

“INTRINSICALLY DISORDERED”: GAY PEOPLE AND THE HOLINESS OF THE CHURCH

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INTRODUCTION

In 2009 it is not surprising that the word “holy” in the Nicene Creed--“We believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church”—might stick in the throats of some Catholics. Unhappy revelations of recent years of clergy abuse and episcopal cover-up, a growing body of evidence of the Church’s cooperation with evil over the course of its entire history, and even official requests for forgiveness by Church leaders for “faults of the past” make some people ask what it means to say the Church is holy, which has been, after all, an article of faith since ancient times. Should we be talking instead about ecclesial sinfulness? Apologies for Christian failure, uttered by the highest authorities in the Church and accompanied by significant gestures—I am thinking, for example, of Pope John Paul II’s visits to Santo Domingo and to the Island of Gorée in Sénégal in 1992 and to Jerusalem in 2000¹--have been welcomed by many in the Church and beyond. But others have rejected the very notion of apology by the Church, asserting that

the Church itself cannot sin² and this for two reasons. First, they claim that the Church as a whole is not a *subject* which can freely decide to act.³ And secondly, God has promised to protect the Church from falling into error.⁴ In any case Pope John Paul's words and gestures seem to embody the declaration of Vatican II that "the Church..., clasping sinners to her bosom, at once holy and always in need of purification, follows constantly the path of penance and renewal."⁵ In 1984 John Paul addressed an apostolic exhortation to the entire Church called *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (Reconciliation and Penance; hereafter RP) in which he asserted that the Church could only accomplish its purpose of achieving reconciliation in the world by (1) accepting forgiveness from God, (2) undergoing a change of heart, and (3) offering forgiveness to those who have wronged the Church.⁶ True, there was no mention of accepting forgiveness from those wronged by the Church. Yet, clearly the issue of the *Church's* ability to sin is complex. If the Church per se can accept and offer forgiveness, and if the Church per se can mediate God's forgiving love, it is acting as a subject. And if the Church as a subject can respond to God's grace, then there should be no reason why, as a subject, the Church cannot sin.⁷

Though he himself never spoke directly of an *ecclesia peccatrix* but only of a "Church of sinners," John Paul's call for a "fresh ecclesial conversion"⁸ became the centerpiece of Church plans for the Jubilee Year of 2000.⁹ One of John Paul's enduring theological legacies, in my opinion, will certainly be the foundation he laid for re-conceiving the Church's holiness.¹⁰ Because sound theology always *follows* authentic Christian praxis, which is to say, the practice of love,¹¹ we should be grateful that a changed practice in regard to ecclesial sinfulness has preceded further doctrinal development in this area. I use the term "development" deliberately. Many might agree

with the perceptive theologian who once gave a useful summary of the pattern by which doctrine evolves in the Church. There are always three steps, he concluded after lengthy investigation. First, a new question arises to which the Church's magisterium must give an answer. "No, the answer is no, has always been no, and will always be no," reply the authorities. In a second step the hierarchy decides to study the question further. And in a third step, the magisterium declares its teaching, clearly and simply: "Yes, the answer is yes, has always been yes, and will always be yes."

Be that as it may, by his words and deeds John Paul prepared the way, perhaps unintentionally, for further development of the doctrine of the Church's holiness. His eventual successor, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, while president of the International Theological Commission, went even further than John Paul. In a truly stunning way, the ITC acknowledged the novelty of the Church asking for forgiveness and at the same time the possibility of doctrinal evolution. In the course of a 700-year Church tradition, the ITC admitted that

In none of the Jubilees celebrated till now has there been...an awareness in conscience of any faults in the Church's past, nor of the need to ask God's pardon for conduct in the recent or remote past. Indeed, in the entire history of the Church there are no precedents for requests for forgiveness by the Magisterium for past wrongs.¹²

This fact may astound us, but I would suggest that the magisterium's willingness to break with this tradition (lower-case) is even more striking. This is why the ITC spoke of "the doctrinal development of this millennium," a development "animated by mutual love"¹³—as I said, rooted in sound practice. And so it is possible that we are now poised to move beyond the language of "Church of sinners" to an honest acknowledgement of ourselves as a "sinful Church." But what could this possibly mean? Is the Church itself,

the Body of Christ, sinful? And if so, how is it possible for the Church to be both holy and sinful, that is, both a vessel of God's love *and* an instrument of evil, and these at the same time? Such a formulation sounds like a simple contradiction and, to most people, like a break with the Church's 2000-year-old self-understanding.

There is a further problem: as many have pointed out, it is far easier to recognize and apologize for faults *of the past*, whether individual or corporate, than to examine charges of ecclesial ignorance, error, or outright cruelty *in the present*. Those who claim to be misunderstood, maligned, or mistreated often remain skeptical, naturally enough, about ecclesial apologies for past sins committed against others. Many gay and lesbian Catholics, for example, have concluded that the soundest course of action is to distance themselves from the Church.¹⁴ And why not? We are told that our hearts are “intrinsically disordered,” our minds are clouded with error, and our acts are “intrinsically evil”—despite overwhelming social and natural scientific evidence that we are as morally upright, as psychologically sound, and as spiritually developed as any other group of persons. Many non-gay Catholics agree. I cannot count the times I have been asked by friends, students, and colleagues--gay and straight alike--how I can maintain my self-respect as a gay person and identify as a member of the Catholic Church. Allow me to explain my answer in three steps, using three terms which for me turn out to be closely connected: disordered, despised, and disciples.

