



GAY PRIDE MARCH PASSES THE COLOSSEUM IN ROME. © REUTERS/MARIO LAPORTA, 2001



# Catholic Pride... and Prejudice

## THE STORY BEHIND THE HIERARCHY'S OBSESSION WITH SEXUALITY

By Mary E. Hunt

**T**HE CURRENT STATE OF CATHOLICISM is a story of pride and prejudice. Lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/queer (LGBTQ) Catholics and their supporters are proud to bring the elephant in the sacristy to public attention. Kyriarchal church officials who are prejudiced against homosexuals are caught between the rock of Peter and the hard place of postmodern life.\* The result is a church struggling over same-sex love. Conservatives are sure that any chink in the hetero armor will result in the end of Catholicism as they know it. Progressives argue that this is one more of theologian Daniel C. Maguire's "pelvic zone issues," joining other issues the Catholic hierarchy has got wrong: reproductive choice, masturbation and the like. How did the story develop and what might be its happy ending?

### SCRIPTURE

The first chapter deals with scripture. Historians debate whether there was such a thing as homosexuality before the 19th century. But the pedestrian interpretations of several scripture texts, including Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 about men lying with men, and Romans 1:26-27 which includes women's relations with women, give the impression that this prohibition is as old as God. However, some scholars say that same-sex activity was quite common at the time and these texts

simply outlawed it for heterosexuals. At most, homosexuality seems to fall into injunctions against ritual impurity rather than categorical evil. But that has not stopped church officials from clinging to prejudice for centuries. Indeed they have bestirred themselves of late to make views on homosexuality and actions against same-sex people the litmus test of orthodoxy now that they consider their ban on abortion to be the theological equivalent of "settled law."

Enlightened scripture scholars have effectively answered most of the anti-gay arguments by contextualizing the pericopes and arguing that they have been misread and/or overinterpreted. For example, the oft-cited Sodom and Gomorrah texts (Genesis 18-19), according to contemporary interpreters, are not a condemnation of homosexuality. Rather, despite the seeming indifference to the well-being of women, this story is read as a cautionary tale about the sin of inhospitality.

These and other so-called "clobber texts" cause endless debate in Protestant circles. But for Catholics who are less accustomed to and reliant on bib-

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\* "Kyriarchy" is a term coined by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. It means, literally, structures of lordship. It denotes the interstructured forms of oppression—gender, race, class, nationality, sexuality and the like—that result in power differences and injustice. Kyriarchy is used to distinguish the hierarchical, clerical model of church from the larger Catholic community.

lical arguments, they are simply the deep background for church documents that themselves are the stuff of discussion. For example, in the “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons” (1986), which intensified contemporary debate on homosexuality, the serious intellectual matter of biblical interpretation, a well developed theological discipline, is reduced to a caricature: “...there is nevertheless a clear consistency within the Scriptures themselves on the moral issue of homosexual behavior.... It is likewise essential to recognize that the Scriptures are not properly understood when they are interpreted in a way which contradicts the Church’s living Tradition. To be correct, the interpretation of Scripture must be in substantial accord with that Tradition” (par.5). This statement shows how far apart church officials and scholars are, not simply on the interpretation of particular texts, but on the state of the art of biblical studies itself.

Whether one likes it or not, there is no “clear consistency” in biblical texts on almost anything, much less on homosexuality. But more problematic is the notion that textual interpretation ought to correspond with the Catholic church’s tradition, even if it is wrong, rather than having the tradition develop in conjunction with advances in biblical scholarship. This is essentially saying that just because we always translated a word to mean ‘pig,’ but now we find out it really means ‘horse,’ we will continue to do so regardless because it is our tradition. Such is theological wishful thinking at best, not the stuff of respected scholarship. Perhaps this explains why, even after *Dei Verbum* (“The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation,” 1965), which encouraged Catholics to read scripture with the benefit of modern tools of biblical criticism, a primitive understanding of texts persists in official teachings. The outmoded scholarship renders much of the teaching intellectually embarrassing because it is so far from contemporary scholarly standards. No wonder

Catholic officials rarely rely on scripture for their arguments.

