

“But the Bible says...”? A Catholic reading of Romans 1

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A talk prepared for Mount Saint Agnes Theological Center for Women, Baltimore,
and given there on 12 January 2004

This evening's talk has a very odd title. One of the reasons it is odd is that few Catholics are likely to interrupt a theological discussion with the phrase: "But the Bible says..." And this is not so much the result of the famed stereotype concerning Catholic ignorance of the Scriptures but because in a Catholic discussion, it is unlikely that an appeal to authority would take the form of an appeal to the Bible. It is more probable that an appeal to authority would take the form "But the Holy Father says..." or "But it's in the Catechism". So why bother people by attempting a Catholic reading of Romans 1?

What has pushed me in the direction of offering this reading is really two things: in the first place, I was brought up Evangelical Protestant, and this text, Romans 1, was really a text of terror for me, a text in some way associated with a deep emotional and spiritual annihilation, something inflicting paralysis. So, finding myself ever freer of that terror, it seems proper to try and offer a road map to others who, whatever their ecclesial belonging, may suffer from the same binding of conscience that a certain received reading of this text has seemed to impose. But there is a second reason, no less important to my mind: owing to arguments surrounding Episcopal appointments in the Anglican Church on both sides of the Atlantic, a huge amount of press has been generated in which it has been repeated *ad nauseam* that "The Bible is quite clear..." about this or that. Furthermore we are told time and again that those who think either that gay people should be allowed to marry, or that being gay should be no bar to Episcopal consecration, are in some way repudiating an obvious written sacred injunction. The impression that "the Bible is quite clear" has passed largely unchallenged in the media, which has found it easiest to present the argument as being between conservative people who take the Bible seriously (and are thus against gay people) and liberal people who don't (and thus aren't against gay people).

Well, what is being treated to public travesty here is the Bible. Indeed it seems to me that if anything, the truth is closer to being exactly the other way round: you need a very modern liberal reading of the Bible in order to make it a weapon against gay people, and those who refuse to do this are, by and large, much more traditional in their Biblical reading habits. But this sounds so counterintuitive in our world that I'd like to take time to show that there is at least one perfectly respectable Catholic way to read this text which enables us to see it in quite a different light.

Before actually reading the text I'd like to make two points as a build up. If any of us is faced with the following verse from Romans 1, it seems to have an obvious and clear meaning:

For this reason God gave them up to dishonourable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural... (Romans 1:26)

A quick show of hands in any English-speaking country nowadays would probably agree to the following statement: “This quite clearly refers to lesbianism. That is the obvious meaning of the words. To deny that this refers to lesbianism is the sort of thing that you would expect from a clever-clogs biblical exegete with an ideological axe to grind.” Well, all I’d like to say at this point is that we have several commentaries on these words dating from the centuries between the writing of this text and the preaching of St John Chrysostom at the end of the fourth century. None of them read the passage as referring to lesbianism. Both St Augustine and Clement of Alexandria interpreted it straightforwardly as meaning women having anal intercourse with members of the other sex. Chrysostom was in fact the first Church Father of whom we have record to read the passage as having anything to do with lesbianism.

Now, my first point is this: irrespective of who is closer to the mark as to what St Paul was referring to, one thing is irrefutable: what modern readers claim to be “the obvious meaning of the text” was not obvious to Saint Augustine, who has for many centuries enjoyed the status of being a particularly authoritative reader of Scripture. Therefore there can be no claim that there has been an uninterrupted witness to the text being read as having to do with lesbianism. There hasn’t. It has been perfectly normal for long stretches of time to read this passage in the Catholic Church without seeing St Paul as saying anything to do with lesbianism. This means that no Catholic is under any obligation to read this passage as having something to do with lesbianism. Furthermore, it is a perfectly respectable position for a Catholic to take that there is no reference to lesbianism in Holy Scripture, given that the only candidate for a reference is one whose “obvious meaning” was taken, for several hundred years, to be something quite else.

This point is a negative one. It clearly demonstrates that there is *no obligation* on a Catholic to agree that what St Paul is saying is obvious, or to read those words as referring to lesbianism.

