

## The pain and the endgame: reflections on a whimper

James Alison

Dear C.

You wrote to me to say how overwhelmed you were with the various incidents in the public domain relating to being Catholic and gay which piled up over the last few weeks of 2008, and wondered if I had anything to say. I asked you for some time, since I too have found it all somewhat overwhelming, and wanted to avoid immediate commentary, which tends to be reactive and not helpful.

However, I've been trying to work through it all, and have sort of got a handle on it – one which is odder than I had expected.

So let me list the various *incidenti*:

- There was the press surrounding the Vatican document on the use of psychology with regards to the preparation of candidates for the priesthood;
- There was the simultaneous good news of Obama's election and the bad news of the victory of Proposition 8 in California, made worse by the way in which our Church was associated with the Mormons in helping produce that victory, and made weirder by the odd semi-apologies/semi-justifications made by several Bishops to gay and lesbian Catholics;
- There was the row over the Vatican's initial refusal to go along with a UN proposal concerning depenalisation of homosexuality, justified with some truly bad arguments by Archbishop Migliore, and then rather inelegantly backed-down from by the Vatican spokesman, Fr Lombardi;
- there was the huge kerfuffle surrounding the Holy Father's pre-Christmas remarks to the Curia surrounding ecology and "gender";
- and finally, and this has happened since you wrote to me, there has been a minor, but very interesting, flap in the Italian press surrounding a much more sensible than usual article which appeared in the official newspaper run by the Italian Bishops's Conference.

Before I look at each of these, I'd like to raise something for which I have no empirical evidence, but seems to me to be worth exploring. That is this: I wonder

whether our pain threshold isn't getting much lower, and that, ironically enough, the greater the pain we feel concerning the various blows we receive, the less the actual damage they are doing to us. I'm not sure whether this is a position which I can sustain or not, but I get the sense, at least with relation to my own capacity to put up with the pain and violence that is directed against us, that years ago the levels of hatred and violence directed against people like us were so strong, so effective and so silent that we seemed to be more thick-skinned, or to have large chunks of our capacity to feel anaesthetized (and at that time it didn't even feel as though there was an "us" – much more like multiple, scarcely bridgeable solitudes). It was automatic to go into a sort of "Stockholm Syndrome" of siding with our haters, at least with large parts of our psyche, simply because the pain of being what they hated was so great that we abandoned our feeling selves in order to survive.

And indeed, how could we "feel" what was so unavailable to language that we could scarcely dare to say that we wanted it for ourselves, let alone imagine that it was a healthy and normal thing to want or to feel? I'm thinking of those "little boy" feelings – the love, the passion, the knowing that you wanted to be with someone forever – that I first encountered aged eight or nine. And then I'm thinking of the sheer panic that engulfed me thereafter. My awareness, as a nine-year old, that I was completely lost and alone in a dangerous and hostile world in which the thing which I most wanted – the love of another boy and to be with him forever – was not only impossible, but utterly reprobate and an abomination. Agreeing that my love was dangerous and should be controlled and hidden seemed at the time far less painful than the realisation of the reality of the love and the terror of the abyss which was opening up before me.

It seems ridiculous to think that a small child can really be vulnerable to such huge feelings. Yet my sense is that I picked up quite clearly at that age the hugeness and dangerousness of the abyss over which I was about to be unmoored. That from then on I sensed that I was really and truly alone, would never really "make it" as a person, with a career, a partner and any stability. And, in a way that is only now seeming to come to an end, I have lived that out since then, with a sense of my life being on hold until the basic issue of the impossibility and unacceptability of my love is resolved. But no one can live with such terror and such pain close to the surface for long. How easy it is for the adult world to kidnap a small child in his own soul and take him into a country that is toxic to him and get him to agree that it is good, all for the best, normal!

Part of the shame about talking about such things is, for me, at least, a fear about using words like "torture" or "child abuse", even when I know that people who

have studied the growth patterns of gay kids brought up in strongly religious environments do find striking evidence of patterns of behaviour which are similar to those of abused children – an internal wedding to self-destruction. And even when I heard that Commissioner Fleury, the most notorious torturer of the military regime that ruled Brazil from 1964 to 1985 had commented in an interview how surprised he had been to discover that it was much more difficult to break gay men under torture than straight men.

Yet even now, when I can put words to these things, I feel ambivalent about doing so, partly from shame, and partly from a belief that this is making too much of a fuss – it's self-indulgent, that one oughtn't to talk about pain, and in any case, since everyone has such pain, then it's really nothing special. The reason for the ambivalence is that, to this day, I'm not sure whether this is right. I'm not sure whether that pain, which only now begins to seem talkable about, is just what everybody has, or whether there was something akin to torture in being a gay kid who learned that his feelings were an abomination. There don't seem to be any sure points of comparison from which to triangulate my position on the "normal human feeling" charts.

