

**Alienated Catholics: Establishing the Groundwork for Dialogue  
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**Catherine M. Murphy**

Associate Professor, Department of Religious Studies  
Santa Clara University  
cmurphy@scu.edu

Good evening.

I would like to begin by thanking our hosts tonight—

- Shirley McGuire, Vincent Pizzuto, the USF LGBTQ Caucus and the Lane Center for Catholic Studies and Social Thought, for creating these conversations for and in the community;
- the USF Jesuit Foundation for their generous grant to pay for all of this;
- and Cameron Ayres and St. Agnes Church, for providing a space and a community committed to a vibrant catholic faith—a faith that welcomes and challenges us all to love and to justice.

I understand St. Agnes is known as the “last-chance church”—like those signs on the Nevada/Utah border—last chance to buy gas, or last chance to gamble before ... Utah. And maybe that’s a good metaphor for us tonight, because I imagine that a lot of us Catholics have come here running on faith fumes, or staying to gamble on the church even though we’ve already lost so much in a game long ago rigged against us.

My task tonight is a lot more personal than the public lectures I usually give. My areas of expertise are the Dead Sea Scrolls, the New Testament and first-century Christianity, topics that don’t tend to generate a lot of excitement or emotion—or even interest among Catholics. Safe topics. And so as I speak with you tonight about the experience of women and particularly of lesbian women within the church, I’m afraid I have little professional expertise to bring to the topic apart from my personal experience as a Catholic lesbian Scripture scholar struggling with a faith tradition that grounds my hope and a church that poisons it.

The antidote for some is to leave the church; for others of us, for now, we place ourselves here, alienated but still in conversation, hoping that together we can better diagnose the illness that alienates us. From my vantage point, the illness is in the church itself, and it is out of love for this church of my birth and my education, the church of my parents and of my Irish and Polish forbears, that I wish to speak tonight. The illness is about what the church hierarchy calls grace and what it calls sin, and how it understands gender and sexuality to be involved in these. I offer these personal reflections tonight fully aware that all of us involved in tonight's conversation are sinners of one stripe or other. As Paul says, we must "work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling, for God is the one who, for God's good purpose, works in [us]" (Phil 2:12-13). So, for the greater honor and glory of God, let us remember and share who we really are.

### **Women and the Church**

I think I was nine years old when my parents invited Fr. Salvatore over to the house for dinner. Our house was just a block from St. Matthew's Church down the peninsula, and it was my parents' custom to invite the parish priests over to our home often so that they could have a good meal, practice their Sunday sermons, and get just enough exposure to the five children to confirm their commitment to celibacy. Fr. Salvatore wasn't one of our regular parish priests, though—he was visiting from Italy, and had, it soon became clear, a special mission to American Catholic children. Before dinner, each one of us four girls was called separately into the living room for a conversation with Fr. Salvatore. I had a little difficulty understanding him through his accent, but his question was clear: "Do you want to be a saint?" Of course, right? Who wouldn't? "Well then," he said, "you will need to become a nun."

For my part, I had already come to that conclusion in third grade the year before. Sr. Susannah had shown us a movie in class in which a woman was giving birth. Now this was 1969, so I'm sure the movie *showed* nothing, but I remember the birth mother off camera screaming her head off. I'm sure the movie was calculated to have precisely this effect on me and the other Catholic girls in the

class—I wanted nothing to do with all that pain. So if I wasn't going to be a mother, the only other option I could imagine was to become a nun.

Over the next decade, and thanks largely to those same Holy Cross sisters, the Mercy nuns in high school, the feminist movement, the Dominicans, the Jesuits, my sisters and my mother widowed at age 45, I came to realize there were actually a whole lot of choices a woman had to make apart from that sexual choice of motherhood or celibacy. But while I was on that developmental trajectory, I came to discover that Church teaching was not. 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.

