

Seeds of truth in same-sex relationships: Paths of accompaniment, discernment, and integration for Gay and Lesbian persons within Catholic communities

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BOSTON COLLEGE
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY

SEEDS OF TRUTH IN SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS

Paths of Accompaniment, Discernment, and Integration for
Gay and Lesbian Persons within Catholic Communities

Thesis Submitted as Partial Completion for the
License in Sacred Theology

by

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April 9, 2020

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Introduction

*We cannot claim to say where God is not, because God is mysteriously present in the life of every person, in a way that he himself chooses, and we cannot exclude this by our presumed certainties.... If we let ourselves be guided by the Spirit rather than our own preconceptions, we can and must try to find the Lord in every human life.*¹

At the very beginning of his *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas affirms that “the truth about God such as reason could discover, would only be known by a few, and that after a long time, and with the admixture of many errors.”² Indeed, our knowledge of God and our understanding of the truth fully revealed in Jesus Christ³ are always limited and subject to error. The Magisterium, by a special grace entrusted from Christ to Peter and the Apostles, plays a unique role as the authentic interpreter of the Word of God, whether written or handed on by the Tradition.⁴ Nevertheless, alongside the rest of the hierarchy and of the people of God, the Magisterium is also subject to human limits and exposed to the possibility of error in its understanding of the truth about God, and about human beings, except in some specific situations foreseen in the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*.⁵

Recent history shows us how, out of fidelity to God’s Word and Tradition, the Church has changed her position in many matters, and acknowledged the mistakes made in previous eras, precisely by recognizing that her exposition of the truth of God and of God’s creation is not something monolithic and finished. Since, as Pope Francis points out, “it is not easy to grasp

¹ Francis, “Apostolic Exhortation on the Call to Holiness in Today’s World ‘Gaudete et Exsultate,’” March 19, 2018, The Holy See, <http://w2.vatican.va/>, no. 42.

² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1947, <https://aquinas101.thomisticinstitute.org/st-index>, I, q. 1, a. 1.

³ See Second Vatican Council, “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation ‘Dei Verbum,’” November 18, 1965, The Holy See, <http://www.vatican.va/>, no. 4.

⁴ See *ibid.*, no. 10.

⁵ See Second Vatican Council, “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church ‘Lumen Gentium,’” November 21, 1964, The Holy See, <http://www.vatican.va/>, no. 25.

the truth that we have received from the Lord, and it is even more difficult to express it... Doctrine, or better, our understanding and expression of it, is not a closed system, devoid of the dynamic capacity to pose questions, doubts, inquiries...⁶ This view of things is particularly important with regard to the discipline of morality, given its practical character and its direct relationship with the lives of believers. The situation becomes even more complex in the field of sexual ethics, since its object deals with one of the most complex and nuanced dimensions of the human being, where general principles tend not to yield justice in concrete situations. Indeed, as Aquinas recalls, “practical reason... is busied with contingent matters, about which human actions are concerned; consequently, although there is necessity in the general principles, the more we descend to matters of detail, the more frequently we encounter defects.”⁷

In *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis, inviting the Church to self-criticism, acknowledges the weaknesses of Church’s teaching on marriage, and on sexuality in general, over the past decades, which has been more centered on abstract principles and duties than on grace and the formation of personal character in Christian virtues. Indeed, he affirms that “we also need to be humble and realistic, acknowledging that at times the way we present our Christian beliefs and treat other people has helped contribute to today’s problematic situation.”⁸ The Pope also acknowledges that the Magisterium has found it hard “to make room for the consciences of the faithful, who very often respond as best they can to the Gospel amid their limitations, and are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations.”⁹

In light of this, the present work aims to respond to the call of the Second Vatican Council to develop moral theology in the direction of a “more living contact with the mystery of Christ

⁶ Francis, “Gaudete et Exsultate,” nos. 43-44.

⁷ *ST* I-II, q. 94, a. 4.

⁸ Francis, “Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on Love in the Family ‘Amoris Laetitia,’” March 19, 2016, The Holy See, <https://w2.vatican.va/>, no. 36.

⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 37.

and the history of salvation.”¹⁰ Pope Francis also acknowledges that “Christian morality is not a form of stoicism, or self-denial, or merely a practical philosophy or a catalogue of sins and faults but, . . . it is our response to God who first loved and saved us, to find God in the others and to go forth from ourselves to seek the good of others.”¹¹ Furthermore, also in the spirit of the Council, I intend to develop my study under the sign of pastorality and historical consciousness, reflecting on Catholic sexual ethics in a merciful way that takes into consideration “the questions of our people, their suffering, their struggles, their dreams, their trials and their worries,” because, as Pope Francis continues, “all possess an interpretational value that we cannot ignore if we want to take the principle of the incarnation seriously. Their wondering helps us to wonder, their questions question us.”¹²

The Synod of the Bishops of 2015 offered some guidance on how to exercise mercy by affirming that “people need to be accepted in the concrete circumstances of life. We need to know how to support them in their searching and to encourage them in their hunger for God and their wish to feel fully part of the Church, also including those who have experienced failure or find themselves in a variety of situations.”¹³ Likewise, in *Amoris Laetitia* the Pope underlined the need “to avoid judgments which do not take into account the complexity of various situations” and “to be attentive, by necessity, to how people experience distress because of their condition.”¹⁴

Indeed, alongside Christopher Pramuk, I intend to enter into a deeper understanding of the mystery of the Incarnation to which “we are still learning how to give full (and full-bodied!)

¹⁰ Second Vatican Council, “Decree on Priestly Training ‘Optatam Totius,’” October 28, 1965, The Holy See, <http://www.vatican.va/>, no. 16.

¹¹ Francis, “Gaudete et Exsultate,” no. 39.

¹² Both quotes in this paragraph are from Francis, “Gaudete et Exsultate,” no. 44.

¹³ Synod of Bishops, “The Final Report of the Synod of Bishops to the Holy Father, Pope Francis,” October 24, 2015, The Holy See, www.vatican.va/, no. 15.

¹⁴ Francis, “Amoris Laetitia,” no. 296.

voice.”¹⁵ To this end, I aim to “attend carefully to the Scriptures and appeal methodically to reason, but also drink deeply from the wellspring of human experience in all its mosaic diversity,”¹⁶ being aware of its ambiguity and its challenging character to our moral theology. Therefore, driven by many stories that I have come to know personally and through my research, some of which I include in this work, I would like, with this thesis, to offer a small contribution to the development of Catholic sexual ethics. In this work I will utilize, although with different degrees of depth, the four sources of moral theology: Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience.

Furthermore, responding to the Pope’s call in *Veritatis Gaudium*, I want this work to be marked by inter-disciplinary and cross-disciplinary approaches, aiming to integrate moral theology, spirituality, and pastoral theology.¹⁷ I intend my work to correspond to the Pope’s call to serve people in their circumstances, with an eminently pastoral perspective that avoids any kind of “desk-bound theology.”¹⁸ Indeed, as Julio Luis Martínez points out, “moral theology must never lose its connection with spirituality, nor its pastoral character, since it ultimately has the mission of ‘helping souls’ on the complex path of real life.”¹⁹

Accordingly, I aim to look at the reality of same-sex relationships from a Catholic perspective, seeking to point out ways that can, in creative fidelity to the Tradition, help gay and lesbian people, individuals and couples, to live out lives of honesty and holiness within the Catholic community. The lives of gay and lesbian individuals and couples present a

¹⁵ Both quotes in the paragraph are from Christopher Pramuk, “Imagination and Difference: Beyond Essentialism in Church Teaching and Practice,” *New Theology Review: an American Catholic Journal for Ministry* 26, no. 1 (2013): 52.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ See Francis, “Apostolic Constitution on Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties ‘Veritatis Gaudium,’” December 8, 2017, The Holy See, <http://www.vatican.va/>, no. 4.

¹⁸ Francis, “Evangelii Gaudium,” no. 133.

¹⁹ “La teología moral no debe perder nunca su conexión con la espiritualidad, ni su carácter pastoral, ya que en última instancia tiene la misión de ‘ayudar a las almas’ en el complejo camino de la vida real.” Julio Luis Martínez, “Discernimiento y Moral en el Magisterio del Papa Francisco,” *Medellín. Biblia, Teología y Pastoral para América Latina y El Caribe* 43, no. 168 (2017): 382. [This translation and all following are mine.]

σκανδαλον,²⁰ i.e., a stumbling block in Catholic moral teaching. Although recognizing that homosexual persons should be treated with “respect, compassion, and sensitivity,”²¹ the Magisterium denies to these persons a path of holiness that comprehends the expression of one’s affectivity through a committed relationship with sexual intimacy with a person of the same sex. Based on a particular interpretation of Scripture and on a Greco-Roman view of natural law, the official doctrine, applying general principles deductively to the concrete life of individuals, does not take into consideration the complexity of the lives of gay and lesbian people.

In practice, the current Magisterial teaching on homosexuality gives no moral guidance for gay and lesbian people striving to follow Jesus within the Catholic community who do not feel called to a life of celibacy or, at the moment, do not feel capable of that life. By not taking into consideration the concrete striving of many persons living in same-sex relationships, the Church’s moral teaching is closing off both grace and growth for them.²² At the same time, the silence and invisibility of those individuals and couples who decide to remain in the community contributes to the perpetuation of the doctrinal and pastoral *status quo*.

In light of this impasse in which homosexual people find themselves, I will investigate if there are *seeds of truth* in gay and lesbian relationships, that is, whether some same-sex couples can realize the ideal of the Christian conception of matrimony in at least a partial and analogous way.²³ To do this, I will draw upon the affirmation of Cardinal Walter Kasper that “just as outside the Catholic church there are elements of the true Church, in the unions mentioned above [unions between homosexual persons, civil unions, or unions of remarried people] there

²⁰ According to James Alison, in the New Testament, the word σκανδαλον—*skándalon*—refers to scandal, or stumbling block. He affirms that “someone who is scandalized is someone who is paralysed into a inability to move. And the undoing of σκανδαλα—*skándala*—which means the unbinding of double binds that do not allow people to be, is what the Gospel is supposed to be about.” James Alison, *On Being Liked* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2003), 103.

²¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1993, The Holy See, <http://www.vatican.va/>, no. 2358.

²² See Francis, “Amoris Laetitia,” no. 305.

²³ See *ibid.*, no. 292.

may be elements of Christian marriage, even if they do not fully or not yet fully realize the ideal.”²⁴

My purpose is also based on the recommendation of the Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Youth, in 2018, that called for a “deeper anthropological, theological and pastoral study”²⁵ of some questions connected with sexuality, such as “sexual inclinations.” Indeed, the Bishops suggested the development of “journeys of accompaniment in faith for homosexual persons” in which young people should be helped to “discern the best ways” of adhering with freedom and responsibility to their baptismal calling and of belonging and contributing to the life of the community. For this purpose, I will draw upon Pope Francis’ proposal of accompanying, discerning, and integrating situations that “do not yet or no longer correspond to [Church’s] teaching on marriage.”²⁶

It is important, first of all, to define a few of the key concepts I utilize in this work. To that end, I will follow mainly Stephen Pope’s definitions.²⁷ By ‘sexual orientation’ I understand the “sustained erotic attraction to members of one’s own gender, the opposite gender, or both—homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual, respectively.” Under the concept of ‘homosexual person’ I consider “those who experience a persistent dominant erotic attraction to members of their own sex and enduring psychological disposition to engage in sexual activity with same-sex partners.” Different from homosexual orientation or homosexuality is the concept of ‘homosexual activity,’ which refers to “a range of sexual behavior, from sexual imaginings to genital activity culminating in orgasm, which flows from a deeper homosexual orientation.”

²⁴ “Come al di fuori della chiesa cattolica ci sono elementi della vera chiesa, nelle citate unioni possono essere presenti elementi del matrimonio cristiano, anche se non realizzano pienamente o non ancora pienamente l’ideale.” Walter Kasper, *Il Messaggio di Amoris Laetitia: Una Discussione Fraterna* (Brescia: Queriniana, 2018), 57.

²⁵ All the quotes in this paragraph are from Synod of Bishops, “Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment,” October 27, 2018, <http://www.synod.va/>, no. 150.

²⁶ Francis, “Amoris Laetitia,” no. 292. See, in this regard, the entire chapter eight of this document.

²⁷ All the following quotes are from Stephen J. Pope, “Scientific and Natural Law Analyses of Homosexuality: A Methodological Study,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 25, no. 1 (1997): 94.

Although in my study I mainly base myself on these definitions, I will prefer the use of the terms ‘gay person’ and ‘lesbian person’ over homosexual, but without being too strict. As John Boswell points out, the word homosexual has a strongly ‘technical’ connotation and has its origin in the medical field. In turn, the words gay and lesbian have a more personal, less technical, connotation, being more linked to the identity of the person.²⁸ Although I privilege the expressions ‘gay person’ and ‘lesbian person,’ because Magisterial documents always use the word ‘homosexual,’ at times I will indiscriminately use both expressions. Also, unless it is a quotation, I will avoid using the acronym ‘LGBT’ or ‘LGBTQ.’ I consider the use of acronyms more adequate for political and advocacy purposes. Given the personalistic/spiritual/ethical approach to the topic in this work, I will avoid the use of acronyms. Not being able to cover all issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity, I will restrict the scope of my study to gay and lesbian people.

As regards my methodology, I will foster a revisionist model based on a historically conscious approach to moral theology. Revisionism is a new ethical method characterized by its focus on the person, “on the life of the baptized Christian living in community.”²⁹ The concept of historical consciousness finds its origins in a Bernard Lonergan’s article “The Transition from a Classicist World-View to Historical-Mindedness,” in which the author distinguishes two different worldviews or mentalities: a classicist perspective and a historically conscious one.³⁰ Lonergan argues that the Second Vatican Council operated a methodological shift from a classicist approach to a more historically conscious one in the Church.

²⁸ See John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 42-44.

²⁹ James F. Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century: From Confessing Sins to Liberating Consciences* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 83.

³⁰ See Bernard Lonergan, “The Transition from a Classicist World-View to Historical-Mindedness,” in *A Second Collection*, eds. William F. J. Ryan and Bernard J. Tyrrell (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1974), 2.

The classicist worldview is a deductive method that “works methodologically from the abstract and universal towards the more concrete and particular.”³¹ In a classicist mentality and methodology, concepts such as “human nature” are a result of an abstraction of the differences that can exist between human beings. So, human nature is defined as something that “applies *omni et soli* and through properties verifiable in every man.”³² Being a result of an abstraction, human nature is also considered unchangeable.

The historically conscious worldview and its method is empirical and inductive, although it does not completely avoid deductive reasoning.³³ Such a method “is reluctant to draw conclusions independently of a consideration of the human person and the complexities of human existence.”³⁴ Indeed, in this method, historicity is of utmost importance: it “is the exigency for change and the medium of all human knowing and living.”³⁵ If the human being is always historically situated, “we not only inherit our world but we also contribute to making what it is and what it will be.”³⁶ In order to integrate the “developmental, personalistic, and social structural dimensions of lived experiences,”³⁷ this method must make use of human and social sciences. Therefore, the contribution of the sciences, along with the testimony of people of good will—individually and as communities—becomes fundamental for moral theology. It should also be noted that we cannot expect absolute truths and the absence of error in the conclusions of such a method. Rather, the method assumes that “its conclusions are, at best,

³¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

³² *Ibid.*, 5.

³³ Lonergan draws his theological method from the method of modern human sciences, which is no longer based on general principles and laws, but begins from particular experiences that can generate normative relations. In such a method, particular experiences “generate the revision of conclusions, laws, and principles that are accepted today.” Bernard Lonergan, “Theology in Its New Context,” in *A Second Collection*, eds. William F. J. Ryan and Bernard J. Tyrrell (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1974), 40.

³⁴ Richard M. Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith: Foundations of Catholic Morality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 37.

³⁵ Donna Teevan, *Lonergan, Hermeneutics & Theological Method*, (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2005), 168.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 166.

³⁷ Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith*, 37.

tentative summaries of the present state of the question.”³⁸ Thus, they are always open to new data from experience and from new insights.

Therefore, the revisionist method, because it puts the human person in his/her concrete circumstances at the center, seems to be the most appropriate for my objective in this work. In fact, my intention is precisely to go beyond the clearly classicist, abstract model that characterizes current Catholic sexual ethics, with an unchangeable understanding of human nature, that is, in turn, preventing the Magisterium from going deeper in engaging the gay and lesbian persons.

To that end, in the first chapter, I will begin by presenting the current Magisterial teaching on same-sex relations, based on the main documents published by the Roman Curia in recent decades on this topic. I will focus especially on the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and then try to analyze the reasons that this document presents to argue for the disordered character of such relationships, when they include sexual expression.

To verify the accuracy of the statement that “tradition has always declared that homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered and they are contrary to the natural law,”³⁹ I will revisit the history of Church teaching on the subject of homosexuality or, more properly, on the subject of ‘sodomy’ or sin ‘*contra naturam*.’ At the same time, I will analyze the origins and variations of the concepts of human nature and natural law throughout history, with particular emphasis on the doctrine of Thomas Aquinas. Finally, I will present my own criticism of the Magisterial documents.

In the second chapter, I will set forth in greater detail the importance of experience as a source of moral theology, in the context of a Church marked by a merciful attitude, in the spirit of Vatican II. At the same time, as with the other sources of moral theology, I will reflect on the importance of interpreting the data we receive from experience. In the following section,

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

³⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2357.

showing how experience represents a challenge to a moral edifice that is stubborn in its rigidity, I will present some testimonies of gay and lesbian people in their struggle to continue living their faith in the community, despite the misunderstanding they feel from the hierarchy and the community. Nevertheless, I will also present some signs of openness and understanding on the part of the hierarchy that reveal how some bishops—and even the Pope—seem to be listening to the voices of these people. Finally, I will investigate what seeds of true Christian love we can find in same-sex relationships by presenting the traits of Christian love that must characterize every Catholic loving relationship.

In the third chapter, I will articulate an ethical framework that can help gay people to live out lives of honesty. To this end, I will draw upon the proposal offered by Pope Francis in his Post-Synodal Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* to reintegrate divorced persons living in a new civil union into the life of the community. I will propose its eventual application to gay and lesbian persons, particularly those living in a relationship with sexual expression. In the first section, I will focus on Francis' invitation to rediscover the fundamental role of personal conscience, and personal and pastoral discernment in finding out one's particular path of holiness, even for those who live in situations that do not correspond exactly to the ecclesial rules. In the second section, I will discuss the importance of the formation of conscience and of personal character in the Christian virtues, presenting, with the help of various authors, sets of virtues that are more suitable for gay people. Finally, I will discuss the importance of integrating ethics, sexuality and spirituality, while also presenting some characteristics of a spirituality for gay and lesbian people. Particularly, alongside James Alison, I will reflect on the characteristics of the conscience of a gay person.

To conclude, I will offer my final reflection on the topics raised in the previous chapters. In particular, I will argue for changing Catholic doctrine regarding same-sex relations. At the same time, I will support the implementation of paths of spiritual and doctrinal formation in our

communities, in order to accompany gay and lesbian people, empowering them to discern, in the light of the Spirit, of the Word, and of the Tradition, how they are called to walk in the way of holiness within the community.

In 1986, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, then-Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, issued a “Letter on Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons” in which he affirmed that there are many people, inside and outside the Church, urging the Church to accept the homosexual condition as one that is not disordered and to “condone homosexual activity.”⁴⁰ Ratzinger argued that such people were “guided by a vision opposed to the truth about the human person... [and] they reflect[ed], even if not entirely consciously, a materialistic ideology which denies the transcendent nature of the human person as well as the supernatural vocation of every individual.”

I do not know whether these are still the reasons for maintaining the Magisterial *status quo* on this topic. In any case, with this study I have no materialistic motivation, neither conscious nor unconscious. I do believe in the transcendent nature of the human being and in the vocation to union with God offered to every individual. By studying this topic, and by the argumentation that follows, I simply aim to contribute to the edification of a Church, to whose hierarchy I belong, that brings Christ to the world, that “goes forth,”⁴¹ that “never closes herself off, never retreats into her own security, never opts for rigidity and defensiveness.”⁴² I intend to work for the edification of a Church that “is called to be the house of the Father, with doors always wide open,”⁴³ that privileges “those who are usually despised and overlooked.”⁴⁴ I long to foster a Church which is “bruised, hurting and dirty because she has been out on the streets, rather than

⁴⁰ Both quotes in the paragraph are from: Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons,” October 1, 1986, The Holy See, <http://www.vatican.va/>, no. 8.

⁴¹ Francis, “*Evangelii Gaudium*,” no. 46.

⁴² *Ibid.*, no. 45.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, no. 47.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 48.

a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security;”⁴⁵ a Church which “wishes to use the medicine of mercy rather than taking up arms of severity... [which] wants to show herself a loving mother to all; patient, kind, moved by compassion and goodness toward her children;”⁴⁶ a Church whose “all rich teaching is channeled in one direction, the service of humankind, of every condition, in every weakness and need,”⁴⁷ and whose first mission is to show the way to the union with God to all people in all times, without exception.

⁴⁵ Ibid., no. 49.

⁴⁶ John XXIII, “Open Speech of the Second Vatican Council ‘Gaudete Mater Ecclesiae,’” October 11, 1962, The Holy See, <http://w2.vatican.va/>.

⁴⁷ Paul VI, “Address at the Last General Meeting of the Second Vatican Council,” December 7, 1965, The Holy See, <http://w2.vatican.va/>.

1. Magisterial teaching on same-sex relationships

1.1. The current Magisterial teaching

I begin my study by examining the Magisterial documents that speak about homosexuality published in the last fifty years—although my analysis is in no way intended to be exhaustive. Before the publication of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) in 1992, the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (CDF) had issued two documents regarding this question: the first, in 1975, was a *Declaration Regarding Certain Questions of Sexual Ethics ‘Persona Humana’* (PH); the second was a *Letter to all Catholic Bishops on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* (Letter), signed by Cardinal Ratzinger in 1986. In 2003, the CDF also issued *Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons*. Although I will focus mainly on the three numbers that the *Catechism* devotes to homosexuality,⁴⁸ I will also refer to these documents, for a better understanding of the Magisterial vision of same-sex relationships.

The *Catechism* defines homosexuality as referring to “relations between men or between women who experience an exclusive or predominant sexual attraction toward persons of the same sex.”⁴⁹ It states also that homosexuality “has taken a great variety of forms through the centuries and in different cultures” and “its psychological genesis remains largely unexplained.”⁵⁰ Furthermore, the CCC asserts that the Scriptures condemn homosexual acts as a “grave depravity”⁵¹ and, quoting PH, affirms that Tradition “has always declared that ‘homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered.’”⁵² To support this statement, the *Catechism* offers the following three reasons: homosexual acts are (1) “contrary to the natural law;” (2)

⁴⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 2357-2359.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 2357.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

“they close the sexual act to the gift of life;” (3) “they do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity.”⁵³

At the same time, the Magisterium, in the same document, recognizes that the number of men and women “who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies is not negligible.”⁵⁴ However, by considering their inclination as “objectively disordered”, this document simply invites these persons, if they are Christians, to unite their lives “to the sacrifice of the Lord’s Cross.”⁵⁵ In the following number, the *CCC* sustains that “homosexual persons are called to chastity.”⁵⁶ Indeed, in addition to affirming clearly that they “must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity,”⁵⁷ the *Catechism* also invites gay and lesbian people to Christian flourishing, that is, to “fulfill God’s will in their lives,”⁵⁸ and “to gradually and resolutely approach Christian perfection.”⁵⁹ It is true that the virtue of chastity—which is a gift of grace—is fundamental to the way every Christian in every state of life conforms themselves to the Lord. However, given the peremptory condemnation of homosexual acts, we should understand this calling to chastity as a calling to perpetual sexual abstinence. Therefore, we can conclude that, according to the *Catechism*, the only possible way to grow in holiness as a Christian for gay and lesbian persons is through a state of celibacy, or at least, in a type of relationship that does not include any sort of genital contact with a person of the same sex. Indeed, in the *Letter* of 1986, the CDF asserts that, although homosexual persons are often generous and giving of themselves, “when they engage in homosexual activity they confirm within themselves a disordered sexual inclination which is essentially self-indulgent.”⁶⁰

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 2358.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 2359.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 2358.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 2359.

⁶⁰ Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, “Letter on Pastoral Care of Homosexual,” no. 7.

The same letter, by referring to *PH*, underlines the distinction between the homosexual condition or inclination and homosexual acts. Furthermore, the Congregation explains that although this inclination “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.”⁶¹ The same document also asserts that “to choose someone of the same sex for one’s sexual activity is to annul the rich symbolism and meaning, not to mention the goals, of the Creator’s sexual design.”⁶² Therefore, the CDF considers that, given that homosexual activity is not able to transmit life, “it thwarts the call to a life of that form of self-giving which the Gospel says is the essence of Christian living.”⁶³

This document also recognizes the importance of evaluating the concrete circumstances of persons. However, it refuses absolutely the idea that, even if homosexuality is not chosen, the persons “have no choice but to behave in a homosexual fashion.”⁶⁴ Indeed, the CDF underlines that homosexual acts are an evil. So, as in all processes of conversion, human effort, illuminated and sustained by God’s grace, is able to avoid such an evil.⁶⁵ Moreover, by denying themselves⁶⁶ and so conforming themselves with the sacrifice of the Lord, homosexual persons will be saved “from a way of life which constantly threatens to destroy them.”⁶⁷

Additionally, although *PH* had recognized that “according to contemporary scientific research, the human person is so profoundly affected by sexuality that it must be considered as

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, no. 3.

⁶² *Ibid.*, no. 7.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 11.

⁶⁵ See *ibid.*

⁶⁶ The document also explains what the meaning of “self-denial” associated with the cross of the Lord: instead of being simply a pointless effort of self-denial, “the Cross is a denial of self, but in service to the will of God himself who makes life come from death and empowers those who trust in him to practise virtue in place of vice.” *Ibid.*, no. 12. I will return to this topic in the last chapter, particularly by referring to the brilliant article by Paul G. Crowley regarding a deeper understanding of the “counsel of cross” and of one’s association with the Cross of Jesus for gay people, beyond a “renunciation of sex and a crucifixion of desires for same-sex love.” Paul G. Crowley, “Homosexuality and the Counsel of the Cross,” *Theological Studies* 65, no. 3 (2004): 500.

⁶⁷ Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, “Letter on Pastoral Care of Homosexual,” no. 7.

one of the factors which give to each individual's life the principal traits that distinguish it,"⁶⁸ the *Letter* declares that "the human person, made in the image and likeness of God, can hardly be adequately described by a reductionist reference to his or her sexual orientation."⁶⁹

In the document regarding the legal recognition of same-sex relationships, the CDF asserts that "homosexual unions are totally lacking in the biological and anthropological elements of marriage and family.... Homosexual unions are also totally lacking in the conjugal dimension, which represents the human and ordered form of sexuality."⁷⁰ Moreover, the document, by appealing to experience, affirms 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."⁷¹ The CDF also declares that "the principles of respect and non-discrimination cannot be invoked to support legal recognition of homosexual unions."⁷² On the contrary, the denial of the social and legal status of marriage to forms of cohabitation that are not and cannot be marital is a question of justice for Catholic people. Indeed, the CDF contends that there are good reasons for holding that same-sex unions are not only harmful to the individuals involved in the unions but also "to the proper development of human society, especially if their impact on society were to increase."⁷³

With the aim of, first, determining whether it is true that the Tradition has always declared that homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered and, secondly, of better understanding Church's teaching, I will now present a historical study of the Church's teaching on same-sex relationships.

⁶⁸ Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, "Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics 'Persona Humana,'" December 29, 1975, The Holy See, <http://www.vatican.va/>, no. 1. The same teaching would later be incorporated in the *Catechism*, no. 2332: "Sexuality affects all aspects of the human person in the unity of his body and soul. It especially concerns affectivity, the capacity to love and to procreate, and in a more general way the aptitude for forming bonds of communion with others."

⁶⁹ Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, "Letter on Pastoral Care of Homosexual," no. 16.

⁷⁰ Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, "Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons," June 3, 2003, The Holy See, <http://www.vatican.va/>, no. 7.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*, no. 8.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

1.2. The history of Magisterial teaching on same-sex relationships from Early Church until 20th century

As we have just seen, the most recent Magisterial documents on same-sex relationships ground their condemnation of homosexual behavior in the Scriptures and in the fact that “tradition has always declared that ‘homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered.’”⁷⁴ It is beyond the scope of this work to analyze with accuracy the Scriptural texts that deal with same-sex sexual acts, although I will refer to them whenever necessary.⁷⁵ In this section I will analyze the history of Church’s teaching on same-sex relationships, to ascertain whether the already noted affirmation of the *Catechism* is correct.

Before I enter in detail into the historical evolution of the Church’s teaching, I would like to establish some preliminary points. Firstly, it is important to keep in mind that when we speak of Tradition in Catholic theology, we are not referring to a monolithic and immutable block, whose statements we simply repeat. Like the Word of God, Tradition needs to be interpreted and transmitted to the men and women of today in language they can understand, taking into account the new insights of philosophy, other disciplines, and human experience itself. As Pope John XXIII pointed out at the beginning of the Second Vatican Council:

it is necessary... that the doctrine itself be examined more widely and more deeply and that consciences be more fully imbued and informed, as all sincere supporters of Christian, Catholic and apostolic truth ardently desire; it is necessary that this certain and immutable doctrine, to which faithful assent must be given, be deepened and set forth according to what is required by our times. For the deposit of Faith, that is, the truths which are contained in our venerable doctrine is one thing; the fashion in which they are proclaimed, but always in the same sense and in the same extent, is another thing.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2357.

⁷⁵ Regarding the exegesis of biblical texts that speak about homosexual acts, I refer to the analysis made by the recently published document of the Pontifical Biblical Academy *Che Cosa È l’Uomo?*, particularly numbers 185 to 195 that deal with the issue of homosexuality in the Bible. See Pontificia Accademia Biblica, “Che Cosa È l’Uomo?” (Roma: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2019).

⁷⁶ “Occorre che la stessa dottrina sia esaminata più largamente e più a fondo e gli animi ne siano più pienamente imbevuti e informati, come auspicano ardentemente tutti i sinceri fautori della verità cristiana, cattolica, apostolica; occorre che questa dottrina certa ed immutabile, alla quale si deve prestare un assenso fedele, sia approfondita ed esposta secondo quanto è richiesto dai nostri tempi. Altro è infatti il deposito della Fede, cioè le verità che sono contenute nella nostra veneranda dottrina, altro è il modo con il quale esse sono annunziate, sempre però nello stesso senso e nella stessa accezione.” John XXIII, “Gaudete Mater Ecclesiae.”

Similarly, in 1969 Joseph Ratzinger affirmed that “not everything that exists in the Church must for that reason be also a legitimate tradition; in other words, not every tradition that arises in the Church is a true celebration and keeping present the mystery of Christ.”⁷⁷ Moreover, the International Theological Commission reminds us of the importance of distinguishing Tradition from “traditions that belong to particular periods of the Church’s history, or to particular regions and communities.”⁷⁸ Furthermore, this Commission underlines that

traditions must always be open to critique, so that the ‘continual reformation’ of which the Church has need can take place, and so that the Church can renew herself permanently on her one foundation, namely Jesus Christ. Such a critique seeks to verify whether a specific tradition does indeed express the faith of the Church in a particular place and time, and it seeks correspondingly to strengthen or correct it through contact with the living faith of all places and all times.⁷⁹

Secondly, given that, as we have seen, there are no unanimous and timeless definitions on the issue of same-sex behavior, it is important to begin by saying that it is difficult to state precisely that there is a constant teaching of the Church on such a matter. Thirdly, the concepts of ‘sin against nature’ or ‘sodomy/sodomite’, that were used by many documents over the centuries, do not strictly correspond to the concept of homosexuality as an ‘inclination’ or a ‘condition’ of the person, as defined by the most recent Magisterial documents. In this regard, the Pontifical Biblical Academy points out that “it should be noted immediately that the Bible does not speak of the erotic inclination towards a person of the same sex, but only of homosexual acts.”⁸⁰ In the same way, Mark Jordan states that medieval (but also ancient) texts employ terms or categories “that we cannot get over into modern English, that we cannot easily conceive without provoking serious misunderstandings.”⁸¹ Furthermore, even if it is true that

⁷⁷ Joseph Ratzinger, “The Transmission of Divine Revelation,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler, vol. 3 (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969), 182.

⁷⁸ International Theological Commission, “Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles and Criteria,” 2011, The Holy See, <http://www.vatican.va/>, no. 31.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ “Va subito rilevato che la Bibbia non parla dell’inclinazione erotica verso una persona dello stesso sesso, ma solo degli atti omosessuali.” Pontificia Accademia Biblica, “Che Cosa È l’Uomo?,” no. 185.

⁸¹ Mark D. Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 160.

we find, neither in the Scriptures nor in the history of Christian teaching, any approval of these type of relationships, there have been periods in which, as we will see, there has been greater condemnation or persecution of such behavior, and other periods in which we have few ‘official’ pronouncements on the subject. The Pontifical Biblical Academy (PBA) also asserts that Bible deals with same-sex acts “in a few texts, different from each other in literary genre and importance.”⁸² Moreover, some historians speak of a certain acceptance of same-sex relationships in some places or periods of the Christendom.⁸³ The affirmation of the *Catechism* that the tradition always taught that homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered, therefore, seems exaggerated, at least.

The ‘Invention’ of Sodom

Throughout the history of Christianity, and of the Christian countries, sexual acts between persons of the same sex have been classified as ‘sodomy’ and the persons who perform them as ‘sodomites.’ Such a term found its origins in the episode of the destruction of the city of Sodom in the chapter 19 of Genesis, and its meaning results from a progressive association of this episode with the sexual behavior of its inhabitants. The abovementioned document of the Pontifical Biblical Academy makes a remarkable summary of the *status quaestionis* regarding the interpretation of the chapter 19 of Genesis. This document asserts that the Hebrew Bible “never alludes to a sexual transgression practiced by people of the same sex,”⁸⁴ and it is only in two texts of the New Testament (2 Peter 2:6-10 and Jude 7) that the city of Sodom is associated with erotic relationships between persons of the same sex. Moreover, Jesus, in the Gospels, speaks two times about Sodom (Matthew 10:14-15 and Luke 10:10-12) but, in both

⁸² “In pochi testi, diversi fra di loro per genere letterario e importanza.” Pontificia Accademia Biblica, “Che Cosa È l’Uomo?,” no. 185.

⁸³ In this regard, the work of John Boswell is particularly interesting, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

⁸⁴ “Non si allude mai a una trasgressione sessuale praticata nei confronti di persone dello stesso sesso.” Pontificia Accademia Biblica, “Che Cosa È l’Uomo?,” no. 186.

cases, the problem is the lack of hospitality of those cities towards his disciples; those cities, because of their inhospitality, will be punished more severely than Sodom. To summarize, the Pontifical Biblical Academy affirms that the story of Sodom

illustrates a sin that consists in the lack of hospitality, with hostility and violence towards the stranger, a behavior considered very serious and therefore deserving of being sanctioned with the utmost severity, because the rejection of the different, the needy, and defenseless stranger is the principle of social disintegration, having in itself a deadly violence that deserves an adequate punishment.⁸⁵

According to Louis Crompton, it was Philo of Alexandria, a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher from the first century CE, who became the first scholar to associate the sin of Sodom with same-sex genital acts. Philo created the myth that the inhabitants of Sodom were punished by God because of their sexual perversion and, particularly, because men had sex with men without regard for the active and passive roles.⁸⁶ Such an interpretation was eventually fostered by many Fathers of the Church and, therefore, “homosexuality became the unique cause of Sodom’s destruction and hence a dire threat to any community that donned it.”⁸⁷ John Boswell also sustains that the original understanding of Gen 19 (the lack of hospitality) survived in some circles until the Middle Ages. However, “the increasing emphasis of Hellenistic Jewish and Christian moralists on sexual purity gave rise in late Jewish apocrypha and early Christian writings to association of Sodom with sexual excesses of various sorts.”⁸⁸

This misinterpretation of a Biblical passage, although similar to other misinterpretations over the centuries,⁸⁹ had an important impact in Western society and in Christianity, particularly concerning erotic relationships between persons of the same sex. As David Greenberg argues,

⁸⁵ “Illustra un peccato che consiste nella mancanza di ospitalità, con ostilità e violenza nei confronti del forestiero, comportamento giudicato gravissimo e meritevole perciò di essere sanzionato con la massima severità, perché il rifiuto del diverso, dello straniero bisognoso e indifeso, è principio di disgregazione sociale, avendo in se stesso una violenza mortifera che merita una pena adeguata.” Ibid., no. 188.

⁸⁶ See Louis Crompton, *Homosexuality and Civilization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 137.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 97.

⁸⁹ Like the literal interpretation of the first chapters of Genesis.

even if “pagan writings [and laws] have deplored homosexuality, none though it caused the gods to destroy cities,”⁹⁰ as in the case of Sodom. The author also affirms that “these themes are unique to Christian writings.”⁹¹ In the same way, Derrick Bailey sustains that such interpretations of the story of Sodom “have exercised a powerful influence upon the thought and the imagination of the West in the matter of homosexual practices, and the effect of this is to be seen in the [Christian] tradition.”⁹² But this concept, as we will see throughout the study of the Christian tradition, has never had an univocal sense.