If you are told your feelings are wrong, and you cannot trust them, then you are indeed radically unmoored. For who is to guarantee that any point of comparison you find is the right point of comparison? If it seems to validate your feeling, might it not be just some evil influence? And yet, in the absence of your own feelings, it is not as though you have any other feelings, other than a shame at the growing realisation that you are not able to respond appropriately to all the markers which prompt the feelings that you are supposed to have. So there is a sort of shutdown, and a lostness which seems even to be prior to any ability to feel and verbalise pain.

In any case, please excuse my long background build-up to my point: the pain seems much closer to the surface now, much more able to be talked about. Which means it can be felt. Whereas I had imagined that one 'felt' things and then could talk about them, it actually seems to me to be closer to the mark, closer to a fact of observation, that it's when they start to be talked about, that then they can be felt. Socialised talking makes the feeling possible. And as they can be felt, so they can be sympathised with easily by healthy people of all walks and stripes.

And that's what I've noticed over these last months: how the fact that the pain not only can be talked about, but that it seems obvious to talk about it, and other people, who aren't gay at all, clearly regard it as normal and sane to talk about it. All that feels like something of a seismic shift, a quantum leap into a field of

ordinariness, of being part of ordinary human discourse, that I wasn't used to before. A sense of being recognised into the normal human world.

I guess that this was one of the things that became more obvious in the aftermath of Proposition 8's victory in California. An awful lot of straight people were clearly as shocked and upset as we were. It was amazing to me to behold it being so obviously right and straightforward to many of them that people like us have lives, hearts, emotions, like others and of course we must be treated the same way under law. That this is even clearer the lower you go by age down the demographic lists is even more encouraging.

So, in answering you, I wanted to start with this impressionist sketch of the plateau on which we find ourselves – one where the increased sense of pain is actually the fruit of a major cultural shift which is bearing us up.

In this new place, of course, we run the risk of being blown off course by our anger and pain at the constantly grudging nature of our Church's movement toward getting used to this new sense of shared humanity. Especially as part of the shift in the plateau also involves a shift in the way we relate to our own Church. Since, and again this is an impression, it seems that what used to be genuinely, mortally painful coming from Church authority is increasingly just irritating and silly.

So I'd like to offer some hints for "reading" the various "incidenti" which I referred to above, really for the purpose of maintaining our mental hygiene as we move into the new space which is opening up for us. And then later, make some more substantive points about how I see us living what seems pretty clearly to me to be the "endgame" of this whole issue.

First the document of the Congregation for Catholic Education on the use of psychology with regards the preparation of candidates for the priesthood. I've actually read this, at the urging of a gay seminarian friend of mine who was thrown by it, and it is for the most part a perfectly straightforward and sensible document concerning formation. My take on it is that it is transitional, as though a new team at the Dicastery for Catholic Education were trying to move on from the hole into which Cardinal Grocholewski and the 2005 document forbidding gay people to enter the priesthood had got them. It was really very curious that *Avvenire*, the daily newspaper belonging to the Italian Bishops' Conference, wrote about this new document under the headline "Homosexuality precludes admission to the priesthood". It then went on to quote Cardinal Grocholewski as saying: "If a candidate for the priesthood manifests deep-seated homosexual

tendencies, even though living a perfect chastity and thus not committing any sexual sins, even so he cannot be admitted to the priesthood. This is because the deep nature of the priestly vocation contains a sense of human and spiritual paternity which a homosexual doesn't possess." Well Cardinal Grocholewski may well have said such a thing (and he does have form – he told a North American vocations conference in 2002, at the time when every day yielded a new headline concerning the US hierarchy's cover-up of child abuse, with Boston as the lead story, that the vocations crisis would be solved if only priests were to spend more time with their altar boys). Nevertheless this little gem appears nowhere at all in the document.

The document only mentions homosexuality once, as a reference to those with "deep-seated homosexual tendencies", along with a list of other things like "affective immaturity" and so on. And that mention is highly ambiguous, since no one knows for certain what the entirely un-professional term "deep-seated homosexual tendencies" means. It is not a term that appears in psychological literature with any fixed meaning. So it will be interpreted, as is usual in matters vocational, by religious authorities according to what they want it to mean. Some will interpret it to mean "all gay men", some will interpret it to mean "any gay men who seem to have a strong sex drive", some will interpret it to mean "the sort of gay men who I don't like having around". In short, it will make little difference to the arbitrariness with which gay men are treated by the formational structures of the Church, so often at the behest of other gay men.

