



Roman Catholicism

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The Roman Catholic Church is the largest Christian denomination in the Western world. Organized complexly and hierarchically, the Church is united in doctrine and worship under the supreme jurisdiction of the Pope, the Bishop of Rome. Roman Catholics believe that the Church alone possesses the system of truths, laws, and practices that was instituted by Jesus Christ for the governance of humankind and that has been passed down in apostolic succession from Saint Peter. They hold that the Church has been given a gift of infallibility and jurisdiction over all believers.

Historically, the Roman Catholic Church may be the institution most responsible for the suffering of individuals involved in same-sex sexual relationships. Through its interpretation of biblical passages and its embrace of a "natural law" theology that heavily influenced the secular laws of most of the Western world, the Church is deeply implicated in, and has sometimes actively promoted, the brutal persecution of sexually variant people throughout the Christian era.

These persecutions range from the torture and execution of "sodomites" during the Middle Ages and the early modern period to the imprisonment of thousands of homosexuals on charges of "crimes against nature" in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to say nothing of the guilt, alienation, and despair (sometimes leading to suicide) that millions of glbtq people have felt as the result of the Church's pronouncements.

Attraction of Roman Catholicism for glbtq People

Notwithstanding the hatred that the Church has fomented against sexual minorities, at some points in its history, it has served as a haven for those whose sexual desires were unorthodox. The sex-negative attitudes of the Church led to the establishment of a celibate male clergy and of sexually segregated monasteries and convents, which undoubtedly provided a refuge for individuals who failed to conform to heterosexual norms yet sought respectability and esteem from the community and an opportunity to find spiritual fulfillment. Moreover, the Church has frequently served as patron to some of the world's greatest artists, including Michelangelo, Leonardo, Caravaggio, and El Greco, whose lives not only exhibited same-sex sexual interest, but whose created works are noteworthy for their homoeroticism.

At some times in its history, the Roman Catholic Church has been more accepting of glbtq people than have other Christian faiths. Indeed, during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries, many English homosexuals--including Oscar Wilde and Radclyffe Hall--converted to Roman Catholicism precisely because it was seen as more tolerant of sexual variation than Protestant religions. Other converts, such as Cardinal John Henry Newman and other members of the nineteenth-century Oxford Movement, found in the Church the possibility of intense masculine friendships, which were at least homoerotic if not actually homosexual.

The Church's emphasis on spiritual mystery, mystical experience, elaborate ritual, and rich symbolism, as well as its beautiful architecture and transcendent art, has had and continues to have a strong appeal to



Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger became Pope Benedict XVI (above) in 2005. In 1986 Ratzinger declared homosexuality "an objective disorder" in a letter to Catholic bishops. Photograph by Sergey Kozhukhov. Image appears under the Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike License.

some glbtq people, including many who became (and become) priests. Not only does Catholicism offer a unique cultural experience valued by many glbtq people who find in the Church a sense of belonging and community, but Catholicism's traditions of selfless community service and of sublimating sexuality into religious devotion may hold particular attraction for individuals who are uneasy with or feel guilty about their sexual desires.

This latter tradition especially may explain the disproportionate number of homosexuals in the Catholic priesthood and other religious orders. Although they are expected to observe vows of chastity, individuals of a homosexual orientation have been estimated to comprise from 30 per cent to more than 50 per cent of American priests. While speculation about the number of lesbian nuns has not attracted the same attention as speculation about the number of homosexual priests, it is believed that the percentage of lesbians among the ranks of nuns is also large.

Theological Positions Regarding Homosexuality

In many ways the Roman Catholic Church remains a medieval institution, especially in regards to its sexual doctrines, which condemn artificial contraception and masturbation as well as same-sex sexual acts. However, since 1975 it has accepted the conclusion of modern psychologists and sexologists that a minority of human beings are sexually oriented toward their own sex. Moreover, it acknowledges that this orientation is not something that individuals choose, but something they discover.

The Church makes a distinction between homosexual orientation and homosexual acts. In the Catholic view, homosexual desires are not in themselves sinful, for they are involuntary. A homosexual orientation, then, is not regarded as in itself evil.

According to the 1992 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, "The number of men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies is not negligible. They do not choose their homosexual condition; for most of them it is a trial. They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. These persons are called to fulfill God's will in their lives and, if they are Christians, to unite to the sacrifice of the Lord's Cross the difficulties they may encounter from their condition."

