

Live, feel and think as Gay Catholic.

Paolo Gamberini, SJ

In recent years, Homosexuality has become a topic of much heated debate in all Christian churches. Even the Catholic church is not absent in this discussion, although it often prefers to play the role of *magistra* rather than listener. The church often speaks of gay people as one of the many “categories,” together with: women, the poor, emigrants, divorcees, those who have abortions, prisoners, drug addicts ...

The church will have no authority if she does not pay heed to the experience of gay people and learn from their language, and finally if she does not accept their gifts. Many people, inside and outside the Church, think that gays are only interested in sex, performed in a certain way. But if we pay attention to those directly involved in a gay experience, we get a different perspective.

1. A phenomenology of gay experience

In 1997 the then Archbishop of Westminster, Card. Hume stated in *Note on Church Teaching Concerning Homosexual People* that “love between two persons, whether of the same sex or of a different sex, is to be treasured and respected.” (Pezzini 1997, pp. 188-191). Card. Martini affirmed on several occasions that “same-sex unions [...] can show, under certain conditions, the value of mutual affection.” (Martini 2012, pp. 47-53). A gay relationship is not always and under every circumstance “unnatural,” or even worse “perverse,” but the manifestation of “love.”

Every experience always and inevitably brings with it an interpretation mediated by the language of a community. In my phenomenology of the gay experience, I will primarily focus on the sexual experience of someone who believes in God, that is someone open to the Transcendent dimension of Life, to the One I will call the “Mystery of Love.” This person experiences in his/her depth the voice of the One who loves him and dwells in her. “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” (Mt 22: 37-39).

Talking about the spiritual friendship, the English Cistercian monk, Aelred of Rievaulx, says: “You and I are here, and I hope that Christ is between us as a third.” (Aelred of Rievaulx 2010, p. 55). “To love another is in fact to reach out to God who shares his loveliness with the one we love. To be loved is to receive a sign, or a share, of God's unconditional love.” (Pezzini 1997, pp. 188-191).

Wherever and whenever a feeling and a desire for a relationship emerges, there happens an encounter with the other. Gay and straight make the experience of the same kind of sexual energy, which is an essential component of any relationship, either towards oneself, others, or God. What we do with this sexual energy, how we live and channel this powerful desire, that makes a person into a *spiritual* person. “En una noche oscura, con ansias, en amores inflamada.” Thus says the Spanish mystic Saint John of the Cross: “On a dark night, kindled in love with yearnings.” Desires and longings contain profound truths and tell something about who we are and what our needs are.

Only a spirituality infused with eros will not risk withering and freezing. A true Christian spirituality must be able to recognize that what makes a human being “human” is his/her ability to love in full. “I am convinced that a spirituality without erotic passion becomes lifeless and cold. God becomes an abstraction, an idea rather than a living presence in our lives. I am searching for a Christian spirituality that acknowledges that the human calling is to make passionate love in this world, in our beds and in our institutions. To love well means to share the gift of life with zeal and great generosity and to seek right relations with all others, relations of genuine equality and mutuality, of shared power and respect.” (Ellison 1996, p. 222).

2. Sense and *dis*-sense of eros

Sexuality cannot be reduced in its genital component, but engages the whole person: body, senses, feelings, and mind. The energy of “eros” permeates the spectrum of the whole person in all her dimensions. Sexuality is a fire and a drive, expressed and communicated in the experience of sexual pleasure. This power is a δαίμων as the Greeks called it. In *Symposium* (202, de), Plato defines *eros* as a great demon, mediating between God and mortal. “[...] between both so that the All is bound together with itself.” Humans may either

- a. repress and suppress eros (the negative taboo attitude);
- b. let it go like a river without banks (the permissive-destructive attitude),
- c. or channel, bond it with soul and spirit.

The role of the spirit is to give a soul, a center (an *entelechy* in Greek) and a vision to eros. Love *disposes* and *exposes* the sexual passion to the encounter with another “you.” The Greek New Testament qualifies love not as *eros*, but as *agape*. This kind of love does not seek someone to satisfy its needs. It is simply a love of giving, characterized by an interior and overflowing richness. *Agape* is love with a direction: beyond the *ego* towards *the other*.

