

September 24, 2019

Dear Gerry,

Thanks for your response of August 20. At our annual parish encounter (January, 2019), people expressed their frustration, outrage and anger over the sex abuse scandal. But they also offered a constructive strategy: call for the Catholic Church to adopt more holistic and realistic methods of sex education at all levels, in families, schools, seminaries, etc. That motivated me to engage in dialogue about the spirituality of sexuality.

I agree with you that as church pastors we hope that *the Church's response is not a no against sex, but a yes for the person of Christ*. But I observe that for most mainstream Catholics, the Church's YES to the person of Christ is loudly shouted by our NO to sex. When I ask why Catholics no longer go to Church, one answer is the disjointed ramblings or angry rants that pass for homilies (as Pope Francis noted in *The Joy of the Gospel*). But the *more* frequent reason is that the Catholic Church's official teaching on sex is irrelevant, even harmful.

Related to this, Bishop Barron is distressed that many young people object to the Catholic Church because they think we teach *faith is opposed to reason*. They don't care that Catholics invented universities, or that Roger Bacon and Gregor Mendel were priests. They do know the way Catholic authorities treated Galileo. When people say "faith vs. science," I think they are questioning the way church authorities *think* and *speak* about things that matter to them, like sex. They do not know the correct term; but they are objecting that our *epistemology* is hopelessly outdated, flat-earth thinking; we have not learned a thing from the Galileo affair.

### Epistemology

We need a more nuanced epistemology, which will promote a more authentic and credible ontology – and sexuality. Following Lonergan in *Method in Theology*, whenever we say anything meaningful, we need to clarify the different *realms* of *meaning* in the reality we are considering. A joke is funny because it suggests a different meaning. Irony gets a point across precisely by framing something in an incongruous alternate meaning that makes you to stop and think. Jesus did this with his parables, which can be baffling, but is effective (Lk. 16:9).

Four realms of meaning are: common sense, theoretical, intersubjective and transcendent. It is *commonsense* to say, "The sun sets at 7:56 tonight." It took several centuries of irrefutable evidence to finally get most people to accept the *theory* that the earth spins, and rotates around the sun, contradicting commonsense. Meanwhile, people continued to get up at "sunrise" and go to bed at "sundown" because humans do not function well in the dark. Now that we have electric lighting and glowing screens everywhere, we can freely go about our business at different times of day and night; but that means we now have to assume more personal, conscious control over our diurnal patterns of work, sleep, family and leisure. This is the *intersubjective* realm. In the *transcendent* realm, we continue to believe God is Creator of the universe (in and through Christ, as affirmed in Colossians), even though we still have to explain to people that God might not have created the world in six 24-hour periods.

In the **commonsense** realm, I judge anything by how it *appears to me* and affects me. If it "makes sense" it is natural; before modern medicine, it was commonsense for people to have as many children as they could, hoping that at least two might reproduce. But appearances can deceive. Left-handedness seemed unnatural and was forcibly corrected with corporal punishment. For the people of Nazareth it seemed unnatural for a son of Mary, a carpenter, to speak about God's Reign. Joan of Arc was burned at the stake for the unnatural habit of wearing men's clothing in battle. Interracial marriage was considered "inter-species" and *unnatural*.

In the **theoretical** realm, I explain how things *relate among themselves*. The ancients observed predictable patterns, and figured out a theory of "laws" of nature – an interlocking hierarchy, some entities naturally superior to others: day over night, sun over moon, male over female. Anything impulsive or unmanageable ("lower passion") needs to be curtailed. A regulated union between one man and one woman, with a contract of rights and duties, providing care for the children, is a *theoretical advance* over breeding by random sexual copulation. The family mirrors the orderly universe, and sex, even though a lower passion, is justified, or at least tolerated.

The **intersubjective** realm describes conscious human persons, *subjects*. Subjective nature goes beyond biological processes and theoretical analyses. It is natural for a dog to bite. It is *not* natural for a person to *bite someone's head off*. It is natural to defend myself against injustice, but I do this by methods that are suitable to *my nature* as a conscious loving person: I employ reasonable, interpersonal conflict resolution. Mutual exchange between subjects transforms animal copulation into *sexual intercourse*. Spouses *naturally* transform sexual relations from mere personal satisfaction to mutual self-revelation. Their love is *intentional*, in the realm of reflection, self-awareness, responsibility. The subjective nature of marriage transforms a *contract* with rights and duties into a mutual vow, a covenant of love, in an ever-deepening communion. They express affection and commitment by all sorts of attention and concern for each other, which often climaxes in sexual intercourse; and their intercourse integrates their whole lives into one another.