A “DISORDERED” TEACHING

What exactly does the Church's magisterium mean by the term "disorder" in relation to homosexuality? It is not easy to know since no precise definition is given, nor are any comparable cases of "disorder" mentioned in Church teaching on homosexuality. (15) Nevertheless, the magisterium gives two primary reasons for the determination that homosexual desire is "disordered." First, according to the magisterium, it orients people to relationships that lack true interpersonal complementarity. The magisterium sees male and female human beings as essentially different¹⁶ and all males and all females *in essence* as the same. Thus such relationships must always and necessarily be narcissistic, self-focused, and egotistical with no mutual exchange of selves possible. The sole aim of homosexual relationships, in this view, is sexual gratification. Secondly, homosexual couples cannot procreate, a central purpose of sexuality, according to the magisterium. Any sexual act which is not open to procreation is also closed to social responsibility.¹⁷ In other words, it is frivolous, solely about pleasure, because it does not include the possibility of reproduction and its accompanying responsibilities. Thus it is easy to see why the consequences of acting on the homosexual "disorder" are grave. Such acts are necessarily narcissistic, irresponsible—in a word, selfish—and thus sinful and cannot help but damage the persons involved, the Church and society, and most importantly, the persons' relationships with God. To many Catholics today, including most of my undergraduate students over the past 20 years, the Church's official teaching on homosexuality and homosexual persons sounds incoherent and even cruel.¹⁸ They search in vain for a way to make sense of a Church—their Church—which preaches love yet teaches and behaves in a way that scandalizes them—that is, the Church's teaching on

homosexuality makes faith in God more difficult for them. And of course it makes people struggle with the words “I believe in the holy catholic Church.”

While it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the magisterium’s reticence to give analogues to homosexuality is deliberate, the semi-official Vatican newspaper *L’Osservatore Romano* did provide parallels to homosexuality in a series of fourteen articles in 1997, written by members of the hierarchy and scholars working for the most part at Vatican-affiliated universities. The main purpose of the essays is to better explain the teaching (and, very likely, to counter widespread rejection of it). In this series several analogies to the homosexual inclination are suggested, for example, extreme shyness or aggression which, it is explained, are often the result of family or social conditioning and are never good in themselves.¹⁹ Homosexuality is also likened to selfishness, the desire for power, greed, kleptomania, sadism, and pyromania—all “negative conditions” in which “human freedom can be preceded by disordered inclinations.”²⁰ (What this means is that our free decisions are negatively affected by such pre-existing conditions. They orient our freedom toward evil.) According to the author, selfishness and greed are not sins in themselves but they “stem from sin” and they are inclinations which “tend to lead to sin.”²¹

Had I been asked to contribute to this series of essays (not very likely, I admit), I might have suggested alcoholism as a clearer parallel to homosexuality than the analogues provided since it is a condition not freely chosen but one which, if acted upon (by drinking) inevitably leads to destructive consequences for the alcoholic, for those around him or her, and for society. Whichever analogy one might choose, it is obvious that the official position of the Catholic Church on homosexual orientation remains close

to an earlier view advanced by Western medicine: homosexual persons are afflicted with a grave disorder for which they are not responsible. They thus deserve special care as well as respect in order to help them avoid acts for which they *are* responsible. The magisterium believes that the condition itself renders them unfit for healthy intimate relationships²² and from ordained ministerial service.²³ Even more importantly, should they choose anything besides chastity and union with Christ on the Cross, they sever their relationship with God.

Furthermore, no matter what we may learn from biology, philosophy, sociology, psychology, the data of human experience, and even the study of scripture,²⁴ the magisterium's position cannot be altered because the Church is motivated by "the desire to do the will of God our Father," and its teachings "transcend the horizons of science."²⁵ Let me point out that *transcend* here does not mean that faith "adds to" or builds on what we know from science, as St. Thomas Aquinas might have put it; rather it means leaving science behind, even disregarding it. Here faith *replaces* science—and human experience. (Let me note in passing that this contradicts the very purpose of a Catholic institution of higher learning like Santa Clara University which, according to its mission statement, is committed to "rigorous inquiry and scholarship, creative imagination, [and] reflective engagement with society....")

This is how the Church's magisterium has closed its mind to the data of human experience. It is easy to see that if kleptomaniacs or, even more, alcoholics, *act* upon their condition, material harm is the inevitable result. If alcoholics choose to drink, they risk harming themselves, those they love, and society. But where is the social scientific data that shows the harmful effects of homosexual love? What are the verifiable

consequences of this “disorder”? None of the Church’s pronouncements on the matter cite any scientific studies in support of its position, a fact which escapes no one’s notice.

DESPISING AND BEING DESPISED

Let me note here that the beliefs of many ordinary Catholics, priests, and even some bishops do not correspond to the Catholic Church’s official teaching. Nor does pastoral care offered to gay people always follow the magisterium’s guidelines. (Whether we are speaking about “cafeteria Catholics” or Catholics of conscience, I’ll leave to you to decide.)²⁶ Nevertheless, homosexual persons, including homosexual Catholics, are officially seen as “disordered.” This ought to mean that they would be objects of special care and attention since the Church’s assertion of God’s “preferential option for the poor” means that Catholic Christians are called to solidarity with the poor.²⁷ Something far different, of course, is occurring.