However, we should not think that such an interpretation is an outdated problem in Magisterial teaching. In the abovementioned “Letter on Pastoral Care,” the CDF, although it does not threaten divine calamity or vengeance upon those who practice same-sex behavior—as Pope Pius X still did at the beginning of the twentieth century⁹³—nevertheless states that

when such a claim [that homosexual orientation is not intrinsically disordered] is made and when homosexual activity is consequently condoned, or when civil legislation is introduced to protect behavior to which no one has any conceivable right, neither the Church nor society at large should be surprised when other distorted notions and practices gain ground, and irrational and violent reactions increase.⁹⁴

Hence, it is evident that the myth of the destruction of Sodom as divine revenge for the ‘homosexual’ behavior of its inhabitants which has marked the Christian tradition is, in fact, still present in the Catholic imagination to this day, albeit in a more sophisticated way.

The Early Church

As in the Scriptures, in the first millennium of Christianity there is neither consistent nor diffuse teaching about sexuality in general nor about same-sex acts particularly. As Greenberg

⁹⁰ David F. Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 223.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Derrick Sherwin Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (London: Archon Books, 1975), 154.

⁹³ See in this regard the list of “Sins that Cry to Heaven for Vengeance”, in the section “The Vices and other Grievous Sins” in Pius X, “The Catholic Catechism of Saint Pope Pius X,” 1908, <http://archive.org/details/CatechismOfSaintPopePiuxXTheSt.PiusX>.

⁹⁴ Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, “Letter on Pastoral Care of Homosexual,” no. 10.

affirms, “even the Patristic literature, which expresses strongly negative views [about same-sex behavior], does not devote a great deal of space to the subject.”⁹⁵ The Fathers of the Church reacted to a social context marked by decadence and followed many pagan philosophers and poets who “inveighed against the widespread corruption that signed the deterioration of state and religion in the Graeco-Roman world.”⁹⁶ In such a context, the Fathers found inspiration in the ethics of Stoic philosophers and Neo-Platonist doctrines, as Jewish thinkers had before them. As Todd Salzman and Michael Lawler affirm, “the early Greek Christian understanding of the nature of sexuality resembles that of the Stoic philosophers.”⁹⁷ According to Boswell, “stoics tautologically inferred from ‘natural’ processes what was ‘natural’ and made this their ethical norm.”⁹⁸ In this regard, the following statement of the Christian philosopher Lactantius is paradigmatic:

Everyone should therefore conclude that union of the two sexes was provided for living creatures for the sake of procreation, and that is a law laid down for our emotions to ensure our continuity. But just God gave us eyes not to gaze and grab at pleasure but to see for the sake of those actions relevant to the needs of life, so too we have been given the genital part of the body, as the word itself indicates, merely for the creation of offspring. This law of God needs an obedience of the utmost dedication.⁹⁹

Thus, according to these philosophers, only actions needed to fulfill a natural (biological) purpose were considered natural: and so, for example, one should only eat for nourishment and engage in sexual intercourse for procreation. Consequently, Stoic ethics “held out chastity as an ideal, with sexual intercourse allowed only within marriage, and then only for the purpose of having children.”¹⁰⁰ Therefore, the patristic period was marked by an exaltation of asceticism and celibacy as the highest value and, consequently, an “intense suspicion for all forms of

⁹⁵ Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality*, 234.

⁹⁶ Anthony Kosnik *et al.*, *Human Sexuality: New Directions in American Catholic Thought* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 34.

⁹⁷ Todd A. Salzman and Michael G. Lawler, *The Sexual Person: Toward a Renewed Catholic Anthropology* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2008), 27.

⁹⁸ Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 146.

⁹⁹ Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, Book 6, trans. Anthony Bowen and Peter Garnsey (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003), 380.

¹⁰⁰ Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality*, 219.

sexuality.”¹⁰¹ This suspicion against sexuality is also a result of the translation of the personal experiences of the Fathers of the Church into their writings that, with the development of theology, eventually became normative. According to James Keenan, “Christian theology on sex grew out of the personal struggles of major early figures whose ascetical programs for personal integration encountered an impasse in light of their own sexual urges.”¹⁰²

The first Father of the Church to speak consistently against same-sex behavior was John Chrysostom whose *Sermon on Rm 1:26-27*¹⁰³ is, according to Crompton, “the fullest and most detailed ecclesiastical pronouncement on homosexuality in the first thousand years of the Church.”¹⁰⁴ In this homily, Chrysostom condemns masculine same-sex behavior because these men “dishonoured that which is natural” and “ran after that which was contrary to nature [*contra natura*]”¹⁰⁵ that “hath in it an irksomeness and displeasingness, so that they could not fairly allege even pleasure,” because “genuine pleasure is that which is according to nature.”¹⁰⁶ Chrysostom also denounces same-sex relationships as diabolical, and states that people who practice same-sex acts “are even worse than murderer... for the murderer disserves the soul from the body, but this man ruins the soul with the body.”¹⁰⁷ Note that, contrary to what is common throughout history, Chrysostom also speaks against sexual behavior between women, particularly women who abused women. Nevertheless, as in many laws of the later Roman Empire, namely the Theodosius Code (438),¹⁰⁸ the Bishop of Constantinople was particularly concerned with effeminate male same-sex behavior and passive ‘homosexuality,’ that is, with

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 228.

¹⁰² James F. Keenan, *A Brief History of Catholic Ethics* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, forthcoming), chapter 3.

¹⁰³ John Chrysostom, “The Homilies of S. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople on the Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to the Romans,” Homily IV, in *A Library of the Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church, Anterior to the Division of the East and West*, trans. J. B. Morris and Charles Marriott, (Oxford, London: John Henry Parker, F. and J. Rivington, 1848), 42-54.

¹⁰⁴ Crompton, *Homosexuality and Civilization*, 141.

¹⁰⁵ The latin expression *contra naturam* is the result of the translation of the Pauline expression *παρὰ φύσιν* in Rom 1: 26 made by the Vulgate.

¹⁰⁶ All the quotes are from Chrysostom, Homily IV, 44-45.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., Homily IV, 48.

¹⁰⁸ See Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality*, 229.

men behaving as women, and being penetrated by men. Thus, he states that it is worse than mutilating the body like a eunuch: “nothing can be more worthless than a man who has pandered himself.”¹⁰⁹ According to Crompton, Chrysostom “made homosexuality not just Sodom’s preeminent but its unique sin,”¹¹⁰ thus promoting the misinterpretation of the episode of Sodom, which has persisted throughout time in both Christian doctrine and civil law. Indeed, the bishop of Constantinople identifies Sodom with an anticipation of hell.¹¹¹

Turning to Augustine, we realize that he “developed the view of marriage that has shaped Christian thought about sex and marriage for centuries.”¹¹² His theology on marriage and sex contained in works as *De nuptiis et concupiscentia*, *De bono coniugali*, and *De continentia*, must be understood in the context of his defense against Manicheans and Pelagians. Augustine was also influenced by the abovementioned Stoic vision of marriage. Thus, the conjugal act is good, insofar as it is directed toward the end to which it is naturally ordered, as food and study, which are the necessary means to such goods as health and wisdom.¹¹³ In *De bono coniugali*, the bishop of Hippo states that “when a person does not employ these goods for that other necessary purpose for which they were established, he sins in some cases venially and in others mortally; whereas the person who directs them for the purpose for which they were given acts well.”¹¹⁴

To rebut Manicheans who considered sexual intercourse an evil and were against marriage, Augustine affirmed the intrinsic goodness of both intercourse and marriage, because they are the creation of a good God and, therefore, sinless. Moreover, he manifests the goodness of marriage as being threefold: procreation of children (the end of the marriage), the mutual

¹⁰⁹ Chrysostom, “The Homilies of S. John Chrysostom,” Homily IV, 49.

¹¹⁰ Crompton, *Homosexuality and Civilization*, 141.

¹¹¹ See John Chrysostom, “The Homilies of S. John Chrysostom,” Homily IV, 50.

¹¹² Thomas M. Finn, “Sex and Marriage in the Sentences of Peter Lombard,” *Theological Studies* 72, no. 1 (2011): 48.

¹¹³ See Augustine, “De Bono Coniugali,” IX, 9 in *De Bono Coniugali; De Sancta Virginitate*, trans. P. G. Walsh (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 45.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

fidelity between the spouses, and its sacramental significance (indissolubility). To these goods, Augustine also adds friendship between the sexes.¹¹⁵ Nevertheless, in his defense against Pelagians the doctrine of marriage and intercourse seems to be more problematic. Although Augustine affirms that marital intercourse is good in itself (despite the possibility of a disordered use of it), he also recognizes the presence of concupiscence that can turn good into evil. In short, “sexual intercourse is good in itself, but there are uses that can render it evil.”¹¹⁶ Indeed, after the Fall and, thus, because of concupiscence, sexual intercourse which is not intended to create children is sinful:

Intercourse in marriage, then, when undertaken to beget children, carries no blame. When indulged to satisfy lust [*concupiscentiae*], so long as it is with a married partner, it bears only venial blame because it preserves fidelity to marriage-bed... Abstention from all sexual intercourse is better even than intercourse in marriage undertaken to beget children.¹¹⁷

Shaji George Kochuthara, in his admirable work on the understanding of sexual pleasure in the Christian tradition, points out that for Augustine sexual intercourse was seen as a remedy for concupiscence and thus “sexual pleasure always involves sin, at least venially.”¹¹⁸ Therefore, the same author continues, the bishop of Hippo “systematically developed the skeptical approach to sexual pleasure on the grounds of its irresistibility,”¹¹⁹ and in consideration of the fact that it destroys the rational and spiritual nature of the human being. Augustine also judged the feeling of sexual pleasure a consequence of original sin.¹²⁰ This diffidence towards the pleasure associated with genital relationships, alongside with the biological vision of nature, continued to influence the Christian vision of sexuality in general but had a particular influence on the Christian view of same-sex genital acts.

¹¹⁵ See Salzman and Lawler, *The Sexual Person*, 30.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹¹⁷ Augustine, “De Bono Coniugali,” VI, 6, 43.

¹¹⁸ Shaji George Kochuthara, *The Concept of Sexual Pleasure in the Catholic Moral Tradition*, vol. 152 (Roma: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 2007), 457.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ See *ibid.*, 265.

Augustine also spoke, although briefly, about the sin against nature in his *Confessions* and *The City of God*. Since he sees the goodness of intercourse only if it is directed to its proper natural purpose, same-sex behavior becomes unacceptable because it lacks such a purpose. In his *City of God*, Augustine also identifies the sin of Sodom with intercourse between men: Sodom “was a place where sexual promiscuity among males had grown into a custom so prevalent that it received the kind of sanction generally afforded by law to other activities.”¹²¹ In the *Confessions*, he affirms that the sin against nature is a great offense against God, precisely because it constitutes a violation of the laws of nature created by God:

Therefore shameful acts which are contrary to nature, such as the acts of the Sodomites (Gen 19: 5 ff), are everywhere and always to be detested and punished. Even if all peoples should do them, they would be liable to the same condemnation by divine law, for it has not made men to use one another in this way. Indeed the social bond which should exist between God and us is violated when the nature of which he is the author is polluted by a perversion of sexual desire.¹²²

Crompton affirms that “the stance of the early Church toward same-sex relations was defined not just by the Bible and patristic teachings but also by the decrees of ecclesiastical councils, which later became the basis for canon law.”¹²³ However, neither the theologians nor the Councils of the early Church were particularly concerned with this matter and so lacked a consistent teaching on same-sex genital behavior. The Council of Elvira (305) in the Iberian Peninsula was the first to establish norms of sexual behavior and punished (pederastic) same-sex acts. Derrick Bailey also refers to canons sixteen and seventeen of the Council of Ancyra in Asia Minor (314) that “penalize certain persons termed *alogeusamenoï*, that is, those who are guilty of shamelessly offensive conduct.”¹²⁴ Although the term is not clear, many authors have interpreted it as referring to same-sex behavior between men and these canons have been

¹²¹ Augustine, *Concerning the City of God Against the Pagans*, Book XVI, Chapter 30, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 692.

¹²² Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 3, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 46.

¹²³ Crompton, *Homosexuality and Civilization*, 152.

¹²⁴ Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition*, 86.

“cited as authoritative in subsequent enactments against homosexual practices”¹²⁵ in the West, namely in Penitential books. The Council of Toledo (693), in accord with the negative vision of the Visigothic kingdom towards ‘homosexuality,’ also issued condemnations of same-sex behavior, particularly among clergy.¹²⁶

Early Middle Ages

During the Early Middle Ages, same-sex genital behavior was still not at the center of the preoccupations of the Church and the secular kingdoms. This is the period of the advent of individual confession in Ireland (sixth century) that, from the sixth to the thirteenth century, spread into continental Europe. This practice gave rise to the emergence of the so-called *Penitential books*, that were handbooks which intended to help monks in the attribution of just penance in confession. The practice of confessing sins, as James Keenan indicates, developed rapidly as it avoided public penances, made them shorter, and it could be repeated whenever necessary.¹²⁷ Before the institution of the Easter Duty by the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), the practice of confessing sins was mostly restricted to monks, nuns, and clergy, although some lay people, particularly from higher social conditions, also did it.¹²⁸ Thus, since the monks were called to celibacy and purity regarding sexual behavior, topics such as “same-sex desire, masturbation, other ‘impure thoughts’, and even nocturnal emissions”¹²⁹ received great attention in those books. According to Greenberg, “taking the penitentials as a whole, 4 to 8 percent of the rules concern homosexuality.”¹³⁰ Such works entered in great detail about the sexual acts performed, and attributed harsher penances for receptive anal and oral same-sex

¹²⁵ Ibid., 88.

¹²⁶ See Crompton, *Homosexuality and Civilization*, 152.

¹²⁷ See James F. Keenan, “Moral Discernment in History,” *Theological Studies* 79, no. 3 (2018): 669.

¹²⁸ See James F. Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century: From Confessing Sins to Liberating Consciences* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 2.

¹²⁹ James F. Keenan, “Catholicism, History Of,” in *Sex from Plato to Paglia: A Philosophical Encyclopedia*, Vol. I: A-L, ed. Alan Soble, (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 2006), 147.

¹³⁰ Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality*, 262.

intercourse that were considered “more grievous activities than taking another man’s wife.”¹³¹ Likewise, the penances were different according to the state of the agent: they were heavier for adults rather than for young people, and for clergy rather than lay people. Some of these penitentials also punished lesbianism, but according to Crompton, it was much more unusual.¹³² Despite the importance of these books, Pierre Payer points out the absence of biblical references in these books and notes that “no rationale is provided for the sinfulness of homosexuality at this time, nor is there any explanation of why sodomy should be treated differently from femoral intercourse or mutual masturbation.”¹³³ Indeed, as Greenberg recalls, these books had a practical purpose, and so they were not concerned with justifications by authorities.¹³⁴

The main consequence for Christian life of the development of individual confession and, consequently, of the penitentials was, according to Keenan, to focus on the acts instead of on the moral agent. Indeed, “the confessor could only know the penitent’s moral worth solely through the penitent’s acts, and then only those acts specified in the manuals. Thus, once an objectively bad act was committed, further questions about the agent were not to determine *if* the agent was guilty but rather *how* guilty the agent was.”¹³⁵ Such an understanding had serious consequences for the Catholic moral theology in the succeeding centuries.

Louis Crompton considers that rather than the penitentials, the growth of canon law, particularly from the eleventh century onwards, “allows us to trace the evolving ecclesiastical consensus on sexuality.”¹³⁶ As I mentioned above, during the Patristic time and the early Middle Ages there was no consistent teaching of the Church on same-sex acts, and the scattered and sparse condemnations of them had not a normative purpose. On the contrary, these

¹³¹ Keenan, “Catholicism, History Of,” 147.

¹³² See Crompton, *Homosexuality and Civilization*, 155.

¹³³ Pierre J. Payer, *Sex and the Penitentials: The Development of a Sexual Code, 550-1150* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 44.

¹³⁴ See Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality*, 262.

¹³⁵ Keenan, *A Brief History of Catholic Ethics*, chapter 3.

¹³⁶ Crompton, *Homosexuality and Civilization*, 174.

condemnations were pronounced in books of a spiritual, pastoral, or theological nature, in addition to the few normative prescriptions contained in some local Councils. But, from the eleventh century on, the first compendiums of Church teachings—patristic opinions, conciliar edicts, penitential rules, and papal decrees—appear, beginning the process of the progressive centralization of the Catholic Church toward Rome.

Before we enter the High Middle Ages, however, it is important to refer to another inescapable author for the topic I am addressing: Peter Damian. Mark Jordan considers Damian as the “inventor” of the category of ‘Sodomy.’¹³⁷ Jordan points out that throughout the Early Middle Ages, particularly in the *Penitentials*, the concrete persons who practiced acts of ‘sodomy’ were progressively abstracted into the category of ‘sodomites,’ as a kind of caricature of those who practiced sodomy. As the author states, “all you need to know about the Sodomites is that they practiced Sodomy.”¹³⁸ Therefore, the power of the abstraction of persons into essences or categories draws on the fact that it allows the abolition of motives and circumstances, permitting condemnation everywhere and every time.¹³⁹

Peter Damian’s *Liber Gomorrhianus* is, according to Crompton, “not only the most elaborate attack on homosexuality from the pen of a churchman in this age, but was to remain the single ‘book’ the Middle Ages produced on the subject.”¹⁴⁰ Damian was himself a monk and addressed his book to the earlier Pope Leo IX. Damian’s main preoccupation was the “abominable and terribly shameful vice... [that] is shameful to speak of, shameful to suggest such foul disgrace to sacred ears... [that is] the vice against nature that creeps like a cancer and even touches the order of consecrated men.”¹⁴¹ Therefore, Damian was particularly concerned with the same-sex intimate behavior among clergy, priests, and monks. The book is divided in

¹³⁷ Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy*, 29.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹³⁹ See *ibid.*, 44.

¹⁴⁰ Crompton, *Homosexuality and Civilization*, 175.

¹⁴¹ Peter Damian, *Book of Gomorrah: An Eleventh-Century Treatise Against Clerical Homosexual Practices*, trans. Pierre J. Payer (Waterloo, Ontario: Wildfrid Laurier University Press, 1982), 28.

two parts: a canonical one, addressed to the Pope (Preface, chapters 1-16, and 26), and a pastoral, directed to the ‘sodomite’ priests (chapters 17-25).¹⁴² In the first part, the author is particularly concerned with the deposition of priests who acted sexually with other men, and for which purpose he appeals to the authority of the Council of Ancyra and of several Popes. Damian distinguishes “four types of this form of criminal wickedness”¹⁴³, according to the degree of severity: masturbation, mutual masturbation, femoral fornication, and the “complete act against nature.”¹⁴⁴ He affirms that, contrary to the normal practice that only considers the last situation, the accomplishment of all of these acts should be sufficient to depose a priest. Moreover, Damian argues that “surely it is clear that a person who has been degraded by a crime deserving death is not reformed so as to receive an order of ecclesiastical rank.”¹⁴⁵ In the second part, in which he addresses ‘sodomite’ priests directly, Damian asserts that such a ‘crime’ “is the death of the bodies, the destruction of the souls. It pollutes the flesh; it extinguishes the light of the mind. It evicts the Holy Spirit from the temple of the human heart; it introduces the devil who incites to the lust.... It defiles everything, stains everything, pollutes everything.”¹⁴⁶

As Mark Jordan points out, Damian speaks about ‘sodomy’ from the perspective of a “well-informed reasoner.”¹⁴⁷ Therefore, he invokes “the most evident principles of reason, as well as the easy observation of the animal life, to argue the irrationality and irregularity of same-sex desire.”¹⁴⁸

Although later references to Damian’s book are uncommon, perhaps because it exposes the dark side of the life of some clergy, the threat contained in the above-quoted line is pervasive

¹⁴² See Pierre J. Payer, “Introduction,” in *Book of Gomorrah: An Eleventh-Century Treatise Against Clerical Homosexual Practices*, by Peter Damian (Waterloo, Ontario: Wildfrid Laurier University Press, 1982), 14-15.

¹⁴³ Damian, *Book of Gomorrah*, 29.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 34.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 63.

¹⁴⁷ Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy*, 56.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

in the imagery of the people of Christian countries through our day. Indeed, even if Damian was addressing priests, these images and vocabulary have been used in literature, sermons, and preaching in the Christian world throughout the centuries to condemn same-sex intimate behavior both of clergy and lay people.

High Middle Ages

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the hostility against same-sex intimate behavior increased not only for religious reasons but also in the secular literature in which such a behavior was linked with Islam and heresy.¹⁴⁹

In the twelfth century ‘homosexual’ acts were condemned by a few Councils. The Council of Nablus (near Jerusalem) determined that active and passive people involved in same-sex relations should be burned. The Third Lateran Council (1179) was the first ecumenical council to raise the problem of same-sex intimate behavior. Indeed, in its Canon 11 this Council establishes that

all who are found guilty of that unnatural vice for which the wrath of God came down upon the sons of disobedience and destroyed the five cities with fire, if they are clerics be expelled from the clergy or confined in monasteries to do penance; if they are laymen they are to incur excommunication and be completely separated from the society of the faithful.¹⁵⁰

By the mid-twelfth century, the tendency arose of a “questioning attitude that manifested itself in attempts to make sense of the inherited texts and to co-ordinate them into systematic accounts.”¹⁵¹ It is the case of the glossed Bible, the *Decretum* of Gratian, and the *Book of Sentences* of Peter Lombard, which collectively became the customary sources both for texts and for their interpretation. These works and the subsequent commentaries on canon law and

¹⁴⁹ See Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality*, 268.

¹⁵⁰ Third Lateran Council, “Canon 11,” 1179, <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/councils/ecum11.htm>.

¹⁵¹ Pierre J. Payer, *The Bridling of Desire: Views of Sex in the Later Middle Ages* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 5.

on the *Sentences* of Lombard gave birth to a “consistent view of nature, function, and morality of sex.”¹⁵²

The *Decretum* of Gratian (1140) is a vast compilation of different sources in which the author tries to bring about a concordance among discordant canons. This work became the standard text in law and was eventually incorporated into the *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, the predecessor of the Code of Canon Law, which was in force from the fifteenth century to 1917.¹⁵³

Crompton also underlines a novelty introduced by Gratian that became “a basic tenet of scholastic theology”¹⁵⁴ and influenced the teaching of Thomas Aquinas on same-sex acts: the *Decretum* presents a list of sexual sins according to their degree of abhorrence, in which the sins against nature appear as the worst of all.

Greenberg points out that, over the twelfth century, Christian theologians began to see “in the regularities of the world a manifestation of divine reason and valued efforts to comprehend it.”¹⁵⁵ This author affirms that the theological treatises of this period, which classified some sexual behavior as *contra naturam*, “simply took the sexual prohibitions of the penitentials and provided rationales for them that were absent there.”¹⁵⁶ According to John Boswell, Scholastic theologians found such rationales in the effort to integrate “the Christian faith with principles of Greek philosophy drew heavily in concepts of ‘nature’ popularized in the twelfth century by authors like Alan de Lille.”¹⁵⁷ Alongside this conception of nature as a kind of “beneficent and lovable goddess”¹⁵⁸ who determines what is morally right and wrong in sexual matters, Scholastic theology was also marked by the rediscovering of Roman legal conception of natural law, as it was defined by the Roman jurist Ulpian in the third century of our era: “natural law

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ See Crompton, *Homosexuality and Civilization*, 174.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality*, 275.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 276.

¹⁵⁷ Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 311.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

is what nature has taught all animals.... From it comes that the union of male and female which we call marriage, as well as the procreation of children and their proper rearing [*educatio*].”¹⁵⁹

Along with Augustine, Thomas Aquinas is a major figure of Christian philosophy and theology, and his thought remains an inevitable reference in the context of Catholic theology. Consequently, despite the centuries that distance us from the *Doctor Angelicus*, his conception of human sexuality, and particularly his definition of natural law, continues to exert a strong influence on Catholic sexual morality today.

Two premises are important to establish before entering into the analysis of this author’s thought regarding sexuality. First, like Scripture, dogma, and the whole doctrine, the writings of Aquinas must be analyzed with hermeneutic criteria. Therefore, when we encounter these texts, we need to keep in mind that neither Aquinas nor the medieval authors possessed a knowledge of human sexuality in the terms we know today. Thomas Aquinas himself is the first to say that our knowledge of human nature is always limited and subject to error. Based on the *Summa Theologiae*,¹⁶⁰ Katie Grimes affirms that, according to Aquinas, the human being “will always have an incomplete and at times even inaccurate understanding of human nature.”¹⁶¹ As Payer reminds us in this regard, “medieval theologians had theories about the infected nature of the reproductive system, about the legitimate forms of marital intercourse, about the superiority of virginity over marriage, about the sinfulness of homosexuality,”¹⁶² but they did not have a theory about sex. This is evidenced by the fact that, first, there are no Latin words corresponding to our terms ‘sex’ or ‘sexuality.’ Second, and related to the previous point, it is also necessary to keep in mind that, as I mentioned above, fidelity to tradition does not mean

¹⁵⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*, 313.

¹⁶⁰ See *ST I*, q. 85, a. 5.

¹⁶¹ Katie Grimes, “Butler Interprets Aquinas: How to Speak Thomistically About Sex,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 42, no. 2 (2014): 192.

¹⁶² Payer, *The Bridling of Desire*, 15.

simply repeating the teaching of great theologians, as if they were living in the present time and using the same categories that we use today.

Aquinas, along with the twelfth-century masters of theology and canon law, provided a rationale for the origins of sexual intercourse and for its role in the divine design for human beings. Although these works found inspiration in the moral thought of Augustine (and other Fathers), their new formulations, however, “were facilitated by the new disciplines of biblical studies, theology, and ecclesiastical jurisprudence.”¹⁶³ In the same vein as Augustine, medieval theologians believed in the existence of a gap between the way we were initially conceived by God in the original order of creation and our actual way of being, after the Fall, marked by the consequences of the original sin. Regarding intercourse and sexual issues, medieval scholars, although they do not praise sexual pleasure, only in a few exceptional cases actually condemn it openly. Like Augustine, they conceived of intercourse as something good in itself, but stained by concupiscence, which was considered the central aspect regarding sex.

This is also the period of the recovering of Aristotle. As I mentioned above, given the unsuitability of biblical and patristic language for the new environment of the Schools, medieval theologians returned to Greek philosophy, particularly to Aristotle, to strengthen the Tradition with clarity, accuracy, and consistency. Therefore, concerning sexual issues, they took from Aristotle the theories of reproduction and generation; of the production and nature of semen; of the inferiority of women; of the nature of virtue and vice; of the conception of temperance; of the centrality of reason and of the nature of pleasure.¹⁶⁴ All of these theories were incorporated by Aquinas into his *Summa Theologiae*, which became a masterpiece of Catholic theology.

Although there was no theory of sexuality at this time, Payer offers us what would be the definition of sexuality according to the mentality of the medieval authors. Sex was for them “a natural, impersonal biological force with an inherent teleological orientation to the conservation

¹⁶³ Ibid., 5.

¹⁶⁴ See *ibid.*, 12.

of the species.”¹⁶⁵ Indeed, as Payer notes, such a conception was teleological and instrumentalist insofar as the intercourse was to be used “as the instrument for reproducing the human species.”¹⁶⁶ In this context, sexual pleasure had only a secondary role.

Aquinas’ theory of natural law is of utmost importance for the issue of same-sex erotic relationships. In the *Summa*, Aquinas defines natural law as the participation of the human creature in the eternal law, through the use of reason.¹⁶⁷ The eternal law, or will of God, constitutes the ultimate norm of morality, the foundation of moral objectivity, and the source of moral obligation. Therefore, human beings can participate in the eternal law through reason,¹⁶⁸—elevated by grace and moved by faith, hope, and charity—“by reflecting critically on the proximate norm of morality—what it means to live a fully human life in community with others striving for human holiness.”¹⁶⁹ Indeed, human flourishing is central to Aquinas’ natural law ethics. As Stephen Pope points out, “Thomas began his ethics with an extended reflection of natural human happiness,”¹⁷⁰ underlining that happiness (or flourishing) comprehends both “supernatural happiness”—that is the ultimate perfection of rational nature—and “imperfect beatitude” in this life.¹⁷¹ Moreover, for Aquinas, human nature, human flourishing, and human virtue are intrinsically connected. Hence, if we consider same-sex erotic behavior as unnatural, following Aquinas, we have to conclude that the persons who perform it are also incapable of virtue and flourishing.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 179.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ See *ST I-II*, q. 91, a. 2.

¹⁶⁸ Reason, which should be understood in the Thomistic sense of *recta ratio*, “entails the totality of the human tendency to want to know the whole reality and come to truth... [and] includes observation and research, intuition, affection, common sense, and an aesthetic sense in an effort to know human reality in all its aspects.” Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith*, 224.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Pope, “Scientific and Natural Law Analyses of Homosexuality,” 118. Pope quotes in this regard *ST I-II*, qq. 1-5.

¹⁷¹ Ibid. Pope quotes in this regard *ST I-II*, q. 2.

¹⁷² See Grimes, “How to Speak Thomistically About Sex,” 201.

However, Thomas' understanding of natural law is not consistent. On the one hand, the fundamental norm of natural law—do good and avoid evil¹⁷³—has a dynamic character and manifests itself more as a tendency or basic disposition than a set of norms. As Gula explains, this fundamental norm “encourages us to become who we are by acting in a way that would actualize our potential.”¹⁷⁴ Similarly, Stephen Pope states that “according to Thomas, human reason has broad competence to grasp the goods proper to human nature and to identify the virtues by which they are attained.”¹⁷⁵ On the other hand, Aquinas grounds the specific norms of natural law, which gave content to the fundamental norm, in the natural inclinations of the human being. Indeed, he considers that practical reason identifies the natural inclinations of the persons with moral imperatives which correspond to the concrete norms of natural law. Such inclinations are: (1) the tendency to persevere in being; (2) the tendency to procreate and educate the offspring, which is common to animals; (3) the tendency to know the truth about God; and (4) the tendency toward sociability. The two latter tendencies are exclusive to humans.¹⁷⁶

When Aquinas speaks about sexual matters,¹⁷⁷ which are connected with the inclination to procreate and education of offspring, he shares the abovementioned definition of *jus naturale* made by Ulpian. In this regard, by establishing that natural law is that “which nature taught to all animals,”¹⁷⁸ the *Doctor Angelicus* “emphasizes human physical and biological nature in determining morality”¹⁷⁹ and, at the same time, “understands the nature as the viceroy of God.”¹⁸⁰ Indeed, there is a full identification between the laws of nature and the laws of God: nature is not only indicative of what we are, but is also normative of who we are called to be.

¹⁷³ *ST* I-II, q. 94, a. 2.

¹⁷⁴ Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith*, 225.

¹⁷⁵ Pope, “Scientific and Natural Law Analyses of Homosexuality,” 108.

¹⁷⁶ See *ST* I-II, q. 94, a. 2.

¹⁷⁷ Aquinas' approach to sexuality is contained on the “Treatise on Temperance” *ST* II-II, qq. 151-154.

¹⁷⁸ *ST* I-II, q. 94, a. 2.

¹⁷⁹ Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith*, 226.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 227.

Consequently, the eternal law (or the ultimate moral norm) is written in nature and thus human moral obligations “are fulfilled by conforming human action to the detailed patterns found in nature.”¹⁸¹ On the other hand, every violation of this ‘order of nature’ always constitutes a serious offense because it is an offense against God, its author.

Aquinas speaks about same-sex intercourse in the context of the vice of lust within two questions of the *Summa*.¹⁸² He affirms that lust (*luxuria*) “consists essentially in exceeding the order and mode of reason in the matter of venereal acts,”¹⁸³ and therefore is always an excess of venereal pleasure that is a consequence of the Fall. Thomas divides the sin of lust into six categories: simple fornication, adultery, incest, seduction (*stuprum*), rape (*raptus*), and unnatural vice (*vitium contra naturam*).¹⁸⁴ He considers that the unnatural vice, in addition to going against the dictates of right reason (like all the vices of lust), is also “contrary to the natural order of the venereal act as becoming to the human race.”¹⁸⁵ Thus, such a sin is “the gravest of all”¹⁸⁶ because in this case “the very order of nature is violated, an injury is done to God, the Author of nature.”¹⁸⁷ It is important to note that Aquinas considers the vice *contra naturam* a graver vice than incest or rape, because the latter are at least in accord with the order of nature. The unnatural vice is divided in four types:

First, by procuring pollution, without any copulation, for the sake of venereal pleasure: this pertains to the sin of ‘uncleanness’ which some call ‘effeminacy.’ Secondly, by copulation with a thing of undue species, and this is called ‘bestiality.’ Thirdly, by copulation with an undue sex, male with male, or female with female, as the Apostle states (Rm 1:27): and this is called the ‘vice of sodomy.’ Fourthly, by not observing the natural manner of copulation, either as to undue means, or as to other monstrous and bestial manners of copulation.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² See *ST* II-II, q. 153-154.

¹⁸³ *ST* II-II, q. 153, a. 3.

¹⁸⁴ See *ST* II-II, q. 154, a. 1.

¹⁸⁵ *ST* II-II, q. 154, a. 11.

¹⁸⁶ *ST* II-II, q. 154, a. 12.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ *ST* II-II, q. 154, a. 11.

It is important to note that, as Keenan points out, with the exception of the reference to sex between women, “what links all these sins is basically that the semen went elsewhere than the fit or appropriate vessel; that it went elsewhere makes it unnatural.”¹⁸⁹ Considering that venereal acts are of utmost importance for the common good, because they are necessary for the propagation of the species, “there is the greatest necessity for observing the order of reason in this matter.”¹⁹⁰ Therefore, every use of seed that is not directed to that end is considered to be a grave sin. Moreover, in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* Aquinas states that “the disordered emission of seed is contrary to the good of nature, which is the conservation of the species.”¹⁹¹

Concerning sexual pleasure, Kochuthara highlights that “even with the innovations he made with the help of the Aristotelian view of pleasure, Thomas does not find it easy to break away from the Augustinian tradition that did not give sexual pleasure an independent value.”¹⁹² Instead, as I mentioned, he follows the traditional doctrine on sexual intercourse. For Aquinas, sexual experience is the “furthest from reason,”¹⁹³ which is considered to be the ideal and crown of all human values. Therefore, “sexual pleasure is the lowest of human pleasures and lacks all intrinsic value.”¹⁹⁴ Given that we participate in the knowledge of God through reason, and that sexual pleasure is the further from reason, thus “the knowledge in sexual experience... is most unlike the divine.”¹⁹⁵

Aquinas also speaks about homosexuality in the “Treatise on the Passions,” in which he establishes a distinction between pleasures that are natural and those that are “‘not natural’ speaking absolutely but ‘connatural’ in some respect.”¹⁹⁶ For the *Doctor Angelicus*, the ‘connaturality’ experienced in a desire for non-natural sexual acts is a result of the ‘corruption’

¹⁸⁹ Keenan, *A Brief History of Catholic Ethics*, chapter 3.

¹⁹⁰ *ST* II-II, q.153, a.3.

¹⁹¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* III.122. Trans. English Dominican Fathers (London: Burns Oats & Washbourne, 1924), <https://archive.org/details/summacontragenti01thomuoft/page/n7/mode/2up>.

¹⁹² Kochuthara, *Sexual Pleasure in the Catholic Tradition*, 219.

¹⁹³ *ST* II-II, q. 141, a. 7.

¹⁹⁴ Kochuthara, *Sexual Pleasure in the Catholic Tradition*, 224.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁶ *ST* I-II, q. 31, a. 7.

of the natural principles of the species. Therefore, because the desires of these individuals reflect a corruption of nature, “their experience of connaturality cannot be taken as indicative of human nature, properly conceived.”¹⁹⁷

As Keenan notes, “the sins against nature received further treatment by being coupled with two other conceptual categories: ‘intrinsic evil’ and ‘parvity of matter.’”¹⁹⁸ Therefore, although Aquinas never uses these expressions, every action that frustrates the finality of a natural—that is, God-given—faculty is considered to be ‘intrinsically evil’ or ‘intrinsically disordered.’ As John Dedek indicates, the doctrine of intrinsic evil found in nineteenth and twentieth-century manuals, “is the doctrine, not of St. Thomas Aquinas, but of the fourteenth-century anti-Thomist, Durand of St. Pourçain,”¹⁹⁹ and it is a result of a development in the doctrine of the *Doctor Angelicus*. Indeed, Dedek asserts that “Aquinas knew nothing of intrinsically evil acts.... Thomas spoke only of acts which are *secundum se* evil and therefore never can be made good or licit even by God.”²⁰⁰ These type of acts were either the sins against the first table of the Decalogue or acts committed with a sinful will. However, in the mind of Aquinas, “no material action... is so inherently deformed that it cannot be permitted or commanded by God for a good reason.”²⁰¹

According to Josef Fuchs, there are two elements in the definition of an act as ‘intrinsically evil.’ On the one hand, such an action should be wrong “not because it is forbidden, but because it is wrong in itself.”²⁰² On the other hand, “it is wrong independently of further circumstances,

¹⁹⁷ Pope, “Scientific and Natural Law Analyses of Homosexuality,” 102.

¹⁹⁸ Keenan, *A Brief History of Catholic Ethics*, chap. 3. About ‘parvity of matter’ see Patrick J. Boyle, *Parvitas Materiae in Sexto in Contemporary Catholic Thought* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987).

