

HOMOSEXUAL AND HOLY

By JIM COTTER

‘**H**OMOSEXUAL AND HOLY’: do you punctuate the phrase with a full stop, a question mark, or a series of speechless asterisks? To make it acceptable, the Church would traditionally wish to add another word: ‘Homosexual, abstinent and holy’. On scriptural and philosophical grounds, all sexual activity between two people of the same sex has been regarded as sinful because it is thought to offend against the divinely given order of creation and to result in disorder and chaos in human lives. The assumption is that *all* such behaviour is furtive, inconsequential, compulsive, violent, i.e. that it is impossible for homosexual desire to be integrated into the maturing in love of two people in a relationship. So homosexual activity has always been thought ‘unnatural’, a slippery term but one which has not in practice usually meant ‘an unchanging inbuilt law of nature’, rather ‘that which is against the customs of our community and offends emotionally’. In fact, not only is ‘nature’ more dynamic and changing than once supposed, but the Church has changed its mind on what it deems ‘unnatural’. Indeed we see this happening in the earliest days of the Church over food laws. We find it hard to realize how horrific must Peter’s vision have been, when he was commanded to kill and eat animals he would have believed to be unclean. And I have a certain sympathy with Peter when I contemplate eating snails. In France I might be faced with the choice between two unnatural acts—eating snails (which would make me feel ill) or refusing hospitality (which would offend my host). But Peter was being challenged to change his view: what he had thought disordered was not necessarily so. Similarly, it was once thought ‘unnatural’ for money to grow by means of lending at interest: the Church had to think its way through that one in the later Middle Ages. Defenders of apartheid might still wish to argue that it is unnatural for black people to exercise authority over white. So in our society we are struggling with a tradition that says it is unnatural for women to exercise authority over men,

or for two people of the same sex to make love together sexually. (And I must admit to finding it unnatural to watch a television programme on a weekday morning: isn't that a time for *work*?)

So the claim now being put forward by some Christian people is that not all homosexual activity should be thought unnatural, for it does not necessarily lead to disorder and may in fact be creative of harmony. In terms of the title of this article, can a person become *holy* in and through a sexual relationship with another of the same sex? Can such a relationship, far from being unnatural, be a means of that grace which builds on nature and by which saints have struggled to become, and allowed themselves to be made, holy?

To learn to recognize holiness in another is to be alerted to certain qualities of being and presence that have been shaped by the gracious love of God in Christ. Among these are: a total acceptance of others with that unreserved welcome that we see in Jesus; a sacrificial constant goodwill that stops at nothing to gain the good of the beloved—the hallmark of agapaic love; a living of truth that is seen in a piercing quality of the eyes instantly recognizing and burning out the lie; a sense of humour that pricks the pompous balloons of solemnity about sex and about God; a resilience and bounce that knows failure but never yields to despair; a spontaneous and generous giving that does not stop to be self-concerned or stay to be possessive; a total reliance on God because of the profound faith that no one but Christ has been free of the mesh of the corporate 'gonewrongness' of the world, and therefore a great humility and awareness of the mercy and love of God alone as the healing-saving power; and a deep gratitude for everything that happens, knowing that nothing, however evil and tragic, is ultimately beyond the redeeming power of the love of God.

Such holiness is rare. Nevertheless, it is recognizable in all manner of folk in glimpses, patchily, unexpectedly. It is most likely to be found amongst the poor, those who strive with the reality of being stuck, unable to move, hard-pressed by a power of powers that are all the greater for being unnamed, and with which they have no relationship that can influence events. Every human being knows such poverty in one form or another: in relationships where one person dominates another, in a lack of money, in an emotional deprivation in early years, in belonging to a minority with no language or influence, where words are shaped and defined by

those in power. In touch with that poverty, and only so, do we belong to the *anawim*, the little people of God. It is to such people that God comes with acceptance and affirmation, with a new language, and with the spirit of freedom, empowering them to widen this zone of liberation, and thus be the first-fruits of the coming Commonwealth of God.

