

Pastoral Letter on Human Sexuality: The Sacred Body

Dear Friends in Christ,

1. The reality of the Incarnation is the foundation of this Pastoral Letter.

The sacred body of Christ is a mirror that reflects our own sacred beauty. We experience this beauty each time we gather to celebrate the Eucharist, for we realize that we are what we receive, the Body of Christ. The foundation of our faith is this reality of the Incarnation: that all creation is imbued with the divine presence. We find God in the water, wind, earth and stars, and we find the most profound divine encounter in each other. In our teaching, our celebration, and our actions, we strive to announce Jesus as God's irrevocable "yes" to every corner of human history and the striving of every human heart. The Incarnation of God in Christ is an affirmation of sacredness in all dimensions of human life.

The beauty and holiness of all creation is understood from the first chapter of Genesis: *God looked at everything that was created and found it to be very good.* (Genesis 1:31) And again: *They were created, male and female, in the divine image.* (Genesis 1:27) In the New Testament we also find this teaching, which proclaims that ultimately, *God will be all in all.* (1Corinthians 15:28) Christian theologians affirm the holiness of the material universe. An example is St. Gregory Nazianzus (4th century), who boldly says, *Christ exists in all things that exist.*

This is the great message of grace: that we and all creation share in the beauty and goodness of God. This includes the life of the body, the life of human love and sexuality, and the life of our sensual experience as a part of the earth. We are one with the earth which exists as our very bodies, and we are one with its rhythms of life, including our experience as sexual beings.

This message of creation's sacredness has often been absent in the Church's teaching on sexuality. Therefore, it is necessary to redeem the concept of divinity in all creation, including human sexuality, while holding in dynamic tension the necessity for responsible sexual expression. Such expression is grounded in unselfish love, fidelity, honesty, and commitment; it is neither permissive nor exploitative. We find that there exists a pastoral need to address issues of sexuality in the lives of adults over a lifetime. In this Letter we strongly affirm the goodness of both our human bodies and of a responsible sexual life.

2. Christianity is primarily about love.

The Christian Church is a community gathered in love and gratitude because of God's extravagant gift of love to the whole human family. Our existence as participants in the life of God reveals the meanings of love itself as an outpouring of abundant life. Love is the name that best reveals the essence of God: *for God is love.* (1 John 4:8)

As the Apostle Paul teaches, love is not permissive or self-centered, but is genuinely concerned for the other, e.g: *Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant...it rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. Faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.* (1 Corinthians 13:4-8, 13) Such love prompts the Christian community to help one another be faithful to the demands of love. Such love makes the divine mystery present and gives us the measure of our morality. As Paul says, all of the commandments are summed up in this single command: *You must love your neighbor as yourself.* (Romans 13:9) The outpouring of God's love is the substance of our faith; love of neighbor is the substance of our morality.

3. The development of doctrine emerges through community reflection.

Just as the mystery of love reveals itself gradually in each individual's life, so too the Christian community is continuously growing in its understanding of the infinite gift of God's self-communication and our call to respond. The full understanding of our Christian tradition did not come to the community of faith whole and complete in the era of the apostles, and is not complete even now. So too, an understanding of God's loving self-communication continues to unfold, even into our own times. We characterize this phenomenon as the development of doctrine; the development of Christian morality.

We see this process of development at work even within the community of the first generation of Christians with regard to the question of whether or not Gentiles may be included among the followers of Jesus. About a decade after the formation of the Christian movement, the apostle Peter realizes the implications of the gospel of Jesus with regard to the inclusion of Gentiles into the Church. In his encounter with the Gentile household of Cornelius he says *you must know that it is not lawful for a Jew to associate with Gentiles or to have any dealings with them, but God has made it clear to me that no one should call any person unclean or impure.* (Acts 10:28) This story concludes with the revolutionary act of receiving the Gentile household of Cornelius into the Church through baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

More recently, the process of the development of doctrine can be clearly seen with regard to the institution of slavery. Nowhere in the writings of the New Testament is there any explicit condemnation of this inhuman practice. For centuries Christians engaged in, and the Church supported, the institution of slavery in various forms. Not until the nineteenth century did the Catholic Church formally condemn this practice. We now consider the institution of slavery to be intrinsically evil and not consistent with the gospel of Christ and Christian faith.