As Jesuit theologian Jon Sobrino has pointed out, the New Testament speaks of two kinds of poor or marginalized people.²⁸ First, the “economic poor” (those we would call the materially poor) struggle every day for mere survival on this planet. (We must not forget, as we discuss the matter of ecclesial holiness, that in 2009 about half the world’s population is trying to survive on less than \$2.50 per person per day and 80% on less than \$10.00 per person per day.) The “sociological poor,” by which Sobrino means those whom the ruling class sees as ignorant, insignificant, and/or sinners (tax-collectors and prostitutes, for example) are those who don’t matter to the elites. For his part, Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez employs more than 40 terms or phrases, often

added to the term “poor,” to indicate what he means by “poor.” Among them are the nameless of history, those who are not listened to, the uninvited, those whom others try to conceal from sight. He joins Sobrino in using a term—the “despised”—which not only denotes the victims of contempt but also directs our attention to the interior reality of those who victimize.²⁹ The respectable, perhaps paradoxically, do *not* always overlook the unimportant; often they in fact *despise* them. The term “despised” itself is quite biblical: the New Testament uses the verb *despise* (Greek: *exoutheneo* which means “to make utterly nothing of”) and its various forms eleven times; we also find countless synonyms.

But while the despised make the comfortable of our Church and world uncomfortable, there is no doubt that the New Testament nearly always holds them up to the reader as objects of special concern to God, Jesus, or the disciples. Jesus showed a decided partiality toward both kinds of poor people, standing up for the socially marginalized with perhaps even greater force than for the economic poor because their exclusion had religious, that is, soteriological, consequences.³⁰ Indeed, we can legitimately say that the despised stand at the center of the New Testament because of their advocate Jesus, who was himself not only beaten before he was executed but also mocked and even spat upon (Mk 15:17-20).

Nevertheless, some will balk at using the harsh term “despised” to describe the view of gay people held by many in the Church. It plainly refers more to an affective than a cognitive response. No one can doubt that homosexual persons and their love for each other have fractured the Christian churches by challenging prevailing views of Christian doctrine, biblical interpretation, and pastoral practice. In fact, some would

argue that nothing divides Christians today the way homosexuality does.³¹ But opposition to self-affirming gay people also *unites* many believers, not only within churches but also across denominations and even faith traditions. The symbolic hubs of the Jewish and Catholic traditions are Jerusalem and Rome respectively, and recent years have seen leaders of those two religious traditions openly express their deepest *feelings*, not only their ideas, about self-affirming homosexual persons. The division in the Catholic Church³² and the true feelings of the bishop of Rome who is charged with symbolizing and maintaining the Church's unity were on display in 2000 when the World Pride Festival celebrating gay and lesbian liberation (from fear and self-loathing) took place in Rome. On July 9 of that year, the day after the festival, Pope John Paul II declared from the balcony of St. Peter's basilica during the Sunday Angelus,

I feel obliged, now, to mention the well-known demonstrations held in Rome in the past few days.

In the name of the Church of Rome I can only express my bitterness³³ at the affront to the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 and the offence to the Christian values of a city that is so dear to the hearts of Catholics throughout the world.

The Church cannot be silent about the truth, because she would fail in her fidelity to God the Creator and would not help to distinguish good from evil.

It was rare for John Paul to admit to such bitterness and perhaps especially difficult for one who had dedicated the Jubilee Year of 2000 to reconciliation and penance for Christians' past faults.

Five years later, when the same festival was planned for Jerusalem, it was met with such united, and very bitter, opposition from Jewish, Christian, and Muslim leaders in the Holy City that it had to be postponed a year. When it was finally held, Shlomo Amar, Israel's Sephardic chief rabbi, spoke for Christian and Muslim leaders as well as

orthodox Jews when he said, “They [the international gay leaders] are creating a deep and terrible sorrow that is unbearable. It hurts all of the religions. We are all against it.”³⁴

For his part, the Sufi sheik Abdel Aziz Bukhari said, “We can’t permit anybody to come and make the Holy City dirty. This is very ugly and very nasty to have these people come to Jerusalem.” Such feelings are common in many parts of the world today.

Despite increasing openness and democracy in Iraq , for example, the *New York Times* reported in April, 2009 that

Clerics in Sadr City have urged followers to help root out homosexuality in Iraqi society, and the police have begun their own crackdown on gay men. “Homosexuality is against the law,” said Lt. Muthana Shaad, at a police station in the Karada district, a neighborhood that has become popular with gay men. “And it’s disgusting.” For the past four months, he said, officers have been engaged in a “campaign to clean up the streets and get the beggars and homosexuals off them.”...Gay men and lesbians in Iraq have long been among the targets of both Shiite and Sunni death squads, but their murders have been overshadowed by the hundreds of overall weekly casualties during the height of sectarian violence in 2006 and 2007. In 2005, the country’s most influential Shiite cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, issued a religious decree that said gay men and lesbians should be “punished, in fact, killed.” He added, “The[se] people should be killed in the worst, most severe way of killing.” The language has since been removed from his Web site.