#### HISTORICAL SCHOLARSHIP

Another important chapter in this tale of pride and prejudice was written by historians. John Boswell, in his landmark studies *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (1980) and *Same-Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe* (1994), looked at “the confusion of religious beliefs with popular prejudice” rebutting “the common idea that religious belief—whether Christian or other—has been the *cause* of intolerance in regard to gay people” (p6). Boswell, though renowned as a pioneer in gay historical work, was really something of an apologist for the church, making the case that Christianity was not as bad as it seems on issues of same-sex love. Despite his glaring lack of gender analysis, Boswell claimed that the danger or threat allegedly posed by those a society once finds intolerable, like witches or moneylenders, “now seems so illusory that it is difficult for modern readers to imagine that intelligent people of the past could actually have been troubled by such anxieties” (p7). So it will one day be with gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender/queer people.

In the meantime, natural law—that male and female must inexorably “fit” together for sexual purposes—remains the guiding epistemology of most kyriarchal church teachings. This worldview collides with postmodern, post-Einsteinian, symbolic ways of understanding reality that take the starting point of the knower as seriously as the givens of that which is known. For example, from a natural law perspective a male and a female person are necessary for licit and productive sex. In postmodern life the permutations are many. Transgender challenges to even static notions of male and female render us less sure who’s what anymore. Meaningful conversations on sexuality are hard to have in an institution where the operative worldview is out of sync with the experience of many people. Then fiat rather than argument, decree rather than dialogue, become the best way to impose order.

Significant challenges from the social and biological sciences demonstrate the variety and variability of human sexual interaction, something Boswell detected in the early centuries of the church. He opened a new arena of scholarship by studying the passionate friendships of medieval men and women. Saint Aelred of Rievaulx, a Cistercian abbot, is an example of a gay man in religious life who saw the relationship between Jesus and John as reminiscent of his own loves. Boswell pointed to Saints Perpetua and Felicitas, martyred together in 203, as a female case of same-sex love that he thought was admired in the early centuries of the Christian tradition.

Scripture scholar Bernadette Brooten, in her tour de force *Love between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (1996), agreed that same-sex love was part of the early Christian community’s experience. But she disagreed with Boswell’s reading of how it was valued, parting company with him on gender grounds. Boswell, she claimed, focused on male-male cases of same-sex love that may indeed have been tolerated because they did not challenge the fundamental top-down relational paradigm, for instance between a boy and a man, a master and a slave. She notes that he does not even write that Perpetua and Felicitas were sexually intimate. Nor does he mention that they had babies, which seems to imply some relatively recent heterosexual coupling. And, she reports, he passes over that Felicitas was a slave while Perpetua was of a high class, a difference that raises the question of coercion or sexual abuse as possible dynamics in the women’s relationship. She reads Boswell’s inclusion of them as simply a “feminine counterpart to Saints Serge and Bakchos” (p13) who are the subject of liturgical texts that Boswell cites to claim that male-male friendship rites were part of the early church’s liturgical repertoire.

[For more on this, see “How Our Minds Have Changed,” by Bernadette Brooten, p34.]

## CONTEMPORARY KYRIARCHAL STATEMENTS

These intellectually exciting scholarly interventions, and many other lively debates on sexuality in theological ethics, stand in stark contrast to the one-dimensional statements from the Vatican on homosexuality which constitute another chapter in this Catholic saga. These documents have followed in lockstep, from the medieval penance manuals to the most recent statement against gay seminarians. In summary, the institutional position is that “homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered and can in no case be approved of.” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), “Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics,” 1975, par. 8.) This means all same-sex activity, whether fleeting and furtive or as part of a monogamous committed

simplicity of worldview as if something as complex as a human relationship could be categorized so neatly. The experience of countless same-sex couples in long-term faithful relationships ought to be sufficient to show that blanket condemnations of same-sex love are groundless. Even the witness of the church’s own allegedly celibate clergy and religious who are gay/lesbian ought to counter egregious statements about orientation. But such information is not easily accessible due to the Catch-22 of “don’t ask, don’t tell” that operates in ecclesial settings. Merely speaking of sexual experience is grounds for deep suspicion and probable negative repercussions for those whose lives are circumscribed by canonical connections.