The **transcendent** realm *goes beyond* supposed limits, integrating into something new. Theory transcends commonsense, self-awareness transcends theoretical analysis. Believers go even further, into the realm of God. Our subjective relations become transcendent in the Death and Resurrection of Christ and the Mission of the Holy Spirit. Christian spouses transform sexual union into an experience of Divine love; becoming *co-creators* with God, transforming their family into an experience of God's faithful, unconditional, all-embracing love.

The realms of meaning do not cancel each other out. Theory understands common- sense experience (church authorities condemning Galileo did not admit this); the subjective realm gives our experience new inflections and interpretations; the transcendent beckons to us from beyond our limits. But we often cripple the subjective and transcendent realms by compressing them into commonsense and legal theory. (Amoris Laetitia: # 37)

### Ontology

We realize that some events in nature do not occur in absolutely identical patterns in all situations (particularly in human nature, endowed with free will – eg, there is no absolute age to marry). Rather, living beings follow patterns of emerging probability; they cluster into *normal distributions*. Very few individuals are at the exact “average;” most individuals *normally* verge on either side of the mean. Some are considered “talented,” others appear “below” the norm. This is natural. Differences are not disorders; they are part of the *orderly* universe and predictable by “statistical laws.” Every human person deserves respect regardless of particular anomalies; this is bedrock Catholic social teaching (a *theory*, but inspired by the intersubjective and transcendent realms).

Animals and humans share the same *nature* of propagation – insemination of a female by a male. The XX and XY Chromosomes determine sex, but this is not universal in nature. *Hormones* exercise variable influences *in utero* that can overwhelm the chromosome; and some species can change sex in adulthood if the dominant male is removed. Recent research amends the archaic notion that all individuals are absolutely identical in “nature.” Transgender persons are telling the truth when they say they were “born in the wrong body.”

Humans share sexual structures with other mammals, but animals do *not* share the subjective and transcendent *nature* of human intercourse: mutually shared goals, joys, suffering, responsibilities, the will to extend one's self for another's spiritual growth – *love*. Sexual copulation and human love are related but distinct *natural* functions. Love transforms the act of sex into *intercourse* – a self-sacrificing, permanent bond of love in the image of Christ. What is *naturally ordered* or *disordered* needs to be understood in the intersubjective and transcendent realms of meaning. Lesbian, Gay and Transgender people ask us to consider these possibilities with them.

### Spirituality: Searching for Authentic Transcendence

Love must continue to grow and develop, becoming ever more *intentional*. We pay close attention to our experience. We try to be intelligent in understanding what is going on. We make a reasonable judgment about what this means for me, you and me, and us, here and now. Finally, we make a responsible, ethical decision about how to interact. This means we must: Be attentive – Be intelligent – Be reasonable – Be responsible. These are *intersubjective* functions, which also facilitate living in the transcendent realm. Assisting this growth in love are four virtues that are related to sexuality, but are distinct from one another.

**Abstinence** is to refrain from indulging a tendency, pleasure or craving, such as abstaining from meat on Friday, or from sexual intercourse. In commonsense, sexual abstinence prevents pregnancy and venereal disease. In the theoretical realm, abstinence contributes to the good order of society. In the subjective realm, abstinence before marriage allows intended spouses to anticipate and appreciate their total gift to each other when they do make their vows. In the transcendent realm, abstinence before or during marriage can express love in a way that transcends bodily craving, reflecting the self-sacrificing dimension of Divine Charity.

**Continence**, in commonsense, means self-restraint and control of impulse, mainly of bodily functions – bladder, bowels, or sexuality. In the theoretical realm it means self-control. An alcoholic may need to abstain completely; but continence itself means *self control*. In the subjective realm, continence means moderating sexual desires in respectful care – in sexual intercourse, and on occasion in abstinence. In the transcendent realm, sexual continence is a graceful surrender that reflects the unconditional love of God, but is not necessarily abstinent.

**Celibacy**, in the commonsense realm, means unmarried. In the theoretical realm, celibacy may be required to serve in a professional commitment (as schoolteachers and airline stewardesses once were). Medieval priests were ordered to be celibate; but that did not mean they were abstinent or continent (including popes). In the subjective realm, celibacy is an ego strategy to gain personal fulfillment by consciously sublimating sexual energy into a personal relationship of love and care, as Latin Rite priests do to serve their people (which does not explain how Greek Rite priests do it). In the transcendent realm, celibacy is an explicit affirmation of trust in God's love in this passing world. This was St. Paul's motive (I Cor. 7:8,17-31).