Obstructing one’s passionate move towards the other leads to spiritual suicide or to become crazy. Spirituality educates one’s desires (from the verb *educare*, related to *educere* “lead out”) from being self-centered to be open to reality. Eros and spirit; pleasure and contemplation, *pathos* and *logos*. They are inter-connected. Eliminating

one of the two wings of the human experience of sexuality means to whirl around oneself: either in mental fantasies or pious reflections.

Spirit constitutes the principle of unity for the person (*entelechy*); eros – instead – is the source of creativity, vital energy, and pleasure. Too much order and normativity suffocate life, whereas chaos or lack of orientation cause our life to go astray and be banned from *the garden of Eden*. “You made us for yourself, Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” (Augustine, *Confessions*). The balance between these two dimensions of the person, *eros* and *spirit*, must be continuously sought. It is an ongoing task that changes life. Such dynamic transformation is well described Jacob's struggle at the Jabbok: “Truly I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been saved.” (Gen 32: 23-32).

There are two ways to go around and visit a place for the first time. One possibility is by using a map. In this case, the interesting spots are clearly indicated. Another way is by becoming acquainted with the surrounding, in the same way a native does. When that happens, one leaves the usual and signed track, and begins to wander. The impact is more direct, but there are risks and surprises to be met. For example, one may discover that the path is blocked and has no exit. Our human and spiritual life is often like visiting new places. We have precise indications to follow, either from the Bible or from the church, but sometimes we find ourselves in blind alleys and do not know how to get out from these *cul-de-sacs*.

When two gay people live a sincere and deep experience of love and want to live their faith within the church in sincerity and truth, they find moral norms that impede their spiritual journey. They face the alternative either to comply with the normativity of the church by neglecting their own experience, or to yield to loneliness and accommodating oneself with sexual promiscuity.

3. Catholic Church and Homosexuality

This paragraph intends to briefly summarize what the Catholic Church affirms about sexuality in general and Homosexuality in particular. What the church teaches, that binds not only the consciences of Catholics but also of every other human beings, because it interprets moral truths related to human nature.

3.1. The official teaching of the Catholic Church

The fundamental premise for understanding the Catholic position on human sexuality is to keep in mind that the Catholic church understands herself to be the authentic and authoritative interpreter not only of divine revelation but of the moral principles of human nature.

Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (1968) defines sexuality as having a double meaning: *procreative* and *unitive*. If one of these two is absent, the sexual act is performed *against* the true nature of sexuality. The legitimate exercise of sexuality exclusively takes place within the bond of marriage, between a man and a woman. Any sexual act consummated within marriage must be intrinsically open to the transmission of life, and consequently to procreation. Every human must observe this double dimension of the sexual act to live sexuality "according to nature" and "morals."

The Catholic church has clarified its position on Homosexuality in successive and various documents. In *Persona Humana* (1975) the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith at no. 8 makes the distinction between two categories of gay people: those with a *transient* and those with a *permanent* tendency. Especially the latter must be treated with understanding and sustained in the hope of overcoming their personal difficulties and inability to fit within the society. The document provides another distinction: between personal responsibility (*subjective morality*) and intrinsically disordered acts (*objective morality*). Only the homosexual behavior is objectively immoral, whereas the homosexual orientation - even if it is a tendency against nature - is not in itself "immoral," since it is a condition towards which the person is merely passive and not active. Only an act can be guilty, not an orientation or a deep-seated tendency. "Their [= *homosexual* persons] culpability will be judged with prudence. But no pastoral method can be employed which would give moral justification to these acts on the grounds that they would be consonant with the condition of such people. For according to the objective moral order, homosexual relations are acts which lack an essential and indispensable finality." (n. 8)

In a later document *The pastoral care of homosexual persons* (1986), the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith restated 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; and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder." (n. 3) The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992) defines in n. 2357 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."

