

- Topic: Theological Implications of the Church's Teaching on Homosexuality
- Convener: James B. Nickoloff, College of the Holy Cross
- Moderator: James B. Nickoloff, College of the Holy Cross
- Presenters: Susan A. Ross, Loyola University of Chicago
Mary Ellen Sheehan, University of St. Michael's College, Toronto
Roger Haight, Weston Jesuit School of Theology

Debate in the church about homosexuality has largely focused on the morality of homosexual acts, the ethical requirements and pastoral guidelines suggested by the church's teaching on homosexuality, and the scriptural bases of this teaching. To date little consideration has been given to the theological foundations of the teaching or the theology which it indirectly advances. In the interest of elucidating some of the strictly theological issues involved, the three presenters set forth in systematic fashion the understandings of God, Jesus Christ, and the human person found in the church's official view of homosexuality. Presenters took as principal sources of this view the "Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics" (1975), "Letter on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons" (1986), and "Responding to Legislative Proposals on Discrimination against Homosexuals" (1992) of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith; the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994); and the U.S. bishops' letter "'Always Our Children': A Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children and Suggestions for Pastoral Ministers" (1997).

Susan Ross sketched the theological anthropology found explicitly or implicitly in these documents. First, all human beings, regardless of orientation, have an inherent dignity bestowed on them by virtue of their creation by God. Second, sexuality is not an accidental characteristic of the person but is rather an essential part of the person, constitutive of his or her personhood. Third, human beings are dimorphic, created as male and female for each other, and for the purpose of love and procreation. Fourth, the dimorphic condition of human beings is expressed in sexual complementarity which involves separate psycho-sexual-social characteristics for males and females. Particularly in the thought of Pope John Paul II, the "nuptial" relationship between men and women mirrors the relationship of God to humanity. Fifth, in recent teachings on the person, and particularly in John Paul II's teachings on women, Mary's receptivity is taken as the model for humanity; she thus reinforces gender complementarity and further problematizes homosexuality.

Mary Ellen Sheehan traced the image of God found in the church's teaching on homosexuality. First, God is portrayed as the author and enforcer of the divine law which posits the male and female relationship, by reason of its faculty for procreation, as normative. Second, created reality reflects God's goodness; in particular, human beings, both male and female, are made in God's image and likeness. Third, however, the church also suggests that God abandons those who

practice homosexual acts, that is, those who by such behavior abandon God. Fourth, God wills lifelong chastity for homosexual persons who may overcome the difficulties entailed in their objectively disordered condition by uniting themselves with Christ in the mystery of the cross. Finally, the bishops of the United States teach that God calls homosexual persons to full membership in the Christian community.

Roger Haight began his report on the understanding of Jesus Christ found in the church's teaching on homosexuality with the observation that christology is not operative in the genesis or grounding vision that supports the church's teaching. Christology enters the church's position on the nature of homosexuality obliquely as a reinforcement of the position. Christology enters the discussion of homosexuality more directly in relation to the practical considerations of the Christian life of gay people. A spirituality of the cross, of identification with Christ's suffering, is held out as a way in which gay people might integrate the suffering involved in abstinence from all homosexual activity. Finally, a more constructive christological theme of "acceptance" structures the positive pastoral strategy of parents towards gay children, and of church ministers generally, proposed by the U.S. bishops.

A thoughtful discussion further explored strictly theological problems with the church's teaching and also probed the pastoral, psychospiritual, and ecclesiological implications of the church's theology of homosexuality. The attendance of well over 100 people at the session suggests serious interest in the issue.

JAMES B. NICKOLOFF
College of the Holy Cross
Worcester, Massachusetts