

The Catholic Response to Homosexuality

Is it within the Church's power to determine whether homosexual relationships are sacramental? Do they resemble a Sacrament, which Augustine describes as "a visible form of an invisible grace"? In March, the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith issued a *responsum ad dubium* (reply to a doubt) to the question: Does the Church have the power to bless homosexual unions? The *responsum* was necessitated by the Pope's "Who am I to judge?" comments about homosexuals, made off the cuff to journalists on a plane, and his subsequent observation about homosexuals being children of God with a right to a family. These comments were seized upon, and a narrative was woven around them, by those hoping the progressive Pope would normalise homosexual relationships and invest them with the same sacramental status as heterosexual marriage.

The answer is No. The *responsum* explains why. It begins by admitting that calls for such blessings can often represent a sincere desire to welcome and accompany homosexual persons along the paths of faith, "so that those who manifest a homosexual orientation can receive the assistance they need to understand and fully carry out God's will in their lives". It proceeds by explaining that when any human relationship is blessed:

in addition to the right intention of those who participate, it is necessary that what is blessed be objectively and positively ordered to receive and express grace, according to the designs of God inscribed in creation, and fully revealed by Christ the Lord.

It is not licit to bless relationships, even stable ones, which involve sexual activity outside marriage, as "the indissoluble union of a man and a woman open in itself to the transmission of life". The presence of positive elements in homosexual relationships does not make those relationships the legitimate objects of ecclesial blessing, "since

the positive elements exist within the context of a union not ordered to the Creator's plan".

Therefore, the Congregation affirms that priests do not have the power to bless such unions. Nevertheless, the *responsum*:

does not preclude the blessings given to individual persons with homosexual inclinations, who manifest the will to live in fidelity to the revealed plans of God as proposed by Church teaching. Rather, it declares illicit any form of blessing that tends to acknowledge their unions as such. In this case, in fact, the blessing would manifest not the intention to entrust such individual persons to the protection and help of God, in the sense mentioned above, but to approve and encourage a choice and a way of life that cannot be recognised as objectively ordered to the revealed plans of God.

When this dense and freighted prose is unpacked, the issue is really celibacy. Homosexual practice remains objectively disordered, under Scripture and Natural Law, but God does not despise what he has made. The challenge here is getting the Modern West—including the Church—to seriously re-engage with the idea of humanity's *telos*—a goal, a purpose, a direction—understood as *eudaimonia*, a basic orientation towards God as the Good.

The issue of blessing homosexual unions must be reframed: Who is demanding the blessing and why? As Douglas Murray points out in *The Madness of Crowds: Gender, Race and Identity* (2019), a decade ago almost nobody was supportive of same-sex marriage, not even gay rights groups:

A few years down the road and it has been made into a foundational value of modern liberalism. To fail the gay marriage issue—only years after almost everybody failed it

(including gay rights groups)—was to put yourself beyond the pale.

According to Murray, we are living through a period in which the narratives which once gave meaning to our lives have collapsed. One by one, each grand narrative was refuted, became unpopular, or was difficult to sustain. Christianity went first, beginning in the nineteenth century with the advent of higher criticism and evolutionary theory. In the latter part of the twentieth century, we entered the postmodern era, “which defined itself, and was defined, by its suspicion of grand narratives”:

However, as all schoolchildren learn, nature abhors a vacuum, and into the postmodern vacuum new ideas began to creep, with the intention of providing explanations and meanings of their own.

It was inevitable that some pitch would be made for the deserted ground. People in wealthy Western democracies today could not simply remain the first people in recorded history to have no explanation for what we are doing here, and no story to give life purpose.

Although homosexual himself, Murray describes how Western societies are in a state of industrial-strength denial about homosexuality. He quotes a sardonic rant from Bret Easton Ellis which critiques the ideology behind social justice propaganda:

The reign of the Gay Man as Magical Elf, who whenever he comes out appears before us as some kind of saintly E.T. whose sole purpose is to be put in the position of reminding us only about Tolerance and Our Own Prejudices and To Feel Good About Ourselves and to be a *symbol* ... The Sweet and Sexually Unthreatening and Super-Successful Gay is supposed to be destined to transform The Hets into noble gay-loving protectors—as long as the gay in question isn't messy or sexual or difficult.

The point here is clever and well made. Homosexual identity has become one of many battering rams for intersectional politics. Homosexuals are not Magical Elves. Being homosexual is messy. It involves sexual acts that were until recently recognised as hazardous to health. There is no basis, in Scripture or Natural Law, by which the Church can bless practising homosexuals.

Nevertheless, Christians are under extraordi-

nary pressure to accept the normalisation of homosexual behaviour. This is not happening because God is love, or because Jesus took our sins upon himself once for all upon the cross. It is happening because there was a sexual revolution in the 1960s and because the West has discovered cures for sexually transmissible infections. Without that revolution, or those cures, there would be no demand to bless homosexuality, as an affirmation of our collective rejection—as a society—of Scripture and Natural Law.

