

A Call for a New Theology of Sexuality

I'm the father of a gay son and I believe that current Church teaching on same sex relations is outdated, divisive, untenable and inconsistent with Jesus' message of love and inclusiveness. It has been the source of pain and stigma for hundreds of thousands of gay, lesbian and trans individuals and their families.

It is impossible to separate teaching on same sex relations from overall Church teaching on sexuality. There is no absence of scholarly criticism of current Church teaching regarding sexuality. In *The Unhealed Wound, The Church and Human Sexuality* (2001), Eugene Kennedy contrasts the teachings of Jesus about sexuality with the approach of the institutional Church. "Jesus' teachings should not send fear into our souls, for he was always comfortable with sinners and readily forgave those whose sins seemed to be sexual."

For Kennedy the problem for Catholicism is that it acts as an institution rather than as a church, and "its bureaucratic attentions infect what its pastoral possibilities would otherwise heal." He states "This shadow Church keeps itself together as an Institution by investing its power in keeping its members in a frightened and dependent state.

The Institution knows that if it can control sexuality, it can maintain its mastery over human beings." And of course, control over sexuality means control over women. "The presumption of singular male potency was written into canon law. The requirements for ordination for the priesthood made the

case in stark fashion: a baptized male. There was no other specification about qualifications or education. A baptized male would do." Actually, a celibate baptized male, which eventually resulted in thousands of men walking away from the priesthood. Kennedy also covers the fiasco of *Humanae Vitae* and the resulting loss of Church influence and credibility. He summarizes the pain and tragedy of the clergy child abuse scandal and the heinous and disgusting response from church leadership, motivated by a fierce commitment to retaining institutional power and control. Perhaps most depressing, Kennedy writes about the "The John Paul II" generation of young priests and seminarians, who "see themselves as new men, saviors who will repair the damage they believe Vatican II caused the Church." He sees them in their "asexual elitism and orthodoxy" focused on sexual sin, blissfully preaching on birth control, and unaware of "how gratified they are or how much their sense of potency depends on continuing to exacerbate humanity's sexual wound."

Sex, Priests and Secret Codes, The Catholic Church's 2000 Year Paper-Trail of Sexual Abuse (2006), written by Thomas P. Doyle, A.W.R. Sipe and Patrick J. Wall, is not the most recent account of the Church's child abuse scandal, but it is the most thorough and comprehensive review of the history of clergy sexual abuse within the Church, a history that goes back a shockingly long way, a history dictated by the Church's dysfunctional, unhealthy, self-serving theology of sexuality.



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The authors provide three reasons why Catholic teaching about sex is directly tied to clergy sex abuse.

First, “There is an obvious credibility gap of cosmic proportions between the lofty ideals of clerical chastity, the supremacy of virginity and the narrow tolerance of marital sexuality, and the way church authorities generally react to the sexual activities of the clergy from priests right up to popes.”

Second, “The profound sense of shame that has grown out of this pessimistic and negative dualistic (Augustinian) understanding of humanity, and sexuality in particular, helps explain the Church’s obsession with secrecy. This secrecy surrounds clergy sex offenses and crimes.”

Third, “The mystique surrounding celibacy is necessary in order to sustain its rationale and to attract men to initially embrace it in the priesthood and religious life.”

When the Boston Globe published its first story about sexually abusive priests, church leaders claimed this was a new situation, but the authors here make the case that “the only new aspect is the aggressive expose by the secular press.” The authors are clear about the history here: “Clergy sexual abuse of minors and vulnerable adults has occurred from the earliest centuries. It has been known to Church authorities and is a predictable but highly unfortunate feature of clerical life. It has been denied and hidden by bishops and popes who have consistently acted in a conspiratorial manner to prevent instances of abuse from becoming publicly known, especially to law enforcement authorities.”

The book covers the impact of abuse on victims, as well as legal issues and financial penalties, and the self-serving efforts of some dioceses to retain public relations firms “to help spin the entire mess that the exposure of widespread abuse unleashed.” The authors conclude: “The sexual abuse crisis is not isolated from the questions of the celibate practice of all clergy and the moral questions that involve marriage and all human sexual

behaviors. These are the main, yet unspoken reasons why sexual abuse has been such an inflammatory and dangerous issue for the hierarchy. One foundation of their power and control rests on the celibacy of the clergy. That area of religious ideal and personal practice has heretofore been shrouded in secrecy and taboo, certainly for the laity.



That is no longer the situation. For the first time, certainly since the Protestant Reformation, the sexual life and adjustment of bishops and priests is open for discussion by laypeople. This is the task of the new century: Clergy and laypeople need to talk together about sexuality and how it affects them all.”

