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An In-Depth Review of *Homosexuality: A New Christian Ethic*

Rev. John F. Harvey, O.S.F.S.

Father Harvey received the Linacre Quarterly award on Oct. 20, 1984 at the NFCPG annual meeting in Philadelphia, in recognition of the great number of book reviews and articles he has written for Linacre during the past years.

Homosexuality: A New Christian Ethic, written by Elizabeth Moberly and published by Attic Press, Greenville, S.C., should be read in conjunction with the author's previous volume, *Psychogenesis: The Early Development of Gender Identity* which I reviewed in the May, 1984 issue of *Linacre Quarterly*. Moberly first reviews the principal elements of her theory concerning the nature of homosexuality and then challenges Christian ethicists to seek a deeper understanding of the condition, with a view to the development of a more adequate pastoral program for homosexual persons. To comprehend her position, however, one must review her psychological premises. From eight years of intensive research, Moberly holds that a homosexual orientation "does not depend on a genetic dispositional hormonal imbalance, or abnormal learning processes, but on difficulties in the parent-child relationship, especially in the earlier years of life."

I. Relational Deficit

Admitting the complexity of the homosexual phenomenon, Moberly singles out one underlying principle — that the homosexual man or woman "has suffered from some deficit in the relationship with the parent of the same sex and that there is a corresponding drive to make good this deficit through the medium of same-sex or 'homosexual' relationships." The term "deficit" does not in itself imply any willful neglect or maltreatment of the child by the same-sex parent, yet some kind of trauma has disrupted the normal attachment to the same-sex parent, leaving the child unfulfilled in its need for same-sex attachment. Many factors are involved in this disruption, and it would be simplistic to attribute it to a single factor, like divorce with absence of the same-sex parent. The hurt of the child becomes traumatic when he/she is no longer willing to relate to the source, his/her parent. An

abiding deficit is then found in the child's relational capacity to the extent that if, after the trauma, the parent of the same sex offers love, it will not change the ability of the child to receive love.

Again, this relational deficit may not be evident to those close to the child. Family relationships of the homosexual person may appear sound, but the intrapsychic damage exists at a deep level and is often latent, though sometimes overt. The inability to relate to the parent of the same sex will be carried over to members of the same sex in general. A defensive detachment emerges which resists the restoration of attachment and which remains long after the initial trauma.

Involved also are the dynamics of repression. Repressing the normal need for attachment strengthens the opposite drive for the restoration of the attachment. This reparative urge is involved in the homosexual impulse, that is to say, this impulse is essentially motivated by the need to make good earlier defects in the parent-child relationship. "The persisting need for love from the same sex stems from, and is to be correlated with, the earlier unmet need for love from the parent of the same sex, or rather, the inability to receive such love, whether or not it was offered." This defensive detachment, coupled with the urge for renewed attachment, implies that the homosexual condition is one of *same-sex ambivalence*. This holds for both males and females, the only difference being one of greater or lesser degree in individuals.

The overall structure of ambivalence has various characteristics:

- 1) hostility latent or overt, toward parental figures and toward other members of the same sex. It may enter into actual sexual relationships. The homosexual partner is often identified with the hated father.
- 2) tendency to collect injustices;
- 3) authority problems.

In situations of this kind, unresolved animosity originating as a response to hurtful behavior from a same-sex parent has been generalized with the potential to enter into any personal relationship with persons of the same sex. Thus, defensive detachment from the same-sex parent blocks the normal identificatory process. Sometimes this is manifested by effeminacy in the male. Such effeminacy is really "dis-identification" from the same sex. The well-known mother fixation of the male homosexual is really an effect rather than a cause, because it is normal to be attached to one's mother; but if he is attached to his mother only, this is abnormal.

To fulfill unmet love needs, a woman may seek out a motherly figure in a lesbian relationship. This is really an effort to resolve an abnormal detachment. The same is true of effeminate males seeking virile partners to get a shot of masculinity.

