

Homosexual Inclination as an “Objective Disorder”: Reflections of Theological Anthropology

Livio Melina

The issues relating to the difference between the sexes are not trivial ones, but indicate epochal shifts in culture and the spiritual history of humankind.

One of the most significant changes made by the *Corrigenda* in the official Latin edition of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (=CCC) [1997] with respect to the 1992 vernacular version concerns the *Catechism's* treatment of homosexuality. The first commentaries, which focused on other moral issues such as the death penalty, self-defense, and organ transplants, somewhat neglected this modification, which is nonetheless of great importance. Paragraph 2358 of the original text spoke of “innate homosexual tendencies” in a considerable number of men and women, who, it said, had not “chosen” this condition. The revised text, by contrast, limits itself to calling these tendencies “deep-seated,” without saying that they are innate or that they are not chosen. It does, on the other hand, state that “*this inclination is objectively disordered.*” The *Catechism* thereby better harmonizes its formulations with the “Letter to

Msgr. **Livio Melina** is professor of moral theology at the John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family in Rome.

the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons” (cf. 3), published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (=CDF) on 1 October 1986.

What is the significance of this statement? Without entering into the moral issues,¹ I would like to offer a few reflections on the level of theological anthropology in order better to understand precisely what is meant by calling homosexual inclinations an “objective disorder.”

1. *Homosexual Inclination as “Objectively Disordered”*

An adequate description of the Catholic Church’s teaching on homosexuality must say more than (1) that homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered, inasmuch as they lack their essential and indispensable finality (cf. the Declaration *Persona humana*, CDF, 29 December 1975, 8) and (2) that we must always treat homosexual persons with respect, compassion, and tact and must avoid any unfair discrimination (cf. CCC, 2358). Rather, it is also necessary to say (3) that the inclination to homosexuality, “though not in itself a sin,” is “objectively disordered” in itself (cf. Letter of the CDF, 1986, 3). If we fail to make this last point, compassion and respect can become ambiguous. An acceptance that makes no judgment about homosexual orientation, and that supposes it to be “natural,” or at least “unchangeable,” if not actually “part of personal identity,” can slide into toleration of the acts that follow from the orientation. At the same time, there would be no good reason for calling homosexuals to chastity: to do so would be tantamount to imposing an extrinsic limit on an orientation that is deemed to be natural, innate, and constitutive of personal identity and that has no legitimate outlets. It thus seems that whoever denies that homosexual inclination is an objective disorder faces the following dilemma: toleration and approval of homosexual activity or despair.²

However, the ordinary magisterium’s affirmation that homosexual inclination is objectively disordered immediately provokes an objection, which appears to be decisive. How can we define something

¹ On this point, I take the liberty of referring to my article “Criteri morali per la valutazione dell’omosessualità,” in *Antropologia cristiana e omosessualità*, Quaderni de *L’Osservatore Romano* 38 (Vatican City, 1997), 103–10; and to G. Grisez’s response “May a parent condone a son’s homosexual activity?,” in *The Way of the Lord Jesus 3: Difficult Moral Questions* (Quincy: Franciscan Press, 1997), 103–12.

² Methods for sound therapy and pastoral initiative have been sketched, for example, by G. van den Aardweg, *Omosessualità e speranza: Terapia e guarigione nell’esperienza di uno psicologo* (Milan: Ares, 1995) and J.F. Harvey, *The Homosexual Person: New Thinking in Pastoral Care* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987).

as morally wrong if it is not the result of a free choice? Catholic teaching has made use of the distinction between “homosexual condition” and “homosexual acts” with the document *Persona humana*. This distinction implicitly acknowledges that homosexual orientation, insofar as it is not the fruit of deliberate choices, is not per se a moral wrong for which persons are to be held responsible. According to Saint Thomas Aquinas and the entire tradition of Catholic moral theology, we can speak of moral good and evil only in relation to what falls within the sphere of free will (“*voluntarium*”).³ Tendencies that are merely “suffered” (“*passiones*”) are morally relevant only insofar as they are subject to the control of reason and will.