Those who have grown up with a strong attraction to others of the same sex will recognize themselves in that last paragraph, whatever the religious and cultural context in which they live. They will have known poverty, not in relation to wealth, but in relation to their sexuality. They will have doubted the validity of their identity and feelings, let alone any expression of them: They may not even have recognized that their desire is to be united as closely as possible to, and to create with, another human being. They will probably have absorbed the assumption that it is sinful in all circumstances to act sexually with another of the same sex, and will have split themselves, denying their sexual energy (or letting it inhabit a separate room in their lives called 'Loveless sex: avoid if possible'), and exalting the intellectual, dwelling in a realm of so-called pure ideas. They will have tried to take to heart the Church's teaching, attempting to be abstinent without necessarily sensing a vocation to celibacy, and never admitting to anyone their sexual orientation. To know that this powerful sexual energy is a reality in one's life and not to own it, not to put it in the context of community, is to make it *the* most powerful reality, in practice dominating everything else, however much hidden from view. It is a great relief to recognize those feelings openly. It is a liberation to name the desires good because the desire to unite and create is good. It is enlivening to call oneself a self-affirming (not a self-confessed) gay person, and to take on the responsibility—now that choice is possible—of deciding just what kind of touch is appropriate in a given relationship. The point is not that everyone must be genitally sexual, but that each of us needs to come sexually alive and direct that living energy into passionate and creative loving.

So it is that the subject of this article is of pastoral concern to *all* who read it and a very deep personal concern to *many* who read it, not least among the public representatives of the Church, clergy and religious, women and men. This is not to argue that everyone ought to speak publicly about their sexuality (much is rightly private anyway), but much emotional damage is done when a

person cannot be open with self, with friends and with God. In terms of poverty, there is a world of difference between knowing that one is poor and trying to be open to truth and to others, and colluding with being destitute and downtrodden—that is the masochism that invites the boot. Poverty can be so crushing and grinding as to make people almost inhuman. Oppression can be so heavy that it turns an open and trusting human being into an embittered seeker of revenge, wanting to play the power game in reverse. But in some measure to be poor is a good starting point: at least you do not have to give up the illusion of powerful invulnerability. Rare is the person or institution that does that voluntarily! In the upside down world of Christianity the servant is always greater than the lord, the slave is the one who sets the master free. It is a fine point to distinguish between fawning slave and free servant, but another mark of holiness is surely to be identified with the least, and not with the greatest, of humanity.

In the last generation, in pockets of liberation from oppression, here and there in the western world and Church, people united by this desire have begun to find one another, and to explore another way of loving from that of the statistical norm. Fraught with the dangers both of anarchy and of new moralisms, both of which can be characteristic of ghettos, these geographical and psychological spaces have provided some room for a reorientation of thought and faith and relationships. Thin lines of communication, through travel and technology, sustain this half-visible network of homes and clubs, coffee bars and pubs, churches, associations and residential quarters of cities: numerous Chrises and Pats (who is which gender?) in their apartments and houses, a club called 'Heaven' whose music is purgatory to some, a coffee shop called 'First Out', the Metropolitan Community Church (American in origin, where there is a sect for every occasion, but who is to deny a pastoral haven for the damaged?), Dignity for Roman Catholics in America, now forbidden to hold Mass in churches, the Friends' Homosexual Fellowship in Britain (as far as I know, the Society of Friends were the first Christian body in the world to put forward a case for the possibility of being homosexual and holy some twenty-five years ago), the Castro district of San Francisco, where for once a gay person can assume that most people passing by in the street are also gay.

Behind these brief descriptions there is an extraordinary ebullience, in struggle and celebration, often painful, sometimes

destructive, when the powers of compulsion, violence and licence take over, yet more truthful, compassionate, courageous, joyful. Here is life being lived, however chaotic at times—and who would not be somewhat chaotic after generations of silence? At least this is the raw material of holiness. So many of those who condemn seem to do so because they are only half-alive and afraid, sometimes because there is hostility on the loose inside them. Certainly the saint is one who has recognized the forces of hatred within and allowed them to be transformed by the love of Christ; certainly too the saint is always more than twice alive. An American ministering among gay people in New York looked round at an English Barchester and said, in sorrow and perplexity, and in kindly tone, 'But these people have never *lived*'.