However, even though a homosexual orientation is not in itself viewed as evil, it has since 1986, in a harsh modification of the Church's 1975 position, been regarded as an "objective disorder," a "tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil." In a "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons," issued on October 31, 1986, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, speaking as Prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, declared that "Although the particular inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin, it is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil; thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder. Therefore special concern and pastoral attention should be directed to those who have this condition, lest they be led to believe that the living out of this orientation in homosexual activity is a morally acceptable option. It is not."

Thus, while a homosexual orientation is "an objective disorder," but not sinful in itself, homosexual acts are, in the Church's view, intrinsically evil. The commission of homosexual acts is regarded as gravely immoral, for they are freely chosen.

According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, "Basing itself on sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity, tradition has always declared that homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered. They are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved."

The Church's condemnation of homosexual acts is rooted both in the biblical passages censuring same-sex

sexual activity, as interpreted by the Church Fathers, and in the belief that such acts are "unnatural." The latter belief derives from the Roman Catholic adherence to the dubious principle of Natural Law, as articulated by the medieval scholastic Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas condemned same-sex sexual activity as "unnatural," and it is on this basis that "crimes against nature" were ultimately proscribed in the legal codes of most Western nations.

In addition, homosexual acts are considered "contrary to the natural law," for they do not lead to procreation. For the same reason, artificial contraception is condemned. In the Roman Catholic view, the purpose of sexuality is procreation. Thus, the Church regards homosexual acts as inhuman and akin to bestiality, for, as Pope John Paul II recently announced, in a condemnation of same-sex marriage, "Sexual relations are human when and insofar as they express and promote the mutual assistance of the sexes in marriage and are open to the transmission of new life."

The teaching of the Church is that homosexuals should lead chaste and celibate lives. As expressed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, "Homosexual persons are called to chastity. By the virtues of self-mastery that teach them inner freedom, at times by the support of disinterested friendship, by prayer and sacramental grace, they can and should gradually and resolutely approach Christian perfection."

A Roman Catholic homosexual who confesses occasional homosexual acts is usually absolved with the admonition to go and sin no more and is allowed to receive communion. However, if he or she is involved in a permanent relationship with a person of the same sex, then a priest is supposed to deny him or her both absolution and the sacraments unless and until the relationship is terminated.

Is the Church Homophobic?

Although the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church ostensibly speaks with a single voice, and priests, bishops, archbishops, and cardinals--and theology professors in Church-supported institutions--are prohibited from expressing views contrary to the Church's official policies, those policies are given slightly different nuances depending on the speaker and the audience to whom the messages are addressed.

Hence, depending upon who is speaking and which documents are cited, the Church may be seen as virulently homophobic or as mildly accepting (though never approving) of homosexuality. In the official pronouncements of the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Ratzinger, bristling as they do with references to "deviance," "immorality," "depravity," and "evil," the Church's intolerance is obvious. In the more soothing declarations of individual priests engaged in pastoral care for gay and lesbian congregants, the Church might seem to accept, if not embrace, sexual diversity.

Moreover, there are differences in the temperaments of the various branches of Catholicism. Although the teachings of the Church are uniform throughout its vast expanse, Italian Catholicism may seem more indulgent than, say, Irish Catholicism, which might emphasize punishment more than forgiveness. One diocese might be led by a bishop less concerned with homosexuality than a neighboring diocese; hence the issue might be at the fore in one jurisdiction but recede to the background in another. Jesuits may be seen as more intellectual and more prone to questioning Church traditions than members of other orders, while the Franciscans, for example, may appear more intent on pastoral care.

In addition, the very "queerness" of the Church, with its unusual costumes, fabulous lore, scholastic arguments, mystical beliefs, deep spirituality, and sex-segregated schools and convents and monasteries, to say nothing of the large percentage of people of a homosexual orientation in the priesthood and religious orders, may in itself seem to signify an acceptance of the unconventional and the queer.

In most--though not all--jurisdictions, the Roman Catholic Church has generally not been quite as vocal about the "sinfulness" of homosexuality as some of the evangelical Christian denominations, such as the Southern Baptists, and so has sometimes seemed less rabidly anti-gay.