¹⁹⁹ John F. Dedek, “Intrinsically Evil Acts: The Emergence of a Doctrine,” *Recherches de Théologie Ancienne et Médiévale* 50 (1983): 225.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 191.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

²⁰² Josef Fuchs, *Christian Ethics in a Secular Arena* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1984), 73.

consequences, and finalities, so that this action judged morally wrong cannot become morally right by reason of further circumstances, consequences, and finalities (ends).”²⁰³

As Keenan points out, the category of intrinsically evil, coined in the fourteenth century, was progressively combined with sins against nature, preventing all debate regarding “the moral liceity of any sexual action in which a man’s semen would be emitted into any other place than his wife’s vagina.”²⁰⁴

To conclude the study of this period of history, I would like to mention that throughout the history of Catholic teaching, many behaviors that have been classified as unnatural are today considered to be absolutely natural. As Crompton notes,²⁰⁵ usury was considered a vice against nature; Boswell, indeed, affirms that there was a “much more powerful medieval *moral* tradition against usury than against homosexual behavior.”²⁰⁶ Indeed, as this author mentions, there is a much more consistent condemnation of usury throughout history of theology: besides the biblical, patristic, and scholastic condemnations, “many more church councils [have] condemned it, beginning with Nicea... and including dozens of others before the steady and severe proscriptions of the First, Third, and Fourth Laterans.”²⁰⁷

In addition to the theological systematization of the condemnation of sex against nature, the Middle Ages were also marked by an accentuation of persecution and an intensification of the punishment of the crime of sodomy. Greenberg considers that the progressive centralization of power, whether by states or by the Church, was an important cause of the growth of hostility towards homosexuals.²⁰⁸ The Inquisition would eventually end up playing a fundamental role in the repression of the behavior, which once again became associated with heresy.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Keenan, *A Brief History of Catholic Ethics*, chapter 3.

²⁰⁵ See Crompton, *Homosexuality and Civilization*, 189.

²⁰⁶ Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 330.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 331.

²⁰⁸ See Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality*, 279.

Renaissance, Reformation, and Modern Ages

With Thomas Aquinas, the doctrine on sins against nature, which would influence Catholic doctrine until our days, was essentially outlined. The moral theology manuals that began to appear after the Council of Trent, and lasted until the Second Vatican Council, just like their predecessors the ‘penitentials’ and ‘confessional manuals’ “were all about sin, and they were only for confessors.”²⁰⁹ These manuals, which mark the birth of the discipline of moral theology, separated morality completely from spiritual or devotional literature. Catholic morals were presented essentially as being about avoiding evil, and very little concerned with the edification of the Christian people. As Thomas Slater affirmed at the beginning of the twentieth century, “manuals of moral theology are technical works intended to help the confessor and the parish priest in the discharge of their duties.... They are not intended for edification, nor do they hold up a high ideal of Christian perfection for the imitation of the faithful.... They are books of moral pathology.”²¹⁰

Contrary to what is commonly claimed, the Renaissance was, according to Crompton, a time of strong persecution and condemnation of homosexual behavior.²¹¹ As we know, the Inquisition, whose main purpose was to persecute heresy, became a religious court often at the service of the monarchs in the process of the increased centralization of political power. This situation is particularly evident in Spain, a nation that had been created in 1492, with the unification of the various kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula, with the exception of the Kingdom of Portugal. Both Portugal and Spain were involved in maritime expansion and the occupation of other continents since the beginning of the fifteen century. In both, the Inquisition played a

²⁰⁹ James F. Keenan, *Moral Wisdom: Lessons and Texts from the Catholic Tradition* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 2.

²¹⁰ Thomas Slater, *A Manual of Moral Theology*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1908), 5-6. As quoted in Keenan, *Moral Wisdom*, 3.

²¹¹ See Crompton, *Homosexuality and Civilization*, 245.

key role, having been exported to the occupied territories, in pursuing heresies and sexual relations against nature.

Reports from the Inquisition (and other local courts) are an important source of knowledge of the condemnation of homosexual behavior. However, we should bear in mind that these documents are complicated historical sources, because they often result from confessions obtained under torture or other forms of pressure.

Based on these documents, Crompton affirms that Spain was the country where the inquisitorial persecution was most intense because of political absolutism, historical racial conflicts, and popular superstition against deviant behaviors.²¹² In contrast, in Portugal the crime of sodomy seems to have been treated with less harshness by the *Sancto Officio*. The Inquisition had been introduced in Portugal in 1536 by the King João III and, in 1562, Cardinal Henrique obtained permission from the Pope to burn the ‘sodomites.’ According to the Brazilian anthropologist Luiz Mott, there was a certain tolerance of sodomy in Lisbon; the author even argues for the existence of a gay subculture in the Portuguese capital. Despite the considerable number of denouncements, only a small number of sodomites was burned at the stake during the period of Inquisition activity in Portugal.²¹³

This period is also marked by casuistry,²¹⁴ which experienced its golden age in the 16th century, especially among Jesuit moralists, when the new political, social, and religious situation presented new issues to moralists. Casuistry books represented an innovation in regard to the precedent set by the *Summae Confessorum* that proliferated in the Middle Ages. Indeed,

²¹² Ibid., 291.

²¹³ See Luiz Mott, “Pagode Português: A Subcultura Gay em Portugal nos Tempos Inquisitoriais,” *Ciência e Cultura* 40, no. 2 (1988): 120-139.

²¹⁴ Casuistry regards practical moral reasoning in concrete circumstances with the aim of solving particular moral issues. It comes from the Latin word “casus,” which means “having happened” and, according to Kennan, refers to “a method of moral reasoning to answer a question about a case, a *casus*, a story of something that has happened.” James F. Keenan, “Jesuit Casuistry: Yesterday and Today,” in *Is There a Jesuit Ethics?*, ed. Michael Sweeney, forthcoming, 1. Regarding the definition of casuistry see also Albert R. Jonsen and Stephen Edelston Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry: A History of Moral Reasoning* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 13.

these books were more inductive and creative than confessional manuals, and offered a way to respect the primacy of conscience without compromising moral objectivity.²¹⁵

High casuistry, using the inductive method, was concerned with accompanying human beings situated in their specific circumstances. The casuistic method reflects, as I stated above, not only the spirituality of the Jesuits, but, above all, Jesus' own way of proceeding as manifested in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37).²¹⁶ Such a method has a particular relevance in times when moral principles are not sufficient to answer new questions and "other pathways for developing moral solutions are sought."²¹⁷

The cases were often connected with real-life which "calls always for the exercise of human perceptiveness and discernment," that is, "equity."²¹⁸ The more problematic the question is the greater necessity of discernment. Therefore, following the aforementioned methodology, the conclusions of the cases, rather than being certain, were marked by probability, taking into account the complexity of human life.

Casuistry returned ethics to the field of practical science, taking into serious account the concrete circumstances which are an indispensable source for ethics. Furthermore, casuistry is an indispensable instrument by which to adapt morality to new contexts and questions. After all, even the principles were born from concrete situations.

Among the Jesuit casuists of the period of High casuistry, Tomás Sánchez stands out as a prominent master of moral casuistry. His works, particularly the "*De Sancto Matrimonii Sacramento Disputationum*,"²¹⁹ were an important contribution to the development of sexual ethics.

²¹⁵ See James F. Keenan, "The Birth of Jesuit Casuistry: Summa Casuum Conscientiae, Sive de Instructione Sacerdotum, Libri Septem by Francisco de Toledo (1532-1596)," in *The Mercurian Project: Forming Jesuit Culture* (Roma: Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu, 2004), 462.

²¹⁶ See James F. Keenan, "Jesuit Casuistry: Yesterday and Today," 11.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

²¹⁸ Jonsen and Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry*, 9.

²¹⁹ I am using a Spanish translation of this work, published by "El Motín" in Madrid in 1887, available on the Internet at the site "Filosofía en Español" (Tomás Sánchez, "Controversias del Santo Sacramento del Matrimonio," *Filosofía En Español*, <http://filosofia.org/mor/var/sat.htm>.) A digital version in latin is available on the Internet at

Although Sánchez follows the scholastic understanding of the sins against nature, Melchor Bajén considers that Sánchez introduced some innovation on the issue of sexual pleasure.²²⁰ For him, one of the characteristics that distinguishes Sánchez is his capacity to attend to persons in their concrete circumstances, applying natural law according to those circumstances.²²¹ Such an approach allowed the Jesuit to give a proper response to the new problems of his time, which called for new solutions. As a brilliant casuist, and as a man with a lot of experience listening to people in confession, Sánchez knew how to approach sexuality in a different way than scholastic theologians did. Bajén underlines that the Jesuit fostered a clear “attention to the individual over and above nature, when right reason allows.”²²² The author recalls that, in the case of the health hazard of the individual due to retention of harmful semen, Sánchez had no qualms going against the tradition and natural law. In that case, he accepted the possibility to perform an intrinsically evil act (semen emission) to save the person. Bajén Español contends that the superiority that Sánchez gives to the person over acts of nature constitutes a “progress in the history of morality: from an act-based perspective, Sánchez rises to the consideration of the individual.”²²³ Therefore he considers Sánchez a true precursor of personalism.

Many other casuists such as Martin the Master, Jean Mair, and Martin de Azpilcueta discussed, during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the possibility of some acts of sexual character not constituting a mortal sin. This discussion among theologians, however, was eventually dissuaded. On the part of the Jesuits, in 1612, the Superior General Claudio Acquaviva, condemned the statement that some venereal pleasures might not incur mortal sin,

the Biblioteca Digital Hispanica of the Biblioteca Nacional de España:
<http://bd-hrd.bne.es/>.

²²⁰ See Melchor Bajén Español, *Pensamiento de Tomás Sánchez, s.j., Sobre Moral Sexual* (Granada: Universidad de Granada, 1976), 320.

²²¹ See *ibid.*, 319.

²²² “Atención al individuo por encima de la naturaleza, cuando lo permite la recta razón.” *Ibid.*, 323.

²²³ “Progreso en la historia de la moral: de una perspectiva basada en los actos, Sánchez se eleva a la consideración del individuo.” *Ibid.*, 326.

thus ending the reflection on the matter among Jesuits.²²⁴ By the eighteenth century, according to Keenan, “the moral manualists locked into place the teaching that all sexual desires and subsequent activity were always mortally sinful unless it was the conjugal action of spouses that was in itself left open to procreation.”²²⁵

After the Reformation there was not any new development in the teaching on same-sex erotic acts. The division between ‘sexual’ sins according to nature and against nature prevailed in the moral manuals until the twentieth century, and the association between such acts and sodomy remained both in canon laws and civil laws as a horrendous crime. The condemnation of ‘homosexual’ behavior was equally strong among the reformed churches.

In the beginning of the twentieth century, as I mentioned above, Pope Pius X, in his *Catechism*, still included among the “Sins that Cry to Heaven for Vengeance” the “impure act against nature,” in a clear reference to the episode of Sodom.²²⁶ Moreover, the first Code of Canon Law promulgated in 1917 still speaks of ‘sodomy’ as a crime. Canon 2357 §1 condemns lay persons as ‘infamous’ (*ipso facto infames sunt*).²²⁷ Canon 2359 § 2 condemns the clergy to suspension, to be declared infamous (*infames declarantur*),²²⁸ and deprived from any benefice, dignity, or office, and, in the most serious cases, to be expelled from the clerical state. It is important to note that, in both canons, sodomy is equated with pederasty, incest, bestiality, and rape.

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries were also marked by the consolidation of the centralization of theology (particularly, of moral theology) in Rome and, particularly, in the

²²⁴ In his book about parvity of matter in the sixth and ninth commandments, Patrick Boyle affirms that Sánchez “was among the last of the Jesuit who could speak his mind freely on the subject [parvity of matter].” Indeed, after this prohibition established by the Superior General of the Jesuits, the theological reflection on this issue simply ended. In this regard see Boyle, *Parvitas Materiae in Sexto*, 12.

²²⁵ Keenan, *A Brief History of Catholic Ethics*, chapter 3.

²²⁶ See Pius X, “The Catholic Catechism of Saint Pope Pius X.”

²²⁷ See Pietro Gasparri, ed., *Codex Iuris Canonici Pii X Pontificis Maximi Iussu Digestus, Benedicti Papae XV Auctoritate Promulgatus*, 1917, <http://www.internetsv.info/Text/CIC1917.pdf>.

²²⁸ See *ibid.*

figure of the Pontiff.²²⁹ In this regard, Charles Curran affirms that the teaching office, that had the role of handing down—defend and explain—the deposit of the faith, “became more important than the substance it originally defended and explained... The Magisterium had become, as *Humani generis*²³⁰ in 1950 said, the proximate norm of truth.”²³¹ Following this tendency, in the 1970s we have the first official pronouncement from the Roman Curia about homosexuality, in the abovementioned Declaration *Persona Humana*. According to James Alison, this is “the only period in church history from which we have what purports to be a systematic treatment of the gay issue in documents emanating from the Roman Curia.”²³²

To conclude, I would like to summarize some points that emerge from this historical research concerning the treatment of same-sex genital relations by Catholic theology. Firstly, tradition is anything but constant. The concepts of sodomy or sin against nature are vague, incoherent and, as we have seen, can be attributed to various types of behavior that do not correspond at all to what we today consider as homosexuality or homosexual behavior.

Secondly, as we have seen, the concept of nature has developed throughout the history of theology, but its foundation lies mainly in Greek, and Stoic philosophy, and in Roman law. Therefore, it is not a strictly biblical or religious concept, nor even an absolute concept revealed by God, but seems to be the fruit of very concrete historical-philosophical circumstances.

Thirdly, one of the aspects that clearly stands out is the different degree to which male homosexuality and female homosexuality have been condemned throughout the history of Catholic moral theology. Although some theologians and some documents condemn sex between women, no text treats such behavior with the detail with which genital relations

²²⁹ See Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century*, 30.

²³⁰ “This deposit of faith our Divine Redeemer has given for authentic interpretation not to each of the faithful, not even to theologians, but only to the Teaching Authority of the Church.” Pius XII, “Encyclical Letter Concerning Some False Opinions Threatening to Undermine the Foundations of Catholic Doctrine ‘*Humani Generis*,’” August 12, 1950, The Holy See, <http://www.vatican.va/>, no. 21.

²³¹ Charles E. Curran, *The Development of Moral Theology: Five Strands* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 194.

²³² Alison, *On Being Liked*, 92.

between men are analyzed. This shows that at the root of the condemnation seems to be not simply a question of ‘order of nature’ established by the Creator, but, on the one hand, the fact that the theology was mostly men-centered. On the other hand, the main concern, as I have mentioned above, was with men behaving in a way that is not ‘proper’ for men, that is, by performing receptive anal intercourse. This is confirmed by the fact that in societies influenced by the Catholic tradition, female homosexual behavior has always been much more tolerated than masculine homosexual behavior. In the same way, most theologians have seemed to be particularly concerned with the emission of semen outside the right vessel, that is, the wife’s vagina, asserting this as a key reason for the condemnation of same-sex behavior.

Fourthly, the condemnation of same-sex behavior seems to be associated with a long tradition of diffidence regarding sexual pleasure that, as I mentioned above, was mainly developed by Augustine, influenced by the Stoics. Therefore, throughout the history of moral theology a dualism of reason/spirituality vs. body/affectivity/emotions was developed notwithstanding that it lacks biblical roots. In this context, sexual pleasure has been progressively associated with irrationality and with something that takes us away from the Spirit. Such dualism and such diffidence regarding sexual pleasure still exert a great influence on Catholic doctrine today.

1.3. Evaluation of the Magisterial teaching

After studying the historical evolution of the Church’s teaching, I will now evaluate the Magisterium’s arguments for condemning same-sex genital acts, particularly the argument that such acts “are contrary to natural law.”

Firstly, it is important to note, as I have mentioned above, that the concept of homosexuality as a condition, inclination or identity of the person is recent. Indeed, according to the French philosopher Michel Foucault, ‘sodomy’ was a category essentially act-centered and the ‘sodomite’ a person who performed isolate acts. However, the concept of homosexuality,

coined in the nineteenth century, referred to a “type of life, a life form, and a morphology,”²³³ and the homosexual was considered to be “a personage, a past, a case history, a childhood.”²³⁴ Although Foucault considers that the word ‘homosexuality’ was created by the German psychiatrist Karl Westphal in 1869, Robert Beachy argues that “it was Karl Kertbeny, a Hungarian-German author, who introduced the word.”²³⁵

The key point to retain in this regard is that this concept was coined in a medical context, as a pathological form of sexual expression. Moreover, “a central—if not perhaps the central—element that has characterized modern homosexuality is the understanding of erotic same-sex attraction as a fundamental element of the individual’s biological or psychological makeup.”²³⁶ Therefore, the idea of a “(homo)sexual personhood has a very recent history,”²³⁷ and cannot be identified exactly with the concept of ‘sodomy.’ This conception of homosexuality as a condition of the person had been assumed by the Magisterial teaching after *PH* in 1975. Indeed, in this and in subsequent documents, the Magisterium fostered the abovementioned distinction between acts and condition or inclination of the person. However, although in 1973 the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, and, in 1990, the World Health Organization removed it from the *International Classification of Diseases* some Magisterial documents still seem to consider homosexuality as a sort of mental disease. It was stated explicitly as such in *PH* in 1975, but the idea remains implicit in the document issued in 2005 by the Congregation for Catholic Education with the *Criteria for the Discernment of Vocation for Persons with Homosexual Tendencies*, regarding the admission to the priesthood of homosexual persons. In the former,

²³³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 43.

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Robert Beachy, “The German Invention of Homosexuality,” *The Journal of Modern History* 82, no. 4 (2010): 804.

²³⁶ Ibid., 804.

²³⁷ Ibid., 805.

the CDF affirms that some types of homosexuality are ‘definitive,’ “because of some kind of innate instinct or a pathological constitution judged to be incurable.”²³⁸ In the latter much more recent document, the Congregation for Education establishes that people “who practice homosexuality, [or] present deep-seated homosexuals tendencies”²³⁹ are not suitable for holy orders because “such persons, in fact, find themselves in a situation that gravely hinders them from relating correctly to men and women.”²⁴⁰

In fact, it is, on the one hand, important to take into account that the homosexual condition is a completely new phenomenon, unknown to the Biblical authors, to Greek philosophers, to the Church Fathers, to scholastic theologians and to the manualists. On the other hand, it is important to remember that the former idea that homosexuality was something pathological has been progressively overcome since the last decades of the twentieth century.

On the latter, this fact has been confirmed by human experience, genetic science, and behavioral sciences. Although it is beyond the scope of this work to analyze what the sciences currently say about same-sex orientation and behavior, and even if regarding its etiology there is very little consensus among scientists of the different human dimensions involved, today there is a widespread understanding of (homo)sexual orientation as a natural variation in human sexuality. Indeed, a person’s sexual orientation is said to be influenced by a combination of factors such as genetics, hormonal action, development dynamics, as well as social and cultural influences. Therefore, scientists mainly agree that sexual orientation is determined by the combination of both biological and environmental causes.²⁴¹

²³⁸ Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, “Persona Humana,” no. 8.

²³⁹ Congregation for Catholic Education, “Criteria for the Discernment of Vocation for Persons with Homosexual Tendencies,” November 4, 2005, The Holy See, <http://www.vatican.va/>, no. 2.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ In this regard, Stephen Pope refers to some scientific debates about the etiology of sexual identity, namely from evolutionary psychology, and from genetics and physiology. See Pope, “Scientific and Natural Law Analyses of Homosexuality,” 91.

Considering this scientific evidence, it seems that the *Catechism*'s statement that "homosexual acts are contrary to natural law" makes no sense. Indeed, on the one hand, this position seems to be grounded in the abovementioned conception of natural law espoused by Aquinas. However, as the same Aquinas teaches, we are called to overcome, by God's grace, the determinism of our "nature" understood as "physical" dimension.²⁴² On the other hand, even if the Magisterium followed Aquinas' physicalist conception of natural law, it would have to revise its position. Indeed, as Pope points out, Aquinas grounded the unnatural character of same-sex genital acts on the scientific data he had in his times.²⁴³ Therefore, according to Katie Grimes, "unlike Aquinas, the contemporary Magisterium does not turn to the sexual behavior of non-humans for guidance in making moral judgments about human nature."²⁴⁴ Indeed, if we attend to current scientific data today, as Aquinas did in his day (even looking at animal's behavior), we must conclude that same-sex genital behavior is absolutely natural.²⁴⁵ For this reason, Grimes concludes that the Magisterial understanding of human nature "is not traditional and long-held, but relatively new... [because] the method of defining 'human nature' in the Magisterial documents differs from Aquinas."²⁴⁶ The same author points out that, although the *Catechism* draws upon psychological insights regarding the importance of sexuality to the heterosexual married person, it ignores completely the psychological data when thinking of the homosexual person.

Magisterial teaching is also incoherent concerning its vision of human sexuality in general. Even if after the Second Vatican Council the Magisterium fostered a personalistic approach to sexuality and marriage,²⁴⁷ the subsequent documents regarding homosexuality have had

²⁴² *STI-II*, qq. 110-111.

²⁴³ See Pope, "Scientific and Natural Law Analyses of Homosexuality," 109.

²⁴⁴ Grimes, "How to Speak Thomistically About Sex," 201.

²⁴⁵ It is important to note that considering an act or behavior as natural says nothing about its moral value. Just as there is heterosexual intercourse within Catholic marriage that can be immoral (although natural), so there is also homosexual intercourse that, though natural, can be immoral.

²⁴⁶ Grimes, "How to Speak Thomistically About Sex," 201.

²⁴⁷ See Second Vatican Council, "Pastoral Constitution on the Church on the Modern World 'Gaudium et Spes,'" December 7, 1965, The Holy See, <http://www.vatican.va/>.

difficulty in extending such a vision to homosexual acts. Indeed, as Pope John Paul II declared in *Familiaris Consortio*, “sexuality... is by no means something purely biological, but concerns the innermost being of the human person as such.”²⁴⁸ Further, the Pope states that “sexuality is an enrichment of the whole person-body, emotions and soul and it manifests its inmost meaning in leading the person to the gift of self in love.”²⁴⁹ In the same way, the *Catechism* affirms that “sexuality affects all aspects of the human person in the unity of his body and soul. It especially concerns affectivity, the capacity to love and to procreate, and in a more general way the aptitude for forming bonds of communion with others.”²⁵⁰ This document also states that “everyone, man and woman, should acknowledge and accept his sexual identity.”²⁵¹ However, both documents agree that according to “Christian revelation” there are only “two specific ways of realizing the vocation of the human person, in its entirety, to love: marriage and virginity.”²⁵²

Despite that, the abovementioned letter of 1986 refuses to recognize a homosexual “identity” by considering that “the human person, made in the image and likeness of God, can hardly be adequately described by a reductionist reference to his or her sexual orientation.”²⁵³ Therefore, on one hand, the Magisterium recognizes that sexuality affects all the aspects of the human person but, on the other hand, it refuses to acknowledge sexual orientation as a natural and very relevant dimension of human sexuality. Moreover, as Mark Jordan affirms, whereas regarding sexuality within the marriage the Magisterium speaks in terms of the human person as a whole, when it turns to homosexuality the documents shift to “the notion of an intrinsic ‘ordering’ of [sexual] acts.”²⁵⁴

²⁴⁸ John Paul II, “Apostolic Exhortation on the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World ‘Familiaris Consortio,’” November 22, 1981, The Holy See, <http://www.vatican.va/>, no. 11.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 36.

²⁵⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2332.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*

²⁵² John Paul II, “‘Familiaris Consortio,’” no. 16.

²⁵³ Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, “Letter on Pastoral Care of Homosexual,” no. 16.

²⁵⁴ Mark D. Jordan, *The Silence of Sodom: Homosexuality in Modern Catholicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 27.

The inconsistency and the illogical character of the Magisterial arguments against same-sex behavior is also manifested in its classification as ‘intrinsically disordered.’ As Bishop Lucius Ugorji points out, the abovementioned ‘against nature, then against God’s will’ argument is simply circular. According to this author, to affirm that one moral act is right because it is the will of God and that another one is wrong because is forbidden by God is, in itself, the same as affirming that “an act is morally right because it is morally right and an act is morally wrong because it is morally wrong.”²⁵⁵ Indeed, since God is a rational being, “He always prescribes acts with some reason”²⁵⁶ and, regarding same-sex acts, the reason God forbids them is not presented in an adequate manner by the Church teaching. This author also draws attention to the danger of mistaking natural law for the will of God. He claims that the meaning of these realities is wider than their moral dimension. Indeed, ‘will of God’ can designate God’s providence or the will of God as the Creator who is *Causa Prima*. In the same way, ‘natural law,’ besides the moral meaning, can also designate some physical, psychological, or biological laws just like “the combination of two atoms of hydrogen with two atoms of oxygen produce water.”²⁵⁷ Such laws do not have any moral connotation. Ugorji considers that the erroneous association of biological and physical laws regarding procreation with will of God leads to the moral condemnation of masturbation or contraception. I consider that the same happens regarding same-sex genital behavior. Indeed, even if we were to concede that genital acts between persons of the same sex are against nature, this would not automatically result in a moral consequence, much less an expression of the divine design.

Actually, even if the CDF’s Letter of 1986 affirms that “as in every moral disorder, homosexual activity prevents one’s own fulfillment and happiness by acting contrary to the

²⁵⁵ Lucius Ugorji, *The Principle of Double Effect: A Critical Appraisal of Its Traditional Understanding and Its Modern Reinterpretation* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1985), 73.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 74.

creative wisdom of God,”²⁵⁸ the Magisterium have never explained consistently—besides referring to the abovementioned physicalist interpretation of natural law—why same-sex love is incapable of virtuous monogamy and, therefore, of participating of the goodness of God.²⁵⁹ Likewise, the Magisterium does not offer a consistent argument to support that the eventual reproductive *telos* of the genital organs represents in all its extension and comprehension the will of God about human sexuality. Today we know human sexuality with a much greater depth than was conceived of by the Scriptures, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, or the manualist moralists. Therefore, the simple act of affirming that some behavior is disordered based on ancient or medieval conceptions of the human being, particularly in the Stoic vision of the ends of sexual activity, seems intellectually dishonest, to say the least.²⁶⁰ Furthermore, when we add to intellectual dishonesty the supposed ‘will of God’ and the authority of Tradition or hierarchy, instead of preaching Jesus Christ as the Lord, we can be putting our own power before the power that comes from God (2 Cor 4:5-7), and we may become a cause of scandal for our little brothers and sisters (Mt 18,6). Indeed, the Magisterium was able to overcome the Thomistic ideas that monarchy was the form of government more natural and best suited for the achievement of common good,²⁶¹ or that “man is the beginning and end of woman; as God is the beginning and end of every creature.”²⁶² Hence, nothing prevents the Magisterium from also changing its conception of the ‘natural’ order of sexuality because of the deeper knowledge we have today regarding this human dimension. Indeed, as the International Theological Commission pointed out, “the concrete application of the precepts of the natural law can take

²⁵⁸ Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, “Letter on Pastoral Care of Homosexual,” no. 7.

²⁵⁹ See Pope, “Scientific and Natural Law Analyses of Homosexuality,” 118.

²⁶⁰ In this regard, I refer again to the abovementioned document of the PBA which assures us that “the Bible does not speak of the erotic inclination towards a person of the same sex, but only of homosexual acts.” Pontificia Accademia Biblica, “Che Cosa È l’Uomo?,” no. 185.

²⁶¹ See Thomas Aquinas, “De Regimine Principum,” in *St. Thomas Aquinas Political Writings*, trans. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

²⁶² *ST I*, q. 93, a. 4.

different forms in different cultures, or even in different epochs within a single culture.”²⁶³ This document recognizes the historicity of natural law, “whose concrete applications can vary over time.”²⁶⁴

Thus, the argument that “the Church’s teaching today is in organic continuity with the Scriptural perspective and with her own constant Tradition”²⁶⁵ fails. Although we saw in the previous section that there is a constant—albeit sporadic—condemnation of same-sex genital acts, such condemnation was grounded on very different reasons than those presented by today’s Magisterium. At the same time, the classification of homosexual orientation as intrinsically disordered is something that finds no basis in the Tradition, precisely because we are facing a completely new phenomenon, which is the fruit of a deeper understanding of sexuality.

Mark Jordan also launches a remarkable criticism against the Magisterial documents. This author argues that the authoritative repetition of the condemnation of homosexual acts “by stipulation or regulation more than persuasion”²⁶⁶ aims to “prevent serious discussion about same-sex love.”²⁶⁷ Jordan considers that, for such a purpose, the Magisterium relies on a “rhetorical process of tedium” marked by repetition, flattening,²⁶⁸ and an attitude of certainty.²⁶⁹ By repeating that “we always taught that homosexuality is intrinsically disordered” the Magisterium ends up by creating an idea of immutability or a static vision of history that, as I have shown, is not true. This idea of certainty prevents the Magisterium from looking to the particular situations, and to the experience of real people—and instead focuses on the caricatures

²⁶³ International Theological Commission, “In Search of a Universal Ethic: A New Look at the Natural Law,” 2009, <http://www.vatican.va/>, no. 53.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 54.

²⁶⁵ Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, “Letter on Pastoral Care of Homosexual,” no. 8.

²⁶⁶ Jordan, *The Silence of Sodom*, 53.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁶⁸ By ‘flattening’ Jordan means the caricature, without scientific grounds, that the documents make about homosexual persons, such speaking about complex things in a simple way; for example, by considering that “homosexual lives are necessarily selfish, solitary, bitter, sterile, hedonistic, and narcissistic.” *Ibid.*, 22. See also *ibid.*, 56.

²⁶⁹ See *ibid.*, 55.

described in the documents. It avoids, at the same time, the development of the personal conscience and the prudential discernment of concrete situations.

Jordan also presents other obstacles to a serious discussion, namely, the invisibility of gay people within the Catholic communities, and what he calls the “rhetoric of hysteria.”²⁷⁰ Indeed, Catholic communities continue to insist on inviting gay and lesbian people to hiddenness, to the “closet;” gay and lesbian couples remain invisible in our communities; the real experience of these people remains imperceptible to our communities. In such a situation, there is no room for a change of mentality and these people will remain in a sort of clandestinity within the community. According to Jordan, it is only “once we learn to speak about them, [that] we may discern their life-giving possibilities.”²⁷¹ In the meantime, the Magisterium seems to limit itself to repeating supposedly immutable teachings and caricatures of gay and lesbian lives.

By the “rhetoric of hysteria” Jordan means the environment that characterizes many Catholic circles, which is not restricted to the Roman Curia or even to the hierarchy, since it is perceptible also among lay people. This rhetoric refers to the fact that, in these circles, when someone decides to break the silence and challenge the official teaching on homosexuality, that person is immediately labeled as being “inflamed with hidden incontinence, with unrestrained and disfiguring homosexual desires.”²⁷²

I do not agree with Jordan’s criticism in every respect. In particular, I do not share the idea that all members of the hierarchy and all those involved in writing the Magisterial documents

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 90.

²⁷¹ Ibid., 77.

²⁷² Ibid., 91. In this regard, by way of example only, I mention the controversy that has been raised in many American Catholic environments and beyond, following the publication of the book *Building a Bridge: How the Catholic Church and the LGBT Community Can Enter into a Relationship of Respect, Compassion, and Sensitivity* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2017) by the American Jesuit priest James Martin. I refer to two stories on this topic: one from Massimo Faggioli, “Catholic Cyber-Militias and the New Censorship,” *La Croix International*, last modified December 29, 2017, <https://international.la-croix.com/news/catholic-cyber-militias-and-the-new-censorship/5923>. Another one from Michael J. O’Loughlin, “Jesuit Writer James Martin Disinvited From Talk at Prestigious Seminary,” *America Magazine*, last modified September 16, 2017, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2017/09/16/jesuit-writer-james-martin-disinvited-talk-prestigious-seminary>.

have an evil intent to prevent us from facing this issue. However, whether premeditated or not, I agree that both silence and the atmosphere of slander, threat, and persecution prevent the Church from looking at people who, within the community, do not experience the sexual orientation of the majority. Not even the authoritarianism with which the Magisterium has sometimes presented itself in past decades guarantees the adherence of the faithful to its teaching. Furthermore, by maintaining such a teaching, we can be closing off “the way of grace and of growth, and [discouraging] paths of sanctification which give glory to God”²⁷³ for many Christian people.

To conclude, according to Stephen Pope, the central moral issue regarding same-sex love does not draw upon genetic or statistical naturalness but rather “whether homosexuals can respond (at least, that is, as well as heterosexuals) to the universal challenge to train and habituate their sexual passions—naturally oriented to various goods but existentially disordered by concupiscence—in a way that contributes to their flourishing.”²⁷⁴ As the same author points out, to be faithful to its mission, “the Magisterium must find a way to honor the experience of gay people, including gay Catholics who are sincerely trying to live in accord with the gospel and the best wisdom of Catholic morality.”²⁷⁵ This is the task I propose in the following two chapters.

²⁷³ Francis, “Amoris Laetitia,” no. 305.

²⁷⁴ Pope, “Scientific and Natural Law Analyses of Homosexuality,” 115.

²⁷⁵ Stephen J. Pope, “The Magisterium’s Arguments Against ‘Same-Sex Marriage’: An Ethical Analysis and Critique,” *Theological Studies* 65, no. 3 (2004): 530-565.

2. Experience as a source of moral theology: *seeds of truth* in same-sex relationships

In this chapter, in six steps, I turn to the issue of human experience and its importance as a source for moral theology. First, I will present the theological and Magisterial foundations for considering experience as a place in which moral truth can be known, and as source of moral teaching. To demonstrate this, I will draw particularly upon *Gaudium et Spes*. Second, I will underline the importance of reawakening in the life of the Church a merciful and empathic approach, which should permeate the whole of the Church's teaching—particularly in its moral dimension—, as well as each way of doing theology and every pastoral action. Third, I focus on the importance of interpreting the data we gather from experience, especially from the sexual experience of people. The fourth step is to attend to the actual experience of gay and lesbian Catholic persons, regarding their personal sanctification, and their struggle to reconcile their sexual orientation and affective life with the Magisterial teaching on homosexuality. Fifth, I will present some cases that show how the hierarchy seems to be listening to the experience of people. Finally, based on the experience of gay and lesbian couples, I will show how seeds of the Christian marriage can also be present in some of these partnerships.

2.1. Theological and Magisterial foundations for experience as constitutive for moral teaching and moral truth

The Second Vatican Council has awakened historical consciousness in the Catholic church and, consequently, a greater pastoral awareness of people in their concreteness. *Gaudium et Spes* (*GS*) is paradigmatic in this regard by affirming, at its very beginning, that “the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.”²⁷⁶

²⁷⁶ Second Vatican Council, “*Gaudium et Spes*,” no. 1.

The same document urges the Church to carry out her mission of bearing witness to the mercy and love of Christ for humanity. To this end, she has the “duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel,”²⁷⁷ so that she might respond in language intelligible to our times to the persistent questions which concern human beings. Thus, in order to accomplish her mission, the Christian community is bound to discern in human history, always in the light of the Gospel, the ways in which the Spirit is manifesting the eternal newness of God in our times. Furthermore, *GS* also points out that if, on the one hand, the Church has a message of joy, hope, and sense to propose to the world, on the other hand she also acknowledges “how richly she has profited by the history and development of humanity.”²⁷⁸

The Council recognizes that “from the beginning of her history she has learned to express the message of Christ with the help of the ideas and terminology of various philosophers, and has tried to clarify it with their wisdom, too.”²⁷⁹ Therefore, “the Church requires the special help of those who live in the world, are versed in different institutions and specialties, and grasp their innermost significance in the eyes of both believers and unbelievers,”²⁸⁰ in order to better transmit the message of Christ to today’s world.

Since the beginning of his pontificate, Pope Francis seems to be reawakening, in new ways, that principle of pastorality that John XXIII (re)introduced into the life of the Church and, consequently, of theology, exemplified in the speech which opened the Second Vatican Council.²⁸¹ In this regard, Walter Kasper asserts that, with Francis “another phase of the

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 4.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 44.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁸¹ According to Christoph Theobald, this principle constitutes the focal point which forms the internal unit of the *corpus* of the Second Vatican Council. This principle is located at the crossroads of two axes: “the theological or vertical axis, which is that of revelation and its reception by faith, and the horizontal or ‘social’ axis, which is that of communication between the Church and all the components of society, that is, of human societies in their worldwide extension.” (“L’asse teologale o verticale, che è quello della rivelazione e della sua recezione per fede e l’asse orizzontale o ‘sociale’, che è quello della comunicazione tra la Chiesa e tutte le componenti della

reception of the Council has begun, after the reception of the previous pontificates, in order to transmit to the future what which has been handed down with creative fidelity.”²⁸² Similarly, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn points out that “John Paul II opened the door wide to Christ. Pope Benedict has refounded the organic quality of the faith in the person of Jesus. Pope Francis urges us to cross the threshold and go out to meet Him in our poverties. All three, each one with his own providential style, put into action this process of renewal in fidelity that characterizes the Council.”²⁸³ Hence, the Argentinian Pope has grasped in the principle of pastorality the key to making Christian faith credible in a world that no longer accepts a deductive doctrinal model, imposed above the faithful, to which everyone should submit, trying to live something that “has not been thought for themselves.”²⁸⁴

It seems that Francis has understood how to interpret the *signs of the times* and has recognized that new questions cannot be answered with old responses. To this end, he has tried to overcome the clear split—present in many ecclesial spheres—between doctrine and pastoral care, while remaining faithful to the truth claims inherent in Christianity. In this sense, he has understood that there is no other way of doing theology (and of being pastoral ministers) than starting from encounter, confrontation, and contact with different cultures and with the concrete experience of the women and men of our world.²⁸⁵

società, cioè delle società umane nella loro estensione mondiale.”) Christoph Theobald, “Tornare alla Sorgente: La Recezione del Vaticano II,” *Il Regno*, 2 (2012): 28.

