

*Is it Ethical to be Catholic? Queer Perspectives*

(Presentation at a discussion hosted by the University of San Francisco “Communities in Conversation” Project, and held in Most Holy Redeemer Parish, 12<sup>th</sup> Feb 2006)

Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you, Professor McGuire for your introduction and for moderating this event. Reverend Alison, it is wonderful that you have come all this way to speak with us here in San Francisco. Personally, it is an absolute honor to have the opportunity to engage in this conversation with you as a representative of USF’s queer student body.

We’re here today addressing what has already been outlined as a tough question to answer and I feel that you have provided us with a very **hopeful** and **optimistic** outlook for the future of gay Catholics. I wanted to start by quoting something that particularly stuck out in my mind while listening to your speech, which is that “only as we learn to love our neighbors as ourselves do we find out who we *really* are.”

This claim, I feel, speaks best to the framework of thought that I will use to respond to what you have shared with us today. It encompasses the virtues of **acceptance, mercy, humility, and love** and most clearly presents the angle from which we all must approach this very serious issue of ethics and ethical behavior in the Catholic Church.

You mentioned that your fears about becoming Catholic were mostly rooted in the belief that upon confirmation into the Catholic faith, you would be “sucked into the

service of evil.” After completing nearly nine years of Catholic school education by the time I was fourteen, which marked the same year that I was confirmed into the Catholic

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Church, my concerns did not rest so much in the threat of becoming *evil*. Rather, my deepest concern, as a young woman, was that the Catholic Church had an interesting way of demonstrating the significance of women and the role that we play be it in the last 2,000 years of recorded human history or in the present day.

It is important to note that as recent as July of 2004, the Vatican distributed a pamphlet in which it condemned the “modern feminist movement” and its apparent influence on making “homosexuality more culturally acceptable.” This pamphlet, titled “On the Celebration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World” was actually written by then *Cardinal* Ratzinger who argued and I quote that, “[Proponents of feminism] call into question the family in its *natural* two-parent structure of mother and father and make homosexuality and heterosexuality virtually equivalent in a new model of polymorphous sexuality.” It also is very clearly stated that this feminist ideology and anything other than a sanctimonious commitment between a man and a woman will *negatively* impact global society.

With that said, it is very difficult for me to be so enthusiastic about the current leadership, and just as difficult to be optimistic about the rate at which we are progressing in the Catholic Church. I’m going to move on, but I will return to this issue of same-sex vs. heterosexual marriage and the manner in which Pope Benedict perceives them.

The Catholic education that I received was possibly **abnormally** ethics-obsessed given the detachment between the Catholic faith and ethics that you experienced,

Reverend. The primary focus **was, in fact**, on understanding the difference between right and wrong, good and bad, pure and evil. In my transition from my Catholic elementary

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school to my Benedictine Catholic high school, I maintained this acquired knowledge of Catholic definitions of right and wrong and to some extent I was able to discuss them with some degree of expertise in group discussion and in papers. I see a solid relationship between Catholicism and ethics as my experience rarely, if ever, separated the two.

I still to this **very** moment, despite how much my interactions with the Catholic faith have changed, hold firm the belief that Catholicism is a collection of guidelines by which we lead a satisfying and virtuous life; that it provides us with a sense of good and bad, and that it gives us the power to do what is right rather than what is wrong. My religion teachers, particularly in elementary school, stressed the importance of the Pope's supreme power. It wasn't until recently that I allowed myself to truly investigate just how **destructive** and **detractory** that power could become. But before then, it was my understanding that the manner in which the Pope interpreted God's word was to be accepted as divine truth **without** exception.

As a result, this "just there" quality that you introduce and suggest as being a calming source of relief that allows us to be far more relaxed about Popes, bishops, etc., is actually **ineffective** in my case. As a **lesbian and a feminist**, it is a challenge to relax in the midst of a pope who believes **so strongly** that my presence is negatively impacting the world at large. What increases my anxiety is the fact that I am one of many young adults who received a Catholic education which assures youth that whatever the Pope says goes.

While many of us in this room know that I surely cannot be an abomination in the eyes of God as I was created in God's image, there are several people out there who do feel

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otherwise. And **why shouldn't they?** After all, they were taught, just as I have been, that the Pope is generally always right.