These needs exist independently of sexual expression, although they are often expressed sexually. A good nonsexual relationship with a member of the same sex is another means of fulfilling such needs.

The reparative urge remains an essential component of the homosexual condition. While the total structure of the homosexual personality as ambivalence may not be apparent at all times or in all cases, the positive or the negative aspect may be obvious; but in any case, the two aspects are parts of the same condition.

II. A New Outlook

Moberly believes that seeing homosexuality as same-sex ambivalence opens up new vistas to the pastoral care of the homosexual person. Attempted heterosexual relationships do not solve the problem of the homosexual because they do nothing to fulfill same-sex deficits. But the capacity for same-sex love is the way to a natural healing process. Since the problem of homosexuality is twofold, there must be a twofold therapeutic goal, namely, the undoing of the defensive goal, and making up for unmet needs.

It is not enough, however, to discourage the mistaken solution of sexual activity. One must also point to the proper solution, which is the meeting of same-sex needs without sexual activity. But the objection may be raised as to why, if the homo-emotional drive is the solution to the problem, the problem is not often actually resolved in homosexual relationships. Moberly responds that such a resolution does take place in many instances, but we have insufficient evidence. She admits, however, that there are certain obstacles to such a solution. 1) In a homosexual relationship, both partners have similar psychological needs, and these needs or deficits render each less capable of satisfying the other's needs. 2) Deep dependency needs, when experienced, are not readily met when the person is chronologically an adult. 3) Most important, the defensive attachment which was originally responsible for the prevention of the normal growth process may re-emerge and disrupt the renewed attachment. This third factor may account for the instability of many homosexual relationships.

There are also other difficulties in same-sex relationships which may prevent their own fulfillment. The fact that homosexual needs are often eroticized has drawn attention away from the true nature of the homosexual condition. Although the homosexual person may believe that he can satisfy his needs by sexual expression, he fails to realize that such is not appropriate to the normal parent-child relationship. Sexual expression does not meet nonadult attachment needs.

In the homosexual condition, psychological needs which are essentially pre-adult remain in a person who is, in other respects, adult. By homosexual activity, one confuses the emotional needs of the non-adult with the physiological desires of the adult. But sexuality is meant to express the desires both of physiological maturity and of psychological maturity in coordination with each other. Where there is

a lack of such coordination, deficits in growth should be filled nonsexually and, hopefully, an integrated basis for a sexually expressed relationship will be attained.

The very term "homosexuality" begs the question because it describes the homosexual condition primarily in terms of sexual desire and activity. A nonsexual definition is needed, such as same-sex ambivalence, since this condition exists prior to, and independent of, any sexual activity, and most importantly, the needs involved in and should be met independently of any sexual activity.

Ethicists miss the point when they argue whether homosexual acts are permissible or not, while neglecting the underlying personality condition. Such is the more basic question. The debate concerning what activity is acceptable is off the mark "since the question is not intrinsically sexual in the first place." The issue is what is necessary for growth and development to psychological maturity, and what one is to do to make up deficits in this.

Here Moberly confuses two distinct perspectives of the question—the moral and the psychological. It is not begging the question to assess free homosexual activity to show that it does not conform to the moral norm of sexual activity as developed in Church teaching. Granted that much homosexual activity is compulsive, and thus not primarily a moral issue, yet some activity is free and subject to moral evaluation. It would be more appropriate to state that homosexual activity is both a psychological and a moral issue. Still, it is insightful that Moberly should stress the psychological dynamics involved in the homosexual condition.

Consistently, Moberly holds that marriage is not a valid point of comparison with homosexuality, since one is comparing the essentially sexual with the essentially nonsexual. On the basis of Moberly's evidence, however, "the true point of comparison for homosexuality is not sexual pair-bonding, but the parent-child relationship." Within this perspective, we should make our evaluation of homosexuality.