However, the key thing about this reference, and the quick nod in note 25 of the document to the 2005 Instruction which banned such people, is the way in which those references are put in as things to be taken for granted. Obligatory nods, as it were. As though these things have to be said in deference to the previous document and the fuss surrounding it, but the real weight of this document is elsewhere, and nothing to do with gay people. One might be forgiven for thinking that this is a classic piece of Vatican "moving on" from an unworkable previous position: make a nod to the previous position as though taking it for granted, while in fact heading somewhere else. If you want further evidence that this document is the Vatican "moving on", then sense the way that *Avvenire* and Grocholewski tried to make sure that the document which did not contain their hardline and unworkable positions became publicly associated with those positions. It was as though they sensed that someone was gently pulling the rug from under them, and they needed to fight back. In any case, it's worth remembering as a general rule that people in and around the Vatican are as likely to want to torpedo an initiative, or seriously to alter public perception of what it means, for their own political purposes, as any agency of the "liberal media".

The next incident to register was the the row over the Vatican's initial refusal to go along with a UN proposal concerning depenalisation of homosexuality, a refusal which was later walked back from by Fr Lombardi, the Vatican spokesman. More than anything else, this whole fuss seemed to me a sign of institutional incompetence and lack of savoir-faire in publicity. My guess, and this is only a guess, is that it revealed how closely the Vatican United Nations desk in New York was in league with the Bush administration's own handling of this issue – the bad reasons given by both for not supporting France's proposal seemed remarkably similar: ideological disapproval dressed up in concern about things which would allegedly follow if homosexuality were depenalised. Not for the first time, Catholic gay people were left with the uncomfortable knowledge that our own Church authorities' first reaction is to prefer the positions of theocratic Islamic states to our own freedom. Happily, the outcry was such that even Church authority realised that they had scandalised people, and so there was an attempt to backtrack.

All of this had scarcely quietened down when there emerged a huge row about the Pope's pre-Christmas address to the Roman Curia. His remarks, which were in Italian, and not translated into English for several days, percolated into the English-speaking world through two principal sources: Reuters and Zenit. Both, in their own way, interpreted the Pope's remarks as having something to do with homosexuality. Neither was forced to by what Jozef Ratzinger actually said. Reuters, and with it the liberal press, played the remarks as another shocking papal insult to gay people, suggesting that his observation about ecology and gender were a coded attack on gay people (as if, one supposes, being gay were a form of deforestation or environmental pollution, while being straight and married were a form of much-to-be-prized-and-cared-for surviving virgin rainforest). And Zenit, from the more conservative and Catholic side of things, also interpreted the papal remarks as to do with homosexuality, explicitly interpolating the word into their press report, where it didn't appear in Benedict's actual allocution. Their aim seemed to be to give comfort to those who like it when the Pope attacks homosexuality.

Now, I have read Benedict's entire speech given on that occasion, concentrating with particular attention on the last four points about the Holy Spirit (the controversial paragraph is in the second half of the first of these four points). I found what he had to say concerning the link between Creation and Salvation good and helpful (and, if I may say so, just the sort of point that helps us understand how we must proceed as gay Catholics – for it is in the understanding the link between Creation and Salvation that the “gay issue” will be properly and

creatively worked out in the Church). Furthermore, he seemed to me to be doing something good and proper in giving as a context for his references to gender and marriage not questions of law, or of Biblical or Magisterial interpretation, but the overall picture of the Spirit of the Creator who loves us, brings us into being and wants us to be more than we know we are. If the Roman Curia, which he was addressing, regularly understood its task as responding to the Spirit we would certainly be a better Church. However I must say that I quite simply do not know what Benedict was referring to in his remarks about gender and the self-emancipation of humans from the Creator. It is conceivable that these were indeed a sort of donnish sideswipe at gay people, a “clever” criticism, all the more clever for being a sort of collective calumny which, because it never focuses on anything specifically identifiable, can’t be refuted or defended against.

However, it may be that these remarks had nothing to do with gay people at all. It is quite conceivable that they referred to particular understandings of human self-construction in academic discussions about gender, of the sort which have been of concern to the dicastery that was until recently headed by the late Cardinal Lopez Trujillo. These would have far more relevance to discussions concerning transexual or transgendered persons than anything to do with the comparatively stable field of those whose gender identity is in no way complicated by their attraction to people of the same sex. But in the end, I don’t know what he was referring to. Not for the first time, his style tends to leave hostages to fortune.