The claims demonstrate a continued reliance on natural law to understand what we now know to be nature’s own vari-

major role in keeping homosexuality at the forefront of kyriarchal concern despite the fact that it was virtually ignored by the Second Vatican Council. Like abortion, it is an area of private life that the hierarchical church uses to assure a dubious public that it still had a role to play as its moral suasion ebbs on issues of war and economics.

In 1975, the Congregation, under the leadership of its Prefect, Cardinal Franjo Seper, issued the previously mentioned “Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics.” It was a failed effort to square traditional teaching against masturbation and homosexuality and in favor of monogamous marriage with 20<sup>th</sup> century social science. Alas, tradition won out, marriage was reaffirmed as expected, and masturbation, at the end of the day, was still a “grave moral dis-

**In 1991, the kyriarchal church sanctioned, almost encouraged, discrimination against gay and lesbian persons in certain areas including teaching, coaching, the military and other forms of employment.**

relationship, is equally and always sinful. With the slightest nod to nuance, namely that sexuality is more than the sum of genital activity, the Vatican took another misstep to proclaim that sexual orientation itself “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.” (CDF, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons,” 1986, par. 3.) This phrase has been particularly offensive: sexual orientation itself, quite apart from anything one might imagine to do in function of it, is considered wrong.

Buried in the rhetoric are many assumptions about sexuality, the nature and role of sexual orientation, sexual identity and sexual integrity that are all part of contemporary discussion. But a look at these foundational claims reveals a shocking

ety. And there is an obstinate unwillingness to admit into evidence any but the church’s own sources. The data of the social and physical sciences make clear that homosexuality is a healthy, natural occurrence in a certain percentage of the population. Ignoring such information for the sake of maintaining a kyriarchal system through a spate of documents, threats and actions against LGBTQ people makes the Catholic church synonymous with sexual oppression. This reputation has developed over a long period of time, beginning most explicitly in the 4th century with the Councils of Elvira (305-306) and Ancyra (314) whose discussions provided the basis for canon law on the matter. Anti-gay writings can be found in the patristic materials, Basil and Gregory among others, and persist until the present.

In modern times, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has played the

order.” On homosexuality there was a distinction between homosexual acts that are always wrong and homosexual orientation that is neutral. While the distinction is not enormously helpful, it does signal at least some understanding of the complexity at issue.

This position changed in the 1986 “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons,” called the Halloween Letter by progressive Catholics who found its contents more trick than treat, signed by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Prefect of the Congregation. Orientation was called morally disordered; acts remained evil. But the real import of the letter was that it signaled an intensification of action against lesbian and gay persons. Bishops were ordered to prohibit Catholic lesbian/gay groups from using church property. Catholics were coun-

seled not to be surprised that anti-gay violence might erupt when LGBTQ people sought civil rights, with no acknowledgment of the role religious prejudice plays in such crimes. Following the publication of the letter, many scholars and activists mobilized to denounce it. They created alternative Catholic theological positions and physical spaces where LGBTQ Catholics and their supporters could find meaning and ministry.