We must remember that when the Catholic church speaks of "disorder," regarding homosexual orientation, she does not make a biological, psychological, or sociological statement, but an *ontological* one. The church does not "describe" sexuality as it appears, but "prescribes" what sexuality *should be*. She makes a statement about the ultimate meaning of sexuality from the perspective of natural law. As we know the *American Psychiatric Association* in 1973 indicated that Homosexuality is not a pathology but a normal orientation of human sexuality, that is a variant of sexuality. The World Health Organization in 1990 confirmed the same evaluation. According to the Catholic church, however, these pronouncements do not change the church's stand

on Homosexuality, because what the church teaches has to do with the *end* of human sexuality (*ontology*) and not with its *phenomenology*.

Only within marriage – as the 1986 document of the *Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith* states – realizes human sexuality its metaphysical end and therefore can be morally considered “right.” A person with a homosexual behavior is “immoral” for two reasons. First, because s/he acts out with people of the same sex, contradicting the *procreative* meaning of human sexuality. Secondly, because s/he contravenes the *unitive* dimension of human sexuality, because he performs sex “outside of marriage.” “Homosexual activity is not a complementary union, able to transmit life; and so, it thwarts the call to a life of that form of self-giving which the Gospel says is the essence of Christian living. This does not mean that homosexual persons are not often generous and giving of themselves; but when they engage in homosexual activity, they confirm within themselves a disordered sexual inclination which is essentially self-indulgent.” (n.7)

Since the homosexual inclination is objectively disordered and against nature (*contra naturam*), homosexual behavior is always and gravely a sin, and contrary to chastity. Such consideration refers not only to homosexual acts but to each and every moral sexual act which is performed “outside” of marriage. The lack of marital, unitive, procreative meaning in sexual acts (either masturbation, premarital or extramarital) qualifies as unnatural, intrinsically disordered, and always gravely immoral any sexual behavior (*Catechism of the Catholic church*, nos. 2352; 2357).

Those who are thus *disorderedly* oriented must live in chastity, uniting their sexual struggle to the sacrifice of Jesus’ cross. If the “end” of human sexuality consists in an *exclusive*, *indissoluble* and *procreative* loving marital relationship, any other exercise of sexuality, must be considered *objectively disordered*, that is, not ordered to the end and the meaning for which human sexuality was created. According to the official teaching of the Catholic church, marriage alone remains the natural, and therefore morally licit, way of living human sexuality. For baptized Catholics, only as sacrament can marriage be realized, thus disposing the conjugal behavior as *not* sinful.

3.2. *Some observations and critical remarks*

A question – at this moment – may arise. Do these three dimensions - *exclusive*, *indissoluble*, and *procreative* – exhaustively identify a loving relation, or is the “erotic” dimension of sexuality, and therefore of pleasure, an essential element of the human sexual experience? The dimension of pleasure (*eros*) plays an important role in the experience of sexual love. “The meaning of sexual pleasure is to be considered in all its aspects, namely, the pleasure of love, of interpersonal communion, etc. It is a dimension related to the whole phenomenon of human sexuality. All the same, we hold that this dimension is fundamentally derived from the biological aspect. Therefore, it

can be held that the dimension of pleasure is a meaning of the biological aspect of sexuality with reference to the totality of human sexuality.” (Kochuthara 2007, pp. 416-417).

Does the purpose of a moral act simply consist in the observance of a norm, or should this observance, because it is *formative*, and not only *informative* of the moral conscience, be oriented to the encounter with another *you* in whom the ineffable *Thou* of a loving God is revealed? This is what Jesus of Nazareth taught and did. He broke the religious norm, anytime it challenges what is the “human good.” Shouldn’t spirituality precede and not give in to moral norms? The distinguishing aspect of Christian faith in ethics should be the Spirit who makes moral good to be possible within human conscience, especially in situations of conflict of conscience. “In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God.” (Rm 8:26-27).

In his encyclical *Amoris Laetitia* at no. 305, Pope Francis advises that it is “possible that in an objective situation of sin – which may not be subjectively culpable, or fully such – a person can be living in God’s grace, can love and can also grow in the life of grace and charity, while receiving the Church’s help to this end. Discernment must help to find possible ways of responding to God and growing in the midst of limits. By thinking that everything is black and white, we sometimes close off the way of grace and of growth and discourage paths of sanctification which give glory to God.”