My second point is slightly more positive. According to the official teaching body of the Catholic Church, Catholic readers of the Scripture have *a positive duty* to avoid certain sorts of what the authorities call “actualization” of the texts, by which they mean reading ancient texts as referring in a straightforward way to modern realities. I will read you what they say, and please remember that this is rather more than an opinion. This is the official teaching of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, at the very least an authorized Catholic source of guidance for how to read the Scriptures, in their 1993 Document “*The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*”:

“Clearly to be rejected also is every attempt at actualization set in a direction contrary to evangelical justice and charity, such as, for example, the use of the Bible to justify racial segregation, anti-Semitism or sexism whether on the part of men or of women. Particular attention is necessary...to avoid absolutely any actualization of certain texts of the New Testament which could provoke or reinforce unfavourable attitudes to the Jewish people.” (*The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* IV.3)

The list which the Commission gives is deliberately not exhaustive, but it has the advantage of taking on vastly the most important of any possible improper actualization, which is that related to the translation of the words ‘οι Ἰουδαῖοι,

especially where they are used in St John's Gospel. I ask you to consider quite clearly what this instruction means. It means that anyone who translates the words *'οι Ἰουδαῖοι*, literally as "the Jews" and interprets this to refer to the whole Jewish people, now or at any time in the past, is translating it and interpreting it less accurately, and certainly less in communion with the Church, than someone who translates it less literally as something like "the Jewish authorities", or "the local authorities" who were of course, like almost everyone in St John's Gospel, Jewish.

Now, given how vitally important the Jewish people and the relation between the Jewish people and the Church has been in the development of Christian Doctrine, if we are urged to avoid *absolutely any actualisation* of the text, then the following statement must, *a fortiori*, be at the very least perfectly reasonable, if not actually highly recommended, as a guide to a properly Catholic reading of a passage dealing with something rather less important. Here it is: given the possibility of a restricted ancient meaning in a text which does not transfer readily into modern categories, or the possibility of one which leaps straight and expansively into modern categories and has had effects contrary to charity on the modern people so categorized, one should prefer the ancient reading to the actualized one.

Well so far two minor introductory points: there is no obligation on Catholics to read Romans 1 as referring to what modern readers claim is its obvious meaning; and indeed, given the possibility of an ancient limited meaning, or a more expansive modern one potentially harmful to a modern category of people, a Catholic reading should prefer the ancient limited meaning.

Now to a reading of the text. I am going to read it to you twice. Once in the standard version which you will find in almost any modern biblical translation – actually I'll be reading you the Revised Standard Version. And once in exactly the same version, and in fact in exactly the same translation, so with exactly the same words, but this time I'll be taking out the bits which are not by St Paul. Before you say: "Aha! – that's his trick – he's got some complicated reason why St Paul couldn't have said such and such, so he's going to claim that some bit he doesn't like isn't really by St Paul" I would like to rush to assure you. I am going to remove *no word at all* from the text. But I'm going to remove all the numbers. That is, the verse and chapter numbers. These are the bits that are not by St Paul. They were a mediaeval addition; first the division into chapters and later the subdivision by verses. They are supposed to be, and are, a simple help to finding your way in the text, just as a book cataloguing system is supposed to help you find your way round a library rather than point out which books are important and to be read. Of course Paul didn't write his Epistle to the Romans in chapters and verses. He wrote, or dictated, it, in scarcely punctuated continuous Greek prose. What you will see is quite how much the introduction of numbers has done to freeze a certain sort of reading into place as though the numbers had the authority to do that, and quite how differently the passage reads if the numbers are removed.

You will notice also a difference of tone in the reading. The first time I will read it in the portentous tones of Ayatollah Paul, who has just stepped down, Charlton Heston-like, from Mount Sinai, with a burning zeal to dictate the univocal word of the Lord concerning iniquity. Without my knowing those long words, like Ayatollah, or portentous, and without having seen the Charlton Heston movie, this was the reading which was obvious to me in my early teens, the one which read itself through my

eyes, and it may well be one that has been obvious to you. I hope to suggest that the tone which we bring to the text when we read or hear it is at least as important as the words on the page for creating the meaning that seems obvious. The second time I will read it to you in the bathetic tones of Rabbi Paul, heir to a rich tradition of ironic and quizzical readings. And lest you be worried that, in referring to him as Rabbi, I am in some way trying to undercut his apostolic authority, which is somehow upheld if he is read in the tones of an Ayatollah, I would like to make clear that the word "Rabbi" here refers, in my understanding, to his style and rhetoric and in no way undermines his authority: he was Apostle precisely as someone who was extremely well-educated in the rabbinical tradition of interpretation. I hope that this second reading will, after I have given it to you, be obvious to you, as it now is to me.

