

ALWAYS OUR CHILDREN

A Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children and Suggestions
for Pastoral Ministers

A Statement of the U.S. Bishops' Committee on Marriage and Family

Approved September 10, 1997

Preface

The purpose of this pastoral message is to reach out to parents trying to cope with the discovery of homosexuality in their adolescent or adult child. It urges families to draw upon the reservoirs of faith, hope, and love as they face uncharted futures. It asks them to recognize that the Church offers enormous spiritual resources to strengthen and support them at this moment in their family's life and in the days to come.

This message draws upon the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the teachings of Pope John Paul II, and statements of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and of our own conference. This message is not a treatise on homosexuality. It is not a systematic presentation of the Church's moral teaching. It does not break any new ground theologically. Rather, relying on the Church's teaching, as well as our own pastoral experience, we intend to speak words of faith, hope, and love to parents who need the Church's loving presence at a time that may be one of the most challenging in their lives. We also hope this message will be helpful to priests and pastoral ministers who often are the first ones parents or their children approach with their struggles and anxieties. In recent years we have tried to reach out to families in difficult circumstances. Our initiatives took the form of short statements, like this one, addressed to people who thought they were beyond the Church's circle of care. *Always Our Children* follows in the same tradition.

This message is not intended for advocacy purposes or to serve a particular agenda. It is not to be understood as an endorsement of what some call a "homosexual lifestyle." *Always Our Children* is an outstretched hand of the bishops' Committee on Marriage and Family to parents and other family members, offering them a fresh look at the grace present in family life and the unfailing mercy of Christ our Lord.

An even more generous, intelligent and prudent pastoral commitment, modeled on the Good Shepherd, is called for in cases of families which, often independently of their own wishes and through pressures of various other kinds, find themselves faced by situations which are

objectively difficult.

– John Paul II, On the Family, 1981, no. 77

A Critical Moment, A Time of Grace

As you begin to read this message you may feel that your life is in turmoil. You and your family might be faced with one of the difficult situations of which our Holy Father speaks:

- You think your adolescent child is experiencing a same-sex attraction and/or you observe attitudes and behaviors that you find confusing or upsetting or with which you disagree.
- Your son or daughter has made it known that he or she has a homosexual orientation.
- You experience a tension between loving your child as God's precious creation and not wanting to endorse any behavior you know the Church teaches is wrong.

You need not face this painful time alone, without human assistance or God's grace. The Church can be an instrument of both help and healing. This is why we bishops, as pastors and teachers, write to you.

In this pastoral message, we draw upon the gift of faith as well as the sound teaching and pastoral practice of the Church to offer loving support, reliable guidance, and recommendations for ministries suited to your needs and to those of your child. Our message speaks of accepting yourself, your beliefs and values, your questions, and all you may be struggling with at this moment; accepting and loving your child as a gift of God; and accepting the full truth of God's revelation about the dignity of the human person and the meaning of human sexuality. Within the Catholic moral vision there is no contradiction among these levels of acceptance, for truth and love are not opposed. They are inseparably joined and rooted in one person, Jesus Christ, who reveals God to be ultimate truth and saving love.

We address our message also to the wider church community, and especially to priests and other pastoral ministers, asking that our words be translated into attitudes and actions that follow the way of love, as Christ has taught. It is through the community of his faithful that Jesus offers you hope, help, and healing, so your whole family might continue to grow into the intimate community of life and love that God intends.

Accepting Yourself

Because some of you might be swept up in a tide of emotions, we focus first on feelings. Although the gift of human sexuality can be a great mystery at times, the Church's teaching on homosexuality is clear. However, because the terms of that teaching have now become very personal in regard to your son or daughter, you may feel confused and conflicted.

You could be experiencing many different emotions, all in varying degrees, such as the following:

Relief. Perhaps you had sensed for some time that your son or daughter was different in some way. Now he or she has come to you and entrusted something very significant. It may be that other siblings learned of this before you and were reluctant to tell you. Regardless, though, a burden has been lifted. Acknowledge the possibility that your child has told you this not to hurt you or create distance, but out of love and trust and with a desire for honesty, intimacy, and closer communication.