Nevertheless, what precedes our freedom, the basic predisposition that conditions our free choices, is of great significance for morality. It can therefore be assigned a moral quality analogically, insofar as it favors a certain orientation. After all, man’s freedom is a “merely human,” that is, non-absolute freedom: a real, but finite, situated, and conditioned freedom, which rests on, and develops from, motivations, contingencies, and bodily determinations.⁴ Concern for these prior conditionings, judgment of them with reference to the behavior towards which they incline, and the attempt to correct them, are all part of the inescapable task of a sound, objective, and realistic moral teaching.

The very language that has become entrenched and that we are obliged to use in speaking of homosexuality carries with it a second difficulty and a dangerous ambiguity, for it seems to imply that “sexuality” is an abstract and neutral term, to which two apparently symmetrical versions are added only later: “hetero-“ and “homo-“ sexuality. In this way, normal sexuality is redefined as a later specification and implicitly placed on the same level as abnormal behavior. The ideological and manipulative character of this contrived system of language must not escape us. The apparent symmetry is in reality false: sexuality is constitutively relative to the gender difference and is thus in and of itself “normally” heterosexual.

Nevertheless, what is not normal for the common condition can appear to be “natural” to the individual because of the disordered disposition of his being. Saint Thomas points this out in relation to

³ Cf. *quaestio* 24: “*de bono et malo in animae passionibus*,” *Summa Theologiae*, I–II; in particular, *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, q. 24, a. 3, ad 1. On this point, S. Manero, “Sobre las mútuas influencias de las pasiones y del voluntario libre,” in *Revista de Filosofía* 30 (1949): 401–32.

⁴ This is what, in analyzing the structure of man’s voluntary action, we can call its “archeology.” See: P. Ricoeur, *La sémantique de l’action. Première partie: Le discours de l’action* (Paris: Ed CNRS, 1977); A. Léonard, *Le fondement de la morale: Essai d’éthique philosophique* (Paris: Cerf, 1991), 33–100.

unnatural pleasures: “what is contrary to the nature of the species becomes natural to this individual *per accidens*.”⁵ In the case of homosexuality, as in other cases, the complaint “that’s the way I am” expresses many things: the frustrating realization that one cannot change, a way of blaming nature and perhaps God for one’s condition, even the unwillingness to reconsider one’s attitude towards reality.

The psychoanalysts point out that sexuality is not only a “natural” faculty or capacity but also the subject’s articulated response to the world around him. Sexuality, then, is inclusive of a “stance.” In any case, our focus here is not on the psychological aspects of homosexuality, but rather on the anthropological meaning of homosexuality in terms of what the Church calls a “disordered tendency.”

2. *The Meaning of the Expression “Objective Disorder”*

To speak of sexuality as a “stance” or a “disposition” is to speak of a plurality of elements and factors in the personality that are meant to make up a unified tendency upon which the subject constructs his or her own sexual identity and recognizes his or her place in relations with others and the surrounding world. The concept of “order” and, correlatively, of “disorder,” seems to apply precisely to this kind of stance or disposition.

Augustine defines order as “an arrangement of equal and unequal that gives each its place”:⁶ an appropriate disposition of differentiated, indeed, complementary elements such that each finds its proper place within the harmony of the whole. Thomas Aquinas offers a definition that makes more of the dynamic aspect of order. According to this definition, the formal principle of order lies in orientation to an end: “Now, an inclination to an end, or to action, or to something of this sort follows upon form; because each thing, insofar as it is in act, acts and tends towards what befits it according to its form. And this pertains to weight and order.”⁷ Thomas’ relating of order to an end also allows him to integrate the dynamism of human freedom into the striving for perfection that permeates the whole universe and animates its movements.