Mere abstinence from sexual activity is not, however, a solution, unless certain legitimate psychological needs are also met. One should neither ignore unmet needs (the conservative mistake) nor eroticize them (the liberal mistake). Our failure to understand this has led to the polarization of the debate.

It is the longing for same-sex psychological completion which itself criticizes the state of incompleteness from which it stems and which it tries to make good. The end result of this process of growth is heterosexuality, "understood as the capacity for relating to people as a psychologically complete member of one's own sex." Thus it is not sexual activity with the other sex which defines the heterosexual, because such activity can be relatively superficial; rather, it is the nature and direction of underlying psychological needs. Heterosexuality must be defined not only in terms of relating to the other sex, but

also in terms of fulfilling certain psychological needs in regard to one's own sex. Once these needs are fulfilled, one is capable of relating to the other sex. Heterosexuality is the ability to relate to both sexes, and not just the other sex. It is not just a matter of sexuality, but of gender identity, and the fulfillment of homo-emotional needs.

On the other hand, homosexuals relate to the same sex and to the other as incomplete members of their own sex. What they need to do is become complete members of their own sex. As soon as they have met homo-emotional needs, homosexual persons no longer need the attachment by which these needs have been fulfilled. This means that homosexual relationships are inherently self-limiting since they belong to the process of maturation and cease if they fulfill their purpose. We are not saying that all heterosexual relationships are stable, but rather that there is nothing *inherently* self-limiting about heterosexuality.

Homosexuality is not a "flight" from heterosexuality, because the latter has not been attained. Thus, when we speak of immaturity in the homosexual, we are concerned with incomplete growth. For this reason, the condition of homosexuality cannot be normative of human behavior. But the psychological needs involved are normal. They are part of the process of growth which cannot be bypassed without rendering the goal of maturity permanently unattainable. The fulfillment of same-sex attachment needs is for the homosexual the satisfying of deepest emotional longings.

"The capacity for same-sex love is itself the natural healing process for a state of same-sex deficits, and it is vital that one should cooperate with this process. Therapists have mistaken the solution of the problem for the actual problem. Healing for the homosexual is possible, but it has not yet been genuinely tried."

III. The Christian Position Reassessed

Moberly does not disagree with the traditional biblical texts condemnatory of homosexual acts, but she believes that the traditional teaching should be reassessed in another way. Instead of concentrating on homosexual activity, we should consider the underlying psychological dynamic of the homosexual, and evaluate it, not according to norms for adult sexuality, but according to considerations of pre-adult development, particularly of the parent-child relationship. Moberly sees the scripturally-based arguments about God's image being found in man and woman together (complementarity) as applicable to adults, but not to homosexuals who have been blocked from reaching such complementarity. The incomplete development of the homosexual person is contrary to God's intention. This leads Moberly to conclude that homosexual acts are prohibited, not because they repudiate the man-woman relationship, but because sexual expression is not appropriate to pre-adult relationships.

While male-female complementarity is the goal of human development, it is not something given from the start. It has to be learned. Without denying that homosexual acts are evil, Moberly sees the problem more broadly in terms of gender identity. The reparative striving for same-sex completion is the solution and not the problem. From this position, two points follow:

- 1) It is a mistake for homosexuals to assume that God intended them to be as they are, that is, incomplete. The homosexual condition is not in the image of God. God created men and women who are intended to attain psychological maturity in their gender identity. Through the fulfillment of same-sex needs, homosexuals are in the process of becoming what God intends for them.
- 2) Healing must imply the fulfillment of unmet needs. "To block the homosexual urge, as distinct from its sexual expression, is to block the process of healing."

Here one must distinguish between homosexual needs, as such, and their sexual expression. If one speaks of "homosexual" temptation, one must restrict the meaning to the urge to express oneself in a sexual-genital way. The goal of healing is the fulfillment of unmet homo-emotional needs.

