



FAQs: Catholicism, Homosexuality, and Dignity

Frequently Asked Questions About Being Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Transgender and Catholic



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The following was written for DignityUSA by **Daniel A. Helminiak**, the author of *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*. He holds a Ph.D. in systematic theology from Boston College and Andover Newton Theological School, and a Ph.D. in educational psychology from The University of Texas at Austin. For 28 years, he served as a priest in the Roman Catholic Church. He is a member of Dignity/Atlanta.

1. What is Dignity?

DignityUSA is the oldest and largest national lay movement of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) Catholics, our families, and our friends. Begun in 1969 in San Diego under the leadership of Fr. Patrick Nidorf, OSA, first as a counseling group and then a support group in Los Angeles, DignityUSA has been a national organization since 1973. An independent nonprofit group, our national office is in Washington, DC, with chapters located throughout the United States.

In local chapters, we worship openly with other GLBT and supportive Catholics, socialize, share personal and spiritual concerns, and work together on educational and justice issues. Members gather at periodic regional meetings and biennial national conventions.

On a nationwide basis and through its local chapters, Dignity: advocates for change in the Catholic Church's teaching on homosexuality; provides educational materials, speakers, and other resources to Catholic parishes, gay ministries, and other interested groups; maintains ongoing dialogue with Catholic bishops and other Church leaders; represents gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Catholics in the media; presents positive testimony from a Catholic perspective on civil rights legislation; publishes a quarterly journal and monthly newsletter; is a founding member of **Catholic Organizations for Renewal (COR)**, a network of diverse groups seeking change within the Church; networks internationally with GLBT Catholic groups, including assisting in the development of new groups in countries such as South Africa,

Poland, and Colombia; supports an AIDS ministry; and offers many other services

2. What is the official Catholic teaching about homosexuality?

In the mid-1970s, the Catholic Church recognized the difference between being homosexual and engaging in homogenital (same-sex) acts. The Catholic Church holds that, as a state beyond a person's choice, being homosexual is not wrong or sinful in itself. But just as it is objectively wrong for unmarried heterosexuals to engage in sex, so too are homosexual acts considered to be wrong.

The Church also teaches understanding and compassion toward gay and lesbian people. In their 1976 statement, *To Live in Christ Jesus*, the American bishops wrote, "Some persons find themselves through no fault of their own to have a homosexual orientation. Homosexuals, like everyone else, should not suffer from prejudice against their basic human rights. They have a right to respect, friendship, and justice. They should have an active role in the Christian community.... The Christian community should provide them a special degree of pastoral understanding and care." In 1990, the U.S. National Conference of Catholic Bishops repeated this teaching in their instruction, *Human Sexuality* .

In 1997, the U.S. Catholic Bishops released a Pastoral Letter entitled ***Always Our Children: A Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children and Suggestions for Pastoral Ministers***, directed to the parents of gay and lesbian Catholics. In this document, the bishops briefly addressed lesbians and gay men, saying, "In you God's love is revealed." The letter also encouraged families to remain connected when a member revealed his or her homosexuality, and called for the establishment of ministries sensitive to the needs of gay and lesbian Catholics and their families.

3. What is the basis for Catholic teaching about the immorality of homogenital acts?

All Catholic sexual ethics rests on this principle: procreation is an essential aspect of human sexuality, so every genital act must be open to the possibility of conception. For this very same reason Catholic teaching forbids homogenital acts as well as contraception, masturbation, and pre-marital and extra-marital sex.

This teaching pertains to the very nature of human sexuality. That is, the Church presents this teaching as natural law, the ordering which the Creator built into the universe.

4. What part does the Bible play in deciding the morality of same-sex acts?

Unlike some other Christian churches, the Catholic Church does not rest its teaching on the Bible alone. But the Catholic Church does appeal to the Bible

to support its teaching about natural law. Church documents have claimed that, from the book of Genesis to the end of the Christian Testament, there is constant opposition to homogenital acts.

However, contemporary Bible scholars raise many questions about the matter. Read within the context of their own historical and cultural backgrounds, the Bible texts do not address adult, loving homosexual relations as we understand them today.