My point here, for our sanity, is that it is not very important that we excavate exhaustively and find out exactly what he was referring to. It is very important that we learn a little mental hygiene, acquire a little immunity, when faced with these kinds of incident where a remark which might, or might not, have had something to do with gay people becomes a huge source of offense, of scandal. Part of that mental hygiene involves a certain being able to stand back with certain awarenesses. The first awareness is that of a distinction between what any given text says and how it is reported. In almost all the cases quoted above there was a time lag between what was reported and the text that was being referred to becoming available in English.

The second awareness is that of a distinction between the figure of Peter and the particular personal and cultural opinions of his current Vicar. It is easy enough for any of us to enter into a sort of personal mimetic rivalry with the Pope, such that he becomes far too important to us, and we are far too easily inclined to imagine that we know what he actually thinks about any given thing, and usually far too quick to “read” some reported remark as hostile to us, and so to interpret him in a relentlessly negative way. If we are all only political animals, and the

Church merely yet another player in the field of human culture wars, then this appears to be a perfectly reasonable attitude to take: the Pope can be assimilated into our particular political and cultural struggle, and be adopted as a useful cultural marker against which we can react when what he says appears to be, or genuinely is, against us, or occasionally he can be used as a positive banner when he happens to stand up for something with which we agree.

However, for our mental hygiene as gay catholics, it is worth remembering that this is not how either Jozef Ratzinger, or the Church, sees the Pope. Jozef Ratzinger may be a somewhat culturally conservative Bavarian theologian of a certain age and generation. He may have many of the social and political riches of view, and prejudices, proper to those of his time and place. He may or may not have ignorant or well-informed views about matters gay. He may or may not be a self-hating gay man who has a blind spot in this area as a certain press suggests. We can't know, and I don't suppose we ever will: the papal "persona" makes of its occupant's biography too much of an interpretative minefield during his life and for too long after his death for us really to "know" the man. And in the sphere of matters gay, he long ago gave up the possibility of expressing his personal opinions in any sort of public forum. But what he certainly is, and knows he is, is called to act as Peter, whose role and function is one of strong, mistaken, and penitent service to us as the Body of Christ. Someone in fact, whose mistaken-ness and penitence make him the only sort of leader with whom we can't really be tied into a mimetic rivalry.

Here it seems to me that we need to spend more time thinking about this figure if we are not to be scandalised by the office holder. What I would expect of Peter is someone who had strong views concerning religious rightness and sanctity. When faced with the mounting evidence that in matters gay the teaching of the Church has been based on a taboo, that is, a sacred idol, a series of violent lies which seemed to be holy but were not, I expect Peter at first to hold firm. Then, as it becomes clearer that what seemed to be from God was not from God, and that God is revealing something new and fresh about God's creation, God's impartial love for all of creation and how no human is profane or unclean<sup>1</sup>, I expect him gradually to get it, to recognise that what had seemed "outside" has been brought in by a power not his own, for God's holiness is shown in Creation made fully alive. I then expect him to help this change of heart concerning what *is* to percolate through the Church by removing such obstacles to it as he can, while doing his very best not to scandalize those of weak faith who feel lost and threatened by the change of world which is coming upon us; nevertheless, I

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<sup>1</sup> Cf Acts 10.

expect him ultimately to ratify the change. I would expect him to be very keen to be trying to formulate other ways of making clear God's holiness and power given the collapse in vision which seemed to accompany the realisation that what seemed holy was not. I expect this to take place over time, over several pontificates, and to be a thoroughly messy business, an endgame full of flailing around in which the Gospel truth only emerges slowly, but does emerge surely.

Given this, it seems to me that we can allow ourselves a far more healthy reading of recent developments. And here I'd like to bring into evidence something which I had expected to emerge as part of this endgame, though nothing like so soon, the article I referred to from the January 7<sup>th</sup> 2009 edition of *Avvenire* by Vittorino Andreoli. The article, one in a long series about priesthood, is about priests and homosexuality, and its author is a respected mainstream doctor and psychiatrist. While making the usual appropriate acts of reverence to the teaching authority of the Church in moral matters, and the right of the Church to choose whomsoever it wants for its presbyterate, what is striking about the article is that its author is perfectly clear and straightforward that he does not consider it to be scientifically acceptable to regard homosexuality as a form of sickness.

This would not be a striking opinion in, say, the *Guardian*, or even a much more conservative English language newspaper. However, it is a sign of something having moved out of the sphere of the taboo and into the sphere of the rational that it appears in the official newspaper of the Italian Bishops Conference. Let us remember that the first two documents in Church history to try to say something professional about homosexuality – in 1975 and 1986 respectively – both sought to define homosexuality in such a way that it could not be regarded as something neutral. The latter document insisted that it be regarded as an objective disorder as the necessary basis from which an absolute prohibition of homosexual acts could be sustained. And yet now, quietly, and without much fanfare, it rather looks as though it is perfectly possible publicly to maintain the opposite position in a properly Catholic context without fear of immediate retribution. Proper discussion has broken out.