These needs, however, are to be fulfilled nonsexually in deep friendships. It is part of the maturational process of the homosexual to seek such friendships, but the eroticization of this urge is not in accord with the perfection of the person. In the exact sense, homosexual love is the child's need for the parent. "A man does, properly, fulfill a man's desire for community in the father-son relationship. And a woman does properly fulfill a woman's desire for community in the mother-daughter relationship."

Actually, the homosexual has a greater need for relationships than a single heterosexual, because the former involves a child's need for his parent, rather than the need of one adult for another. Within this perspective, our scriptural understanding of homosexuality should consider not only the specific texts referring to homosexual acts, or the general texts on human sexuality, but also evidence of guidelines in scripture which express concern for orphans, or making good deficits in parental care (Isaiah 1:23; Jeremiah 5:28; Ezekiel 22:7; and many other texts, pp. 35-36). God protects and helps orphans (Deut. 10:18) and is "the father of the fatherless" (Ps. 68:2). Since the homosexual condition is like that of the orphan, it is just as laudable to help the homosexual person fulfill his/her need for a parent as helping orphans in other ways.

Moberly further states that the homosexual condition may not be evaluated within the context of human sexuality as a whole, because the question is not essentially sexual. The correct perspective is the parent-child relationship and the facilitation of human maturation. While love is important, not all love is meant to be sexual. Indeed, even

for the heterosexual only the marital relationship is meant to be sexual.

The duration of a homosexual relationship indicates either the continuing lack of resolution of same-sex deficits or the fact that much time is needed to make good substantial defects. The point is that the nature of the reparative drive is such as to make homosexual relationships *inherently self-limiting*. For this reason, homosexuality cannot be considered on the same level as heterosexuality.

One must bear in mind the legitimacy of homosexual needs in working toward a solution of the problem. The barrier in the homosexual is the defensive detachment vis à vis the same sex, but this detachment will not be removed by *sexually* expressing the reparative urge. Mere abstinence from sexual expression is not the solution. It should only be temporary while awaiting the resolution and fulfillment of same-sex deficits. As soon as these are truly met, the person attains the psychological basis for sexual fulfillment in a heterosexual relationship.

IV. Healing and Prayer

One should pray to fulfill homosexual needs which, when properly fulfilled, lead to heterosexuality. The two goals in the healing process are: 1) undoing defensive detachments vis à vis the same sex; and 2) meeting unmet needs. Relationships and prayer may serve as the means toward this twofold goal. The solution to same-sex deficits should be sought by means of one or more nonsexual relationships with members of the same sex. The male homosexual needs a male helper, and the female homosexual, a female helper. A relationship between a heterosexual and a homosexual of the same sex is likely to be more stable than that between two homosexuals, and it is thus important that more heterosexuals become involved in this ministry. The provision of good same-sex relationships helps to meet unmet same-sex needs and to forward the healing process. Once the relationship has fulfilled these needs, it is no longer necessary. Even if not consciously experienced as such, the capacity for same-sex love is essentially the love need of the child for the parent.

PRAYER is at the heart of healing. This means opening up the past to the healing love of Christ. We should offer Christ our unconscious as well as our conscious life, so that our total person may be redeemed and healed. It is God Who heals. We listen to the other person, and we listen to God's Holy Spirit. In prayer, particular attention should be paid to the negative aspect of the same-sex ambivalence, because defensive detachment is not generally recognized by the homosexual person. The person's inability to trust the needed love source is beyond conscious control. It needs healing.

