

Is it Ethical to be Catholic? – Queer Perspectives

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The question you have asked me to address is, to my mind, a somewhat surprising one, one which has had me scratching my head. You see, it would never have crossed my mind to wonder whether it is ethical to be Catholic, and I’m not at all sure that I understand where the question is coming from. I guess that the reason for my bafflement is that I’ve never met anyone who became a Catholic for ethical reasons. Every Catholic I know is so either because they were baptised as an infant and brought up that way, or because they converted to Catholicism later in life. When I’ve heard conversion stories, not many of them are to do with ethics, and mine is no exception. I became a Catholic when I was eighteen, at a time when there was no Pope (Paul VI had just died), and so at my reception into the Church I recited a formula of obedience to “Our Pope N”. He’s been one of my favourites ever since. Every now and then over the last twenty five years or so I’ve been tempted to want him to come back soon, though at the moment I’m very happy with his substitute.

But what brought me into the Church was a mixture of two graces. The first was having fallen in love with a Catholic classmate at school some years earlier. He was and is straight, but I perceived a certain warmth of personality in him which seemed untypical of the world of Protestant schoolboys in which I lived, and I associated that warmth with his being Catholic. The second was a special grace at a time when I was at a very low ebb, having just started to “come out” as a gay man in a very hostile conservative evangelical environment, shortly before going to University. This grace I associate absolutely with the intercession of Padre Pio, since it came at a time when I glimpsed something of the link between his stigmata and the sacrifice of the Mass; and I then knew, and have always since known, the Mass to be no mere memorial supper. This grace, which was accompanied by an astounding joy, literally blew me into the Church. It was the gift of the Catholic Faith. Once it had fallen upon me I knew myself to be involved on the inside of something which has been a love affair ever since, something which just seems to open out and get bigger and better all the time. I was aware even then that my often tortuous journey of self-acceptance as a gay man and my becoming a Catholic were part of the same movement of joy. And God has been faithful, keeping the texture of those loves intertwined and slowly bringing them into one love and one blessing, nurturing the heart that it has been his idea to give me and keeping it safe from Lord alone knows how much erratic behaviour, slowness to trust, and cowardice, on my part, as well as from the defamation of love and the hatred espoused by so many whose job it is to speak in God’s name.

It certainly never crossed my mind back then to think that it was ethical to be Catholic. It seemed self-evident to me at the time, with my English middle-class prejudices, that Protestants were much more moral people than Catholics. Not far beneath the surface of the 1950’s style Evangelical Protestantism of my background was the suspicion that the Pope was Antichrist. I remember some weeks of what I can only call spiritual pain as I worked through the scar on my soul that had been left by my exposure to that lie and the fear which went with it, that by becoming a Catholic I

might be handing over my life to the service of evil. A couple of years later, I read that John Henry Newman had experienced working through just such a pain as part of his own process of being brought by God into the life of the Church. And since then other converts from the same background have mentioned a similar passage of pain. But here we are talking not, I think, about a level-headed discussion concerning what is good, but the deep existential terror that I might be being sucked into the service of evil, part of that terror being that I wouldn't even know that evil is what I had become. Such moments of fear have assailed me every now and then since that time, compounded in my case by the very deep fears of being evil which seem to be common to gay youth from religious backgrounds. But I have learned to sit back, look at these assaults, giggle, and be aware that God is much bigger, more powerful, more gentle and more trustworthy than my heart, and that I shouldn't take myself so seriously as to think that I could really get in God's way very effectively or for very long.