The Congregation, under Cardinal Ratzinger's leadership, struck again in 1991 with "Some Considerations Concerning the Catholic Response to Legislative Proposals on the Non-Discrimination of Homosexual Persons." This time the focus was on civil rights with a clear aim at the US political situation where gay civil rights was becoming a topic of serious attention. Unbelievably, the kyriarchal church sanctioned, almost encouraged, discrimination in certain areas including teaching, coaching, the military and other forms of employment. The Vatican claimed that lesbian/gay people should not be likened to women, racial minorities and others against whom discrimination is unfair. Rather, lesbians and gays, many of whom experience hate crimes, apparently deserve their fate. While some documents have included admonitions to respect gay and lesbian people, there is in fact little respect to be found in church circles.

In 1993, Pope John Paul II issued the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* which some scholars read as the first time a modern pope mentioned homosexuality. Of course it was a negative take, coupling homosexuality with contraception, masturbation and artificial insemination as evils to be avoided. Otherwise, he left the heavy lifting on this issue to Cardinal Ratzinger.

The American bishops published their own letter in 1997, "Always Our Children: A Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children and Suggestions for Pastoral Ministers." It was a well meaning but deeply flawed document, a moral baby step beyond "hate the sin and love the sinner" that was the most progressive pas-

toral advice of an earlier generation. It is full of comfort to parents who should not blame themselves for this terrible tragedy that has befallen their children. This is hardly the stuff of gay pride. Rather, they should urge their children to be chaste, get them the help they need, presumably to change their orientation if possible and bond with other such parents to carry their burdens together. There is no denying that much good has come from this episcopal effort at enlightened concern. But the jury is still out on whether such a patronizing approach is really helpful, or whether it reinforces the kyriarchal position under the gooey guise of being pastoral. Some parishes set up support groups for parents of LGBTQ people. But they were constrained, for example, when it came to inviting speakers who would offer Catholic theological pro-sex positions or making known their own views when they conflicted with official church policy.

"Always Our Children" is a document replete with church teaching on heterosexuality as well as homosexuality. Just in case anyone could forget that licit sex is between a man and a woman and open to procreation, the teaching is reiterated in contrast to same-sex activity which is not. Of course no mention is made of the many same-sex families with adopted children, children from earlier hetero relationships and/or insemination. Nor is there any recognition that some people like to live without committed partners and still have the human right to be sexual, that others care for elderly parents, pets or the environment, in short, that there are many good ways to be in this world such that everyone need not be coupled. It is no wonder so many lesbian and gay people found this missive sadly lacking, and were unpersuaded by the kind but infantilizing words with which it ends: "Though at times you may feel discouraged, hurt or angry, do not walk away from your families, from the Christian community, from all those who love you. In you God's love is revealed. You are always our children." If this is as good as it gets from kyriarchy, it is not enough.

## CATHOLIC PRIDE

During this 30-year period, 1975-2005, many Catholics rejected the kyriarchal position, writing their own chapters in this story. Catholic scholars including Boswell and Brooten, Daniel Helminiak, Mark Jordan, John McNeill and myself, to name just a few, have been hard at work rethinking, researching and rewriting Catholic theological, historical and ethical materials. Intellectual strides have been made on many fronts, for example Helminiak on scripture, Jordan opening up *The Silence of Sodom*, McNeill using psychology and my sketching a Catholic lesbian feminist theology. That work continues.

On the organizational level, DignityUSA, the Conference for Catholic Lesbians (CCL), Women-Church Convergence, New Ways Ministry and the National Association of Catholic Diocesan Lesbian and Gay Ministries (NACDLGM) all work in coalition and independently on a broad agenda of sexual and social justice for lesbian and gay people.

Several American dioceses, notably Baltimore and San Francisco, have distinguished themselves in their efforts to act pastorally toward lesbian and gay people in the face of these damaging teachings. Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen in Seattle was disciplined for his willingness to allow same-sex Catholics to worship in the local cathedral. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger oversaw an apostolic visitation that resulted in the usurping of Hunthausen's episcopal authority in the years just before his retirement.