**Chastity** or **chaste** means *clean* in the commonsense realm. In the theoretical realm it defines a person who is *uncompromised* or *undefiled* (i.e., virgin). In the subjective realm, it “promotes the integration of sexuality within the whole person, leading to inner unity of body and heart” (C.C. 2337). The virtue “chaste” is mentioned only four times in the Bible. We would expect to find it in Galatians 5:22 along with the other Fruits of the Spirit: *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness* and *self-control* – some texts add *chastity*, but most do not. In Christian tradition, chastity has taken on the transcendent identification with the fruits of the Spirit of God, as a sign of God’s Reign (C.C. 1832). Chastity is not the same as abstinence. Abstinence may or may not be chaste; an abstinent person could be consumed by salacious desires. But married people are chaste when they relate to each other sensitively and respectfully, including during sexual intercourse.

*Abstinence, continence* and *celibacy* help us manage our sexuality in different situations; they all aim toward *chastity*. Growing in chastity asks several intersubjective questions for reflection:

“*How does our relationship reveal the basic value of love?*” Are we loving God above all things, with all our heart, mind, body and soul? Is our lovemaking continent and respectful of each other? Do we practice abstinence when that is the loving thing to do?

“*How do we recognize the embrace of God when we make love?*” Do we appreciate that intimate sexual love is a primary experience of God’s love? Are we convinced that conceiving and rearing children makes us “co-creators” with God, forming our children in the image of God?

“*How do we deal with suffering and difficulties?*” Even wholesome unions have misunderstandings, burdens, financial worries, challenges rearing children. Are we growing in awareness of the costs that love entails? Can we embrace suffering by embracing each another, even when we think each other is causing the suffering?

Virtues and vices do not “exist” as *things* already out there, in the commonsense realm; they are merely *concepts* in the theoretical realm. They become *real* in the attitudes and actions of individual persons:

Sarai offered Abram her servant girl because having children was *the* critical value, outranking monogamy. As Christians, in our *subjective* understanding, we would no longer imitate this practice.

Onan is punished because of his spiteful refusal to carry on his brother’s line, not for the act of masturbation.

The men of Sodom try to rape Lot’s guests (the most graphic way men can demean another man) to drive away these desert Bedouins who are “encroaching” on their town. Ironically, making this story a diatribe against homosexuality distracts us from its real meaning – unjust oppression of “the stranger in your midst” (Ex 22:21).

Lot offered to sacrifice his daughters to their rage (a horrible choice in the subjective realm), but he was desperate to protect his obligation to the *Law of Hospitality* (which, for him, was a primary transcendent value).

Jesus transcends traditional commonsense teaching in Mark 9:45 by advancing to subjective meaning: respect for women and children, while at the same time including a wife’s rights and responsibilities.

Then Jesus teaches the transcendent meaning of the permanence of marriage by the way God created the human race “in the beginning” (Mark 10:5-9) (Collins, *Sexual Ethics and the New Testament*).

Paul adopted commonsense household codes. The household codes, however, list sexual sins along with rudeness, boasting, and brainless behavior (Rom. 1:30), making it hard to distinguish common courtesy from egregious offenses like incest and pederasty. We agree that children should obey their parents. We no longer hold that women are subservient to men; but Paul did raise these codes to the *subjective* realm – a new sense of *mutuality* – Husbands, respect your wives, parents, respect your children (Eph. 5:22-27; Col. 3:18-22).

Paul’s condemnation of male-to-male sex is certainly definitive, but he seems to be referring prostitution with boys. We agree that should be condemned. Meanwhile, Paul could not imagine a same-sex loving relationship.

No *act* stands on its own. Many acts are neutral, and take on a moral quality in the minds of the actor and/or the bystanders. Jesus pointed this out in Luke 7:33-35:

*John the Baptist came neither eating food nor drinking wine, and you said, 'He is possessed by a demon.'*

*The Son of Man came eating and drinking and you said, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of sinners.'*

Self-centered and violent sex between spouses *without love* is *spousal rape*, and is sinful – even if they perform it in the “correct” position, and it results in a child. On the other hand, the same act of sexual intercourse in mutual spousal love transcends a theoretically “unnatural” condition of temporary or permanent sterility, and fulfills the *subjective nature* of sexual intercourse, even though it does *not* result in conception.

Deep friendships arise between LGBTQ persons. Some homosexual friends are faithful to the Catechism which holds that homosexual acts are: “*grave depravity; 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.*” (#2357) They may join the group *Courage*, which promotes celibate abstinence, which Catholic authorities currently demand. But celibacy is not a *natural* state; strangely, persons considered *intrinsically contrary to nature* must live a solitary lonely life, contrary to nature! Celibacy is a transcendent gift of the Spirit, freely given, and one’s response must be entirely free.

