

ORGANIZATIONS THAT CALL THEMSELVES "CATHOLIC"
YET FAIL TO UPHOLD CATHOLIC TEACHING ON HOMOSEXUAL BEHAVIOR

Committee on Doctrine
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

In view of the increasing number of organizations that appropriate the name "Catholic" while presenting teaching that is not in conformity with authentic Catholic teaching and practice, it is not surprising that bishops sometimes receive questions from people confused about such organizations. In order to help bishops respond to these queries, the Committee on Doctrine offers the following resource, which explains in summary fashion authentic Catholic teaching, and why other pastoral resources which fail to uphold Catholic teaching on homosexual behavior do a disservice to persons with a homosexual inclination.

Unfortunately, there are indeed organizations that claim to be Catholic yet that are in conflict with the Church in what they teach and propose for pastoral practice. A prominent example is Catholics for Choice (formerly known as Catholics for Free Choice), which has for many years opposed the efforts of the Church and others to put an end to abortion.¹ In recent years, groups that claim to be Catholic but oppose Church teaching on homosexual behavior have received considerable attention. The most prominent example is New Ways Ministry. In 2010, Cardinal Francis George, then President of the USCCB, issued a statement about this organization in which he asserted: "No one should be misled by the claim that New Ways Ministry provides an authentic interpretation of Catholic teaching and an authentic Catholic pastoral practice. Their claim to be Catholic only confuses the faithful regarding the authentic teaching and ministry of the Church with respect to persons with a homosexual inclination." He

¹ See the statement by the President of the NCCB/USCC Bishop Joseph Fiorenza, 10 May 2000.

concluded: "I wish to make it clear that, like other groups that claim to be Catholic but deny central aspects of Church teaching, New Ways Ministry has no approval or recognition from the Catholic Church and that they cannot speak on behalf of the Catholic faithful in the United States."

In a democratic and pluralistic society such as ours, people freely promote a wide variety of worldviews and pursue a wide variety of lifestyles. Whenever these are contrary to Church teaching but labeled as "Catholic," civil law provides few restrictions. There is a critical difference, however, between what is "Catholic" in name only and what is truly Catholic. Therefore it is paramount that any resultant confusion be dispelled, as is the case with the issue of homosexuality.

In 2006, the bishops of the USCCB published a document entitled *Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care*. This document summarizes Church teaching on homosexuality and offers guidance on how ministry to persons with a homosexual inclination should be undertaken in a way that is consistent with Church teaching. Organizations whose approach to ministry does not accord with these *Guidelines* or even contradicts them are in fact not presenting an authentic Catholic position, even if they claim to be Catholic.

The *Guidelines* summarize the basic elements of Catholic teaching in this area. First of all, the Church teaches that every human person as created by God "possesses an innate human dignity that must be acknowledged and respected" (p. 2). Consequently, the Church condemns any kind of hatred, violence, or unjust discrimination against persons with a homosexual inclination. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* asserts that persons with a homosexual inclination "must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity" (no. 2358).

The *Guidelines* also explain that determining the proper pastoral approach to the phenomenon of homosexuality requires a correct understanding of the role of human sexuality in God's plan for humanity. God created man and woman equal as human beings but different in a complementary way that relates to procreation, for in their difference man and woman can come together in a union that is open to the possibility of new life. Human sexuality finds its purpose in the complementary union of man and woman in marriage. "The purpose of sexual desire is to draw man and woman together in the bond of marriage, a bond that is directed toward two inseparable ends: the expression of marital love and the procreation and education of children" (p. 3).

Thus it follows, according to God's plan, that sexual acts outside the bond of marriage between a man and a woman do not fulfill the natural purpose of human sexuality and are thus immoral.

There are a variety of acts, such as adultery, fornication, masturbation, and contraception, that violate the proper ends of human sexuality. Homosexual acts also violate the true purpose of sexuality. They are sexual acts that cannot be open to life. Nor do they reflect the complementarity of man and woman that is an integral part of God's design for human sexuality. (p. 4)

Because sexual acts outside of marriage do not fulfill the natural purpose of marriage, they do not contribute to true human well-being or happiness, but rather detract from it. "Immoral actions, actions that are not in accord with the natural order of things, are incapable of contributing to true human fulfillment and happiness. In fact, immoral actions are destructive of the human person because they degrade and undermine the human dignity given us by God" (p. 7).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* provides the Church's clear teaching on God's plan in creation for men and women, human sexuality, the virtue of chastity, homosexuality, and

the love of husband and wife (nos. 2331-2391). This teaching is the norm against which all teaching and pastoral practice regarding sexual activity must be measured for authenticity.

The Church's position is frequently caricatured by opponents as representing a rejection of those with a homosexual inclination as persons. The Church teaches very clearly, however, that to have a homosexual inclination is not itself a sin. "To the extent that a homosexual tendency or inclination is not subject to one's free will, one is not morally culpable for that tendency. Although one would be morally culpable if one were voluntarily to entertain homosexual temptations or to choose to act on them, simply having the tendency is not a sin" (p. 5). The Church does not teach that people are bad because they have a homosexual inclination. Rather, as she challenges all people to respect the proper purpose of sexual activity, the Church reminds persons that the virtue of chastity entails resisting the performance of actions that are contrary to this purpose.

The Church recognizes that, particularly in our society, which places so much emphasis on sexual desire and gratification, chastity can be seen as an unwelcome burden. In facing the reality of temptation, sexual appetite, and a sexually permissive culture, Church teaching offers a wisdom about human sexuality based not only on centuries of human experience and study, but also on what God has revealed about the place of sexuality in the divine plan for humanity. A life of faith even in all its struggles offers participation in a community where friendship can be experienced, as well as mutual support. Finally, the communion of the Church offers a privileged place of encounter with God. Here we find readily available the grace of Christ, particularly through the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist. The Gospel of Christ offers hope.

There are a number of well-meaning people, Catholics included, who believe that in order to affirm the personal dignity of those with a homosexual inclination one must affirm, either explicitly or implicitly, homosexual behavior. A ministry based on such an approach does not, in the final analysis, provide the assistance that is needed. Organizations that follow this approach are mistaken about what constitutes true human well-being and happiness. Even if unintentionally, they are misleading people and contributing to the general confusion about human sexuality in our society.

This is why it is so important to distinguish between organizations that come to the aid of persons with a homosexual inclination in a way that truly accords with the authentic teaching of the Church and organizations that, even though "Catholic" in name, do not follow Church teaching in its entirety and that thus fail to provide authentic pastoral support and guidance. Bishops, pastors, and all those in positions of responsibility have a duty to the truth and to our brothers and sisters in the faith to make sure that the faithful know when an organization that calls itself "Catholic" does not in fact uphold Church teaching and authentic pastoral practice.