5. What was the point of the Bible texts if not to condemn homosexuality?

It is not easy to summarize briefly the body of research on homosexuality in the Bible. But these are the interpretations that some scholars are proposing: The story of Sodom in Genesis 19 is about offense against the sacred duty of hospitality. That is how Ezekiel 16:48-49 and Wisdom 9:13-14 interpret this text. The attempted male rape only heightens the atrocity of this offense. Leviticus 18:22 does forbid male-male sex as an "abomination." But the word simply means an impurity or a religious taboo — like eating pork. As in the case of Catholics who used to be forbidden under pain of mortal sin to eat meat on Friday, the offense was not in the act itself but in the betrayal of one's religion. The ancient Jews were to avoid practices common among the unclean Gentiles. Romans 1:27 mentions men having relations with men. But the terms used to describe them are "dishonorable" and "shameless." These refer deliberately to social disapproval, not to ethical condemnation. Moreover, according to Paul's usage, different from the prevalent Stoic philosophy of the day, *para physin* ("unnatural") would best be translated "atypical" or "beyond the ordinary." So it bears no reference to natural law. And it can imply no ethical condemnation because in Romans 11:24 God is said to act *para physin*. Paul sees gay sex as an impurity (see Rm. 1:24), just like uncircumcision or eating forbidden foods. He mentions it to make the main point of his letter, that purity requirements of the Jewish Law are not relevant in Christ Jesus. See L. William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex*. 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:8-10 list *arsenokoitai* among those who will be excluded from the Reign of God. This obscure term has been translated "homosexuals" but its exact meaning is debated. It certainly does not include women but only some kind of male sexual offenders. If it does refer to men having sex with men — which is dubious — it must be interpreted in light of the abuse and licentiousness commonly associated with male-male sex in the Roman Empire. See Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*. Finally, Genesis 1-3 shows Adam and Eve created for mutual companionship and procreation. These accounts use the most standard of human relationships to teach a religious lesson. The point is the love and wisdom of God, who made all things good and wills us no evil. Nothing suggests the biblical authors intended a lesson on sexual orientation.

6. Hasn't there been constant opposition to homosexuality throughout Christian history?

Recent and detailed historical scholarship questions that claim. Although one could find some opposing voice in every century, there was no common opposition to homosexuality in Christian Europe until the late 12th century except for a period around the collapse of the Roman Empire. Indeed, for nearly two centuries after Christianity had become the state religion, Christian emperors in Eastern cities not only tolerated but actually taxed gay prostitution. In 7th century Visigoth Spain, a series of six national church councils refused to support the ruler's legislation against homogenital acts. By the 9th century almost every area in Christian Europe had local law codes, including detailed sections on sexual offenses; none outside of Spain forbade homogenital acts. By the High Middle Ages, a gay subculture thrived, as in Greco-Roman times. A body of gay literature was standard discussion material at courses in the medieval universities where clerics were educated.

Opposition to homosexuality, as in Augustine and Chrysostom, rested on reasons unacceptable today: "natural-law" arguments based on beliefs about supposed sexual practices among hares, hyenas, and weasels; a philosophical Stoicism that was suspicious of any sexual enjoyment; a sexism that saw a degrading effeminacy in being the receptive partner in sex. All-out Christian opposition to homosexuality arose at a time when medieval society first began to oppress many minority groups: Jews, heretics, the poor, usurers. A campaign to stir up support for the Crusades by vilifying the Muslims with charges of homosexual rape also played a part in Christian Europe's change of attitude toward gay and lesbian sex. See John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*.

7. What other considerations about the morality of homogenital acts need to be made?

Besides appealing to Scripture and Tradition (constant Church teaching), the Catholic approach to morality also relies heavily on human reasoning. The argument from natural law is a prime example. Other instances are the study of the human sciences or attention to people's personal experiences.

But arguments from natural law are inconclusive, for the nature of human sexuality is debated. Procreation is certainly one aspect of sexuality. Yet the Catholic Church allows marriage between known sterile couples and sex between couples beyond child-bearing age. Moreover, Catholic teaching has recently emphasized the unitive aspect of sex — loving, caring, interpersonal sharing. Is the biological or the personal the key aspect of sex among human beings?

Similarly, the human sciences provide no universally accepted conclusion, but the majority opinion is that homosexuality is a natural variation, biologically based, fixed by early childhood, in no way pathological, and affecting about 6% of the population in virtually every known culture. (This 6% includes both the exclusively and the predominantly homosexual.) Likewise, while some may condemn practicing homosexuals as Godless and sinful, contemporary lesbian and gay Christians recognize their self-acceptance as a graced moment and report that, since coming out, they are happier, healthier, and closer to other people and to God.

8. What options are open to a person who is homosexual and Catholic?

Official Catholic teaching requires that homosexual people abstain from sex. But the Catholic Church also teaches solemnly that people are obliged to form their conscience carefully and responsibly and to follow it as the bottom line in every moral decision.

