

John McNeill

Objective Disorder

The Vatican in its recent instruction barring gays from the seminary has given a vicious collective slap in the face, not only to gay priests and seminarians, but to every gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual and transgendered person on the face of the earth. The instruction from Pope Benedict calls homosexual orientation an “objective disorder” and any sexual actions that flow from that orientation are contrary to the divine will and profoundly sinful. Note that this judgment applies not only to seminarians and clergy struggling to live in accordance with their vow of chastity, but to all gay men and lesbian women. Any effort by a gay person to reach out for human sexual love, no matter what the circumstances, is judged as evil. Scripture says that if anyone loves, they know God, because God is love. The Vatican says that if gay people enter into a human sexual love relation they know evil and will separate themselves from the love of God.

I believe this is the worst document issued from the Church since it declared in 1866 (three years after the Emancipation Proclamation) that “slavery itself...is not at all contrary to the divine and natural law”. Slavery is not, but homosexuality is.

I foresee two probable consequences to this instruction; the first will be a sharp decline in candidates for the priesthood. That decline in candidates has already reached a critical point in Europe and the United States. In fact, the instruction may well deal a death blow to a cultic priesthood of exclusively chaste male (heterosexual and repressed homosexual) men and force the hierarchy to open the priesthood to other candidates such as married men and eventually, to woman. If this happens, it represents what I call the shrewdness of the Holy Spirit.

It is common knowledge that the primary yet unstated reason for the publication of this instruction is the priest child abuse scandal that has seriously and perhaps permanently damaged the Church’s moral authority. This document has nothing to do with God or even morality. It is a political document issued in self-defense by the human and sinful hierarchy of the institutional church. The hierarchy, rather than accept their responsibility for this crisis, decided to scapegoat gay priests and seminarians. Starting with the fact that the vast majority of the victims were young boys, some high officials in Rome and many in the United States declared that the majority of the perpetrators were homosexual priests. They assumed without evidence that every same sex act implies homosexual orientation. In fact, most empirical research evidence points to the opposite conclusion. The majority of men involved in child abuse are heterosexual. The motivation for most child abusers is not sex but power.

A more probable explanation for the abuse, according to the vast majority of psychologists is the high number of priests who were immature, insecure about their tendencies and full of doubt and guilt. Any homosexual who achieves a healthy self acceptance and has a positive attitude toward his sexual orientation is precisely the one this instruction excludes from seminary. Whereas those gay men who are struggling with immaturity, who manifest insecurity and self rejection because of their homosexuality, who are full of doubt and guilt,

they are acceptable candidates for the seminary. The healthy are unacceptable; only the pathological may apply. Rather than acting as a cure of the child abuse crisis, this instruction guarantees that the crisis will continue. What is bad psychology has to be bad theology.

The second consequence of this Instruction will be a further decline of the moral authority of the hierarchy. The Instruction is so out of touch with reality that it is obvious that the authors consulted only so-called experts who agreed with its dogmatic premises that homosexual orientation is an orientation to evil. On November 30, 2005, the Vatican newspaper published a commentary on the instruction written by Fr. Tony Anatrella, a French priest and psychoanalyst, and a consultant to the Pontifical Council for the Family. Father Anatrella's essay is such a homophobic caricature of gay priests as to be laughable. Yet Vatican spokesmen say Anatrella's essay does represent an official explication of what the instruction's authors had in mind. By limiting themselves to such prejudiced consultants the Vatican cut itself off from the reality of gay life. Every major psychological association has concluded from empirical evidence that homosexuality as such does not imply psychological disorder and homosexuals can be as mature and responsible as heterosexuals. The Vatican has an important role in the human search for truth, but it certainly does not have the right to invent the truth concerning homosexuality.

The Vatican is right, I believe, in claiming that we are dealing with an "objective disorder". But that objective disorder has nothing to do with homosexuality but with the Vatican itself. One clue to what that disorder is, is to be found in the use of the word "objective". Traditionally, the Vatican viewed all homosexual behavior as a choice motivated by lust by otherwise heterosexual men and, therefore, "subjectively disordered" But when modern psychologists accumulated undeniable evidence that there is such a thing as homosexual orientation that is not chosen and is unchangeable, the Vatican was forced to concede that homosexual orientation, since it is not a matter of choice, cannot be qualified as subjectively morally evil. One possible conclusion then was that homosexual orientation was part of God's creative plan and since " *agere sequitur esse*", the acts that would flow from such an orientation, if they are in the context of interpersonal love, would be morally acceptable. To say that God created humans with an orientation to evil is blasphemy. In defense of its tradition the Vatican chooses to go the other way. God intended all humans to be heterosexual. Homosexual orientation must represent, then, some mysterious disruption of God's plan possibly due to original sin. The orientation itself is an orientation to evil and any action flowing from that orientation would be sinful.