For Aquinas, then, order is an expression of wisdom: “sapientis est ordinare.” It is precisely in establishing ends that God’s provident

⁵ *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 31, a. 7, cited in G. Zuanazzi, “La condizione omosessuale. Atteggiamenti strutturali e considerazioni conclusive,” in *Antropologia cristiana e omosessualità*, 64.

⁶ Saint Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, 19, 13, 1.

⁷ *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 5, a. 5.

wisdom orders the world. And by recognizing the goals preestablished in God's plan, the wise person is enabled to order his or her actions and dispositions.

We can thus understand more precisely what is meant by the expression "objectively disordered inclinations." Such inclinations are tendencies wherein the elements of the personality are disposed in such a way that they do not orient the subject towards the attainment of the end that God's plan assigns to sexuality. The Council of Trent spoke in an analogous sense of the disorder of concupiscence.⁸ As a result of sin, the sense powers are no longer subject to reason in accord with their original *ordering*, but resist and rebel against it, thus pushing men to actions contrary to the moral order. In itself concupiscence is not a sin in the strict sense, but it is called "sin" by the Apostle Paul insofar as "it derives from sin and inclines to it."

From the moral point of view, Catholic doctrine defines homosexual acts as intrinsically disordered, inasmuch as they activate the sexual dynamism of persons without (1) that *unitive meaning* of total self-gift to the other which can be realized only in the matrimonial union of man and woman and (2) openness to the *procreative meaning* whereby human sexuality is further ordered to the good of the child. But the criteria for ethical evaluation are rooted in a theological anthropology of human sexuality. It is only in the light of this anthropology that we can see, by way of contrast, the disorder inherent in homosexual inclination.

3. The Order of Human Sexuality in the Wise Design of God

As is the case with every other fundamental dimension of human existence, we can understand human sexuality theologically only to the extent that we relate it to Christ.⁹ God's wise plan is recapitulated in him as its final point. The universe, in fact, was created in him and through him: He is the first born of every creature (cf. Col 1:15–20). In him we too have been "predestined" according to the plan established by God the Father before the creation of the world, in order to be the praise of his glory (cf. Eph 1:3–14). The mystery of human sexuality, which is part of the divine plan, is therefore the mystery of our likeness to Christ, of our call in Christ to express the wealth of Trinitarian Love, whose created image we bear.

In the perspective of a Christocentric and dramatic anthropology, and following the cue of Genesis 1:27, we see that human sexuality,

⁸ Conc. Tridentinum, *Decretum de peccato originali*, Sessio V, 17 June 1647: DS 1515.

⁹ Cf. P.M. Quay, *The Christian Meaning of Human Sexuality* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1985), 9ff.

marked by the duality of male and female “genders,” is a constitutive part of the *imago Dei* which the Creator impressed on man at the moment of creation.¹⁰ The difference between the sexes is a reminder of the original love, of the divine source of man’s being, which is a whole composed of body and spirit. At the same time, it invites each person to a vocation of self-giving and welcoming the other in love.

The difference between the sexes is the sign of the creaturely and finite condition of human nature: “no individual human being is ever capable of exhausting by himself the whole of man: the other mode of being man (in respect to his own) is always before him.”¹¹ At the same time this difference is an invitation to encounter and to communion, and thus constitutes, in the proper sense of the word, a vocation. As John Paul II has said in his catecheses on love in the divine plan: “sex expresses an ever new surpassing of the limit of man’s solitude that is inherent in the constitution of his body, and determines its original meaning.”¹² The body, then, is the place where both a limit and a vocation are revealed. The body, with its masculine and feminine specificity, is a real symbol of a call to transcend original solitude, in order to encounter other, who is different from oneself, and to form with him/her a unity in which the original likeness of God’s Love shines forth. The body has, as the Pope said, a “nuptial meaning”: it is made to express the person’s gift of self to another person who is different from oneself.¹³ Christ’s Eucharistic gift to his Church (“take this all of you and eat it, this is my body”) is the unsurpassable model of every gift of love, even in marriage, as well as the source of grace that makes this gift possible.