This evolution of understanding comes in many ways, but wisdom and moral insight are especially present in the Christian community as it prayerfully reflects on Scripture, tradition, and human experience. Thus, when Church leaders articulate a teaching, their words should give expression to the wisdom of the community. In this way, moral authority is akin to poetry—it speaks of what the faith community already knows and cherishes, but in such a way that these deep treasures emerge with new freshness, power, and clarity in the speaking.

4. We address three specific issues of love and sexuality.

In light of the Incarnation, the call to love, and the development of our understanding of the demands of this love, we address three specific issues that have practical implications for our faith communities: divorce and remarriage, same-sex relationships, and the sexual lives of our clergy. This, by no means, exhausts the range of issues that could be taken up. However, they are issues that require a response from our Church with regard to its policies and practices.

There are many other issues of human sexuality that might be considered in a pastoral Letter. These include: persons who are called to lead a celibate life, persons who are without a sexual partner through no choice of their own, the sexual maturation of adolescents, and the nurturing of love in married couples. These topics deserve serious attention, and raise issues of the differences among people and the changes we face as we progress through life. Nevertheless, in this document we limit ourselves to three topics which merit our attention at this time.

Divorce and Remarriage

Divorce is a trauma for all who experience it: spouses, children, and others who are close to the family. Therefore, efforts at healing and reconciliation are important and necessary. When the dissolution of a marriage is still the outcome, however, the family involved and the Christian community are called to love and support one another.

This love includes an invitation to those who are divorced and remarried to participate fully in the sacramental and community life of the Church. Love and faithfulness are strengthened by the healing power of friendship in Christ through the activities, study, and prayer life of our communities and celebrated in the Eucharistic meal and all of the sacraments. Many of us, clergy and lay people alike, have experienced the suffering of divorce, and now extend our hands to those who have been bruised by this experience. In this sense we are wounded healers who joyfully welcome the presence of renewed love in our midst.

We join our Orthodox Christian brothers and sisters in an ancient tradition of supporting those who are divorced and remarried by: embracing them in their brokenness and pain; including them fully in the sacramental life of the Church; counseling them to reflect on all that has passed and to grow with new insight; and encouraging them to reestablish love and commitment in their lives.¹

Same-Sex Relationships

The issue of same sex relationships is one where Christian understanding has changed over time. In the past century, Christians have begun to rethink many matters related to sexuality and gender equity. For example, our position on issues of birth control, divorce and remarriage, the right of women to education, the ordination of women, and other matters have been reconsidered. After prayerful reflection and consultation with the members of our faith communities, we offer the following considerations regarding our brothers and sisters who are gay and lesbian.

When Christ was asked to name the greatest commandment, he answered: *'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.'* *This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'* *On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.* (Matthew 22:37-40) Jesus urges us to love our neighbor without exception. That is what he did, as story after story in the Gospels show. All human activity is, in fact, measured by this standard of love.

The Christian understanding of sexual morality, like many other issues in Christian teaching, has developed over time. What remains consistent is the standard of measure, which is love. In order to clarify and contextualize our understanding of same sex relationships in the life of the Church, we have used the great commandment of love to frame this document. We affirm the goodness of creation and the human body in the context of the incarnation of God in Christ, and believe that we are called to respond to God's presence with love for God and for our neighbor. We regard the teaching of Jesus, and of the whole New Testament, as overpoweringly in favor of love of neighbor and concern for the welfare of others. We recognize that in the past whole groups of people, gay and lesbian persons among others, were often compelled to give up personal wellbeing (or even to suffer) on behalf of supposed moral principles. The arguments that led to such sacrifice are not consistent with the gospel of Christ. Therefore, the Christian community must acknowledge that gay and lesbian persons should be accorded the same dignity and freedom that is the gift of our Creator.

