HOMOSEXUALITY: THE TEST CASE FOR CHRISTIAN SEXUAL ETHICS

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This is a remarkably clear, orderly analysis of homosexuality by James P. Hanigan, an American married layman, professor of moral theology at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh. Homosexuality is admittedly one of the most sharply contested of our contemporary moral concerns. The subject is so controversial that Hanigan considers it a "Test Case for Christian Sexual Ethics." He approaches his task with great care and pastoral sensitivity.

The multiple current debates about premarital sex, or divorce and remarriage or any other sexual issue are no longer approached by simply judging such actions in the light of an approved purpose of human sexuality. Now the very purpose and meaning of human sexual behavior itself is being questioned as Hanigan sees it. For many, "the consensus among Christians as to the ends sex is intended by God to serve has collapsed" (Introduction p. 5).

Hanigan believes that the Christian teaching forbidding activity to homosexuals has decisive influence on our total view of human sexuality. Unfortunately, that teaching is not self-evident but Hanigan defends it as the only acceptable moral solution to this very complicated problem growing daily more urgent as the reporting on the spread of AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) sets off alarm bells around the world.

Having reduced the abundant current literature on the morality of homosexual behavior and relationships to four general approaches, Hanigan critiques their strength and weaknesses.
He finds all four approaches defective, while conceding that there is much to be learned from them.

1. FIRST SCHOOL: TRADITIONAL CATHOLIC TEACHING

The 1986 letter of the Roman Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to the Catholic Bishops of the world “On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons” contains the official teaching of the Catholic Church. It classifies any and all sexual actions between homosexuals as “intrinsically disordered” and “able in no case to be approved and the [homosexual] inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder” (no. 3). The final position of Hanigan is basically in agreement with the official church teaching. Rejecting all homosexual actions and pseudo-marriages, Hanigan sees the irreversible homosexual condition “as an invitation to Christian discipleship, either as a single person in service to the world or in a life of consecrated celibacy” (p. 103). Such consecrated celibacy would obviously suppose that the individual possess the character, strength of will and emotional balance fitting for such a calling.

AMBIGUITY IN HANIGAN’S POSITION

When it comes to deep interpersonal relationships between homosexuals, it is not clear just how far Hanigan gives his approval. His judgment of homosexual desires is not that they are unruly or to be understood simply as temptations to be avoided (p. 143). Going on to homosexual actions, Hanigan holds that “it is simply impossible to declare all homosexual actions and unions gravely sinful of their very nature, though they lack the objective capacity to embody fully such vocational integrity . . . For such acts and relationships may very well include not merely the desire for sex but also the desire for interpersonal communion and intimacy as both a sign and service of one’s Christian discipleship” (p. 149). For Hanigan, the basic question is whether the individual is moving “towards the ideal and towards a fuller understanding and acceptance of one’s Christian vocation” (ibid.).

The Church must propose the Christian sexual idea in all its
fulness. Moving towards or away from the ideal is the litmus test for sin for Hanigan. “The degree to which our actions miss the mark of this ideal and the degree of our responsibility for that failure are questions to be answered concretely in the internal forum of conscience and the confessional” (p. 151).

SCRIPTURAL ARGUMENTS ON HOMOSEXUALITY

In his critique of the traditional Catholic position, Hanigan follows the modern trend in rejecting arguments such as St. Paul’s as not applicable today because St. Paul “manifests no knowledge of an irreversible homosexual orientation, and never even considers the possibility of a caring, committed homosexual relationship” (p. 46). For Paul, homosexuals seem to have freely chosen their condition and acted purely out of lust. Hanigan believes that Scriptural arguments, in general, are not relevant to today’s debate “not because the Bible is not authoritative, but simply because it does not address the issues involved” (ibid). At most Hanigan will admit that Scripture proves “a presumptive bias against homosexual acts without setting the issue of morality of homosexual behaviour and relationship beyond all question” (ibid.).