So here goes with Romans 1:14- to the end from the RSV:

¹⁴ I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish: ¹⁵ so I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. ¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." ¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse; ²¹ for although they knew God they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles. ²⁴ Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵ because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen. ²⁶ For this reason God gave them up to dishonourable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, ²⁷ and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error. ²⁸ And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a base mind and to improper conduct. ²⁹ They were filled with all manner of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity, they are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, ³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. ³² Though they know God's decree that those who do such things deserve to die, they not only do them but approve those who practice them.

Sound familiar?

Well, now for the second go. First some background details. As far as we can tell, Paul wrote this letter in Corinth. It appears to be written to two groups of Christians who constituted the Church at Rome – the group of Jewish believers in Christ, and the group of Gentile believers in Christ. There appear to have been some problems with rivalry between these two groups, with the Jewish Christians thinking themselves superior to the Baptized Gentiles, and the Gentiles thinking themselves superior to the Baptized Jews. Paul first of all speaks to the Jewish Christians explaining to them that even though all the treasures of revelation had come through the Jewish people, they are in fact not superior to the gentiles, but in just the same need as the Gentiles of the redemption which has been effected by Jesus. Then he turns to the Gentiles to explain to them how they are not superior to the Jews by never having had the Law, but are likewise dependent on Christ's redemption. The point of this is to bring out that all humans are dependent on Christ's salvation: all have sinned, and all need grace, without exception. As far as I am aware this basic framework for the reading of the Epistle to the Romans is pacifically accepted by the majority of scholars of all stripes. Nothing particularly controversial here.

Given that, my starting point for reading Romans 1 isn't in Romans 1 at all. It is in fact what we know as Romans 2:1 and you didn't hear it in the passage I just read. It reads as follows:

Therefore you have no excuse, O man, whoever you are, when you judge another; for in passing judgment upon him you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things.

Now, I suggest to you that it is extremely odd to start a new argument, or a new chapter, with the word "Therefore". Normally, a sentence beginning "Therefore" is an indication that the conclusion to the preceding argument is about to be given. That is, the whole point of what went before is about to be made clear. Let us suppose that we had no reliable manuscript for the beginning of St Paul's letter to the Romans, but merely knew that a short chunk was missing, and the manuscript we have begins with what we call 2:1. Well, you can bet your bottom dollar that all attempts to reconstruct the missing passage would work on the sure presumption that whatever it was about, it was leading in some way to an indication that no one should be able to judge anyone else. Given the thrust of what we call Chapters 2 and 3, arguing against Jewish superiority over gentiles in the Church, exegetes are very likely to posit that whatever the missing passage said, it is very likely to have contained an argument building up to the conclusion that whatever apparent signs of superiority were enjoyed by Jewish believers in Christ, they were in fact fundamentally in the same boat as the Gentiles as regards everything that actually mattered.

Well, you will be amazed to hear that the great, and almost certainly German, Biblical Palaeontologist, Herr Doktor James Alison, by dint of extraordinarily adroit, and indeed almost Nobel Prize-worthy, use of computer buttons in operating his Hermeneutika Bible Works Scripture software, has managed to discover and reproduce the missing chunk which leads up to what we call Romans 2:1, and it does, perfectly conform to what those clever exegetes said it would contain, basing their deduction on the first verse available to them, the verse forbidding judging anyone else. Let me read to you how the rabbinic writer Paul builds up to his point:

I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish: so I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, “He who through faith is righteous shall live.”