The difference between the sexes thus establishes a polarity between man and woman that orients them to a reciprocal relation, even though one can never absorb the other as such. This brings to light a new, fundamental characteristic of sexuality. The reciprocity of the sexes is not an integral complementarity, but always leaves open—and uncloseable—the wound of an asymmetry. This word is the witness and

¹⁰ H.U. von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory, 2: The Dramatis Personae: Man in God* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990), 365–82; cf., A. Scola, *Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Theological Style* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans/Ressourcement, 1995), 92–95.

¹¹ A. Scola, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 92.

¹² John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline Books, 1997), 49–50. On this see J.M. Granados Temes, *La ética esponsal de Juan Pablo II: Estudio de los fundamentos de la moral de la sexualidad en las Catequesis sobre teología del cuerpo* (unpublished dissertation, Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family [Rome, 1997]).

¹³ Cf., John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, 61–62.

the trace of the ontological difference, which distinguishes contingent being from the Being in which it participates. The claim that we can overcome the difference can only be a tragic illusion.¹⁴ We inexorably experience the pain of lack when we realize that we cannot lay our hands on the other and that the very structure of our being prevents us from overcoming our difference from him. Desire never rests in completely satisfied enjoyment.

Though there can be no pacifying and totally satisfying fusion with the other, this very impossibility sets in motion a new dynamism. It also gives sexuality a new openness, in that it orients the lovers to a completion lying beyond themselves. By its very nature love is oriented to produce a fruit that transcends it. In order to avoid self-absorption and self-consumption, love must open up to a further fruitfulness, whose most obvious dimension is procreation. The procreative meaning, then, is not added extrinsically or biologically to the unitive dimension of sexuality. On the contrary, procreation is the completed form of union.¹⁵ Children are the crown of conjugal love,¹⁶ which is inconceivable apart from ready openness to fruitfulness. Otherwise, conjugal love becomes self-absorbed and makes an illusory claim to self-fulfillment. The necessary transcendence of sexuality towards a mysterious third factor, and the presence of this third in sex, is represented by the child. So much so that Balthasar regards conjugal love and its fruitfulness, two aspects that cannot be separated, as an image of the Trinity.¹⁷

The history of the “sexual revolution”¹⁸ is a negative proof that the attempt to cancel the procreative dimension of sexuality leads ultimately to the abolition of the meaning of the sexual difference and to the loss of its symbolic significance. The search for joy [*godimento*] in the encounter with the other is replaced by the more immediate and superficial search for pleasure [*piacere*]. The cultural trend which denies that procreation is co-essential to union is of a piece with the elevation of homosexuality to equal status with heterosexuality. The desire for the infinite in the love between man and woman is kept open to something beyond the couple by the procreative dimension. The denial of procre-

¹⁴ G. Zuanazzi, *Temi e simboli dell'eros* (Rome: Città Nuova, 1991), 76.

¹⁵ Cf. A. Scola, ed., *Quale vita? La bioetica in questione?* (Milan: Mondadori, 1998). For these observations on the connection between “sexual difference and procreation” I am greatly indebted to the essay by A. Scola in this volume.

¹⁶ *Gaudium et spes*, 48.

¹⁷ See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986), 78.

¹⁸ On this point I take the liberty of referring to some notes I developed in the volume J.Lafitte–L.Melina, *Amor conyugal y vocación a la santidad* (Santiago de Chile: Ed. Univ. Católica de Chile, 1997), 51–62.

ation bends this desire back on itself, in a narcissism that seeks pleasure independently of joy in the other [*godimento*].

The elimination of openness to procreation uproots sexuality from its insertion in time and history through the succession of generations. Without the dimension of the past and the future, the sexual encounter is condemned to an aestheticism fixation on the timeless moment. This is even more necessarily true in the case of homosexuality, which A. Chapelle has rightly called a “*pointilisme esthétique*.”¹⁹ The only hope for a future in the homosexual encounter is the exhausting search for a beauty that is dreamed of but always pursued in vain.