Now here, I would say, Jozef Ratzinger has been Petrine. Whatever you make of the occasional donnish sideswipes, culturally conservative positions, affinity for the trappings of papal liturgical kitsch and signs of having lived too long in the small curial world which the press bring to our attention, he has, in ways which are much more difficult to make a story out of, quietly enabled this kind of breakthrough to go ahead. And not just permitted them: provided the kind of background and context which makes these moves possible. After all, he has been resolute and firm in standing up for the way in which scientific learning is

ultimately not going to be found to be in contradiction to the truths about humans revealed by God. He has been a strong champion of the traditional Catholic view that it is not because God has prohibited something that it is bad for us, but that God prohibits only what is bad for us. The corollary of this is that if we come to discover, through the opening up of the world which faith makes possible, that something which we thought was a disorder isn't, it is a normal part of creation, then what we thought was a prohibition from God, wasn't. It is a sacral projection of our sinfulness and violence.

Naturally, Benedict XVI has been subtle in his presentation of these things, and, some may say, timid in drawing out logical conclusions from them. However to interpret him as correctly applying something to Islam (in his Regensburg address) while deliberately excluding the possibility of applying the same Christian principle to Christian teaching would be to accuse him of major hypocrisy. And the fact that he made almost exactly the same point several months later in an address to the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, opening up that self-critical possibility for them, would make that accusation an inaccurate one. I have no reason to doubt that in his Petrine role he's anything other than serious about maintaining the proper Catholic way in which truth about being human becomes available to us, however embarrassingly or inconveniently for traditional Church understandings the chips may fall.

The third awareness is that concerning the role of the media, or press, during this period of the endgame. I want to suggest that we have to stand back from some of our immediacy regarding the relationship between Church authority and the media. To be caught up in the kind of knee-jerk reactions which that relationship produces is not at all healthy, regardless of one's view of the matter at hand. It is tremendously easy for the more liberal media to use whatever comes out of the Vatican as fodder for a view of the world in which the Vatican has a place as a kind of permanent irritant that needs to be scratched. And of course, it is tremendously easy for Church persons, especially Church office holders, to go into victim-mode, seeing themselves as being somehow heroic in standing up against the secular, liberalising horde. It is one of the easiest identities for them to plump for in the modern media market, and it is of course a straightforward betrayal of Christianity. However, by no means all the press is liberal. The conservative press (especially as it works in the majority catholic countries) is as capable of traducing whatever the issue is, but doing so in a way which plays to a quite different gallery in cultural wars in different places. This was much in evidence in the coverage of the *incidenti* which I walked through above. And of course, the same Church persons who are so quick to present the Church as the victim of liberal conspiracies are very rarely brave enough to stand up and

forcibly challenge the conservative worldviews which are being reinforced by a mendacious media reading of the sometimes quite moderate, subtle and sensible things which different bits of the Vatican bureaucracy can come up with from time to time. Not least because those conservative worldviews are far too often their own.

Now, with relation to matters gay in this endgame period, the need to be aware of all this is even clearer. Here's the problem: the liberal and anglophone media world understands quite clearly that it can keep alive the gay question as a permanent irritant in its dealing with the Church. It can always make the Church look bad in this sphere, and thus reinforce its way of fitting the Church into its own concerns and worldview. The trouble is that here, and this is by no means true of all the spheres where the media deals with the Church, they know that they've got the beast by the throat.

There are two quite objective issues which are going to play in this media's favour in the foreseeable future. The first is that it is by now abundantly clear that the basic characterisation – the whole “objective disorder” package – which underlies current Church attempts to deal with matters gay, is untenable. And yet no one in a public position of authority in the Church dares to speak reasonably or truthfully about this. What starts as a mistake does eventually turn into a lie when it is held onto deliberately while the evidence grows against it, and it is more and more obvious that those charged with defending it know that it is indefensible. In this sphere, the media know they've got the Church in a lie, and they enjoy making the Church squirm.

The second and linked objective issue is that the media knows perfectly well that it is dealing, in a significant number of cases, with closeted gay men. Those who live in the press village in Rome know a great deal concerning who is gay, and who is who's boyfriend. This is nothing new. What is new is that what in generations gone by was agreed by everyone to be a subject not fit to be talked about, is now increasingly normal and non-scandalous conversational fare. So when Church authority starts to talk about matters gay, it is talking out of a “don't ask don't tell” culture which is increasingly not shared by anyone else. In short, the media knows not only that it has the Church in a lie, but it also knows that very frequently in this sphere it is dealing with liars. This is what dwelling in a field of mendacity has done to us all.