Then again, one of the reliefs about coming into the Church was precisely that it was not ethics-obsessed. I remember, a year or so after becoming a Catholic, realising that one of the first things I had to learn about being a Catholic – bizarrely – was how to sin. In the world of my formation, being good was obligatory and boring. And sinning, being bad, was a terrible letting down of the side. A sort of failure of English gentlemanliness. This meant, in fact, a constant struggle to live up to “being good”, whatever that meant. Curiously, a strong belief in “Justification by faith alone” seemed to have as its psychological counterpart an extreme need to justify oneself. As a Catholic I had to learn that sin is boringly normal, and that what is exciting is being pulled into learning new things, called virtues, which are ways in which a goodness which is not ours becomes connatural with us, and that this is something of an adventure. I had to learn how not to be so concerned with whether I was getting things right or wrong, but to learn instead to relax into the given-ness of things. I can scarcely tell you how strange it sounds in retrospect, but I was discovering that it is part of the mercy of the Catholic faith that those of us who are infected by spiritual haughtiness find ourselves being lowered slowly and gently into the mud, the slime, of being one of ordinary humanity, and learning that it is *this* ordinary humanity which is loved as it is. If there are to be any diamonds, they will be found amidst the clay, and as the outworking of the pressures in the clay, not perched on high, on stalks, trying to avoid being infected by so much common carbon.

Part of this induction into being Catholic has been the discovery of the secret presence of Our Lady, permeating everything. For many of those of us brought up in Protestant backgrounds, it takes a long time to begin to make sense of what can come across as a psychological weirdness with which it is difficult to identify, which doesn't seem to strike chords in us. But I have come to rejoice in and love Our Lady and the difference which she constitutes in the Church. For it is she who makes it impossible for the Church successfully to turn itself either into an ideology or into a moralistic enterprise. She can never quite be co-opted into standing for something other than what she is. And what I have come to associate her with being is the link, the non-opposition, between the old creation and the new, between nature and grace, between the Israel of the Prophets and Patriarchs and the new, universal Israel of God. Far too delicate to be clearly delineated, and far too present to be dismissed, she has

underlined, seated, and made three-dimensional for me elements of the faith in what her Son is doing which can only be lived-into over time.

The feast of the Assumption, in particular, is one where my heart soars, and I have, over my twenty-seven years of being a Catholic enjoyed two special moments of grace from our Lady on the Solemnity of the Assumption. One, when out for a walk in Cochabamba, Bolivia, where a sense of the openness of heaven gave me the inspiration for the second half of my book "*The joy of being wrong*". And more recently, and even more surprisingly, a grace came when I was desperate to think of a way to finish "*Faith beyond resentment: fragments catholic and gay*". I was in Rio de Janeiro, running out of time before I had to hand in the manuscript, and was stuck, at the end of my tether, and on my way to sleep, having spent Sunday 15 August failing to do anything on the computer other than play FreeCell and Solitaire. And as I fell asleep, I was given the parable of Nicodemus, the Inquisitor and the boys in the square, which became the end of the last chapter of the book. I remember giggling as I fell asleep, as the parable was given to me, so preposterous did it seem as an ending for the book. Just as I remember thinking as I wrote it out the next day that Our Lady's love for her queer children, one of the best kept but also best known, secrets of the Church, is something which no amount of ecclesiastical homophobia can vanquish.

I recently came across what was, for me, an entirely new and wonderful avocation of Our Lady. This is Our Lady Undoer of Knots. I stumbled upon a locally carved statue of her in Brazil, which I bought without knowing anything about the devotion. This turns out to come from Augsburg in Germany, from a painting by an unknown artist dating from 1700. What on earth, you may ask, is a devotion from a Baroque part of Germany doing being sculpted in Salvador, the most African part of Brazil? But this is part of the uncanny wonder of the Catholic Church. The image is of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception holding a cord with knots, which she is undoing. This Avocation gives me great peace, since it is clear to me that the knots concerning the relationship between grace and desire, sin and concupiscence, which have been so tied up into a *skandalon* for gay people in the life of our Church¹ are being gently and carefully undone by hands blessed with far more patience and delicacy than I could hope to muster.

Well, I hope you can see why I was surprised by the question "Is it ethical to be Catholic?" Being Catholic for me has meant discovering myself on the inside of something where God and many wonderful people are doing things *for me* long before I can manage to do anything minimally presentable for others. The relationship between being Catholic and ethics is not a straightforward one, and I would like to give you a brief reminder of its strangeness before turning to look at how this impacts the queer perspectives which you have invited me to discuss.