I need to tell you right at the outset that I am not one of those women who has felt a call to ordained ministry, although I have known many Catholic women who have, women who have gone through Catholic seminary training and received M.Div. degrees with future priests and have even preached and learned to conduct the sacramental rites because the M.Div. degree requires such training, women who have found ways to minister in some professional capacity, but whom the Church hierarchy will not authorize to serve as its ministers, even to its female members (as the early church appointed female deacons to serve the women in their communities<sup>1</sup>). Many of my friends have simply found other

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<sup>1</sup> Phoebe (Rom 16:1-2), though here *διακονος* does not yet seem to have the meaning of a specific church office, as it will come to mean within a few decades. Paul mentions other co-workers: "Greet Prisca and Aquila my fellow workers in Christ Jesus" (Rom 16:3-4), "Greet Mary who has worked so much among you" (Rom 16:6); "Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives and my fellow prisoners; they are prominent among the apostles and they were in Christ before me" (Rom 16:7); "Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena, Tryphosa" (Rom 16:12); Euodia

denominations more open to their gifts. I am not one of those women, so I don't come to this issue with the same sense of grief and betrayal that many of my friends have.

But I do come to this issue with a deep sense of alienation, a wound that deepens with every argument the Church poses to foster acceptance of its teaching. And as I lay out the arguments, I will try to make clear how they do not simply build a case for male priesthood, but how each also demolishes the respect and dignity for women that in so many other documents the Church hierarchy is at pains to uphold.<sup>2</sup> There is a deep irony here that I would like to expose: the very principles advocated in some documents from the hierarchy are the principles they themselves betray in others. We have no further to look for the source of our alienation than Church teaching, but the groundwork for dialogue is also to be found there.

One of the earliest arguments the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops articulated in 1972 was that, since the incarnation of God was in a male, this culminates in a male priesthood. Pope John Paul II seemed to reaffirm this in his apostolic letter, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* in 1994, when he taught that priesthood was not a function to be exercised by anyone, but is specifically and intimately associated in the mission of the Incarnate Word himself. This would seem to suggest a hierarchical anthropology well-known from Christianity's earliest

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and Syntyche "who have struggled together with me in the Gospel with Clement and the rest of my fellow-workers" (Phil 4:2). See also Clement of Alexandria, "The apostles, giving themselves without respite to the work of evangelism as befitted their ministry, took with them women, not as wives but as sisters, to share in their ministry to women living at home: by their agency the teaching of the Lord reached the women's quarters without arousing suspicion" (*Stromata* 3.6. §53), and Pliny's Letter to Trajan (*Epistle* 10.96, 112 CE), in which he mentions that he arrested two Christian women, who held an official position. "This made me decide it was all the more necessary to extract the truth from two female slaves—whom they call 'ministers' (*ancillae* [=διακονος, deaconess?]), by means of torture" (trans. K. C. Hanson). These references were gathered by John Wijngaards, "The History of Women Deacons," *Women Priests*, online, [http://www.womenpriests.org/deacons/deac\\_his.asp](http://www.womenpriests.org/deacons/deac_his.asp). On the subject, see Carolyn Osiek and Margaret Y. MacDonald, with Janet H. Tulloch, *A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, NCCB Committee on Women in Society and in the Church, *Strengthening the Bonds of Peace* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1994), and, "Continuing Reflections on the Role of Women in the Church," *U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Secretariat for Family, Laity Women & Youth* (15 September 1998), online, <http://www.usccb.org/laity/words.shtml>.

encounters with the Greco-Roman world, whereby the male was associated with the mind, reason, and the spirit, while the female was associated with the body, passion, and the material world.<sup>3</sup> In fact, some Greek doctors and philosophers thought that every fetus began as a male, but those that didn't develop fully became female. This informs Aristotle's opinion that a woman is a "deformed man," as if she hadn't gotten "cooked" enough.<sup>4</sup> Thomas Laqueur calls this the "one-sex body" theory—there is one normative body, the male, and the female body is just an underdeveloped version of it.<sup>5</sup> Several of the early Church fathers were well aware of these notions, and added to them a scriptural layer that read Eve's secondary creation from Adam's rib as evidence of woman's subordination and incompleteness compared to man. Eve's susceptibility to temptation later in the story only proved that she should be carefully managed by a man. This gendered anthropology was used to legitimate male control of women on the grounds of female incapacity and male superiority. It's this same principle that has undergirded much of western law, so that only recently have women, rather than their fathers, husbands or the state, been legally allowed to make decisions affecting their bodies, their children and their property.