What is striking in all of these efforts is the David and Goliath nature of the relationship between these small groups and the colossal power of the Vatican to make its position known through the media and to instrumentalize legislation related to sodomy, same-sex marriage and the like around the world. The less institutional connection an individual or group has, i.e., the scholars cited and Dignity or CCL, the more likely they are to publicly promote a pro-sex position. The more institutional connection, the more likely individuals and groups are to remain timid and tentative in calling at most for gay civil

rights, avoiding the claim that same-sex love is healthy, good, natural and holy, subject to the same criteria as heterosexual with regard to its morality. This is how the lines are drawn currently.

#### **GAY CIVIL RIGHTS, MARRIAGE AND CHILDREN**

The story continues. Recent writings on same-sex marriage follow in the “Ratzingerian” tradition, in yet another chapter of “Catholic Pride and Prejudice.” The usual pattern is applied: same-sex love is wrong because natural law says so; same-sex marriage is therefore unthinkable; politicians have a special responsibility to keep it from becoming legal. Gay civil rights are increasingly recognized as basic human rights, including the right to marry

children in institutions rather than be loved and cared for by LGBTQ people. Studies show that a family setting rather than an institution is far preferable for all children. But father pope thinks he knows best.

This issue is being put to the test in Boston. Catholic Charities there, headed by the Rev. Bryan Hehir, has facilitated a small number of same-sex adoptions. Massachusetts state law requires that institutions that provide adoption services must accept well qualified same-sex individuals or couples on the same basis as they accept well qualified heterosexuals. Hehir stated that they did same-sex adoptions despite Catholic policy in an effort to “balance goods.” They receive state funding for all adoption services, hence the need for compliance. The Apostolic

priesthood. It was inevitable that the issue would arise, but unfortunate that it arose in tandem with the clergy pedophilia and episcopal cover-up scandals. Because many of the pedophilia and ephedophilia cases were male-male, there was an understandable but mistaken connection made between homosexuality and criminal behavior. It is well known that most pedophilia is heterosexual. It is expected that bishops, like other citizens who learn of crime, will report it and take steps to prevent it from recurring.

Anecdotal and limited survey data reveal that there is a higher percentage of gay men in the Catholic priesthood than in the population at large. Some estimates range up to 70 percent; no one disputes 40 percent. Religious orders with their communal

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in Canada, Belgium, the Netherlands and Spain, all countries with significant Catholic history and population. Thus, the 2003 document, “Considerations Regarding Proposals To Give Legal Recognition To Unions Between Homosexual Persons,” came as no surprise as the Vatican sees its power waning.

This time, in addition to the expected rant against same-sex marriage, the Vatican tipped its hand in a new direction against same-sex adoptions. The authors argued that “the absence of sexual complementarity in these unions creates obstacles in the normal development of children who would be placed in the care of such persons. They would be deprived of the experience of either fatherhood or motherhood. Allowing children to be adopted by persons living in such unions would actually mean doing violence to these children, in the sense that their condition of dependency would be used to place them in an environment that is not conducive to their full human development.” Apparently the Vatican would prefer that chil-

Nuncio, Archbishop Gabriel Montalvo Higuera, allegedly sent a letter—private correspondence that cannot be documented—indicating that the Vatican is displeased with the current situation and expects it to be changed. The archdiocese said that no same-sex adoptions are in process at the moment, perhaps spelling a sad end to an important practice. The courts will decide. Now it is the children of same-sex parents who stand to lose.

There are reports around the country that some children of same-sex parents have been denied baptism or made to feel unwelcome in Catholic schools. At the same time, some gay and/or gay-friendly priests have been reported to handle these matters with sensitivity and solidarity. No data exist on this phenomenon as yet, but it is disturbing to think that children are penalized because of prejudice.