A few years back, I attended the funeral of a well-known London parish priest, Father Michael Hollings, in Westminster Cathedral. The Requiem Mass was presided over by Cardinal Hume, and there was a huge turnout. Fr Michael had been a decorated military officer, well-known spiritual author, University Chaplain and innovative

¹ I've had a go at undoing those knots myself in an article entitled "Good faith learning and the fear of God" (<http://www.jamesalison.co.uk/texts/eng17.html>).

Parish priest. The fact that this man, widely but discretely known to be gay had, late in life been suspended for some time over what turned out to be a false allegation of molesting a youth, but had himself asked the police for two other counts of inappropriate behaviour to be taken into consideration, didn't seem to have made any dent at all in the huge numbers of people of all ethnic backgrounds who came to his funeral. I don't think anyone who knew him thought of him as flawless, but he was one of those people whose flaws are transparent to grace, and people loved him. Cardinal Hume was on particularly fine form, directing his homily to Michael in his coffin, talking fondly, chidingly, infuriatedly, lovingly. What I, and others, came away with from this funeral Mass, and this is not something that any liturgist can just "produce", was a palpable sense of the proximity, solidity, and openness of Eternal Life. The Catholic faith is in the first place, and above all, to do with Eternal Life. And I suppose it is important just to remember that: why does any of us become Catholic and remain Catholic? Well, ultimately, because it is God's way of giving us Eternal life, God's own life.

There is something special about this, something characteristic and odd. We find our hearts, minds and imaginations being opened up to perceive that Yahweh, the God of Israel and Creator of all things, was present in the life, teaching and signs worked by Jesus of Nazareth in such a way that that very special rock solidity of presence associated with Yahweh was recognised in Jesus' own person. A group of not particularly distinguished people who Jesus had chosen to be the witnesses to what he was about, found, after his death, that he was present to them in the way that was proper to Yahweh, the rock, the one who knows not death and who causes all things to be. These same undistinguished people began to understand that that Rock, the one who makes all things to be and keeps them in unfrustratable being, had been present in Jesus all along such that his acting out of his life, living into the role of High Priest, victim, altar and sacrifice on the Cross was a new and definitive glimpse at the "inner" life of God, showing just how much God loves us as humans, and wants to empower us to come and share God's life from within, so that we can be much, much more than we ever thought possible before.

This undistinguished group of people even became aware that when Jesus had nicknamed one of them, the notoriously volatile and unstable character Simon, "Rock" this wasn't just an ironic joke, but was part of the way that the Rock of Israel was going to make itself present in the life of humans to their advantage. In other words, the rock solidity of salvation opened up and made present by Jesus was not just going to float in the air as some sort of spiritual doctrine for *cognoscenti*, but was going to be made available to anybody at all through a witness given by a whole collection of highly implausible and improbable characters. In the midst of these characters, a certain derivative rock-quality, associated with the ministry of Peter, would also, always, be made available as part of the indestructible opening up of the gates of heaven on earth. This indestructible quality resists all our death-bound-ness, all our waves of desire, patterns of hatred, fear and refusal of life. This gift of a continuing rock-quality, a sheer, unsnuffable-out "having already happened and being open for us", quality is largely independent of the character and of the highly mutable moral qualities of all of us, and certainly of the often undependable and mutable character of Simon Peter's successors.

From my perspective, John Paul as a character was high on bluster and sounding firm and certain about everything, and so the quality of divinely-given “rockitude” was rather more difficult to glimpse beneath the showier elements of his own personality until his last weeks, when he gave a glorious witness to the palpable abundance of eternal life in the midst of his failing. But one of the things I especially like about Papa Ratzki is that he is evidently a much more modest, self-effacing and even timid man, and this enables the rock quality, the authentic Petrine touchstone quality, to shine through rather more perceptibly. He knows that it’s not about him, and yet I think that ordinary Catholics in Italy have sensed rather quickly that the Petrine charism, the surety, is alive and shining in him.