²⁸² “È incominciata un’altra fase della ricezione del concilio dopo la ricezione dei pontificati precedenti, in modo da trasmettere al futuro il dato tramandato con fedeltà creativa.” Walter Kasper, *Il Messaggio di Amoris Laetitia: Una Discussione Fraterna* (Brescia: Queriniana, 2018), 19, footnote 6.

²⁸³ “Giovanni Paolo II ha spalancato le porte a Cristo. Papa Benedetto ha rifondato l’organicità della fede nella persona di Gesù. Papa Francesco ci spinge a varcare la soglia per uscire verso l’incontro con lui nelle nostre povertà. Tutti e tre, ognuno con il suo stile provvidenziale, mettono in opera questo processo di rinnovamento nella fedeltà che caratterizza il Concilio.” Antonio Spadaro, “Conversazione con il Cardinale Schönborn sull’‘Amoris Laetitia’,” *La Civiltà Cattolica* 3986 (2016): 151.

²⁸⁴ Francis, “Gaudete et Exsultate,” no. 11.

²⁸⁵ In the Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium* Francis affirms that “one of the main contributions of the Second Vatican Council was precisely seeking a way to overcome this divorce between theology and pastoral care, between faith and life. I dare say that the Council has revolutionized to some extent the status of theology—the believer’s way of doing and thinking. It is precisely in this light that *Optatam Totius* strongly proposes that ecclesiastical studies ‘be more suitably aligned and... work harmoniously towards opening more and more the minds of the students to the mystery of Christ. For it is this mystery which affects the whole history of the human race, [and] continually influences the Church.’ In order to achieve this, the conciliar Decree urges joining

Bernard Lonergan argues that the Second Vatican Council operated a methodological shift from a classicist approach to a more historically conscious one. The author considers that change and adaptation in the life of the Church are “a mandate based on the very nature and mission of the Church, just as growth and development are inherent in the nature of a living organism.”²⁸⁶ In Lonergan’s epistemology, truth is not identified with *adequatio intellectus et rei* but the “adequacy of our conscious existence” that can be understood “as an existential relation of self to being which must by definition develop in order to realize itself.”²⁸⁷ Thus, truth is dynamic rather than a “relation of conformity with an objective thing which must by definition be stable in order to be at all.”²⁸⁸ New ways of communicating perennial truth do not constitute a new revelation—the revelation was consummated and reached its fullness in Christ²⁸⁹—but rather a way to incarnate this revelation in the concreteness of the lives of individuals and communities.

Lonergan is especially concerned with the integration of Christian belief with the daily experience of contemporary human beings. In this regard, the author appeals to the need to transcend the Hellenic categories that have shaped Christian theology and, dogmatic formulations in particular, in order to “fashion the cultural form which Christianity requires now for the sake of its future.”²⁹⁰ For Lonergan, given his abovementioned conception of truth, the authenticity of one’s living is an important aspect of what it means to be “truly human.” So, instead of an abstract or theoretical concept, the truth of human existence “is the result of consciousness’ incessant tending towards being.”²⁹¹ In the same way, Christian beliefs are true

meditation with the study of sacred Scripture, ‘the soul of all theology’, together with assiduous and conscious participation in the sacred Liturgy, the ‘primary and indispensable source of the truly Christian spirit,’ and the systematic study of the living Tradition of the Church in dialogue with all people of our time, listening attentively to their concerns, their sufferings and their needs.” Francis, “Veritatis Gaudium,” no. 2.

²⁸⁶ Lonergan, “The Transition from a Classicist World-View to Historical-Mindedness,” 1.

²⁸⁷ All the quotes in the sentence are from: Bernard Lonergan, “The Dehellenization of Dogma,” *Theological studies* 28, no. 2 (1967): 337.

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

²⁸⁹ Second Vatican Council, “*Dei Verbum*,” no. 4.

²⁹⁰ Lonergan, “The Dehellenization of Dogma,” 337.

²⁹¹ Ibid., 338.

“as far as they generate true religious experience.”²⁹² Therefore, there is some continuity in the truths of faith. This continuity corresponds to God’s incessant self-communication to the human being, and to the continual response of humans to God’s initiative. However, that does not mean that the truth is static, already given all at once in an encrypted message that it is up to the Magisterium to decipher. The truth of faith is the continuous revelation of the God whose fullness was realized in the life of Jesus Christ, but who also continues to reveal Godself in the concreteness of human existence. Indeed, although this mystery has been revealed once and for all in Jesus Christ who is the Truth, our apprehension of this mystery is progressive and dynamic, and therefore cannot remain unchanged.

Similarly, Pope Benedict XVI affirmed that “*Truth*, in fact, is *lógos* which creates *diá-logos*, and hence communication and communion.”²⁹³ Moreover, Salzman and Lawler remind us that “moral truth exists only in the moral subject”²⁹⁴ and, thus, the concept of an abstract and theoretical truth is unacceptable if we want to promote an ethics of justice and mercy in the light of the Gospel. Indeed, as Lisa Fullam states, the truth is always “personal, cultural situated, and objective,”²⁹⁵ and the personal conscience well-formed can, through discernment, “hew more and more closely to the truth.”²⁹⁶ According to Julio Martínez, “the truth is reached in a creative Tradition open to innovation, which is the very life of the Spirit in the Church, that helps her to illuminate the human experience with the light of the Gospel.”²⁹⁷

²⁹² Ibid.

²⁹³ Benedict XVI, “Encyclical Letter on Integral Human Development in Charity and Truth ‘Caritas in Veritate,’” June 29, 2009, The Holy See, <http://www.vatican.va/>, no. 4.

²⁹⁴ Todd A. Salzman and Michael G. Lawler, “Amoris Laetitia: Towards a Methodological and Anthropological Integration of Catholic Social and Sexual Ethics,” *Theological Studies* 79, no. 3 (2018): 647.

²⁹⁵ Lisa Fullam, “Joan of Arc, Holy Resistance, and Conscience Formation in the Face of Social Sin,” in *Conscience and Catholicism: Rights, Responsibilities, and Institutional Responses.*, eds. David E. DeCosse and Kristin E. Heyer (New York: Orbis Books, 2015), 50.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ “La verdad se va alcanzando en una Tradición creativa abierta a la innovación, que es la vida misma del Espíritu en la Iglesia, que le ayuda a iluminar la experiencia humana con la luz del Evangelio.” Martínez, “Discernimiento y Moral,” 398.

Along the same lines, Christoph Theobald seeks to combine the claim of truth of Christianity with attention to human history and experience. In his study on Theobald, José Frazão Correia affirms that the German-French theologian proposes a “*truth in the plural*, concerned with experience, overcoming its understanding in intellectual and scientific terms of true-false, certainty-error.”²⁹⁸ To this end, he shifts the essential point from the search for truth as objective content towards an intersubjective and intercommunicational structure of truth. Hence, rather than seeing Christianity as a set of objectively certain doctrinal truths to which the believer only has to submit, Theobald proposes a dialogued, discussed, and argued truth; not a definition of truth but a possibility of flourishing through a concrete *style*²⁹⁹ of life.

In this regard, it is important to note that Revelation is not static, already given all at once in an encrypted message that it is up to the Magisterium to decipher. Theobald speaks about God’s event in the communicative style of Jesus.³⁰⁰ He considers that the event of God within history, manifested in the *hospitable sanctity* of Jesus, allows human beings to have deep access to divine life, through their own conscience. Therefore, the lives of the faithful are also part of Revelation and they must challenge and contribute to the church’s understanding of doctrine.

In short, as Francis also affirms, the “truth is not an abstract idea, but is Jesus himself, the Word of God in whom is the Life that is the Light of man (Jn 1:4), the Son of God who is also the Son of Man. He alone, in revealing the mystery of the Father and of his love, fully reveals humanity to itself and brings to light its very high calling.”³⁰¹

²⁹⁸ “*Verità al plurale*, che riguarda l’esistenza, superando la sua comprensione in termini intellettuali-scientifici di vero-falso, esattezza-errore.” José Frazão Correia, *Risonanza Affettiva, Appello Etico, Stile Relazionale: Tratti di una Fede Vivibile e Visibile* (P. Sequeri, A. Rizzi, C. Theobald) (Roma: Aracne, 2010), 382.

²⁹⁹ Theobald uses the aesthetic-theological concept of *style* to speak about Christianity. This paradigm allows us to understand faith and Christianity rather as a way of doing and proceeding than a sort of rational argumentation, rather as a way of living and inhabiting the world than a message to be imposed. This *style* finds its foundation in the “*hospitable sanctity*” of Jesus of Nazareth, as a way of situating himself in the world and in front of those who cross his path. It is a style that awakens in others confidence in life and, therefore, also makes them hospitable witnesses of life before their peers, as individuals and as a community. See Christoph Theobald, *Il Cristianesimo Come Stile: Un Modo di Fare Teologia nella Post-Modernità*, vol. 1 (Bologna: EDB, 2009).

³⁰⁰ See *ibid.*, 289.

³⁰¹ Francis, “*Veritatis Gaudium*,” no. 1.

Therefore, to achieve moral truth and to develop Church's moral teaching we also must listen to the experience of the holy and faithful people of God. Indeed, the truth of faith can only be one discovered in dialogue, discerned through listening to the Spirit who speaks not only in prayer and liturgy, but also through the *sensus fidei fidelium*.³⁰² Indeed, following the teaching of *Lumen Gentium*,³⁰³ Pope Francis affirms that the "instinct of faith"—derived from the Spirit—"gives Christians a certain connaturality with divine realities, and a wisdom which enables them to grasp those realities intuitively, even when they lack the wherewithal to give them precise expression."³⁰⁴ As the International Theological Commission affirms, by their Baptism "the faithful have a [supernatural] instinct for the truth of the Gospel, which enables them to recognize and endorse authentic Christian doctrine and practice, and to reject what is false."³⁰⁵ Pope Francis, in his Address at the end of the first session of the Synod on Family, affirmed that

when the Church, in the variety of her charisms, expresses herself in communion, she cannot err: it is the beauty and the strength of the *sensus fidei*, of that supernatural sense of the faith which is bestowed by the Holy Spirit so that, together, we can all enter into the heart of the Gospel and learn to follow Jesus in our life. And this should never be seen as a source of confusion and discord.³⁰⁶

It sometimes happens, however, that the *sentire* and, consequently, the experience of the holy people of God seems to contradict the official teaching of the Church. Although the International Theological Commission affirms that resistance to Magisterial teaching "as a matter of principle... is incompatible with the authentic *sensus fidei*,"³⁰⁷ and invites the faithful to "understand and accept it [the Magisterial teaching],"³⁰⁸ the commission also acknowledges

³⁰² Regarding the concept of *Sensus fidei fidelium* see International Theological Commission, "'Sensus Fidei' in the Life of the Church," 2014, <http://www.vatican.va/>, nos. 1-6.

³⁰³ Second Vatican Council, "Lumen Gentium," no. 12.

³⁰⁴ Francis, "Evangelii Gaudium," no. 119.

³⁰⁵ International Theological Commission, "Sensus Fidei," no. 2.

³⁰⁶ Francis, "Address of the Holy Father for the Conclusion of the Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops," October 18, 2014, The Holy See, <https://w2.vatican.va/>.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 80.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

that “the Magisterium must likewise reflect on the teaching that has been given and consider whether it needs clarification or reformulation in order to communicate more effectively the essential message.”³⁰⁹ Indeed, the document concedes that the Church’s communion requires efforts from both parts, and thus that the Magisterium should also listen to the *sensus* of the faith expressed in the experience of the Christian people, so that the eternal truth revealed in Christ may manifest its relevance and be adequately apprehended by the men and women of today.

In any case, the Magisterium recognizes that experience, and particularly the daily life of those striving to conform their lives with Christ, constitutes an important source of theology and, in particular, of the moral teaching of the Church, and of moral truth. Therefore, as Lonergan stated, historicity is of the utmost importance in moral teaching because it allows for the incorporation of human experience, characterized by its incompleteness and constant need for conversion, into the practice of theology. Being historically situated, “we not only inherit our world but we also contribute to making what it is and what it will be.”³¹⁰ Consequently, all moral teaching must be interpreted in its own context and translated for the contemporary audience by using the inductive method that takes account of human experience and draws on historical and cultural differences. The results and conclusions of such a method will be always limited by “historically and culturally conditioned experiences and expressions of value within that community.”³¹¹ As George Schnier points out, “all theology... should be ‘experiential’ in a manner analogous to the way in which it ought all to be ‘scriptural,’ ‘philosophical’ and ‘logical.’”³¹²

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

³¹⁰ Teevan, *Lonergan, Hermeneutics & Theological Method*, 168.

³¹¹ Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith*, 32.

³¹² George P. Schnier, “The Appeal to Experience,” *Theological Studies* 53, no. 1 (1992): 40.

2.2. Reawakening a merciful and empathic Church

As I mentioned above, the assumption of experience as a source of moral teaching and of moral truth is a consequence of the pastoral approach that resulted from the Council, and of the attitude of mercy fostered in the last pontificates.³¹³ In his address at the beginning of the Vatican II, John XXIII affirmed: “the Catholic Church, while with this Ecumenical Council raises the torch of Catholic truth, wants to show herself a loving mother of all, benign, patient, moved by mercy and goodness towards the children separated from her.”³¹⁴ Indeed, mercy is considered to be the “key of Christian life,”³¹⁵ or as our distinctiveness as Catholics in our moral living.³¹⁶ Hence, the way of doing and teaching theology, as well as the entire pastoral activity of the Church, needs to be impregnated by such an attitude. In 1980, John Paul II affirmed that “the Church lives an authentic life when she professes and proclaims mercy—the most stupendous attribute of the Creator and of the Redeemer—and when she brings people close to the sources of the Savior’s mercy, of which she is the trustee and dispenser.”³¹⁷ In his programmatic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis speaks of the Church as a mother with an open heart and with doors open³¹⁸ and invites pastoral ministers to accompany with mercy and patience the eventual stages of personal growth as these progressively occur.³¹⁹ The Pope recognizes and underlines that “everyone needs to be touched by the comfort and attraction of

³¹³ Regarding the approach to mercy in the last Pontificates see Walter Kasper, *Misericordia: Concetto Fondamentale del Vangelo, Chiave della Vita Cristiana* (Brescia: Queriniana, 2013), 14-20.

³¹⁴ “La Chiesa Cattolica, mentre con questo Concilio Ecumenico innalza la fiaccola della verità cattolica, vuole mostrarsi madre amorevolissima di tutti, benigna, paziente, mossa da misericordia e da bontà verso i figli da lei separati.” John XXIII, “Gaudete Mater Ecclesiae.”

³¹⁵ See the title of Kasper, *Misericordia*.

³¹⁶ See Keenan, *Moral Wisdom*, 91.

³¹⁷ John Paul II, “Encyclical Letter on Divine Mercy ‘Dives in Misericordia,’” November 30, 1980, The Holy See, <http://w2.vatican.va/>, no. 13.

³¹⁸ See Francis, “*Evangelii Gaudium*,” nos. 46-49.

³¹⁹ In an interview the Pope gave to *La Civiltà Cattolica* at the beginning of his Pontificate, Francis affirmed: “I dream of a church that is a mother and shepherdess. The church’s ministers must be merciful, take responsibility for the people and accompany them like the good Samaritan, who washes, cleans and raises up his neighbor. This is pure Gospel.... The ministers of the Gospel must be people who can warm the hearts of the people, who walk through the dark night with them, who know how to dialogue and to descend themselves into their people’s night, into the darkness, but without getting lost.” Francis, “A Big Heart Open to God: An Interview with Pope Francis,” interview by Antonio Spadaro, September 30, 2013, <https://www.americamagazine.org/>.

God's saving love, which is mysteriously at work in each person, above and beyond their faults and failings."³²⁰ Accordingly, this merciful attitude must be fostered by ordained ministers, religious, and lay people and it is manifested in a capacity to listen, to learn from the people, and to accompany them in their spiritual and human growth.³²¹ In fact, mercy—"the willingness to enter into the chaos of others so as to answer them in their need"³²²—is not a fashionable word but rather "is the perfection of God's essence"³²³ and "it is the most perfect achievement of [divine] justice."³²⁴ Therefore, mercy as the outpouring of God's love "is the sum of the gospel"³²⁵ and "God's fundamental attribute,"³²⁶ and this "has consequences for the life of each individual Christian and for the pastoral practice of the Church."³²⁷ The contemplation of these mysteries should trigger in the Church's life a desire for pastoral accompaniment and personal conversion. As Julio Martínez sustains, for this conversion to take place it is necessary to develop a sensitive knowledge, fostered through "direct experience, and through contact with the concrete life situations of people with names, faces and stories that affect us more and more."³²⁸ Indeed, as John Noonan has demonstrated, throughout the Church's history "empathy with those seen as brothers and sisters leads to the rejection of practices formerly considered to

³²⁰ Francis, "Evangelii Gaudium," no. 44.

³²¹ "Mercy is the very foundation of the Church's life. All of her pastoral activity should be caught up in the tenderness she makes present to believers; nothing in her preaching and in her witness to the world can be lacking in mercy. The Church's very credibility is seen in how she shows merciful and compassionate love. The Church 'has an endless desire to show mercy.'... It is absolutely essential for the Church and for the credibility of her message that she herself live and testify to mercy. Her language and her gestures must transmit mercy, so as to touch the hearts of all people and inspire them once more to find the road that leads to the Father." Francis, "Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy 'Misericordiae Vultus,'" April 11, 2015, The Holy See, <http://www.vatican.va/>, nos. 10-12.

³²² Keenan, *Moral Wisdom*, 94.

³²³ "La misericordia è la perfezione dell'essenza di Dio." Kasper, *Misericordia*, 105.

³²⁴ "È la realizzazione più perfetta della giustizia." Ibid., 108.

³²⁵ "La misericordia come effluo dell'amore di Dio è la somma del vangelo. Ibid., 126.

³²⁶ "La proprietà fondamentale di Dio." Ibid., 127.

³²⁷ "Ha delle conseguenze per la vita di ogni cristiano e per la prassi pastorale della chiesa." Ibid., 200.

³²⁸ "Experiencia directa y en situaciones concretas de la vida con personas con nombres, rostros e historias que nos van afectando poco a poco." Martínez, "Discernimiento y Moral," 387.

be compatible with Christianity such as the enslavement of human beings and persecution for the sake of religion.”³²⁹

2.3. Learning to interpret sexual experience

It follows from the above that human experience needs to be better incorporated among the sources of moral theology, alongside with Scripture, Tradition, and reason because, as Margaret Farley emphasizes, it is “an important part of the content of each of the other sources, and it is always a factor in interpreting the others.”³³⁰ Indeed, Thomas Aquinas has already recognized in the *Summa* that “some moral truths are best grasped ‘by way of experience.’”³³¹ Hence, if we want the *kerigma*, or the “joy of the Gospel,” and the Christian proposal for human sexuality in particular, to continue to fill the hearts of contemporary men and women, we need to learn from the lives of real people and determine the best way to interpret their experience. Particularly regarding the question of natural law, Stephen Pope affirms that to better understand the concept of natural law, in addition to Scripture and Tradition, we need to rely “on what it takes to be reasonable interpretations and judgments of what actually constitutes genuine human flourishing in lived human experience.”³³² Alongside Pope, Pamela Hall affirms that “our discovery of the natural law... takes place within a life, within a narrative context of experiences that engages a person’s intellect and will in the making of concrete choices.”³³³

James Bretzke points out that experience is fundamental in moral theology because it also “highlights more the affective, emotional, intuitive, and imaginative sides of our personhood, and these aspects are crucial for a holistic understanding of, and approach to, the moral life.”³³⁴

³²⁹ John T. Noonan Jr., *A Church That Can and Cannot Change: The Development of Catholic Moral Teaching* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 211.

³³⁰ Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 190.

³³¹ “*Secundum via experimenti*” *ST* II-II, q. 47, a. 15.

³³² Pope, “Scientific and Natural Law Analyses of Homosexuality,” 117.

³³³ Pamela M. Hall, *Narrative and the Natural Law: An Interpretation of Thomistic Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1994), 37.

³³⁴ James T. Bretzke, *A Morally Complex World: Engaging Contemporary Moral Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), 25.

The author draws particular attention to the need to listen to marginalized persons and groups in the Church that were not historically taken greatly into consideration. In fact, by not appreciating the experience of people that can challenge our teaching, Bretzke considers that “we shall run the risk of repeating the Galileo affair in our own lifetime.”³³⁵

Both Bretzke and Farley recall the importance of interpreting experience. Farley underlines that, particularly concerning experiences in the sexual sphere, we need to be aware that they “are shaped by social norms, both religious and cultural, even to the point of determining what experiences are possible and what they will mean.”³³⁶ Therefore, we always interpret such experience within the categories given by our social influences or our worldview. We have to be mindful that for many people, some sexual behaviors—namely same-sex genital behavior—are sometimes experienced as evil not because it is an evil in its very essence, but precisely because it has been socially interpreted as deviant or not open to communion with God.³³⁷ Indeed, although recognizing the importance of experience as a source of moral teaching, Farley also expresses caution about the influence of social construction on moral thinking.

Regarding the issue of same-sex relationships, the abovementioned Magisterial documents seem to draw on experience to declare that homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered because they are contrary to the natural law, or because they constitute a “deviant behavior,”³³⁸ and do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity.³³⁹ In this regard, James Martin, commenting on the document of the Congregation for Catholic Education on gender

³³⁵ Ibid., 27.

³³⁶ Farley, *Just Love*, 190.

³³⁷ See *ibid.*

³³⁸ Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, “Considerations,” no. 11.

³³⁹ By way of example, the *CDF* affirms that “experience teaches us that love must find its safeguard in the stability of marriage, if sexual intercourse is truly to respond to the requirements of its own finality and to those of human dignity.” (Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, “Persona Humana,” no. 7.) In this regard, it would be important to know what hermeneutic criteria were used to reach such an affirmation. I wonder whether this conclusion is grounded in data from experience, or whether it is just a reference to a certain group of people already formed in a specific moral understanding of sexuality.

theory,³⁴⁰ affirms that “if more people had been included in the dialogue, the congregation would probably find room for the now commonly held understanding that sexuality is not chosen by a person but is rather part of the way that they are created.”³⁴¹ Indeed, besides listening to the people, the data taken from the experience to which the Magisterium is referring need to be interpreted. Some questions are important to pose in this regard: What kind of people did the Magisterium rely on to affirm that? Are they people who have grown up convinced that their way of loving is intrinsically disordered? Are they able to assume stable and lasting relationships? Does the imagination of a young Catholic, educated according to the official doctrine regarding homosexuality, offer him/her the possibility of living in a free and lasting same-sex relationship?

As I have already said, according to Aquinas, “the more we descend to matters of detail, the more frequently we encounter defects.”³⁴² That is to say, the more we pay attention to the experience of people, the more the Magisterium listens to the voices of people—especially those who are at the margins of the community—the more the analysis of reality and the consequent teaching need to become complex. In this regard, Pope Francis recognized that “only in narrative form do you discern, not in a philosophical or theological explanation, which allows you rather to discuss.”³⁴³ In the same way, Julio Martínez points out that “without traditions, communities and narratives that shape us as the people we are, any moral project is impossible.”³⁴⁴ Therefore, Martínez considers that in forming a moral teaching is important to listen to people’s stories. Indeed, a narrative and contextual ethic, although less clear than a

³⁴⁰ Congregation for Catholic Education, “Male and Female He Created Them: Towards a Path of Dialogue of Gender Theory in Education,” February 2, 2019, The Holy See, <http://www.vatican.va/>.

³⁴¹ James Martin, “Listen to the L.G.B.T. Person: A Response to the Vatican’s Gender Theory Document,” *America Magazine*, last modified June 11, 2019, <https://www.americamagazine.org/>.

³⁴² *ST I-II*, q. 94, a. 4.

³⁴³ Francis, “A Big Heart Open to God.”

³⁴⁴ “Sin tradiciones, comunidades y narraciones que nos conforman como las personas que somos, es imposible cualquier proyecto moral.” Martínez, “Discernimiento y Moral,” 389.

normative ethic, “is richer in life and moral substance”³⁴⁵ because it takes real life into account, overcoming the fragmentation to which an abstract ethics of principles can lead.

Cristina Traina points out that dialogue that includes the voices of gay and lesbian persons “is crucial to the evaluation of the version of ontological, procreative gender complementarity that undergirds all contemporary Roman Catholic ecclesiastical teachings on homosexuality.”³⁴⁶ Likewise, Margaret Farley observes that “without grounds in Scripture, tradition, or any discipline of human knowledge for an absolute prohibition of same-sex relationships, the witness of experience is enough to demand of the Christian community that it reflect anew on the norms for homosexual love.”³⁴⁷ In order to listen to such witnesses, in the next section, I will present some stories of gay and lesbian Catholic persons. Recognizing complexity and diversity of human experience, these narratives cannot, and are not intended to, portray the full breadth of this issue. Certainly, they do not embody the voice of all gay and lesbian Catholics, but they do seem to be representative of the situation experienced by many gay Catholics in a variety of places.

2.4. Listening to the experience of gay and lesbian persons

The stories I will present are essentially based on two main sources. First, I will examine testimonies of Patrick Gothman published in 2018 in *America Magazine*³⁴⁸ and in his own blog about “LGBTQ stories of faith lost and found” in 2017.³⁴⁹ Second, I will refer to an article published in 2010 on the website of the Portuguese newspaper *Público*, with testimonies of gay

³⁴⁵ “És más rica en vida y en sustancia moral.” Ibid., 390.

³⁴⁶ Cristina L. H. Traina, “Papal Ideals, Marital Realities: One View from the Ground,” in *Sexual Diversity and Catholicism: Toward the Development of Moral Theology*, eds. Patricia B. Jung and Joseph A. Coray (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 271.

³⁴⁷ Farley, *Just Love*, 288.

³⁴⁸ See Patrick Gothman, “I Am Gay and Catholic: Are You Willing to Walk in My Shoes?,” *America Magazine*, last modified October 11, 2018, <https://www.americamagazine.org/>.

³⁴⁹ See Patrick Gothman, “I Thought Gay Celibacy Was My Only Option: I Was Wrong,” *Reaching Out - LGBTQ Stories of Faith Lost & Found*, last modified November 22, 2017, <https://medium.com/reaching-out/>.

and lesbian Catholics in Portugal.³⁵⁰ Although ten years have passed since the article was published, and the understanding of same-sex relations has changed a lot in the Portuguese civil society, it seems to me that regarding the topic of ‘Catholicism and homosexuality,’ the report remains timely.

Patrick Gothman was raised Catholic in a traditional family and, although he was not a fervent Catholic as a teenager, he had a strong experience of conversion at the age of seventeen, after his first same-sex experience. As himself sustains, he is a deeply Catholic man who cannot conceive as himself outside of the Church. Indeed, he believes and agrees with the importance of Tradition, of knowing that “life is about more than just you,”³⁵¹ and “there is more to existence than your own experience of it.” He acknowledges that human purpose is wider than our own imaginings of it. As Gothman affirms, for ten years he did “everything there was to be a good Catholic. Or at least a passable one. A Catholic who was irrevocably gay but desperate to avoid hell.” For this purpose, he tried to become a priest, he tried to live a celibate, single life, and he tried to join a religious order. However, he considers that each attempt “led me farther from reality, farther into a twisted and masked version of myself.” Patrick confesses that he was taught (and convinced) that he only could be happy as a celibate man because he “was incapable of romantic love.” He was told that he was incapable of falling in love, of building a life together with someone else, and even that a same-sex relationship prevent the partners, even when believers, from challenging each other in ways that would bring them both closer to God. Indeed, those instincts, emotions, and desires that were within him “just as intensely as anyone else” were labeled as “intrinsically disordered,” and a “most unnatural and abominable thing,... a threat to everyone else’s love” from which the Church needed to save society, because such emotions and desires were “self-destructive, not self-giving.”

³⁵⁰ See Alexandra Lucas Coelho, “Eles São Católicos, Homossexuais e Praticam,” *PÚBLICO*, last modified April 12, 2010, <https://www.publico.pt/>.

³⁵¹ All the quotes in this paragraph are from Gothman, “I Thought Gay Celibacy Was My Only Option.”

In the *America* story, Gothman shares some questions that he once presented to God in his prayer: “how is that I am only capable of being alone? A woman could never love me. Not the real me. And I am not allowed to love a man. Because it is disordered. As I am—intrinsically. How is that made in your image?... How am I supposed to survive life if I am incapable of love?”³⁵² Indeed, he continues, “I have often been told that my sexuality is worth the pain, for in its repression it can purchase paradise. A straight afterlife awaits me if only I would act the part in this one.”

After spending a decade trying to position himself in the one place the Church would approve him, and of resisting deep contact with his own emotions and experience because they were considered too subjective, Patrick found himself “closer and closer to a hatred of self and hopelessness for any future,”³⁵³ and at certain moments found himself preferring death to continuing to live. As he confessed to *America Magazine*, he was afraid of being rejected by his community, if he changed the role of “Mr. Pious-Church-Guy” he used to play in his community. “Sometimes I wonder if I’m faithful or just terrified of what I would lose if I followed my conscience,”³⁵⁴ Gothman once said to a priest. Finally, he decided to study deeply the Scriptures, the Tradition, and the current teaching of the Church. It was there, after all his experiences of running away from himself, that he realized how he was convinced of his inability to love and form a partnership, as a result of taking seriously the official Church’s teaching on same-sex relations. At the same time, he realized “how deep that wound cuts your soul and affects every corner of your life.”³⁵⁵

At that moment, he finally agreed to face reality. Unlike most people in his situation, Gothman chose not to leave the community but to embrace it and to tell his personal story so that the Church—his peers and the Magisterium—would not continue to treat him like an

³⁵² All the quotes in this paragraph are from Gothman, “I Am Gay and Catholic.”

³⁵³ Gothman, “I Thought Gay Celibacy Was My Only Option.”

³⁵⁴ Gothman, “I Am Gay and Catholic.”

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

abstraction. He contends that knowing him, “you would have the opportunity to care about my struggles and sit with me in my pain.”³⁵⁶ Gothman invites the Church to listen to the stories of gay Catholic people “that have taken its [Church’s] prescriptions about our homosexuality seriously,”³⁵⁷ and evaluate these lives by the fruits of their actions, by looking at their lives as a whole (and not only at their sexual practices). Indeed, he explains that “most Catholics I know will admit there’s some kind of gap between all that intrinsically disordered business and what they see in their gay friends and family members. Their children are not the monsters they have been told they are.”³⁵⁸ Thus, he concludes, “you might even hear me tell my story and see it is not an attack on the church but as a deeper embrace of her.”³⁵⁹

The author of “They Are Catholic, Homosexual and They Practice,”³⁶⁰ the article published ten years ago in Portugal, spoke with several Catholic people who identify themselves as homosexuals. I do not intend to tell all these stories, but only to underline some comments made by those interviewed about their own experience, and particularly the difficulties they encounter in being gay and Catholic. Significantly, the author of the article notes that although at the time it was not difficult to find gay Catholics willing to share their lives, many asked for anonymity, and very few permitted themselves to be photographed.

P.—this is how one of the interviewees presents himself—affirms that he was “a fervent Catholic fighting against his own homosexuality,”³⁶¹ and so his same-sex experiences had been lived “with a great sense of guilt.”³⁶² He used to have one-night stand encounters and then would go several days without sleeping, after which he would go to confession and swear that he would never do it again. He would do that “until the next explosion”³⁶³ occurred. He also

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

³⁵⁷ Gothman, “I Thought Gay Celibacy Was My Only Option.”

³⁵⁸ Ibid.

³⁵⁹ Gothman, “I Am Gay and Catholic.”

³⁶⁰ “Eles são Homossexuais, Católicos e Praticam.” Coelho, “Católicos, Homossexuais e Praticam.”

³⁶¹ “Um católico fervoroso a lutar contra a homossexualidade.” Ibid.

³⁶² “Com grande sentimento de culpa.” Ibid.

³⁶³ “Até nova explosão.” Ibid.

had a girlfriend, “in a final effort to be straight,”³⁶⁴ but only after he broke up with her did he start talking about the issue. When P. met another man who was also gay and Catholic, “a love with a person of the same sex began to become possible.”³⁶⁵ This experience ended badly, leading him into a deep depression. So, P. went through psychotherapy, which helped him accept reality. He describes it as “a gloomy process of brutal violence towards ourselves. We have spent almost half of our lives repressing our own identity and panicking that someone will find it out.”³⁶⁶ During that time, he met a priest who told him that “when you are well, go to the United States to treat your homosexuality and then you bring the treatment to Portugal,” because, according to that priest, “you know that homosexuals do not enter the Kingdom of Heaven.”³⁶⁷

P. also emphasizes that there are many Catholics who are also ‘homosexuals.’ Speaking about some common traits among them, P. affirms: “we all have experiences and sufferings that are connected. There is always a history of repression, a conflict born of guilt and sin, an attempt to be something else.”³⁶⁸ He urges the Church to “return to her origins, to the person of Jesus Christ... to stop being a Church of morality to become a Church of love.”³⁶⁹ P. considers that the Catholic Church “by clinging to the superfluous and not the essential, cannot help the human being,”³⁷⁰ because she is more concerned with the norm rather than with persons. P. asserts that “Jesus looked at each one as a path to be built, and so, perfection lies in love and not in morality. Perfection does not correspond to the heterosexual family with children. When

³⁶⁴ “Num esforço derradeiro para ser heterossexual.” Ibid.

³⁶⁵ “Um amor com uma pessoa do mesmo sexo começou a tornar-se possível.” Ibid.

³⁶⁶ “É um processo tenebroso. De uma violência brutal para conosco próprios. Estamos quase metade da vida a reprimir a identidade e com pânico de que se saiba.” Ibid.

³⁶⁷ “Quando estiveres bem, vais para os Estados Unidos, tratas a homossexualidade e depois trazes o tratamento para cá.” “Sabes que os homossexuais não entram no Reino dos Céus.” Both quotes in this sentence are from *ibid.*

³⁶⁸ “Todos temos vivências e sofrimentos que se tocam. Há uma história de repressão, um conflito de culpa e pecado, uma tentativa de ser outra coisa.” Ibid.

³⁶⁹ “Voltar às suas origens, à pessoa de Jesus Cristo... deixar de ser a Igreja da moral para ser a Igreja do amor.” Ibid.

³⁷⁰ “Que está agarrada ao supérfluo e não ao essencial não pode ajudar o ser humano.” Ibid.

there is love, both a straight relationship and a same-sex relationship are good.”³⁷¹ P. considers to have become more and more centered on and united to the person of Christ since he began to accept his sexual orientation. P. knows many other Christians who, like him, are struggling to discern the truth about themselves, as people capable of loving. “The opposite of this,” he says, “is repression, concealment, which should make the Church reflect.... Repression leads to sickness.”³⁷²

Another of the interviewees goes by the name of A. He also comes from a Catholic family—his brother is a priest—and he had to fight hard to accept his sexual orientation. As he states, “if we had a choice, most of us probably would not feel grateful being gay. Only after we have worked hard to reconcile with ourselves, can we thank God because we are like that.”³⁷³ In the article, A. expresses his desire to arrive at the point of appreciating being gay; however, at the time of the interview, he recognized that he had already begun to like himself more than before. A. affirms that he believes in one God that loves abundantly, not in one God who mocks people. That image of God helped him to reconcile himself with his reality, “which is neither a merit nor a defect.”³⁷⁴ However, A. acknowledges that “even today” the idea of accepting his homosexuality “makes me tremble; I have chills. It is a painful discovery that goes against the stereotypes that we have, and perhaps what we wish we had.”³⁷⁵ A. also shared that when he came out to his brother who is a priest, the answer was: “so, you have to be consistent, you

³⁷¹ “Jesus olhou para cada um como um caminho a ser construído. A perfeição está no amor e não na moral. A perfeição não é uma família heterossexual com filhos. Quando há amor, uma relação hetero é boa e uma relação homo é boa.” Ibid.

³⁷² “O oposto disto... é a repressão, o encobrimento, o que deveria fazer a Igreja pensar.... A repressão leva à doença.” Ibid.

³⁷³ “Se pudéssemos escolher, a maioria de nós provavelmente não agradeceria ser homossexual. Só depois de termos feito muitas pazes é que podemos agradecer a Deus sermos assim.” Ibid.

³⁷⁴ “Que não é qualidade nem defeito.” Ibid.

³⁷⁵ “Ainda hoje isto me faz tremer, tenho calafrios, é uma descoberta sofrida que vai contra os estereótipos que temos, aquilo que desejávamos ter, se calhar.” Ibid.

cannot receive communion.”³⁷⁶ To conclude, A. points out that “the Church sometimes sins by omission, because of her effort to be so cautious.”³⁷⁷

Ana Oliveira is one of the few women who were interviewed in this article. At that time, she was 36 years old, and she went to Mass, she was a catechist, and she belonged to a prayer group. She converted around eighteen—through an experience of social service—although she was baptized as a child and raised in a family of ‘non-practicing’ Catholics. She affirms that “the discovery of faith made me look at myself more truthfully, and it opened up the possibility of verbalizing for myself that I had fallen in love with another girl. It was my faith that led to that.”³⁷⁸ This happened at a retreat in the ecumenical community of Taizé (France) and, at that moment, Ana felt very welcomed by the priest with whom she came out.