I would argue that the men we have placed in positions of leadership in the Church, that is, the men who have the power to help the church **evolve** and **progress** with **new** interpretation's of God's word, are almost *entirely* responsible for getting it right. It is their words and actions that are taken for truth by the majority of members of the Catholic community. Certainly these words and actions are governed by the guidance they believe is given to them by God, but ultimately they are the ones who publish pamphlets and encyclicals including the "rights" and "wrongs" of yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

Reverend Alison, you suggest that less responsibility belongs to our popes, bishops, and theologians... that the work is being done by "**someone else**," that we need not worry, that everything will change for the better and ultimately work out in the end. As an activist, it is very difficult for me to comprehend that "someone else" is doing all the work and "getting it **right**." It is even more challenging to accept that we only contribute *minimally* to change on our own because we will always have this "someone else" to take care of business. I maintain that we are **far more** responsible for the changes made in our environments than we take credit for, and to believe that this "just there"

quality alone will *ultimately* transform our Catholic world is to be **irresponsible** especially as we represent a new wave of positive reform in the Church.

Furthermore, if it is a collective belief that we are here on earth simply representing “someone else’s show” then why must our leaders in the community impart

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their subjective interpretations of exactly who gets treated with respect, and who in turn, is ostracized by the community at large? If the most we can really do is be “more or less appropriate in our response” then we are not living up to the challenge.

It is our **responsibility** as members and allies of the LGBTQ community to continue to “develop and receive full-heartedness love for each other” as you mentioned, Reverend Alison. However, it is **not** our responsibility to show how **our love** is worthy of as much attention and credibility as that which exists between a man and a woman. The goal should not be to explore the differences and similarities between these sexualities, but rather, to remove the terms “hetero” and “homo” from our language and simply replace them both with one word: “**human.**” In doing so, there is no question about who exactly acknowledges love and commitment as gifts from and access to God because the truth that **all** love is a gift would be unanimously accepted.

We are seemingly far away from attaining this goal. The hope of one day being able to throw off my shackles at the site of an upward J-curve is stagnant **at best** given that new literature continues to be published in favor of heteronormative behavior in the Catholic church as being one of an “especially blessed form of love.”

I would question then whether this “harshness of tone” that you refer to **really has** gone, and whether the temperature **has** in fact gone down. This visitation of our Catholic

seminaries, although it was reportedly less disturbing for some who were given the opportunity to speak up about it, should not then be condoned for being less harsh than we expected. What is *truly* disturbing is that our new pope felt that eradicating the church

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of “**perverse men**” would serve as the best remedy to more than just the issue of molestation on the part of clergy members.

I’m happy that they are so embarrassed in Rome, but I am **not** certain that they are **truly remorseful** for the immense stress that they placed these men in question *under* and for the humiliation that they will carry with them throughout the duration of their service to the Catholic Church for having been singled out in such a **demeaning** way. In this case, **shame** is *no* substitute for an **apology**.

And we return to the issue of same-sex love vs. heterosexual love. You argue, Reverend, that Pope Benedict simply places an emphasis on positive initiatives which favor the family; that he is not blatantly suggesting that homosexuality is wrong. To that, I say **he is** doing it *without having* to come right out and say it. To favor the family, which is clearly something that in the eyes of the Church can only result from the joining of a man and woman is to **dismiss** the existence of **same-sex-reared** families.

His privileging of monogamous heterosexual marriage as “an especially blessed form of love” can only be interpreted as demeaning towards what appears to be the “*lesser*” form of love. More than an invitation to simply solidify the rich elements of same-sex love, it seems to me to be an invitation to assimilate ourselves and be more like heterosexuals. Here again I would argue that we are all *human*. We are **all** in this

together, **not** separate of each other, rather completely **interconnected** and interacting to promote positive social change as well as internal change in the Catholic Church.

In fact, it is in my ethics-obsessed Catholic schooling that I arrived at that conclusion, or rather, that this conclusion was spelled out for me. So why *now* are we

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expected to applaud these men, who are **only now** engaging in “adult” discussions about same-sex love, for exercising love and respect towards their neighbors as they would themselves? This kind of charity and graciousness is long overdue.

In summation, I find it extremely difficult to willingly participate in an organized culture that rejects me as being sinful, an axis of evil, and a source of negative influence on our global society. I choose rather than to pretend that the Pope is not against me, to accept that his actions undeniably suggest that much to be true. My gay Catholic heart is a heavy one, but that need not be the case. I continue to seek relief and refuge in the men and women in the Catholic faith who constantly challenge such extraordinarily hateful inquisitions and derogatory statements directed at such a loving community, and I will continue in my own manner to defy the challenges set before me in a world that privileges everything that I am not.