Commenting on the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, where at no. 16 states that “the conscience is the most secret center and the shrine of man, where he is alone with God, whose voice resounds in his own intimacy,” the young theologian Joseph Ratzinger in 1967 wrote: “Over the pope as the expression of the binding claim of ecclesiastical authority there still stands one's own conscience, which must be obeyed before all else, if necessary even against the requirement of ecclesiastical authority. Conscience confronts [the individual] with a supreme and ultimate tribunal, and one which in the last resort is beyond the claim of external social groups, even of the official church.” (Ratzinger 1967, pp. 328-329)

4. Thinking as a Gay Catholic

When a Gay Catholic listens to his/her own experience, this is *already* interpreted by others: family, society, and church. The (*homo*) affective disposition by which s/he lives and feels, is interfaced with words and images transmitted from others. At the same time, the Gay Catholic remains responsible for critically assuming these interpretations from the “outside” and is invited to discern which norms, concepts, and

acts, are more able to preserve, promote and favor his human sexual experience and which frustrate his/her spiritual journey.

Biblical Revelation and anthropological reflection both consider sexuality as a form of human encounter. In God's plan, the other in front of me defines the borders the sexual difference. "Then God said: 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner'." (Gen 2:18). It is neither man or woman alone the image of God; the "relation" between the two "is" the image of God. The divine image is therefore not primarily to be sought in the sexual difference, but in its *relatedness* which grounds the human nature. As God is *relational* (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), so humanity has been created in the image of God: *relational*. The finality of human nature is therefore relatedness and whatever sustains promotes and realizes it can be considered "moral."

Complementarity is not exclusive to the relationship between a man and a woman but can be found also in the experience of human friendship and between two persons of the same sex. Christian faith understands *agape* as the full realization of this encounter with the other: *eros* and *agape* cannot be separated from each other. As pope Benedict XVI says in the encyclical *Deus Caritas est* at no. 7: "The more the two, in their different aspects, find a proper unity in the one reality of love, the more the true nature of love in general is realized." Human relationships can be realized in two complementary ways: through *eros* and *agape*. Without love, *eros* risks getting stuck within the boundaries of the ego and of its needs, which also include the need for sexual pleasure; but without these needs, without *pathos*, love (*agape*) ends up degenerating into a mere commandment.

It is necessary to reclaim an *analogical* understanding of sexuality, so that we may recognize what is similar and different in the *homo* and *heterosexual* orientation. To understand this analogical meaning of human sexuality, we may apply the model Vatican II uses in dealing with the ecclesial status of those churches "outside" the normativity boundaries of the Catholic church. Before Vatican II the distinction was quite clear and sharp: either *inside* the Catholic church, or *outside*. Those who were not Catholics were considered "heretics" and their communities were more a "sect" than a "church." Vatican II introduced a different understanding of these churches through a gradual vision of their character.

The Conciliar document *Unitatis Redintegratio* states at no. 22 that in the ecclesial communities originated with the Reformation of the XVI. century there is an absence of the sacrament of Orders (*defectus ordinis*). According to the Catholic church, these protestant communities have no valid priesthood, and therefore celebrate no "valid" Eucharist. Ecumenical theologians, however, argue whether it is a question of absence (*defectus ut nihil*) or of the fullness of the sacred order (*defectus ut minus*). Indeed, these ecclesial communities are "true" churches, but not in the sense in which the Catholic church understands and wants to be. They are churches of a different type.

From the Catholic standpoint of view, these churches “lack” elements which are considered essential for the Catholic notion of the “church character.” But they are still to be considered “church.” Their deficiency refers to the *confessional* and *categorical dimension* of the Catholic church, but that does not mean that these communities – by not being *Roman catholic* – cannot be considered “true” churches from the *ontological* perspective of the Church of Christ. This ecumenical paradigm helped to accept the communities of the Reformation with their true church elements (*elementa ecclesiae*).

By adopting this ecumenical model, the church may recognize same-sex relationships as bearer of those *elements* of relationality which are constitutive of the human person. Card. Christoph Schönborn adopted such model at the extraordinary synod on the family (Schönborn 2014). What *Lumen Gentium* no. 8 says about the *elementa ecclesiae* can be applied to the many, imperfect forms of marriage and family, such as civil unions and cohabitation of unmarried couples.