Anger. You may be feeling deceived or manipulated by your son or daughter. You could be angry with your spouse, blaming him or her for "making the child this way"—especially if there has been a difficult parent-child relationship. You might be angry with yourself for not recognizing indications of homosexuality. You could be feeling disappointment, along with anger, if family members, and sometimes even siblings, are rejecting their homosexual brother or sister. It is just as possible to feel anger if family members or friends seem overly accepting and encouraging of homosexuality. Also—and not to be discounted—is a possible anger with God that all this is happening.

Mourning. You may now feel that your child is not exactly the same individual you once thought you knew. You envision that your son or daughter may never give you grandchildren. These lost expectations as well as the fact that homosexual persons often encounter discrimination and open hostility can cause you great sadness.

Fear. You may fear for your child's physical safety and general welfare in the face of prejudice against homosexual people. In particular, you may be afraid that others in your community might exclude or treat your child or your family with contempt. The fear of your child contracting HIV/AIDS or another sexually transmitted disease is serious and ever-present. If your child is distraught, you may be concerned about attempted suicide.

Guilt, Shame, and Loneliness. "If only we had . . . or had not . . ." are words with which parents can torture themselves at this stage. Regrets and disappointments rise up like ghosts from the past. A sense of failure can lead you into a valley of shame which, in turn, can isolate you from your children, your family, and other communities of support.

Parental Protectiveness and Pride. Homosexual persons often experience discrimination and acts of violence in our society. As a parent, you naturally want to shield your children from harm, regardless of their age. You may still insist: "You are always my child; nothing can ever change that. You are also a child of God, gifted and called for a purpose in God's design."

There are two important things to keep in mind as you try to sort out your feelings. First, listen to them. They can contain clues that lead to a fuller discovery of God's will for you. Second, because some feelings can be confusing or conflicting, it is not necessary to act upon all of them. Acknowledging them may be sufficient, but it may also be necessary to talk about your feelings. Do not expect that all tensions can or will be resolved. The Christian life is a journey marked by perseverance and prayer. It is a path leading from where we are to where we know God is calling us.

Accepting Your Child

How can you best express your love—itself a reflection of God's unconditional love—for your child? At least two things are necessary.

First, don't break off contact; don't reject your child. A shocking number of homosexual youth end up on the streets because of rejection by their families. This, and other external pressures, can place young people at a greater risk for self-destructive behaviors like substance abuse and suicide.

Your child may need you and the family now more than ever. He or she is still the same person. This child, who has always been God's gift to you, may now be the cause of another

gift: your family becoming more honest, respectful, and supportive. Yes, your love can be tested by this reality, but it can also grow stronger through your struggle to respond lovingly.

The second way to communicate love is to seek appropriate help for your child and for yourself. If your son or daughter is an adolescent, it is possible that he or she may be displaying traits which cause you anxiety such as what the child is choosing to read or view in the media, intense friendships, and other such observable characteristics and tendencies. What is called for on the part of parents is an approach which does not presume that your child has developed a homosexual orientation, and which will help you maintain a loving relationship while you provide support, information, encouragement, and moral guidance. Parents must always be vigilant about their children's behavior and exercise responsible interventions when necessary.

In many cases, it may be appropriate and necessary that your child receive professional help, including counseling and spiritual direction. It is important, of course, that he or she receive such guidance willingly. Look for a therapist who has an appreciation of religious values and who understands the complex nature of sexuality. Such a person should be experienced at helping people discern the meaning of early sexual behaviors, sexual attractions, and sexual fantasies in ways that lead to more clarity and self-identity. In the course of this, however, it is essential for you to remain open to the possibility that your son or daughter is struggling to understand and accept a basic homosexual orientation.

The meaning and implications of the term homosexual orientation are not universally agreed upon. Church teaching acknowledges a distinction between a homosexual "tendency," which proves to be "transitory," and "homosexuals who are definitively such because of some kind of innate instinct" (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics*, 1975, no. 8).