After some time away from the Church, while living a five-year relationship with another woman, Ana returned to Taizé. At that time, she had a strong experience of God, and so she decided to re-approach the Church. In Portugal, she has been accompanied by a nun who helped her to integrate her relationship with her life of faith. As Ana affirms, “for me, it is absurd to think that to be a Christian I have to give up sexuality. That is why I think the Church has no solution for us.”³⁷⁹ As she goes on, “being homosexual is already difficult in social integration. It is not fair that a Catholic person lacks the support of the Church.”³⁸⁰ Ana claims for a different doctrine on sexuality, and she feels that the same tension is experienced by those people in the hierarchy who are close to homosexual people.

Frederico Lourenço is a well-known Catholic professor in Portugal, and publicly came out some years before the interview. His testimony is one of great honesty. He considers that “the

³⁷⁶ “Então tens de ser coerente, não podes comungar.” Ibid.

³⁷⁷ “A igreja às vezes peca por omissão, de tão cautelosa que quer ser.” Ibid.

³⁷⁸ “A descoberta da fé fez-me procurar o mais verdadeiro em mim, e foi o que abriu a porta para verbalizar para mim própria que me tinha apaixonado por outra rapariga. Foi a fé que levou a isso.” Ibid.

³⁷⁹ “É um absurdo pensar que para viver a fé tenho de desistir da sexualidade. É por isso que acho que a Igreja não tem solução para nós.” Ibid.

³⁸⁰ “Ser homossexual já é difícil na integração social. Não é justo que a um católico falte também o apoio da Igreja.” Ibid.

Church has no answer”³⁸¹ to the issue of same-sex relationships. He confesses that he never heard an answer other than that “optimistic invitation to chastity.”³⁸² Although he still believes in God, and prays almost every day and, whenever he can, enters a church, Frederico has abandoned the public and communal practice of Catholicism. He thinks that it would be “a lie, because my sexual life does not correspond to the character [of a chaste man].”³⁸³ At the time of the article, he indicated that he had stopped receiving communion in 1998, because he did not want to live what he considers to be a contradiction. And he concludes: “if I cannot be accepted exactly as I am, then there is no point in playing a role [within the Church].”³⁸⁴

2.5. How the hierarchy is learning to listen to gay and lesbian persons

In response to Francis’ call to a merciful church, many members of the hierarchy seem to have been listening to the voices of gay and lesbian people in their communities. In this section I would like to mention a couple of cases.

First, I allude to Pope Francis and the famous question he raised in the press conference during the flight back from Brazil in 2013. As a good Jesuit, Francis answered one question about the supposed ‘lobby gay’ among clergy with another question: “If someone is gay and is searching for the Lord and has good will, then who am I to judge him?”³⁸⁵ In the same answer, Francis distinguished “between the fact of a person being gay and the fact of someone forming a lobby, because not all lobbies are good. This one is not good,”³⁸⁶ he affirmed. While it is obvious that an interview does not constitute official papal teaching, the fact that the Holy Father pronounces the word ‘gay’ and recognizes that a gay man can seek the Lord and be a

³⁸¹ “A Igreja não tem resposta.” Ibid.

³⁸² “Esse convite otimista à castidade.” Ibid.

³⁸³ “Uma mentira, porque a minha vida sexual não corresponde a essa personagem.” Ibid.

³⁸⁴ “Se não posso ser aceite exactamente como sou, então não faz sentido estar a representar um papel.”

Ibid.

³⁸⁵ Francis, “Press Conference of the Holy Father During the Flight Back from Brazil,” July 28, 2013, The Holy See, <http://www.vatican.va/>.

³⁸⁶ Ibid.

person of good will clearly represents a change in the tone of the papacy's approach to this issue. The Pope does not use the terms 'inclination' or 'tendency' but recognizes that some persons can simply *be* gay. As Brian Massingale highlights, with this statement Francis "acknowledges that as a sexual being, gay people can and do have vital relationships with God."³⁸⁷

Second, I refer to the discussion that took place during the two sessions of the Synod on the Family in 2014 and 2015, as well as the final report of the Synod on Youth in 2018. Even if the Final Report both of 2014 and 2015 and *Amoris Laetitia* add nothing new to the Magisterial vision of homosexuality, the *Relatio Post Disceptationem*, issued by the General Rapporteur, Cardinal Péter Erdő, shows the tone in which the topic of same-sex relations had been discussed over the synod. Indeed, this document recognized that "homosexuals have gifts and qualities to offer to the Christian community... [and] often they wish to encounter a Church that offers them a welcoming home."³⁸⁸ The bishops seemed to be concerned also with the need for "a serious reflection on how to elaborate realistic paths of affective growth and human and evangelical maturity integrating the sexual dimension."³⁸⁹ Furthermore, "without denying the moral problems connected to homosexual unions," the bishops recognized that "there are cases in which mutual aid to the point of sacrifice constitutes a precious support in the life of the [same-sex] partners."³⁹⁰ They also addressed the issue of children of same-sex couples, pointing out that "the needs and rights of the little ones must always be given priority."³⁹¹ Although these statements did not receive the two-thirds vote of the synodal assembly to be included in the

³⁸⁷ Brian N. Massingale, "Beyond 'Who Am I to Judge?': The Sensus Fidelium, LGBT Experience, and Truth-Telling in the Church," in *Learning from All the Faithful: A Contemporary Theology of the Sensus Fidei*, eds. Bradford E. Hinze and Peter C. Phan (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016), 174.

³⁸⁸ Synod of the Bishops, "'Relatio Post Disceptationem' del Relatore Generale, Card. Péter Erdő," October 13, 2014, <https://press.vatican.va/>, no.50. Given that there is not an official English translation available, I used the translation available on <https://zenit.org/articles/synod14-full-text-of-relatio-post-disceptationem/>.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 51.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, no. 52.

final document, through this report we know that the issue has been discussed, and many bishops seem to be taking a more open position on same-sex relationships.

As I mentioned before, the Final Report of the Synod on Youth also referred to same-sex issues. Firstly, by listening to the youth, the bishops acknowledged that “sexual morality gives rise to incomprehension and distancing from the Church, inasmuch as she is perceived as a place of judgment and condemnation.”³⁹² The Bishops also refer to the preoccupation among young Catholics about homosexuality.³⁹³ These statements were later included in the Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit* issued by Francis after the Synod.³⁹⁴

However, in this document, the Pope did not refer to the claim made by the bishops regarding some “questions about the body, affectivity and sexuality that require deeper anthropological, theological and pastoral study, in whatever forms and at whatever level seems most appropriate, from local to universal,”³⁹⁵ including sexual orientation. Although it has not been included by Francis in *Christus Vivit*, the Synod also recommends that the journeys of accompaniment in faith for homosexual persons are to be supported. The Bishops affirmed that

in these journeys, people are helped to read their own history; to adhere with freedom and responsibility to their baptismal calling; to recognize the desire to belong and contribute to the life of the community; to discern the best ways of realizing this. Thus, all young people, without exception, are helped to integrate the sexual dimension of their personality more and more fully, as they grow in the quality of their relationships and move towards the gift of self.³⁹⁶

Another case of a change of tone regarding the hierarchical treatment of same-sex relations is offered to us by Carlo Redaelli, Archbishop of Gorizia, a diocese in northeast Italy, on the border with Slovenia. In June of 2017, in Staranzano, a small town of the diocese, a male scout leader of a Catholic association married another man. The parish priest openly criticized this

³⁹² Synod of Bishops, “Final Document Synod on Youth,” no. 39.

³⁹³ See *ibid.*

³⁹⁴ Francis, “Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation to Young People and to the Entire People of God ‘Christus Vivit,’” March 25, 2019, The Holy See, <http://www.vatican.va/>, no. 82.

³⁹⁵ Synod of Bishops, “Final Document Synod on Youth,” no. 150.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

choice and declared that the scout leader no longer met the conditions to play his role as an educator in a Catholic scouts association.³⁹⁷ In this regard, the Archbishop of Gorizia offered some insights “from the point of view of pastoral discernment”³⁹⁸ both to the diocesan presbyteral council and to the diocesan pastoral council inviting the diocesan community to a prayerful reflection.

Based on the episode of the Council of Jerusalem portrayed in Acts 15, Redaelli points out that, to solve the problem of coexistence between Christians and pagans, the disciples “did not rely on Scripture or on a canonical tradition, of which there was a first embryo, but they have relied, first of all, on concrete experience within the grace of the Holy Spirit.”³⁹⁹ Referring also to the teaching of Carlo Maria Martini, the bishop of Gorizia invites his diocese to look at people’s experience in order to grasp “the aspects of grace present in every event.”⁴⁰⁰ Then he proposes to confront that situation with Church’s teaching “seeing how each new reality challenges faith.”⁴⁰¹ Finally, this process must lead to “a practical solution that takes into account the fundamental truths, respects the path of each one, and brings to maturity a real communion, overcoming the tensions and contrasts often emphasized by passions and emotions.”⁴⁰² Redaelli, by affirming that “discernment is becoming more and more the fundamental form of pastoral action,”⁴⁰³ invites those charged with pastoral care in the church to accept, to accompany, and, without ever replacing one’s conscience, or failing to propose the Gospel, to try to understand the persons—even if one does not accept the behavior of those

³⁹⁷ For more details on the case see Luciano Moia, “Il Caso Staranzano. Il Capo Scout: Sono Gay. La Comunità Si Interroga,” *Avvenire* (Milano, December 7, 2017), <https://www.avvenire.it/>.

³⁹⁸ “Dal punto di vista del discernimento pastorale.” Carlo Maria Redaelli, “Discorso al Consiglio Presbiterale e al Consiglio Pastorale Diocesano,” June 22, 2017, <http://www.settimananews.it/>.

³⁹⁹ “Non si fa ricorso alle Scritture o a una tradizione canonica, di cui c’era un primo embrione, ma si fa ricorso, anzitutto, alla riflessione sul vissuto nella grazia dello Spirito Santo.” *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁰ “Gli aspetti di grazia in ogni avvenimento.” *Ibid.*

⁴⁰¹ “Vedendo poi come ogni nuova realtà interpella la fede.” *Ibid.*

⁴⁰² “Soluzione pratica che tenga conto delle verità fondamentali, rispetti il cammino di ciascuno e faccia maturare una reale comunione, superando tensioni e contrasti, spesso enfatizzati dalla passione e dall’emozione.” *Ibid.*

⁴⁰³ “Il discernimento stia diventando sempre più la cifra fondamentale dell’agire pastorale.” *Ibid.*

persons. The bishop of Gorizia wants to foster in the people of his diocese the desire that “each person—especially the youth—may find in the fullness of the Gospel message the fulfillment of that desire for love that the fact of being the image and likeness of the loving God has placed in our hearts.”⁴⁰⁴ By referring to *Amoris Laetitia*, he also recalls that no one is obliged to seek an abstract perfection, but rather the best possible way forward in the concreteness of their situation.

Furthermore, Redaelli invites both lay people and clergy to an attitude of humility concerning the mystery of human sexuality, especially “when faced with new and complex questions, in regard to which ecclesial reflection is still at an early stage, or in any case not yet completely mature, where opinions are not in agreement, or pastoral practices are not yet well defined.”⁴⁰⁵ Finally, the bishop calls for a deeply spiritual and communitarian approach to the issue, inviting the people, groups and parishes involved in the case to “an attitude of openness towards one another, which starts from the presupposition of mutual good faith, finds opportunities for calm and sincere dialogue, has the patience to listen, and reaffirms that communion which remains true even in the presence of different sensibilities and emphases.”⁴⁰⁶

This case constitutes, according to what we will see later, an application of the ecclesial model that Pope Francis desires for the Church, as he explains in *Amoris Laetitia*. Faced with a new situation, and knowing that doctrine is not a monolithic bloc to use as a weapon against others, this bishop invites the parties involved to listen to the Spirit and to the Tradition, to meet, to listen to each other, and to dialogue, in order to arrive at a decision regarding the concrete situation that fosters communion and holiness.

⁴⁰⁴ “Che ogni persona—in particolare i giovani—possa trovare nella pienezza della proposta evangelica il compimento di quel desiderio di amore che l’essere immagine e somiglianza del Dio amore ha collocato nei nostri cuori.” Ibid.

⁴⁰⁵ “Quando si è di fronte a questioni nuove e complesse circa le quali la riflessione ecclesiale è ancora iniziale o comunque non del tutto matura, i pareri non sono concordi, le prassi pastorali non ancora ben definite.” Ibid.

⁴⁰⁶ “Atteggiamento di disponibilità gli uni verso gli altri, che parta dal presupposto della buona fede reciproca, trovi occasione di dialogo pacato e sincero, abbia la pazienza dell’ascolto, riannodi una comunione che resta vera anche in presenza di diverse sensibilità e accentuazioni.” Ibid.

From Germany there are also some signs of hope. The German Episcopal Conference addressed the question of homosexuality in a press release issued in December 2019⁴⁰⁷ that was a result of an expert consultation which included physicians with expertise in sexuality, moral and systematic theologians, and canon lawyers on the topic of “The Sexuality of Man: How should one discuss it scientifically-theologically and judge it ecclesiastically?” This report is part of the preparation of the Synod on “Life in Successful Relationships: Living Love in Sexuality and Partnership,” held in February 2020. In a statement released by the Bishop’s Conference, Berlin’s Archbishop Heiner Koch, chairman of the Family Commission, emphasized that there was consensus among the experts’ commission on the question that human sexuality comprises dimensions of desire, reproduction and relationship. There was also consensus about considering homosexuality as a “‘normal form’ of human sexual identity.” Koch also asserted that “the sexual preference of human being expresses itself in puberty and assumes a hetero or homosexual orientation... [and] both belong to the normal forms of sexual predisposition, which cannot or should be changed with the help of a specific socialization.”⁴⁰⁸

2.6. How *seeds of truth* in same-sex relationships are emerging from listening to human experience

As I have already said, the *Catechism* states that relationships of a romantic nature between persons of the same sex “do not proceed from a *genuine* [*vera*] affective and sexual complementarity.”⁴⁰⁹ In this section, I would like to investigate whether in same-sex relationships, which include some kind of erotic expression, we can find seeds of Christian love, manifested in marital relationships.

⁴⁰⁷ Deutsche Bischofskonferenz, “Fachkonsultation ‘Die Sexualität des Menschen,’” *Deutsche Bischofskonferenz*, last modified December 5, 2019, <https://www.dbk.de/>.

⁴⁰⁸ All the quotes in this paragraph are from J. D. Flynn, “German Bishops Commit to ‘Newly Assessing’ Catholic Doctrine on Homosexuality and Sexual Morality,” *Catholic News Agency*, last modified December 12, 2019, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/>.

⁴⁰⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2357. Emphasis added. It is important to note that the original latin version does not speak in terms of ‘genuineness’ but of ‘truth:’ “e *vera* complementaritate affectiva et sexuali non procedunt.”

First of all, I refer to what I explained earlier about moral truth. Along the lines proposed by Lonergan, I also consider that the truth of human existence does not correspond to a pre-established abstract concept but is the conscious and personal tendency towards being more human, in the light of the person of Christ. In accord with Theobald, I conceive of truth as a dialogical reality, which takes into consideration the concreteness of existence, and corresponds to the possibility of flourishing according to Christ's style of life. In the same vein as Francis, I consider truth as a path, as the work of an entire life, and that the great criterion of truth is the person of Jesus who is "the way, the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6).

Love and truth are, therefore, two intrinsically related concepts. Benedict XVI's encyclicals *Deus Caritas Est (DCE)* and *Caritas in Veritate (CV)* are paradigmatic in this respect. Alongside the abovementioned authors, in *CV* Benedict affirms that "each person finds his good by adherence to God's plan for him, in order to realize it fully: in this plan, he finds his truth, and through adherence to this truth he becomes free (cf. Jn 8:32)."⁴¹⁰ In *DCE* the German Pope refers to the classic concepts of *eros*, *philia*, and *agape* to explain the different dimensions of love.⁴¹¹ Benedict defines love as "a single reality, but with different dimensions"⁴¹² that cannot be totally cut off from one another. Indeed, he recognizes the importance of the erotic dimension of love, although he also draws attention to the necessity of renunciation and sacrifice in order to purify the *eros* from all traces of egoism or self-centeredness, and to seek increasingly the good of the beloved: in this way it becomes progressively true love.⁴¹³ Moreover, Benedict affirms that "it is characteristic of mature love that it calls into play all man's potentialities; it engages the whole man."⁴¹⁴ feelings, emotions, intellect, will, and spirit. This love is a process that is "always open-ended; love is never 'finished' and complete; throughout life, it changes

⁴¹⁰ Benedict XVI, "Caritas in Veritate," no. 1.

⁴¹¹ See Benedict XVI, "Encyclical Letter on Christian Love 'Deus Caritas Est,'" December 25, 2005, The Holy See, <http://www.vatican.va/>, no. 3.

⁴¹² Ibid.

⁴¹³ See *ibid.*, no. 8.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 17.

and matures, and thus remains faithful to itself.”⁴¹⁵ Indeed, the love between humans mirrors the relationship of love between God and human persons.

Similarly, in *Caritas in Veritate* Benedict states that only when connected with truth can charity “be recognized as an authentic expression of humanity and as an element of fundamental importance in human relations.”⁴¹⁶ Indeed,

all people feel the interior impulse to love authentically: love and truth never abandon them completely, because these are the vocation planted by God in the heart and mind of every human person. The search for love and truth is purified and liberated by Jesus Christ from the impoverishment that our humanity brings to it, and he reveals to us in all its fullness the initiative of love and the plan for true life that God has prepared for us. In Christ, *charity in truth* becomes the Face of his Person, a vocation for us to love our brothers and sisters in the truth of his plan. Indeed, he himself is the Truth (cf. Jn 14:6).⁴¹⁷

In view of the above, I can now pose the question that serves as the motto for this work: just as outside the Catholic Church there are *seeds of the Word*,⁴¹⁸ can we also find in same-sex erotic relationships seeds of the true Christian love revealed in Jesus Christ and, consequently, seeds of Catholic marriage?

Walter Kasper reminds us that, according to what is established in *Amoris Laetitia*,⁴¹⁹ there is no doubt that “unions between homosexual persons do not correspond to the Christian conception of marriage,”⁴²⁰ just as civil unions or the unions of remarried people do not. Nevertheless, the German theologian acknowledges “some of these partners can partially and

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

⁴¹⁶ Benedict XVI, “Caritas in Veritate,” no. 3.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., no. 1.

⁴¹⁸ The concept of *seeds of the Word* or *logos spermatikos* was coined by Justin the Martyr in his *Apologies*, and it was developed in Patristic time. Some documents of the Second Vatican Council, particularly those concerned with Interreligious Dialogue and Ecumenism, refer to this concept by affirming that there are many seeds of the Truth in other religions. In *Nostra Aetate* the Council declares that “the Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence... [that] often [they] *reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.*” Second Vatican Council, “Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions ‘Nostra Aetate,’” October 28, 1965, The Holy See, <http://www.vatican.va/>, no. 2 (emphasis added). Similarly, in *Lumen Gentium* the Council recognizes that “whatever good or truth is found amongst them [the other religions] is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel.” Second Vatican Council, “Lumen Gentium,” no. 16. Furthermore, in *Ad Gentes* the Church invites all the Christians to bear testimony of their baptism in order to lay bare the *seeds of the Word* which lie hidden among their fellows.” Second Vatican Council, “Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church ‘Ad Gentes,’” December 7, 1965, The Holy See, <http://www.vatican.va/>, no. 11 (emphasis added).

⁴¹⁹ Francis, “Amoris Laetitia,” nos. 250-251.

⁴²⁰ “Unioni tra persone omosessuali non corrispondono alla concezione cristiana del matrimonio.” Kasper, *Il Messaggio di Amoris Laetitia*, 56.

similarly realize some elements of a Christian marriage.”⁴²¹ Indeed, “just as outside the Catholic church there are elements of the true church, in the unions mentioned above there may be elements of Christian marriage, even if they do not fully or not yet fully realize the ideal.”⁴²² The author goes on to affirm that although such relationships “cannot be equated with sacramental marriage, they cannot be condemned as a whole; they must be considered in an objective and just way for what is positive about them and in order invite these partners to take possible steps towards the full realization of the ideal.”⁴²³ Thus, in the wake of *AL*,⁴²⁴ Kasper urges an integration of these persons into the Church’s communion. Jean-Miguel Garrigues also acknowledges that the fact that someone lives in an “imperfect” matrimonial union does not prevent this person from walking in the way of salvation. Indeed, the author underlines that “even if people do not sanctify themselves *through* these unions, they can nevertheless sanctify themselves *in* these unions for all that in them leads to charity through mutual help and friendship.”⁴²⁵ This author also notes that “all those who have met... homosexual couples have often seen [in them] a disposition, sometimes heroic, for example in case of physical or moral adversities.”⁴²⁶ Thus, he asks “how denying all this can make our certainties and our testimony to the truth to be stronger?”⁴²⁷ Indeed, the arguments presented and the experience of real people

⁴²¹ “Alcuni di questi partner posso realizzare in modo parziale e analogo alcuni elementi di un matrimonio cristiano.” Ibid.

⁴²² “Come al di fuori della chiesa cattolica ci sono elementi della vera chiesa, nelle citate unioni possono essere presenti elementi del matrimonio cristiano, anche se non realizzano pienamente o non ancora pienamente l’ideale.” Ibid., 57.

⁴²³ “Sebbene non si possano equiparare le citate situazioni irregolari al matrimonio sacramentale, non le si può tuttavia condannare globalmente; le si deve considerare in un modo oggettivo e giusto per quello che in esse c’è di positivo e invitare questi partner a compiere eventuali passi verso la piena realizzazione dell’ideale.” Ibid.

⁴²⁴ “No one can be condemned forever, because that is not the logic of the Gospel! Here I am not speaking only of the divorced and remarried, but of everyone, in whatever situation they find themselves. Francis, “Amoris Laetitia,” no. 297.

⁴²⁵ “Se le persone non si santificano *mediante* questi unioni di fatto, possono comunque farlo *in* queste unioni per tutto ciò che in esse dispone alla carità attraverso l’aiuto reciproco e l’amicizia.” Antonio Spadaro, “Chiesa di Puri’ o ‘Nassa Composita’? Intervista a Jean-Miguel Garrigues O.P.,” *La Civiltà Cattolica*, no. 3959 (2015): 504.

⁴²⁶ “Tutti coloro che hanno frequentato... coppie omosessuali hanno potuto spesso constatare questa disposizione talvolta eroica, per esempio in caso di prove fisiche o morali.” Ibid.

⁴²⁷ “In che cosa il negare tutto questo rende più forti le nostre certezze e la nostra testimonianza alla verità?” Ibid.

seem to contradict the assertion that same-sex relationships, with sexual expression, are not truly human.

Francis underlines that the Church “does not disregard the constructive elements in those situations which do not yet or no longer correspond to her teaching on marriage,”⁴²⁸ and wants to show respect “for [all] those signs of love which in some way reflect God’s own love.”⁴²⁹ Therefore, as Kasper points out, all heterosexual or same-sex unions with lasting relationships and signed by “mutual affection and a bond of fidelity, responsibility and mutual care such as the care and education of children,”⁴³⁰ are relationships in which there are seeds of the truth of Christian marriage.

Similarly, years ago Kosnik and other authors presented some values that “are conducive to creative growth and integration of the human person,”⁴³¹ that “must be enlightened and permeated by... the Gospel law of love... in the light of the life of the Lord.”⁴³² According to them, sexual behavior must be self-liberating and other-enriching by manifesting the fulfilment and flourishing of both partners. It must be honest, manifesting “as truthfully as possible the depth of the relationship that exists between people.”⁴³³ It must be marked by fidelity that facilitates stability in the relationships. It must be socially responsible, by reflecting the responsibility of the individuals to the common good. Finally, sexual relationships must be life-serving in “creative and integrative”⁴³⁴ ways and joyous, encouraging the importance of pleasure and gratification, without feelings of guilt. On the contrary, these authors point out that all sexual behavior that is “frustrating and self-destructive, manipulative of enslaving of others, deceitful and dishonest, inconsistent and unstable, indiscriminate and promiscuous,

⁴²⁸ Francis, “Amoris Laetitia,” no. 292.

⁴²⁹ Ibid., no. 294.

⁴³⁰ Kasper, *Il Messaggio di Amoris Laetitia*, 57.

⁴³¹ Kosnik *et al.*, *Human Sexuality*, 92.

⁴³² Ibid., 95.

⁴³³ Ibid., 93.

⁴³⁴ Ibid., 94.

irresponsible and non-life-serving, burdensome and repugnant, ungenerous and un-Christlike”⁴³⁵ does not contribute to the creative and integrative growth of human beings.

Likewise, Margaret Farley also presents some norms (derived from the concrete reality of persons) as criteria to evaluate the quality of all types of sexual relationships and to promote just relationships. Indeed, she refers to the “clear and profound testimonies” that manifest “the intrinsic goodness of same-sex loves and same-sex relationships, . . . in sustaining human well-being and opening to human flourishing.”⁴³⁶ The norms presented by Farley are: doing no unjust harm, free consent, mutuality, equality, commitment, fruitfulness, and social justice.⁴³⁷ The author underlines the necessity of nurturing and sustaining the sexual dimension of persons, but at the same time she calls for self-control and discipline in this area. Moreover, she also highlights the importance of incorporating sexuality “into a shared life and an enduring love.”⁴³⁸ According to Farley, all just love and all true love must be fruitful at the risk of becoming an “*égoïsme à deux*.”⁴³⁹ Farley points out that “beyond the kind of fruitfulness that brings forth biological children, there is a kind of fruitfulness that is a measure, perhaps of all interpersonal love.”⁴⁴⁰ Such fruitfulness—which ideally for fertile heterosexual couples is procreation—can be manifested in many ways as openness to the community like helping to raise other people’s children, or providing in many ways for others. Furthermore, Farley recalls that every relationship between two persons is always part of a community; hence, sexual partners should “take responsibility for the consequences of their love and their sexual activity”⁴⁴¹ before others. As she affirms, “no great love is just for ‘the two of us,’ so that even failure to share in some way beyond the two of us the fruits of love may be a failure in justice.”⁴⁴² Regarding the

⁴³⁵ Ibid., 95.

⁴³⁶ All the quotes in this sentence are from: Farley, *Just Love*, 287.

⁴³⁷ See *ibid.*, 215-232.

⁴³⁸ Ibid., 225.

⁴³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid., 227.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid., 229.

⁴⁴² Ibid.

requirement of commitment and fidelity, Farley, although aware of the difficulties that contemporary experience shows, believes that “we may still hope that our freedom is sufficiently powerful to gather up our love and give it a future.”⁴⁴³ Patricia Jung and Ralph Smith also underline the importance of fidelity for every sexual relation. They consider that although we were created to love, we must learn how to love. So, fidelity and commitment—which “bears witness to the patient healing presence of God”—are fundamental regarding the pedagogy of love because “great loves do not hinge in the maintenance of romantic illusions” but instead “they become increasingly intimate and truthful.”⁴⁴⁴

At the beginning of his Pontificate, Saint John Paul II stated that “man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it.”⁴⁴⁵ Moreover, as I mentioned before, Pope Benedict XVI stressed that the erotic dimension of love cannot be detached from the other dimensions, despite the need to be constantly purified. Furthermore, Benedict affirms that “man cannot live by oblation, descending love alone. He cannot always give, he must also receive. Anyone who wishes to give love must also receive love as a gift.”⁴⁴⁶ More recently, Pope Francis underlined that the erotic dimension of love is “a gift from God” that “becomes a ‘pure, unadulterated affirmation’ revealing the marvels of which the human heart is capable.”⁴⁴⁷

Therefore, we must recognize that men and women, regardless of their sexual orientation, have in themselves this gift and desire to give and receive love, otherwise their life will be completely meaningless. For many of these people—as the truth manifested in the lives of many

⁴⁴³ Ibid., 104.

⁴⁴⁴ All the quotes in the sentence are from Patricia Beattie Jung and Ralph F. Smith, *Heterosexism: An Ethical Challenge* (New York: SUNY Press, 1993), 184.

⁴⁴⁵ John Paul II, “Encyclical Letter at the Beginning of His Papal Ministry ‘Redemptor Hominis,’” March 4, 1979, The Holy See, <http://www.vatican.va/>, no. 10.

⁴⁴⁶ Benedict XVI, “Deus Caritas Est,” no. 7.

⁴⁴⁷ All the quotes in the sentence are from Francis, “Amoris Laetitia,” no. 152.

Catholic gay and lesbian persons reveals—the experience of this love would not be true if not shared with another person in an affective relationship, with erotic expression. Indeed, in maintaining Lonergan’s concept of ‘truly human,’⁴⁴⁸ and Benedict’s affirmation that human beings find truth in the adherence to God’s plan to them,⁴⁴⁹ we must be able to recognize the truth in the sincere path of each person, in their striving to conform to the person of Jesus Christ. Thus, acknowledging that in some same-sex relationships are present some aspects of that love which characterize sacramental marriage—fidelity and commitment, some kind of fecundity, generosity, reciprocal care to the point of self-sacrifice, honesty, and responsibility for the common good—I see no reason to continue to affirm that such relationships do not proceed from a true affective and sexual complementarity. Indeed, we cannot automatically conclude on the basis of the non-fulfillment of the eventual biological purpose of the sexual organs in a certain sexual act a lack of the sincere expression of loving affectivity between the persons involved in it. Whenever a same-sex relationship is marked by sincere love between two affectively mature people, who seek in their lives—including the sexual and bodily dimension—to be a mirror of that love they have received from God, there is no reason to affirm, *a priori*, that their affection is not truly human. In fact, such a relationship or such affection may or may not be truly human, as we have seen already. In any case, the benchmark criterion cannot be drawn merely from the fulfillment of the biological purpose of the genital act, but must depend on conformation to the love of God manifested in the person of Jesus. As Gula points out, to derive moral imperatives from bodily structure and functions leads us to “exclude the totality of the person and his or her relational context in making a moral assessment.”⁴⁵⁰

When two persons in a same-sex relationship which encompasses sexual expression of their affection are able to love in the Christian sense of the word, on what grounds can we affirm that

⁴⁴⁸ See Lonergan, “The Dehellenization of Dogma:” 338.

⁴⁴⁹ See Benedict XVI, “Caritas in Veritate,” no. 1.

⁴⁵⁰ Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith*, 233.

such a relationship does not proceed from a true love or affection? Similarly, with what reason can we justly conclude that the failure to fulfil the eventual biological purpose of the sexual organs automatically prevents the *eros* from tending “to rise ‘in ecstasy’ towards the Divine, to lead us beyond ourselves?”⁴⁵¹

In short, it seems that the doctrine of the Church on this issue is not taking into consideration the *seeds of the true love* that the actual experience of many same-sex relationships between Catholic persons reveal. Once again, the current Magisterial teaching is showing no respect “for [all] those signs of love which in some way reflect God’s own love,” and so is closing off “the way of grace and of growth, and discourage paths of sanctification which give glory to God”⁴⁵² to many Christian people. Furthermore, the lives of many of the abovementioned persons show how this teaching has created serious problems for them: a sense of guilty, difficulty in accepting themselves as they are, difficulty in believing deeply in a loving God or that they are created in God’s image, and the feeling of not being accepted or not being worthy to belong to the community. For this reason, our Church may be causing public scandal, the scandal “of unjust judgment and condemnation of homosexual partners.”⁴⁵³ In this way, she is not exercising her ministry of being a merciful mother and shepherdess to so many gay and lesbian brothers and sisters. By not considering the seeds of true love present in same-sex relationships, and proposing celibacy for life as the only possible path of holiness, the Church is not accompanying “with mercy and patience the eventual stages of personal growth as these progressively appear,”⁴⁵⁴ helping these people to do the best they can do, also in their affective

⁴⁵¹ Benedict XVI, “Deus Caritas Est,” no. 5.

⁴⁵² Francis, “Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on Love in the Family ‘Amoris Laetitia,’” March 19, 2016, The Holy See, <https://w2.vatican.va/>, no. 305.

⁴⁵³ Todd A. Salzman and Michael G. Lawler, “The Scandal May Be in Not Holding Funerals for Gay Spouses, Theologians Say,” *National Catholic Reporter*, last modified January 16, 2018, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/justice/funeral-rites-gay-spouses-public-scandal-eye-beholder>. In this article the authors comment on Bishop Thomas Paprocki’s ban on holding Catholic funerals for gay couples due to the supposed “public scandal.” The authors present an interesting definition of scandal, concluding that the unfair discrimination of the church in relation to gay couples more easily causes public scandal than a possible funeral of a gay couple.

⁴⁵⁴ Francis, “Amoris Laetitia,” no. 308.

life. It seems that, regarding this topic, we are afraid to let our “shoes get soiled by the mud of the street.”⁴⁵⁵ Therefore, we are not being faithful to our vocation since, as a Church, “we are called to show mercy because mercy has first been shown to us.”⁴⁵⁶

⁴⁵⁵ Francis, “*Evangelii Gaudium*,” no. 45. In this number, the Pope affirms that the church “has to grow in its own understanding of the Gospel and in discerning the paths of the Spirit, and so it always does what good it can, even if in the process, its shoes get soiled by the mud of the street.”

⁴⁵⁶ Francis, “*Misericordiae Vultus*,” no. 9.

3. An Ethical framework for gay and lesbian couples striving for holiness: how can people live out lives of honesty?

In the previous chapters we have become aware of the weaknesses of the current Magisterial teaching on homosexuality, and we have been able to recognize, from the experience of concrete people, that we can find seeds of Christian love in same-sex relationships. With this in mind, in this chapter I want to present an ethical framework for Catholic gay and lesbian people that can help them to live out lives of honesty, in their progressive conformation with Christ. In such a framework, celibacy for life always remains a possibility for all Christians, but we also must bear in mind that this is a special charism to which not all people feel called. Therefore, through this framework I want to broaden the horizons of the Catholic ethical proposal on sexuality, not denying *a priori* the possibility that gay people can also express Christian chastity in an affective relationship with erotic expression.

As Stephen Pope points out, “moral assessment of any pattern of human conduct turns not on its naturalness but on its relation to human flourishing.”⁴⁵⁷ Therefore, as I mentioned above, the morality of same-sex acts should be evaluated, not by the eventual fulfillment of the scope of the genital interaction, but rather by the ability of these acts to contribute to the human

⁴⁵⁷ Pope, “Scientific and Natural Law Analyses of Homosexuality,” 111.

flourishing of the people involved.⁴⁵⁸ Indeed, Pope affirms that “human flourishing is conceived much more strongly in affective and interpersonal terms than in strictly natural terms.”⁴⁵⁹

Along the same lines, in one interview in the Italian Episcopal Conference’s newspaper *Avvenire*, Pier Davide Guenzi, an Italian moral theologian, reminds us that, in recent decades, Catholic moral theology has deepened its comprehension of affectivity and human sexual life. In this sense, it has sought to rely not only on biological data, but, above all, “on the element that qualifies it in human terms, i.e., the intersubjective relationship.”⁴⁶⁰ In fact, as this author maintains, the relational character is precisely what distinguishes human sexuality from the sexuality of other living creatures. The biological dimension of our sexuality brings us closer to the other living creatures. But the sexual act between human beings humanizes in proportion to the depth of the love present in the relationship.⁴⁶¹ Therefore, continues Guenzi, encouraged by the experience of gay believers, we must conclude that the good to strive for is precisely the relationship directed towards the communion of people. With this in mind, we are led to acknowledge “that the man-woman bond does not exhaust all human forms of expression [of that relationship], even from an affective point of view.”⁴⁶² In that light, “homosexual

⁴⁵⁸ Human flourishing or happiness as a central concept in Thomas Aquinas’ ethics, which he presents in his ‘Treatise on Beatitude’ (*ST* I-II, qq. 1-5). According to Aquinas, “all human actions must be for an end” (I-II, q. 1, a. 1) and this end is happiness or human flourishing whose (supernatural) perfection is said to be the “beatific vision” or “union with God” (I-II, q. 3, a. 8). Because “only God can satisfy the will [and the desires] of the man,” (I-II, q. 2, a. 8) created things (including human love) can only allow for a “certain happiness on account of a certain likeness to true happiness,” (I-II, q. 2, a. 8) because of their participation in the goodness of God. Nevertheless, Aquinas acknowledges the reality of happiness in this life, although it has a limited character and contains imperfection. Regarding magisterial teaching on homosexuality, Stephen Pope underlines that it “does not hold that active homosexuality bars one from eternal happiness but rather that, in principle, it cannot support genuine human flourishing and moral excellence *in this life*.” However, this author claims that no “clear, substantive, and non-circular account of what constitutes human flourishing,” particularly regarding same-sex active relationships, has been ever provided. In short, the Magisterium have never explained consistently why this type of love is incapable of participating in the goodness of God. (The quotations in this footnote that are not from the *Summa* are from Pope, “Scientific and Natural Law Analyses of Homosexuality,” 118.)

⁴⁵⁹ Pope, “Scientific and Natural Law Analyses of Homosexuality,” 118.

⁴⁶⁰ Pier Davide Guenzi, “Omosessualità, Quale Bene nella Relazione?,” interview by Luciano Moia, February 19, 2019, <https://www.avvenire.it/>.

⁴⁶¹ The *Catechism* affirms this, although it only considers the relationship between man and woman: “Sexuality, in which man’s belonging to the bodily and biological world is expressed, becomes personal and truly human when it is integrated into the relationship of one person to another, in the complete and lifelong mutual gift of a man and a woman.” *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2337.