But as pastors we need to help them understand that their same-sex orientation is not a *defect* in their personal identity (as the catechism unfortunately implies). They need to know that if they have repressed the feelings of self-hatred, which society and religion have pressed upon them, they may be bravely forcing themselves to live abstinently in order to “avoid sin” – but internally they may assume a psychological *reaction formation* of homophobic hatred against others who do not choose abstinence. Moreover, repressed self-hatred can simmer under the surface, and unexpectedly (and ironically) be acted out in tragic acts of sexual abuse.

Other LGBTQ Catholics, knowing they did not “*choose* the homosexual lifestyle,” see that same-sex orientation is their life-long destiny, *natural* for them and *good* for them. Homosexuality is a characteristic that *naturally* occurs in every society, and is an unchangeable part of that individual’s *natural* constitution. Efforts to change sexual orientation use severe shaming and aversion “therapy,” which is usually unsuccessful, and often harmful. LGBTQ persons are created in God’s image. The issue is whether they themselves, personally and in their relationships, see their love for each other as an experience of the Love of God. They often adopt children, care for the underprivileged, and engage in benevolent social programs. As in male-female marriage, they desire a permanent, exclusive commitment to one another, which is the appropriate relationship for chaste sexual intercourse; they desire to love in both the subjective and transcendent realms.

A moral or immoral deed is intersubjective; a *human act*, as St. Thomas taught. A sexual act between people of the same gender does not have the same commonsense appearance of male-female sex, and cannot generate a child, but committed homosexual couples affirm that their relationships *do* have orderly and genuine sexual union, in the “nature” of person-to-person love. The group *Dignity* states: “We believe that God created us, Christ died for us, and the Holy Spirit sanctified us in Baptism. We believe we can express our sexuality and/or gender identities and expressions in a loving, life-affirming manner in keeping with Christ’s teaching.”

#### Pastoral Response

A few years ago the common pastoral advice was to remind gays and lesbians that their sexual orientation was only a small part of their whole personal identity. This seemed reasonable to the typical straight person, but it would be like the *White Privileged* advice to an African American: “Get over it. Your skin color is only a small part of your identity!” As more and more LGBTQ persons share their experiences, it is becoming clear that sexual identity is, granted, a *part* of a person’s personality – but it is a major, essential part.

The Catechism actually says that Homosexual persons are called to *chastity* (CC # 2359). Chastity differs from abstinence or celibacy. People can be chaste in abstinence *and* in sexual union. Like everyone else, LGBTQ persons are called to be chaste by the same criteria that guide married people. In any case, I need to realize the human person whom I love is not the ultimate source of my happiness and identity – *God* is my “beloved.” This requires growing in self-sacrificing love. The basic question always is: *Do I trust in God as the center of my life?*

I have studied *Amoris Laetitia* and have prayed over # 297 where Pope Francis acknowledges that people find themselves in irregular situations, and he calls for a merciful pastoral approach:

*We need to reach out to everyone, helping each person find his or her proper way of participating in the Church, being touched by unmerited and unconditional mercy. No one can be condemned forever – that is not the logic of the Gospel! Here I speak not only of divorced and remarried, but of everyone, in whatever situation they find themselves...*

Then Francis adds:

*Naturally, if someone flaunts an objective sin as if it were part of the Christian ideal, or wants to impose something other than what the Church teaches, he or she can in no way presume to teach or preach to others [ut doctrinam tradat vel praedicet]; this is a case of something which separates from the community (Mt. 18:17). Such a person needs to listen once more to the Gospel message and its call to conversion.*

What is *objective sin*? Eating meat on Friday? Promoting separation of church and state? There are plenty of church teachings that are now gone and forgotten. Current church teachings regarding sex, marriage, divorce and remarriage have changed over time and differ among rites (see David Bentley Hart, “Divorce, Annulment & Communion,” *Commonweal*, September, 2019, p 25-29). True *objective sins* are distilled over time from *universal principles* – abhorrent actions, such as killing a spouse to be free to marry someone else. Everyone recognizes such a thing as truly evil. Affectionate embrace between consenting adults is not such an evil.

What is *imposing* a teaching as *doctrine* against the Church? This seems to be aimed at oppositional antagonists, who live by *ideology* (the *realm of theory* gone amuck). I think the important goal is not wanting to *separate the community*. St. Paul was always urging the church to *build up the community*: “knowledge puffs up but love builds up” and “strive to excel in building up the Church (I Cor. 8:1; 14:12); “building you up, not for pulling down” (II Cor. 10:8; 13:10); “gifts to equip the saints for building up the body of Christ” (Ephes. 4:12).