Moreover, in 1997 the United States Catholic Bishops issued a pastoral letter addressed to the parents of gay men and lesbians, entitled "Always Our Children." Asking that parents not reject their homosexual children, this is the most positive document about homosexuals ever issued by the Church. The Bishops write that "God loves every person as a unique individual. Sexual identity helps to define the unique persons we are. One component of our sexual identity is sexual orientation . . . God does not love someone any less simply because he or she is homosexual." It is difficult imagining the Southern Baptist Convention issuing such a statement.

Regarding civil rights, the Bishops in this letter remark that "the fundamental human rights of homosexual persons must be defended and . . . all of us must strive to eliminate any form of injustice, oppression, or violence against them."

Unfortunately, however, these rare positive statements are somewhat diminished by several negative comments in the letter, by the fact that it was soon removed from the Bishops' website, and by the Bishops' failure to follow through on their pledge to help eliminate injustice and oppression. Indeed, every year there are reports of the Church itself engaging in discrimination, as diocesan employees--such as secretaries, teachers, choir directors, and organists--are fired when their homosexuality is discovered, often over the objections of parishioners.

Dissent from Within

For all the apparent rigidity of its hierarchical structure, the Church has never been able to silence completely the voices of critics and reformers, both lay and clerical, who have challenged the Church's official positions from within.

In the United States, in particular, many priests have simply ignored the pronouncements of the Vatican on homosexual issues and have sought to nurture the spiritual growth of their parishioners without regard to their sexual orientation or practices. Others--especially those who minister to gay men and lesbians--have spoken out either privately or publicly to indicate their disagreement with the Church's official teachings.

The Church has not hesitated to punish its vocal critics. It has frequently silenced theology professors and dissenting priests, such as Father John McNeill, a Jesuit priest and psychotherapist who wrote the pioneering *The Church and the Homosexual* (1976), which called for a revision of the Church's traditional teachings about homosexuality, and Charles Curran, a theologian who taught at Catholic University of America until he was abruptly dismissed for dissenting from the Church's view of homosexuality.

The Church has also attempted to silence DignityUSA, a group of glbtq Catholics that works to achieve respect and justice for glbtq people in the Church. Founded in 1969 in San Diego, first as a counseling organization and then as a support group, Dignity became a national organization in 1973. Headquartered in Washington, D. C., it has chapters throughout the United States.

In the 1986 directive to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons, the Vatican ordered the Bishops to withdraw all support, or even the semblance of support, from any group vague about the immorality of homosexual behavior. Consequently, Dignity chapters have been denied the use of diocesan facilities and priests ordered not to attend Dignity functions.

The Church does support a much smaller organization called Courage, which upholds the teachings of the Church and aids homosexuals to maintain celibacy, using the methods of a twelve-step program such as Alcoholics Anonymous.

In 1999, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith harshly disciplined Sister Jeannine Gramick and Father Robert Nugent, who had organized "New Ways Ministry" to promote "justice and reconciliation

between lesbian and gay Catholics and the wider community," and who had published books critical of the Church's position on homosexuality. Because, in Cardinal Ratzinger's words, they disregarded "the intrinsic evil of homosexual acts and the objective disorder of the homosexual inclination," they were "permanently prohibited from any pastoral work involving homosexual persons and are ineligible, for an undetermined period, for any office in their respective religious institutes."

Thus, although there are many Roman Catholic priests, theologians, nuns, and other officials who dissent from the Church's official positions, they are not free to criticize those positions without risk of severe punishment.

This risk makes even more courageous the statement issued in late 2003 by nearly two dozen Chicago priests denouncing the Vatican's anti-gay rhetoric as "vile" and "toxic." The priests said they were particularly disturbed by Vatican documents that called gay sex and same-sex marriage as "intrinsically disordered," "a troubling moral and social phenomenon," and "harmful to the proper development of society." Such language, the priests said, is driving gay men and lesbians from the Church.

Political Stances

The Church claims that its theological doctrines are immutable and universal, but it is quite adept at adapting its social policies and political stances to changing political climates. Thus, the Roman Catholic position on civil rights for glbtq people varies somewhat from country to country, depending largely on the power of the Church to shape political realities in particular jurisdictions.

While the Church officially asserts that homosexual persons are to be treated with respect for their human dignity, going so far as to declare in the *Catechism* that "Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided," its actions belie its assertions. The fact is that the Roman Catholic Church has never taken the lead in advocating human rights for sexual minorities. Indeed, the Church has vigorously opposed almost every initiative that would recognize the civil rights of glbtq people, including the repeal of sodomy laws, and has declared that discrimination against glbtq people is sometimes justified.