Now I’d like to suggest that this Rock quality actually permeates the Catholic faith in a whole lot of different areas. I sometimes describe it as the “just there” quality, and I suppose the area we tend to know it from most regularly is the liturgy – the “just there” quality of the presence of Jesus in the Mass. There seems to me to be something quite wonderful about this, the quiet, serene, relaxedness, the lack of self-consciousness about Catholic worship, because we all know that Jesus is “just there”, giving himself for us and inviting us in, and that he’s bigger than the flakiness of so many of our liturgies, and he’s bigger than the idiocy of so many of our homilies and he’s obviously bigger and better than the flawed-ness of our priests and of course of ourselves.

Now I know that this “just there” quality, the *ex opere operato* nature of the sacraments, has often enough led us into a generalised attitude of the presumption of grace, and for that reason we typically spend far less time preparing our liturgies, give far less responsibility to proper musicians to organize real singing, spend far less time training preachers actually to know and love the Gospel text and preach from it, than we have any right to do. Yet this casual certainty of the complete dependability of the self-giving of God to us, the knowledge that however much we screw up, it is not our show, but someone else’s, seems to me to be a quite extraordinary gift, and one which I associate with real faith. It is also one which I associate with our Church order.

You see, curiously, I think that this very “given-ness”, this very “just there” quality actually enables us all to be far more relaxed about Popes, Bishops, theologians, doctrines and so on than would be the case if we had to take such people desperately seriously, as though the matter ultimately depended on them getting it right.

On the one hand we can be relaxed about Jesus in the Eucharist, because we know that he is there, and he will show himself to us as he will, in the way he will, in the way that is suitable for us to receive and that will guide us with love. And this means that we don’t have to work ourselves up into knots of appropriate feeling, or self-consciousness, or liturgical perfection in order to “get it right”, because the real “getting it right” is being done by someone else, and the most we can do is to be more or less appropriate in the respectfulness and gratitude of our response.

And on the other hand, I think the same is true about our theological squabbles in the Church. We can relax about having to get it right, because we know that the one who is making things right, who is bringing us into a new creation, is doing so hugely, safely, spaciouly, gently. And that in the face of this huge, unstoppable “Just...

Having Happened” this “Just...Being There”, we are all tiny parts of a more or less chaotic response to the upheaval. And Pope, Bishops, priests, theologians, and every conceivable other sort of faithful, we are all on the same receiving side, part of this more or less chaotic response to the upheaval, all of us are undergoers of it and not its protagonist, some holding onto the remains of the termite hill which seems to have been completely uprooted, others dashing around looking for something new that looks as though it might be home.

And this I think is something huge and wonderful, and specifically Catholic. Because the upheaval is bigger than any of us, and all of us are undergoers of it, it means that over time we can learn to stand back from any and all of the things that we hold sacred, and see how the One who just is, Who is happening in our midst, is beginning to reshape things. In other words, the real sacredness of what is coming about is not only in texts, or acts of worship, but in what is happening, in the signs of a new creation emerging in the midst of our collapsing termite hill. And these signs are, over time, detectable by us – we are after all not servants, but friends, daughters, sons and heirs, on the inside of this project, not people to whom the project just happens. It is not a building project by a foreign corporation which arrives and plants a huge factory on our street without any consultation or any legal guarantees and says in the face of our consternation: “You say you mind? Do we look to you as though we’re concerned? We aren’t doing this for your benefit!” No, it’s a project which is being done for us, and the signs of it happening are taking us by surprise. Nevertheless the whole point of signs is that they are genuinely difficult to interpret – what looks like “good news” for some people does look like “the end of the world as I know it” for others.

