The Orthodox Church, Sexual Orientation, and Gender Identity: From Embarrassment to Calling

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When Jesus tells us about his Father, we distrust him.
When he shows us his Home, we turn away,
But when he confides to us that he is "acquainted with Grief,"we listen,
for that also is an Acquaintance of our own.

—Emily Dickinson

As the Western world moves deeper into the postmodern context, it seems that the latter is imposing its agenda on issues of sexual orientation and gender identity. This development runs the risk of provoking a defensive attitude on the part of the Church (as is the case now), in which theologians and churchmen seek to condemn what they find wrong in the secular milieu and go on repeating truths in traditional terms. But new problems require new theological approaches. I am going to explain why both issues are posed in terms that create new problems for Orthodox Christians.

Once more, Orthodox theology and the Church seem to be running behind the facts, in their attempt to defend their ancient values, whereas they are urged to face the problem directly and creatively by seeking to translate those values into a contemporary "language." By successfully doing so, they would make manifest what the Church and theology actually are and believe—something always to be defined in a positive way, that is, not in negative opposition to the secular world. Orthodoxy is not to be defined as the opposite pole of a faithless and immoral world.

In fairness, we must acknowledge that this task is too tough to be attractive. Sexual orientation and gender identity are issues that can cause embarrassment even for the brightest theologian and the most inspired pastor. Hence, there are serious reasons for the reluctance of our Church and her theologians to get involved. I will start by mentioning some of the points of embarrassment caused by same-sex attraction that need to be addressed.

1) *Homosexuality carries, from the remote past of Christian history, a heavy stigma that, in light of science, is no longer valid*.

Since the Greco-Roman period, the dominant public opinion about homosexuality has been that it is a choice. People firmly believed that all were born heterosexual, and that some, in their perverse disposition for acquiring new pleasures, decided to deviate into homosexual practices. Homo-

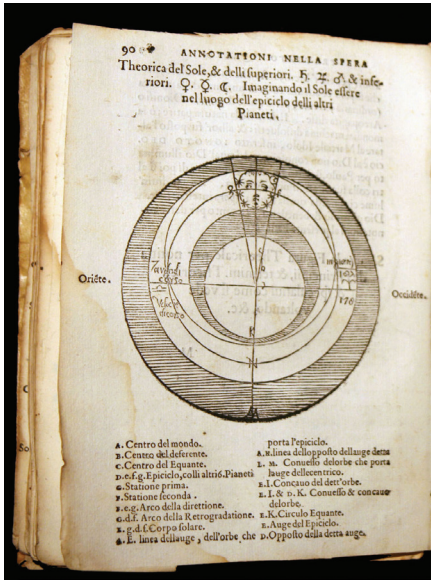
sexuality was considered a behavior, not an identity as is the case today. Thus, it was thought of as a product of free volition, and consequently was judged by Christians to be the worst of all passions—a real rebellion against God. The biblical texts that are often cited in connection with homosexuality share this preconception, and thereby constitute weak arguments in contemporary theological discussion.

The authors of the New Testament, as well as the fathers, are no exception. They share a very strict attitude against homosexual behavior, because they view it as epitomizing all the vices. This makes sense if homosexuality is thought of as the result of conscious rebellion against God's will. It is in this light that the first chapter of the Letter to the Romans has to be read. Saint Paul has in mind someone who arrogantly rebels and becomes self-determining and even deliberately opposed to God. Obviously, very few contemporary homosexuals would identify themselves by those descriptions.

Discussion about passions stems out of this ancient yet resilient idea. Such views naturally lead to the conviction that homosexuality is a passion, among the worst. However, there is the clear patristic concord that the worst passion is narcissism (*philautia*, pride, vainglory). Furthermore, empirical evidence shows that all the passions are intertwined, mutually feeding and being fed by one another. Thus, while a person with same-sex attraction may of course have various passions, they are not necessarily connected with homosexuality. There is no passion that is specifically linked to homosexuality, while sexual perversions (psychiatrically known as paraphilias) are for sure accompanied by many.

This fact motivates me to consider homosexuality neither a passion nor a sexual perversion. Rather, I tend to consider it a unique condition that does not belong to any known category, either of spiritual life or psychiatric taxonomy. Nevertheless, this does not prevent it from being a problem theologically, as I will explain at the end of this article. (It is important to clarify that by "homosexuality" I mean the condition that applies to a certain percentage of people whose same-sex orientation is stable, not to those who feel it inscribed into a borderline personality or who wish merely to experiment with homosexual behavior.)

To conclude this first point, the language around homosexuality as a voluntary or demonic condition to be hated no longer applies, because it is undermined by contemporary scientific knowledge. The Orthodox Church has already dealt with other situations



in which issues were considered to be theological before modernity, but in modernity this judgment has proved to be erroneous. For example, the idea that the world was created some five thousand years before Christ's birth; or the notion that the fetus is preserved in a man's body, starting to grow after being transplanted into the woman's body; or the conviction that the sun revolves around the earth; and so forth.