In his new book, *The Fire Within: Desire, Sexuality, Longing and God* (2021), Fr. Ron Rolheiser sets the tone for how sexuality should be approached. “Sexuality is inside us to help lure us back to God, bring us into a community of life with each other, and let us take part in God’s generativity.

If that is true, and it is, then given its origin and meaning, its earthiness notwithstanding, sex does not set us against what is holy and pure. It is a Godly energy.” He asks, “So where do sin and evil enter? They enter in when we misuse the good energy that God has given us, and they enter in when we relate in bad ways to the good things of creation. Sin and evil, therefore, arise out of the misuse of our energies, not out of the energies themselves.”

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In a 1999 article, *Where the Gospel Leads Us*, Fr. Richard Rohr writes, “I think God would ask of the homosexual relationship exactly what God asks of the heterosexual relationship: truth, faithfulness, long suffering, and the continuing forgiveness of the other (in *Homosexuality and Christian Faith*, Walter Wink, Editor)

As early as the mid-seventies, John McNeill, SJ, a founder of the New York Chapter of Dignity was calling for a reappraisal of Church teaching regarding homosexuality. In *The Church and the Homosexual* (1976), a book not without controversy, McNeill focused on the use of scripture and tradition and natural law as a way to bolster that teaching. He addressed the misinterpretation of Old and New Testament references to homosexuality.

Sexuality goes to the core of a person...

He confronted the untenableness of the two aims of pastoral counseling at that time: conversion to a heterosexual orientation, or total abstinence from all sexual expression. He questioned the Church’s dependency on tradition as the basis for not considering a reappraisal of the teaching, given what has been learned about human development since the time of Aquinas. McNeill suggests that Aquinas’ knowledge of human nature and human sexuality was limited.

Finally, McNeill called for a renewed commitment to sensitivity and compassion in pastoral ministry, in order for homosexuals to achieve some measure of dignity and self-respect.

The impact of McNeill’s groundbreaking work has been diminished over the years because of the condemnations it received, so it is understandable that this book has been conveniently ignored by church leaders. But many bishops appear to ignore more recent scholarship regarding same sex relations.

The most comprehensive review and refutation of the presumed biblical prohibition of same sex relations has been done by Daniel Helminiak, a psychologist, theologian and Catholic priest for twenty-eight years. In *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality* (2000), Helminiak argues that rather than condemning homosexuality, Scripture is indifferent to same sex activity, an attitude reflecting that of the ancient world.

In his introduction he stakes out his position: “Sexuality goes to the core of a person. For people to have to choose between religion and sexuality is to have to choose between religion and themselves, to have to choose between God and human wholeness.” He writes, “There is a wide range of individual differences among human beings. Sexual orientation seems to be one of those differences.”

He goes on, “According to faith, it is God who creates us. Divine Providence forms us as we are. Our genes, our temperaments, our time and place in history, our talents, our gifts, our strengths and weaknesses, all are part of God’s inscrutable and loving plan for us.

So somehow God must be behind the fact that some people are homosexual. Then why should God’s word in the Bible condemn homosexuality? There must be some mistake in the reasoning somewhere.” Helminiak is clear in his conclusion: “The mistake must be in how the Bible is read. That is the argument presented here.”

Before he dives into the pertinent scripture passages, Helminiak points out the different methods of interpreting scripture, and that there is no reading of the bible without interpretation. He delineates the two different approaches to interpretation: the “literal” reading, taking the text simply for what it says, and the “historical-critical” reading, that the text means whatever it meant to the writers of the text.

This approach means that in order to appreciate or declare what a biblical text means today, one has to understand it in its original situation, then apply the meaning to the present time. The

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literal approach is attractive for some, but it can be a problem given that among other things, the earth turned out not to be flat and slavery was eventually determined to be evil.

While Helminiak prefers the “historical-critical” approach, he cautions us that this method of studying the Bible often reverses long standing interpretations and raises substantial questions regarding religion and society. He would say this is the case with homosexuality.

Helminiak reminds us that the scientific study of sexuality, while relatively recent, clarifies that “homosexuality is a core aspect of the personality, fixed by early childhood, biologically based and affecting a significant portion of the population in every known culture. There is no evidence that homosexuality can be changed or that it is in any way pathological.”

All of this could never have been imagined by biblical writers, so it should not be assumed that the Bible expresses any opinion about these developments. In other words, in biblical times there was no specific understanding of homosexuality as a sexual orientation. For the ancient Israelites there was only a general awareness of same sex contacts, but Helminiak suggests that the question today is about people and their relationships, not simply about sex acts.