If a conservative institution like the Church is to believe these things, there needs to be profound reflection, yet a reflection that is invigorated and informed by the experience of people, some of whom sense the divine lure to become holy, and who see their partner as God-given, a companion on that quest. If that sounds unusual, is it partly because it is only recently that marriage has been given its due place on the path to holiness, rather than be regarded as second best, not as holy a path as that of celibacy? And it is certainly true that, however covert, many same-sex couples sincerely claim that their relationships have been blessed by God, and their lives enriched through each other. Some have come to receive God's blessing, asking priest and friends to witness their covenant and pray with them, in churches and houses, sometimes in the setting of the Eucharist or the blessing of a home. Couples of the same sex share bank accounts and mortgages, and draw up wills with the partner in mind. Such basic practical details are as much the stuff of spirituality as prayer, and it is in the shaping of our lives in detail that we begin to discern what is holy and what is not. To those who know such couples, their life together has indeed become a blessing, a source of healing, nourishment, and growth for each other, which Jack Dominian has suggested as the signs of a good marriage. And that blessing has overflowed to the wider community, in hospitality and service, and a quality of contribution which is all the more creative because of the love that sustains them. Nothing less than these things can explain why the Archbishop of Canterbury can make, as part of his contribution to the material of Christian debate, the statement that he is aware that a stable homosexual relationship can provide

'in terms of simple human generosity, hospitality, artistic achievement and flair, what I can't gainsay as human good' (*The Guardian*, 4 September 1987).

However, such relationships are not in fact new. John Boswell, in *Christianity, tolerance, and homosexuality* (University of Chicago Press, 1980), in an address to the Gay Christian Movement in 1982, and in research since, has pointed us to texts, especially in the Eastern Church, in the tenth and other centuries, which clearly indicate the blessing of same-sex relationships. The preamble shows that the Church was aware that these were not marriages, but that they were nonetheless to be blessed, even to the extent of crowns being held over the heads of each—a ritual from the marriage ceremony.

Though such a relationship is not a marriage, it can be presented as a covenant, binding to the two parties, a covenant that will be a blessing, and through which God will bless. And if friendship with God is the highest honour that can be given to a human being—to be a friend of God may be a good definition of the holy human being—then it may be a fine description and goal to refer to a committed same-sex relationship as a special friendship. These three theological terms, used for relationships between God and human beings, and between human beings themselves, i.e. blessing, covenant and friendship, may give us the framework we need for transforming same-sex desire from within into holiness. So one human may come to say to another: 'In the mystery of divine love, you have been given to me, N., and in my own free will and destiny, I embrace you, choosing and being chosen to share with you my being and my becoming. And with and in that love, I promise to be for you and for your well-being for ever, to honour you as a dwelling-place of God, and to be loyal to you and full of faith in you, our life-day long.' It is an awesome thing to be caught up in an exchange of love where one says to another, as God says to us: 'I will love you forever, whatever . . .'

I think it is true to say that the example of loving same-sex relationships reflecting such a God has begun to be experienced in a more open way in the last generation or so and has made many thoughtful people in Church and society reflect more deeply and begin to understand that a struggle to love and be loved beyond surface attractions is being lived out in ways they had previously thought to be not possible. Yes, there may be failures, but that is only to say that we are imperfect in our loving, and

that the road to a maturity of love goes through hurts and forgiveness before it reaches a light-hearted wisdom.

It is at this point that I am only too aware of the difficulty of pointing to individuals and couples who have journeyed with courage some way along this road. They exist, but for their own protection often feel they have to remain hidden, or be euphemistic about cousins, business partners and lodgers. Part of the Christian task of being truthful today is to ask people to share more about their relationships: a certain boldness and openness is the only way forward on both sides of the divide if there is to be progress in the kind of dialogue whose result is a profounder living of truth and love.

To look for examples from the past is notoriously unreliable. I may point out that it is possible that the relationship between David and Jonathan was sexual, but there is no proof either way. In one sense, what does it matter? But I think it can be claimed, not least from the evidence of David's lament, that the love they had for each other was emotional and passionate and would have involved touch of some kind: after all, they belonged to a very *embodied* people.