THE “INTRINSICALLY EVIL” APPROACH

Hanigan devotes a whole chapter to examining the traditional judgment which sees homosexual actions as intrinsically evil. Neither the scriptural arguments nor the appeal to reason seem sufficient to Hanigan to sustain the intrinsic malice of such acts. For Hanigan, the intrinsic link between sex and procreation is “neither biologically well founded nor rationally necessary, to say nothing about its absurdity in common human experiences” (p. 63). Hanigan believes that the very recent Church teaching which justifies sexual relations during the infertile period of the wife shows that we should not “require procreation to make sense out of sexual intercourse” (ibid.).

2. THE SECOND SCHOOL: “EVERYTHING IS ALLOWED”

At the opposite end of the spectrum is this hedonistic approach,
approving all and any actions between consenting adult homosexuals, accepting homosexual desires and attractions as entirely natural. Hanigan condemns this teaching as morally bankrupt, as the conclusion of a radical situation ethics which ignores the revelatory character of both creation and Scripture, and the reality of our disordered sinful nature. This approach denies all meaning to human sexual activity except pleasure. Unfortunately, it is the teaching embraced by a number of organized, secular homosexual groups as well as by a number of radical revisionists of the Christian ethical tradition (p. 64).

3. THE THIRD SCHOOL: LESSER EVIL/COMPROMISE

The proponents of this moral approach, and they are numerous, accept and approve of the traditional condemnation of homosexual actions. But they ask all "to recognize that the normative ideal cannot always be realized in human life" (p. 67). When the homosexual orientation is irreversible and celibacy is impossible, it may be necessary at times, they say, "to accept, albeit reluctantly, homosexual expressions and unions as the lesser of the two evils, or as the only way in which some persons can find a satisfying degree of humanity in their lives" (p. 67). It expresses a theology of compassion and realism in the face of sin and human weakness.

It is interesting to note that this lesser evil approach was again presented by the priest moral theologian, Dennis Regan, Huntington, Long Island, New York Seminary, in an article on AIDS in the London Tablet for December 17, 1988. A committed, monogamous homosexual union is approved by Regan as "applicable in today's unique circumstances and does not imply any degree of dissent from authentic Church teaching" (ibid.).

THE LESSER EVIL APPROACH REJECTED

The main weakness in the arguments for this approach, as Hanigan sees them, is that they "ultimately hold that free mutual consent is the only moral condition limiting human sexual behaviour" (p. 72.) Since this is unacceptable as a moral argument, Hanigan rejects it as unproven with no "sufficient ground for justi-
fying any sexual relationship, be it heterosexual or homosexual” (ibid.). The end is good but the means (sexual activity) must be proven to be morally right or at least indifferent and “not merely assumed or accepted by default” (p. 73).

Going beyond the interpersonal dimension, Hanigan requires a positive significance for the life of the individual as Christian “and the life of the Christian community” (ibid.). A satisfying human life is by no means opposed to Christian faith but it is not the goal which Christ held out for his disciples to seek at all costs.

The lesser evil approach fails on both counts as Hanigan sees it, having significance neither for the individual nor for the Christian community.

4. FOURTH APPROACH: “LESSER IDEAL RATHER THAN LESSER EVIL”

Advocates of this position wish to accord equal status to homosexual and heterosexual relationships, judging them morally by one criterion: the quality of the interpersonal relationship between the partners. The form of the sexual relationship is not deemed to have moral significance. Is the relationship personally enriching, other regarding, faithful, socially responsible, life serving? These are the questions that must be answered to form a moral judgment (p. 69).

With the increasing acceptance among theologians, according to Hanigan, goes the desire to accord such unions some minimum of public Church recognition and celebration, short of sacramental marriage which would be reserved for heterosexual union. (p. 69) Admittedly, for its advocates, it is less than the ideal heterosexual union but it is not an evil, a “lesser ideal” but not a “lesser evil” approach.

FOURTH APPROACH REJECTED

“Seriously incomplete, even to the point of distorting by negligence the nature of the relationships it proposes to guide” (p. 78) is the verdict of Hanigan. Its basic argument does offer one “positive norm for judging all human sexual acts and relationships, a norm rooted in the common humanity and call to grace of all human beings regardless of sexual orientation” (p. 179). Also in its
favor is its emphasis on "the quality of the interpersonal relationship of the sexual partners as the key moral consideration in all human relationships" (ibid.).