“Our question is about spontaneous affection for people of the same sex and about the ethical possibility of expressing that affection in sexual relationships. Because this was not a question in the minds of the biblical authors, we cannot expect the Bible to give an answer.” He asks, “Does God’s word in the Bible condemn what we know today as homosexuality?” Helminiak says no. He takes us through each pertinent passage and makes a compelling case against what we have all been conditioned to believe. To summarize:

Genesis (19:1-11): On the surface this story is about God condemning the citizens of Sodom (Sodomites) for homosexual activity. But like many scholars, Helminiak argues that the real issue here relates to the sacred duty of hospitality and the sin

relating to the failure or refusal to demonstrate hospitality. As for the issue of sexual ethics in the story, regardless of the form it takes, sexual violence—homosexual or heterosexual—is what is being condemned. He also points out that in Ezekiel (16:48-49) and in Wisdom (19:13), the sin of Sodom was clearly the refusal to take in travelers and the hatred of strangers.

Leviticus (18:22, 20:13, 25-26): Male to male sex is definitely the topic here. Leviticus forbids male to male intercourse specifically and only because of religious purity issues, reasons designed to keep Israel different from the surrounding Gentiles. Also, because no penetration is involved, there is no mention of lesbian sex. Helminiak points out that the prohibition of male-to-male sex only occurs in Leviticus whereas other prohibitions are referenced throughout the Hebrew Testament, and he explains that the word “abomination” refers to any violation of the Israelite purity rules.

He writes, “The implication is that the only reason for forbidding male to male sex is concern about uncleanness and holiness. The argument in Leviticus is religious, not ethical or moral. That is to say, no thought is given to whether the sex itself is right or wrong. The intent is to keep Jewish identity strong. The concern is purity.” To highlight a more recent example of a religious law, Helminiak mentions church law forbidding the eating of meat on Friday; the violation of that law was a mortal sin. Yet no one believed eating meat was inherently evil; rather it was seen at that time as a violation of religious law.

In case we needed it, Helminiak reminds us that Jesus was clear that being a good person and meeting the requirements of Jewish law were not the same thing. The only purity that mattered for Jesus was “purity of heart.” And, “the Christian Scriptures insist that cleanness and uncleanness do not matter. Only whether you are doing good or evil matters.”

Romans (1:18-32): This passage is the most significant statement regarding homosexuality in the Bible. Helminiak maintains that “far from condemning same sex acts, Paul is actually

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teaching that they are ethically neutral. Like heterosexual acts, homosexual acts are neither right or wrong in themselves. They can be used for good or for evil, but in themselves they are neither.” Helminiak points to three major considerations that support his conclusion.

First, “the vocabulary Paul uses describes homogenital acts as impure, subject to social disapproval, but not ethically wrong.”

Second, “the structure of the passage sorts out the impurity or social disapproval of homogenital acts, on the one hand, from real wrong or sin on the other.” **Finally**, the “analysis of the overall plan of the letter shows why Paul mentions homogenital acts, though he does not think they are wrong. His purpose is to teach that in Christ, the purity concerns of the Old Law no longer matter and they should not be dividing the members of the Christian community.”

In focusing on issues of translation, Helminiak makes a distinction between “unnatural” and “unethical.” For Paul, the word “natural” does not mean “in accord with universal laws.” Rather, “natural” refers to what is “characteristic, consistent, ordinary, standard, expected and regular.” Furthermore, Helminiak points out that Paul uses the same word “unnatural” (*para physin*) to describe actions of God, that “God himself acted *para physin*. God did what was unnatural, that is to say, atypical. God behaved in an unnatural way.”

A major theme of Paul’s writing is that in Christ God has set up a new order. Used to describe God’s actions, as Paul does, *para physin* has to mean “atypical, not “unnatural” or “immoral.” Therefore, Helminiak suggests, “in reference to homogenital acts, the words *para physin* must similarly imply no moral condemnation.” In Romans, Paul is not teaching that same sex acts are immoral.

And when Paul uses the word *aschemosyne* which has been translated as *shameless*. Helminiak points out that the word’s true meaning is not *shameless* but rather *not according to form* and the word does not imply a moral judgement.

Consistent with Leviticus, Paul seems to regard homogeneity as an impurity pointing out social disapproval, but he wants to emphasize the “difference between ritual impurity and real wrong. Helminiak concludes that Paul’s focus was on faith and love as essential, and that those who misunderstand Paul here “divide and splinter the Church over what does not matter in Christ.”

1 Corinthians (6:9-10), 1 Timothy (1:10): Helminiak treats these two passages together and suggests their meaning depends on how the words *malekoi* and *arsenokotai* are translated, a controversial and highly debated issue among scholars and scripture readers. He asserts that *malekoi* means “soft” but has no specific reference to homogeneity. He acknowledges that *arsenokotai* may refer to male same sex acts, and if so, these texts “condemn wanton, lewd, irresponsible male homogenital acts, but not homogenital acts in general.” But for Helminiak, the bottom line is that the entire discussion and debate regarding these passages is extremely tenuous with no real clarity about the meaning of the texts. “Given that fact, the conclusion should be very simple. No one knows for certain what these words mean, so to use them to condemn homosexuality is dishonest and unfair.”