The sexually alive saints, whose way to holiness includes same-sex relating, will perhaps be looked back to as 'role models' by future generations remembering this and the next century. The only gay Catholic I know of who has written of his relationship is Brian McNaught. 'As a person who has experienced levels of selfless love by way of homosexual lovemaking, the truth revealed insists that to abstain from that vehicle would be living a lie.' (From *A disturbed peace*, Dignity Inc. Washington, 1981.)

Alas that it should take a deadly virus to show us, but I know families who have been stunned by observing the outpouring of compassion by lovers and friends on those suffering from AIDS. To witness such constant, detailed, often messy, uncomplaining active concern, to the extent of organizing round the clock companionship, has provoked the comment that this is a rare loving not often seen. They may not be obviously religious people, but they might justifiably provoke comment, 'See how these Christians love one another?'

In his article, *Holiness*, in the *Dictionary of Christian spirituality* (SCM Press 1983), Eric James writes: 'Jesus was born and died not on days that were holy, but on days that were made holy by the way he lived and died on them'. New holy days are being

forged through a loving that is passionately sexual, touchingly affectionate, and steadily sacrificial. They are not being forged by those who have denied their sexuality and passion and who are afraid to touch, and who do good works out of duty. If Dag Hammarskjöld was right when he claimed that in our era the road to holiness lay by way of the world of action, that action, in tune with the active will of God in the lived life of Jesus, includes living and relating as sexual beings in relationship.

I do not want to argue that gay people and their relationships are a special case, pleading for positive discrimination over and above heterosexual relationships. Indeed, I am aware that most of what I am saying could be subsumed under the title, *Sexual and holy*. Nor do I want to give the impression of 'holier than thou'. But I think it is true that particular historical circumstances place some people in a context of oppression and struggle which results in experiences through which they come to have something special to say, if not to their own, then to the next generation. In time, the majority may come to understand that the experience of the pioneering minority has something of truth for them too.

If the experience of sexual relationship by definition excludes reproduction, and if a couple are of the same sex and have an opportunity to explore ways of relating that are not influenced by a history of the man superior to and often dominating the woman, then their experience may provide clues to the kind of physical loving that is genitally focussed only in the context of a more diffused touch throughout the body. This is no quick genital act for the immediate satisfaction of the male or for conceiving a child (the reluctant necessity theory of sex), but an opportunity for a more subtle and sensitive, a more mutual and varied giving and receiving. I am not suggesting that all heterosexual relationships are without such mutuality and variety, simply that there is a pressure on same-sex relationships to explore those possibilities sooner.

This leads to a further reflection on what enables our flourishing in love for one another. The person attracted to others of the same sex may sense a pressure to discover the opposite gender through an inner exploration rather than through a relationship, to learn to develop both masculine and feminine traits of personality, and so to be able to relate appropriately to others of both sexes with a more completely human sexual energy, penetrating and receiving, each in a unique mix finding ways of mutual delight and healing

with another who is also more sexually alive than many men and women seem to be who are still in thrall to traditional expectations of their roles. And saints are passionate people, sexually fully alive, whether respect and reverence for the other implies, in particular circumstances, restraint or abandonment. Further, such a living of sexuality emphasises the uniqueness of the individual, a rich mutuality, and an equality one before the other, and it puts a higher value on friendship than on patriarchy, on a network of friends than on rigidly and statically hierarchical relationships and institutions. Of course friendships are difficult to control politically: I wonder if this is why the homosexual way to holiness is suspect and its possibility usually denied—it makes those with vested interests in power uneasy. But Christian belief is in a God who turns the world's ways of order upside down, choosing younger sons, not the eldest, for special tasks, and calling men and women to friendship, not slavery.