⁴⁶² “Lo stesso legame uomo-donna non ne esaurisce tutte le forme umane di espressione, anche sotto il profilo affettivo.” Guenzi, “Omosessualità, Quale Bene.”

relationships also express the same potentialities and limits of any human bonds of an affective type, not only in reference to the moral evaluation of behavior, but also considering the positive sign of mutual enrichment of the people involved in them.”⁴⁶³

As we have seen in the previous chapter, the ordinary lived experience of many people in same-sex romantic relationships shows that they can flourish and be mutually enriched, when, for example, they find support from the communities they belong. The *CDF* recognizes that homosexual persons are “often generous and giving of themselves.”⁴⁶⁴ Indeed, according to Pope, when “human flourishing is understood in terms of permanent interpersonal love and the virtues by which it is promoted and sustained, then whether homosexual activity can contribute to human flourishing ought to be discussed.”⁴⁶⁵

We have already seen some of the characteristics of a relationship with sexual expression that must be said to be Christian. In this chapter, I intend to find, within the Catholic tradition, ways to help people who are constitutively gay and lesbian in their flourishing, that is, in their progressive union with God, while still in the present world. I take as given that the well-formed personal conscience can, through discernment, “hew more and more closely to the truth.”⁴⁶⁶ Thus, alongside Francis, and particularly with *Amoris Laetitia*, I underline the importance of recovering the traditions of primacy of conscience, of the discernment of the spirits, and of the need to form individual consciences in Christian virtues. I will also discuss the relevance of reconnecting ethics and spirituality, by offering some insights into what a spirituality for gay and lesbian people should be like in order to illuminate their conscience. Thus, in accord with Stephen Pope, my main purpose is to offer a way in which gay and lesbian persons “can respond (at least, that is, as well as heterosexuals) to the universal human challenge to train and habituate

⁴⁶³ “Anche la relazione omosessuale esprime potenzialità e limiti inerenti ai legami umani di tipo affettivo, non solo in riferimento alla valutazione morale dei comportamenti, ma anche nel segno positivo di arricchimento reciproco delle persone impegnate in esse.” Ibid.

⁴⁶⁴ Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, “Letter on Pastoral Care of Homosexual,” no. 7.

⁴⁶⁵ Pope, “Scientific and Natural Law Analyses of Homosexuality,” 118.

⁴⁶⁶ Fullam, “Conscience Formation in the Face of Social Sin,” 55.

their sexual passions—naturally oriented to various goods but existentially disordered by concupiscence—in a way that contributes to their flourishing.”⁴⁶⁷ In *Amoris Laetitia* Francis affirms that “it is reductive simply to consider whether or not an individual’s actions correspond to a general law or rule, because that is not enough to discern and ensure full fidelity to God in the concrete life of a human being.”⁴⁶⁸ In line with this, I affirm along with Stephen Pope that “the traditional blanket moral prohibition of all sexual activity among homosexuals must be replaced with a more discerning distinction between virtuous and vicious expressions of homosexuality.”⁴⁶⁹

3.1. Conscience and Discernment in *Amoris Laetitia*

Pope Francis seems determined, in his Magisterial teaching, to go deeper into the reception of the personalist tradition of conscience, on the path laid out by *Gaudium et Spes*.⁴⁷⁰ In the Apostolic Exhortation which followed the Synod of the Bishops on the Family, Francis recognizes that the “individual conscience needs to be better incorporated into the Church’s praxis in certain situations which do not objectively embody our understanding of marriage.”⁴⁷¹ According to Cardinal Schönborn, Francis’ approach to conscience in this document brings us “within the great ecclesial tradition, enriched by a personalist perception of the uniqueness of each free act.”⁴⁷² The Austrian Cardinal considers that the moral vision that stems from this

⁴⁶⁷ Pope, “Scientific and Natural Law Analyses of Homosexuality,” 115.

⁴⁶⁸ Francis, “*Amoris Laetitia*,” no. 304.

⁴⁶⁹ Pope, “Scientific and Natural Law Analyses of Homosexuality,” 115.

⁴⁷⁰ “In the depths of his conscience, the human being detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience.... For human being has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of human being; according to it he will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths. In a wonderful manner conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbor.” Second Vatican Council, “*Gaudium et Spes*,” no. 16. Similarly, the Declaration on Religious Freedom *Dignitatis Humanae* states that “in all his activity a human person is bound to follow his conscience in order that he may come to God, the end and purpose of life.” Therefore, no one can “be forced to act in a manner contrary to his conscience.” Second Vatican Council, “*Dignitatis Humanae*,” no. 3.

⁴⁷¹ Francis, “*Amoris Laetitia*,” no. 303.

⁴⁷² “All’interno della grande tradizione ecclesiale, arricchita da una percezione personalista dell’unicità di ogni atto libero.” Spadaro, “Conversazione con il Cardinale Schönborn,” 142.

document is inspired by two great traditions of the Church—the discernment of conscience (in the Ignatian tradition) and virtue ethics (in the Dominican tradition)—and seeks to integrate them with personalism. With *AL*, the church “moves away from moralities of duty, which in their extrinsicism generate both laxity and rigorism.”⁴⁷³

According to Conor Kelly, in *AL* Pope Francis emphasizes “the primary responsibility of conscience for the moral life, indicating that the crux of the moral life is discernment in one’s particular context.”⁴⁷⁴ Indeed, in his wish for inclusivity and mercy, Pope Francis has found in the ancient teaching on the primacy of conscience⁴⁷⁵ a way to allow people in so-called “irregular” situations—as, for example, divorced people in a new committed relationship—to live in God’s grace and to love and grow in the life of grace and charity.⁴⁷⁶

In line with his whole pontificate, the virtues of charity and mercy occupy a prominent place among the whole catalogue of Christian virtues Francis proposes. He reminds us that “to show understanding in the face of exceptional situations never implies dimming the light of the fuller ideal, or proposing less than what Jesus offers to the human being.”⁴⁷⁷ Similarly, Francis reminds all the people of God—lay and ordained—that “we are called to show mercy because mercy was first shown to us.”⁴⁷⁸

⁴⁷³ “Volta le spalle alle morali dell’obbligo, che nel loro estrinsecismo generano al tempo stesso lassismo e rigorismo.” *Ibid.*, 139.

⁴⁷⁴ Conor M. Kelly, “The Role of the Moral Theologian in the Church: A Proposal in Light of *Amoris Laetitia*,” *Theological Studies* 77, no. 4 (2016): 924.

⁴⁷⁵ John Henry Newman states that, according to Thomas Aquinas, “conscience is the practical judgment or dictate of reason, by which we judge what *hic et nunc* is to be done as being good, or to be avoided as evil.” John Henry Newman, *A Letter Addressed to His Grace the Duke of Norfolk on Occasion of Mr. Gladstones Recent Expostulation* (London: S. and J. Brawn, 1875), 62. Consequently, conscience consists in applying the first principles of the natural law, known in *synderesis*, to concrete situations, through a *prudential* judgment. (See *ST* I-II, q. 90. a. 1). For a detailed understanding of the virtue of prudence in the *ST* II-II, qq. 47-56 see James F. Keenan, “The Virtue of Prudence (*Ila Ilae*, qq. 47-56),” in *The Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. Stephen J. Pope (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 259-271.

⁴⁷⁶ Francis, “*Amoris Laetitia*,” no. 305.

⁴⁷⁷ Francis, “*Amoris Laetitia*,” no. 307.

⁴⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 310.

In a personalist understanding, conscience is “the place where human beings come to discern the objective good in each situation,”⁴⁷⁹ because “it is the site of personal, subjective apprehension of objective morality.”⁴⁸⁰ Hence, moral truth is reached in the conscience of the moral agent through discernment. Thus, the objectivity of the eternal law and the subjectivity of the moral agent meet in the personal conscience, which requires “accompaniment, dialogue and encounter,”⁴⁸¹ through which the norm meets with its practical application in concrete life situations.

With the purpose of refocusing the eyes of the Magisterium and of the theology in history, “the Pontiff, listening to the Synod Fathers, becomes aware that it is no longer possible to speak of an abstract category of people and to lock the practice of integration within an entirely general and valid rule to all the cases.”⁴⁸² For that purpose, he invites pastors to dialogue with those who cannot live Christian marriage in its perfection “to distinguish elements in their lives that can lead to a greater openness to the Gospel of marriage in its fullness.”⁴⁸³ A little further on, quoting the *Relatio Finalis* of the Synod of Bishops of 2015, Francis affirms that “there is a need ‘to avoid judgments which do not take into account the complexity of various situations’ and ‘to be attentive, by necessity, to how people experience distress because of their condition.’”⁴⁸⁴ Furthermore, the Pope acknowledges that divorced persons who have entered in a new union, because of the diversity of situations, “should not be pigeonholed or fit into overly rigid classifications leaving no room for a suitable personal and pastoral discernment.”⁴⁸⁵ Precisely because of his purpose to attend to the “immense variety of concrete situations,”⁴⁸⁶

⁴⁷⁹ Linda Hogan, *Confronting the Truth: Conscience in the Catholic Tradition* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 23.

⁴⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴⁸¹ “Acompañamiento, diálogo y encuentro.” Martínez, “Discernimiento y Moral,” 377.

⁴⁸² Antonio Spadaro and Louis J. Cameli, “La Sfida del Discernimento in ‘Amoris Laetitia,’” *La Civiltà Cattolica* 167, no. 3985 (2016): 4.

⁴⁸³ Francis, “Amoris Laetitia,” no. 293.

⁴⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 296.

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 298.

⁴⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 300.

the Argentinian Pope proposes to overcome the legalistic model of conscience.⁴⁸⁷ Indeed, considering that “the principle will be found to fail, accordingly as we descend further into detail,”⁴⁸⁸ the Pope recognizes that although the “general rules set forth a good which can never be disregarded or neglected,... in their formulation they cannot provide absolutely for all particular situations.”⁴⁸⁹

In *AL*, Francis is still affirming the existence of general and objective moral norms because “in no way must the Church desist from proposing the full ideal of marriage, God’s plan in all its grandeur.”⁴⁹⁰ At the same time, he points out that “without detracting from the evangelical ideal, there is a need to accompany with mercy and patience the eventual stages of personal growth as these progressively appear, making room for the Lord’s mercy, which spurs us on to do our best.”⁴⁹¹ Taking into consideration the concrete situation of persons, Francis prefers to encourage people to “undertake a responsible personal and pastoral discernment,”⁴⁹² that “takes into account a person’s properly formed conscience.”⁴⁹³ In this regard, Kasper speaks of a new anthropology shaped by mercy, able to do justice to the uniqueness of each individual. Such an anthropology is concrete and, instead of departing “from the human being in general,”⁴⁹⁴ it looks to “the person in his concrete external and internal situation, and respects them in their dignity always unique.”⁴⁹⁵

⁴⁸⁷ According to this model, fostered by *Veritatis Splendor* and, in some way, by the *Catechism*, conscience is mainly bound to obey to the teaching of the Magisterium, because it assumes that the Magisterium brings to the consciences the objective norms of natural law, which are also written in the heart of the faithful. At the same time, it presupposes that the Magisterial teaching is exempt from error and arrives at objective moral truth. See John Paul II, “Encyclical Letter Regarding Some Fundamental Questions of the Church’s Moral Teaching ‘Veritatis Splendor,’” August 6, 1993, The Holy See, <http://w2.vatican.va/>, no. 54.

⁴⁸⁸ *ST* I-II, q. 94, art. 4.

⁴⁸⁹ Francis, “*Amoris Laetitia*,” no. 304.

⁴⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, no. 307.

⁴⁹¹ *Ibid.*, no. 308.

⁴⁹² *Ibid.*, no. 300.

⁴⁹³ *Ibid.*, no. 302.

⁴⁹⁴ “Non muove mai dall’essere umano in generale.” Kasper, *Il Messaggio di Amoris Laetitia*, 67.

⁴⁹⁵ “La persona nella sua concreta situazione esterna ed interna, e lo rispetta nella sua dignità ogni volta unica.” *Ibid.*

The Pope also affirms that, since “the degree of responsibility is not equal in all cases, the consequences or effects of a rule need not necessarily always be the same.”⁴⁹⁶ To that end, Francis reminds pastors that “we have been called to form consciences, not to replace them.”⁴⁹⁷ Moreover, expanding on the teaching of John Paul II,⁴⁹⁸ the current Pontiff underlines that the person should “recognize with sincerity and honesty what for now is the most generous response which can be given to God, and come to see with a certain moral security that it is what God himself is asking amid the concrete complexity of one’s limits, while yet not fully the objective ideal.”⁴⁹⁹ As Antonio Spadaro affirms, “here the point is not to assume one’s own weakness as a criterion for establishing what is good and what is bad (this would be the so-called ‘gradualness of the law’). Rather, a ‘law of gradualness’ is affirmed, that is, a progressiveness in knowing, desiring and doing good.”⁵⁰⁰

That statement by Francis is better understood by referring to the distinction presented by Fuchs and Keenan between goodness and rightness in moral theology.⁵⁰¹ Indeed, although recognizing that some Catholic people might act wrongly according to the Catholic conception of marriage, Francis nevertheless does not want to neglect the way they strive for love and,

⁴⁹⁶ Francis, “Amoris Laetitia,” no. 79.

⁴⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 37.

⁴⁹⁸ See John Paul II on the law of graduality in “Familiaris Consortio,” no. 34.

⁴⁹⁹ Francis, “Amoris Laetitia,” no. 303.

⁵⁰⁰ “Qui non si dice affatto di assumere la propria debolezza come criterio per stabilire che cosa sia bene e che cosa sia male (questa sarebbe la cosiddetta ‘gradualità della legge’). Tuttavia si afferma una ‘legge della gradualità’, cioè una progressività nel conoscere, nel desiderare e nel fare il bene.” Antonio Spadaro, “‘Amoris Laetitia’: Struttura e Significato dell’Esortazione Apostolica Post-Sinodale di Papa Francesco,” *La Civiltà Cattolica* 3980 (2016): 125.

⁵⁰¹ According to Fuchs, “it is primarily the sincere effort and commitment to do what we honestly believe to be the right thing that makes us morally good, and not the actual right or wrong act performed in itself.” Josef Fuchs, *Christian Morality: The Word Becomes Flesh*, trans. Brian McNeil (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1987), 125; quoted by Bretzke, *A Morally Complex World*, 130. Therefore, according to Keenan, goodness “means that out of love we strive to live and act rightly,” depending only on the motivations of the moral agent. So, goodness “is descriptive of the first and most formal movement in a person... [being] a judgment antecedent to action.” On the contrary, rightness “means that our ways of living and acting actually conform to rational expectations set by the ethical community,” and takes into consideration not only the intention of the agent but also the executed act (or, choice). Thus, it “concerns whether one’s life and actions attain what is necessary for the protection and promotion of values.” All the quotes are from James F. Keenan, *Goodness and Rightness in Thomas Aquinas’s “Summa Theologiae”* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1992), 3, 15.

thus, the goodness of these persons, and so invites them to recognize with sincerity and honesty what actually is the most generous response they can give.

Personal conscience is also part of a community, which makes it possible to avoid relativism or pure subjectivism. However, instead of a Magisterium that has clear answers to everything, Francis wants to empower and form people in discernment through personal conscience. In the first year of his Pontificate, in the *Angelus* of June 30th, Francis clarified his understanding of conscience, by affirming that following the personal conscience “does not mean following my own ego, doing what interests me, what suits me, what I like.... The conscience is the interior place for listening to the truth, to goodness, for listening to God.”⁵⁰²

Thus, the personal and pastoral discernment to which *AL* invites both individuals and pastors⁵⁰³ calls them “to listen to the voice of the Spirit and confront oneself with history and its needs and challenges, especially with those that concern individuals and their concrete life, going beyond abstractions.”⁵⁰⁴ Therefore, personal discernment aims “to know... the special and specific way in which God’s will is imprinted on my life, taking into account my personality, my circumstances and my unique vocation.”⁵⁰⁵ Instead of an abstract and timeless application of general principles in a syllogistic way, discernment is a “historical, dynamic, contextualized and open spiritual process.”⁵⁰⁶ Likewise, it “is not a solipsistic self-analysis or a form of egotistical introspection, but an authentic process of leaving ourselves behind in order to approach the mystery of God, who helps us to carry out the mission to which he has called us, for the good of our brothers and sisters.”⁵⁰⁷ The main criteria of truth in discernment is the

⁵⁰² Francis, “Angelus,” June 30, 2013, The Holy See, <http://www.vatican.va/>.

⁵⁰³ See Francis, “Amoris Laetitia,” no. 300.

⁵⁰⁴ “Ascoltare la voce dello Spirito e confrontarsi con la storia e con le sue esigenze e sfide, soprattutto con quelle che riguardano le singole persone e la loro vita concreta, andando al di là delle astrazioni.” Spadaro and Cameli, “La Sfida del Discernimento in ‘Amoris Laetitia,’” 6.

⁵⁰⁵ “Conoscere... il modo speciale e specifico con il quale la volontà di Dio è impressa nella mia vita, con la mia personalità, con le mie circostanze e con la mia vocazione unica.” Ibid., 7.

⁵⁰⁶ “Procedimento spirituale storico, dinamico, contestualizzato e aperto.” Juan Carlos Scannone, “Discernere e Accompagnare: Le Indicazioni dell’ ‘Amoris Laetitia’,” *La Civiltà Cattolica* IV, no. 4015 (2017): 13.

⁵⁰⁷ Francis, “Gaudete et Exsultate,” no. 175.

life of Christ as proposed by the Gospel, and the Spirit, the most intimate subjective ‘engine’ of the person.⁵⁰⁸

It follows from the above that, “morality has much more to do with deliberation, interrogation, paradox, research or discernment than with demonstration or mechanical application of principles and norms to resolve the dilemmas of personal existence.”⁵⁰⁹ It is not a sort of *problem solving*, or a rational exercise to reach a conclusion. In this way, through a constant process of openness to the Word of God and docility to the Spirit, one must “pay attention to the movements in progress in the soul and in the spirit, in all their particularities and in their historical succession.”⁵¹⁰ In *Gaudete et Exsultate (GE)*, Pope Francis points out that discernment is always a grace and “even though it includes reason and prudence, it goes beyond them, for it seeks a glimpse of that unique and mysterious plan that God has for each of us, which takes shape amid so many varied situations and limitations.”⁵¹¹ Therefore, “it has to do with the meaning of my life before the Father who knows and loves me.... Ultimately, it leads to the wellspring of undying life: to know the Father, the only true God, and the one whom he has sent, Jesus Christ (cf. Jn 17:3).”⁵¹² In *Christus Vivit (CV)*, Francis affirms that discernment “is a path of freedom that brings to full fruit what is unique in each person, something so personal that only God knows it. Others cannot fully understand or predict from the outside how it will develop.”⁵¹³

In *GE*, Francis presents the structure and set the conditions for discernment.⁵¹⁴ Likewise, Gula also points out the three structural components of discernment: prayer, gathering

⁵⁰⁸ See Scannone, “Discernere e Accompagnare,” 12.

⁵⁰⁹ “La moral tiene mucho más de deliberación, interrogación, paradoja, búsqueda o discernimiento que de demostración o mecánica aplicación de principios y normas para resolver los dilemas de la existencia.” Martínez, “Discernimiento y Moral,” 378.

⁵¹⁰ “Attento ai moti in corso nell’anima e nello spirito, in tutte le loro particolarità e nel loro succedersi storico.” Spadaro and Cameli, “La Sfida del Discernimento in ‘Amoris Laetitia,’” 12.

⁵¹¹ Francis, “Gaudete et Exsultate,” no. 170.

⁵¹² Ibid.

⁵¹³ Francis, “Christus Vivit,” no. 195.

⁵¹⁴ See Francis, “Gaudete et Exsultate,” nos. 171-175.

information, and confirmation, both by internal signs (the affective experiences of consolation and desolation) and by external signs: the fruits that our decision bear (see Mt 12:33) and the confirmation of the community.⁵¹⁵

According to Curran, the best criterion to evaluate our decisions is always “the peace and joy of conscience” and “all the virtues, values, norms, experiences, and examples promoted by the church community and people of good will.”⁵¹⁶ According to Spadaro and Cameli, such a criterion is, in the wake of Ignatius, the peace that is manifested “in the right relationship with God and with others... and calls the person to continual conversion.”⁵¹⁷

Moreover, the communitarian dimension of discernment is also manifested in listening, accompaniment, and attention from the community and, particularly from the spiritual directors.⁵¹⁸ Discernment aims to lead the person to a decision, to a commitment, to a reform of life (conversion).⁵¹⁹ The role of the community, represented by the spiritual director, is to nurture in the individual personal freedom; or, to use the words of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, to help the individual in “preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all inordinate attachments, and, after their removal, of seeking and finding the will of God in the disposition of [their] life for the salvation of [their] soul.”⁵²⁰ For this purpose, the spiritual director should

⁵¹⁵ See Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith*, 321-326.

⁵¹⁶ Curran, “Conscience in the Light of the Catholic Moral Tradition,” 22.

⁵¹⁷ “Nel giusto rapporto con Dio e con gli altri... e chiama la persona alla conversione continua.” Spadaro and Cameli, “La Sfida del Discernimento in ‘Amoris Laetitia,’” 15.

⁵¹⁸ In this regard it is important to refer to *Lumen Gentium* in which the Council recalls that “it has pleased God to make men and women holy and to save them, not as individuals without any bond between them, but rather as a people who might acknowledge him in truth and serve him in holiness.” Second Vatican Council, “Lumen Gentium,” no. 9.

⁵¹⁹ According to Lonergan, the process of conversion is fundamental in religious experience, and is the very foundation of theology, given its ongoing, dynamic, personal, communal, and historical character. Indeed, conversion, which happens in the concrete lives of the individuals, is a radical transformation of the person, generated by series of changes and developments in different levels of existence. The author recalls that this process generates new apprehensions of reality caused by the process of conversion and gives raise to new meanings and a “transvaluation of values.” Indeed, “when anyone is united to Christ, there is a new world; the old order has gone, and a new order has begun” (2 Cor 5:17). Thus, “what is normative and foundational for subjects stating theology is to be found” because it is not fixed and determined a priori and in abstract. Lonergan, “Theology in Its New Context,” 66.

⁵²⁰ Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, trans. Louis J. Puhl (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1951), no. 1.

act “as a balance at equilibrium,” allowing “the Creator to deal directly with the creature, and the creature directly with his Creator and Lord.”⁵²¹ Therefore, although our discernment occurs within the community, sometimes we may be called to stand against the community or even against authority. Indeed, by obeying our conscience, we can find ourselves unable to follow the official teaching of the Church about some specific aspect. As Gula affirms, “what ultimately leads to greater love and unity may at first create division as a necessary step toward harmony.”⁵²² In such cases, the criterion to evaluate the legitimacy of the dissent must be the “quality of the person’s relationship to the community over a long period of time.”⁵²³

However, we have to keep in mind that no personal discernment is infallible. As Curran recalls, “there are no infallible criteria to determinate if the decision of conscience is true.”⁵²⁴ Therefore, knowing that in this life we can never be sure of our personal salvation, every discernment also requires an act of faith or trust. Indeed, the kind of truth we reach by obeying what we perceive to be the will of God, which resonates in our conscience, never belongs to the realm of absolute certainties, or is of a logical or mathematical kind. According to Kasper, discernment is the way of life of a Church “on the way towards the truth,” which is a fundamental concept in Holy Scripture.⁵²⁵ Indeed, in John’s Gospel Jesus defines himself as “the way, the truth and the life,” (Jn 14:6) and it is on the way that the disciples of Emmaus gradually recognize the Risen Lord (Lk 24:13-35). The way of discernment is always a way of graduality, of small steps. Indeed, we have to accept that we are always on the way, precisely because “until the end of our existence, we have never fully fulfilled the commandment to love

⁵²¹ Ibid., no. 15.

⁵²² Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith*, 326.

⁵²³ Ibid.

⁵²⁴ Curran, “Conscience in the Light of the Catholic Moral Tradition,” 22.

⁵²⁵ Kasper, *Il Messaggio di Amoris Laetitia*, 23-28.

God with *all* our heart, with *all* our soul and with *all* our mind, and to love our neighbor *as* ourselves (Mt 22:37).”⁵²⁶

Therefore, we should also accept that we can be wrong, that we can misunderstand God. As Keenan points out, “the recognition of the obligation to follow our conscience, then, does not mean that we become infallible if we heed conscience.”⁵²⁷ Hence, we must recognize that, while the legalistic model can lead to injustices by not attending to the circumstances and intentions of the agent, the model proposed in *AL* has limits and is also open to error. Particularly when, by obeying our conscience, we disagree with the official teaching of the Church, we “would always have the humility to say, ‘Maybe, I am wrong’, and pausing to consider this possibility would also be an element of such discernment.”⁵²⁸

In this regard, insights from psychology also can help us toward a better understanding of moral conscience. It is of the utmost importance, particularly in issues of sexuality—“an area notoriously susceptible to the tyranny of superego”⁵²⁹—to distinguish between ‘conscience’ and ‘superego.’ Indeed, this distinction helps us to understand how the individual conscience is a complex dimension of a life exposed to mistakes and failures caused by external factors, by sin, and by our own limitations. Keenan highlights the importance of distinguishing between the inner voice which “call us to grow in love” because it is “suspicious of conformity, particularly when justice is at stake” from that voice “which warns us to stay where we are,” which “manages to make us feel guilty and, worse, terribly isolated.”⁵³⁰ While the former is the very voice of conscience, the latter seems to be more linked to superego.⁵³¹

⁵²⁶ “Fino al termine della nostra esistenza, non abbiamo mai assolto pienamente il comandamento di amare Dio con *tutto* il cuore, con *tutta* l'anima e con *tutta* la mente e di amare il prossimo *come* noi stessi (Mt 27,37s).” Ibid, 28.

⁵²⁷ Keenan, *Moral Wisdom*, 29.

⁵²⁸ John R. Quinn, “Newman and the Problem of Conscience in Relation to Papal Infallibility,” in *Conscience and Catholicism. Rights, Responsibilities, and Institutional Responses*, eds. David E. DeCosse and Kristin E. Heyer (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 25.

⁵²⁹ Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith*, 128.

⁵³⁰ All the quotes are from James F. Keenan, “The Call to Grow in Love,” *C21 Resources*, Fall (2016), 6-7.

⁵³¹ Richard Gula also presents some characteristics of both concepts. Superego is particularly concerned with gaining approval or moved by fear of losing love and, therefore, “is turned toward self in order to secure one’s

3.2. Formation of the conscience in virtues

The personal conscience that is able to discern the will of God within the community needs to be formed. As Lisa Fullam points out, if the goal of conscience is truth, it may be formed toward “developing the cognitive skills and moral character that allow our moral discernments to hew more and more closely to the truth,” which, as I mentioned above, “is personal, culturally situated, and objective.”⁵³² In his Apostolic Exhortation to young people, Francis stresses that the formation of conscience is indispensable because it “allows discernment to grow in depth and in fidelity to God.”⁵³³ The Pope refers to the Synod of 2018 in which Final Document the Bishops affirmed that “forming our conscience is the work of a lifetime, in which we learn to cultivate the very sentiments of Jesus Christ, adopting the criteria behind his choices and the intentions behind his actions (cf. *Phil 2:5*).”⁵³⁴ So, the formation of conscience entails, first of all, education for interiority, an intimacy with the person of Jesus acquired in prayer, sacraments, and liturgy, and familiarity with the teaching and tradition of the Church. In *AL* Francis also emphasizes the need for forming consciences in fraternal charity, which is the Christian’s first law.⁵³⁵ Thus, the first and fundamental step of the formation of our personal conscience involves the commitment of “our freedom to Jesus and internalizing the images,

sense of being lovable.” It tends to be “static by merely repeating a prior command” and is “oriented primarily toward... obeying the command of authority ‘blindly.’” Superego attends primarily to individual acts rather than to the larger context of the person or pattern of actions, and it is mostly “oriented toward the past: ‘the way we were.’” Alongside Keenan, Gula considers that superego connects reparation with a sense of guilt and a need for self-punishment, and affirms that “the transition from guilt to self-renewal comes fairly easily and rapidly by means of confessing to the authority.” Moreover, the author points out that this sense of guilt “depends more on the significance of authority figure ‘disobeyed’ than the weight of the value at stake.” On the contrary, conscience is more a “response to an invitation to love” and thus orients us to the type of person we want to become, and is mainly oriented toward values and toward the future. It “tends to be dynamic,” calling for new ways of responding to values, and connects reparation with “creating a new future,” which is “the way to make good the past.” Conscience is able to understand moral life as a “gradual process of growth” that involves all dimensions of personal development. In it, the “experience of guilt is proportionate to the degree of knowledge and freedom as well as the weight of the value at stake.” All the quotes are from Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith*, 127.

⁵³² Both quotes in this sentence are from Fullam, “Conscience Formation in the Face of Social Sin,” 50.

⁵³³ Francis, “Christus Vivit,” no. 281.

⁵³⁴ Synod of Bishops, “Final Document Synod on Youth,” no. 108.

⁵³⁵ See Francis, “Amoris Laetitia,” no. 302.

stories, and traditions which communicate his cause.”⁵³⁶ In the next section, I will dwell in more detail on the importance of the relationship between spirituality and moral action.

Furthermore, as the Synod of Bishops also acknowledged, the formation of the personal character in Christian virtues, particularly in prudence, is of special value. The Bishops affirmed that “we need to develop the habit of doing good... [and] to grow in the virtue of prudence, giving an overall direction to our life through concrete choices, in the serene awareness of our gifts and limitations.”⁵³⁷ Similarly, the *Catechism* observes that an education in prudence is fundamental to the development of the other Christian virtues: “it prevents or cures fear, selfishness and pride, resentment arising from guilt, and feelings of complacency, born of human weakness and faults.”⁵³⁸ Along these lines, Gula argues that the formation of conscience reduces “the influence of the superego and... allow[s] a genuinely personal way of seeing and responding to grow.”⁵³⁹

In this section, I will focus more precisely on the formation of the conscience of individuals in the Christian virtues, particularly with regard to sexuality. Indeed, virtue ethics approach has as focal point the type of person we want to become. It takes into consideration the human person as a whole, and as a member of a community, in his/her striving for flourishing—that is, for holiness or union with God.

According to James Keenan, the dissatisfaction among the people of God, and particularly among ethicists, regarding the Magisterial teaching on sexuality results from the fact that it is essentially act-centered. The author considers that the virtue ethics approach can help in the necessary renovation of Magisterial teaching, particularly concerning same-sex relationships.

⁵³⁶ Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith*, 186.

⁵³⁷ Synod of Bishops, “Final Document Synod on Youth,” no. 108. In this regard, in the same number of the document, the Bishops point out the importance of the examination of conscience, as an exercise “which is not just about identifying sins, but includes recognizing God’s work in our daily lives, in the events of our history and our cultures, in the witness of so many other men and women who went before us or who accompany us with their wisdom.” Ibid.

⁵³⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1784.

⁵³⁹ Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith*, 129.

Indeed, according to Keenan, “the real discussion of ethics is not primarily the question about what actions are morally permissible,”⁵⁴⁰ but about the type of person we want to become. The virtuous approach to morality aims to answer to three central questions: Who am I? Who ought I to become? How am I to get there?⁵⁴¹ In this context, virtues are to be understood as guides to Christian moral life. Although virtue ethics is not primarily concerned with acts and norms, virtues offer guidelines for moral life, and they are always, in some way, connected with norms. Just as parents need to set rules and norms to help their children to become virtuous persons, virtue ethics also promotes “the rules that we need and the practices that they govern which further our ability to be and live virtuously.”⁵⁴² Thus, while the catalog of virtues helps our self-understanding and feeds our imagination about the type of person we want to become, we also need principles and rules which “further our ability to be and live virtuously,”⁵⁴³ that is, that help us achieve our ends.

Virtue ethics is part of the ancient tradition of Catholic moral theology which the manualistic and neo-scholastic focus on single acts pushed into the background, and it finds its origins in Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. According to both, “we ought to set ends for the type of people we believe we should become.”⁵⁴⁴ Particularly, Aquinas contends that virtue is a habit that disposes us to reason and act well; it is “some perfection of [human] power,” an “operative habit,” “a good quality [habit] of the mind, by which we live righteously, of which no one can make bad use, which God works in us, without us.”⁵⁴⁵ Keenan defines virtues as “traditional

⁵⁴⁰ James F. Keenan, “Virtue Ethics and Sexual Ethics,” *Louvain Studies* 30, no. 3 (2005): 183.

⁵⁴¹ See James F. Keenan, “Proposing Cardinal Virtues,” *Theological Studies* 56, no. 4 (1995): 711. Regarding this questions, Keenan draws upon Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

⁵⁴² James F. Keenan, “Seven Reasons for Doing Virtue Ethics Today,” in *Virtue and the Moral Life: Theological and Philosophical Perspectives*, eds. Kathryn Getek Soltis and William Werpehowski (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 11.

⁵⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴⁴ Keenan, “Virtue Ethics and Sexual Ethics,” 184.

⁵⁴⁵ *ST I-II*, q. 55, aa. 3-4.

teleological (i.e., end-oriented) guides that collectively aim for the right realization of the human person.”⁵⁴⁶

Keenan presents virtue ethics as a “pro-active system of ethics”⁵⁴⁷ that “invites all people to see themselves as they are, to assess themselves and see who they can actually become.”⁵⁴⁸ In this context, prudence, or “the middle point or the ‘mean’ between extremes,”⁵⁴⁹ is the most important virtue to help us to grow as individuals and as communities. As I said before, prudence is an indispensable virtue in discernment, because “it is the virtue that disposes practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it.”⁵⁵⁰ Indeed, one action is virtuous insofar as it constitutes a prudential means to achieve the end we propose to ourselves.

This system of ethics is more connected with ordinary life than act-centered ethics and is, as I mentioned above, more concerned about the formation and development by habitual activity of a certain type of character, particularly in the sexual dimension of the human person. Instead of focusing on acts, this system allows communities of faith to “talk about basic character traits, dispositions, and stances that members of the community ought to develop to be faithful, loving Catholics.”⁵⁵¹ The Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*,⁵⁵² as well as the chapter 4 of *Amoris Laetitia*, are vibrant examples of such an ethical system. Michael Hartwig also argues that the virtue ethics approach can offer and promote internal dispositions or character traits that people need “to find a suitable life companion, become vulnerable enough to share emotional intimacy, assure each other that vulnerability will be honored and

⁵⁴⁶ Keenan, “Virtue Ethics and Sexual Ethics,” 186.

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid., 185.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid., 184. See also *ST I-II*, q. 64, aa. 1-3.

⁵⁵⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1806.

⁵⁵¹ Keenan, “Virtue Ethics and Sexual Ethics,” 197.

⁵⁵² In this regard, Francis affirms, “We are frequently tempted to think that holiness is only for those who can withdraw from ordinary affairs to spend much time in prayer. That is not the case. We are all called to be holy by living our lives with love and by bearing witness in everything we do, wherever we find ourselves.” Francis, “*Gaudete et Exsultate*,” no. 14.

respected, share power with each other, and sustain their love over time and through many professional and personal changes.”⁵⁵³

Keenan follows Aquinas’ doctrine on virtues,⁵⁵⁴ according to which we have, by God’s grace and gratuity, infused virtues,⁵⁵⁵ and virtues we acquire by practice. Among the acquired virtues, there are the cardinal (or principal) virtues that, for Keenan, should take into consideration both the culture and the uniqueness of the individual and their relationality. Indeed, since moral excellence is personally, culturally and historically plural, “people can only become morally excellent persons by being themselves. The saint has always been an original, never an imitation.”⁵⁵⁶ Indeed, he goes on, “if we want to have a credible theological ethics in general and an equally credible sexual ethics in particular, then we need to begin where as the people of God we resonate with one another regarding commonly held truths and insights.”⁵⁵⁷

In the following lines, I will present the virtues that both the Magisterium and some theologians consider important to promote, in order to develop the affective and sexual character, able to lead to personal flourishing.

Chastity as the preeminent virtue for sexual ethics

In addition to the theological and cardinal virtues, the preeminent Christian virtue with regard to sexual behavior has been chastity. The *Catechism* defines it as “the successful

⁵⁵³ Michael J. Hartwig, *The Poetics of Intimacy and the Problem of Sexual Abstinence* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 73.

⁵⁵⁴ See *ST I-II*, qq. 55-70.

⁵⁵⁵ According to Aquinas these virtues are: faith, hope, and charity. They are indispensable to attain our supreme or supernatural end: union with God. They are called theological virtues because: their object is God, they are infused in us by God alone, and we attain these virtues by grace and divine revelation. See *ST I-II*, q. 62, a. 1.

⁵⁵⁶ Keenan, “Proposing Cardinal Virtues,” 713. Along the same lines, Francis states that “we should not grow discouraged before examples of holiness that appear unattainable. There are some testimonies that may prove helpful and inspiring, but that we are not meant to copy, for that could even lead us astray from the one specific path that the Lord has in mind for us. The important thing is that each believer discern his or her own path, that they bring out the very best of themselves, the most personal gifts that God has placed in their hearts... rather than hopelessly trying to imitate something not meant for them. We are all called to be witnesses, but there are many actual ways of bearing witness.” Francis, “Gaudete et Exsultate,” no. 11.