Neither Scripture nor Tradition nor natural law theory nor human science nor personal experience convincingly supports official Catholic teaching about the immorality of homogenital acts. Accordingly, and after much soul-searching, many gay and lesbian Catholics have formed consciences that differ from official Church teaching and have entered into homosexual relationships. In this respect they are exactly like the many married Catholic couples who cannot accept the official teaching on contraception.

9. Can someone be involved in a lesbian or gay relationship and still be a faithful Catholic?

Certainly yes, not as a matter of public Church teaching but only as a matter of conscience, only as a matter of personal application of the whole of Catholic teaching to their particular case.

In 1975 the Vatican published a *Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics*. One of those questions was homosexuality. A principal author of that document was Fr. Jan Visser, C.Ss.R. In an interview published in the January 30, 1976, edition of *L'Europa*, he said: "When one is dealing with people who are so deeply homosexual that they will be in serious personal and perhaps social trouble unless they attain a steady partnership within their homosexual lives, one can recommend them to seek such a partnership, and one accepts this relationship as the best they can do in their present situation." One of the very men who formulated the Vatican teaching that homogenital acts are wrong allows that in certain individual cases one may not only permit but even recommend a homosexual relationship.

Similarly, speaking about Catholics who dissent on Church teaching about contraception, the Canadian bishops wrote in 1968: "Since they are not denying any point of divine and Catholic faith nor rejecting the teaching authority of the Church, these Catholics should not be considered nor consider themselves cut off from the body of the faithful."

10. How could someone do what (the Church says) is wrong and not be living in sin?

As the Catholic Church understands it, wrong and sin are not the same thing. Wrong is harm, disorder, destruction; it is in the objective or external world. Sin is self-distancing from God; it is in the heart. Sin is more a general attitude than any particular action. We sin when we deliberately do what we

believe is wrong. Then in our hearts we opt for evil. Then we move away from goodness and from God, who is good.

It may well be that what you do is not wrong at all. But if you think it is and you do it anyway, well, you are corrupt. That's sin! Or what you do may really be wrong. But if you don't honestly think so and you do it, well, your heart is not really amiss. You may be uninformed, naive, or stupid, and even dangerous, but unless you have neglected properly informing yourself, you are not sinful.

The Church teaches right and wrong but never says who is a sinner. Only God knows our hearts. Many homosexual people simply cannot believe that gay sex as such is wrong. So they do what for them is "the best they can do," though Church teaching says that homogenital acts are wrong. Still, according to the same Church's teaching on conscience, they do not sin in their hearts nor before God. Then they need not confess what is not sin, and they may participate in the Sacraments of the Church.

11. If there is space for homosexual relationships within Catholic teaching, why have bishops expelled Dignity chapters from church property?

Perhaps just addressing homosexuality openly and fully would be enough to provoke an official reaction. But the history is more complicated. On October 30, 1986, the Vatican issued a "**Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons.**" This document instructed the bishops to withdraw all support, or even the semblance of support, from any group vague on the immorality of homogenital acts. Surely the Vatican had Dignity in mind. And many found the letter harsh and uninformed. In national convention in 1987, DignityUSA declared that it believes lesbian and gay people may indeed engage in loving, life-giving, and life-affirming sex, always in an ethically responsible and unselfish way.

Dignity proclaimed publicly what Church teaching does allow, but only in the privacy of conscience. Following these events, bishops began evicting local chapters for rejecting Church teaching and, most importantly, for opposing ecclesiastical authority. However, a few chapters continue to meet in Catholic facilities.

12. Why did Dignity make a public statement challenging the official Catholic position?

Dignity felt called to a prophetic stance, which, simply said, is to be honest about the matter. After nearly twenty years of ministering to hurting Catholics, Dignity members were aware of the harm that the Church's repeated condemnation of homosexuality does to individuals. One statement from a pope or bishop can throw devout gay Catholics back into guilt and self-deprecation that they may have spent years trying to overcome. According to a 1989 study conducted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the rate of attempted suicide among gay and lesbian adolescents is

three to four times higher than that among straight adolescents. According to some estimates, a homosexual person is harassed or assaulted in the USA about every 90 seconds. Insensitive church pronouncements only aggravate these conditions. In contrast, Dignity wanted to go on record as a group of homosexual but self-affirming and practicing Catholics. And Dignity wanted therefore to give hope to other gay and lesbian Catholics.