This being shaken up as part of being saved means that we can be un-preoccupied about being wrong! Part of the joy of belief in the infallibility of the salvation with which God is gifting the Church is not having to hold too tightly to any notion of us getting it right, but rather being aware that we are being taken on the rollercoaster of it being got right by someone other than ourselves, with occasional contributions from us, and sometimes despite what seems to us to be our better judgment. This is because the One who is getting it right loves us, and is getting through to us in ways which we don’t at first understand, ways which it takes time for us to be able to grasp as being for our benefit. But we have been *found*, and can trust that we will get to understand, and it will make sense – in fact, that we will be taken into all truth even in the midst of all our rows and disagreements.

This sense seems to me to be particularly important for us as gay and lesbian Catholics now. We are in the midst of a huge, and very highly emotionally charged row in our Church – one which often seethes in silence and breaks out in strange and awful ways. And yet what I find splendid about this is that in the Catholic Church, over time faith prevents this row from being about ideology. In the Catholic Church this is ultimately a row about *what is*. Which means our taking it for granted that *what is* is something which is bigger than us and which is opening itself up to us, and which we don’t control. Ideology is what you have when you don’t have faith. When you are *not* aware that there is Another, bigger than us, who is holding all of us in his hand through the upheaval and that ultimately we are safe, there is room, we can be wrong, and we can learn to get it right; when you are *not* aware of that, then you are

frightened of disagreement and what you need to do is to produce a unanimity of opinion, of ideology, you need to get everyone to agree, and have those who are in, in, and those who are out, out.

But this is the classic sign of people who have a compulsion for certainty, a compulsion for being right, and a compulsion for being considered to be good, and so who grasp onto a fake certainty, a resolved righteousness, too small a togetherness. If we react like this, then it means that our anchor isn't in the rock beyond the veil. If it were then we would be happy to know that we can all be wrong together, all learn together, and that our squabbling about what is right is a necessary part of the process of all of us learning. In fact, faith in the goodness and trustworthiness of the Creator as revealed by Jesus being prepared to undergo a lynch death and so undo our lynching ways, has as its direct consequence the belief that we can be brought into knowing what is objectively true by the paths of human reason. Those paths involve the very great difficulty of our learning to be reasonable and to reason together by learning not to lynch, learning to detect when we are closing down our possibilities of growth by lying and murdering so as to grasp what we take to be our identities, whether as individuals or as groups. This means that how we conduct our rows and arguments is inseparable from what we discover to be true.

Something like this is going on at the moment for us as gay and lesbian people in the Church. A certain sense of truth about who we are is beginning to become available to us in the midst of frightening and violent struggles, shouting and name-calling. It has begun to become available precisely in the degree in which we learn to stop defining a particular group of people as evil so as to hold on to what turns out to be a spuriously narrow sense of what is good. And this is the only way anything about being human has ever been learned. It is only as we learn to see and love our neighbours as ourselves that we find out who *we* are, and find that we are much more than we thought we were.

Recently this dynamic of learning to see and love our neighbours as ourselves has put into crisis a traditional way of looking at what was assumed to be a weird and evil "other". It is beginning to become possible to make a huge new anthropological distinction, even at the highest level in the life of the Church, between two things which we had not been able to distinguish properly before as a normal part of our race's way of living together. The distinction is between forms of behaviour which are a distortion of what people are, on the one hand, and forms of behaviour which can be a responsible part of what some people are, on the other². We all know and understand that there are some distorted forms of behaviour into which particularly males, but also sometimes females, get inducted, by force of circumstance, same-sex confinement, war, long journeys, imprisonment, or strange religious cults. These forms of behaviour seem to have a sexual component, but the sexual elements are in fact symptoms of frenzied group behaviour run by fear, power, desire for dominance, financial advantage and demarcation of property. These the Church has always and everywhere considered to be grave forms of depravity, and never to be approved under any circumstances.

² I take it that the recent Roman distinction between "transitory" and "deep-seated" homosexual tendencies opens up the possibility of eventual development in this direction.

