was promoting the notion that virginity and motherhood were the two roles through which women could be fulfilled, and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith was asserting that women could never be ordained as priests—that this matter could not even be discussed.

We also invited Vincent Pizzuto, Ph.D., back from our first

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forum to continue his discussion of the gay Catholic experience. He drew a sharp distinction between the Christian tradition and interpretations of that tradition:

Thus, despite coming up against Magisterial teachings to the contrary, the alienation which homosexual Catholics experience is not rooted in that which they believe to be intrinsic to Christian tradition itself, but rather, is associated with an erroneous interpretation of tradition imposed by the teaching authorities of the Church. To put it plainly, we simply disagree with the Church's interpretation of Scripture and Tradition which we otherwise experience as affirming. I suspect that many of us are able to finally endure this dichotomy because we are convinced that at its very roots Christianity is most essentially relational and thus ultimately rejects nothing which bears the fruit of loving relationship.

Finally, Cameron Ayers, S.J., pastor of St. Agnes Church, broadened the discussion by focusing on the experiences of divorced Catholics who, feeling crestfallen, have fallen away. He asked those who felt alienated, "Do you want to be re-integrated into the family?," and concluded by reminding all that there are places, like St. Agnes Church, where all Catholics are welcome.

For our third and final event, we decided that we needed to explore the interaction between religion and sexuality in other faith communities. We have partnered with the African American Studies Program to bring Bishop John L. Selders to USF. Rev. Selders is an ordained minister serving in the United Church of Christ, pastor of Amistad United Church of Christ, Lecturer for Supervised Ministries at Yale Divinity School, and member of the Human Right Campaign's Religion Council. His talk, "The Black Church, Sexuality, and HIV/AIDS" will take place on September 29 at noon in Lone Mountain 100.

The goal of this series has been to promote a broader discussion of the issues that included members from both academic and faith communities. We are very grateful to the USF Jesuit Foundation — committed to "faith that works for justice in the world" and to the "Ignatian ideal of 'finding God in all things'" — for providing financial assistance for these "Communities in Conversation" events. As the events evolved, the "communities" involved broadened from the initial concerns of gay and lesbian Catholic persons to those of Catholic women and divorced persons to our friends in African-American churches. We hope that these conversations were only initial stages in continuing ones that will stretch not only across the USF community but also throughout the Bay Area. ■

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For more information on the "Communities in Conversation" project please visit: www.usfca.edu/lanecenter/events/conversation

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- 1 Teresa M. Shaw provides an entertaining and accessible description of the Greek medical models and early Christian adaptation of them in her book, *The Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998). See also Lesley Dean-Jones, *Women's Bodies in Classical Greek Science* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), especially pages 41-109.
- 2 Aristotle, On the Generation of Animals 1.17-20; 2.1-3, in *De Partibus Animalium I and De Generatione Animalium I*, trans. D. M. Balme (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972) 34-52, 58-65, 140-49, 155-65.
- 3 Thomas Laqueur, "Destiny is Anatomy," in *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990) 25-62.
- 4 John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* [On the Dignity and Vocation of Women, 15 August 1988] (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1989).
- 5 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Inter Insigniores* [Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood, 15 October 1976], *Origins* 6:3 (3 February 1977); reproduced in *Women Priests: A Catholic Commentary on the Vatican Declaration* (ed. Leonard Swidler and Arlene Swidler; New York: Paulist, 1977) 37-49. Pope John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* [Priestly Ordination, 22 May 1994], *Origins* 24:4 (9 June 1994) 49-58; available online, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_22051994_ordinatio-sacerdotalis_en.html. U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Doctrine, "Ten Frequently Asked Questions About the Reservation of Priestly Ordination to Men," United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Office of Media Relations (1998), online, <http://www.usccb.org/comm/archives/1998/98-210a.shtml>.
- 6 Pontifical Biblical Commission, "Biblical Commission Report: Can Women Be Priests?" *Origins* 6:6 (1 July 1976) 92-6; reproduced as "Appendix II: Biblical Commission Report, 'Can Women Be Priests?'" in *Women Priests* (reference above) 338-46. In that same anthology, see the excellent essay by John R. Donahue, S. J., "A Tale of Two Documents," 25-34, which compares the Pontifical Biblical Commission report and *Inter Insigniores*.
- 7 U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Secretariat for Family, Laity, Women and Youth, "Always Our Children: A Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children and Suggestions for Pastoral Ministers" (1998), online, <http://www.usccb.org/laity/always.shtml>.
- 8 U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Secretariat for Family, Laity, Women and Youth, "Always Our Children."
- 9 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1994) no. 2358.
- 10 For example, on the language of "objective disorder," see the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Persona humana* [Declaration on Certain Questions Pertaining to Sexual Ethics, 29 December 1975], *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 68 (1976) 77-96. For a probing critique of the language of "objective disorder" in the context of natural law arguments, see Jack A. Bonsor, "An Objective Disorder: Homosexual Orientation and God's Eternal Law," in *Horizons* 24 (2/1997) 193-214 and "Homosexual Orientation and Anthropology: Reflections on the Category 'Objective Disorder,'" *Theological Studies* 59 (1/1998) 60-83. For Church statements prior to 2000, see Mark D. Jordan, "Teaching by Threatening," in *The Silence of Sodom: Homosexuality in Modern Catholicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) 21-50, 263-6.
- 11 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons" (3 June 2003), online, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_200307 ■