This report was published on the front page of the *Times* which, with its usual wit, placed it right beside a story about the legalization of gay marriage in Vermont.³⁵

It seems clear, to me at least, that “despised” is not too strong a word to describe the view of self-affirming gay and lesbian people held by some of the highest authorities and ordinary practitioners of the world’s three great monotheistic religions. To pretend otherwise is to lie to ourselves. And such a lie distorts not only our grasp of the situation but also obstructs our ability to transform it. Even more, such a lie would block us from witnessing the miracle of God’s love reconciling what appears irreconcilable.³⁶ Allow me to explain what I mean in the third and final part of my presentation.

“DISCIPLESHIP OF THE DISORDERED AND DESPISED”

So where does being labeled “disordered” and being “despised” leave us? Is there any way for self-affirming gay and lesbian Catholics to maintain their integrity and, at the same time, remain members of their Church? For that matter, is there any honest way, in the face of ecclesial sin, for Catholics to mean it when they say the Church is holy? A third question: how can the Church, logically speaking, be sinful and holy at the same time? I have come to believe that these three questions are inextricably linked, and the answer to them—my answer—is simple to state: if the Church is sinful, then it can only be said to be holy when it is open to conversion, a dynamic state which involves the uninvited, the unwelcome, and particularly the despised. Ecclesial holiness refers more to the Church’s “convertibility” than to its “convertedness.” *Ecclesial* sin, like individual sin, always entails a closing in on oneself and a closing out of the other. In other words, when the Church as Church is *open* to conversion, it is holy. It is not hard in this perspective to see the role of those who stand outside, knocking at the gate. When the Church closes its collective mind, hands, and heart to the despised, it turns away from the Holy One of God who was in fact “despised and rejected, a man of sorrows, from whom people hide their faces,” as the prophet Isaiah put it (Is 53:3-4).

The magisterium is correct to speak of a special form of discipleship for gay and lesbian Catholics, a discipleship which embraces the Cross. But the road taken by Jesus and his disciples is not the way of mute self-loathing nor does it lead to the cross of silent suffering.³⁷ Rather, the despised who follow Jesus see him up ahead, making his way

along a rocky path, meeting lies with the truth; injustice, discouragement, and lethargy with bold action; and both success *and* failure with prayer. Walking with him his disciples meet truth, justice, and beauty on this path, but these are often surprisingly intermingled, and sometimes even inseparable, from their opposites. Of course they discover these opposites among themselves as well. And up ahead they glimpse the Cross, but it is not as the goal of the journey or Jesus' choice for himself or for them—as the magisterium seems piously to suggest. Instead, it signifies the depth of opposition to their leader and the price he paid for choosing to be faithful to God, to them, and to himself.

Accepting the invitation to discipleship as despised persons means, first of all, opening ourselves to conversion just as the Church is called to do—that is, opening our own minds, hands, and hearts to “others.” The term “disciple” comes from the Latin *discere*, to learn, and from *discipulus* which means learner; no one, including the despised, can get far on the path of discipleship except as a learner, as one who is prepared to advance by way of trial and error—as all good learners must do.³⁸

To illustrate what I have in mind by the “discipleship of the disordered and despised” and their role in establishing the holiness of the Church, allow me to call on one of the most compelling figures in the New Testament. I am referring to the man born blind in chapter nine of John's gospel.³⁹ You all remember the story. I was first drawn to this figure because of the marvelous combination of humility and boldness that characterizes him. Time and again he stands by what he knows from first-hand experience (“I was blind and now I can see”; v. 25) while refusing to assert more—or less—than he knows (“I do not know,” he says repeatedly in response to hostile

interrogation. Cf. vv.12, 25, 36). His lot after he receives his sight—like that of many gay people after they “come out” and affirm themselves as equal in dignity to all other people—is radically changed but not easy. He comes to see the truth, about himself and about Jesus, only after he has been interrogated three times, reviled as “a sinner through and through” since birth, castigated for the “arrogance” of his claims, and “driven out” of the community (v. 34). Even when Jesus shares his own identity (the “Son of Man”; v. 37) with his new friend and the man falls to his knees to worship Jesus (“Sir, I believe”; v. 38), the man does not fully understand what has happened, how it happened, or who made it happen. He has begun a journey into the realm of unspeakable Mystery.

However, the most striking feature of this story, as with John’s accounts of other key figures in the gospel [e.g., the Samaritan woman at the well (4:1-42), the sick man at the Pool of Bethesda (5:1-16), and the adulterous woman brought to the Temple (8:3-11⁴⁰)], is perhaps the fact that the narrator is conspicuously, even frustratingly, silent about the outcome. What happened to the man after he received his sight, was rejected by his community, and met Jesus face to face? We are not told. Did he remain in the town, stick by his story, and face continual intimidation, harassment, and rejection? Or did he perhaps “accept reality” and live silently among his neighbors, making as few waves as possible? This choice would have allowed him at least the private memory of a marvelous event and the peace of compliance. But it would also be the peace of the grave, for he would remain alone with his treasured knowledge, as isolated in a way as he had been when a blind beggar. Or perhaps he joined the band of Jesus’ disciples, left the town and its narrow-minded residents, and took up a new life at a safe distance from his tormentors. In this case he would, of course, have been exposed to new opponents as his

story was told and re-told, for people in other towns would hardly be more likely than his own to accept him. The truth is that we cannot know for certain what happened to him, but we can be sure that the remainder of his life was not easy.