In a directive to American Bishops in 1992, entitled "Some Considerations Concerning the Catholic Response to Legislative Proposals on the Non-Discrimination of Homosexual Persons," the Vatican specifically condemned anti-discrimination laws, and in effect blamed violence against homosexuals on the political activism of the glbtq rights movement. It declared that 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."

The Church has tepidly endorsed laws that prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation only in jurisdictions where such laws have broad popular appeal and would be adopted regardless of its endorsement; and in those cases, it has worked to limit their application. For example, following the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court's 2003 decision that denying the rights and responsibilities of marriage to gay and lesbian couples violated the Massachusetts state constitution, the Bishops of the state hinted that they might endorse, at least tacitly, civil unions for gay and lesbian couples, but only as a measure to prevent gay marriage in the state.

The Roman Catholic Church has increasingly diminished political power in Europe, where its pronouncements on sexual issues are generally not taken seriously except in a few countries such as Ireland, Poland, and Italy. In 2000, for example, the Church successfully pressured the conservative Italian government to withdraw its support for a large gay pride celebration, "World Pride Rome 2000"; however, when the Pope himself attacked the gathering, the response was such that the celebration grew to exceed original projections and became a great success. Because he was seen as attempting to stifle the free speech rights of homosexuals and limit their rights of assembly, and because of his intemperate language,

the Pope actually lost political credibility in Europe.

In North and South America, on the other hand, the Church retains enormous political power, although the recent scandal of the sexual abuse of children by priests may have diluted the Church's influence in the area of sexual morality. Moreover, North American Catholic laypeople increasingly reject the Church's political positions on a number of issues, from capital punishment to birth control to the use of condoms to prevent the transmission of HIV.

As the largest religious denomination in the United States, the Catholic Church unquestionably wields considerable political power. But it is not clear that there is a Roman Catholic voting bloc, at least in regard to glbtq rights. Roman Catholics as a group do not appear to differ significantly from the population as a whole in regard to gay issues; they may even be slightly more supportive of gay and lesbian rights than the population as a whole. Certainly, they are significantly more supportive than are evangelical Christians.

Recent Political Developments

Two recent documents issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith have raised serious issues about the role of the Church in the civic arena of secular states, but they may be more indicative of the Vatican's frustration with the political gains of the glbtq movement than any real threat to the movement.

In November 2002, the Congregation issued a letter entitled "Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life," which declared that voters and legislators are not free to support parties and laws that are inconsistent with the teachings of the Church.

In a document written in specific reaction to the growing impetus for legal recognition of civil unions, registered partnerships, and same-sex marriage, and approved by Pope John Paul II on March 28, 2003, and released publicly on July 31, 2003, the Congregation not only condemned with unusual vituperation same-sex marriage (declaring, for example, that homosexual unions are "evil" and that allowing homosexual couples to adopt children would amount to violence against children), but also announced that "When legislation in favour of the recognition of homosexual unions is proposed . . . in a legislative assembly, the Catholic law-maker has a moral duty to express his opposition clearly and publicly and to vote against it. To vote in favour of a law so harmful to the common good is gravely immoral."

This directive to Catholic politicians may pose severe problems not only for the politicians but also for the Church itself, for it raises serious questions about the separation of church and state in countries such as Canada and the United States. Is a politician obligated to obey the dictates of his Church or of the constitution of a secular state? Several prominent Catholic politicians, including Senator Edward M. Kennedy, Senator John Kerry, and General Wesley Clark, have pointedly disassociated themselves from any obligation to follow the dictates of the Church hierarchy in secular matters.

The United States Conference of Roman Catholic Bishops recently endorsed a proposed amendment to the United States Constitution that would define marriage as the union of a man and a woman. The Church is likely to galvanize its enormous resources in support of an amendment that would deny homosexuals the right to marry.

New Pope

On April 19, 2005 Cardinal Ratzinger was elected Pope by the College of Cardinals. He succeeds Pope John Paul II as Pope Benedict XVI.

The election of the 78-year-old Ratzinger has been widely interpreted as signalling the Church's desire to have a caretaker pope rather than embarking in a new direction under fresh leadership. For glbtq Catholics, the election effectively dashes any hope that the Church might alter its implacable opposition to

gay and lesbian rights in the immediate future.

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