Although Homosexuality is not identical to Heterosexuality, it cannot be judged entirely negative. Cardinal Marx, archbishop of Munich and Freising, clearly stated in a interview released in *America* that “it is not possible to see a person only from one point of view, without considering the whole situation of that person. This is very important for sexual ethics.” (Hansen 2015) Bishop Johan Bonny of Antwerp, Belgium, in *De Morgen*, a Belgian newspaper, on 27 Dec. 2015, said the church should recognize a “diversity of forms” and could bless gay relationships based on these values of love, fidelity and commitment.

On 20 Sept. 2022, the Flemish-speaking bishops of Belgium published a document, titled “Being Pastorally Close to Homosexual Persons: For a welcoming church that excludes no one,” in which a prayer liturgy for same-sex couples has been created. It is worth noting that God’s blessing is invoked upon the “commitment of love and mutual fidelity” of the couple, and not simply on the individuals as the *Responsum* of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, regarding the blessing of the unions of persons of the same sex, declared: “it is not licit to impart a blessing on relationships, or partnerships, even stable, that involve sexual activity outside of marriage (i.e., outside the indissoluble union of a man and a woman open in itself to the transmission of life), as is the case of the unions between persons of the same sex. The presence in such relationships of positive elements, which are in themselves to be valued and appreciated, cannot justify these relationships and render them legitimate objects of an ecclesial blessing, since the positive elements exist within the context of a union not ordered to the Creator’s plan.”

By further applying a hermeneutic of graduality not only to marriage but more generally to sexuality, the church could recognize that relationality is fully realized in the normativity of conjugal love between a man and a woman but is not excluded or absent in the love between two persons of the same sex. Although “imperfect,” this form of relationship is real and valuable. The expression “imperfect” o “deficient” does

not mean that a gay loving experience is inferior. It simply means that it does not enjoy the fullness of that relationality which is present in heterosexual and marital love expressed by the procreative meaning of sexuality. But the other meaning, the unitive, is well expressed in the intimacy of gay people. The unitive dimension of same-sex love is not disjoint from the element of sexual pleasure that deepens the quality of the relationship. Sexual pleasure is an ethical value, but not a self-standing value. It strengthens the unitive value in its life-giving aspect, that is in opening oneself to the ecstatic dynamic of *agape* towards the other. That means that the gay person seeks the good *for* and *of* the other person, loving the other in such a way that this one becomes stronger, more independent, and not weaker and less able to assume his own life.

Heterosexual love does not exhaust the totality of sexual relationality. We need to understand sexuality in an analogical and non-univocal way. Rather than focusing on procreative genitality, the life-giving dimension of sexuality can be expressed in the fecundity and generosity of gay relationships which are “open” to dedicate their lives for others, and from these evaluate the morality of their sexual acts. This disposition can be embodied in many social forms. Although this kind of fruitfulness is not of the same type as that of the heterosexual couples, because is not “biological,” it does express the gift of love. The Kantian principle “Always act by treating the other as an end, and never as a means,” is the requirement for building up any serious human relationship and, consequently, the ultimate standard for evaluating the morality of a sexual behavior.

In his faith journey, the Gay Catholic chooses those acts and lifestyle that are conformed more and more to the image of a *relational* God. “Perfection” is not an abstract ideal according to which moral acts are evaluated, based on the *right* or *wrong* of a norm, but a journey, a way of *sentire*, a spiritual sense (both as *feeling* and *direction*), in which the sexual tendency is channeled with labor, patience and endurance towards the God’s love. “Progress not perfection,” but also: “progress is perfection.”

We need to realize that friendship and love have an enormous value in the moral and spiritual growth of a person. Such an experience helps any person (not only the Gay Catholic) to “come out” and open him/herself up to another person. The goal of Catholic ethics is not to change a deep-seated tendency into something else, but to enhance the growth of faithful relationships in concrete given situations.

Following his/her moral conscience, a Gay Catholic will choose what *more* helps him to accomplish the “best possible relationship” with his own body, with another and with God. “[A] small step, in the midst of great human limitations, can be more pleasing to God than a life which appears outwardly in order, but moves through the day without confronting great difficulties” (Pope Francis 2013, no. 44). In this dynamic

context, the “moral good” of homosexual acts will be what enables the Gay Catholic to express and sustain faithful and enduring relationships (*fruitfulness*) in his/her life.