Yet the fact that John tells the man's story at all—and does so in such detail and with such finesse—indicates that this person most likely became a “star witness” to the cause of Jesus. And the man born blind could only be considered a witness to the truth—the whole point of John's gospel—if he somehow continued to follow Jesus. To choose to be silent about his identity either in his hometown or on the road would disqualify him outright as a witness.

Assuming, then, that the formerly blind man—clearly despised by the religious authorities and his neighbors and rejected by his own parents--became a disciple of Jesus, what kind of disciple was he? What was his own role in the community of disciples and in the work they undertook in the world? Three features of John's account of the man provide clues and give us what I take to be a paradigm for the discipleship of the despised and their place in the Church. Let me briefly mention them.

First, the man born blind used his mind to grasp the truth of his experience—and then spoke up. Like many self-accepting homosexual Christians today, he discovered that what most aroused opposition was his refusal to be invisible (“closeted”). In him we have an example of someone rejecting “Don't ask, don't tell” from 2000 years ago. The decision to be visible and outspoken—like anyone else in his town—led to fierce opposition, but it also led him to what the Catholic Worker movement calls “clarification of thought.” Opposition likely came as well from the band of Jesus' disciples who, early on, began jockeying for positions of privilege, power, and prestige. The theology of Peter,

then Paul, then Augustine, and so on through the centuries could not accommodate this man's experience and identity any more easily than his compatriots' theology had been able to do at the beginning. But let us not overlook the fact that this man *profited* from opposition to him, opposition that came from many directions, was united, and was overwhelming. He stood alone, a detail underlined by the gospel-writer who does not mention Jesus for 27 verses. Yet this formerly blind beggar, through his honesty and his keen intelligence, was able to reason his way to the truth of Jesus' identity (as well as his own identity) before Jesus shared it with him. He presented it to the Pharisees with impeccable logic: "If this man were not from God, he could do nothing" (v. 33). And the Pharisees understood immediately what had happened, that he was now teaching *them*, that he had become, of all things, a theologian! Their contemptuous response was swift—but also desperate: "'You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us.' And they threw him out" (v.34). When the despised face the facts, tell the truth of their stories, and become disciples, they become teachers—and let's be precise: they become teachers of theology. Passion is important, as we can see in the man's mounting impatience and increasingly bold responses to his interlocutors. But there is no substitute for careful thinking. This, it seems to me, is particularly important in light of the disrespect for reason found in some quarters of the Church today.

A second feature distinguishes the formerly blind man as much as his I.Q.: this disciple *never* withdrew from conflict, no matter who the opponent was. One of the constant temptations of those who fight for justice, and especially for those who are despised and fight for justice is precisely disengagement. As soon as it became clear that the townsfolk and his parents and the religious authorities were not going to greet his

recovery of sight with joy—something which was immediately obvious to him--the formerly blind man could have gone right back into the closet: he could have appeased them all and made peace either by lying (saying he had not been blind) or by pretending that he was still blind. (When Jews hid their identities in Nazi Germany, it was called “passing,” a strategy countless homosexual persons choose today, especially in the Church.) This man was stubborn from the beginning and became feisty over time. It’s easy to imagine the constant discomfort he caused to those around him, even fellow disciples. Another way of saying this: his being, his identity, his very person, invited (or prodded) others to conversion. His “clarification of thought” was embodied; it took shape in his body. His very presence was a challenge to others.

Third and finally, let me call attention to what I take to be the heart of the matter—namely, the man’s heart. Let’s try to imagine what it was like for this man to gain his sight. He had never beheld a human face, and the first faces he actually saw were puzzled, frowning, or even hostile. It is only after seeing for himself the sin of the world—something he had long experienced as a blind beggar--that he encountered a gentle face, that of Jesus. But the man, quite naturally, did not recognize Jesus, though he would have known his voice. (Perhaps this scene prefigures John’s account of Mary of Magdala’s encounter with the Risen Lord in the garden.) When the man learns who is speaking with him--namely, the same one who had given him a gift he could not deny no matter how many apple carts it upset-- he responded not with speech but with his whole body. The gesture he makes is physical and spiritual at the same time. He crouches down and, like a dog playfully licking his master’s hand, as the Greek verb *proskuneo* suggests, he prostrates himself before Jesus in silent adoration. This man, it is obvious, is

a mystic. I say this because only a holy person—one open to conversion—could be filled with gratitude and wonder and love after all he had been through. Not a word of complaint about his mistreatment by so many, not a question about the uncertain future. He has now seen the sordidness of the world with its lies and injustice and abuse of power. But in his confrontation with that world he has also beheld Truth, Justice, and Beauty, not so much with his now-functioning eyes but with his expanded heart, and he responds with his entire being. Readers of John's gospel never learn his name—that's why I keep calling him "the man"—but we do not need to know it, for the change he has undergone, embodied in his very posture, tells us who he is. Before his encounter with Jesus, he sat and begged, probably hunched over self-protectively, unwilling to open himself to a hostile world. Now he bends in loving trust, free to risk speaking the truth and acting for justice. Humiliation has become humility; self-assertion has become silent adoration. Thinking, acting, and praying define his discipleship.

Let me conclude. In 1957 the great Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner wrote, "There are things that can only be understood by someone who loves them. The Church is one of these."⁴¹ I believe this is true, but I would add that the Church is a reality which we can love only when we are willing to face the truth of what it is, to struggle to change it into what it is called to be, and to place both our successes and failures in this effort at the feet of the One who gave us the Church to love in the first place. The form of discipleship I have outlined here is not—indeed, cannot be—for everyone. The particular path which any individual is called to take is a matter for God and the person to determine. But without such disciples--especially among those despised by the Church—committed to

clear thinking, prophetic action, and humble prayer, I do not see how the Church can be holy.