No road to holiness is easy. To discern when and how to touch and be touched is an ascetic task: to live by the Spirit is neither not to touch, so hating the flesh, nor to touch indiscriminately, which takes no account of the needs of the other and is a more subtle form of hatred of self and of others. Sex can be a dark, troublesome and rebellious power. But it cannot be repressed without emerging as violence. If we could learn to channel aggressive desires into creativity and sexual desires into loving touch, perhaps we would no longer need war. It is a test of our belief in the Incarnation whether we really believe that human flesh is to be cherished, however contradictory its messages may be, and however difficult it is to handle, and however vulnerable to pain it always is. Through our more accurate understanding of the human psyche we now know much more about the dynamics of sexuality than did our ancestors. The genie cannot be put back into the bottle, and we face the choice of learning to become more loving human sexuals or in ignorance continue to be destructive human sexuals. Sexuality has been our neglected outcast, and redemption can come only by welcoming that outcast home.

Lurking in this discussion is the issue of pleasure. Is holiness compatible with fun? We have often thought of holiness as meaning aloofness, denial, grimfaced duty, and we have found it hard to associate the word with celebration, delight and pleasure. But if the lines of our faces are etched by our struggles with the contradictions of being bodies, may not those faces begin to glow because

of our relaxations into the pleasures of being bodies? This is not to encourage hedonism, or the taking of pleasure at the expense of others—by inordinate demand, inside or outside a relationship, or by automatic compulsion or routine, or by the exploitation that leads to physical and emotional harm. *And* it is to encourage those finer vibrations of pleasure that come from the complete trust that two people have in each other when they are faithful over a long period of time. *And* it is to claim that the saint is the one who enjoys more of life than the rest of us, and who cherishes and loves the flesh and the earth in a non-possessive way. It was William Blake who said that 'he who kisses a joy as it flies, lives in eternity's sunrise'. Further, the presence of the holy God is mediated through human touch. 'With my body I thee worship', says the Marriage Service in the Book of Common Prayer. I give you worth, I affirm your value as a human being, through my physical closeness to you. Our sexuality becomes God's given means of making love, of increasing the love that is creating an ever more complex and marvellous universe. Is the valuing of sex in a relationship to be limited to the few occasions necessary for producing two or three offspring, or expanded into thousands of pleasurable acts of love?

It may also just be conceivable that celibate people, sexually alive, but not expressing that sexuality genitally in a committed relationship, might so learn the language of touch that they experience subtler vibrations of pleasure so intensely that orgasm would become an unnoticed irrelevance. By concentrating on when orgasms are allowable, in a historical climate of hostility to the flesh, we may have missed the point: we are called to let our sexuality be a means of creating pleasure and love among us: if that happened more readily in a diffused way, then we might be content to leave orgasms to the occasions of reproduction. I speculate: the implications would not please either traditionalist or radical. And we are a long way from seeing the call to celibacy as a call to celebrate sexuality in a profoundly physical way, enjoyable but different from the norm. Is the eunuch the one who has been castrated, or the one who is challenged to use sexuality in a fruitful way through all manner of touch?

If sex is given for the increase of love in the world, at its heart it is *good*. It is a seed which always contains potential for new life. It may be neglected, it may be trampled on, it may be damaged, it may be almost squashed by experiences of violence and hatred,

it may know humiliation, it may even lie in the desert for years, apparently dead. But it is indestructible, and can at any time be awakened. Many people find this so hard to believe, but I think it is true that even in the most awful circumstances, they are misusing what is good, not being punished by something that they expect to be bad through and through. The only way to a sane and holy sexual aliveness is to come to the point of knowing within oneself that this troublesome power is good and that we seek through it to become more loving and creative, to make of life something more enjoyable and pleasurable. Any structures, laws, covenants, are for the cherishing of the living flame, not for dousing it.

If we have been taught contrary things, and believed and lived them, we shall be living a lie, and part of the task of prayer will be to allow the Spirit of truth to ease out from us these distortions, that we may allow our minds and hearts to be reshaped, that we may in turn approach one another with a more accurate touch. This will be yet one more struggle on the holy way. Repentance will be in order from time to time, but a repentance more often for the times we have refused the risk of touch than for the times when we have touched and harmed. There is a moving scene in James Baldwin's novel *Another country*, in which one of the characters, Vivaldo, is talking about the last time he had been with Rufus, a friend whose death he is mourning. He tells of how they had fought, and how Rufus had told him many terrible things, and how he had cried. Vivaldo had been afraid to leave him alone, and as they had prepared for bed, he had felt that Rufus had wanted him to take him in his arms, that at that moment he had wanted a man to hold him. Fear had held Vivaldo back, even though he had known that Rufus had not been asking for genital sex. That might have happened, but it would have been incidental to the desire for comfort and healing. Vivaldo had been afraid that his touch would be misinterpreted, and yet it would have expressed only the love in his heart.