“A relationship is ‘good,’ promotes other relationships; it is good a behavior that is embedded in this fruitful relational dimension [...]. A relationship that promotes other relationships, and does not block them, and in so doing, ends up blocking the relationship [...]. The more a relationship is self-diffusive and activates other relationships, the more it realizes what an ethical relationship is. It is a relationship which is able to actualize the good.” (Fabris 2010, pp. 89-91).

This “relational” principle can be applied to gay and straight people. By rethinking the morality of same-sex acts, moral theologians need to broaden the horizon, within which to discern the *quality* of sexual acts, indicating norms, values and virtues based on what can be considered “moral” in a gay relationship. For example, by paying attention to what makes the gay person grow both psychologically and spiritually, rather than diminishing his/her human dignity and well-being with perverse, libertine, or neurotic acting out. By attentively listening and discerning his/her *lived* experience with its deep-seated sexual orientation and the desire for a same-sex partnership, a Gay Catholic will not demonize sexual but channel the erotic energy and move it through on his life-journey. The criteria for evaluating such “gay relationships” would be *fidelity*, *reciprocity*, and *responsible love*. Discerning the journey to go a spiritual guide or a priest can be on his/her side listening to their trials and failures in the sacrament of reconciliation and breaking the bread of life in the Eucharist (Pope Francis 2016, footnote 351).

Imposing chastity on those who have not chosen it as permanent lifestyle, and even more on those who are not even Catholic, means to prevent a gay person from seeking the best for him/herself, thus convincing him to consider chastity as a “norm” to be observed rather than a “virtue” by which the good is spontaneously achieved. According to Thomas Aquinas “chastity” is not primarily the suppression of desire, but the awareness to live and act *secundum rationem*, that is, in the real world, in conformity with the truth of reality (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologia* , II-II, q. 151, art.1, *ad quartum*).

The meaning of chastity is not to abandon the test of experience and take refuge in a false image of oneself and others, but to live in touch with our true self and that of others. Chastity brings us back to earth and helps us to relish from within the *goodness* of the relationship with whom we love. From this perspective, Gay Catholics are called – as anyone else – to live *secundum rationem*, that is in chastity.

5. What are the rights for same-sex couples?

One of the major requests of gay activists is the recognition of marriage – or any other form of civil union – for same-sex couples. There are currently 32 countries where same-sex marriage is legal, and forms of “civil unions or partnerships” have been recognized in many other countries. The Catholic church and other conservative Protestant denominations are opposing same-sex marriage or unions. This paragraph intends to briefly summarize what the Catholic church has so far declared on this specific topic and how we may continue the discussion.

5.1. *The Catholic Church and the "rights" of homosexuals*

In 1992 the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith released a document on *The Social Rights of Homosexual Persons*. In this official declaration, the Catholic church distinguishes between the homosexual tendency, which is an objective disorder, and all other differences of race, ethnicity, and religion.

Homosexuality is not a right we may ascribe to a human person. The gay person has rights only insofar as s/he is a human *person*, not as a *gay* person. For the Catholic church, anyone who publicly reveals his sexual orientation, he or she implicitly acknowledges that homosexual tendency is something indifferent or even “good.” These forms of “outing” cannot be considered “rights,” and therefore they must be legitimately restricted. The Pontifical Council for the Family, in a document on *Family, marriage and “de-facto” unions* (2000) and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in *Considerations regarding the projects for the legal recognition of unions between homosexual persons* (2003) confirmed these official considerations, restating that marriage and civil union are not “rights” that same-sex people enjoy. Rational and natural truth acknowledge that marriage is possible only between a man and a woman. It is only because of sin that human reason has obliterated or weakened the understanding about this natural truth. To reclaim this fundamental truth, revelation is necessary, and the Catholic church is its authoritative interpreter. What the church teaches about human nature and natural law binds not only the Catholic faithful but every other human being. The civil laws of a nation – in order to be observed by its citizens – must comply with the dictates of the natural law that the Catholic church authoritatively interprets.

