

## THE CHURCH AND HOMOSEXUALITY

- 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: Leo J. O'Donovan, Georgetown University  
Mary E. Hines, Emmanuel College  
Thomas J. McElligott, St. Mary's College

The second of an intended three-part discussion of the theological implications of the church's teaching on homosexuality drew about eighty people. The aim of the Selected Session is narrowly conceived: while scholarly attention has centered on the morality of homosexual acts and the scriptural bases as well as the historical development of the teaching, little consideration has been given to the strictly theological concepts which either support or are implied by the teaching on homosexuality. At the first Selected Session on this topic (San Jose in 2000), three panelists reported on the theological anthropology, the theology of God, and the christology which they found either stated or implied in the church's official teaching on homosexuality. This year's panel examined (1) the notions of grace and sin, (2) the ecclesiology, and (3) the spirituality found in the teaching. In New Orleans presenters once again took as principal sources of this teaching the "Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics" (1975), "Letter on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons" (1986), and "Responding to Legislative Proposals on the Discrimination Against Homosexuals" (1992) of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith; the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992); and the U.S. bishops' letter "'Always Our Children': A Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children and Suggestions for Pastoral Ministers" (1997).

Leo J. O'Donovan outlined the understandings of sin and grace found in five basic positions taken by the church in relation to homosexuality, the grounds offered for the positions, and questions generated by these positions. The first and most basic teaching (grounded in reason, revelation, and the church's magisterium) affirms the essential goodness of human sexuality as constitutive of personal existence, as part of the inherent dignity of every person, and as a channel of grace. These strong affirmations do not, however, prevent one from asking whether empirical inquiry has genuinely entered into the church's teaching. If so, how? If not, can the teaching really be called reasonable? The grounds for a second position, which holds that all homosexual activity is gravely sinful, likewise appear thin due to inadequate attention to actual experience and scientific study. The grounds for a third position, which distinguishes between sexual orientation and sexual activity, are likewise minimally developed. It is not plain how a permanent, natural condition can be said to be "disordered," nor is

the meaning of the term "objective disorder" clear. Is this disorder to be understood as a deficiency, a disease, a misguided affection, or an irresistible tendency? Furthermore, should activity which follows upon a temporary tendency be judged differently from that which follows upon a fundamental instinct? A fourth position, found in all sources except the U.S. bishops' letter, encourages self-denial and association with the cross of Christ for those who are constitutionally homosexual. Why exactly is the invitation to join Christ in his suffering omitted in "Always Our Children"? A fifth and final position affirms the respective responsibilities of bishops, other pastors, and lay people in shaping public policy. While the church condemns the malicious treatment of homosexual people, it does not allow purported discrimination to be used as grounds for policies that would obscure or diminish the church's moral teaching. Does such a position imply a view of homosexual people as threatening, antifamily, and predatory? And finally, if discrimination is acknowledged, isn't it necessary to say something more positively about truly unjust forms of it?

In her comments Mary E. Hines pointed out that while there is no developed systematic ecclesiology in the documents, there is clearly an operative ecclesiology in each. The understanding of church in the Roman documents coheres with that found in other documents of this papacy concerning neuralgic areas of church life. It reinforces a centralizing, universalizing approach that increasingly marginalizes the concerns, insights, and plural experiences of the community of the faithful which are not being taken into consideration in the formulation and expression of church teaching. As in other such documents, the argument from tradition is central. What the church has always taught it must continue to teach. The church's tradition is understood in a static, essentialist way, not yielding to currents of cultural and social change. The ecclesial self-understanding in these documents may be summarized in five statements. First, the church is primarily understood as an institution and identified with the hierarchy. Second, the documents represent an ecclesiology from above. Third, the documents reveal a universalist ecclesiology with little attention to the reality and diversity of the local churches or inculturation. Fourth, the church is understood as a public church with a mission to influence the common good of the whole society. Fifth, the letter of the U.S. bishops represents an ecclesiology of community, or communion taken in a broad sense, which differs from that of the CDF. There is an uncomfortable tension in the letter between a pastoral practice based on an understanding of the church as an inclusive and welcoming community and the more institutional, hierarchical and exclusive understandings of the Roman documents that provide its theological underpinning. As long as there is a disjunction between the ecclesiology marking the church's doctrinal tradition and the ecclesiology undergirding the U.S. church's pastoral practice, it is hard to see how its more inclusive pastoral practice ultimately can be convincing or effective.

Thomas J. McElligott examined the spirituality found in the church's teaching on homosexuality. If Christian spirituality concerns the lived experience of the paschal mystery, we may ask how the church's teaching actually helps to

transform homosexual persons and others who relate with them toward fullness of life in Christ. Specifically, how does the homosexual person live the experience of the faith in light of the claim that "the [homosexual] inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder"? Four spiritualities may be found in these documents: one pertaining to the homosexual person, one addressed to bishops and pastors of souls, one directed to the church as a body, and one directed to parents of gays and lesbians. Each of these spiritualities is conflicted in some way. The conflicts center around four factors: (1) the understanding of the person, (2) the pastoral approach to the homosexual person, (3) the use of scripture and the social sciences, and (4) the finality of the sexual act and the dimorphic condition of human beings.

The lively discussion which followed the presentations revealed great interest in the project of constructing a more adequate theology of homosexuality. While sympathetic to this desire, the convener invited those in attendance to return next year for a third and final session dedicated to a careful exposition of several additional theological implications of the church's teaching on homosexuality.

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#### THE CHURCH AND OTHER TRADITIONS

Topic: The Catholic Church and Other Religious Traditions  
 Convener: James Fredericks, Loyola Marymount University  
 Presenters: David B. Burrell, University of Notre Dame  
 Marianne Farina, Boston College  
 Respondent: Giv Nassiri, University of California, Berkeley

Diana Eck has recently noted that the United States is now the most religiously diverse society on the world. Christian theologians have begun to respond to this development by entering into friendships with those who follow religious paths other than their own. "Interreligious friendships" should be counted a sign of the times. The purpose of an interreligious friendship is in part *theological*: understanding the Christian tradition anew in relationship to the religious lives of Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, or, in the case at hand, Muslims. Interreligious friendship was once thought a vice. Today, it should be seen as a virtue that promotes new forms of solidarity, creates social capital, and offers the Christian community new opportunities for theological reflection. This selected session brought together two Christian theologians to reflect on their friendships with Muslims.

David Burrell has worked with Muslims in the United States, the Near East, and Pakistan. Based on these friendships, he has written on the doctrine of