Well here Paul sets out quite clearly what he wants to do, justifying his mission to some potential Jewish listeners who may not be so happy with Paul’s emphasis on the Gentiles. So he moves on to speaking in terms with which any educated religious Jew living in the Diaspora would be familiar. He is almost quoting from, and certainly taking as known, the book which appears in Catholic Bibles as *The Book of Wisdom*, or *The Wisdom of Solomon*. Part of this is a straightforward Jewish treatise against all the iniquities of pagan idol worship. Moses had his preachers in every city, expounding Jewish monotheism and attracting people from the gentile cults, and this was the just sort of thing those preachers said. I have appended the relevant verses from chapters 13 and 14 of the *Book of Wisdom* for you to see this for yourselves (See *Appendix I*). Those verses and St Paul’s are extremely similar in their analysis of idolatry.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse; for although they knew God they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles.

OK. So here we have a standard piece of Jewish polemic about pagans in general: the sort of thing they do is “exchange” (a word we also get in *Wisdom*) – something like “travesty” – the glory of God for images. All Paul’s readers and listeners would know exactly to what he was referring. Ancient cities were full of Temples and Shrines with images of gods, goddesses, Cats, Jackals, Crocodiles, Serpents, Isis, Osiris, Anubis, Mithras and so on.

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen.

Here, as in the book of *Wisdom*, which sets out to explain the link between idolatry, the source of all evil, and the evil of which it is the source, it is *because* pagan people became involved in the idolatrous cults that *then* they were led to get involved in passions which did them no honour. You can tell Paul is on something of a riff here, playing to his audience, his listeners, because he interrupts his own argument to make an exclamation after mentioning the Creator:

who is blessed for ever! Amen.

This is the sort of exclamation where, in a Pentecostal Church, we would expect voices to emerge from the listeners saying “Hallelujah” or “Right on, Brother!” It is part of a rhetoric of convincing people that he is on their side, that he is one of them, that they can count on him. And of course, it is for a very deliberate purpose as we will see. Paul moves on:

For this reason God gave them up to dishonourable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

These are exactly the sort of things that went on in and around pagan temples throughout the Mediterranean world in Paul’s time, as at the time of the writer of the Book of Wisdom, which goes into rather more detail than Paul does¹. These would include women dressing up as satyrs with large phalloi so that they could be the penetrators rather than the penetratees with their partners (and it was this travesty or exchanging of role, going against “farmyard logic”, rather than the gender of the partner which seems to have been what was regarded as going against type here). This is what Clement of Alexandria had to say on the subject:

For that reason, births are infrequent among hyenas, because they sow their seed contrary to nature. ... Such godless people ‘God has given over,’ the Apostle says, ‘to shameful lusts. For the women change their natural use to that which is against nature. ...’ Yet nature has not allowed even the most sensual beasts to sexually misuse the passage made for excrement....Blurring the natural order, men play the part of women, and women play the part of men, contrary to nature. ... No passage is closed against evil lusts; and their sexuality is a public institution – they are roommates with indulgence.²

We have, you will not be surprised to hear, even more evidence from antiquity about the sort of things that the men got up to. Certainly there were cults like that of Cybele, Atys or Aphrodite, whose largest temple (rumoured to have as many as 1,000 temple prostitutes) was in Corinth where Paul probably wrote this letter, and whose cult had recently been introduced into Rome. This cult had a very strong cross-dressing element. Not only that, but the rites involved orgiastic frenzies in which men allowed themselves to be penetrated, and which culminated in some of those in the frenzy castrating themselves, and becoming eunuchs, and thus priests of Cybele, for whom, as was common with Mother Goddess cults, transcending gender was particularly important. Such castrated devotees, sometimes called “galli” would wander around, as

¹ See especially Wisdom 14: 23-28. Independently of Jewish sources, evidence abounds of the practises in the Ancient World surrounding the cults of different divinities: Cybele, Mithras and so on and their popularity. For a particularly interesting and useful compilation of the evidence see Jeremy Townsley’s *Romans 1:22-28: Paul, the Goddess Religions and Homosexuality* available on his website <http://www.jeramy.org/papers/paulcybl.html>.

² Clement, *Paedagogos*, 2.10.86-87, 3.3.21.3. Translation: Jeremy Townsley.

do the “hijra” in modern India, as festal eunuchs assumed to have magic powers or prophetic gifts. The body of just such a castrated Roman eunuch priest with ornaments showing devotion to Cybele was recently uncovered by archaeologists in Northern England³.