To some extent, this notion of female incapacity lurks behind the language of complementarity used by John Paul II in *Mulieris Dignitatem* in 1989.<sup>6</sup> It's not the one-sex body theory, to be sure, and so seems to be an improvement: there are *two* sexes each with their own complementary roles. This makes sense, doesn't it, because we all know that in every pairing each person takes on certain roles so that everything gets taken care of. But *Mulieris Dignitatem* then goes on to say that the complementary roles are fixed by the theological metaphor of church

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<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Laqueur, "Destiny is Anatomy," in *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990) 25-62.

<sup>6</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* [On the Dignity and Vocation of Women, 15 August 1988] (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1989).

as bride of Christ, with Mary the God-bearer (ΘΕΟΤΟΚΟΣ) as the icon of that nuptial relationship. She is the “representative and archetype of the whole human race” (2.4), while the *divine* principle meets her as male child. She is matter, he is spirit. For John Paul II, virginity and motherhood are the “two particular dimensions of the fulfillment of the female personality” (6.17); they *must* be because the presentation of woman’s nature is fixed by the theological metaphor of the church and the example of Mary. An *idea* of how the church and Mary negotiate the chasm between matter and spirit defines the roles to which real women are to aspire. Even granting that this ideology of womanhood is born out of John Paul II’s profound devotion to the virgin mother Mary and is presented as a meditation rather than a theological exposition, it perpetuates the notion that womanhood is a fixed ideal that men define in terms of themselves and their definitions of sin and grace. Simply recall the language of the Second Vatican Council in its closing message, which John Paul II quotes in the opening paragraph of *Mulieris Dignitatem*:

The hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of women is being acknowledged in its fullness, the hour in which women acquire in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved. That is why, at this moment when the human race is undergoing so deep a transformation, women imbued with a spirit of the Gospel can do so much to aid humanity in not falling.

A promising start, to be sure, but in the end women’s role is imagined not as a constructive addition, but as a prophylactic against further sin, which by the way women were responsible for in the first place. The most women can be imagined to do in this framework is to not make humanity fall further, as Mary did by obeying; the job of *saving* humanity from sin is reserved to men. Thus the male is still imagined as the one who transcends sinful human nature, while the female can participate in terms of her body (celibacy [1 Cor 7] or procreation [1 Tim 2:15], or better yet, as in the case of Mary, both!).

One last word about this first argument, that only males can be priests because Jesus was male. Do we really want to understand the doctrine of the Incarnation

as requiring that God become male? Rosemary Radford Ruether quickly pointed out the flaw here; the doctrine is that God came *in carne*, in the flesh, not in the male flesh.<sup>7</sup> “The Word became flesh, and made [its] dwelling among us” (John 1:14). It is offensive, to men I would hope as well as to women, to imagine that male flesh is the clearest icon of God, especially when Genesis 1:27 clearly says that the image of God is both male and female.<sup>8</sup> So this argument in support of a male priesthood requires the denigration of women and their alienation from the Incarnation. To its credit, the hierarchy has shied away from this argument in its more recent teaching.

But the central argument it now makes is problematic in a different way. From the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s *Inter Insigniores* in 1977 to John Paul II’s *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* in 1994 to the USCCB Committee on Doctrine’s Pastoral Response in 1998, we get the assertion that the Church is not *free* to ordain women because it is bound by the example of Jesus, who only selected men as his Apostles.<sup>9</sup> I call this the “What Would Jesus Do” argument. Let us pass over for the moment all the historical problems with this statement (such as whether Jesus ordained anyone, whether the evangelists are giving us the exact practices of the historical Jesus, why Paul should be accorded so much weight since he was not one of the Twelve). Let us also pass over the fact that, just three months before the CDF issued *Inter Insigniores*, the Pontifical Biblical Commission, a subsidiary of that same Congregation, had issued a report stating that (a) the New Testament does not settle in a clear way once and for all

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<sup>7</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983) 122-6.

<sup>8</sup> *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 3.1 recognizes this.