⁵⁵⁷ Keenan, “Virtue Ethics and Sexual Ethics,” 180-181.

integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man [and woman] in his [her] bodily and spiritual being... [and] involves the integrity of the person and the integrality of the gift.”⁵⁵⁸ Moreover, the same document affirms that chastity “is a gift from God, a grace, [and] a fruit of spiritual effort,”⁵⁵⁹ that has “laws of growth which progress through stages marked by imperfection and too often by sin.”⁵⁶⁰

As Keenan points out, in practice, however, the concept of chastity in Catholic teaching has two levels. Besides being considered as the integration of sexuality in the whole person as a relational being, the concept of chastity also entails “strong, regulatory norms of abstinence.”⁵⁶¹ Through an extensive reading of the section of the *Catechism* on the sixth commandment,⁵⁶² as well as the other Magisterial documents already mentioned, we come to the conclusion that, outside Catholic marriage, chastity is essentially understood as perpetual continence. Keenan acknowledges that chastity “promotes a considerable Christian realism about the challenges of sexuality in the modern world,” and allows us to “integrate our sexuality within ourselves as relational persons.”⁵⁶³ But, at the same time, the teaching based on chastity puts strong emphasis on abstinence regarding all forms of “sexual expression that are genitally intimate outside of marriage.”⁵⁶⁴

In any case, chastity—even when understood as perpetual continence—is always the fruit of an integration of the various dimensions of the person. Thus, as Pope Benedict also pointed out in *Deus Caritas Est*, the chaste way of love, i.e., *agape*, is an unconditional and disinterested love for oneself and for each other for God’s sake, who first loved us.⁵⁶⁵ This way of love, by

⁵⁵⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2337.

⁵⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 2345.

⁵⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, no. 2343.

⁵⁶¹ Keenan, “Virtue Ethics and Sexual Ethics,” 181.

⁵⁶² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 2331-2400.

⁵⁶³ Both quotes in this sentence are from Keenan, “Virtue Ethics and Sexual Ethics,” 181.

⁵⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶⁵ See Benedict XVI, “*Deus Caritas Est*,” nos. 3-8. Benedict also draws attention to the danger of separating *agape* from *eros*, i.e., the disinterested love from the need and desire to give and receive affection: “Yet it is neither the spirit alone nor the body alone that loves: it is man, the person, a unified creature composed of body and soul, who loves. Only when both dimensions are truly united, does man attain his full stature. Only thus is love—*eros*—

uniting ourselves with God and with others, is considered to be our happiness.⁵⁶⁶ But for love to be truly chaste and lead effectively to human flourishing, it requires two fundamental steps, as John Edwards reminds us.⁵⁶⁷ First, it requires the recognition of one's existence as a gift. Second, chastity calls for self-love and self-acceptance as a consequence of the progressive integration of the various dimensions of the person: intellectual, spiritual, emotional, physical, and sexual. Indeed, without these two prerequisites, chastity can become a denial of the self, or of the affective dimension of oneself, with disastrous consequences for the person and for their relationships, as we have seen in the stories of many people in the second chapter. Therefore, for chastity to be an effective a virtue leading to human flourishing, it is necessary that it integrates self-love and interpersonal love as two interdependent and inseparable parts of the whole that constitutes the human person.⁵⁶⁸

In light of the above, I agree that chastity as perpetual continence outside of the marriage can be a way of sanctification for many Catholic persons, including gay and lesbian Catholics. Nonetheless, considering the particular exigencies of such an option in terms of self-integration, love for oneself, and self-acceptance, I wonder whether the imposition of such an understanding of chastity on all the people is the only possible and honest response that Catholic sexual ethics can offer to the people of our time. Particularly concerning gay and lesbian persons, I wonder if perpetual continence may become a cross too heavy to carry without it being chosen. Indeed,

able to mature and attain its authentic grandeur... Yet *eros* and *agape*—ascending love and descending love—can never be completely separated. The more the two, in their different aspects, find a proper unity in the one reality of love, the more the true nature of love in general is realized... Even if *eros* is at first mainly covetous and ascending, a fascination for the great promise of happiness, in drawing near to the other, it is less and less concerned with itself, increasingly seeks the happiness of the other, is concerned more and more with the beloved, bestows itself and wants to “be there for” the other. The element of *agape* thus enters into this love, for otherwise *eros* is impoverished and even loses its own nature. On the other hand, man cannot live by oblation, descending love alone. He cannot always give, he must also receive. Anyone who wishes to give love must also receive love as a gift.” *Ibid.*, nos. 5-7.

⁵⁶⁶ “Then Jesus said: ‘You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments.’” (Mt 24: 37-40).

⁵⁶⁷ See John P. Edwards, “Constructing a Coherent Christian Sexual Ethic: Toward Discovering the Gift of Homosexuality,” *CONCEPT* 29 (2006): 35-55.

⁵⁶⁸ See *ibid.*, 43.

between either perpetual continence or the classification of same-sex acts as “intrinsically evil” acts, can we find a mean that avoids neglecting the struggle for a virtuous life of a great number of gay and lesbian persons who do not feel the call to celibacy, or do not have the human qualities required for that state of life?

Chastity beyond abstinence: virtuous proposals for gay and lesbian people

A personal path of identification with Christ requires an integration that, as I mentioned above, is always progressive, and can also be signed by imperfection. There are people who do not feel called to perpetual continence, or who legitimately understand the integration of their own sexual dimension in terms of an intimate relationship with genital expression. Others, at least for the moment, do not feel capable of integrating their sexuality in terms of sexual abstinence. The situation is particularly problematic for those with a sexual orientation toward persons of the same-sex, on whom the Magisterium imposes perpetual continence.

Keenan and Zacharias' proposal

Recognizing that chastity conceived as sexual abstinence is not able to express human sexuality in all its depth, Keenan presents a set of cardinal virtues for our time and context that work as a standard to evaluate who we are and, at the same time, serve as goals or guidelines for the type of person we want to become regarding our sexual dimension. These virtues “perfect who we are in the mode of our being, which is as being in relationships.”⁵⁶⁹ and must shape Catholic persons also in their sexual dimension. Keenan replaces the traditional cardinal virtues⁵⁷⁰ with another set: justice, fidelity, self-care, and prudence, informed by mercy.⁵⁷¹

Our identity is relational in three ways—in general, specifically, and uniquely—and each way of being relational has a corresponding cardinal virtue: “in general, we are called to justice...

⁵⁶⁹ Keenan, “Proposing Cardinal Virtues,” 723.

⁵⁷⁰ Justice, fortitude, temperance, and prudence.

⁵⁷¹ See Keenan, “Virtue Ethics and Sexual Ethics,” 188-197. In this regard see also Keenan, “Proposing Cardinal Virtues,” 723-729, and James F. Keenan, *Virtues for Ordinary Christians* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996).

specifically we are called to fidelity... uniquely, we are called to self-care.”⁵⁷² Prudence completes the set of cardinal virtues, by determining “what constitutes the just, faithful, and self-caring way of life for an individual,”⁵⁷³ and thus it integrates the three virtues in our relationships. Consequently, prudence is a virtue that “pursue ends and effectively establishes the moral agenda for the person growing in these virtues.”⁵⁷⁴ Keenan adds mercy to this set of virtues, because he considers that it represents the “distinctiveness” and “uniqueness” of Catholic morality.⁵⁷⁵

Searching to overcome the narrowness of the Magisterial teaching on sexual ethics, Ronaldo Zacharias took this set of cardinal virtues proposed by Keenan and developed a Catholic sexual ethics of personalist content. Therefore, according to the Brazilian author, in the context of sexual ethics, justice is about “learning to appreciate the other person with a dignity that belongs to being human and in the image of God,”⁵⁷⁶ and then seeing the other always as a subject. Justice in our sexual relationships is manifested by never using the other to fulfill our desires, by never compromising the dignity of the other, by denouncing any exploitation of others, by promoting equality and, because of an imperative of mercy, by paying attention to those who are marginalized.

The virtue of fidelity, in sexual ethics, is revealed by faithfulness to long-standing and particular relationships, by defending and sustaining one’s lovers and considering them in their specificity, by attitudes marked by honesty and informed by mercy, and by a striving for dialogue and communication.

⁵⁷² Keenan, “Proposing Cardinal Virtues,” 723.

⁵⁷³ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁴ Keenan, “Virtue Ethics and Sexual Ethics,” 191.

⁵⁷⁵ See James F. Keenan, *The Works of Mercy: The Heart of Catholicism*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).

⁵⁷⁶ Ronaldo Zacharias, “Virtue Ethics as the Framework for Catholic Sexual Education” (STD Dissertation, Weston Jesuit School of Theology, 2002), 193.

The virtue of self-care is connected with “not let[ting] oneself be taken advantage in any relationships” but, on the contrary, “knowing one’s own capability, whether and when one can sustain a sexual relationship.”⁵⁷⁷ This virtue manifests itself in maturity in sexual relationships to avoid harm to others and ourselves. As I mentioned above, prudence is the virtue which informs our personal judgment of conscience, by taking into account the circumstances and the moral agent. Therefore, as Michael Hartwig affirms, the prudential judgment informed by self-care and mercy “leads some people to delay as precipitous sexual intimacy, but for others it gently prods them to seek sexual love that has, for long, been an object of fear and dread.”⁵⁷⁸ Lastly, self-care “invites us to see sexuality and sexual relationships as goods to be pursued but precisely within a virtuous context,”⁵⁷⁹ and thus to live seriously and with maturity this dimension of our lives.

Particularly regarding same-sex relationships, and attending to the abovementioned Magisterial teaching on homosexuality, in his Doctoral Dissertation at the Weston Jesuit School of Theology Ronaldo Zacharias, following Keenan’s proposal, intended “to evaluate through the lens of virtue ethics whether continence can serve one’s growth toward integration when not embraced as a personal calling.”⁵⁸⁰ Zacharias conceives of homosexuality as an “anthropological condition” that is “much more than a genital phenomenon,”⁵⁸¹ as the Magisterial documents seem to consider it.

The Brazilian author affirms that “requirements of chastity cannot be prescribed independently of the persons and of the relationship that is in question,”⁵⁸² and, therefore, he takes into consideration the experience and the concrete circumstances of the individuals. In

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid., 196.

⁵⁷⁸ Hartwig, *The Poetics of Intimacy*, 48.

⁵⁷⁹ Keenan, “Virtue Ethics and Sexual Ethics,” 196.

⁵⁸⁰ Zacharias, “Virtue Ethics,” 357.

⁵⁸¹ Both quotes in this sentence are from *ibid.*, 358.

⁵⁸² *Ibid.*

order to help gay and lesbian people to live the best way they can as sexual beings, the author offers the mentioned set of virtue “as concrete guidelines for our actions.”⁵⁸³

Therefore, the virtue of justice calls for equality and impartiality in same-sex relationships. It requires a wider understanding of chastity, in order to allow both heterosexual and homosexual persons to integrate their sexuality in sexually intimate, interpersonal, mutual, and enriching relationships. The virtue of fidelity calls for honesty and responsibility in embracing and responding to the gift of love that God offers to all of us and, therefore, for expressing this love, in concrete circumstances, in our sexual relationships. According to the author, “one is called primarily to transform life into a reciprocal gift and not to embrace the sufferings ‘associated’ with a cross that was not chosen.”⁵⁸⁴ The virtue of sexual self-care “calls for uniqueness and wholeness,”⁵⁸⁵ which, in turn, demands unity and integration. Consequently, if on the one hand we should recognize that the way of sexual integration for some gay and lesbian persons may be continence, on the other hand, we have to be aware that this is not the only way of integration for all gay and lesbian persons. The virtue of prudence prioritizes the singularity of the individuals and takes into consideration concrete circumstances. Formed and practiced in prudence, in our striving for holiness and flourishing in Christ “we all—homosexuals and heterosexuals—have the unique responsibility of finding the best way of realizing ourselves.”⁵⁸⁶

Zacharias also presents some criteria to evaluate the quality of the relationships: it is a question of whether they are self-liberating, other-enriching, honest, faithful, life-serving, and joyous. At the same time, all relationships must “avoid depersonalization, selfishness, dishonesty, promiscuity, harm to society, and demoralization.”⁵⁸⁷

⁵⁸³ Ibid., 259.

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid., 370.

⁵⁸⁵ Ibid., 294.

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid., 370.

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid., 215.

To conclude, Zacharias considers it a matter of justice that Catholic morality also promotes modes of intimate relationships and commitment for same sex couples. Indeed, gay and lesbian people, in their striving for holiness, need “to be helped in their effort to nurture and sustain the bonds of their relationships,”⁵⁸⁸ which are an important part of their path toward total conformation with Christ.

Michael Hartwig’s proposal

Speaking about the formation of the conscience of young people in sexual matters, Michael Hartwig also considers as obvious that “sexual self-control (chastity) is insufficient to prepare young people for successful sexual lives.”⁵⁸⁹ Indeed, the author claims that sexual self-control alone “does not enable personal and relational excellence.”⁵⁹⁰ As he maintains, the focus of traditional sexual education on abstinence can lead to the repression of one’s awakening sexuality (particularly in teenagers who identify as gay), and so “when they begin to develop affection for another person, [they] must strive to dissociate their emotional feelings from their sexual ones.”⁵⁹¹ Some of the testimonies presented in the previous chapter are examples of this. In fact, this author reminds us that “sexual desire is the most intense embodied experience of our longing for mutuality and relationship,”⁵⁹² and, because of that, it is understandable why suppressing *eros* has been assumed as a way to reach self-possession and peace. However, along the lines of *Deus Caritas Est*, Hartwig warns that such a suppression “eclipses the rich poetic, multidimensional and inexhaustible depth of personal life.”⁵⁹³

For this reason, Hartwig calls for a richer notion of sexual virtue that can better prepare individuals to “initiate, cultivate and sustain contemporary intimate relationships.”⁵⁹⁴ Indeed,

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid., 372.

⁵⁸⁹ Hartwig, *The Poetics of Intimacy*, 73.

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁹¹ Ibid., 74.

⁵⁹² Ibid.

⁵⁹³ Ibid., 77.

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid.

we need to understand which virtues can promote both self-love and love for each other, because neither ‘hygienic’⁵⁹⁵ nor ‘moralist’ approaches help people to “develop the kinds of internal skills needed to understand their sexuality with all its rich human interpersonal meaning.”⁵⁹⁶ Indeed, any approach which reduces sexual virtue to heterosexual-reproductively-intentional acts, constitutes a “reification and objectification of sexuality, compromising the truth and reality of other persons.”⁵⁹⁷

Based on the work of Thomas Moore,⁵⁹⁸ Hartwig calls for a way of poetically and metaphorically approaching human sexuality that he calls the ‘poetics of intimacy.’ For him, this is the only type of language able to engage mind, spirit, soul, and body. Indeed, a poetic conception of the self and of relationships is completely different from an essentialistic and closed view of human nature and relationships, because the former is “able to celebrate the multidimensionality of personal life and the difficulty of defining, objectifying, possessing, or comprehending human subjectivity.” Therefore, we need to know and relate to the other as “a verb, a life, a narrative in progress,”⁵⁹⁹ rather than a closed definition.

The author also reminds us that this is how God entered in relationship with us, in the life of Jesus. Indeed, “the life of Jesus poetically expressed the way God loves and the way God calls us to love. The power of Jesus’ witness to the love of God was not in his ability to theologially define and categorize doctrine but in his ability to tell stories that poetically illustrated God’s way of being,”⁶⁰⁰ and also in his embodied gestures of love, solidarity, and vulnerability. If God did not choose to manifest Godself through a dictate of precise teachings,

⁵⁹⁵ The author refers to the models of sexual education that are limited to the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and unwanted pregnancies. See *ibid.*, 74.

⁵⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁵⁹⁸ See Thomas Moore, *Soul Mates: Honoring the Mysteries of Love and Relationship* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994).

⁵⁹⁹ The last two quotes are from Hartwig, *The Poetics of Intimacy*, 76.

⁶⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 78.

but through an ongoing revelation in relationship, so there is no reason to understand ourselves or our sexuality in terms of ‘black-and-white.’

Therefore, because—as I indicated above—Magisterial teaching affirms that the only possible language of sexuality is either exclusively or essentially heterosexual and reproductive, it is not taking into consideration the whole mystery of human sexuality. Indeed, the virtuous and chaste character of a sexual relationship cannot reside either exclusively or primarily in its procreative character. In fact, procreation is the only element of sexuality that we share with animals. Therefore, Hartwig considers that we must ask “how we can best support the human project of learning how to love and be loved with greater depth and integrity in accord with the poetic of character of our personal, relational, social and spiritual lives.”⁶⁰¹ For this purpose, he offers a set of virtues that can serve as guides to people to become ‘poets of intimacy’—both in heterosexual and homosexual relationships—and three attitudes that can favor the formation of those virtues, according to the different stages of life.

First, Hartwig calls for a new grammar, underlining the need to teach children new languages, new possibilities. He proposes a new vocabulary for affection that goes beyond either abstinence or genital intimacy. This grammar “involves learning what it means to be loved because one belongs, not because one conforms to others’ expectations... learning how to love those who are different, particularly those who may suffer social prejudice.”⁶⁰² Second, the author speaks about ‘composition,’ which he links with adolescence, because it is a time in which humans begin to experience “a depth desire or interiority that longs for deep companionship and recognition.”⁶⁰³ This is the time for developing integration, for discovering one’s sexual orientation, during which time both sexual involvement and fear regarding emergent sexuality can be harmful. Third, the adult age is the time for the poetics of intimacy.

⁶⁰¹ Ibid., 276.

⁶⁰² Ibid., 96.

⁶⁰³ Ibid.

In this moment, intimate relationships marked by commitment⁶⁰⁴ can be a way for people to achieve “a deeper sense of the poetic richness of their own personality and that of others.”⁶⁰⁵ Through virtuous sexual relationships, adult lovers “are saying to each other in the language of this embodied intimacy that they will be tender and respectful of even the most fragile and vulnerable layers of each other’s emotional life.”⁶⁰⁶

As a consequence of the Incarnation, these virtuous sexual relationships must be Christ-centered, and body affirming, overcoming every type of dualism between body and mind, affection and reason. They should be also justice-oriented, and avoid discrimination and any type of strict gender role descriptions. Virtuous sexuality must be also love-centered, which allows people to “develop a richer vocabulary of intimacy and deeper appreciation for the mystery of intimate relationships.”⁶⁰⁷ Because sexual intimacy is “one of the richest contexts for learning to love more deeply and more authentically,”⁶⁰⁸ it can be a privileged way of union with God and with the other. Virtuous sexual relationships are those in which the partners learn how to be “sensitive to the poetic and metaphoric dimensions of each other’s lives,”⁶⁰⁹ in order to know and appreciate more deeply the life of each other. Finally, Hartwig also considers fecundity or fruitfulness as a virtue for sexual relationships. From his point of view, human reproduction emerges as one of many dimensions of a fruitful sexual intimacy and love, understood in a metaphoric and poetic sense.

Todd A. Salzman and Michael G. Lawler’s proposal

Salzman and Lawler also propose a virtue-ethics-based method for sexual ethics. Their method is historically conscious and embedded in the Catholic Tradition, but at the same time

⁶⁰⁴ Commitment means the “decision to attend to the other even when I am not always inclined to do so.” Ibid., 89.

⁶⁰⁵ Ibid., 101.

⁶⁰⁶ Ibid., 93.

⁶⁰⁷ Ibid., 118.

⁶⁰⁸ Ibid., 119.

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid., 120.

is primarily concerned with the human person as a whole, rather than the moral evaluation of one's acts. Instead of absolute and universal norms to be applied to concrete situations, the norms of virtue ethics are directed to behavior and they indicate "an *appropriate* act for reaching the desired end, selected from the continuum that lies between virtuous excess and defect."⁶¹⁰

These authors share the same conception of virtue ethics as James Keenan. For the judgment of the concrete situation, the role of prudence (practical wisdom) is fundamental: it helps to "select one action over others along the continuum that is appropriate and proportionate for this particular person, in this situation, and for this right reason."⁶¹¹

The method proposed by Salzman and Lawler is also based on, and seeks to facilitate, human and sexual dignity. In this aspect, these authors do not follow the traditional Magisterial approach to sexual ethics, more based on acts rather than on the character of the persons. Indeed, they call for a different selection, interpretation, prioritization, and integration (SIPI) of the sources of ethical knowledge: Scripture, Tradition, Experience, and Reason. They follow the *Catechism* in its definition of human sexuality as an authentic integration into the relational dimension of the person, particularly expressed in committed and faithful relationships. However, the authors want to extend the Magisterial conception of sexuality to homosexual and bisexual persons. Through a renewed prioritization and integration of the sources of ethical knowledge, Salzman and Lawler aim to "construct a renewed definition of human and sexual dignity and to formulate a new foundational principle for sexual ethics, namely, holistic complementarity."⁶¹²

⁶¹⁰ Todd A. Salzman and Michael G. Lawler, *Virtue & Theological Ethics: Toward a Renewed Ethical Method* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018), 191.

⁶¹¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶¹² *Ibid.*, 158.

According to these authors, holistic complementarity “includes [sexual] orientation, personal, and biological complementarity.”⁶¹³ Recognizing sexual orientation as a fundamental dimension of human sexuality, Salzman and Lawler consider that an honest teaching on sexual ethics cannot ignore humans’ sexual orientation, although the Magisterium affirms that “heterogenital complementarity is the primary, foundational, *sine qua non* condition for what defines a truly human sexual act.”⁶¹⁴ However, Salzman and Lawler sustain that the integration and manifestation of a sexual orientation, personal, affective, and biological (genital and eventually reproductive) complementarity “in just and loving, committed sexual acts facilitate a person’s ability to love God, neighbor, and self in a more profound and holy way.”⁶¹⁵ By the virtue of love, sexual activity should manifest the *ekstasis* of one person toward another self “who is absolute and unique in herself or himself.”⁶¹⁶ Such relationships must also be mutual, because “there is no true love until love is mutual,”⁶¹⁷ and mutuality creates the necessary communion between the lovers. The authors also consider some type of long-term commitment as a manifestation of loving and just relationships. By the virtue of justice, sexual relationships must be marked by equality between the partners and the free consent of both.

Salzman and Lawler conceive holistic complementarity informed by the virtues of justice, love, and chastity as the grounds for sexual moral norms that, at the same time, “must seek to facilitate the integration of holistic complementarity.”⁶¹⁸ Therefore, Salzman and Lawler do not consider norms as absolutes to be applied to the concrete situation. However, they recognize the importance of these norms to guide and help the moral subject to discern the best way to pursue the end he/she wants to reach: holiness as identification with Christ, through a holistic complementarity in sexual relationships informed by chastity, justice, and love.

⁶¹³ Salzman and Lawler, *The Sexual Person*, 157.

⁶¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁶¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁶¹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁶¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 160.

3.3. Spirituality for gay and lesbian persons: paths of holiness

In this ethical framework, there is one last aspect to be stressed: spirituality. Although I mention it last, spirituality is a fundamental element of all moral agency and particularly of moral conscience. Indeed, at the origin of a Christian's entire moral life is one's personal relationship with Jesus and one's progressive participation in the Trinitarian life. As Richard Gula states, God's love for us "is the supreme truth, the rock bottom foundation, the first principle on which we build a moral and spiritual life."⁶¹⁹ Thus, in recent decades, theologians have become aware of the need to integrate spiritual life with moral action in order to overcome the dichotomy between devotion and spirituality, on the one hand, and moral agency on the other.

Gula also points out that personal conscience, formed in the Christian virtues that shape one's character, is the place where morality and spirituality converge. Thus, the good life⁶²⁰ "is a life of friendship with God and all that God loves—ourselves, other people, and all of creation."⁶²¹ Along the same lines, in *Gaudete et Exsultate*, Pope Francis affirms that holiness consists in "experiencing, in union with Christ, the mysteries of his life."⁶²² Moreover, along the lines of Ignatius of Loyola, Francis states that the contemplation of these mysteries "leads us to incarnate them in our choices and attitudes,"⁶²³ and "we are challenged to show our commitment in such a way that everything we do has evangelical meaning and identifies us all the more with Jesus Christ."⁶²⁴ Indeed, according to the logic of the *Spiritual Exercises*, beyond the incarnation in our lives of the mysteries of Jesus, is the memory of "the great good I have

⁶¹⁹ Richard M. Gula, *The Good Life: Where Morality and Spirituality Converge* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 2.

⁶²⁰ Good life means "to grow in our fullness as disciples of Jesus and to respond to the presence of God in a way that leads to full communion with God." *Ibid.*, 122.

⁶²¹ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁶²² Francis, "Gaudete et Exsultate," no. 20.

⁶²³ *Ibid.*

⁶²⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 28.

received” that makes one able “to love and to serve the Divine Majesty in all things.”⁶²⁵ According to Ignatius, and in accord with the purest Christian tradition, there is no sense in separating spirituality from the different dimensions of human action, particularly its sexual dimension.

Given the insights that the human sciences have offered about the fundamental role of sexuality in human existence, the Church, especially since Vatican II, has sought to reflect on the profound connection between sexuality and spirituality.⁶²⁶ In fact, concerning the relation between sexuality and spirituality, as I mentioned in the first chapter, the Christian tradition has been marked, for many centuries, by a dualism of Stoic origin that has separated the body and its sexual drives from the spirit. In such a context, salvation meant “release from the lower (fleshly) into the higher (spiritual) life.”⁶²⁷ The way in which popular piety and hagiography hold up as models of holiness people without sexual desire or any desire is a proof of this. Actually, until the Second Vatican Council, celibacy was considered a higher form of perfection. As Shaji George Kochuthara also points out, the Christian tradition particularly devaluated sexual pleasure, reducing the goodness of sexual intercourse (in itself good, because created by God) to its procreative purpose. According to this author, “one of the ways of devaluating sexuality and sexual pleasure was presenting celibacy as superior to marriage.”⁶²⁸

Fortunately, it seems that things are changing. Salzman and Lawler affirm that “for the Christian, sexuality, love, and spirituality are all intertwined.”⁶²⁹ Indeed, they continue, “far

⁶²⁵ Both quotes in this sentence are from Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises*, no. 233.

⁶²⁶ In this regard, William McDonough, based on the study of Giuseppe Baldanza, affirms that, even before Vatican II, particularly since Pius XI’s 1930 Encyclical *Casti Connubii*, Catholic sexual morality began a process of flight from Stoicism. First, by defining marriage as “the blending of life as a whole,” (*totius vitae communio*), this Encyclical includes, for the first time, sexual love within the essence of marriage. (Pius XI, “Encyclical Letter on Christian Marriage ‘Casti Connubii,’” December 31, 1930, The Holy See, <http://www.vatican.va/>, no. 24.) Secondly, in *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 48, “sexual love itself is assumed into God and becomes sacramental of God’s love.” William McDonough, “Alasdair MacIntyre as Help for Rethinking Catholic Natural Law Estimates of Same-Sex Life Partnerships,” *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 21 (2001): 201. See also Giuseppe Baldanza, *La Grazia del Sacramento del Matrimonio: Contributo per la Riflessione Teologica* (Roma: Centro Liturgico Vincenziano, 1993).

⁶²⁷ James B. Nelson, “Reuniting Sexuality and Spirituality,” *Christian Century* 104, no. 6 (1987): 189.

⁶²⁸ Kochuthara, *Sexual Pleasure in the Catholic Tradition*, 464.

⁶²⁹ Salzman and Lawler, *The Sexual Person*, 134.

from being an impediment to authentic spirituality, truly human sexuality and sexual acts, embraced and used as gifts of the creator God, can enhance, deepen, and develop one's spirituality."⁶³⁰ These authors further state that "the doctrine of incarnation... is the most radical affirmation of the physical embodiedness of the human and of human sexuality, and of the goodness of both."⁶³¹ Likewise, the bishops of the United States declared that "the *incarnation* of God's Word, the divine becoming fully human, adds even greater dignity or divine approbation to our being corporeal, sexual beings."⁶³² Moreover, Kochuthara urges a re-discovering of (conjugal) sexual spirituality, given that "sexual union is the most profound experience of intimacy"⁶³³ between the spouses. This author actually considers that "conjugal spirituality is essentially conjugal sexual spirituality."⁶³⁴ The same vision is shared by several Magisterial documents of the last decades, especially *Amoris Laetitia*. As I already mentioned, Benedict XVI also claims the inseparability of *eros* and *agape*, since they are two different dimensions of human love.⁶³⁵ Along the same lines, Salzman and Lawler, by affirming that the Trinity provides the model for every human relationship, recognize that "the communion between spouses expressed in the sexual intercourse... is also a sacrament of the divine communion."⁶³⁶ Indeed, the authors continue, "the act of sexual intercourse allows humans a unique insight into the love shared within the Trinity."⁶³⁷ According to James Nelson, "sexual sanctification can mean growth in bodily self-acceptance, in the capacity for sensuousness... in the diffusion of the erotic throughout the body (rather than in its genitalization)."⁶³⁸

⁶³⁰ Ibid.

⁶³¹ Ibid., 135.

⁶³² United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Human Sexuality: A Catholic Perspective for Education and Lifelong Learning* (Washington, D.C.: USCCB, 1991), 10.

⁶³³ Kochuthara, *Sexual Pleasure in the Catholic Tradition*, 465.

⁶³⁴ Ibid.

⁶³⁵ See Benedict XVI, "Deus Caritas Est," nos. 3-8.

⁶³⁶ Salzman and Lawler, *The Sexual Person*, 135.

⁶³⁷ Ibid.

⁶³⁸ Nelson, "Reuniting Sexuality and Spirituality," 189.

Nevertheless, as William McDonough acknowledges, the flight from Stoicism over the twentieth century in Catholic sexual ethics “has not been far and fast enough.”⁶³⁹ In fact, this change of attitude from the Magisterium towards integration between sexual pleasure and spirituality is restricted to the context of Catholic marriage. Outside of this context, as I have already mentioned, the Magisterium continues to look with suspicion at sexual pleasure and the Stoic-inspired dualism between sexual pleasure and spirituality—that is, between body and spirit—remains in force. The situation becomes particularly complex regarding gay and lesbian people. Although they are called to have a spiritual life and to grow in sanctity along with other children of God, according to the current teaching of the Church it seems that their only possible way to achieve holiness is through the complete sacrifice of the sexual expression of their affectivity.

From the testimonies presented in the previous chapter, we can recognize a characteristic common to almost everyone. At a certain point in their lives, when people discover themselves to be gay or lesbian, most experience an inner division, an inability to love themselves, and particularly an inability to feel worthy to be loved by God. As Margaret Farley states, “sex has been *experienced* [for many gay people] as not open to communion with God because it has been interpreted as without this possibility.”⁶⁴⁰ Indeed, James Empereur acknowledges that “often because they cannot have their identity and feelings validated, they resort to a kind of dualism by denying their sexual energies.”⁶⁴¹ For many gay people who want to fit into Magisterial teaching, their affections, emotions, and their way of embodied love are synonyms for something that is ‘intrinsically disordered,’ and, therefore, in order to walk in the way of holiness, they are to be denied or neutralized. In his brilliant article on the counsel of the cross for homosexuals, which I will discuss later, Paul Crowley affirms that Magisterial documents

⁶³⁹ McDonough, “Rethinking Catholic Natural Law,” 200.

⁶⁴⁰ Farley, *Just Love*, 190.

⁶⁴¹ James Empereur, *Spiritual Direction and the Gay Person* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1998), 10.

draw upon the presupposition that “gay people who have not sacrificed their wills in a pursuit of a chaste life, i.e., a life without any sexual expression, are constantly threatened by destruction, presumably their own self-destruction.”⁶⁴² Magisterial documents assume that the desires that emanate from the homosexual ‘condition’ are necessarily “self-indulgent” and therefore they must be ‘crucified.’

It is beyond the scope of this work to analyze in detail the traits and characteristics of a spirituality for gay and lesbian people. However, I will present four aspects that I consider most relevant: the need for self-acceptance and self-love, as a primordial stage of spiritual growth; the dwelling on the margins and the periphery as a privileged place in the heart of God; the importance of cultivating freedom of conscience in relation to the ecclesial community; and the invitation made by the Magisterium to “unite to the sacrifice of the Lord’s Cross.”⁶⁴³

The first step of every spiritual path, and particularly the spiritual path of gays and lesbians, is to accept and assume one’s reality. As Gregory of Nazianzus stated, “what has not been assumed, has not been healed; but that which is united to his Godhead is also saved.”⁶⁴⁴ Therefore, the very act of embracing one’s sexual orientation is, in itself, a spiritual act, an act of death for one’s and others’ expectations of being heterosexual, and of resurrection to a new life. This call to acceptance is based on the assumption that sexuality, and particularly gay sexuality, is a “sexual charism,” and “a special sexual gift which shows forth the diversity and beauty of God in our world.”⁶⁴⁵ As Empereur points out, “unless the loss [of one’s and others’ expectations] is accepted and mourned, it will be difficult to move ahead in the spiritual life in

⁶⁴² Paul G. Crowley, “Homosexuality and the Counsel of the Cross,” *Theological Studies* 65, no. 3 (2004): 507.

⁶⁴³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2358.

⁶⁴⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus, “Letters on the Apollinarian Controversy: To Cledonius Against Apollinaris (Epistle 101),” in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Edward Rochie Hardy, vol. 3 (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 1954), 218. This statement arises in the context of disputes against the heresy of Apollinaris, who held that Jesus Christ had not assumed a rational mind. Gregory continues: “If only half Adam fell, then that which Christ assumes and saves may be half also; but if the whole of his nature fell, it must be united to the whole nature of Him that was begotten, and so be saved as a whole.” Ibid.

⁶⁴⁵ All the quotes in this sentence are from Empereur, *Spiritual Direction*, 3.

a positive way.”⁶⁴⁶ Indeed, the author goes on, the denial of one’s sexual energy “often because they cannot have their identity and feelings validated,” leads to a kind of dualism. Thus, the loss of expectations allows one to acknowledge and love the truth about oneself and, consequently, to love oneself. It allows one to open one’s life to the loving care of God, in order to enter progressively into union with Godself. As Daniel Helminiak affirms, “to acknowledge the truth is to be real, and to act according to the truth, to integrate each new truth with all else that you know you are, is already to grow spiritually.”⁶⁴⁷ Given that the acceptance of one’s sexuality is fundamental for positive self-esteem and that “sexuality is increasingly seen as a necessary part of our spiritual lives and so intrinsic to our experience of God,”⁶⁴⁸ sexual self-acceptance and self-esteem, which advances human development, are also fundamental steps for spiritual growth.

Therefore, we have to take seriously the Conciliar teaching that “all the faithful, whatever their condition or state, are called by the Lord—each in his or her own way—to that perfect holiness.”⁶⁴⁹ Furthermore, Pope Francis in *Gaudete et Exsultate* states that “the important thing is that each believer discern his or her own path, that they bring out the very best of themselves, the most personal gifts that God has placed in their hearts, rather than hopelessly trying to imitate something not meant for them.”⁶⁵⁰

If it is fundamental that each person meets the Lord in their personal truth, and if it is true that “there are many actual ways of bearing witness”⁶⁵¹ of Christ, then gay and lesbian people are also called to holiness from who they are, from their concrete way of loving, because “gay sexuality is a fact of creation.”⁶⁵² Indeed, “as with everyone else, if they are to love at all,

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid., 35.

⁶⁴⁷ Daniel A. Helminiak, *Sex and the Sacred: Gay Identity and Spiritual Growth* (Binghamton, NY: Harrington Park Press, 2006), 5.

⁶⁴⁸ Empereur, *Spiritual Direction*, 36.

⁶⁴⁹ Second Vatican Council, “Lumen Gentium,” no. 11.

⁶⁵⁰ Francis, “Gaudete et Exsultate,” no. 11.

⁶⁵¹ Ibid.

⁶⁵² Empereur, *Spiritual Direction*, 3.

lesbians and gay men must love where they are able—and that is in gay and lesbian relationships.”⁶⁵³ In their spiritual life, gay and lesbian persons are called—as all human beings are called—to “*trust* their experience of God,”⁶⁵⁴ to trust that “they are loveable and can love themselves... precisely because that is how God loves them and wants them to be,”⁶⁵⁵ despite of the expectations of family, Church, or society.

In this regard, it is important to refer to the work of James Alison, who reflects on the relationship between personal conscience and the expectations of the Church toward gay persons. In his book *Faith Beyond Resentment*, this author sustains that “the discovery of the conscience of son and brother for a gay man should be the discovery of the most profoundly Catholic sense of conscience.”⁶⁵⁶ Alison considers that for our times, we need a renewed moral theology capable of “unbinding the consciences of people who fear, at a very deep level, receiving the conscience of a child of God.”⁶⁵⁷ The concepts of childhood and fraternity are fundamental in Alison’s conception of Catholic conscience. He aims to help each Christian, and particularly gay and lesbian persons, to listen in their own consciences to the (re)creative voice of God, who considers everyone a beloved son or daughter.

The author recognizes that, for different reasons, it is not easy for Catholic gay and lesbian persons to discern this voice in their hearts. Indeed, as I have already mentioned, many homosexual Catholics experience a sense of inadequacy or even a sense of not being worthy to be called a beloved son or daughter of God. If, as some Magisterial documents affirm, the voice of the Magisterium is to be understood as the official interpretation of the voice of God, and if the homosexual ‘inclination’ is considered to be “objectively disordered,” it is only to be

⁶⁵³ Helminiak, *Sex and the Sacred: Gay Identity and Spiritual Growth*, 141.

⁶⁵⁴ Empereur, *Spiritual Direction*, 3.

⁶⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶⁵⁶ James Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay* (New York: Crossroad, 2001), 96.

⁶⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 55.

expected that a person with such an ‘inclination’ would have trouble believing that he or she is a beloved son or daughter of God.

Looking at his own experience, as well as at the experience of other people struggling with the same issues, Alison notes that the Magisterial teaching, and the consequent way of proceeding of many Catholic communities, can be translated in these terms: “God loves you just so long as you hide what you are and deny yourself the search for the integrity and transparency of life and of virtues which is your task to teach others.”⁶⁵⁸

Alison notices that such a context leads, generally, to two typical reactions. On the one hand, to what he calls a “pathological loyalty”⁶⁵⁹ which prevents the individual from distinguishing between the ecclesiastical institutions and the voice of the loving God. On the other hand, it can generate a “pathological rejection”⁶⁶⁰ that manifests itself either in complete rejection of faith (at least within a community), or in open participation in groups of resistance.