Paul’s listeners would not have needed any explanation of this sort of thing: it was a regularly occurring part of the public life of the Mediterranean world at the time. What it meant for “galli” to receive in their persons the due penalty for their error might refer to the castration, or to their general weirdness of demeanour and appearance, but Paul’s readers would have picked up the sort of thing he meant. Because, as any self-respecting Jew could tell you: this was just the sort of idiotic thing that gentiles got up to as a result of their idolatry.

At this point, please notice something quite subtle: Paul is shading towards puncturing the pride of those he has been building up for a fall. After the graphic depiction of a set of practises which were self-evidently pagan, and would allow the Jewish listeners to feel very much a “we” against the silly “they” being described (and the words Paul uses are those concerning purity and shamefulness rather than morals and evil which is why I use words like “silly” and “idiotic” rather than “wicked”), Paul moves on – still talking about “they” – to a list of much more serious things: deep internal attitudes of heart. And of course he would still have his listeners absolutely on side:

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a base mind and to improper conduct. They were filled with all manner of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice.

You can imagine that we are still in the realm where the listeners will have been able to say “Right on, Brother!” – This was still the sort of thing they were used to hearing. But Paul sweeps on, moving on from those deep attitudes of heart which the silly “they” are full of, to what one might call a list of rather more banal, domestic, common-or-garden forms of wickedness:

Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity, they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

We are skating on thin ice here...would his listeners have already picked up hints that this list, containing not a single reference to anything sexual, was coming dangerously close to home? So Paul gives one final blast to the traditional anti-pagan trumpet:

Though they know God’s decree that those who do such things deserve to die, they not only do them but approve those who practice them.

³ BBC News for Tuesday, 21 May, 2002: “Archaeologists in North Yorkshire have discovered the skeleton of a cross-dressing eunuch dating back to the 4th Century AD. The find was made during excavations of a Roman settlement in Catterick, first started in 1958. The skeleton - found dressed in women’s clothes and jewellery - is believed to have once been a castrated priest who worshipped the eastern goddess Cybele. Archaeologists say it is the only example ever recovered from a late Roman cemetery in Britain.”

You can see why those who divided the chapters divided the argument here: it sounds like the end of a breath – and it is. It is the end of a breath, but not the end of the argument, because the sting is still to come, and without the sting the argument is not complete:

Therefore you have no excuse, O man, whoever you are, when you judge another; for in passing judgment upon him you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things.

Now you can see what the effect of this phrase is on the preceding argument. The effect is rather similar to what would have happened if Paul had said “We all know that the gentiles do idiotic things, get involved in bizarre rites and frenzies, and guess what terrible consequences this leads to: they become *gossips*, disobedient to their parents! Behave foolishly! How unlike anyone *we* know!” and then paused for the first giggles of self-recognition to break out.

Now of course this rhetorical device of building up his listeners for a fall, and then puncturing their balloon, wouldn’t work at all if Paul were claiming that his listeners had been doing the same things as the pagans – that is the bizarre cults and frenzied sexualised rites leading to castration. His point is not that his listeners have been doing these things, but that even though they haven’t, and wouldn’t dream of doing them, they share in exactly the same pattern of desire, and the ordinary banal wickedness which flows from that pattern, the really serious stuff, which they have in common with the pagans who do indeed do those silly things.

Paul confirms what he has been doing all along by moving, at last, from “they” to “we”, and his use of “we” is interesting:

We know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who do such things.

Paul appears to repeat the anti-pagan charge – that “they know God’s decree, and still do these things”. His repetition of it here, but in the form of “we” sounds awfully like; “Whether or not *they* know about God’s judgment, *we* certainly do”. And then he goes on to address “you” – not just a Jewish you, nor just a Christian you, but the human “you” that is any of us.

Do you suppose, O man, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you presume upon the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not know that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed.