Its greatest failure, as Hanigan sees it, is "its neglect of the specifically sexual character of the acts and relationships it would evaluate" (p. 86). We have many satisfying interpersonal relationships (relations, friends, business partners, etc.) with no sexual connotation whatsoever. Homosexual unions cannot be morally evaluated in the same way as the other very common relationships. As a basic condition, Hanigan proposes that homosexual unions be examined as "graced callings oriented to the service of God's people" (p. 97). Only if they pass this test should such unions be accorded equal normative status with heterosexual unions as the Christian ideal for sexually active people. Failure to pass this test would prove them incompatible with the Christian way of life. (ibid)

Hanigan believes that this fourth approach fails to pass the test and hence must be rejected as morally unacceptable. Faithful and exclusive interpersonal relationships by themselves are not sufficient to win moral approval. Hanigan requires that their "sexual activity must be an essential aspect of the exercise and realization of their vocational calling and have social as well as personal import" (p. 99). Hanigan concludes that homosexual unions fail on both counts.

IRREVERSIBLE HOMOSEXUAL AS INVITATION TO CELIBACY

Only heterosexual marriage shapes a way of life which can realize the true personal and social significance of sexual expression. What is the homosexual to do? Hanigan answers that an irreversible homosexual orientation should be interpreted as "an invitation to Christian discipleship either as a single person in service to the world or in a life of consecrated celibacy" (ibid.).

In advocating celibacy, Hanigan is in perfect accord with the 1986 Vatican Letter. There remain unanswered questions, as Hanigan admits, but its merit is "in rooting our sexual lives in the more fundamental structure of the Christian life, the following of the Lord Jesus" (p. 104). Advancing or hindering the coming of the Kingdom will be the norm for evaluating the concrete worth of
sexual activity which is ultimately peripheral to the seeking of the Kingdom (ibid.).

INAUTHENTICITY OF HOMOSEXUAL UNIONS

As with other authors, Hanigan sees a fundamental flow in the arguments favoring homosexual unions in their being radically in-authentic (p. 10). They are failed imitations of heterosexual marriages since nature does not call homosexuals to a two-in-one flesh union. They cannot achieve this kind of unity in the sexual act, nor in the shared love of unity and difference that is male and female, nor in the new life that is flesh of their flesh, and bone of their bone (p. 99). The complementarity of the male and female is simply lacking and there is no compensating factor.

PSYCHOLOGICAL EVALUATION OF HOMOSEXUALITY

Is the irreversible homosexual condition to be classified as a pathology or as a natural and normal sexual difference? After all his research Hanigan says that he does not know nor does he know how to determine it beyond question. The 1986 Vatican Letter insists that the particular sexual inclination of the homosexual "must be seen as an objective disorder" (no. 3).

A sad change in the professional evaluation of homosexuality occurred in 1973 when the American Psychiatric Association eliminated homosexuality from its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. Implicitly homosexuality was henceforth to be considered a normal form of sexual life. What was behind the change? Not any advance in psychiatry or psychology but political and social pressure. Hanigan notes the anomalous conditions under which this change took place and observes "that it was by no means unanimous among the professionals nor was it made with complete scientific detachment" (p. 25). Following up the references that Hanigan gives one can see how unscientific and irresponsible this "professional" reevaluation was.

Charles W. Socarides, M.D., a highly respected authority in the matter, condemned the reevaluation in the strongest terms. For Socarides, to classify as normal "one of psychiatry's most severe examples of sexual pathology is all the more remarkable, brash
and outrageous when one considers the great amount of evidence and research that was disregarded.” The change was not based on scientific evidence.

In addition, the change did not represent the view of the general membership of the association. The influence of a letter from the national Gay Task Force should not be discounted in the opinion of Socrarides. No doubt, the intention of the association was to help the homosexual, but it has encouraged homosexual to present their homosexual life style as an alternative open to all males, a matter of free choice to be accepted socially and even blessed by the Church. Socrarides insists that even if all discrimination against homosexuals “stopped tomorrow, as indeed it should, it still would not relieve their conflicts, anxiety and susceptibility to frequent breakdown and depression” (p. 149). Obviously, this is not the psychological profile for successful marital unions.