<sup>9</sup> 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](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>.

whether women can be ordained priests (a unanimous vote); (2) scriptural grounds alone are not enough to exclude the possibility of ordaining women (12-5 vote), and (3) Christ's plan would not be transgressed by permitting the ordination of women (12-5).<sup>10</sup> For the sake of time, let us pass over these matters. This argument that the Church is bound by what Jesus did can only appear gratuitous, since one of the first things the Twelve did after selecting Matthias to replace Judas (Acts 1:15-26) was to break from the example of Jesus by first ordaining Hellenist deacons (Acts 6:1-7) and then authorizing the mission to the Gentiles and the abrogation of a good portion of the Jewish law (Acts 10 on). If the example of the Twelve is normative for the Church hierarchy now, then the courage of the Twelve to trust the Spirit and change what Jesus did should surely be normative as well. And since when have Catholics been fundamentalists about Jesus' practice and scripture? One of the things I love and respect about the Church is that it acknowledges tradition as well as scripture as the revelatory media of the Holy Spirit, thus allowing for the ongoing guidance of the Spirit in the life of the Christian community. In principle, that means that tradition can change, as the Twelve knew when they prayed about the Hellenist widows who weren't getting enough food and about the Gentiles who thirsted for the good news.

But our teachers have taken Jesus out of history in this historical assertion. First, they have made this act of Jesus a perennial norm. Second, they have claimed that in this Jesus was not simply following the patriarchal custom of his day, but was acting freely on a divine plan (so conveniently on this one issue he apparently was not human). Third, they are now calling the restriction of priesthood to men part of the deposit of faith on a par with scripture and the

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<sup>10</sup> 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*.

sacraments!<sup>11</sup> The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has said that the restriction of priesthood to men is founded on Scripture, has been constantly applied in the Tradition of the Church, and has been set forth infallibly by the universal ordinary magisterium. Scripture, tradition, infallibility—a veritable trinity of fences around the teaching. What *would* Jesus do if he heard this today? Listen to the counterpoint the U. S. Bishops offer in their comparatively forward-looking 1998 statement: “the Church best fulfills its mission when it engages the gifts of all members”; “the diversity of women’s gifts should not be feared but recognized as a sign of the Church’s vitality”; “we acknowledge that society and Church have not always affirmed the gifts of women”; and my favorite, “the Holy Spirit grants new gifts in response to changing historical circumstances.” YES! History changes, the Spirit moves, and as Peter told the apostles after baptizing the Gentile Cornelius, “If then God gave them the same gift he gave to us when we came to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to be able to hinder God?” (Acts 11:17).

These are only a few of the chief arguments used to foster acceptance of the teaching of the church hierarchy; time prevents me from discussing others. I call them to mind not to make a case for women’s ordination, though that is a happy corollary to my concern. Rather, I have used them to expose a view of women that infects them, that is at best metaphorical and at worst misogynist and never seems to be based on the experience of real women. An actual woman would tell you that women are no more associated with the material world and sexuality than are men, nor should we imagine the material world and sexuality as the danger zone that all people should flee if they want to be holy, as Fr. Salvatore encouraged me to do 35 years ago. How is such a view of sanctity incarnational? How is such a view of matter sacramental?

Consider the fate of our host tonight, St. Agnes. Martyred in the third century at age 12 or 13, she is extolled by fifth-century men not for giving up her life so

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<sup>11</sup> See particularly the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Doctrine, “Ten Frequently Asked Questions About the Reservation of Priestly Ordination to Men” (reference above).

much as for giving it up *while remaining a virgin*. Lest we miss this testimony to her chastity, each fifth-century author adds more and more sexual threats to the account, so that by the time Prudentius gets his authorial hands on her, Agnes' execution is depicted as a kind of rape to accentuate the kind of perfection young Agnes has managed to achieve.<sup>12</sup> His explicit text uses sex and violence to encourage chastity to such a degree that it verges on the pornographic. We must recognize a deep ambivalence in our tradition here about the body and sexuality that has profoundly disturbing implications for real women.

The preference of spirit over matter, this concern to dominate and control that which we do not know, these are the dangerous inclinations that we must address. When the hierarchy calls their work service but won't let half of baptized Christians do it, it's not about service, it's about power and privilege. It's about who will sit at the right and left hand of Jesus rather than about who will follow him to the cross (Mark 10:35-45 and parallels).