Notes

1. In 1992 when John Paul II visited the Island of Gorée off the coast of Sénégal, from which countless men, women, and children were deported in chains across the sea, he spoke of the “shameful traffic in which baptized persons participated [as they] did not live out their faith.” (my translation from the French). John Paul II, “Discours de Sa Sainteté Jean-Paul II à la Communauté Catholique de l’Île de Gorée dans l’Eglise de Saint Charles Borromée,” 22 February 1992 (Speech given at a meeting with the Catholic community of Gorée Island) For its part, the Vatican’s International Theological Commission (I.T.C.), headed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the future Pope Benedict XVI, recalled several of John Paul II’s apologies in its study “Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past” (1999; hereafter MR). All official church documents cited here may be found on the Vatican website: www.vatican.va. The I.T.C. made special reference to a number of “faults” for which the Church has asked forgiveness: the division of Christians (both the Great Schism of 1054 and the Reformation), the use of force in the service of the truth, anti-Jewish prejudice, and behavior by Christians which has encouraged the rise of atheism (MR 5.2-5.5). In 1992 the Holy Father undertook “an act of expiation” and asked forgiveness of the native population of Latin America and of the Africans deported as slaves (Speech addressed to the Afro-American community, Santo Domingo, October 13, 1992, and Address given at the General Audience of October 21, 1992) Ten years earlier in Cameroon he had already asked forgiveness from Africans for the way in which they had been treated (Speech to Catholic Students at Yaoundé, August 13, 1985).

2. The tendency to see the Church one-sidedly as holy arose early in Christian history. By 381 the First Council of Constantinople could speak of believing in “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church,” an article not found in the Nicene Creed of 325. (Nicaea did not mention the Virgin Mary either.) Norman P. Tanner, S.J., ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol.1: *Nicaea I to Lateran V* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 5, 24. By 787 the Second Council of Nicaea justified its view of the Church as holy and without “blemish or wrinkle” by reference to Ephesians 5:27. The Pauline text, however, clearly asserts that Christ took a *sinful* Church as his bride. He gave himself up for her in order to *make her holy*. Thus Christ loved the Church *before* it was holy, and since the Church is still growing and still imperfect, Christ is still cleansing the Church he loves so that it “*may be* holy and without blemish” (Eph 5:27; emphasis added). Ibid., 133.

3. As Francis A. Sullivan, S.J. has pointed out, illustrious 20th-century Catholic ecclesiologists from Charles Journet to Yves Congar, O.P. have held that a moral or immoral act—such as sinning—cannot be attributed to a collectivity such as the Church. See Sullivan’s essay, “Do the Sins of Its Members Affect the Holiness of the Church?” in *In God’s Hands: Essays on the Church and Ecumenism in Honour of Michael A. Fahey, S.J.*, eds Jaroslav Z. Skira and Michael S. Attridge (Leuven: University Press, 2006), 251-56. The problem such a view raises, of course, is how the Church can be considered the subject of grace, and more precisely, the sacrament of salvation, if it is not able to err or to sin.

4. Nicaea II also asserted that Christ promised his holy disciples that he would guard the Church against error, a promise made to future generations of disciples. The Council supports this claim by reference to Christ’s promise in Mt 28:20: “I am with you every day until the consummation of this age.” Nevertheless, it is clear in Mt that Christ promises to “be with” the disciples as one who *sends* them (the Church) to make disciples by teaching others, through example, to obey. No mention is made of the disciples’ own holiness. Rather, Mt notes the hesitation of “some” of the eleven apostles to believe and worship the Risen Lord (28:17). Christ’s presence to the Church, then, does not necessarily mean that the Church *is* holy, but it does mean that the Church is *called to be* holy. Ibid., 133.

5. *Lumen Gentium* (LG) 8. Later in the same constitution, the Council asserted that “the Church on earth is endowed already with a sanctity that is real though imperfect” and spoke of “the pilgrim Church” which “dwells among creatures who groan and till now are in the pains of childbirth and await the revelation of the children of God” (LG 48). In *Gaudium et Spes* (GS), the Council’s final word to the Church and the world, there are many references to the limitations, imperfections, and even failings of the members of the Church (GS 19, 21, 27-28, 32, 33, 43, 76). GS also quotes *Lumen Gentium*’s exhortation to Christians to purification and renewal “so that the sign of Christ may shine more brightly over the face of the Church” (GS 43, quoting LG 15).

Note: The quotation from *Lumen Gentium* 8 reads, according to the translation from www.vatican.va as follows: “the Church already on this earth is signed with a sanctity which is real although imperfect.” and again, “herself dwells among creatures who groan and travail in pain until now and await the revelation of the sons of God.” The above may be another translation of *Lumen Gentium* as they are very similar in expression, but since the author mentioned the website www.vatican.va I reproduce these here.