Some will reply that Jesus "loved the sinner but hated the sin", and that homosexual behavior is condemned in the scriptures. However, many scripture scholars have recently concluded that the biblical writers did not deal with homosexuality as an orientation. This concept, that people are attracted to members of the same sex as a natural psychological condition, was unknown when the sacred texts were written. In the time of Paul, for example, homosexual behavior was thought of as bad behavior by heterosexuals, rather than as natural behavior by persons attracted to members of the same sex. Biblical passages often read as condemning homosexuality can, and perhaps should, be read as condemnations of violent and exploitative sexual behavior. When particular sexual behaviors, homosexual and heterosexual, were condemned, it was in the context of promiscuous or exploitative actions, not in the context of loving relationships.

In recent times, the psychiatric and psychological communities of the world have concluded that homosexuality is not an aberration of character, but rather a difference due to biological, psychological and cultural factors.

Our enlightenment to such emerging evidence is causing us, as a society, to reevaluate our understanding of homosexuality. This is not unlike our reevaluation of other prejudices in our culture, such as the bias we have had toward ethnic and racial minorities, and the change in our understanding of the opportunities and equal treatment that should be afforded to women.

The community of faith continues to develop its understanding of the truth that the love of God is present in all creation and therefore in every human being irrespective of race, gender or sexual orientation. Love is measured by *the fruit of the Spirit which is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law.* (Galatians 5: 22-23). The moral issue for Christians is not whether love is homosexual or heterosexual, or on a continuum between these two. The moral issue is the extent to which love is characterized by the fruits of the Spirit. This applies to all people, whatever their sexual orientation, and is the standard by which Christian behavior is evaluated.

Therefore, we joyfully welcome gay and lesbian individuals and couples fully into our faith community. We have been graced by their presence among us, have seen the fruits of the Spirit in their lives, and have witnessed their dedication to a life of faith and faithfulness. The love we witness in their lives is the manifestation of their determination to live the gospel despite the obstacles that have been placed before them by both church and society.

We offer gay and lesbian couples the support given to others in our community. We embrace these couples, welcome them into the household of faith and provide a context in which to live out the Christian ideal of love, fidelity and commitment to one another. In order to strengthen their shared life together in Christ we offer, to those who desire it, the graces of a holy union blessed by the Church.

The Sexuality of Ordained Clergy

Fitness for ordained ministry is measured by the standard of biblical love. Like God's grace, the call to ministry is found in persons who are male and female, heterosexual and homosexual, single, widowed, divorced and married.

Clergy, in their sacramental and pastoral role in the community, are called to exemplify an extraordinary measure of this biblical love in their ministry and in their lives. This is especially true considering the vulnerability of those who look to them for guidance. When sexual exploitation is found in the ministry of the Church it is especially damaging both to those persons involved and to the beloved community of faith. Inappropriate and exploitative sexual behavior on the part of clergy is categorically intolerable.

When evaluating a person for candidacy and/or continuation as an ordained member of our faith community we look for the qualities of commitment, maturity, insight, and unselfish love. These qualities, and other characteristics of grace-filled ministry, are not limited to persons of a particular gender, sexual orientation or marital status. We joyfully welcome all called and qualified persons to ordained ministry, and we are enriched by the grace of their diversity.

5. Sexuality in a larger context

Not everyone is called to a relationship of sexual intimacy. Some are called only for a time in their lives. Divorce and death end some of our relationships and the sexual sharing that accompanies them. Others choose a celibate life. Still others long for a relationship of loving sexual expression, but never find the appropriate person with whom to join their lives. Sexual expression for some will reflect a season of life, for others the entirety of their adult lives, and for still others it will not be present at all.

As we observe the many varieties of lifestyle in our society and Church, we also recognize that our sexual lives, like all other experiences we share in this life, will end. With this in mind, we are reminded of the limitations of our sexual identities. There is a place and time to encounter God that is beyond sexual and personal distinction, as well as beyond age, ethnicity, and all other things that distinguish us.

6. Conclusion

The life we are called to lead is a challenging one. We are spirits embodied in a material world which is filled with God's presence. Living in that presence is a great joy, and it calls us to be the very best versions of ourselves. It is also true that living according to the ideal of love of neighbor and of God is not only a blessing but also a task which involves faithfulness, self-giving and maturity. For most of us, that task will also involve finding a partner to whom we can dedicate ourselves and with whom we can live in physical and emotional fidelity.