Since the homosexual person usually experienced animosity toward the same-sex parent, complete forgiveness is important. But forgive-

ness is a process in which the hurts of the past are brought to life. One should pray for the gift of forgiveness, asking God's pardon for our own lack of forgiveness. Forgiveness may be linked with the healing of the actual relationship with the parent, or of the memories of that relationship. Usually, however, it is the homosexual's general relational capacity which must be dealt with. Sometimes this involves transference of attitudes originating in the relationship with the parent. There is need for healing of memories to bring to the surface early hurts which have persisted unresolved. One discovers anger and a sense of grievance at the parent, coupled with a sense of loss, as the attachment to the parent is disrupted. Healing prayer can make a person aware of these hurts. The person's deep inability to trust seems to stem from the unwillingness to *trust again* in a love source experienced as hurtful. This lack of trust represses the need for attachment.

In the process of healing, the ability to recall the hurts of the past makes the healing process easier. This is joined with the formation of supportive same-sex relationships. Both the prayer and the relationships should be fostered by the Church. Through prayer, the homosexual can make up for the love which he should have received but did not receive from the parent of the same-sex.

On the counseling level, Moberly holds that the homosexual needs a same-sex counselor, because he/she needs to make up deficits in same-sex relationships. All this means is that "a woman cannot be a father, and a man cannot be a mother." The amount of time it will take to heal the homosexual person depends upon how deeply imbedded the orientation is. One does not expect a person who has been formed in a homosexual pattern for several decades to change in a brief time. Time, good relationships, prayer and guidance are necessary for healing.

Moberly concludes that "love, both in prayer and in relationships, is the basic therapy. . . . Love is the basic problem, the great need, and the only solution. If we are willing to seek and to mediate the healing and redeeming love of Christ, then healing for the homosexual will become a great and glorious reality."

Critique

In my review of Moberly's *Psychogenesis*, I expressed the hope that her second volume would throw light on ways in which the homosexual person could fulfill homo-emotional needs on his/her way to heterosexuality. She has done that. She has challenged the moral and pastoral theologian to consider the negative and positive elements of the homosexual condition in their efforts to develop a plan of life for homosexual persons. The need for positive relationships with members of one's own sex is more lucidly presented than in the first volume. She points out that it is preferable in a same-sex relationship that the

other person be heterosexual, a far cry from the myth that a homosexual can have a close relationship only with another homosexual. Moberly holds consistently with her theory that one outlives these friendships as one fulfills same-sex needs, and is ready to relate to persons of the other sex. She gives due importance to prayer, particularly in the healing of memories. But, in my opinion, her most important contribution is to make us realize that homosexuality ought to be redefined as a problem in pre-adult development, rather than as a sexual problem. In no way does this contradict traditional teaching on the objective immorality of homosexual activity. On the contrary, in our pastoral programs of spiritual support groups, we shall be aware of the positive aspects in the "reparative urge."

There are, however, certain difficulties with Moberly's theory. Although I have seen one former lesbian who verified the details of her position, I believe we need more evidence from professional therapists who are open to following her approach. To be sure, many will dismiss Moberly out of hand, but I believe her two volumes are like a breath of fresh air in a confused atmosphere of psychological theory.

A second difficulty is the time factor. In the spiritual support group called COURAGE, which I direct in New York City, most of the 25 persons at a weekly meeting are over 40. It would seem that it would take much longer for them to fulfill completely homo-emotional needs as a necessary step toward heterosexuality. Granted, for the sake of example, some did reach the stage where they felt a genuine attraction to women. At their age, it would be difficult to find the right person to marry. Nonetheless, the presence of heterosexual orientation would give the person a sense of completion, albeit in a celibate lifestyle.

A third difficulty is Moberly's view that when the person becomes heterosexual, he has outlived the relationships which helped him to fulfill pre-adult needs. Does this mean that one discards a relationship which helped him/her to healing? Could not this relationship be transferred from the parent-child to a different level? True, the relationship is no longer necessary, but it may involve elements of adult friendship which would help the person as a heterosexual. Perhaps I have misunderstood Moberly.

In any case, these points are all minor compared with the copious insights this volume provides. Hopefully, professionals in the field will respond to Moberly's challenge.

This book should be read by all those who are seeking creative approaches to the homosexual person.