There is a deeper reason why the Vatican seems so out of touch whenever it deals with sexual ethics. Paradoxically, the Vatican, which teaches the Christian position that God is love, has no adequate philosophical foundation for dealing with love, divine or human, or with the unique individual person and that person's subjective consciousness. The Vatican remains exclusively committed to objective Thomistic realism and has systematically rejected any effort to introduce the human subject into its moral reasoning. In his encyclical, *Veritatis Splendor*, published in 1993, Pope John Paul II defended this choice because objective realism makes possible the formulation of absolute, universal laws essential to the power and absolute authority of the Church, whereas to introduce the human subject is to allow a kind of relativism, which would undermine the absolute authority of the Church. For

over a hundred years, progressive Catholic theologians have urged the Church to develop its philosophical foundation to allow for the unique human subject, the person, and that person's contribution to theological thinking. Instead of basing its sexual morality on biology, gender differences and procreation, this would allow the Church to deal with the specific human purposes of sex such as interpersonal love and companionship, but the Church has adamantly refused to do so.

As far back as 1893, Maurice Blondel in his book, *L'Action* argued that objective realism, since it could only deal with conceptual reality, was necessarily depersonalized and depersonalizing because the unique individual person can never be objectified in a concept. He also maintained that love is a human experience that can only be known from within in the action of loving. He believed that a philosophy that included the unique human person would be much more compatible with Christian belief. The ultimate level of truth was not the conformity of human concepts with objective reality but the conformity of will-willing with will-willed. That truth can only be arrived at through human action and commitment and is a truth that is only available subjectively in individual consciousness.

Jesus at the last supper told his followers, "It is necessary that I go away. If I do not go away the Spirit can not come to you. But if I go away I will send you the Spirit. The Spirit will dwell in your hearts and lead you into all truths." Jesus was recommending a spiritual maturing process by which his followers' contact with God would no longer be Jesus outside themselves but the divine life living within them.

"Because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. Nevertheless, I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away. For if I do not go away, the Holy Spirit will not come to you, but if I go, I will send him to you. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth." (John: 16:6-13)

Jesus is expressing the need in some way to prove to be a fallible leader in order for his followers to mature and move on to the next stage in their spiritual life, where their authority is no longer just Jesus outside themselves but the Spirit dwelling in their hearts.

As Blondel put it, what Jesus was promising was not a "visio beatificans", a purely intellectual viewing of the divine essence, but a "vita beatificans", a sharing on the subjective level of divine life, a sharing that can rise up into our consciousness when we place an action of love. "For God is love and, if anyone loves they know God." "The only way we can know God is in some way to be God, to share in divine life." When we place an action that is in conformity with that divine spirit dwelling within us then we experience total certainty and intense joy and fulfillment.

A central Christian teaching based on the indwelling of the Spirit, one that is without doubt of utmost importance especially to those who are gay or lesbian, is the teaching of freedom of conscience. This teaching was expressed anew in a powerful way in the documents of Vatican II:

Every human has in his or her heart a law written by God. To obey that law is the dignity of the human. According to that law we will be judged. There we are alone with God whose voice echoes in our depths. (The Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World)

According to this teaching where do you seek to find out what God wants of you? You turn inward in prayer and you listen carefully to discern what your heart is saying to you. You ask God, if you are about to make a choice, if what you are about to do is in harmony with God's spirit dwelling in your heart, to fill your heart with confidence, peace and joy. "Lord, grant me the grace to know your will for me and the courage to be able to do it." Note that God speaks to us primarily through our hearts, that is to say, through our emotions, and only secondarily through our reason. This indwelling of the Holy Spirit was the grounds on which Ignatius Loyola based his Spiritual Exercises, especially his Rules for the Discernment of Spirits. This is the reason why the Vatican never trusted the Jesuits and preferred Opus Dei's rigid authoritarianism instead.

Paul saw the gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Sunday as fulfillments of this prophesy of Jeremiah: "This is the new covenant I will make with my people in those days. I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts and I will be their God and they shall be my people. No longer will they teach one another, or say to each other: Know the Lord. For they shall all know me from the least to the greatest, says the Lord!" Again Paul quotes these words from the prophet Joel: "In the last days, it will be," God declares, "that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and daughters will prophesy and your young men will see visions. And your old men will dream dreams. Even upon slaves, both men and women, I will pore out my Spirit and they shall prophecy." (Acts 2: 16-17) (There is no comment on these passages in John Paul II's encyclical, *Splendor Veritatis*, which gives a brilliant defense of the role of reason in moral life.) The hierarchy has no exclusive claim to discerning what the will of God is. This power belongs to every baptized Christian who has received the Holy Spirit.