In this quest for a partner and in this life of fidelity, the differences between us, of gender or sexual orientation, are not as important as the ways in which we are the same. For those called to share their life with another in committed partnership, finding the right partner and living with that partner in love is not easy, but can be a life filled with the grace and joy of the Spirit. Centuries of our tradition identify a life of loving commitment and responsible fidelity as the surest path to human happiness. We affirm this reality, and urge all members of our communities to pray for the grace that nurtures and enables such a life.

The many ways in which we are different enrich our community. The personal and psychological differences among us, our individual talents, do this in a clear sense. Other differences, of ethnicity and culture, of age and gender, as well as differences of sexual orientation, also enrich the community. This rich diversity makes it possible to be open to the wonders of the world and of each new day, for every day is different and we are constantly being challenged to celebrate the ways in which life is always changing around us.

In this Letter we have considered three areas where people have traditionally disagreed but where the Christian community is coming to greater understanding: divorce and remarriage, same sex relationships and choosing persons for ordained ministry. We affirm that from the point of view of the Christian, the material world is blessed and that our primary response to this blessing is love of God and love of neighbor. In the Christian vision all behavior, including sexual behavior, is judged by the standard of this love and sexuality, with its concomitant vitality, is transformed as a path to God. This is both a challenge for personal growth and a source of great joy.

In summary we affirm that our sexuality, like our body itself, is a grace--a gift where the divine and human meet. This grace knows many modalities: youthful and aging, single and married, heterosexual and homosexual. The moral call of this grace, as with all grace, is to make it a medium where love can flourish. For as St. Paul tells us, *faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.* (1 Corinthians 13:13)

In the love of Christ,

Peter

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Annotated Bibliography

Peter J. Gomes, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart*. San Francisco: Harper Publishing Co., 2002.

The author is a Baptist minister, a gay man, and the Minister at Memorial Church, at Harvard University and the Plummer Professor of Christian Morals at Harvard College. The book covers a variety of topics about the Bible in its several chapters, including ones on reading the Bible in a non-fundamentalist way. The chapter on homosexuality concentrates on the Biblical texts used to condemn gays and lesbians. Gomes is aware of recent scholarship as well as the complexities of the religious traditions involved. The book is included here because this treatment is easy to read, relatively brief, and represents a different tradition than many other books on this list.

Patricia Beattie Jung and Ralph F. Smith, *Heterosexism: An Ethical Challenge*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994.

The title is a variation on the concept of sexism – seeing things from the point of view of only one’s own sex. It turns the root word into a similar idea, the common heterosexual inability to think seriously about people who are different from them. Beattie is a Roman Catholic Theologian, Smith is a Lutheran pastor. Though he is not gay and she is not lesbian the book is a comprehensive look at many aspects of the issue of homosexuality and the church. Perhaps its most useful sections are the long treatments of Biblical texts and of natural law reasoning as they have been used to condemn homosexual persons – that is as they have used “heterosexistly.” The book is written at about the level of a college text book; it is thorough and reliable.

John J. McNeill, *The Church and the Homosexual*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1993.

John McNeill, a former Jesuit priest, is a philosopher and psychotherapist. This book was originally published in 1976 and reissued ten years ago with additional material. McNeill argues persuasively that evidence from the fields of scriptural studies, history, psychology, sociology, and moral theology seriously challenges the Roman Catholic Church’s teaching on homosexuality. He explores each of these fields of study in a systematic and readable way. He concludes that “. . . the same moral rules apply to homosexual as to heterosexual attitudes and behavior. Those that are responsible, respectful, loving, and truly promoting the good of both parties are moral; those that are exploitive, irresponsible, disrespectful, or destructive of the true good of either party must be judged immoral.” Even those who disagree with his conclusions will agree that this book makes an important and scholarly contribution to the ongoing exploration of the issue of homosexuality within and outside the Roman Catholic Church.

National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Always Our Children: A Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children and Suggestions for Pastoral Ministers*. A Statement of the [U.S. Roman Catholic] Bishops’ Committee on Marriage and Family. Washington, D.C., 1997.

This document of the Roman Catholic Bishops’ Committee is notable enough in several ways to make it worth reading and discussing, even though it is fatally flawed. Because of this flaw, as well as of the prominence of the Roman Catholic Church, we wish to make clear what seems good about this document. Therefore, this note is longer than the others.