13. What did people find harsh and uninformed in that 1986 Vatican letter ?

It backed away from the prevailing ethical opinion that a homosexual orientation is morally neutral and called it "an objective disorder." Whatever this is supposed to mean, it suggests that gay people are sick, despite massive evidence to the contrary in medical, psychological, and sociobiological research. As if blaming gay people for the AIDS epidemic and ignoring their heroic — and virtually solitary! — efforts to stem it, the letter said: "Even when the practice of homosexuality may seriously threaten the lives and well-being of a large number of people, its advocates remain undeterred and refuse to consider the magnitude of the risks involved." Regarding gay-bashing it read: when gay people seek to "protect behavior to which no one has any conceivable right, neither the church nor society at large should be surprised when other distorted notions and practices gain ground, and irrational and violent reactions increase." As for securing the civil rights of gay people: "The bishops should keep as their uppermost concern the responsibility to defend and promote family life" — as if lesbian and gay children, sisters, brothers, fathers, or mothers were not part of family life.

The Vatican's 1992 follow-up letter actually required the American bishops to oppose all gay rights legislation, even legislation exempting the churches. It compared homosexuality to contagious disease or mental illness and argued that, for the common good, the state has the right and obligation to curtail people's civil rights. In the case of teachers, athletic coaches, military personnel, and adoptive or foster parents, this document said "it is not unjust discrimination to take sexual orientation into account." Ignoring all the evidence, the Vatican presumed that lesbian and gay people, and not heterosexuals, are the greatest sex offenders or are automatically unfit role models or are incompetent. Quite inconsistently, the Vatican suggested there would be no problems if homosexual people just kept their sexual orientation secret.

In fact, however, stating what many bishops were known to believe, Bishops Charles Buswell, Thomas Gumbleton, and Walter Sullivan publicly criticized the 1992 document. Moreover, since 1992, through their respective Catholic conferences, bishops in Florida, Maine, Michigan, Oregon, and Washington have opposed discriminatory legislation and/or supported gay rights legislation.

14. Is Dignity the only ministry to GLBT Catholics?

No. Through his pioneering books, lectures, and counseling, Fr. John McNeill, expelled from the Jesuit order for his work, continues to minister to gay and

lesbian Catholics. Since 1977, New Ways Ministry in Mount Rainier, Maryland, has provided a national service of education, publications, workshops, and newsletter on homosexuality and Catholicism. Although in 1999 and again in 2000 the Vatican officially silenced co-founders Fr. Robert Nugent, S.D.S., and Sr. Jeannine Gramick, S.S.N.D., the organization continues to provide a "gay-positive ministry of advocacy and justice for lesbian and gay Catholics." Another network of groups, much smaller than Dignity, is Courage. Founded in the early 1980s by Fr. John Harvey, O.S.F.S., of New York City, it helps people to be celibate "in accordance with [the narrowest interpretation of] the Roman Catholic Church's teaching on homosexuality." A positive, life-enhancing celibacy is certainly a legitimate goal for those who freely choose it. But the Courage ministry rests on the belief that homosexuality is a psychological aberration, an emotional debility. Built on a 12-step program like Alcoholics Anonymous, Courage aims to have people restrain and control their "sickness." Such a negative starting point, which ignores the bulk of current scientific opinion, can hardly foster personal integration, emotional well-being, or real holiness. Many dioceses now have their own official gay ministries or at least appointed chaplains, and many belong to the National Association of Catholic Diocesan Lesbian & Gay Ministries. These ministries vary in quality from excellent to oppressive to nominal.

15. What hope is there for the future?

Our best hope is not to be afraid to love one another. To love sums up the Law and the Prophets, according to Jesus. Christian love covers a multitude of sins, according to St. Peter. And human love cannot be separated from the honest affections of the heart. So Dignity's mission is to help lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people to follow the ideal of Christians throughout the centuries: to be prayerful, respectful, honest, fair, forgiving, compassionate, and joyful — like the gay abbot, St. Aelred of Rievaulx, and like the martyr for conscience who dressed like a man, St. Joan of Arc.

There is encouragement in numerous signs of the times. The gay liberation movement is gradually fostering an understanding of homosexuality and securing the civil rights of lesbian and gay people. The tragic AIDS epidemic has had the positive effect of forcing an awareness of homosexuality and of letting people witness the deep love and care among lesbian and gay "family" members. According to a 1992 Gallup study, half of American Catholics believe a lesbian or gay committed relationship may be a morally acceptable choice. And 78%, up from 58% in 1977, believe gay and lesbian people should have equal rights in terms of job opportunities. In fact, compared to people in other Christian denominations, Catholics are the most accepting of homosexuality. Besides, many Catholic priests, religious, and lay ministers are sensitive to the needs of homosexual people, and good-willed American bishops are quietly doing what they can to provide ministry to lesbian and gay Catholics.

The hope is that one day the wide array of differences within the human family will be everywhere accepted and celebrated, and all peoples, praising God, will live together in peace.

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