In light of this possibility, therefore, it seems appropriate to understand sexual orientation (heterosexual or homosexual) as a deep-seated dimension of one's personality and to recognize its relative stability in a person. A homosexual orientation produces a stronger emotional and sexual attraction toward individuals of the same sex, rather than toward those of the opposite sex. It does not totally rule out interest in, care for, and attraction toward members of the opposite sex. Having a homosexual orientation does not necessarily mean a person will engage in homosexual activity.

There seems to be no single cause of a homosexual orientation. A common opinion of experts is that there are multiple factors—genetic, hormonal, psychological—that may give rise to it. Generally, homosexual orientation is experienced as a given, not as something freely chosen. By itself, therefore, a homosexual orientation cannot be considered sinful, for morality presumes the freedom to choose.¹

Some homosexual persons want to be known publicly as gay or lesbian. These terms often express a person's level of self-awareness and self-acceptance within society. Though you might find the terms offensive because of political or social connotations, it is necessary to be sensitive to how your son or daughter is using them. Language should not be a barrier to building trust and honest communication.

You can help a homosexual person in two general ways. First, encourage him or her to cooperate with God's grace to live a chaste life. Second, concentrate on the person, not on the homosexual orientation itself. This implies respecting a person's freedom to choose or refuse therapy directed toward changing a homosexual orientation. Given the present state of medical and psychological knowledge, there is no guarantee that such therapy will succeed. Thus, there may be no obligation to undertake it, though some may find it helpful.

All in all, it is essential to recall one basic truth. God loves every person as a unique individual. Sexual identity helps to define the unique persons we are, and one component of our sexual identity is sexual orientation. Thus, our total personhood is more encompassing than sexual orientation. Human beings see the appearance, but the Lord looks into the heart (cf. 1 Sm 16:7).

God does not love someone any less simply because he or she is homosexual. God's love is always and everywhere offered to those who are open to receiving it. St. Paul's words offer great hope:

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:38-39)

Accepting God's Plan and the Church's Ministry

For the Christian believer, an acceptance of self and of one's homosexual child must take place within the larger context of accepting divinely revealed truth about the dignity and destiny of human persons. It is the Church's responsibility to believe and teach this truth, presenting it as a comprehensive moral vision and applying this vision in particular situations through its pastoral ministries. We present the main points of that moral teaching here.

Every person has an inherent dignity because he or she is created in God's image. A deep respect for the total person leads the Church to hold and teach that sexuality is a gift from God. Being created a male or female person is an essential part of the divine plan, for it is their sexuality—a mysterious blend of spirit and body—that allows human beings to share in God's own creative love and life.

Like all gifts from God, the power and freedom of sexuality can be channeled toward good or evil. Everyone—the homosexual and the heterosexual person—is called to personal maturity and responsibility. With the help of God's grace, everyone is called to practice the virtue of chastity in relationships. Chastity means integrating one's thoughts, feelings, and actions, in the area of human sexuality, in a way that values and respects one's own dignity and that of others. It is "the spiritual power which frees love from selfishness and aggression" (Pontifical Council for the Family, *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*, 1996, no. 16).

Christ summons all his followers—whether they are married or living a single celibate life—to a higher standard of loving. This includes not only fidelity, forgiveness, hope, perseverance, and sacrifice, but also chastity, which is expressed in modesty and self-control. The chaste life is possible, though not always easy, for it involves a continual effort to turn toward God and away from sin, especially with the strength of the sacraments of penance and eucharist. Indeed God expects everyone to strive for the perfection of love, but to achieve it gradually through stages of moral growth (cf. John Paul II, *On the Family*, 1981, no. 34). To keep our feet on the path of conversion, God's grace is available to and sufficient for everyone open to receiving it.

Furthermore, as homosexual persons "dedicate their lives to understanding the nature of God's personal call to them, they will be able to celebrate the sacrament of penance more faithfully and receive the Lord's grace so freely offered there in order to convert their lives more fully to his way" (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, 1986, no. 12).