(Chartres Cathedral from page 7)

pope against such a reactionary move. (In 1889, Manning would also intervene in the London Dock Strike; the resulting "Cardinal's peace" had an impact far beyond Britain.) The pope's thought continued to change as he grappled with such immediate events.

Thus, when *Rerum Novarum* finally appeared in 1891, it came as a shock and established its legendary place in the history of

Catholic thought. After a century of intransigent opposition to changing social and economic realities, Catholicism weighed in favor of workers' rights to form associations that would offer them leverage in the face of wealthy industrialists. It did this while maintaining its distance from the atheistic underpinnings of communism (and some forms of socialism) by appealing to the enormous weight of Catholic tradition going back to medieval times. Catholic anthropology was not fundamentally individualistic — its philosophy of the human person did not (as did 17th- and 18th-century philosophers) envision a person as being first an individual and only secondarily a member of a community (by means of a "social contract"). Catholic anthropology began instead with the individual as embedded within a community of persons from the beginning of life — and this was not rooted merely in modern socialist thought but rather in ancient tradition.

Leo's world-view, expressed in his two landmark encyclicals on Catholic philosophy and Catholic social ethics, was grounded in the broad neo-medievalist movements of his century. These movements looked to an earlier epoch in order to locate a world that (at least in their hopes and dreams) could provide alternative models of thinking and valuing — alternative models of interpersonal obligations and mutual duties as well as of individual rights; of organic interconnectedness as opposed to the radical individualism and isolation that was felt to be alienating in the modern world.

Few have articulated the enduring appeal of Chartres as poignantly as the Swedish film-maker Ingmar Bergman, and his reflections are a fitting place to end these brief reflections on the choice of Chartres as the image for our Lane Center masthead.

Regardless of my own beliefs and my own doubts, which are unimportant in this connection, it is my opinion that art lost its basic creative drive the moment it was separated from worship. It severed an umbilical cord and now lives its own sterile life, generating and degenerating itself. In former days the artist remained unknown and his work was to the glory of God. He lived and died without being more or less important than other artisans; 'eternal values,' 'immortality' and 'masterpiece' were terms not applicable in his case. The ability to create was a gift. In such a world flourished invulnerable assurance and natural humility.

Today the individual has become the highest form and the greatest bane of artistic creation. The smallest wound or pain of the ego is examined under a microscope as if it were of eternal importance. The artist considers his isolation, his subjectivity, his individualism almost holy. . . .

Thus if I am asked what I would like the general purpose of my films to be, I would reply that I want to be one of the artists in the cathedral on the great plain. I want to make a dragon's head, an angel, a devil — or perhaps a saint — out of stone. It does not matter which; it is the sense of satisfaction that counts.

Regardless of whether I believe or not, whether I am a Christian or not, I would play my part in the collective building of the cathedral.

Ingmar Bergman, introduction to *Four Screenplays of Ingmar Bergman* (1960) ■

The unabridged text of this essay may be found at www.usfca.edu/lanecenter/masthead