By any measure, the speed with which homosexuals have gone from being public health risks to being objects of public virtue is extraordinary. Australians, Christian or not, should recognise where this extraordinary pressure comes from and how it is exerted. If homosexuals owe more of their existence to modern medicine than they dare admit, this is true of most people in the modern West. To be honest about this means balancing our freedom and our constraint, what society creates versus what nature determines. This is what the difficult tension between social constructionism and biological determinism means.

Nevertheless, legal jurisdictions are ruling that the biblical understanding of maleness and femaleness is “incompatible with human dignity”, particularly the dignity of trans persons who do not identify with their biological sex. In these same jurisdictions, the category of woman—a noun meaning adult, human female—is proscribed, because trans activists believe it violates the rights of trans persons. According to Murray, the sheer speed of this change is causing mass cultural derangement. He is right. What was accepted as true yesterday—by cultural consensus—has today atomised into a confounding array of subjectivities. If the terms “Culture Wars”, “Long March Through the Institutions” and “Cultural Marxism” are overworked, they accurately describe what is happening around us.

One of the more dangerous conceits of our century is the Western belief that we can change the nature and structure of reality by creating and legislating whatever world we desire. The *responsum* is a reminder, unwelcomed by many—including many in the Church—of what cannot be changed. Christians speak of the God of Love, but many of them have a limited, solipsistic understanding of what this means and believe it applies to whatever they wish. The Jesus of progressive Christians is a hero of social justice, who fulfils desires and liberates from whatever is thought to ail the body politic in an intersectional age. The Jesus of conservative Christians is the person who told those disorienting

parables about God's Kingdom, which embody the reversal of expectations at the heart of the Gospel.

Here it is worth remembering another unpopular *responsum*. In May 1994, John Paul II issued an ecclesiastical letter, *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*, so "all doubt may be removed regarding a matter of great importance", which is to say, "the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women". At the time there was much debate about the letter's status among academics, which amounted to little more than questioning the Pope's wisdom for saying what they did not want to hear. In a *responsum* of October 1995, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith declared that *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* had been "set forth infallibly by the ordinary and universal Magisterium" and is therefore "to be held definitively, as belonging to the deposit of faith".

The 2021 *responsum* was about blessing homosexual behaviour. In 1995 it was about ordaining women to the priesthood. These are related. Ideologically and politically, homosexual identity and female identity are linked.

Now that the *responsum* has been issued, the disappointed will express sadness and regret or shock and sorrow. This will be reported by the media, because same-sex marriage is legal in the secular democratic world, so the Church withholding its blessing must seem unjust in some way—even tragic—and this is newsworthy. Western civilisation is now synonymous with homosexuality. It has become a sign of what human freedom most truly means, in a society that has rejected its traditional values and no longer knows what it stands for. Every family has homosexual relatives, some in relationships. In Ellis's terms, they remind us about tolerance and prejudice. They make us feel good about ourselves. They have become *symbols* of meaning in a post-Christian world.

The *responsum* speaks of "the right intention" of those who participate in a blessing. Leaving aside for the moment the question of objective disorder, what does a homosexual couple seek from the Church if they have already been affirmed by the secular world? In other words, what more do they want? Throughout Western history, monarchs have tried to bend the Church to their will, so

they can appropriate its moral authority for their earthly desires. Is homosexual marriage the modern equivalent of this historical struggle? If it is, the scriptural and evolutionary implications must be explored. More must happen than looking sadly into the camera, like Meghan.

Among progressives, Francis must inevitably lose some of his sheen, as the reality sets in. Each pontificate begins with expectations, hopes and projections. John Paul II was hailed for being a bulwark against communism and reviled for maintaining the status quo. Benedict XVI suffered for being God's Rottweiler, Cardinal Ratzinger, a man of deep intellect in an anti-intellectual age and impeccable theology in an anti-theological age. Francis has been cast as an advocate in the culture wars, an impossible role which needs to be performed carefully, and he is doing a brilliant job.

Francis wants the Church to shift from a model of *conciliarity*—a model where the Pope governs in consultation with the bishops—to a model of *synodality*. The Council of Trent mandated the calling of provincial synods every three years, and diocesan synods every year, but this never happened. Vatican I (1869–1870) encumbered the papacy by buttressing papal primacy and defining papal infallibility. Vatican II avoided mandating the calling of synods, or determining their frequency, by not making statements

about them. These three councils created a more centralised, clericalised, bishop- and pope-centred Church.

This has become a managerial nightmare. The number of bishops has doubled since Vatican II, from 2500 who attended the Council to around 5300 in 2017. Ideally, the Church should devolve into a collection of provincial and diocesan synods, each with a system of checks and balances: a House of Laity, a House of Clergy, with episcopal oversight and right of veto.

There is an assumption that the synodical model is democratic, because it is consultative, but the Anglican Church is also synodical, and it has not managed to avoid schism in its pursuit of intersectional politics.

Dr Michael Giffin, a frequent contributor, is a priest in the Anglican Diocese of Sydney.

Throughout Western history, monarchs have tried to bend the Church to their will, so they can appropriate its moral authority for their earthly desires. Is homosexual marriage the modern equivalent of this historical struggle?
