

On helping the Faithful negotiate confusion

This is a very slightly edited version of the text of James Alison's response to Professor Haldane in *The Tablet* of 3 March 2007. For Professor Haldane's article and this response as they originally appeared see www.thetablet.co.uk/articles/9445/ and www.thetablet.co.uk/articles/9446/ respectively.

In February 2006 Pope Benedict addressed the Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith¹. Setting out the vision which should inspire their work and the permissions necessary to do that work, he spoke with the deftness which enables remarkable things to pass largely unremarked by the media. Among his points was this:

The Church welcomes with joy the authentic breakthroughs of human knowledge and recognizes that evangelization also demands a proper grasp of the horizons and the challenges that modern knowledge is unfolding. In fact, the great progress of scientific knowledge that we saw during the last century has helped us understand the mystery of creation better and has profoundly marked the awareness of all peoples.

However, scientific advances have sometimes been so rapid as to make it very difficult to discern whether they are compatible with the truths about man and the world that God has revealed. At times, certain assertions of scientific knowledge have even been opposed to these truths. This may have given rise to a certain confusion among the faithful and may also have made the proclamation and acceptance of the Gospel difficult.

Consequently, every study that aims to deepen the knowledge of the truths discovered by reason is vitally important, in the certainty that there is no "competition of any kind between reason and faith".

There is no reference to which scientific advances or authentic breakthroughs he was referring to. However, the parameters are established for dealing with such matters: new understandings emerge, some are authentic, some are not, the process of discernment is difficult; during the process of discernment, confusion does arise among the faithful, and this does have consequences for spreading the Gospel. We

¹ *Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Participants of the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*. Clementine Hall. Friday, 10 February 2006.

should not be afraid of pursuing truth, because ultimately whatever is true will be shown to have come from God.

I think this is a better framework from within which to understand the recent statement of the Diocese of Westminster regarding pastoral outreach to gay people, and its authorisation of a gay-friendly Mass in Soho, than Professor Haldane's suggestion of a mixture of weak-mindedness, imprudence and injustice.

Transparency demands that I declare myself a loyal but irregular attender of the Catholic Masses celebrated at St Anne's (Anglican) Church since 2001, and a friend to many of those involved in the discussions between the Archdiocese, other clergy, the SMPC, and other groups. However I was not at the meetings which preceded the Cardinal's authorization and make no claim to speak for any of those who took part. I am in print as disagreeing with the current teaching of the Roman Congregations in this area, and so qualify as one of those who Professor Haldane characterizes as internal critics, even though my arguments have been quite different from those concerning the diversity of theological opinion on human sexuality and the *sensus fidelium* to which he alludes.

My own interpretation of these events is as follows: we are witnessing the fleshing out in a particular local Church of the mechanisms which the Catholic faith has given us to maintain unity, work through our being scandalized by change, and enabled to learn what is true over a time of discernment. The overarching priority is not to allow scandal at change to block us from receiving the grace which Our Lord seeks to give us through the sacraments. And then to make sure that this grace, and the new life it produces in us is available in ecclesial form so that others can be invited in as well.

I think this has come about because Church authority has become aware that the advent of "matters gay" in recent years may not primarily center on sexual ethics at all. Rather it concerns an emerging anthropological truth about a regular, normal and non-pathological variant within the human condition. In other words, it is not that the Church's teaching about sexual ethics is being challenged by insufficiently heroic people, but that the field of application of that teaching is being redefined by emerging reality. And of course it is proper to the Catholic faith, where Creation and Salvation are never to be completely separated, that it takes very seriously "what is" as informing "what should be" rather than trying to force "what is" to fit into an understanding of "what should be" derived from other sources.

The first time a soccer player picked up a ball and ran with it, we were clearly talking about a disobedient soccer player, since it is intrinsic to soccer that only the goalie under tightly regulated circumstances can handle the ball. But over time it did become possible to talk about the game of rugby as something where the overall purposes of sports playing, shared with soccer, are faithfully maintained within a different set of practises. My point is that for the referee to blow the whistle on a ball-handler in a soccer game is very proper. And for as long as it is clear that there is only soccer, he is right. However, as it becomes clear that there may also be a game called rugby, he must learn to be very careful indeed, since attempting to referee a rugby match as though it were soccer being played by perverse rule breakers would degenerate into insanity.

Well, mercifully, the Catholic faith does offer us the possibility of living through the working out of whether being gay is to be characterised as a form of viciousness or a pathology as has traditionally been taught, or as a normal and non-pathological variant in nature. The distinction between orders of teaching such that “third order” teachings are not communion breakers is not purely an intellectual tool, but an ecclesial one as well. Because of it, Cardinal Cormac can in good faith both put forward the traditional teaching, and yet invite a group of people many of whom do not agree with it to take an active part in the construction of the life of the Church as long as they agree not to make of the sacraments an ideological issue. He both offers cover to the consciences of those for whom the lens of the pathological characterisation of the homosexual condition is vital for their faith not to be scandalized, and yet signals that the belief of some that they are dealing with a non-pathological way of being may turn out to be true over time.

For me, this ecclesial fleshing out of a third-order teaching offers a challenge to two equal and opposed forms of Donatism: on the one hand those who do not wish to be in communion with impure self-professed sodomites; and on the other those who do not wish to be in communion with a Church whose official teaching goes counter to what they are finding to be the truth concerning being gay, and yet so many of whose clergy are closeted gay men. Both these forms of ideological purity have roiled other ecclesial communities throughout the world, precisely because those communities do not seem to have a way of ecclesially enfleshing living together while we work out what is true over time.

Professor Haldane’s tone of constructive suggestion suggests that, like me, he is fighting any temptation to Donatism. Unlike him, I think it was

right that the Cardinal should mention neither the SMPC, EnCourage², nor any of the other groups which may have been involved in discussions with Archdiocesan representatives. Where none are mentioned, all can fit in on their own terms. Of course there will always be a place within any Catholic structure for a group of people who wish to encourage each other in the pursuit of a celibate lifestyle. Such a group can only flourish better if that pursuit is a matter of a gift to them, rather than an obligation derived from an erroneous characterization of their starting point. But what is true, the reality of Our Lord's giving himself to us through the Mass, and building us up as Church is certainly more important than these matters, and to be rejoiced in by all.

At last, the Catholic Church in London will have the opportunity to evangelize in the midst of a central part of modern urban culture, one which attracts many gay and lesbian people from abroad. That this opportunity should have been so carefully worked out by the diocese in consultation with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and in such a way as to enable us all to navigate scandal in confusing times is not of purely local ecclesial significance. I am grateful for the bravery of all those who faced the fears and pains of establishing this initiative and ask for the prayers of those who are dismayed.

© James Alison, 2007

² Fr Harvey's international group Courage is known as EnCourage in the UK, since the name "Courage" had already been taken here by the formerly ex-gay, but now gay-affirming, evangelical group pastored by Jeremy Marks with which it has been my honour to be associated on several occasions.