

Review: Catholic Teaching on Homosexuality

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 22, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Louis Cameli has written a very important book, *Catholic Teaching on Homosexuality: New Paths to Understanding* [1]. Anyone who is honest enough to admit that our Catholic theology on homosexuality is inadequate, and it is, should consider this book a primer, the starting point for further reflection. I have added the Amazon link but, of course, always check with your independent bookseller first!

I frankly groaned a bit when the book arrived. I gave up reading most books on homosexuality and Catholicism some time ago. They all seemed to fall into one of two genres. The least serious simply endorsed cultural norms, ignoring centuries of Catholic tradition. The more serious, but sometimes more insidious, tried to pick out ideas drawn from our Catholic theological tradition, such as justice, and then filter the Church's teachings on sexuality through that concept, which had the effect of ignoring some key, albeit challenging, concepts like procreation and concupiscence, niftily ending up at the same point as the less serious books, a refutation of the Church's teaching, neglecting an unavoidable and, I think vital, characteristic of theology, its ecclesial function.

Then came the fight over same sex marriage and too many Catholic leaders distinguished themselves by their homophobia, often displaying a "me thinks the lady doth protest too much" difficulty. Others adopted coarse and hoary judgments of gay people and the lives they lead. Others proved themselves to be simple, or complex, bigots. Ugh. I decided to hope that some future generations would wrestle with these issues, that the "sin that dear not speak its name" would go quiet for a bit at least so far as theology was concerned, and turned to other subjects.

Early on in Cameli's book, the reader realizes that this book is by someone who not only grasps the tradition, but loves it, and just so, the book does what good Catholic theology should always do: Cameli sees the teachings in new, vital, more comprehensive ways, indeed in ways that result in greater faithfulness to the tradition. He takes the same theological building blocks and re-arranges them, or sheds a different light on them, and the result is a critical step forward for Catholic theological treatment of this admittedly difficult topic.

Cameli's pastoral theology starts with the most necessary of building blocks in a culture such as ours, overrun with subjectivism, and explains in them in the kind of non-culture warrior language that actually invites readers in: "If the fundamental truth of who I am (which includes my sexuality) comes to me as a gift, something given prior to my choice or action, then I need to accept it. If I accept it, then I am affirming my responsibility and stewardship for that gift. I am not determining what to do with myself and my sexuality on the basis of my subjective judgment but on the basis of who I am and what my sexuality is." He then notes that a "very significant difference" between the subjective and objective views that emerges in the context of our faith. "The first position "I am the source" stands outside a larger historical narrative. The second position "I discover and receive the truth given to me" when coupled with a faith context includes a determining historical narrative: human sexuality is created good by God, then marked by sin and its attendant struggles, and finally redeemed by Christ who gives us hope." The key word there is "determining. At a time when some on the realm of academic theology deny any standard of normativity beyond a peer reviewed article, this frank admission of the

determinative quality of our tradition shows that Cameli is not dilettante.

Before delving into the guts of the book, Cameli notes some of the impediments to a more fruitful theology of homosexuality and the socio-cultural context that inhibits even a real discussion. He starts with the sadly popular belief that "the one who is not like me is my enemy." Cameli examines the way people view otherness as threatening, especially where homosexuality is concerned. This fear of otherness "leads to a cascading series of negative reactions and responses." There is, I surmise, no room on this planet for my way of life and your different way of life. That incompatibility means that your difference threatens my way of life. I grow uneasy and afraid. I suspect that some of our more vocal opponents of same sex marriage sing in this key more often than they would like to admit.

Against this pervasive fear and alienation, Cameli points to the Catechism of the Catholic Church and the highly contentious 1986 text from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. In both documents, there is a clear call for acceptance of gay people, alongside an affirmation of the traditional teaching that homosexual acts are wrong. Cameli asks: "For all the trouble of our reflection and analysis, have we simply arrived at the familiar shibboleth: love the sinner, hate the sin? If we stop here, we have indeed arrived at this religiously inspired commonplace. In fact, the complexity of the questions calls for further reflection. We " whoever we might be " are in this life together. The real enemy in the matter of sexual difference is the prospect of undoing human solidarity."

Cameli then examines another widely held view, that the secret to living together in a pluralistic society resides in following the admonition to keep one's private life private. He argues that while there is a common sense quality to this observation, and even some truth, at the end of the day, "this approach compartmentalizes our lives" and suggests this attitude resembles the former military policy, "don't ask, don't tell." Of course, there is a deeply private space in all of us, which Cameli notes is where the conscience enters into dialogue with God, not only a private space but a sacred space, one not meant to be shared cavalierly with others. And, a person's history, her doubts, his dreams, may best be shared only with intimates. There are distinctions to be drawn between the private and the public, to be sure, but there is also a cost when one trumps the other. The "don't ask, don't tell" approach entails "a sacrifice of personal transparency," and in the case of sexual minorities, that lack of transparency can have debilitating effects. It will also shape in negative ways the avenues for socialization of adolescent gays and lesbians, who will lack the resources for nurturing their sexual understanding in ways their heterosexual peers do not. Don't ask, don't tell does nothing to establish a common identity.

One of the best sections of the book confronts the "slippery slope" arguments. Again, Cameli does not elide the different perspectives at work here. He writes;

Quite evidently, the sloping from tolerance to acceptance to approval represents an enfranchisement of homosexuals or gay people but also an inverse disenfranchisement of those whose position is contrary to homosexuality or gay rights. A similar process of sloping happens for those who embrace homosexuality as a positive value and embrace themselves as homosexuals. They also fear an ethical-moral slope that could move rapidly and have terrible negative impact on their lives and, in their estimation, on society at large.....Containment will, in their estimation, invariably slope down to societal disapproval. Various forms of discriminatory and hostile policy may follow. Such policy could effect housing, hiring, educating and enjoying social rights and benefits.

Cameli does not despair at this point, although I was tempted to do so. The mutual fears, the mutual recriminations, the inability even of our religious leaders to avoid demonizing those who hold different views, all must be faced and faced squarely if, as Cameli insists, we must avoid the further breakdown of human solidarity and make the resources of our Catholic tradition available in more helpful ways to gay and lesbian

Catholics.

Tomorrow I shall conclude my review of this wonderful book.

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[1] http://www.amazon.com/Catholic-Teaching-Homosexuality-Paths-Understanding/dp/159471293X/ref=sr_1_sc_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1382446103&sr=8-1-spell&keywords=catholic+teachingon+homosexuality