To live and love chastely is to understand that "only within marriage does sexual intercourse fully symbolize the Creator's dual design, as an act of covenant love, with the

potential of co-creating new human life” (United States Catholic Conference, *Human Sexuality: A Catholic Perspective for Education and Lifelong Learning*, 1991, p. 55). This is a fundamental teaching of our Church about sexuality, rooted in the biblical account of man and woman created in the image of God and made for union with one another (Gn 2–3).

Two conclusions follow. First, it is God’s plan that sexual intercourse occur only within marriage between a man and a woman. Second, every act of intercourse must be open to the possible creation of human life. Homosexual intercourse cannot fulfill these two conditions. Therefore, the Church teaches that homogenital behavior is objectively immoral, while making the important distinction between this behavior and a homosexual orientation, which is not immoral in itself. It is also important to recognize that neither a homosexual orientation, nor a heterosexual one, leads inevitably to sexual activity. One’s total personhood is not reducible to sexual orientation or behavior.

Respect for the God-given dignity of all persons means the recognition of human rights and responsibilities. The teachings of the Church make it clear that the fundamental human rights of homosexual persons must be defended and that all of us must strive to eliminate any forms of injustice, oppression, or violence against them (cf. *The Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, 1986, no. 10).

It is not sufficient only to avoid unjust discrimination. Homosexual persons “must be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2358). They, as is true of every human being, need to be nourished at many different levels simultaneously. This includes friendship, which is a way of loving and is essential to healthy human development. It is one of the richest possible human experiences. Friendship can and does thrive outside of genital sexual involvement.

The Christian community should offer its homosexual sisters and brothers understanding and pastoral care. More than twenty years ago we bishops stated that “Homosexuals . . . should have an active role in the Christian community” (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *To Live in Christ Jesus: A Pastoral Reflection on the Moral Life*, 1976, p. 19). What does this mean in practice? It means that all homosexual persons have a right to be welcomed into the community, to hear the word of God, and to receive pastoral care. Homosexual persons living chaste lives should have opportunities to lead and serve the community. However, the Church has the right to deny public roles of service and leadership to persons, whether homosexual or heterosexual, whose public behavior openly violates its teachings.

The Church also recognizes the importance and urgency of ministering to persons with HIV/AIDS. Though HIV/AIDS is an epidemic affecting the whole human race, not just homosexual persons, it has had a devastating effect upon them and has brought great sorrow to many parents, families, and friends.

Without condoning self-destructive behavior or denying personal responsibility, we reject the idea that HIV/AIDS is a direct punishment from God. Furthermore

Persons with AIDS are not distant, unfamiliar people, the objects of our mingled pity and aversion. We must keep them present to our consciousness as individuals and a community, and embrace them with unconditional love. . . . Compassion—love—toward persons infected with HIV is the only authentic Gospel response. (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Called to Compassion and Responsibility: A Response to the HIV/AIDS Crisis*, 1989)

Nothing in the Bible or in Catholic teaching can be used to justify prejudicial or discriminatory attitudes and behaviors.² We reiterate here what we said in an earlier statement:

We call on all Christians and citizens of good will to confront their own fears about homosexuality and to curb the humor and discrimination that offend homosexual persons. We understand that having a homosexual orientation brings with it enough anxiety, pain and issues related to self-acceptance without society bringing additional prejudicial treatment. (*Human Sexuality: A Catholic Perspective for Education and Lifelong Learning*, 1991, p. 55)

Pastoral Recommendations

With a view toward overcoming the isolation that you or your son or daughter may be experiencing, we offer these recommendations to you as well as to priests and pastoral ministers.

To Parents:

1. Accept and love yourselves as parents in order to accept and love your son or daughter. Do not blame yourselves for a homosexual orientation in your child.

2. Do everything possible to continue demonstrating love for your child.

However, accepting his or her homosexual orientation does not have to include approving of all related attitudes and behavioral choices. In fact, you may need to challenge certain aspects of a lifestyle that you find objectionable.