From here Paul will go on to develop his understanding of how the human problem is fundamentally one of desire, and it is at the level of a change in the pattern of desire that we are saved by and through Christ, a change in the pattern of desire which even the Law, which was good in itself, could not effect. It is this analysis which led him to work out what a later generation, following St Augustine, would call “The doctrine of Original Sin”. The whole purpose of this doctrine is to keep alive the sense that all

humans, from the very outset of humanity, suffer from essentially the same pattern of distorted desire, with the result that none of us is in a position to judge others, because, unlike God, none of us is free from having our capacity to judge distorted by our social belonging. This is absolutely in line with Jesus' teaching in the Gospels: if Pharisees can't judge prostitutes, then Jews can't judge gentiles, and of course, vice-versa.

Well, I hope that you can now sense that there is another "obvious" reading of Romans 1. The moment you realise that the introduction of chapter and verse numbers is discretionary, and it becomes possible to see that the whole point of the argument is leading up to the central puncturing of judgmental group creation, then it begins to become possible to hear St Paul's voice in a different way. What I call "bathetic" Paul rather than "portentous" Paul. Witty, rabbinic, persuasive Paul rather than Paul the univocal, authoritarian, irony-free zone. His argument works by setting his hearers up for a fall, and then delivering the coup de grace. If you want to see this for yourselves, and that is really the only way to do it, try reading aloud to yourselves, or to friends, the version I have made available for you as appendix II, the one without numbers, in the tones of portentous Paul. It works fine until you get to the end of Chapter 1. But then try to read Chapter 2 verse 1 in the same tone of voice. It makes no sense at all. If you read in the tones of an Ayatollah, then you have to stop at the end of Chapter 1 and regroup for the next chapter. However, if you read in the tone of Paul the Rabbi, then you can cross seamlessly from Chapter 1 to 2 and appreciate the full subtlety of his persuasive style on the way.

Well, there you have a Catholic reading of Romans 1. The only thing extraneous to the text which I have brought in is some knowledge of the frenzied cults of the ancient world. This helps to restrict any tendency to uncharitable actualization of the text, in the same way as does limiting the reference of *'οι 'Ιουδαιοι* in John's Gospel to the local Jewish authorities in first century Palestine. The modern "obvious" reading of the text also imports into it something extraneous: an understanding of "homosexuality" as something which it was Paul's intention to condemn, despite the evidence that the modern category was unknown in the ancient world. The modern "obvious" reading then uses this as a political and religious weapon against a modern group of people. I hope that I am being more obedient to the Pontifical Biblical Commission in preferring the ancient and limited meaning.

One of the things which I hope this makes clear is that even if it could be shown (as I do not think it can) that it is obligatory to regard Paul as referring to lesbians and gay men in what we know as Romans 1:26b-27; even then, the one use to which his reference could not be put, without doing serious violence to the text, is a use which legitimates any sort of judging of such people. Their presence in the text would be as illustrations for an argument of this sort: "Yes, yes, we know that there are these people who do these silly things, but that is completely irrelevant besides the hugely significant fact that these are simply different symptoms of a profound distortion of desire which is identical in you as it is in them, and it is you who I am trying to get through to, so don't judge them."

If you want to see what I mean, then try this for yourselves: Let us suppose that the Jewish preachers of the ancient world had become convinced that one of the things which idolatry led to was the widespread practice of Extreme Sports. Let us imagine, consequently, that they had prohibited such things. Now substitute the words

“abseiling” and “paragliding” in place of what has sometimes been taken to be “lesbianism” and “gay male sex”.

“Their women took up abseiling, and the men likewise gave up natural modes of transport and took up paragliding, men shaming themselves by imitating mere birds and often enough, owing to unexpected updrafts, receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error.”

Can you imagine how easily the Christian world would have abandoned the supposed ancient prohibition against these clearly insane activities? The prohibition would have been abandoned by pointing out that an argument which referred tangentially to abseiling and paragliding as part of the build up to a point concerning the impermissibility of judging anyone cannot properly be used to judge those who engage in abseiling and paragliding. The only reference to abseiling in Scripture would, rightly, be regarded as of no moral weight at all.