Divorce and polygamy, but even more same-sex marriage, contradict what the natural law defines as marriage: an exclusive, indissoluble, and procreative union between a man and a woman. To this specific type of relationship, rights and duties are ascribed, and not to other forms of relationships.

5.2. The “social” meaning of same-sex union

In order to open up the discussion, we need not to identify “marriage” with “same-sex unions.” Both are “relationships” and we must acknowledge the “good” present in both types. These relationships do not only nourish the two partners, but also the society in which they live and act. The difference between marriage and “same-sex” union is that the latter can be considered an “imperfect” form of relationship, only when we look at the procreative dimension of the relationship. Being “imperfect” does not mean “immoral” (*intrinsice malum*); it only means that fecundity is not biologically present in the relationship, but it is available in other forms: for example, adoption.

In a recent interview for the News Agency *Deutsche Welle*, the German bishop of Aachen, Helmut Desier, said that “Homosexuality - as science demonstrates - is not a fault, it is not a disease, it is not the expression of a defect, and it is not even a consequence of original sin. Then I have to say: the world is colorful, and creation is diverse. And then I can also accept a diversity in sexuality which is willed by God and does not violate the will of the Creator. Same-sex sentiment and love is not an aberration, but a variant of human sexuality.” (Matic, S./ Strack, C. 2022).

The society has the duty to protect and guarantee the “common good” the gay couple represents. Their rights are not based on their “being gay,” but on the basis of this “common good,” which is the permanent and lasting relationship they embody. To assist one's partner at the hospital, to share the benefits of the insurance, to inherit the goods purchased together or shared during life: these are all rights that must be acknowledged not only to the single individuals but to the relationship as such. The “good” is not only what benefits each individual apart from the relationship, but what favors both within and out of the *relationship*.

Normally it is objected that it is not enough to be in a relationship to have rights and duties to be recognized. In the case of “friendship” we have a powerful and permanent bond between two people – in some cases more significant than the marital one – but that is not enough to ascribe to friendship social “rights.” Those who raise such objections do not realize that a same-sex couple live not only a stable, but an exclusive relationship, which is not the case about friendship.

Although family is grounded on marriage, and both are primary and normative models for the society, the two cannot be identified. It is true that marriage originates family, but there is a variety of forms of family, completely independent of marriage. Today we speak of “extended” family model (tribe family), “singular” family, such as the “religious” family of religious orders and congregations, or “communes”. The concept of family, therefore, does not overlap that of marriage. Therefore, we may apply – by analogy – the notion of “family” to all forms of “stable” cohabitation between two or more people who for different reasons decide to live together. Strictly speaking, same-sex marriage is contested not because the Catholic church deems it as something

“negative” or “illegitimate,” but because it is considered “impossible” by definition. Indeed, marriage is defined as an *exclusive, indissoluble, and procreative* relationship.

If you need eggs, flour, and chocolate to make a “chocolate cake,” when one of these ingredients is missing, you cannot speak of a chocolate cake but something else, for example, of a lemon cake, if you add lemons instead of chocolate to your cake. Similarly, if we define “marriage” as the union between same-sex people, the (*biological*) procreative dimension of marriage is lacking. It follows that there is no marriage but something else, namely a same-sex civil union.

The rationale of this argument is not followed when one of the other two essential elements of marriage is missing: *exclusivity* or *indissolubility*. When one of these two is missing, the church still calls the new “union” a marriage. According to natural and ecclesiastical law, polygamy and divorce do not make marriage “impossible.” And why not call same-sex union a marriage, notwithstanding (*biological*) procreation is missing?

6. Conclusions

The debate over gay issues confronts the Catholic church with modern society. Without anyone denying their religious, moral, and social convictions, it is nevertheless desirable that both parties deepen the arguments of the other position. According to the Catholic church, the end of human sexuality consists in an exclusive, indissoluble, and procreative loving relationship. Any other exercise of human sexuality “outside” the boundary of marriage is considered *objectively disordered* and for the baptized Catholic sinful if it is not celebrated as a sacrament.