What is beginning to become apparent is that there is a more or less regular minority of people of both sexes who, entirely independently of circumstance, war, long journeys, imprisonment, cults and so on, simply are principally attracted to people of their own sex at an emotional and erotic level. It is furthermore becoming clear that this is in most cases a stable and lifelong feature of who the person is, is not in any sense a dysfunction and does not in any way diminish the viability of the person who just is this way. And it is even beginning to become clear that such people are able to develop and receive that full-heartedness of love for each other, that delicate birth of a being-taken out of themselves for the other which is not just lust, nor a defect of some other sort of love which they really ought to have, but don't seem to be able to, but is quite simply the real thing, which, when present, is recognized as a gift from and an access to God.

So it is also beginning to become apparent that the attempt to describe these people by using the same ethical and descriptive tools which were used to describe the wayward form of behaviour is simply a category mistake. If you want to know what I mean by a category mistake, take a look at a picture of poor Private England and her dog on a leash and the pile of humiliated male prisoners in Abu Ghraib. Then look at a picture, taken almost the same week, of two women walking down the steps of Boston City Hall waving a marriage certificate. Ask yourself: to which of these two images does the biblical category of "Sodom" rightly apply? The category mistake is to say: "Well, in some deep sense, they are both the same thing". And holding onto a category mistake as it becomes clear that something *just is*, ultimately constitutes a failure of faith, a refusal to allow ourselves to trust being pulled into the bigger picture which is the new creation. And part of our trust in the Petrine gift that is a key element of the Church is that we know that ultimately, however much kicking and screaming goes on, God won't let such a failure of faith close down our access to that new creation.

Peter's job is to keep us together as we squabble over the extraordinary possibilities of truth and freedom which keep on being opened up for us as God reveals to us who we are and how much we are loved. And of course, keeping us together often means giving succour to brethren of weak conscience, those most frightened of change, those who most miss the apparent protection of the good old termite hill. As you would expect, it is such people who are most attracted to what they take to be the stability of the rock, and often enough they do quite a good job of hiding the fact that that stability of the Petrine rock derives from a Living Rock, one from which flows living water.

What I want to say at this point is: now is not the moment to be despairing of the Church! I was taught at school that there is a so called "J-curve" theory of revolutions, according to which while people are really oppressed and downtrodden, right down at the bottom of the J, they don't rise up against the regime. It is only when their circumstances start to improve and the regime starts to lighten up that they finally rise up and throw off their shackles, at the beginning of the upward curve. And this, I suppose is what I make of the question you posed to me. From a queer perspective, why should we be wondering whether it is ethical to be Catholic now? We have just survived twenty-five years of John Paul who, with all his qualities and virtues, seemed to me, at the distance from which I saw such things, a poor judge of

character, and a man who gave succour to his sycophants. The result was that on his watch the Catholic faith did seem to become associated with a sort of totalizing moral ideology in which we were simply a source of evil to be denounced and criticized.

Well, it seems to me to be the height of perversity to get worried about whether it is ethical for us to be Catholic now, just as it is becoming clear that we are in a much bigger and better space! The harshness of tone has gone, the temperature is going down. The visitation of seminaries seems, from what I've heard, to have been in many cases a less unpleasant experience than was feared. The long awaited Instruction on not admitting gay people to the seminary seems to have fallen flat on its nose, with no indication that anyone in Rome is anything other than rather embarrassed by it. Certainly there seems to be no inclination to make public agreement with the Instruction into the litmus test for Episcopal appointments which *Humanae Vitae* became under John Paul. The psychological backing for the Instruction met with well-nigh universal incredulity, and it seems that we are well on the way to the issue of whether or not being gay is really, as has been claimed, a psychological disorder, being taken out of the sphere of doctrine and left where it belongs, in the sphere of the human sciences, with all the consequences which will follow from that.