The Italian philosopher Augusto del Noce has acutely observed that “today’s nihilism is gay in two senses. First, it lacks restlessness (we might even define it as the suppression of the Augustinian *inquietum cor meum*). Second, its symbol is homosexuality (in fact, we could say that it always intends homosexual love, even when it retains the man–woman relation).” A. Scola, commenting on this passage, notes that “gay nihilism, not ‘seeing’ [the] difference, including sexual difference, as a sign of the other, risks conceiving of love as a pure prolongation of the I (again, in a homosexual way).”²⁰

The difference between the sexes, in other words, has a meaning that transcends mere physical being: it is ontological before it is physiological, it is in the soul before it is in the body.²¹ The ultimate explanation of this difference is threefold. It lies in the creaturely logic of the relation between God and the world that comes from him, in Christ’s spousal covenant with his Church and in the analogy of the Trinitarian life within God himself.

The uni-duality of the nuptial communion between man and woman is, infinitely distant, an image of the uni-Trinity of the divine persons.²² As John Paul II has affirmed in *Mulieris dignitatem*, “We read that man cannot exist ‘alone’ (cf. Gn 2:18); he can exist only as the ‘unity of the two’ and therefore *in relation with another human person*. It is a question here of a mutual relationship: man to woman and woman to man. Being a person in the image and likeness of God thus also involves existing in a relationship, in relation to the other ‘I.’ This is a prelude to

¹⁹ Cf. A. Chapelle, *Sexualité et sainteté* (Brussels: IET, 1977), 147.

²⁰ A. del Noce, *Lettera a Rodolfo Quadrelli* (unpublished letter, 1984, cited in A. Scola, “Libertà e paternità,” in *Anthropotes* 12, no. 2 [1996]), 337–43. It is a suppression inasmuch as it seeks a series of superficial satisfactions in order to eliminate the drama of the human heart.

²¹ See D. Schindler, *Heart of the World, Center of the Church: Communion Ecclesiology, Liberalism, and Liberation* (Grand Rapids/Edinburgh: Eerdmans/T.&T. Clark, 1996), 259.

²² Cf. John Paul II, *Dominum et vivificantem*, 67 [AAS 78 (1986): 900].

the definitive self-revelation of the Triune God: a living unity in the communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”²³

4. *Homosexuality as a Disorder: The Theological Dimension*

The difference between the sexes is part of the creaturely image of God in the human person. It must be understood as an analogical term situated within the relation to the Creator, and of the Church with Christ, as well as within the call to mirror the communion of the divine persons. If all this is true, it is normal to expect the disorder of homosexuality to have a paradigmatic theological significance in the history of salvation. The French theologian Gaston Fessard offers an illuminating interpretation of this paradigmatic significance in a commentary on the first chapter of Saint Paul’s Letter to the Romans (cf. Rom 1:20–29).²⁴

In the text, the Apostle connects the refusal to recognize God on the part of pagan idolaters with the sexual perversions to which they have abandoned themselves: “*For this reason* God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error” (Rom 1:26–27). But what is the meaning of this connection between godlessness and idolatry and homosexuality, between one’s religious attitude toward God and one’s sexual behavior?

To be sure, to avoid invidious misunderstandings, we must recognize at the outset that Saint Paul is not interested here in homosexuality as an individual matter and even less in its material causes. His aim is rather to understand its “typical meaning and value for society,” indeed, for world history, in which pagan and Jew are opposed, in order to illustrate the historical essence of idolatry. Fessard presents an original interpretation of the text, drawing on the three polarities that define human historicity: the man-woman couple (natural historicity), the master-slave couple (human historicity) and the Jew-pagan couple (supernatural historicity).