It is my view that Romans 1 has quite simply nothing at all to do with what we call homosexuality. I hope I have shown that it is perfectly possible to read it in such a way as to respect the integrity of the text, to show appreciation for, and agreement with, St Paul, and to show how Paul’s argument is an important step towards formulating a major doctrine of the Church, without saying or implying anything at all for or against so-called “homosexuality”. It is not my claim that this reading which I have given you is *the* real reading of St Paul, that *exactly this* and no more and no less, is precisely what he meant. I don’t think there is such a thing as *the* real reading of this text. I think that there are better and worse readings of the text, and more importantly, that there are more Catholic and less Catholic ways of reading the text, because reading the text within the Church is an infinitely creative exercise in giving glory to God and creating merciful meaning for our sisters and brothers as we come to be possessed by the Spirit breathed into us by the Crucified and Risen Lord.

And this leads into my last point this evening, which is really why I think it worthwhile to attempt this exercise of an attempt at a Catholic reading in your midst at this time. We have for too long been beguiled by what I would like to call a Koranic reading of scripture. It is at least coherent for a Muslim to claim that the Koran was dictated by God to Mohammed, and therefore that the Koran itself must be read as so dictated by an authority from above. The text becomes a sort of intermediary body between God and reader, such that the faithful are imprisoned under the fixed words of the text, which are imagined to be “just there”, inspired by God, and which thus absolve the reader from taking responsibility for the reading which he or she supplies. But it is not coherent for a Catholic to read Scripture in this way. The Catholic Church, heir to an extraordinarily rich tradition of creative Jewish textual reading, reads scripture Eucharistically, because for us the prime source of authority is not the text itself, but the crucified and living victim, alive in our midst, who is the living interpretative presence teaching us how to undo our violent and evil ways of relating to each other, and how together to enter into the way of penitence and peace. For us “The Word of God” refers in the first place to a living person, and only by analogy to the texts which bear witness to him. The living hermeneutical presence is more important than that which it is hermeneuting. This is what is meant by Jesus telling the Pharisees in Matthew’s Gospel (Mt 9:13; 12:7):

Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.'

And:

...If you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless.

Now *there* is an instruction regarding the Catholic reading of Scripture from an authority even more important than the Pontifical Biblical Commission. And I'm glad to say that the Commission's passage which I read to you at the beginning of my talk is in complete accord with it.

It is time we learnt to read the words of our brother Paul, someone who wrote to us not from above, but on the same, fraternal, level as us, in a Eucharistic manner. Let us imagine him as with us at the Eucharistic gathering, bearing witness to the effect of the Crucified and Risen one on all our lives. And let us learn to have his words interpreted to us through the eyes of the Lord in the centre of our gathering, the eyes of One who so much liked us and wanted to be with us that he gave himself up for us so that we might become able to create, with him, and in great freedom, a world full of mercy where there are no "they"; A world where we can look at each other with hearts unchecked by niggles of the sort "But the Bible says...", and with eyes undimmed by sacralised fatality.

London, January 2004

The shift in understanding which this paper attempts to set out was a long time in the gestation and I am especially grateful for the help and insights which I have derived from the writings of Rev Thomas Hanks of Buenos Aires, and Dr Ralph Blair of New York City; from a talk given by Rev Tony Campolo at Greenbelt in 2001; the website of George Hopper, <http://www.reluctantjourney.co.uk>; some comments of Dr Andrew Goddard of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford; the work of Jeramy Townsley of GTU, Berkeley (see footnote 1); and Dr Daniel Helminiak's book *What the Bible really says about homosexuality* (New Mexico: Alamo Square 2000). Of course, my gratitude to them does not imply their agreement with anything I say here.

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Appendix I

Wisdom 12:23 – 13:10 and 14:9 – 31

12:23 Therefore those who in folly of life lived unrighteously thou didst torment through their own abominations. ²⁴ For they went far astray on the paths of error, accepting as gods those animals which even their enemies despised; they were deceived like foolish babes. ²⁵ Therefore, as to thoughtless children, thou didst send thy judgment to mock them. ²⁶ But those who have not heeded the warning of light rebukes will experience the deserved judgment of God. ²⁷ For when in their suffering they became incensed at those creatures which they had thought to be gods, being punished by means of them, they saw and recognized as the true God him whom they had before refused to know. Therefore the utmost condemnation came upon them.