#### **GAY SEMINARIANS AND SEMINARY PROFESSORS**

The most recent chapter in this complicated story deals with gay men in the

lifestyles tend to have a higher percentage than diocesan groups. But all of this is irrelevant to the larger point, namely, that a commitment to celibacy is required so sexual orientation as such is moot. This did not stop the Vatican from issuing its latest salvo, the “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.” While the focus is on keeping gay seminarians from ordination, the cover letter included gay seminary personnel among those who should be barred from the scene.

It is significant that Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the prime architect of the anti-gay position, is now Pope Benedict XVI with the potential to codify what he has taught for so long. This document repeats his earlier misconceptions about homosexuality, insisting that “deep seated tendencies” as well as acts are “objectively disordered.” It adds that support of the gay community, presumably by heterosexuals as well as homosexuals, is an automatic

disqualifier for ordination. But it goes another step to state that homosexuality “gravely hinders” people from “relating correctly to men and women,” and can have “negative consequences,” not so veiled references to pedophilia. In an odd twist, the document allows that homosexual activity must be concluded three years before diaconal ordination, perhaps an acknowledgement that such is common in the seminary population. One only wonders if a similar calendar countdown applies for heterosexual candidates, but such is the banal level of thinking that such documents invite. [For more on this, see p44.]

#### HOW WILL THE STORY END?

It is hard to imagine how the kyriarchal Catholic church will extricate itself from its current straightjacket. *Humanae Vitae* in 1968, the so-called birth control encyclical promulgated against the advice of a Vatican commission that included sexu-

ally experienced lay people, eroded any credibility the kyriarchy had on heterosexuality. So, too, it seems that these documents, especially the most recent one on gay seminarians that is so obviously scapegoating for and distracting from the ecclesial crisis occasioned by criminal behavior and cover-up, signal the end of the Vatican’s authority on homosexuality. The price will be high for many people whose lives, ministry and/or faith will be affected by the fallout of these statements.

Progressive Catholics will persist in efforts to reshape and communicate a pro-sex theology. The Vatican will probably release another statement, perhaps on lesbian nuns or bisexual bishops. But the gap helps no one when what really needs to be done is to articulate a sensible, sensitive theology of “good sex” in an age of HIV/AIDS. To that end, I suggest a moratorium on discussion on homosexuality, and a common Catholic commitment to

eradicate heterosexism, the attitude and ability to enforce the notion that heterosexuality is normative to the exclusion of the full flowering of same-sex possibilities. Heterosexism, not homosexuality, is the sin that needs attention.

Such a shift of focus would put an end to the current impasse. It would allow both the “pride” and “prejudice” sides of this divide to begin anew, to look at their positions against the horizon of heterosexism. It would shift the ethical attention from the behaviors of some to the behaviors of all, since most of us are heterosexual whether we realize it or not. It would invite new extravagances of charity in the mysterious arena of human love about which no one is finally expert. It would shift the authority from the top to the heart of a church that has abundant resources to put to the service of human well-being. This is the next Catholic story waiting to be written. ■

#### OPINION

# On the Unstable Marriage of Reproductive and Sexual Rights

## THE CASE FOR A TRIAL SEPARATION

By Rosalind P. Petchesky

**S**EEMINGLY A LIFETIME AGO, I was part of a feminist movement in the United States that galvanized around what we then were calling “reproductive freedom.” Though a primary incite-

ment to our organizing was the right-wing attacks on abortion access that followed like an avalanche after *Roe v. Wade* in the 1970s, we had a vision far broader than just safe, legal abortion. As we put it in the foundational document of CARASA (Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse), along with “adequate abortion services and an end to involuntary sterilization,” reproductive freedom meant:

...the availability to all people of good public childcare centers and schools;

decent housing, adequate welfare, and wages high enough to support a family; and of quality medical, pre- and post-natal and maternal care. It also must mean *freedom of sexual choice, which implies an end to the cultural norms that define women in terms of having children and living with a man; an affirmation of people’s right to raise children outside of conventional families; and...a transformation of childcare arrangements so that they are shared among women and men.* (CARASA, *Women Under Attack: Abortion,*

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