The first step proposed by Alison to deal with the official teaching on homosexuality in a healthy and adult way is posing the question: “Yes, but is it true?”⁶⁶¹ Thus, the first step to liberate gay conscience from the violence of the Magisterial teaching is to ask oneself and the Magisterium if, for example, assertions like “homosexual acts do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity” are true.

However, according to Alison, the definitive step to free Catholic gay conscience from all types of violence involves “unbinding our conscience from any form of paternal cultural and religious teaching.”⁶⁶² Indeed, a healthy Catholic gay conscience must learn how to deal with the ecclesiastical institution not in terms of ‘paternity’ but of ‘fraternity.’ Such a proposal is not a pure invention of the author, but is deeply rooted in the story of Jesus in the Gospel, for whom

⁶⁵⁸ Ibid., 45.

⁶⁵⁹ Ibid., 46.

⁶⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁶¹ James Alison, “Yes, but Is It True...?,” *James Alison. Theology*, August 3, 2003, <http://jamesalison.co.uk/texts/yes-but-is-it-true/>.

⁶⁶² Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment*, 78.

fraternity comes before paternity. Because of that, Jesus reminds us that “only one is your Father and Master” (Mt 23:8-9) and so, in their lives, Christian people should recognize ‘paternity’ only in God, the Father. Similarly, as Alison recalls, the only authentically divine voice we have ever heard is one that spoke to us only in a fraternal way: Jesus. In the New Testament, the Father makes his voice heard rarely, and only to confirm the mission of Jesus as the beloved son, our brother. In the Gospel, it is never the paternal voice that teaches, but rather the true Master is Jesus, the brother, who teaches us a new way of paternity—one marked by mercy.

Therefore, one has to learn “how to think and act free of our ‘paternal’ group belonging and, instead, how to live and act as ones who only have siblings, including intergenerational ones who need fraternal treatment appropriate to their age and strength.”⁶⁶³ As an adult in faith, one is called to recognize the vulnerability of one’s mothers and fathers, placing oneself in a position of fraternity even with them. Indeed, “the distorted paternity and maternity we received are simply particular instances of the fratricidal nature of human culture.”⁶⁶⁴ In such a context, instead of being victims of the past or of unalterable divine traditions, “we start to be able to treat these structures [institutional church] as something on the fraternal level with us, and this is true of our family life, our political structures, our national heritage and our religious institutions.”⁶⁶⁵ Therefore, at the level of conscience, it is important to develop a capacity to discern the different voices that echo in our deeper being: those which address us in a non-fraternal tone, those of the resentful victim, and “the authentically fraternal voice calling us out of fratricide.”⁶⁶⁶

⁶⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁴ Ibid., 78.

⁶⁶⁵ Ibid., 80.

⁶⁶⁶ Ibid., 82. In this regard, it is important to refer to the abovementioned distinction between conscience and superego.

In short, Alison holds that those upholding Church teaching and those attacking it are locked in a world of fratricide dynamics disguised as sacred paternity, and therefore bound to resentment. The free Catholic gay conscience requires “the hard work of ensuring that both our listening and our speaking are only at the fraternal level—never mind who else is shouting, or refusing to talk, in either case fratricidally.”⁶⁶⁷ This process of liberation is basically the paschal process that every Christian is called to live, in the path of conforming to the Lord Jesus: to die to the old being, and find oneself being given a new one, based on fraternity. This is the process that will disclose in the individual conscience the voice of the true Father who says: “you are my beloved child.”

The fourth aspect that I would like to analyze is the invitation made by the Magisterium to gay and lesbian people to unite their sufferings “to the sacrifice of the Lord’s Cross.”⁶⁶⁸ In his abovementioned article, Crowley aims to offer “a route to the Cross that leads to hope and joy, i.e., human flourishing.”⁶⁶⁹ Far from wanting to avoid or hide the suffering inherent in all human life, particularly in its sexual dimension, the author takes into account this suffering as “an authentic way of participating in the Pascal Mystery of Christ.”⁶⁷⁰ Indeed, given that suffering is part of human existence, including sexuality, we are called as Christian to participate in the sufferings of Christ, if we want to share in his glory.

However, the Magisterium considers that when gay and lesbian people engage in homosexual acts, “they confirm within themselves a disordered sexual inclination which is essentially self-indulgent.”⁶⁷¹ Furthermore, the Magisterium considers that the denial of the self, far from being an absurd denial of oneself, constitutes instead for them “a source of self-giving which will save them from a way of life which constantly threatens to destroy them.”⁶⁷²

⁶⁶⁷ Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment*, 85.

⁶⁶⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2358.

⁶⁶⁹ Crowley, “Homosexuality and the Counsel of the Cross,” 501.

⁶⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷¹ Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, “Letter on Pastoral Care of Homosexual,” no. 7.

⁶⁷² *Ibid.*, no. 12.

Thus, the way of the Cross, as the renunciation of the sexual expression of one's own affectivity, emerges as the only possible alternative for a gay or lesbian Catholic who wants to grow in conformation with Christ. On the one hand, the Council invites everyone to follow their unique path of holiness without, as Pope Francis adds, anyone being exhausted in trying to follow a path that is not their own. On the other hand, the only possible spiritual path for homosexuals is that of the Cross, as denial of their embodied affectivity.

Although identification with the crucified Christ "can lead to service to the will of God rather than enslavement to one's own desires," purifying one "from the desire to have control over all aspects of one's life,"⁶⁷³ Crowley considers it a problem to recommend the Cross of self-sacrificial suffering to gays as the only spiritual path possible to them, because it risks missing "part of the central mystery of the Cross, including the fact that Christ freely accepted it."⁶⁷⁴ Along the same lines, John Edwards wonders whether all sacrifices the Magisterium asks of gay people "are 'fruitful,' loving, and life-giving as Christ's clearly was."⁶⁷⁵ Actually, the experience of many people, as it appears in the testimonies I discussed before, shows that in many cases the sacrifice of the desires for love and intimacy of many gay and lesbian persons generates frustration, anxiety, depression, and bitterness, rather than a self-giving attitude.

In practice, "the path of the Cross is the only route through Christian life for the gay Catholic."⁶⁷⁶ This is a cross that is not freely embraced, but which proves to be the only option for one "who is beset by the paradox of a sexuality that is at once a part of God's creation yet oriented toward evil."⁶⁷⁷ This position, according to Edwards, reveals the Church's "fundamentally flawed understanding of human flourishing, which does not recognize that self-

⁶⁷³ Crowley, "Homosexuality and the Counsel of the Cross," 506.

⁶⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 516.

⁶⁷⁵ Edwards, "Constructing a Coherent Christian Sexual Ethic," 39.

⁶⁷⁶ Crowley, "Homosexuality and the Counsel of the Cross," 509

⁶⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

sacrifice can only contribute to human flourishing if it is a genuine and loving choice coming after self- acceptance.”⁶⁷⁸

The renunciation that comes from embracing the Cross is one made out of love and gratitude, as a response to God’s call. Therefore, I wonder whether denying one’s own way of expressing affectivity—even if affectivity is not reduced to sex—can constitute such a renunciation. If we understand sexuality as a fundamental dimension of human life, recognizing that gay people will never be able to embrace Christian marriage, is it fair to invite them, in practice, to a lifelong renunciation of their sexuality? Is this really the only way open to them to growth in holiness?

Indeed, if, we consider homosexual orientation as a natural variant of human sexuality, and as something created by divine goodness; if we affirm that homosexual persons are capable of walking in holiness through living out honest relationships guided by Christian virtues; if we stress that this way of expressing affectivity does not in itself constitute a threat to personal holiness and flourishing, and to the common good; then it seems that it does not make sense to identify the free embracing of Christ’s Cross with the sacrifice of the sexual expression of this same affectivity.

As a way to overcome this impasse, both Crowley and Alison invite faithful gays and lesbians to conform themselves to the empathy of the crucified Jesus with all those who suffer. These authors invite these people to crucify with Jesus their eventual desires for victimization or resentment, in order to open themselves to empathy with others in suffering. Hence, Crowley proposes a positive theology of the Cross, in which “the Christian enters willingly into the crucible of life, through love.”⁶⁷⁹ This approach does not entail a sort of “individual’s combat with the flesh, and final victory over all of its chaotic unruliness,”⁶⁸⁰ but is based on gratitude

⁶⁷⁸ Edwards, “Constructing a Coherent Christian Sexual Ethic,” 40.

⁶⁷⁹ Crowley, “Homosexuality and the Counsel of the Cross,” 529.

⁶⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 528.

and “on the dynamics of a divine love that leads to joy.”⁶⁸¹ This empathy can be expressed also as God’s mercy. In short, empathy or mercy manifests the ability to enter into the chaos of the other.

Finally, I would like to refer to the marginal and vulnerable position that gay and lesbian people occupy in Catholic communities all over the world, in which they are often the subject of ridicule and discrimination. If, on the one hand, as Shawn Copeland states, this vulnerability and marginality “makes a claim on the body of Jesus of Nazareth, on the body of Christ,”⁶⁸² on the other hand, this position entails a privileged place in the Kingdom’s logic. As the Portuguese Cardinal Tolentino Mendonça affirms, “for the Church... the periphery is not a problem, but a horizon.... In fact, the choice of an encounter with the peripheries is not only an imperative of charity, but a historical and geographical mobilization that allows the encounter with what Christianity has been, and what it actually is.”⁶⁸³ According to him, although the peripheries are often “dark areas, places of vulnerability and exclusion,” at the same time, “it is there that the brightness of a light can spring.”⁶⁸⁴

Alongside James Martin, I do not consider that gay and lesbian people are condemned to be or to feel marginalized by the Church. This is rather an observation of what is the experience of many people, that “are seen as ‘other,’”⁶⁸⁵ by the Magisterial documents and by many communities. However, as the author states, “for Jesus there was no ‘other.’ Jesus saw beyond categories; he met people where they were and accompanied them.... Jesus was willing to be with, stand with, and befriend” people in the margins. As Martin continues, “the movement for

⁶⁸¹ Ibid., 529.

⁶⁸² M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 74.

⁶⁸³ “Para a Igreja... a periferia não é um problema, mas um horizonte.... De facto, a escolha do encontro com as periferias não é apenas um imperativo da caridade, mas uma mobilização histórica e geográfica que permite o encontro com o que o cristianismo tem sido e com o que ele é.” José Tolentino Mendonça, *Elogio da Sede* (Lisboa: Quetzal, 2018), 143.

⁶⁸⁴ “Zonas noturnas, lugares de vulnerabilidade e de exclusão.” “É aí que pode raiar o brilho de uma luz.” All the quotes in this sentence are from *ibid.*, 144.

⁶⁸⁵ All the quotes in this paragraph are from Martin, *Building a Bridge*, 43-44.

Jesus was always from the outside in. His message was always one of inclusion,” without requiring anyone to be ‘pure’ to approach them. From a Christian point of view, the periphery, instead of being a place of exclusion, becomes a place of grace, of encounter with the Lord, who comes not to the healthy, nor to the just and the self-sufficient, but to those who have a heart and flesh sufficiently wounded, waiting for balm and comfort.⁶⁸⁶

By discovering ways to have a full experience of God, and learning to follow God’s voice that resonates in their unbound consciences calling for compassion, gay and lesbian people can bring to the community “a particular perspective on the justice intended by God. It is not a justice achieved only through angry protests against institutions nor in rejecting a homophobic church. Real justice comes when one puts one’s energies in living compassionate, truthful, and joyous lives.”⁶⁸⁷

⁶⁸⁶ See Mk 2:17.

⁶⁸⁷ Empereur, *Spiritual Direction*, 10.

4. Final remarks by way of conclusion

I would like, in conclusion, to offer my final remarks on how the Catholic Church can help gay and lesbian people to live out lives of honesty, and to progress on the way of holiness towards their full conformation with Christ.

Firstly, I recall again that Church's teaching on sexual ethics, particularly regarding same-sex relations and contraception, has not been taken seriously by the vast majority of the lay faithful, by many theologians, and even by many confessors and spiritual directors. I agree with those who recognize and identify the Church's "hermeneutics of consistency." Especially since *Casti Connubii*, the Magisterium has been more concerned with the consistency of the teaching on sexual ethics than with its relevance to, and coherence with human experience. In fact, the Magisterium grounds the authority of its sexual ethics not so much in the relevance and appropriateness of its proposal to the actual struggles of the faithful, but rather in the authoritative validation of a truth claim that is coupled with "as we have always taught."

As I demonstrated in the first chapter, the approach of Catholic doctrine to same-sex relationships throughout history is anything but consistent. Therefore, as I mentioned in the second chapter, the first step to restoring the credibility of the ecclesial proposal in terms of sexuality necessarily involves listening to what real people are telling us. This is an imperative that flows from the Second Vatican Council itself.⁶⁸⁸ But also the very reading of Sacred Scripture should lead us to a serious reflection on this topic. I am thinking, for example, of the episode of the man born blind, reported in the chapter 9 of John's Gospel. The dialogue of the newly healed blind man with the Pharisees bears some similarities with the dialogue between the lay faithful, particularly the gay and lesbian faithful, and the Magisterium. Although

⁶⁸⁸ "With the help of the Holy Spirit, it is the task of the entire People of God, especially pastors and theologians, to hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our age, and to judge them in the light of the divine word, so that revealed truth can always be more deeply penetrated, better understood and set forth to greater advantage." Second Vatican Council, "Gaudium et Spes," no. 44.

experience shows that many gays and lesbians who live in virtuous and fruitful relationships bear the fruits of Christian holiness, the Magisterium prefers to remain in the logic of repetition. Along with the Pharisees, the Church's teaching seems to be saying to gay people: "You were born totally in sin, and are you trying to teach us?" (John 9:34). And, as it happened with the formerly blind man, we are simply throwing them out from the Church by not really listening to the people.

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, scholastic theology, under stoic influence, "reflected a deep antipathy toward sexual pleasure, together with a sense that sexual activity is fundamentally incompatible with spirituality."⁶⁸⁹ Despite small and slow steps made over the last century to overcome this vision of things, regarding issues as birth control and homosexuality, "procreation is [still seen as] the superior good, so much so that in some cases if the procreative end is not present, no amount of unification and love can give even minimal value to sex."⁶⁹⁰ In addition to being incoherent with a vision of chastity as an integration of sexuality into the person considered as a whole,⁶⁹¹ this teaching is also incompatible with the conception of holiness expressed by Pope Francis in *Gaudete et Exsultate*. If each believer is called to "the most personal gifts that God has placed in their hearts,"⁶⁹² just so, gay and lesbian people cannot flourish by annihilating their affections, their emotions, and their way of loving, which for many of them must also be manifested through sexual expression.

Moreover, if we consider sexual orientation as a gift from God and a natural component of human sexuality,⁶⁹³ we must recognize that "the concrete natural order that homosexuals experience... is not ordered to reproduction."⁶⁹⁴ The current Magisterial teaching already

⁶⁸⁹ Jean Porter, *Natural and Divine Law* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 191.

⁶⁹⁰ Edwards, "Constructing a Coherent Christian Sexual Ethic," 42.

⁶⁹¹ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2337.

⁶⁹² Both quotes in the sentence are from Francis, "Gaudete et Exsultate," no. 11.

⁶⁹³ As Hartwig reminds us, "the assumptions which supported Stoic and natural law views of human nature have been questioned by contemporary findings in psychology, neurobiology, sociology, genetics, and other human scientific studies." Hartwig, *The Poetics of Intimacy*, 109.

⁶⁹⁴ Pope, "Scientific and Natural Law Analyses of Homosexuality," 115.

acknowledges an exception to the doctrine of the inseparability of the unitive and procreative purpose of each sexual act within marriage⁶⁹⁵ in relation to infertile people. Indeed, it recognizes that, although by nature these persons are incapable of fulfilling the procreative dimension of their sexual union, yet, their sexual unions are considered not only ‘ordered,’ but a means of achieving holiness.⁶⁹⁶ Likewise, if by following human experience and the data offered by the large majority of human sciences, we are led to conclude that homosexual orientation is something natural, why do we not concede the same or, at least, some value to the unitive dimension eventually present in a same-sex couple?

Furthermore, if we attend to the actual experience of many heterosexual couples striving for holiness, we have to recognize that not every one of their sexual acts is necessarily procreative. By way of example, Cristina Traina, a Catholic theologian, shares the experience of her “faithful, prayerful, and procreative” marriage.⁶⁹⁷ It seems to me that her experience will not be much different from that of many Catholic marriages of very virtuous people. Therefore, the idea of a supposed unitive and procreative character of each sexual act, beyond using or not using ‘unnatural’ contraceptive methods, seems to have little connection with the actual sexual life of the faithful people of God.⁶⁹⁸

Moreover, we need to take the law of graduality seriously, and apply it also to the lives of gay and lesbian people. The law of graduality applies to social ethics and also to the first and most important law of Christianity which is the law of charity. According to both John Paul II

⁶⁹⁵ In this regard I refer to Paul VI, “Encyclical Letter on the Regulation of Birth ‘*Humanae Vitae*,’” July 25, 1968, The Holy See, <http://w2.vatican.va/>, nos. 11-12. In this Encyclical, the Magisterium requires the inseparability between unitive and procreative purpose of every sexual act of a Catholic married couple.

⁶⁹⁶ See Second Vatican Council, “*Gaudium et Spes*,” no. 50.

⁶⁹⁷ The author declares that “the ecstatic joys and profound peace of procreativity have characterized our sexual encounters on perhaps ten occasions. Otherwise our sexual relationship, while not antiprocreative in any ideological sense, has been intentionally—often anxiously—non-procreative. And the moments when we have experienced our sexual complementarity as in any way essential to the business of our marriage have been limited to these same ten occasions.” Traina, “Papal Ideals, Marital Realities,” 274.

⁶⁹⁸ Pope Francis acknowledges this fact in *Amoris Laetitia*: “At times we have proposed a far too abstract and almost artificial theological ideal of marriage, far removed from the concrete situations and practical possibilities of real families.” Francis, “*Amoris Laetitia*,” no. 36.

and Francis, the law of graduality concerns also Christian marriage. But, with regard to the sexual life of the faithful outside of marriage, why does the position of the Magisterium vary only between black and white, between absolute abstinence and mortal sin or objective disorder? Are we not, as Pope Francis says, under the inadvertent influence of the old Gnostic temptation, domesticating the mystery, whether the mystery of God and divine grace, or the mystery of others' lives?⁶⁹⁹

In *GE* Francis underlines that holiness is a path and that it grows through small gestures. The Pope recognizes that such path entails moments of dismay, weakness, and conversion, and, in our way, he invites us to open every aspect of our lives to God.⁷⁰⁰ Therefore, the sexual dimension of the person, and particularly one's sexual orientation, must be also part of this process. As the Magisterium itself recognizes, sexuality is also subject to growth, to moments of regression and, perhaps, of sin. However, the rigidity of the doctrine, by thinking that everything is black and white, reveals its inability to accompany processes, and certainly does not help people—as the cases presented report—to walk in the way of the Lord. By proposing the Cross at the beginning, at the middle, and at the end of the spiritual path of the faithful gays and lesbians, the Magisterium is, as I have mentioned several times, closing off “the way of grace and of growth, and discourage paths of sanctification which give glory to God.”⁷⁰¹ As a result, the faithful people of God, particularly those gays, lesbians, and their families, cannot find in the community that “light [which] helps them [to] better understand their situation and discover a path to personal growth.”⁷⁰²

A second major topic I would like to mention is connected with the phenomenon of what is commonly called the ‘sexual revolution.’⁷⁰³ In the Magisterial documents on sexuality,

⁶⁹⁹ See Francis, “Gaudete et Exsultate,” no. 40.

⁷⁰⁰ See *ibid.*, nos. 15-16.

⁷⁰¹ Francis, “Amoris Laetitia,” no. 305

⁷⁰² *Ibid.*, no. 312.

⁷⁰³ I am aware of the complexity of this phenomenon. It is not my intention to analyze the phenomenon itself, but only to highlight some of its paradoxes, which are inherent to all the events of human history. Given the scope

particularly with regard to the subject under analysis, a negative view and a diffidence in relation to the contributions of secular society on sexuality are not uncommon. Although after Vatican II the Catholic Church decided to open up to humanity, with regard to human sexuality this opening did not happen. On the contrary, the Church closed herself in the abovementioned hermeneutics of consistency.

It is a fact that the so-called ‘sexual revolution’ has not infrequently led to a liberalization of customs that has fallen into libertinism, human degradation, frustration, and exploitation. But it is also important to say, in support of the truth, that, as Nelson states, the sexual revolution “helped convince many Christians that an incarnationalist faith embraces the redemption of alienated sexuality as well as other estranged dimensions of our lives.”⁷⁰⁴ Moreover, the same sexual revolution, which favored sexual promiscuity and superficial and exploitative forms of freedom, also affirmed the importance of an integrated sexuality to enrich human flourishing; it underlined the primacy of loving companionship as the central meaning of sexuality; it denounced gender inequalities, structures of oppression and sexual discrimination, and the harm caused by repressing one’s sexual energy. As Nelson affirms, the uncompleted sexual revolution began to recognize that “sexual sin lies in the dualistic alienation by which the body becomes an object, either to be constrained out of fear... or to be treated as a pleasure machine.”⁷⁰⁵

Something similar happened during the period of the liberal revolutions that, in Europe, put an end to the so-called *Ancient Régime*, over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Despite the violence of those revolutions, particularly towards the classes that occupied the positions of power in the previous regimes, that period also marked the emergence

of this work, by ‘sexual revolution’ I refer here very generically to the changes that have occurred over the last century in the human and social sciences—psychology, sociology, history—and in human behavior with regard to the understanding and experience of human sexuality.

⁷⁰⁴ Nelson, “Reuniting Sexuality and Spirituality,” 189.

⁷⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

of many of the values and rights that we, as Christians, retain today as fundamental. Likewise, as we know, political regimes that we defend today—such as democracy—or rights that we proclaim today—such as freedom of worship—were once rejected by the Magisterium. Therefore, I ask the question: is not the Magisterium acting towards the sexual revolution in the same way that, for example, Pius IX⁷⁰⁶ and Pius X⁷⁰⁷ reacted against democracy or freedom of worship, respectively? Are we not, out of fidelity to the ‘Tradition,’ showing ourselves incapable of distinguishing between the wheat and the chaff, and rejecting *a priori* aspects that can help more people to walk the path of holiness?

Furthermore, in recent decades, we have deepened our knowledge of human sexuality in new ways. The sciences, which in the nineteenth century had classified homosexuality as a pathology, have come to assume that physical, affective, and sexual attraction to people of the same sex is a natural variant of human sexuality.⁷⁰⁸ Although the human sciences do not have the same degree of accuracy as the mathematical or astronomical sciences, I believe that, as I have said, we have enough credible data to establish a minimum of certainty regarding the natural character of same-sex attraction.

Four centuries ago, Galileo, “a sincere believer, proved to be more perceptive than his theological adversaries,”⁷⁰⁹ regarding the interpretation of Scripture. Faced with new data from the experimental sciences, Galileo came to a conclusion that contradicted the cosmological tradition of the Church which, among other things, was based on a literal interpretation of some biblical passages. In one speech to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences in which he acknowledges that Galileo’s condemnation in 1633 was an error, John Paul II states that, at that

⁷⁰⁶ See Pius IX, “Encyclical Letter ‘Quanta Cura,’” December 8, 1864, The Holy See, <http://www.vatican.va/>.

⁷⁰⁷ See Pius X, “Encyclical Letter on the Errors of Modernism ‘Pascendi Dominici Gregis,’” September 8, 1907, The Holy See, <http://www.vatican.va/>.

⁷⁰⁸ As Hartwig points out, “the assumptions which supported Stoic and natural law views of human nature have been questioned by contemporary findings in psychology, neurobiology, sociology, genetics, and other human scientific studies.” Hartwig, *The Poetics of Intimacy*, 109.

⁷⁰⁹ “Sincero credente, si mostrò su questo punto più perspicace dei suoi avversari teologi.” John Paul II, “Discorso ai Partecipanti alla Sessione Plenaria della Pontificia Accademia delle Scienze,” October 31, 1992, The Holy See, <http://www.vatican.va/>.

time, “the new science, with its methods and the freedom of research that it entails, forced theologians to question their criteria for interpreting Scripture,”⁷¹⁰ and, I might add, the Tradition. Therefore, the Pope continues, at that time it would have been necessary “to know how to take into account a new scientific datum when it seems to contradict faith.”⁷¹¹ At the same time, it would have been necessary “to overcome thinking habits and invent a pedagogy capable of illuminating the people of God.”⁷¹² Warning of the danger of an ‘unitary thought culture,’ the Pope still recognizes that in that era, “the majority of theologians did not perceive the formal distinction between Sacred Scripture and its interpretation,”⁷¹³ which led to unduly transpose in the field of doctrine of the faith a matter belonging to scientific research.

It would be worth taking a closer look at this speech, but for the purpose of this work, I only would like to present some questions. Are we Catholics, and particularly the Magisterium, making a similar mistake to the one made by those theologians by not accepting what the sciences are telling us about homosexual behavior? Are we not, as I said before, clinging to an obsolete and physicalist interpretation of the natural law, which prevents us from listening to the experience of faithful gays and lesbians, and the contributions of the sciences? John Paul II stated that, “it can happen that, one day, we would be faced with a similar situation, which would require from both of us [theologians and scientists] an awareness of our own fields and of the limits of the respective competences.”⁷¹⁴ Are we not faced now with this situation with regard to the matter on hand? Are we not, attributing to the divine plan a vision of human sexuality that is only the fruit of historical contingencies that the current sciences have shown to be different?

⁷¹⁰ “La scienza nuova, con i suoi metodi e la libertà di ricerca che essi suppongono, obbligava i teologi a interrogarsi sui loro criteri di interpretazione della Scrittura.” Ibid.

⁷¹¹ “Sapere come prendere in considerazione un dato scientifico nuovo quando esso sembra contraddire la fede.” Ibid.

⁷¹² “Vincere delle abitudini di pensiero e inventare una pedagogia capace di illuminare il popolo di Dio.” Ibid.

⁷¹³ “La maggioranza dei teologi non percepiva la distinzione formale tra la Sacra Scrittura e la sua interpretazione.” Ibid.

⁷¹⁴ “Non è da escludere che ci si trovi un giorno davanti a una situazione analoga, che richiederà agli uni e agli altri una coscienza consapevole del campo e dei limiti delle rispettive competenze.” Ibid.

I consider that the development of the understanding of human sexuality by the sciences and by culture constitutes an authentic challenge—similar to the one that Galileo represented in the seventeenth century—to Catholic sexual ethics, which many theologians and many faithful have already accepted. However, although I believe they have done so in good faith, the Magisterium, some theologians and a small portion of the people of God seem to prefer repeating to exhaustion—at times accompanied also by threats—teachings that can no more be an expression of the Good News of the Gospel to the people.

Finally, I would like to return to the question of conscience and discernment. The first point to stress is that the dynamics of discernment on conscience belong to, as I have already mentioned, an ancient Catholic spiritual tradition, which in the field of social morality is applied without any margin for confusion. In fact, as early as 1971, in the Apostolic Letter *Octagesima Adveniens*, Pope Paul VI recognized that Christian communities, in communion with their bishops, with the help of the Holy Spirit, and in the light of the Gospel, are able to “discern the options and commitments which are called for in order to bring about the social, political and economic changes seen in many cases to be urgently needed.”⁷¹⁵ Indeed, the Pope recognized that “in the face of such widely varying situations it is difficult for us to utter a unified message and to put forward a solution which has universal validity,”⁷¹⁶ conceding that such was neither the ambition, nor the mission of the Magisterium. Likewise, in 1987, John Paul II affirmed that the Church seeks to “lead people to respond, with the support also of rational reflection and of the human sciences, to their vocation as responsible builders of earthly society.”⁷¹⁷ Moreover, the *Catechism* teaches that the Church’s social teaching “proposes principles for reflection; it provides criteria for judgment; it gives guidelines for action.”⁷¹⁸

⁷¹⁵ Paul VI, “Apostolic Letter for the Eightieth Anniversary of ‘Rerum Novarum’ ‘Octogesima Adveniens,’” May 14, 1971, The Holy See, <http://www.vatican.va/>, no. 4.

⁷¹⁶ Ibid.

⁷¹⁷ John Paul II, “Encyclical Letter for the Twentieth Anniversary of ‘Populorum Progressio’ ‘Sollicitudo Rei Socialis,’” December 30, 1987, The Holy See, <http://www.vatican.va/>, no. 1.

⁷¹⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2423.

Thus, faced with such a teaching, the question arises: why has the Church a double moral standard? In the field of social ethics, the Church relies on personal discernment through a formed conscience, sustained by familiarity with God, the Scriptures, and the principles of Catholic social ethics. Why is it not the same with sexual ethics? Why, as Salzman and Lawler say, regarding sexual ethics, “a model antithetical to personal freedom still applies?”⁷¹⁹ Why in sexual ethics do we have almost only absolute norms to be obeyed?

As I have argued throughout this work, the Church needs to review her teaching on same-sex relationships, for the diverse reasons already presented and analyzed. However, a more urgent—and perhaps less complex—task is needed, along the lines proposed by Pope Francis in *Amoris Laetitia*, to help gay and lesbian people to live lives of honesty. The task of rediscovering the centrality of personal conscience, and of personal and pastoral discernment, is a way of meeting people where they are, to accompany their growth, to help them to read their lives with the light of the Gospel, and to integrate them in their communities. It will enable them to live “the joy of the Gospel [that] fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus.”⁷²⁰

As James Alison contends, the conscience of gay and Catholic persons needs to learn how to relate to God as the only ‘Father,’ and to Jesus as the only ‘Master’ (Mt 23:8-9). These persons need, like any Christian, to deepen in prayer their inner knowledge of Jesus, because no one follows someone unknown. But gay or lesbian persons need particularly to learn how to relate to a Magisterial doctrine and to a community that does not fully accept them as they are. And then, before a Magisterium understood as a fallible sibling—since there is no infallible pronouncement in this matter—the dictates of the gay and lesbian conscience must stand. As Cardinal Newman taught, whenever people legitimately disagree with the Pope, they “must follow upon serious thought, prayer, and all available means of arriving at a right judgment on

⁷¹⁹ Salzman and Lawler, “*Amoris Laetitia*,” 652.

⁷²⁰ Francis, “*Evangelii Gaudium*,” no. 1.

the matter in question”⁷²¹ because, as Joseph Ratzinger affirmed years ago, “over the pope as the expression of the binding claim of ecclesiastical authority there still stands one’s own conscience, which must be obeyed before all else. If necessary even against papal authority.”⁷²²

In view of the above, and because, as we have seen, we can find in many of these couples *seeds* of the true Christian love, I consider it necessary and urgent to create in our communities paths of accompaniment, discernment, and integration for gay and lesbian couples, similar to the proposal presented by the Pope in *Amoris Laetitia*. Of course, the first step should be that of welcoming and giving visibility to gay and lesbian persons in our communities, regardless of their state of life: married, single, celibate, or in a partnership. A second step would then be to propose ways of discernment so that gay and lesbian couples can be formally recognized by their communities and participate actively in the sacraments and other moments of the liturgical and social life of the community. In addition to what I mentioned earlier, I present, as a good concrete example of such a proposal, the path offered by the Archdiocese of Braga, in Portugal, for remarried people.⁷²³ This seems to me a proposal that, with the necessary adaptations, could be applied to gay and lesbian couples. In the pastoral proposals to be implemented, it will be equally important to assist the gay and lesbian faithful in the formation of conscience and their character in the Christian virtues and spiritual paths presented above.

It goes without saying that, as in any process of discernment, the first and last requirement on the part of those who begin these paths is a deep love for the Church. Saint Ignatius, the great teacher of discernment, places at the end of the book of the Spiritual Exercises a set of rules “for thinking, judging, and feeling with the Church,”⁷²⁴ which are basically rules for the

⁷²¹ Newman, *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, 65.

⁷²² Joseph Ratzinger, “The Dignity of the Human Person,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler, vol. 5 (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969), 134.

⁷²³ See Jorge Ortiga, *Pastoral Letter “Building the House Upon the Rock”* (Braga, Portugal: Archdiocese of Braga, 2017), <http://www.arquidiocese-braga.pt/>. See, in the attachment of this document, the proposal with “practical elements for a process of accompaniment, discernment and integration of divorced people in a new civil union.”

⁷²⁴ See Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises*, nos. 352-370.

genuine attitude to foster in the Church. In such a context, discernment is not a claim to rights, or a kind of protest. It is a spiritual experience which requires not only a deep familiarity with God, but also a great love for the Church community, its people, its hierarchy and its Magisterium. As James Martin pointed out, gay and lesbian people and hierarchy/Magisterium are “together on the bridge,”⁷²⁵ and, as the *Catechism* teaches, they must approach each other with “respect, compassion, and sensitivity.”⁷²⁶ Even if for some people it might be difficult, Catholics are called—both lay people and hierarchy—to be respectful and to forgive people with whom one disagrees or is angry.

In short, there is an urgent need to let shine Jesus Christ, the face of the Father’s mercy, to the world, especially in its most peripheral places. Indeed, Pope Francis affirms that many Christians are not receiving this message, because they “feel that the Church’s message on marriage and the family does not clearly reflect the preaching and attitudes of Jesus, who set forth a demanding ideal yet never failed to show compassion and closeness to the frailty of individuals like the Samaritan woman or the woman caught in adultery.”⁷²⁷ It seems to me that, looking at the people around us, the same happens with sexual morality in general and, particularly, with same-sex relationships. As Copeland points out, “if my sister or brother is not at the table, if my sister’s mark of sexuality must be obscured... we are not the flesh of Christ.”⁷²⁸ Indeed, as also Gregory of Nyssa affirmed, “the establishment of the Church is re-creation of the world. But it is only the union of all the particular members that the beauty of Christ’s Body is complete.”⁷²⁹ Likewise, Hartwig affirmed that “when a particular set of moral teachings is inconsistent with the best information we have about human nature, when it is anti-body or anti-sexual, when it marginalizes particular groups of people, when it does not bear

⁷²⁵ Martin, *Building a Bridge*, 74.

⁷²⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2358.

⁷²⁷ Francis, “Amoris Laetitia,” no. 38.

⁷²⁸ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 82.

⁷²⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, “On the Making Man,” in *Gregory of Nyssa, Dogmatic Treatises*, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 13.

fruit or enable personal and social well-being it cannot be celebrated as an authentic expression of the Good News!”⁷³⁰ The situation of exclusion and concealment to which gay people are relegated in our communities should make us pray, reflect, and find creative means to bring them to the table, helping them to live virtuous relationships, without having to leave an important part of themselves in the closet.

Gay and lesbian people are probably one of the most ostracized persons in Catholic communities. I think that, for example, in practice we could do much more for the poor and for those powerless. However, I believe that no member of the hierarchy would dare to teach that the poor should not be worthy of our predilection, or that Jesus did not have them as his favorites. At least in my context, I believe that today, no parish priest or director of a Catholic institution would dare to expel anyone from the group of catechists, teachers, choirs, acolytes, or scouts because they are poor, or because he is from a disadvantaged social condition, or from a marginalized social group. However, even today, many gay and lesbian people are still expelled from or, at least, not accepted within our communities, our groups, and our schools simply because they live publicly who they are.

I would like to finish with the words of Cardinal Tolentino Mendonça:

The humanity in us always needs to be embraced, but even more so when it is wounded, when it feels like a leper, diminished, suffocated by exclusion and stigma, broken into pieces without knowing how to rebuild itself, isolated as an island of pain. In such cases a simple word of kindness unblocks and clears centuries of obstacles, does good to the heart, pours balm on wounds, and mirrors the scent of consolation.⁷³¹

With this work, I aimed to respond to the Council’s call to renew moral theology and make it more in tune with the Gospel, as well as to listen to our people’s questions, to their anxieties,

⁷³⁰ Hartwig, *The Poetics of Intimacy*, 122.

⁷³¹ “A humanidade em nós precisa de ser abraçada sempre, mas com muito mais razão quando ela está ferida, quando ela se sente como se estivesse leprosa, diminuída, sufocada pela exclusão e o estigma, feita em cacos sem saber como reconstruir-se, isolada como uma ilha de dor. Nesses casos uma pequena palavra bem-dita desbloqueia, desimpede séculos de obstáculos, faz bem ao coração, derrama bálsamo nas feridas, espelha o perfume da consolação.” Tolentino Mendonça, *Elogio da Sede*, 149.

dreams and concerns. I have sought to propose ways of accompaniment, formation, and integration for gay and lesbian people, particularly for those who do not feel called to celibacy for life. Throughout this journey, we have seen how the official teaching of the church in this matter lacks solid historical foundations, and we have perceived how the argument used to justify the ‘disorderly’ character of homosexual acts is fragile. Listening to the real experience of some people, we saw how in same-sex relationships there are also *seeds* of that love that unites the spouses in Catholic marriage. Finally, we have seen how spiritual discernment, in a conscience enlightened by the Spirit and well-formed in the Christian virtues, can help gay and lesbian people to progress in conforming themselves to Christ. We also stressed how they can flourish even when they live within a community that, in her pilgrimage towards truth, is slow to grasp the signs that the Spirit is offering to all in our current history.

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