The considerations I have exposed about the spiritual formation and moral discernment for a Gay Catholic can help to understand the same-sex relationships in a “broader” context and vision. The perspective I propose is that of “relationality” in which rethink the doctrine of creation and anthropology: the encounter with the other *you* who is the “threshold” of the mystery of God’s love. “Love your Lord and love your neighbor as yourself.” (Mt 22:37.39). If the moral doctrine on homosexual acts must change, Catholic teaching on human sexuality must change. But that needs a move towards a new anthropology, in which the notion of “relatedness” constitutes the identity of the person and recognizes the rights that protect that identity in its manifold “relationships.”

Reference bibliography

- Aelred of Rievaulx (2010), *Spiritual friendship*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville (MI).
- Alison, J. (2001), *Faith beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay*, The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York.
- Benedict XVI (2005) *Deus Caritas est* (www.vatican.va)
- The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992)
- Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (1975), *Persona Humana* (www.vatican.va).
- Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (1986), *The pastoral care of homosexual persons* (www.vatican.va).
- Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (1992), *The Social Rights of Homosexual Persons* (www.vatican.va).
- Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (2003), *Considerations regarding the projects for the legal recognition of unions between homosexual persons* (2003)
- Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (2021), “Responsum to a dubium regarding the blessing of the unions of persons of the same sex,” 15 March 2021 (<https://press.vatican.va>)
- Ellison, M.M. (2004), *Same Sex Marriage? A Christian Ethical Analysis*, The Pilgrim Press, Cleveland.
- Ellison, M.M. (1996), *Sexuality and spirituality: an intimate – and intimidating – connection*, in Thatcher, A. e Stuart, E., a cura di, *Christian Perspectives on sexuality and gender*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, pp. 220-227.
- Empereur, J.L. (1999), *Spiritual Direction and the Gay Person*, Continuum, New York.
- Fabris, A. (2010), *TeorEtica*, Morcelliana, Brescia.
- Filteau, J. (2012), “Bishop urges change in ‘church teaching concerning all sexual relationships’,” National Catholic Reporter (online edition), March 16.
- Fischer, J. (2004), “Hat die Ehe einen Primat gegenüber der nichtehelichen Lebensgemeinschaft?“, *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, 101, 346-357.
- The Pontifical Council for the Family (2000), *Family, marriage and “de-facto” unions* (www.vatican.va)
- Pope Francis (2013), *Apostolic Exhortation: “Evangelii Gaudium,”* (www.vatican.va).
- Pope Francis (2016), *Encyclical: “Amoris Laetitia,”* (www.vatican.va)
- Hansen, L. (2015), “Cardinal Marx on Francis, the Synod, Women in the Church and Gay Relationships,” *America*, (January 22, 2015)
- Keenan, J.F. (2003), “The open debate: Moral Theology and the lives of gay and lesbian persons”, *Theological Studies*, 64, 127-150.
- Kochuthara, S. G. (2007), *The Concept of Sexual Pleasure in the Catholic Moral Tradition*, Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, Rome.
- McCarthy Matzko, D. (1997), “Homosexuality and the Practices of Marriage”, in *Modern Theology*, 6: 371-397.
- Pope, S. J. (1997), “Scientific and Natural Law Analyses of Homosexuality: A Methodological Study”, *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 25, pp. 89-126.
- Radcliffe, T. (2007), *Amare nella libertà*, Qiqajon, Magnano.
- Ratzinger, J. (1968), “Pastorale Konstitution über die Kirche in der Welt von heute. Erster Hauptteil: Kommentar zum I. Kapitel”, in Brechter, H.S., a cura di, *Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil*, Herder, Freiburg, pp. 313-354.
- Rogers, E. F. (2000), *Sexuality and the Christian Body*, Blackwell Publishers, London.
- Schönborn, C. (2014), “Come parlare con rispetto di matrimonio e di famiglia, quando essi non sono perfettamente realizzati?”, <http://www.ilregno-blog.blogspot.it/2014/11/una-nuova-chiave-ermeneutica.html>
- Matic, S./ Strack, C. (2022), “Kirche und Sex: Ein Bischof will Reformen,” *Deutsche Welle*, Nov 13, 2022, <https://p.dw.com/p/4JBac>