### **Lesbians in the Church**

As a Catholic lesbian, I find it important to name properly when power masquerades as service and misogyny masquerades as reverence for women. To borrow the recent language of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' *Always Our Children*, as amended by the Vatican, the prerogative of power and the disdain for women are more or less deep-seated tendencies in Catholic teaching, and I believe together they lie at the heart of the Church's objectively disordered views of homosexual practice.<sup>13</sup> The Church hierarchy, like any entity in power, defines its truths to maintain its position on top. The "others" it creates, onto whom it projects its demons, must exist so that the Church doesn't have to exorcise itself. The Church has had many historical others, the Jews and

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<sup>12</sup> Ambrose, *De Virginibus*, 1.2; Prudentius, *Peristephanon*, Hymn 14; both are reproduced in the helpful anthology, *Women in the Early Church* (ed. Elizabeth A. Clark; Message of the Fathers of the Church 13; Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press/Michael Glazier, 1984) 106-114.

<sup>13</sup> 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>.

Muslims, for example. But its deeper others are its sexual others, women and homosexuals—deeper because they function as almost mythic figures of sin and deviance. When the Jews and Saracens were demonized in the middle ages and even more recently, they were feminized and imagined as sodomites because these sexual others run deeper. Women and homosexuals were not imagined as Jews and Muslims. The “others” the Church hierarchy creates in its teachings, onto whom it projects its demons, must exist so that the Church doesn’t have to exorcise itself.

How else are we to read the Church’s handling of the sexual abuse crisis? As Vincent so powerfully proclaimed at our last conversation, the bishops responsible for condoning the abuse have taken the spotlight off themselves and rendered this a “clergy” crisis rather than a crisis of episcopal leadership; they have transferred their own culpability to the convenient but tragically inappropriate scapegoat of gay clergy, and this despite the fact that so many of the bishops are gay themselves (or maybe because of it). There is an illness here that needs to be properly diagnosed before a remedy can be discerned, and this hierarchy would rather sacrifice the wrong victim than face their own illness. “If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you are saying, ‘We see,’ so your sin remains” (John 9:41; cf. 15:22).

This illness infects the Church teaching on homosexuals and accounts for the fact that these teachings don’t even make sense on their own terms. How can *Always Our Children* tell us, on the one hand, that the “homosexual orientation cannot be considered sinful,” and then add a Vatican-mandated footnote reminding us that the inclination is an “objective disorder”?<sup>14</sup> Either my homosexual desire and practice is a grace because it is part of the created order for a small and not really very threatening percentage of us, or it is an objective disorder because it is entirely my sinful choice. It cannot be both/and—that is logically and theologically incoherent. The footnote reads, “This inclination,

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<sup>14</sup> U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Secretariat for Family, Laity, Women and Youth, “Always Our Children.”

which is objectively disordered, constitutes for most [persons with the homosexual inclination] a trial."<sup>15</sup> When I was younger, I believed that my homosexual desires were a trial; I took on faith that others were more right about me than I was. Abdicating responsibility for my own life, I reasoned as a child. But as an adult, I put aside such reasoning (1 Cor 13:11). Now that I am in a healthy and life-giving relationship with a wonderful and deeply spiritual woman, I experience no trial within my conscience, only the trial manufactured by so many others when I venture out my front door.

The criminal charges are clear:<sup>16</sup> “you are objectively disordered,”<sup>17</sup> “homosexual acts are contrary to natural law,”<sup>18</sup> the “peculiar propensity of the homosexual person” inclines the person “more or less strongly” to do something that must be considered “objectively evil” in the “moral order,” so “the propensity itself is to be judged objectively disordered,” and gay people must remain chaste their entire lives.<sup>19</sup> Gay couples who adopt children “do violence” to those children, “in the sense that [the children’s] condition of dependency would be used to place them

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<sup>15</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1994) no. 2358.

<sup>16</sup> For the 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.

<sup>17</sup> 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.