And the liars have absolutely no idea how to cope with this. The office holders are entrapped liars, living in a sphere in which they appear to suffer from a moral impossibility of truth-telling, and are constantly vulnerable. The good reasons for

silence and discretion (not scandalizing those of little faith, enabling slow and gentle change) and the bad reasons (self-preservation, convenience, job security) are impossibly closely intertwined. So they retreat into implausible, dry and defensive positions which only make the Church more ridiculous. And of course they can never draw attention to the small, sensible shifts which they are longing to bring about, and *are* actually bringing about, since that would be to reveal themselves. The sensible ones don't dare to say anything except in the most oblique of codes, while the less bright shoot their mouths off at the slightest provocation.

All of this is far too good news for the media to be able to be resolved easily. Closet cases can be relied upon to be excessively hardline in backing up right-wing causes, knee-jerked by the tacit blackmail of the more conservative press which at least is trying to keep alive the "don't ask don't tell" world so vital for the survival of the closet. While the liberal press can constantly titillate, rile, and scandalize with its subtle hints of the hypocrisy of the whole operation.

Now it seems to me quite important, again, for our own mental hygiene, that we be able to stand back sufficiently from all this not to be too quickly and easily drawn into the scandalous world of the scandalised, which is what is promoted by the current link between matters gay, Church authority, media, and cultural shift. The Holy Spirit is not part of the scandal, and is quietly, gently undoing its knots from within so as to set us free.

So I would like, in my final section to see if I can make some more substantive points for us as gay catholics about this period of living the endgame.

## 1.

The first point is that the taboo has fallen. I want to bring attention to this, since it is a much bigger issue than it at first seems. There is an obvious sense in which the appearance of a sensible article in an official Catholic publication, like Dr Andreoli's in *Avvenire* doesn't sound like much of a deal. But it really is. It is a sign that Church authority has realised that the opinion that there is no physiologically or psychologically recognisable objective disorder that is intrinsic to an orientation towards those of the same sex is at the very least an opinion which it is possible to be held by Catholics in good faith, alongside the older opinion, that being gay is some sort of defect in an intrinsically heterosexual human being.

It must also be apparent, at this stage, that in more and more countries and

cultures the newer opinion is by far the more probably true of the two opinions, which means that it is by far more likely that moral and spiritual life-projects and decisions made in the light of its truth will be good ones, while those made in the light of the older opinion, since it appears not to be true, will be bad life-projects and decisions.

Now, my guess is that we, in the Church, will be fairly slow to work out what the consequences of the tiny shift in anthropological understanding to which Dr Andreoli's article is but one small witness will look like. Yet they will be huge. Because a huge amount of the life of the Church and its culture has depended on a vision of humans of which the old opinion appeared to be an absolutely necessary part. And it appears that the Holy Spirit, which is of course the principal motor behind the emergence of anything that is true, is not letting that old vision stand.

This means that we are in a new place. It is not a question of "how can gay people fit in by becoming like people they aren't", but rather "What does it mean to be Church where, as part of what we can see to be a genuinely Christian pattern of salvation, God has manifested that gay and lesbian people are sons and daughters even though the shape of their flourishing doesn't seem to fit into the schemas of goodness which we thought to be definitive of who we are". This is a huge question, not least because it flows both ways: a mistake about being gay is also a mistake about being straight. For being normative and being a large majority are two very different things, and the shifts in self-understanding which will flow from this are only just starting.

However, please let us be clear, and honour the logic which comes from the Holy Spirit: the moment it is conceded that gay and lesbian people "just are that way", it is conceded that they are part of God's project of creation and salvation *as* gay and lesbian people, and not in spite of it. Enforcing understandings of goodness on them that are derived from the previous vision of them as defective heterosexuals make no more sense than enforcing the rules of Soccer on Rugby players, as though Rugby players were defective Soccer players who were forever disobeying the cardinal rule of Soccer that only the goalie may handle the ball on the pitch. Instead, we are going to have to trust that the same Holy Spirit which has opened up the truth of our *just being* this sort of thing is also going to show us over time what is the best and richest shape for our *living out of our just being* this sort of thing, giving us the human, social, and ecclesial tools to create whatever signs of God's love we are asked to birth.