The Church is in need of a special transformation to become a Church of the Holy Spirit. With the coming of the Spirit, we, like the Apostles, must give up the security of a provident leader. We have a special need with God's grace to become mature, self-motivated, autonomous people, no longer dependent on outside forces for a sense of our identity and well-being. We must not let our enemies outside ourselves define us, we must let the Spirit of love that dwells in our hearts define us. If we approach external Church authorities, it should not be to seek an approval they cannot and frequently will not give us. Rather, it should be to witness to what the Holy Spirit is saying through our experience.

The loss of the moral authority of the Catholic Church is truly tragic. There is a desperate need for that authority in such issues as poverty, war and peace, the economy and many other areas. True authority in the Church of the Holy Spirit will only be exercised by leaders who are tuned in and listening to what the Holy Spirit is saying in and through the experiences of the people of God. Here is where God is making an ongoing revelation of God's truth. In the Book of Revelations, the Holy Spirit makes the statement: "Behold! I am doing something new." Scripture and reason are not the only sources to reveal to us the will of God. We also have the living and creative voice of God's Spirit speaking to us

directly in our hearts and through our experiences. And Jesus promised us that if we prayerfully listen to that voice, the Spirit “will lead us into all truth”.

For twenty-five years, I conducted ecumenical retreats twice a year at Kirkridge Retreat Center located in the Poconos, for gay and lesbian Christians using the theme “Seeking Intimacy with God”. Every Saturday night during the weekend retreat we held a session called the ‘fishbowl’ during which ten selected retreatants shared their spiritual journey as gay men. After hearing five hundred such biographical accounts, a clear pattern of how the Holy Spirit acts in gay men emerged. Initially, there was a period of acceptance of homophobic Church teaching which led to self-loathing, emotional breakdown, alcohol and/or drug abuse, and relating to God purely out of fear. More often than not there were heartbreaking experiences of being thrown out and disowned by their family and Church community, being abused and beaten by fellow students in school, attempted suicide and coming close to despair. The amount of human suffering in the gay community was overwhelming. In the midst of all that suffering and despair the Spirit came to them and touched their hearts. They became aware that God loved them as gay men. This experience of God’s love healed their spirit and psyche. Having accepted themselves as loved by God, they were then able to reach out for companionship. “It is not good that a human remain alone. Every human needs a companion of his or her own kind.” (Gen 2) The final stage in that journey was a call to ministry, the Spirit urging them to share their experience of God’s love and all the good things that God has done for them with their brothers and sisters. Gay seminarians should keep in mind that Jesus was not a priest in his Church. His authority to minister came directly from the Spirit of God dwelling in his heart.

Wherever humans are being liberated to a greater fullness of justice and life, there is God’s Holy Spirit “doing something new” in establishing the kingdom of God on earth. The two great liberation movements of our day, women’s liberation and gay and lesbian liberation are both the work of the Holy Spirit. And they are not unconnected. The root cause of all homophobia is what I name feminaphobia, the hatred of all things feminine. This is the most central “objective disorder” in the Vatican.

The Holy Spirit cannot be contained. “The wind of the Spirit blows where it will!” I do not think it was pure coincidence that the movie, *Brokeback Mountain* was released simultaneously with the Vatican Instruction. That movie is a revelation of the human goodness and beauty of gay love that speaks directly to the human heart. Another event will happen at the Equity Forum film festival in Philadelphia during the month of May. A documentary on the life of the gay Franciscan priest, Mychal Judge, the chaplain of the New York fire department entitled “The Saint of 9/11” will be shown. Father Judge, a gay man was the perfect model of a saintly priest. Again I think it was no coincidence that at the very moment Father Judge was dying while anointing a fallen fire fighter at the foot of the World Trade Towers, hierarchs were drafting the Instruction in Rome banning gays from the priesthood.

Father Jacques Perotti, a leader of David and Jonathan, the Christian gay movement in French speaking countries, speaks of a declic, a special moment in history, “a revelation of a positive homosexual identity from the heart of the world. After so many ages of rejection,

destruction and intimidation, a wind of freedom has begun to blow!” Since this is the work of God, no human force can stop it.