Around the world various forms of same-sex partnership laws appear to be becoming normal, Catholic countries having shown a great deal of ease in getting their heads round this; and even in Italy the issue is now in the centre of forthcoming election discussion. The result has been the Italian Bishops having to learn rather fast to move from the vitriolic language and somewhat artificially dramatic displays of being shocked that such things could even be talked about to something closer to adult discussion of the issues at stake. I rather think that Papa Ratzis is steering the very heavy John Paul emphasis on the "family" in a more productive direction. He appears to be keen that governments support the family; but rather more subtly than John Paul, he is keen that this be a search for *positive* initiatives which favour the family. In other words, he is moving on from an emphasis on the family which was conceived of as "over and against" gay people and their best interests to one which need not necessarily be over and against gay and lesbian people, and indeed is far better interpreted by us as including us. His privileging of monogamous heterosexual marriage as an especially blessed form of love in his recent encyclical should not, I think, be read as a blow *against* same-sex love. It leaves room for us and I suggest that we read it as an invitation for us to work out what the rich elements and gifts of same-sex love can be. How we are to set about creating a Catholic culture of same-sex love.

It's up to us! That's where I think the ethical bit comes in. Are we going to allow ourselves to be given new life? What will be the shape of our moving from Creation into New Creation? This means working out what the shape of holiness of life and of heart is for us as gay and lesbian Catholics. It means noting with joy that we are now closer than ever to being able to imagine that a rejoicing gay heart and a rejoicing Catholic heart can be the same heart, and a normal, and healthy and holy thing. We can imagine a seminar reading *Brokeback Mountain* in the light of *Deus Caritas Est* or vice versa, and this would be something that could easily make sense to all those, straight or gay, who took part in such a session. And one of the things which, as the Pope rightly insists, we might find ourselves learning, is how the development of our

love should feed into, and be fed by, our development of charitable practices, of practical Catholic outreach to the poor, the sick, the imprisoned and the marginalised. It seems presumptuous of me even to mention it here in this parish Church, in this City of San Francisco, where the ethical response to the HIV-AIDS pandemic by so many Catholic groups and individuals has been such a beacon, but even so, it is worth hammering home this point: the Catholicity of gay love will be seen by the way in which it is part of our empowerment to love the dispossessed. And this is something no one will be able to take away from us.

My concern with the matter of ethics at the moment is this: let us be magnanimous victors. There are some people in our Church who have been seriously upset by the way that ordinary Catholicism is breaking out again under Pope Benedict. They are going to be terribly sore as it becomes clear that the Church, in its stumbling, bumbling, chaotic way is just learning how to deal with the new reality of honest, straightforward lesbian and gay people, learning how to treat differences of opinion in this sphere as discussions concerning third order truths which do not exclude from the life of the Church³.

There are also a good number, maybe a majority, of priests and Bishops who genuinely don't know what to do, who are themselves to some degree implicated in all this, who have never been able to face for themselves the issues of conscience which go with the deep fear about just being gay; people who have been hoping against hope that Church structure would somehow save them from having to face the issue of their own truth squarely, and who are now genuinely at sea with coping with all this. For them the gentle temperature-lowering way in which, as far as I can see, Papa Ratzki wants to deal with this issue is, maybe for the first time in their lives a permission not to have to be certain about this, not to have to get it right. It will take some time for people like this to be able to say "I just don't know what's right here, but let's try and help each other out of the hole". So, let us be gentle! Ethics is very much to do with how we extend mercy to the fearful, just as we have found ourselves the recipients of mercy at a time when we have been frightened, tortured, annihilated by the voices which told us how evil we were.

For me the real ethical challenge as a Catholic now is: I don't have an excuse any more; it's no good pretending that the Pope or the Church is really against me for the long haul, so that I have to fight him or them. Instead I'll have to grow up and learn to love, starting where I am, and being aware that the gift of a gay Catholic heart is a heavy responsibility, pregnant with love and opportunity.

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³ Confirmed by Cardinal Kasper in his remarks to Anglicans and others in Durham earlier this year.