Now I don't know about you, but I would have loved the fall of the taboo to be

greeted with a mighty trumpet blast, the logic of it immediately to have become clear, and the deadwood of the old world to be tidied away as quickly as the new American administration is trying to tidy up the world of criminal lawlessness and unconstitutionality bequeathed to it by its predecessor. However, my guess is that it won't work like that. The logic of the truth will only impress itself upon us gradually, and it will have to undo a good number of our presuppositions and apparent certainties on the way. The taboo is going out, not with a bang, as I had hoped, but with the whimper to which I referred in my title.

## 2.

So, my second point is that I suspect we are in for a time in which Church authority will be flailing around illogically trying to hold onto bits of the old world. We can already see some of the flailing in those Church authorities who attempt to say something like this: "Of course we don't think that gay people are defective straight people. The Church merely says they mustn't do certain things". So, they try to hold on to the prohibition, even though the basic premise of the "defective heterosexual" which was necessary for its maintenance has fallen through. This is of course easier, and more loyal and traditional sounding than the, in fact much more loyal and traditional view that, given a new basic premise, the Gospel law of freedom obliges us to find out together as Church what the new shape of flourishing is going to be.

Another example of flailing will be the shift from attacking gay people head on ("the sort of thing you are involved in is a mortal sin, and not capable of receiving any sort of recognition as rights"), which becomes impossible to defend when it becomes clear that people *just are* that way. Instead, the new watchword will be "Defend marriage": "We're sorry, but Marriage between one man and one woman as it has come to be understood by the Church over the course of the last millennium just is an unalterable anthropological human data, so we mean no disrespect to gay people by saying that the current civil institution known as marriage can't include them. Indeed we ask Catholic gay and Lesbian people not to support political movements to alter the civil law in their countries, since they would be doing irreparable harm to something against whose introduction in the civil sphere we fought with great vehemence in many countries when it was first introduced, but which we now declare to be essential to the order of the universe."

Now there is nothing wrong with working to strengthen and make more happy and fruitful that wonderful human institution which is freely chosen marriage between opposite sex couples. However, that the campaign is, in this case, an example of "gay-troubled flailing" will be understood perfectly clearly by gay

catholics, since the only way in which it might be a reasonable tack to take is if it were arrived at after the following steps had been worked through: 1) a clear public recognition that the official Church teaching about gay and lesbian people had been wrong, and part of a deeply damaging world of mendacity which the Church was now committed to helping overcome; 2) sufficient time had gone by for it to be clear what the shape of healthy gay and lesbian partnered lives looked like, a process in which gay and lesbian people are by definition protagonists and speak with authority; 3) it had become clear to large numbers of those concerned that the shape of God's spousal love for the world is better reflected, in the case of gay and lesbian partners, in a different institution than that by which it seeks to show itself through the love of opposite sex partners and their offspring.

However, in fact, step one hasn't taken place formally, neither has sufficient time elapsed since it became clear that the truth is different than what it was thought to be, nor has Church authority shown any sign of regarding gay and lesbian couples themselves as protagonists in developing a true understanding of their lives, people whose opinion should actually be taken into account when discussing political measures taken in their name. And of course, we haven't even begun to have an ecclesial discussion of the appropriate ways by which same-sex partnerships between baptised Catholics bear witness to God's sponsality. So instead, we have a typical ecclesiastical bit of flailing – moral opportunism disguised as loyalty to tradition. It is a different mode of scandalised thinking: trying to keep a prohibition, or at least its cultural effects, alive even though it has become clear that the fundamental premise for the prohibition is untrue, and thus that it will take time to work out which cultural effects should simply wither away.

Something similar is starting to happen as Bishops' Conferences face up to the pressure for same-sex legal arrangements in different countries. Many of them want to say something like this "Oh, anything but marriage". The more conservative ones would say "Well, gay and lesbian people can make individual legal arrangements to protect their partners in any sphere where it is just that they be protected". Several Italian Bishops have talked like this. The more liberal ones would say "Well, they can have civil unions, with all the rights and responsibilities of marriage, if they want to, but the word marriage itself must be reserved to opposite sex couples". The secretary of the Portuguese Bishops' conference recently said just this, giving as an example the UK Civil Partnership legislation, (which was not, of course, backed enthusiastically by the Bishops of England and Wales when it was introduced).

These Bishops' Conferences are clearly quite unable to obey the perfectly

straightforward and entirely wrong-headed 2003 Vatican instruction on the matter. That instruction insisted that they oppose not only any attempt to introduce gay marriage, but also anything even remotely analagous to it. Perfectly logical, if being gay is a defective form of heterosexuality, and any form of same-sex coupling is a form of mortal sin. The Bishops can't obey this, because its fundamental premise is untenable, but the dog-less tail still wags them mightily, and so they end up making the Church ridiculous by maximising their unpleasantness to gay people without the benefit of any real logic in their position.