There are other significant issues beyond presumed scriptural prohibitions. In *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church* (2007), Australian Bishop Geoffrey Robinson argues that there is no possibility of a change in church teaching on homosexual acts unless the church changes its teaching on heterosexual acts.

Citing the church’s claim that God inserted into nature the demand that every human sexual act be both unitive and procreative, he contends that this teaching creates the false image of an angry, sex-obsessed God, and he reminds us that the teaching is simply an assertion with no compelling arguments or proof that it reflects God’s will.

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Robinson proposes that the church consider sexual acts in relation to the good or harm done to individuals and their relationships rather than in terms of offending God. He believes the sexual act should be motivated by a desire for what is good in the other person, should involve no coercion or deceit and should not harm a third party.

He believes these requirements can be better met in marriage, but he does not believe that is the only way they can be met. Robinson suggests that either heterosexual or homosexual acts, if they meet these requirements, are not offensive to God but are rather pleasing because they enhance individuals and relationships.



In Just Love, A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics (2006), Mercy Sister Margaret Farley, a moral theologian on the faculty of Yale Divinity School, also suggests that the church has to rethink its entire approach to human sexuality. Farley argues that a review of sexual ethics is required because of the major advances in knowledge regarding psychology, gender and human behavior. She also asserts, “Theological critiques of anthropological dualism and of an emphasis on sin and shame have made possible new perspectives on sexuality in the context of beliefs about creation, incarnation, and eschatology. Critical biblical exegesis has unsettled previously accepted sexual norms, and it has shed new light on the place of sexuality in the human community and in the call of human persons to God.”

Farley prioritizes justice as the major criteria in determining the morality of sexual behavior, and in doing so she reminds us that we are called to justice as well as to love. She presents a detailed analysis of the norms that are required for morally accepted sexual behavior: do no harm; free consent; mutuality; equality; commitment; fruitfulness; social justice. Farley applies these norms in three areas: marriage and family, divorce and remarriage, and same sex relations.

Regarding homosexuality, Farley challenges us: “At the very least, without grounds in Scripture, tradition or any discipline of human knowledge for an absolute prohibition of same-sex relationships, the witness of experience is enough to demand of the Christian community that it reflect anew on the norms for homosexual love.” Farley offers a vision for the future: “Everyone should look forward to the day when it will not matter in the course of human and Christian affairs whether one is homosexual or heterosexual, and when one sexual ethic will help us discern the morality of all sexual relationships and activities.”

In *Sexual Ethics, A Theological Introduction* (2012), Creighton University moral theologians Todd Salzman and Michael Lawler build on Farley’s work and summarize the history of Catholic sexual ethics. They compellingly argue that it is impossible and irresponsible to ignore how experience and culture inform and influence responsible thinking about sexual behavior. They respectfully but clearly criticize the datedness of church teaching on sexuality. “What Augustine and his medieval successors knew about sexuality cannot be the exclusive basis for a moral judgement today.”

Salzman and Lawler set the tone for their book early on: “In social morality, the Catholic Church offers principles for reflection, criteria for judgement, and guidelines for action. In sexual morality, however, it offers propositions from past tradition, not as principles and guidelines for reflection, judgement and action, but as laws and absolute norms to be universally and uncritically obeyed. How this can be is, at least, debatable.

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Since social and sexual morality pertain to the same person, this double and conflicting approach seems illogical.”

And finally, in *God and the Gay Christian* (2014), Matthew Vines, a young gay evangelical, makes a forceful case for affirming orthodox, scripture-based faith and at the same time affirming committed same sex relationships. He also refutes and discredits the well-known passages in Scripture that have been the basis of church teaching on homosexuality. Vines declares, “When we tell people that their every desire for intimate, sexual bonding is shameful and disordered, we encourage them to hate a core part of who they are. And when we reject the desire of gay Christians to express their sexuality within a lifelong covenant, we separate them from our covenantal God, and we tarnish their ability to bear his image.”

The historical precedent for change in church moral teaching is well documented in John Noonan’s *A Church That Can Change and Cannot Change* (2005). Noonan makes clear how the Church changed its moral theology regarding slavery, usury and freedom of conscience without any retreat from the Gospel message of Jesus Christ. We are not talking about the Incarnation or the Trinity here.

I’m not holding my breath here for a change in teaching, but unless church leaders figure out a way to rethink their position, they will continue their slide toward irrelevance, continue to watch young Catholics walk away from the Church, continue to be on the wrong side of compassion, on the wrong side of inclusiveness, on the wrong side of Jesus’ message of love and, not for the first time, on the wrong side of history.