Aggressive and righteous language, by both purist and heterodox ideologues, is “knowledge that puffs up,” and cannot be allowed to control Church teaching. It is “something which separates the community,” imposing as doctrine something against what the Church teaches – ie, *Love One Another*. We must make room for all our brothers and sisters. This requires the humility to examine specific teachings and prohibitions with an openness toward promoting theological development by dialogue, listening to one another, without separating the Church.

As you say, *Long established Church teaching, Scripture, Tradition and the natural law* are obviously essential sources for a theology of sexuality. However, as Brown states: “It is easy to make rhetoric (indeed, polemic) out of the pros and cons of a Christian past when we do not attempt to make its living texture our own, but are content to sit in judgment on it.” (Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1988, Introduction, 2008, page lxvii).

We need to promote open and receptive dialogue. Many years ago, long before it was a commonly discussed issue, a few of us pastors were discussing the next Sunday’s Gospel, in which Jesus touched a leper to heal him. We asked one another, Who is the leper today? So we decided to invite a show of hands during our homily: “Does anyone have a family member or friend who is gay?” I raised my hand as I asked this, of course, and thirty or more people raised their hands. They all thought they would be the only one. When people looked around and saw all those hands, we decided that the best way to follow Jesus’ teaching to *love one another with all our strength and mind and heart and soul* is to reach out and embrace one another in love and compassion.

*Unleash the Gospel* promotes going out to the margins. A good way to do that in this particular case would be to sponsor group discussions over Fr. James Martin’s book about building bridges. He promotes loving dialogue in which Catholics of different opinions listen to one another with respect, building bridges between the Catholic LGBTQ community and the Catholic leadership. Pastors may think their people are “not ready” to discuss this, so I think Archbishop Vigneron should include this as an example of reaching out in warm welcome.

I suggest that we build a *suspension bridge* that has the flexibility to withstand strong winds, supported by cables of several strands braided together: commonsense experience, theoretical reasoning, subjective human relations, and God’s love. As we meet one another on this bridge, we can form reasonable judgments by listening to each other with loving respect, neither party demonizing the other. The *re-founding* of our parishes should have this kind of openness. We can and should consider all four distinct realms of meaning whenever we speak of natural law and human sexuality. This would be powerful *Good News*, especially to young adults.

I realize the Pope is head of a world-wide communion of Catholic Churches; many of them are not ready to accept same-sex relations. Moreover, Pope Francis is clear that we in the Western World ought not to inflict “cultural colonialism” on other peoples. A sad example of this is well-meaning humanitarians who spotlighted African countries where homosexuality is persecuted, even punished by death. Ironically, there have been severe backlashes, such that LGBTQ persons are now in more danger than ever. This is a very complex issue.

Last April, however, a LGBTQ delegation met in the Vatican about avoiding violence against homosexuals. This would be a small but important step. Cardinal Parolin pledged to work with this group. I suggest that bishops from churches where people *are* discussing this issue openly, including ours, should let Pope Francis know that we support ongoing dialogue with the LGBTQ community, in our local churches and at the Vatican. Another thing Pope Francis could do, as he did with the death penalty, is remove # 2357 from the Catholic Catechism. He could justify this move simply as an act of compassion, without promoting a sinful lifestyle. As he stated in *Amoris Laetitia*: In “irregular” situations one can “*recognize with sincerity and honesty what for now is the most generous response which can be given to God, and come to see with a certain moral security that it is what God himself is asking amid the concrete complexity of one’s limits.*” (#303)

In conclusion, Gerry, I wholeheartedly agree that *it is vital that our brothers and sisters who experience same sex attraction should stand shoulder to shoulder with us*. As a pastor, I will not *impose* a teaching against the Church as *doctrine*. But I do refrain from rehearsing interpretations that are harmful, not only to LGBTQ persons themselves, but also to the rest of us who are challenged to continual conversion. “*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*” (*Amoris Laetitia* #305).

I think every parish should sponsor dialogue with openness to everyone of good will, listening to all, even those who seem to disagree with us. That was the main message Pope Francis gave to the bishops when he was here in the United States. There are many people, for whatever reasons, who do not think the Catholic Church “welcomes sinners and dines with them” (Luke 15:2). So we have work to do, and we have risks to take, “dining” with everyone, like Zacchaeus, and allowing persons “thought to be sinners” to wash our feet.

Vic Clore