3. Urge your son or daughter to stay joined to the Catholic faith community. If they have left the Church, urge them to return and be reconciled to the community, especially through the sacrament of penance.

4. Recommend that your son or daughter find a spiritual director/mentor to offer guidance in prayer and in leading a chaste and virtuous life.

5. Seek help for yourself, perhaps in the form of counseling or spiritual direction, as you strive for understanding, acceptance, and inner peace. Also, consider joining a parents' support group or participating in a retreat designed for Catholic parents of homosexual children. Other people have traveled the same road as you but may have journeyed even further. They can share effective ways of handling delicate family situations such as how to tell family members and friends about your child, how to explain homosexuality to younger children, and how to relate to your son or daughter's friends in a Christian way.

6. Reach out in love and service to other parents struggling with a son or daughter's homosexuality. Contact your parish about organizing a parents' support group. Your diocesan family ministry office, Catholic Charities, or a special diocesan ministry to gay and lesbian persons may be able to offer assistance.

7. As you take advantage of opportunities for education and support, remember that you can only change yourself; you can only be responsible for your own beliefs and actions, not those of your adult children.

8. Put your faith completely in God, who is more powerful, more compassionate, and more forgiving than we are or ever could be.

To Church Ministers:

1. Be available to parents and families who ask for your pastoral help, spiritual guidance, and prayer.
2. Welcome homosexual persons into the faith community, and seek out those on the margins. Avoid stereotyping and condemning. Strive first to listen. Do not presume that all homosexual persons are sexually active.
3. Learn more about homosexuality and church teaching so your preaching, teaching, and counseling will be informed and effective.
4. When speaking publicly, use the words “homosexual,” “gay,” and “lesbian” in honest and accurate ways.
5. Maintain a list of agencies, community groups, and counselors or other experts to whom you can refer homosexual persons or their parents and family members when they ask you for specialized assistance. Recommend agencies that operate in a manner consistent with Catholic teaching.
6. Help to establish or promote support groups for parents and family members.
7. Learn about HIV/AIDS so you will be more informed and compassionate in your ministry. Include prayers in the liturgy for those living with HIV/AIDS, their caregivers, those who have died, and their families, companions, and friends. A special Mass for healing and anointing of the sick might be connected with World AIDS Awareness Day (December 1) or with a local AIDS awareness program.

Conclusion

For St. Paul love is the greatest of spiritual gifts. St. John considers love to be the most certain sign of God's presence. Jesus proposes it as the basis of his two great commandments, which fulfill all the law and the prophets.

Love, too, is the continuing story of every family's life. Love can be shared, nurtured, rejected, and sometimes lost. To follow Christ's way of love is the challenge before every family today. Your family now has an added opportunity to share love and to accept love. Our church communities are likewise called to an exemplary standard of love and justice. Our homosexual sisters and brothers—indeed, all people—are summoned into responsible ways of loving.

To our homosexual brothers and sisters we offer a concluding word. This message has been an outstretched hand to your parents and families inviting them to accept God's grace present in their lives now and to trust in the unfailing mercy of Jesus our Lord. Now we stretch out our hands and invite you to do the same. We are called to become one body, one spirit in Christ. We need one another if we are to " . . . grow in every way into him who is the head, Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, with the proper functioning of each part, brings about the body's growth and builds itself up in love" (Eph 4:15-16).

Though at times you may feel discouraged, hurt, or angry, do not walk away from your families, from the Christian community, from all those who love you. In you God's love is revealed. You are always our children.

There is no fear in love . . . perfect love drives out fear.
(1 Jn 4:18)

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Notes

1. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states also: “This inclination, which is objectively disordered, constitutes for most [persons with the homosexual inclination] a trial” (no. 2358).
2. In matters where sexual orientation has a clear relevance, the common good does justify its being taken into account, as noted by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in *Some Considerations Concerning the Response to Legislative Proposals on the Non-Discrimination of Homosexual Persons*, 1992, no. 11.

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