<sup>18</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2357. Mark D. Jordan critiques the Church’s deviation from traditional natural law argumentation on the grounds that, unlike Thomas Aquinas, the Church disregards modern science when it analyzes homosexual desire. See *The Silence of Sodom*, 51-75, and more recently, *Rewritten Theology: Aquinas After His Readers* (Challenges in Contemporary Theology; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Homosexualitatis problema* [Letter on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons, 1 October 1986], *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 79 (1987) 543-54; English translation in Jeffrey S. Siker, *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994) 39-47. For an excellent exposition of the problem of exhorting gays to chastity by aligning it with the suffering of Christ, see Paul G. Crowley, S.J., “Homosexuality and the Counsel of the Cross,” *Theological Studies* 65 (2004) 500-529. When I taught at St. Francis High School in Mountain View in the mid-1980s, one of my students presented this teaching on a quiz as, “Gay people in the Catholic Church must remain chased”—an innocent but apt error.

in an environment that is not conducive to their full human development.”<sup>20</sup>

Therefore, as of this March 10, and following events in Boston, the Archdiocese of San Francisco has been instructed by its former Archbishop and now Prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal William Levada, to prevent Catholic Charities from “[placing] children for adoption in homosexual households.”<sup>21</sup> This teaching is misguided; the only violence that is done to the child of gay parents is done not by the gay parents, as the CDF asserts, but by people, and churches, that name the grace of our love a sin and sanctify their own hatred and fear as divine law. Even had the Catholic bishops not jeopardized their credibility on this issue by turning a blind eye to the abuse of children—“using [the children’s] condition of dependency...to place them in an environment that [was] not conducive to their full human development”—this would be a perfect example of a perverse logic that names grace a sin and authorizes evil in the name of grace.

I yearn for the day when my fellow Catholics and Christians can judge my love not by the sex of my partner, but by the quality and the fruits of the love itself, for surely these not only testify to the source of the love, but give glory to God as well.

## **Conclusion**

As a Catholic lesbian, I have taken comfort in a passage from the first letter of John:

Whoever says [she] is in the light, yet hates [her] brother, is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his [sister] remains in the light, and there is nothing in him to cause a fall. Whoever hates his brother [or his sister] is in darkness; he walks in darkness and does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes. (2:9-11)

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<sup>20</sup> 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\\_20030731\\_homosexual-unions\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20030731_homosexual-unions_en.html).

<sup>21</sup> Patricia Wen, “Calif. Archdiocese to Reconsider Its Adoption Policy,” *The Boston Globe* (10 March 2006), online, *Boston.com*, [http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles/2006/03/10/calif\\_archdiocese\\_to\\_reconsider\\_its\\_adoption\\_policy/](http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles/2006/03/10/calif_archdiocese_to_reconsider_its_adoption_policy/), 26 March 2006.

My comments tonight are offered in the spirit of identifying the real darkneses that jeopardize love, the hatreds that we can no longer afford to mask as love or reverence. We have done too much damage to too many people who in good conscience discover themselves to be women or gay or lesbian and yearn to live loving lives in the context of our rich faith, but find church doors closed to them and too many sacrificial victims crucified on its walls. We need more love, we need more mercy at this moment in our church.

Do you know the song “Mercy Now,” by Louisianan Mary Gauthier (pronounced Go-shay)? Raised Catholic by her adoptive family, a run-away at 16, a lesbian recovering alcoholic and only later in life a poet and songwriter, it is *her* prayer for reconciliation with all those who demonized her. Toward the end of the song, she sings:

My church and my country could use a little mercy now  
As they sink into a poisoned pit  
That's going to take forever to climb out  
They carry the weight of the faithful  
Who follow them down  
I love my church and country, and they could use some mercy now

Every living thing could use a little mercy now  
Only the hand of grace can end the race  
Towards another mushroom cloud  
People in power, well  
They'll do anything to keep their crown  
I love life, and life itself could use some mercy now

Yeah, we all could use a little mercy now  
I know we don't deserve it  
But we need it anyhow  
We hang in the balance  
Dangle 'tween hell and hallowed ground  
Every single one of us could use some mercy now<sup>22</sup>

Those of us who wish to remain in the church have the nearly impossible task of helping to transform the language of damnation into the language of communion. The reason I remain is that I recognize this to be not my task primarily, but the costly price of love long ago paid on a cross.

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<sup>22</sup> Mary Gauthier, “Mercy Now,” on the CD *Mercy Now* (Nashville, Tennessee: Lost Highway Records, 2005).