6. RP 11-12.

7. Karl Rahner went further than Journet and Congar, writing in 1947 that “...it must be conceded that the Church can be sinful in her actions. It goes without saying that this happens in opposition to the impulse of the Spirit and the norms and laws always proclaimed by the Church. But this is surely what is so great about this *faith* in the sinful Church, that she can really do all these things and yet...remain the bride of Christ and the vessel of the Holy Spirit...” (emphasis in original). Karl Rahner, “The Church of Sinners,” in *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 6 (Baltimore, Helicon Press, 1969), 261. In 1965 he asserted that “...the Church cannot be the *subject* of her own renewal and purification if she was or is not also in the first place and in a certain sense the subject of sin and guilt” (emphasis in original). This “certain sense” requires, in Rahner’s view, that we see the Church as both a “free subject” and, following *Lumen Gentium* 39, as “indefectibly holy.” Karl Rahner, “The Sinful Church in the Decrees of Vatican II,” *Ibid.*, 285.

8. RP 13.

9. The pope pointed out in his 1994 apostolic letter, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, that “it is appropriate that, as the Second Millennium of Christianity draws to a close, the Church should become more fully conscious of the sinfulness of her children, recalling all those times in history when they departed from the spirit of Christ and his gospel and instead...indulged in ways of thinking and acting which were truly *forms of counter-witness and scandal*” (TMA 33).

10. The notion of Church as “perfect society” had already given way at Vatican II to that of “Church of sinners.” It is true that, in the strict sense, the term *societatis perfecta* refers to the perfect form (structure) of the Church believed to have been established by Christ, and not to its moral status or that of its members. Nevertheless, it is also true that in both the popular imagination and in the mind of the Magisterium, the notion came to signify the spiritual purity of the ecclesial body.

11. MR 5.2 The International Theological Commission itself spoke of “doctrinal development animated by mutual love.” It was referring to the anathemas of 1054 of the Eastern and Western Churches which the Catholic Church abolished at Vatican II.

12. MR1.1. After studying the biblical tradition of admitting guilt for past sins and asking forgiveness of those who were wronged, the I.T.C. concluded (with notable forthrightness) that “John Paul II’s appeal[s] to the Church to mark the Jubilee Year by an admission of guilt for the sufferings and wrongs committed by her sons and daughters in the past...do not find an exact parallel in the Bible. Nevertheless, they are based on what Sacred Scripture says about the holiness of God, the intergenerational solidarity of God’s people, and the sinfulness of the people” (MR 2.4). The last two points would seem to imply that the People of God—today, the Church—is sinful.

13. MR 5.2.

14. A word about terminology: I prefer to use the word “gay” to designate persons with homosexual desire or what the Magisterium usually calls “inclination.” In scholarly discourse it is common today to reserve the term “gay” for self-identifying and self-affirming homosexual persons. Here I will add the adjective “self-affirming,” or some other, to the adjective “gay” to indicate those homosexual persons who are open about and unashamed of their sexuality and who consciously construct a public personal identity which includes their homosexuality. “Gay” by itself refers to those who experience sexual attraction to persons of the same sex, whether they publicly acknowledge, act on, or even perceive this attraction or not. Thus, it is likely that there have been “gay” people in all human cultures and at all times. How people with homosexual desire respond to their sexuality and “construct” an identity in their own time and place depends, of course, on the choices available to them. The reason I prefer this usage, aside from its consistency with ordinary English, is that I don’t find the arguments made in favor of the narrow usage by queer theorists, post-modernists, and/or social constructionists convincing. Most of them are, in the end, forced to do what they claim to oppose in order to speak at all--namely, group persons according to the gender of the object of their sexual desire, whether this desire is acknowledged or not.

15. In past centuries many groups, including women, Africans, indigenous Americans, and Asians, were seen by leading Catholic theologians and official teachers as significantly defective in their humanity.

16. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith speaks of “physical, psychological, and ontological complementarity,” a “sexual difference...deeply inscribed in man and woman.” See the C.D.F.’s “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World” (2004), 8. The C.D.F. even says that “man and woman are distinct, and will remain so for all eternity.” Ibid., 12. This is why Francesco D’Agostino can say that “the essential point [is that] homosexual communication...is not communication.” See “Should the Law Recognize Homosexual Unions?” No. 10 in the series “Christian Anthropology and Homosexuality” *L’Osservatore Romano*, 21 May 1997, 5.

17. One of the authors in the series on “Christian Anthropology” asserts that sexual acts which are not open to the possibility of procreation reinforce the modern concept of romantic love, thereby encouraging sex without social responsibility. See Gianfrancesco Zuanazzi, “The Homosexual Condition: II. Structural Attitudes,” No. 7 in the series, *L’Osservatore Romano*, 30 April 1997, 4. The series is available at www.ewtn.com/library/humanity/homo.htm.

18. For a detailed analysis of the incoherence, see Gareth Moore, O.P., *A Question of Truth: Christianity and Homosexuality* (London and New York, Continuum, 2003). On three occasions panels of distinguished theologians presented the flaws in the theological foundations and consequences of the Church’s official teaching on homosexuality at the annual meeting of the Catholic Theological Society of America. For summaries of the presentations, see James B. Nickoloff, “Theological Implications of the Church’s Teaching on Homosexuality,” in *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 55 (2000): 130-31; 57 (2002): 137-139; and 59 (2004): 158-60.

19. Fr. Bartholomew Kiely, S.J., “Antecedents of Homosexuality: Science and Moral Evaluation,” No. 12 in the series “Christian Anthropology and Homosexuality,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, 4 June 1997.