This issue is of great spiritual importance for us Christians because, by avoiding obsolete discourse, we will avoid homophobia too. Although hostility can never be justified, awareness of the involuntary origin of homosexuality makes hostile behavior far more inappropriate than in an era when same-sex attraction was considered a (perverse) choice. (I find it necessary to note here that the term "homophobia" should be used exclusively in its emotional connotation, as its etymology indicates anxiety, fear, disgust, and hatred, and not only ideas or opinions. The gay movement systematically cultivates the inclusive meaning because it wishes to ban any disagreement.)

2) *A growing body of evidence shows that a biological factor is involved in homosexual orientation.*

While the most conservative part of the Church still maintains the idea that homosexuality is a product of free volition, another significant portion—more moderate in mentality—admits that this attraction is not voluntary and instead attributes it to environmental factors. Folk psychology has enabled awareness of various factors (some real and some not) that suggest the influence of the family setup on the child's psychosexual development. For some homosexuals, this setup certainly has had an etiological impact; however, we would be in error if we attributed all same-sex attractions to parental failures.

Actually, extensive research has proven that sexual orientation is a product of many factors, as divergent as genetic predisposition, family relationships, history of sexual abuse, and personality disorder. Their role in each individual case is unique and the process of influence is extremely complex.

My suggestion is that future research should distinguish *subtypes* of homosexuality, determined by the prevalence of one etiological factor or another. In the meantime, evidence for the existence of genetic predisposition becomes stronger, and this is a cause of anxiety for pastors and theologians. So, the ancient but false idea that homosexuality is a free choice put the entire burden for homosexual activity on the shoulders of the homosexual. In a

TRATTATO QVARTO. 91

Theorica delle line c, & de i moti.

D. Centro del mondo.
C. Centro del deferente.
H. Centro del Equante.
H.g.i.f. Epiciclo.
E. clitica l'estremo circulo.
B.N. linea dell'auge.
G. Auge media, dell'epiciclo.
H. Auge vera dell'epiciclo.
A. Principio dell'ariete.
A.N. Auge nella seconda significatiõe, del'arco A.N.
D.L. Linea del mezo moto.
A.N.L. Arco del mezo moto.
D.K. Linea del vero moto dellepiciclo.
A.N.K. Vero moto dell'epiciclo.

M ii

An elaborate defense of a geocentric cosmos: diagram of the Ptolemaic system from Johannes de Sacrobosco, *Tractatus de Sphaera*, Florence, 1550.

The Creation of Adam and *The Fall of Humanity*. Fresco, Chapel of Vera Cruz, Maderuelo, Spain, ca. 1123.

more recent stage of thought, the fault for homosexual desire lies with the parents and renders them responsible, but homosexuality remains (theoretically) preventable. Now, however, faced with the evidence of the genetic disposition to homosexuality, theology and the Church stand speechless: what can they suggest, except (uncertain) epigenetic improvements?

The evidence for genetic (as well as any other biological and non-preventable) predisposition towards homosexuality, when taken in conjunction with the Church's teaching that homosexuals are called to lead a celibate life, whether or not they feel a vocation for this, points us toward the cross. But regarding this specific cross, theology has nothing to say, nor has our Church a pastoral strategy. Centuries of false opinion have hindered us from preparing ourselves for this moment. From time to time, eccentric and provocative representatives of the gay movement are used temporarily as an alibi and offer a relief to Christians (by proving the gay population ridiculous or vicious), yet anxiety is aroused every time a pious homosexual appears and poses questions.

3) *Conversion therapies seem quite ineffective*.

Some parts of the Protestant world have placed their hopes broadly on conversion therapies, and organize institutions that offer them. After some decades, we now know that their effectiveness is quite limited, not to say frequently psychologically damaging. This finding points to the need for more research into subtypes of homosexuality; for example, we can expect higher rates of success in therapies for borderline personalities, for whom an ambiguity of sexual orientation is part of an overall diffused sense of identity. But, in fact, these are not conversion therapies, for they do not aim at a change in sexual orientation, although this may be a collateral effect. Besides, the reluctance of mental health professional associations to consider homosexuality as a pathology requiring therapy leads in the long term to a shortage of clinicians adept in handling this issue.

Moreover, if focused long-term therapies are not widely beneficial, what could one say about the folk ideas prevalent among clergy, such as "It's just an obsession; don't dwell on it," or "It may be healed through marriage," or "By persistent prayer, you may convert"? Obsessions about being a homosexual should be treated as obsessive-compulsive disorders in which no real homosexuality is involved; marriage never "heals" homosexuality; and persistent prayer together with a consistent spiritual life can lead to virtue and sanctification, but not to a change of sexual orientation. Such false advice just serves to relieve the pastor of his anxiety, because he does

not know how to handle this thorny problem in any other way.