LEADING CATHOLIC MORALISTS

Bernard Härning, the world renowned Redemptorist leader in the Post-Vatican II renewal of moral theology, considers homosexuality as one of the “grave pathologies.”

“Detestable” is the term Härning uses to condemn the advice of Kinsey that homosexual activities are biologically and psychologically part of the normal picture. More optimistic than most, Härning believes that youthful homosexuals (under thirty) can be healed “if they find a competent therapist and are strongly motivated” (p. 69). Believing that most homosexual problems are either caused or at least aggravated by a disturbed family background or social environment, Härning contends that timely psychiatric care could neutralize the harmful influences. Obviously, if they are told that their condition is normal, homosexuals will never seek a cure.

Karl H. Peschke, S.V.D., another world-renowned moralist whose textbooks, like Härning’s, are used in many major seminaries in the Philippines and around the world, also affirms the intrinsic disorder of homosexual acts. Peschke stresses the frustrations and depression that often accompany homosexual actions and the unconscious guilt that haunts many of them. Old age, as Peschke points out, leaves the homosexual “without family, roots or pur-
pose” (p. 436). No longer attractive as a sexual partner, the homosexual has great dread of growing old. Any pseudo marriage that was attempted usually is not lasting because of the many volatile elements in the attempted union. Celibacy is the only moral option for the homosexual just as it is for many heterosexual people because of their special circumstances (ibid.).

John Harvey, O.S.F.S., the American moralist who has made homosexuality the center of years of study and pastoral work is firmly convinced that the condition itself is a deviation from the normal, but a cure is possible. For Harvey, the lesser evil approach is a great disservice since it undermines the homosexual’s resolve to be cured (cf. “Notes on Moral Theology”: 1960-1985, Theological Studies).

While these experts in the field insist that the condition is itself a disorder, agreeing with the Vatican 1986 Letter, still they are all careful to stress that the homosexual is not to be judged any more severely than his heterosexual counterpart if he fails to live up to his moral obligations. Likewise all violence in speech or action, any form of discrimination or violation of human rights of homosexuals is to be condemned as violative of the intrinsic dignity of each person, no matter what their sexual orientation.

A British Catholic priest, Kevin Kelly, in a review of Hanigan’s book (The Tablet, Oct. 1, 1988) believes that its main weakness is the insistence on judging a homosexual union by a heterosexual marriage. Kelly believes that the goodness of homosexual relationships need not be derivative from marriage, “a kind of second best for disabled persons who cannot make the real thing” (p. 1120). Kelly admits the thoroughness, honesty and sensitivity of Hanigan’s study, but believes that his line of argument is ultimately inconclusive because he is arguing from an ethics of marriage rather than from a separate sexual ethics (ibid.).

Kelly concludes that if homosexuality is the test case for Christianity as Hanigan alleges, this Christian sexual ethics is indeed “tested” and found wanting. A deeper study of Vatican II is Kelly’s recommendation. Such study might prove fruitful but no one should be surprised if a condition that is intrinsically disordered does not fit neatly into our code of Christian ethics. To reclassify the disorder, to deny that it exists is to turn away from the truth that alone can set us free.
CONCLUSION

The theology of creation as found in Genesis, male and female made in the image and likeness of God, the complementarity of the sexes reflecting the inner unity of the Creator, as the 1986 Vatican Letter reminds us (no. 6), would seem to be the only starting point for a sexual ethic. The conclusion would be that it "is only in the marital relationship that the use of the sexual faculty can be morally good" (no. 7).

For those with this intrinsically disordered condition, the search must go on for a cure. The great optimism among experts cited above such as Häring and Harvey coupled with a greater awareness of the familiar influences (if it is acquired) and advances in genetic engineering (if it is genetic) do raise the hope of success. Facing the whole truth and accepting it seems to show homosexuality as a test case for psychiatrists and psychologists rather than for Christian sexual ethics.

Those who offer a moral solution differing from that of the Catholic Church have failed to prove their case. Hanigan has examined the various positions with great care and has reinforced the basic teaching of the Church with more pastorally nuanced arguments. It does not seem likely that any new theological insights will appear to challenges the official Church teaching. If there is to be any progress, one must look to the psychiatrists and psychologists to neutralize or cure this most unfortunate disorder.