There is another way in which our sexuality can serve to make us holy. Not only can it mediate God's creative loving presence to us through one another, but it reminds us that even the closest union in this life is but partial and temporary. Even at its best, sexual love reminds us of incompleteness and death. This is partly because of the letting go of self that is experienced at the height of orgasm, partly because it creates a desire for something more than can be satisfied by repetition of intercourse. We yearn for a yet

more deep and lasting union. As with all earthly joys, sexual love challenges us both to be glad of its gift and also to acknowledge the gap between desire and fulfilment, to live in the tension of the incomplete, to turn its pain to a yet deeper loving, and not to use the limitations as an excuse to think sex bad or to hurt the other who cannot give all that we are asking. Not only does our earthly loving have inherent limits, but we bring to it all our wounds in the hope of healing. We still need to be in touch with the transforming Centre, the God within and beyond us.

So we are called to live the life of Christ and reflect the image of God. But that causes many of us to ask the question, what kind of God do we really believe in? The gay person inevitably becomes sensitive to any distortions perpetuated by the powerful, for Christian leaders so often give the subtle, or not so subtle, message that God loves you, but . . .

In liturgical prayer, the image of God as Lord dominates. One modern version of Compline uses 'Lord' thirty-six times; 'Father' comes second, used twelve times. Now, if human lords exercise power coercively, over against people, and if by reason of your sexuality you have been aware of that power hovering over you ready to pounce, you may have your suspicions, to say the least, that it is the human lords who have made sure that the public prayer of the Church portrays a grander lord and king as the object of human devotion. The pervading belief comes across that God's love is conditional, that compassion and forgiveness and long-suffering love are not really inexhaustible, that patience and endurance are limited, that the power of love to redeem tragedy will fail. On the contrary, the God of Jesus Christ does not know how not to love.

Of course such love can be painful to us, for it disturbs us out of our comfort and selfishness, it heals us with scalpel and laser, but it does not remove from us our particular identity and sexuality. Rather does it challenge us to become whole and holy through acknowledging whatever is true, and living that truth in love. It is to delight and rejoice in the God whose name is love; in Christ the clown who turns our solemnities into laughter; in Christ the Unicorn, restrained and still as well, paradoxically, as passionate and abandoned, integrating image for the polarities of our experience; in God whose creative being can be celebrated as lover,

beloved, and the generating of love between, as life-giver, pain-bearer, love-maker, striving with us and shaping us for glory, pursuing us, luring us, drawing us on, and never letting go.

In the quest to match 'homosexual' with 'holy', indeed 'sexual' with 'holy', we shall need new prayers and readings and hymns in worship, fresh images to quicken the imagination, sources of meditation to counteract what has dripped on us through past distortions in the resources most often used. Here is one such offering, inspired by a verse in a medieval hymn, incorporated, in the translation of J. M. Neale, as the third verse of what follows:

Word made Flesh! We see Christ Jesus
 Sharing our humanity,
 Loving, graceful, always truthful,
 Drawing close so bodily,
 Full of passion, full of healing,
 Touch of God to set us free.

On this earth we live as bodies,
 Flesh and blood to touch and see,
 Place of pain and contradiction,
 And of joy and ecstasy,
 Place of passion, place of healing,
 Where God's touch can set us free.

O how glorious and resplendent
 Fragile body you shall be
 When endued with so much beauty,
 Full of life and strong and free,
 Full of vigour, full of pleasure,
 That shall last eternally.

Glory give to God the Lover,
 Grateful hearts to the Beloved,
 Blessed be the Love between them,
 Overflowing to our good:
 Praise and worship, praise and worship
 Give to God whose name is Love.