With respect to all three of the problems mentioned, Orthodox theology and the Church find themselves in a difficult position. Homosexuality is still here, more frequently than in the past, offering more vindication than was expected, and therefore more "innocent" in terms of free choice and personal will. What can we do about these sources of embarrassment?

As if these points were not enough, there are embarrassing issues about gender identity too:

4) *In their psychological content, the two genders are not two poles but rather tend to move along a continuum*.

Stereotypes have long been used as basic tools in approaching the question of genders. It is no wonder why such stereotypes were more prevalent in Church circles, for her members tended to feel more at home in premodern ideas. Actually, premodern traditional societies were the main factor in creating and establishing gender stereotypes; over the centuries, the coexistence of traditional society and the Church created the illusion that these stereotypes were accurate characterizations of gender. This is not the only area in which social cognitions and habits are mistakenly confused with ecclesiastical ones.

Yet progress in psychology, as well as a growing liberation of individuals from socially stereotyped roles, led to the realization that men and women may have psychological traits belonging theoretically to the opposite gender. Besides, gender differences in brain structure and function are of a statistical nature, which means that they are not absolute and that they do not serve a clear-cut differentiation. So, as female psychological characteristics stopped being a taboo for males, their gender identity ceased being a fixed entity with impermeable boundaries; and vice versa. Therefore, society began to be more open to sex change and to the fluidity of gender.

What about the ecclesiastical position in regard to sex change? Should the Church accept it? In all forms? If not, in which cases? Actually, the Church cannot cope here without having recourse to psychiatry and psychoanalysis, which provide the indispensable criteria for telling the difference between the genuine gender dysphoria of a true transsexual and the narcissistic fantasy of an immature or histrionic person who has fallen in love with his or her imagined condition in the opposite sex. A serious problem here is the ongoing neutral attitude of the psychological and psychiatric community in the West; it seems that a (growing) minority of mental health professionals tends to respect any patient's demands for sex change, without checking for psychopathological signs (autistic, borderline, or obsessive) or for personality traits (his-

trionic, immature). This seems to me really a betrayal of science for the sake of ideology.

If the Church is to adopt a stance more in tune with the sufferings of people today, it needs to abandon stereotyped, clear-cut perceptions of gender, as well as premodern ideas about the superiority of the male, which led people in the past, the fathers included, to consider both male homosexuality and the desire to convert into a woman as degradations of human nature. Orthodox theology and the Church are called to listen with loving compassion to those who ache in their souls because of gender dysphoria, taking their pain seriously, as well as providing warning advice to those who want to play or to experiment with their gender. But to do so an explicit answer to the following question is required.

5) *What is the ontological status of gender? Does gender possess any ontological significance?*

For sure, attributes such as race, nationality, age, and education do not. They do not reveal any ontological distinction at the heart of human nature. But then what is exactly the difference in the case of gender? The Church has no objections when a man and a woman belonging to two different races get married; why should she have when they belong to the same gender? Is this a sign that gender is of a higher ontological status than these other attributes?

Sex change would be absolutely unacceptable theologically in the hypothetical case that the two genders were of distinct ontological status. In this case the two genders would, in effect, represent two distinct human natures. If gender were of ontological significance, then Christ has assumed only the male gender, and thus women are not saved. To make things more complicated, Christ himself, while assuming male gender, presents psychological characteristics of both genders. He expresses the masculine characteristics of anger and even aggression against the Pharisees and the merchants in the Temple, while also expressing maternal feelings toward Jerusalem, comparing himself to a "hen gathering her chicks under her wings." So we find in the case of Christ, not just the relativity of gender, but a transcendence of gender, liberating it from the fixed, quasi-ontological status of biological sex which is usually ascribed by the Church. Gregory of Nyssa speaks about an eschatological overcoming of gender: for instance, of a male soul being "pregnant" by the Holy Spirit and giving birth to Christ as the soul gradually comes to be shaped in his likeness.

I think that the problem can be overcome only if we make use of the Maximian distinction between the *logos* and the *tropos* of human nature. The former expresses the *raison d'être* of human beings, what lies in the divine will about them and their purpose. The latter represents various ways in which our *logos* finds expression—gender being one of them. For the postmodern mentality of the gay and queer movements, only *tropos* exists; the *logos* of human nature has been usurped by this *tropos* (or even these *tropoi*): the lack of an underlying *logos* renders the *tropos* uncontrollable, and thus subject to modification and multiplication, as it is not accountable to the *logos* of human nature Modification and multiplication of

tropos (regarding sexuality and gender) can be traced in the postmodern discourse that equates homosexuality to heterosexuality and adopts a continuum of genders. Postmodernity rejects any ontology as "totalitarian" and tends to consider all options as equal, unable to understand why *tropos* has to submit to *logos*. Postmodernity hates hierarchy and favors divergent independent "units," thus facilitating the shift from an agent-participating-in-structure toward the exclusive notion of an agent-as-a-physical-being (structure here being the task initiated by Christ and continued by Christians; I call it structure because it is formed by what Saint Maximus refers to as the *logoi*, which structure and constitute the world and thus our being).