13:1 For all men who were ignorant of God were foolish by nature; and they were unable from the good things that are seen to know him who exists, nor did they recognize the craftsman while paying heed to his works; ² but they supposed that either fire or wind or swift air, or the circle of the stars, or turbulent water, or the luminaries of heaven were the gods that rule the world. ³ If through delight in the beauty of these things men assumed them to be gods, let them know how much better than these is their Lord, for the author of beauty created them. ⁴ And if men were amazed at their power and working, let them perceive from them how much more powerful is he who formed them. ⁵ For from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator. ⁶ Yet these men are little to be blamed, for perhaps they go astray while seeking God and desiring to find him. ⁷ For as they live among his works they keep searching, and they trust in what they see, because the things that are seen are beautiful. ⁸ Yet again, not even they are to be excused; ⁹ for if they had the power to know so much that they could investigate the world, how did they fail to find sooner the Lord of these things? ¹⁰ But miserable, with their hopes set on dead things, are the men who give the name "gods" to the works of men's hands, gold and silver fashioned with skill, and likenesses of animals, or a useless stone, the work of an ancient hand.

Wisdom 14:9 - 31 For equally hateful to God are the ungodly man and his ungodliness, ¹⁰ for what was done will be punished together with him who did it. ¹¹ Therefore there will be a visitation also upon the heathen idols, because, though part of what God created, they became an abomination, and became traps for the souls of men and a snare to the feet of the foolish. ¹² For the idea of making idols was the beginning of fornication, and the invention of them was the corruption of life, ¹³ for neither have they existed from the beginning nor will they exist for ever. ¹⁴ For through the vanity of men they entered the world, and therefore their speedy end has been planned. ¹⁵ For a father, consumed with grief at an untimely bereavement, made an image of his child, who had been suddenly taken from him; and he now honoured as a god what was once a dead human being, and handed on to his dependents secret rites and initiations. ¹⁶ Then the ungodly custom, grown strong with time, was kept as a law, and at the command of monarchs graven images were worshiped. ¹⁷ When men could not honour monarchs in their presence, since they lived at a distance, they imagined their appearance far away, and made a visible image of the king whom they honoured, so that by their zeal they might flatter the absent one as though present. ¹⁸ Then the ambition of the craftsman impelled even those who did not know the king to intensify their worship. ¹⁹ For he, perhaps wishing to please his ruler, skilfully forced the likeness to take more beautiful form, ²⁰ and the multitude, attracted by the charm

of his work, now regarded as an object of worship the one whom shortly before they had honoured as a man. ²¹ And this became a hidden trap for mankind, because men, in bondage to misfortune or to royal authority, bestowed on objects of stone or wood the name that ought not to be shared. ²² Afterward it was not enough for them to err about the knowledge of God, but they live in great strife due to ignorance, and they call such great evils peace. ²³ For whether they kill children in their initiations, or celebrate secret mysteries, or hold frenzied revels with strange customs, ²⁴ they no longer keep either their lives or their marriages pure, but they either treacherously kill one another, or grieve one another by adultery, ²⁵ and all is a raging riot of blood and murder, theft and deceit, corruption, faithlessness, tumult, perjury, ²⁶ confusion over what is good, forgetfulness of favours, pollution of souls, sex perversion, disorder in marriage, adultery, and debauchery. ²⁷ For the worship of idols not to be named is the beginning and cause and end of every evil. ²⁸ For their worshipers either rave in exultation, or prophesy lies, or live unrighteously, or readily commit perjury; ²⁹ for because they trust in lifeless idols they swear wicked oaths and expect to suffer no harm. ³⁰ But just penalties will overtake them on two counts: because they thought wickedly of God in devoting themselves to idols, and because in deceit they swore unrighteously through contempt for holiness. ³¹ For it is not the power of the things by which men swear, but the just penalty for those who sin, that always pursues the transgression of the unrighteous.

Appendix II

Romans 1:14 - 2:5 (RSV, but without verse and chapter breaks)

I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish: so I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse; for although they knew God they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen. For this reason God gave them up to dishonourable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a base mind and to improper conduct. They were filled with all manner of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity, they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's decree that those who do such things deserve to die, they not only do them but approve those who practice them. Therefore you have no excuse, O man, whoever you are, when you judge another; for in passing judgment upon him you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. We know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who do such things. Do you suppose, O man, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you presume upon the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.