

John J. McNeill

An Open Letter to the American Bishops on the Issue of Homosexuality (19 Novembre 2000)

In 1974, the delegates of Dignity's first national convention requested in a letter, that a dialogue be opened between the American bishops and the members of the Catholic gay and lesbian community. With very few exceptions that letter was ignored.

Now, nearly thirty years later, once again I call upon the American bishops to open that dialogue. For over thirty years, I have ministered as priest and psychotherapist to lesbians and gays. I helped found Dignity, New York to provide a safe and loving community within the Catholic Church for gay people. This June will mark the twenty-fifth year I have given retreats for lesbians and gays, at Kirkridge, an ecumenical retreat center.

I have written three books on gay spirituality: *The Church and the Homosexual*, *Taking a Chance on God*, and *Freedom, Glorious Freedom*. I also published an autobiography on my own spiritual journey as a gay priest. As a result of my experience, I have come to the conclusion that what is at stake at this point in time is not only the spiritual and psychological health of many gay and lesbian Catholics and other lesbian and gay Christians. What is at stake is your moral authority to teach on this issue.

In the past, when you undertook a listening process to hear what the Holy Spirit was saying through the People of God, you won our respect. We respected you when you made your statements on the economy, on nuclear warfare and, especially, your aborted effort to draw up a letter on the role of women in the Church. You listened carefully to what women had to say and, and drew up your statements responding to what you heard from women. These actions gave us gay and lesbians reason to hope that the Holy Spirit would lead you into a spirit of willingness to listen to us gay and lesbian Catholics.

What is at stake now is your own moral authority! Unless we gay and lesbian Catholics receive the message that you take us seriously and are willing to listen carefully to what the Holy Spirit is saying to you through our lives and our experience, your judgments on homosexuality will be, for the most part, ignored and you will lose what authority you have left to deserve to be listened to with respect on this issue.

I have never heard the same level of courage from the American Bishops in dealing with the Vatican as that shown by the Major Superiors of Religious Men in response to the egregious document issued by The Congregation for the Defense of the Faith, entitled, "Some Considerations Concerning Homosexual Persons" as follows:

"We view (this document) as a hindrance to the Church leaders of the United States in this most difficult and sensitive area of human living. ---We are shocked that the statement calls for discrimination against gay men and lesbian women. We find the reasoning for supporting such discrimination to be strained, unconvincing and counterproductive to our statements and actions to support the pastoral needs and personal dignity of such persons. Far from a help to the Bishops and other religious leaders in the United States Catholic Church, the statement complicates our already complex ministry to all people.

"Moreover we find the arguments used to justify discrimination based on stereotypes and

falsehoods that are out of touch with modern psychological and sociological understandings of human sexuality. We regret such actions by the CDF and we reaffirm our support for the human rights of all our brothers and sisters.”

As a gay Catholic theologian and psychotherapist, I am fully aware of the enormous destruction recent Vatican documents have caused in the psychic life of young Catholic gays, and of the violence they will provoke against all gay people. I find myself in a dilemma what kind of faith and trust can I place in a teaching authority that I see clearly acts in an unloving, hateful and destructive way toward my gay family and is more interested in defending its institutional interest than it is in truth and justice?

In the name of the thousands of gay and lesbian Catholics and other Christians to whom it has been my God-given privilege to minister, I make this statement:

At this point, the ignorance and distortion of homosexuality, the use of stereotypes and falsehoods in official Church documents, forces us who are gay Catholics to issue the institutional Church a serious warning. Your ignorance of homosexuality can no longer be excused as inculpable; it has become of necessity a deliberate and malicious ignorance. In the name of Catholic gays and lesbians everywhere, we cry out “Enough!”

Enough! Enough of your distortions of Scripture. You continue to claim that a loving homosexual act in a committed relationship is condemned in Scripture, when competent scholars are nearly unanimous in acknowledging that nowhere in Scripture is the problem of sexual acts between two gay men or lesbian women who love each other, ever dealt with, never mind condemned. You must listen to biblical scholars to find out what Scripture truly has to say about homosexual relationships.

Enough! Enough of your efforts to reduce all homosexual acts to expressions of lust, and your refusal to see them as possible expressions of a deep and genuine human love. The second group you must listen to are competent professional psychiatrists and psychotherapists from whom you can learn about the healthy and positive nature of mature gay and lesbian relationships. They will assure you that homosexual orientation is both unchosen and unchangeable and that any ministry promising to change that orientation is a fraud.

Enough! Enough of your efforts through groups like Courage and other exgay ministries to lead young gays to internalize self-hatred with the result that they are able to relate to God only as a God of fear, shame and guilt and lose all hope in a God of mercy and love. What is bad psychology has to be bad theology!

Enough! Enough again, of your efforts to foster hatred, violence, discrimination and rejection of us in the human community. We gay and lesbian Catholics pray daily that the Holy Spirit will lead you into a spirit of repentance. You must publicly accept your share of the blame for gay murders and bashing and so many suicides of young gays and ask forgiveness from God and from the gay community.

Enough, also, of driving us from the home of our mother, the Church, and attempting to deny us the fullness of human intimacy and sexual love. You frequently base that denial by an appeal to the dead letter of the “natural law.” Another group to whom you must listen are the moral

theologians who, as a majority, argue that natural law is no longer an adequate basis for dealing with sexual questions. They must be dealt with within the context of interpersonal human relationships.

Above all else, you must enter into dialogue with the gay and lesbian members of the Catholic community. We are the ones living out the human experience of a gay orientation, so we alone can discern directly in our experience what God's spirit is saying to us.

And for the first time in history you have gay and lesbian Catholic communities of worship and prayer who are seeking individually and collectively to hear what the Spirit is saying to them in their gay experience --- what experiences lead to the peace and joy of oneness with the Spirit of God and what experiences lead away from that peace and joy!

God gave you the commission of discerning the truth. But there is no mandate from Jesus Christ to "create" the truth. We pray daily that the Holy Spirit will lead you to search humbly for the truth concerning homosexuality through dialogue with your lesbian sisters and gay brothers.

The only consolation I can offer gay and lesbian Catholics in the meantime is the profound hope that the very absurdity and hateful spirit of recent Vatican documents will lead gay Catholics to refuse them and recognize the contradiction of their message and that of Jesus who never once spoke a negative word concerning homosexuals.

I work, hope and pray that lesbian and gay Catholics and other gay Christians will exercise their legitimate freedom of conscience, discerning what God is saying to them directly through their gay experience. I hope, too, that they will be able to de-fang the poisons of pathologically homophobic religion, accepting the good news that God loves them and accepts them as gays and lesbians and refusing to be caught in the vortex of self-hatred vis-à-vis a God of fear.

I believe that we are at the moment of a special "kairos" in this matter. The Holy Spirit is "doing something new." I was recently the guest at a gay ecumenical community that established homes for adult retarded people in the city of Basel in Switzerland. The extraordinary spirit of love and compassion that permeated that community was a foretaste of what lies in the future. I believe there is a vast reservoir of human and divine love that has remained until now untapped because of prejudice and homophobia. The Spirit is calling on you to help release that vast potential of human and divine love through your action at this national conference.

Please be assured that the actions of Soulforce and Dignity at your national conference are based in profound respect and love. We pray and hope that the same Holy Spirit who has graciously liberated us who are gay to self-respect and self-love will liberate in you, our Catholic leaders, a profound love for your gay brothers and lesbian sisters and melt away all prejudice and judgmentalism in your hearts. May you make us welcome as full members in your family in Christ.

May God bless your efforts!

Sincerely in Christ

John J. McNeill