The document teaches that parents who find that that their children are gay or lesbian should respond with sympathetic love and understanding not rejection or condemnation. Secondly, it stresses that a gay or lesbian orientation is, for many or most young people, not a choice but the result of conditions beyond their control. The document suggests that we “**understand sexual orientation (heterosexual or homosexual) as a deep-seated dimension of one’s personality and to recognize its relative stability in a person.**”

Both of these elements are very important. Adolescence is often a difficult time even without complications, and it is made worse for many young people who discover themselves attracted to members of the same sex. Parents and other adults should be especially aware of their difficulties and their vulnerabilities, their sense that they are alone, misunderstood, and unlikely to find happiness. They are more likely than other teens to attempt suicide. They need the best understanding and love that we are able to provide. Secondly, the document is in touch with the best recent social-scientific thinking on the subject when it recognizes that, for many or most

young people awakening to a sexual orientation which places them in a minority situation, homosexuality is not a choice that they make. Although some people do, in fact, have a choice in the matter, it would be a mistake to assume without any other information that this particular person (young or not) has such a choice. These two points are the reasons the document is recommended.

They outweigh the unfortunate flaw in the document, its reliance on a mistaken, “natural law” understanding of human sexuality. When we consider other conclusions such thinking leads to, namely, Roman Catholic difficulties with such sex and gender issues as birth control, divorce and remarriage, the rights of women, etc., we should recognize that there is something wrong about this approach. We should not be eager to accept it in this case either.

James B. Nelson, *Embodiment*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978.

James Nelson is Professor Emeritus of Christian Ethics at United Theological Seminary in Minnesota. Nelson is solidly rooted in an understanding of both the Old and New Testaments: “Through its Old Testament rootage in the goodness of creation and through the New Testament’s central focus on divine incarnation, Christian theology ought to have an immensely positive bias toward embodiment.” The central question Nelson sets out to answer is this: “We are asking what it means that we as body-selves participate in the reality of God and as body-selves reflect upon – theologize about – that reality.” Along the way he takes up the issues of marriage and fidelity, homosexuality, sexual variations, and the Church as sexual community. The subtitle of this book is “An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology”. It could well have been titled “A NEW Approach. . .,” because Nelson’s ideas are challenging and thought-provoking. Readers should be prepared to disagree with some of them, but/and to know why they disagree and to be able to argue their own point of view.

James B. Nelson and Sandra P. Longfellow, *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994.

This is an anthology which addresses the question: What does human sexuality mean in the light of faith? The authors share two convictions: 1) sexuality is more comprehensive and more fundamental to our existence than simply genital sex; and 2) sexuality is intended by God to be neither incidental nor detrimental to our spirituality, but a fully integrated and basic dimension of that spirituality. The authors address several aspects of this, including what our sexual experience reveals about God, the ways we understand the gospel, and the ways we read scripture and tradition and attempt to live faithfully. Because there are several authors (27 in all), there is plenty of variety in style and content. Most of it is very enlightening and offers a wealth of material on the critical topic of sexuality and the sacred.

Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983

Robin Scroggs, Professor of New Testament, Union Theological Seminary, has been acclaimed in many Christian publications for his serious research about what the New Testament really says about homosexuality. The reason for his research was occasioned by his concern about how the Bible was being invoked in ways that were wholly inappropriate to canons biblical scholarship. He says that he has had no personal interest, but sees the tragic results of false biblical scholarship and the tragic rejection of homosexual persons, in the name of Christian righteousness, or even love. Scroggs concludes that “the basic model of today’s Christian homosexual community is so different from the model attacked by the New Testament, that the criterion of reasonable similarity of context is not met. The conclusion I have to draw seems inevitable: Biblical judgments against homosexuality are not relevant to today’s debate. . . should in no way be a weapon to justify refusal of ordination, not because the Bible is not authoritative, but simply because it does not address the issues involved.” He concludes with more discussion that pederasty was the issue of the biblical text, not homosexual relationships as we understand them today.

1. See also our “Pastoral Letter on Family Life,” March 10, 1997.