20. Livio Melina, “Moral Criteria for Evaluating Homosexuality,” No. 13 in the series “Christian Anthropology and Homosexuality,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, 11 June 1997.

21. Ibid.

22. “Although the particular inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin, it is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil; and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder. Therefore special concern and pastoral attention should be directed toward those who have this condition, lest they be led to believe that the living out of this orientation in homosexual activity is a morally acceptable option. It is not.” Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Homosexualitatis*

Problema (Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons; hereafter HP), (1 October 1986), 3.

23. "...[T]he Church, while profoundly respecting the persons in question (those with "deep-seated homosexual tendencies"), cannot admit to the seminary or to holy orders those who practice homosexuality, present deep-seated homosexual tendencies, or support the so-called 'gay culture.'" Congregation for Catholic Education, "Instruction Concerning the Criteria for the Discernment of Vocations with regard to Persons with Homosexual Tendencies in view of their Admission to the Seminary and to Holy Orders" (4 November 2005), 2.

24. Perhaps the clearest example of an anti-scientific attitude occurs in the Church's view of masturbation. See Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Persona Humana* ("Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics;" hereafter PH) (29 December 1975), sec. IX, where all of the sources of knowledge just mentioned are discarded.

25. HP 2. The Magisterium's indifference to, and even disrespect for, the sciences and lived human experience may be seen in many documents dealing with homosexuality. See, for example, the conflicting views of science in the Pontifical Council for the Family's lengthy treatment of "The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality: Guidelines for Education within the Family" (8 December 1995). In HP 2 the Council acknowledges that it "owe[s] much to the gains of science," but in HP 138 it warns against professional associations of *sex-educators*, *sex-counselors*, and *sex-therapists* whose work may be based on "unsound theories, lacking scientific value and closed to an authentic anthropology...no matter what official recognition they may have received."

26. This is a matter of great concern to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. See HP 3.

27. The precise meaning of "solidarity with the poor" and God's "preferential option for the poor" is still in dispute; nevertheless, the phrases are firmly established notions in Catholic theology and official teaching today. See, for example, John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* 42. In his Inaugural Address at the Fifth Conference of the Latin American Bishops in Aparecida, Brazil in 2007, Pope Benedict XVI, said that "the preferential option for the poor is implicit in the Christological faith in the God who became poor for us, so as to enrich us with His poverty (cf. 2 Cor 8-9)."

28. Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological View* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 80-81.

29. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The God of Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 99, 113, 115.

30. Sobrino, citing Schillebeeckx, 81 (and note 44).

31. See Jeffrey S. Siker, ed., *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994), xv, 179.

32. For Catholics, such division cannot help but raise the question of ex-communication. Even though Vatican II broke decisively with the tradition of anathemas found in every one of the previous 20 ecumenical councils of the Church, the Catholic hierarchy has in recent years not resisted the temptation to impose order through ex-communication. Nevertheless, an examination of ex-communication from the Church makes several important things clear. First, truth emerges slowly in the Church and through trial and error, as in any other human community. Second, truth and error have co-existed in the Church for long periods of time. And third, ex-communication is usually only partial, often aimed at the level of reason, sometimes at the level of praxis, and seldom at the level of the heart. No break or rupture is absolute, no matter what words are used, because the fact of past (comm-) union endures and cannot be erased. It's not the break that hurts but the memory of an earlier communion.

33. In the official English translation, the Italian *amarezza* is translated as “deep sadness” instead of “bitterness”—an obvious attempt to soften the pope’s statement. See John Paul II, “Angelus” (9 July 2000), 3 available in both Italian and English at www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/angelus/2000/index.htm.

34. See Laurie Goodstein and Greg Myre, “Clerics Fighting a Gay Festival for Jerusalem,” *New York Times*, 31 March 2005, sec.1A & 4A.

35. See Timothy Williams and Tareq Maher, “Iraq’s Newly Open Gays Face Scorn and Murder,” *New York Times*, 7 April 2009, sec. 1A.

36. The approach to discipleship I am proposing here for gay and lesbian Catholics differs significantly from that of James Alison in his work *Faith Beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2001). Alison encourages an inward journey for gay and lesbian Catholics which seems to bring them “freedom” but does not change “passing” behavior and leaves structured homophobia in place. See 52-53, 221. His apparent inability to imagine an angry love or an anger that is not revengeful results in an overly irenic and, I would say, historically ineffective form of discipleship. For examples of this, see *Ibid.*, 44, 56-57, 100, 106-109, 111, 120, 124, 133, 135, 141-142.

37. Paul Crowley has summed up the magisterium’s prescription for gay and lesbian Catholics. See Paul Crowley, S.J., “Homosexuality and the Counsel of the Cross,” *Theological Studies* 65, no. 3 (2004): 519.

38. Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Dogma* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992).

39. I have offered more detailed reflections on the story of the man born blind in James B. Nickoloff, “Seeing the Truth: A Gay Reading of Two Johannine Figures,” *The Ecumenist* 36, no. 4 (1999): 8-10.

40. Though this passage is considered by virtually all scholars to be an addition to the gospel by a later editor and not the product of the original evangelist, it conforms to the dramatic pattern of the other three testimonies treated here and in this sense may be said to be “Johannine.”

41. Karl Rahner, *Mission and Grace: Essays in Pastoral Theology* Volume 2 (London and New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964), 106. I thank Richard Lennan for guiding me to Rahner’s essay.