So, I think that Orthodox theology and the Church are called to embrace lovingly those who really need to undergo a medical sex change and simultaneously to explain why gender is too serious to play with. Gender is not an ontological entity, yet its status is higher than that of the other human attributes: actually, according to Maximus, gender is a locus from which one is invited to enter the *imitatio Christi*, namely to struggle for the unity of all through the healing of sexual division. Gender is not an ontological entity, but it serves an ontological mission.

This cosmic mission applies to an Orthodox critique of homosexuality as well. Same-sex attraction is not a sin, yet it definitely makes for a *sinful condition*, because it hinders the implementation of this cosmic mission. Therefore, the homosexual person is not sinful in terms of personal will (for many of them, their deep genuine desire is to be heterosexual) but is found to be in a condition incompatible with God's plan. To understand the difference, we need to remind ourselves of the *cosmic* dimension that has really been quite forgotten: each of us, along with our own personal will, is an agent-participating-in-structure. There are sins of our personal (gnomic) will which make up the most of everyday evil; there are also sinful conditions pertaining to our cosmic mission.

So, homosexuality constitutes a theological problem because it does not allow the person to serve the bridging of genders through heterosexual marriage. Therefore, as we cannot accept and sanction homosexual unions, it seems that the calling for homosexual persons is to enter a chaste life, empowered by the sanctifying grace that is offered by the spiritual means of the Church. This suggestion still regards as reasonable and worthy of discussion the question as to how pastoral *oikonomia* can apply for those who are unable to fulfill this calling in a consistent way.

I have attempted to depict the challenges posed to theology and to the Church by the changes that have taken place in the sociocultural and the scientific landscape of both sexual orientation and gender identity. Although the issues are quite tough, to me the truth itself seems optimistic: we do have theological equipment to cope with them. Yet coping here does not mean that we have "solutions" that do away the problems; rather it means that we are able to derive criteria from our rich tradition, which will enable us to engage in the public dialogue in a way that avoids the common reaction of "fight or flight." There is an urgent need for the Orthodox

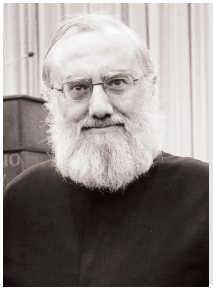
Church to make a constructive contribution to discussions about sexuality and gender, in ways that avoid the pseudo-dilemma of "conservative" versus "liberal." It is my impression that both sides lack a sense of deep theology and are concerned less with truth than with their accountability to a strict construal of "tradition" or of the postmodern context respectively.

More specifically, we are not justified in promising an exit from psychic pain; rather, our task is to transform meaningless suffering into a meaningful cross. Clinging to arguments from the past results in the former, whereas exploring more deeply our theological treasury that is waiting to be discovered leads to the latter. When feeling bereft of theological answers, we tend to react with embarrassment that in the long term becomes inhuman; on the contrary, if we assiduously work towards finding fresh and creative theological responses, using them in love, we might find ourselves able to address the psychic pain of homosexual and transsexual persons, and even alleviate it. When satisfactory solutions are not feasible, it is still something if people find a convincing meaning in their troubles.

To conclude, the Church is called, as it always has been, to interpret its theology in the context of contemporary culture. Pastors and theologians are also called to overcome anxiety (which may be a sign of defective preparation, lack of faith, or latent personal sexual issues), and to embrace our mission willingly for those brothers and sisters in ways that will preserve the testimony of both love and truth. Helping people to bear their crosses also entails empathetic participation in the spiritual pain that is experienced. Theological articulations and pastoral guidance become more reliable and effective when elaborated through spiritual pain.

Homosexuality and transsexual identity constitute two "accidents" of human development, two among numerous other aspects of the corruption of our nature, two ordeals which have the potential to renew our theology and to guide us toward rediscovering the mystery of humankind. Far from the inclusivity of political correctness or of liberal oversimplifying of Christian attitudes, we Orthodox are invited to stand in awe before the human mystery, not so as to avoid theological exploration but rather to realize its limits. The love and providence of God are much larger than our theology.

As in all other issues, in these two as well our perspective is eschatological: "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Rev. 21:4). After all, it is only afterward that we understand everything. Theology will receive its final formulation in the kingdom, with persons in relationship taking the place of words.



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