Moreover, for Paul the primal origin of these attitudes is not carnal or psychic, but rather “spiritual,” or, to be precise, “diabolical” (cf. Eph 6:12). Now, the starting-point of Fessard’s interpretation of the text is the observation that the Apostle, following numerous and well-known passages from the Old Testament, bases his account of the relation

²³ Cf. John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem*, 7 [AAS 80 (1988): 1664].

²⁴ G. Fessard, *De l’actualité historique, I: A la recherche d’une méthode* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1960), 186–97.

between God and humanity on the analogy of the man-woman relationship. Both in creation and in the history of salvation, God is a man who freely offers his love to humanity, which is a woman in relation to him. The pagan's idolatry flows precisely from the spiritual pride that drives the human being to want to be "like God," not recognizing his Creator, refusing to obey him as a servant obeys his Lord.

The result is a perversion of the creature's original attitude of feminine receptivity to the Creator.²⁵ Refusing God, the pagan claims to exercise an arbitrary freedom and an exclusively virile power over creation. In Fessard's interpretation, sexual inversion is ultimately an expression of spiritual pride, the sign of an aspiration to an asexual angelism revealing the human spirit's refusal to adopt before the transcendent the feminine attitude characteristic of creaturely being. At the heart of idolatry, homosexuality, not only as a deliberately chosen and consciously justified lifestyle, but above all as a paradigmatic spiritual attitude, is actually a sin against the Spirit which denies the order of nature and attempts to posit itself as the principle of a culture without transcendent points of reference.



Our anthropological reflection on the objective disorder inherent in the homosexual inclination has led us to a final and delicate threshold: to the spiritual dimensions of the creature's relation with its creator. As A. Chapelle puts it, "much more is involved in the drama of homosexuality than a sexual behavior."²⁶ When the objective disorder is not merely acted out, but crystallizes through free decision into a spiritual attitude and an ideology, homosexuality takes on a typological significance. To be sure, it must be stated unequivocally that what we have said concerning the typological value of homosexuality cannot be taken as a judgment on individual persons, who may suffer because of an unchosen disposition and may act out of weakness. We are dealing instead with a general spiritual physiognomy that informs a consciously chosen lifestyle, though its influence often reaches well beyond what individual persons are actually aware of, a "spirit" which we must resist and which manifests itself in many and varied ways.

The obligatory struggle against certain unjust discriminatory practices in society, solidarity with persons with homosexual tendencies, and the pastoral effort to aid them to live chastity must not lead us to

²⁵ On the spiritual and active dimension of receptivity as the fundamental attitude of the creature before the Creator, see: D. Schindler, *Heart of the World*, 237–74.

²⁶ A. Chapelle, *Sexualité et sainteté*, 150.

neglect the cultural, indeed, spiritual dimensions of the struggle for the truth and the authenticity of love. It would be a profound distortion if the homosexual option were elevated to the same level as the choice of a man and a woman to contract a marriage and to form a family in which to raise children, or if such a lifestyle were woven into the cultural and legislative fabric of society. As the CDF clarified in 1992: “Sexual tendency is not a quality comparable to race, ethnic origin, etc., with respect to non-discrimination. Unlike these, homosexuality is an objective disorder and calls for moral concern.”²⁷

“This is a great mystery! I say it in reference to Christ and the Church” (Eph 4:32). The mystery of Christian marriage fulfills human sexuality as a gift of self that is open to life. It is great insofar as it finds its place in the order of the wise plan of God, who in Christ loves the Church. The issues relating to the difference between the sexes are therefore not trivial ones, but indicate epochal shifts in culture and the spiritual history of humankind. The act of recognizing and reestablishing the order willed by God’s wise plan is thus the basis of the path of truth and freedom, a path that begins with the humble recognition that we are creatures before the Creator.—*Translated by Adrian Walker.* □

²⁷ CDF, *Recentemente*, which offers “some considerations concerning the response to laws regarding the non-discrimination of homosexual persons,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, 24 July 1992, p. 4, 10.