So, unless we are blessed with some extraordinarily wise leadership in the next years, this flailing around is going to go on. I used to hope that part of the Catholicity of the Church was that lessons learned in one cultural sphere would be able to be applied relatively easily in another. So, for instance, the Church in the English-speaking world has had to deal with the emergence of matters gay within the parameters of our own cultural world, religious history, military culture and political wars. I had hoped that, these lessons having been learned, some of their fruit could be applied to other cultures where the change was starting later. I was wrong. It really does look as though each culture has to work through having its demons of misogyny and homophobia cast out for itself, without any shortcuts.

### 3.

And this brings me to my third point. I suspect that the pain, about which I was talking at the beginning, is going to increase. Or at least, the awareness of the pain. Because for anyone who loves the Church, the realisation that we have been subjected to a lie, our lives hugely affected by a lie, is a big deal. A really huge deal. I don't want to go on about this much at this stage, having already touched on it. But I suspect that it is going to be more and more common for us to find ourselves, while loyal and loving Catholics, thrilled to be in the Church, and clearly delighted by the way that Jesus reveals himself to us through the Church, able to talk about ways in which we are coming up spluttering and coughing, as if emerging from an acute dose of poison gas, or from being held underwater for a long time. The fact is that lies are not innocent, nor mendacity a trivial matter. Lies poison and kill. And without being in any way victimary in our self-understanding, we need to be able to identify and cast off those lies which have affected us very greatly and very gravely. All the more so for having been so closely enmeshed with so much that was, and is, true and good and loving<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> As I'm writing this, the news of the confirmation by the authorities of the Legionnaires of Christ of the double life lived by their founder, fr Marcial Maciel Degollado, is percolating through the airwaves.

What is new and interesting about this, is that this is going to be part of a new self-critical understanding of what it is to be Church, one which earlier, more authority-based and more polemically forged accounts of being the Church were unable to contemplate. For we will have been witnesses to the Church, God's vehicle of salvation for us, having been terribly caught up in, and marked by, something wrong which was antithetical to what God wanted for us, and for it to have been terribly difficult and painful for us to be released from the lie and the damage. Traditional apologetics concerning the rightness of the particular pronouncements of Church authority will look incredibly shallow in the light of this lived, written about, historically researchable and demonstrable change in self-understanding.

#### 4.

To the relief of both of us, my final point. Because we are talking about a work of the Holy Spirit, leading us into truth, and because we are talking not about a culture clash, nor a political struggle, but the birthing of the new Creation through the sacrament of salvation which is the Church, there is a quite specific dynamic which has been given us to live out creatively in the midst of this time of flailing. The nausea-inducing lies, poor arguments, moral opportunism and cowardice will flourish as sideshows while the Spirit gradually brings its work into being. But the Spirit's work will not be achieved by clever victories, or putting bad people down. One of the key things I have learned as a theologian is that, in our world forgiveness is prior to creation. It is through being forgiven that we are created. This means that there is a quite specific shape by which the New Creation is brought into being. The Son of man has power on earth to forgive sins, and we are invited into living out this priestly forgiving of sins kenotically. In so far as we score victories over our enemies, we join them in helping hold back the New Creation. In so far as we allow ourselves to be forgiven for our own grasping onto being constituted in the violent lie, and present ourselves towards those who are still run by it as forgiving them, emptying out any grasping at identity or need for security. In so far as we are involved in this, then we are part of the priestly shape of the bringing in of the new creation.

I want to suggest that particularly for those of us who are gay and who are ordained presbyters, and thus particularly for those of us who have been living out the lie in one of its most nausea-inducing and violent forms, as both heirs to

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My heart goes out to the many good-hearted members of the Legion and of Regnum Christi, its lay branch, who are having to work through this same nausea of discovering that they have been severely misled by people they trusted.

and enablers of these lies, but also of course for all those who share in Jesus' High Priesthood by Baptism, this apparently weak form of truth which is the kenotic living out of an unbreakable forgiveness in the face of all the lies and all the violence, is the strongest sign there could be of the inbreaking of this tiny corner of the kingdom in whose harvest it is turning out to be our unspeakable pleasure to labour.

I'd like to conclude with a couple of quotations I found in the most recent book of the thinker I follow, René Girard, called *Achever Clausewitz*. The first is from Pascal, and says incomparably well what I have been trying to flesh out above.

C'est une étrange et longue guerre que celle où la violence essaie d'opprimer la vérité. Tous les efforts de la violence ne peuvent affaiblir la vérité, et ne servent qu'à la relever davantage. Toutes les lumières de la vérité ne peuvent rien pour arrêter la violence, et ne font que l'irriter encore plus. Quand la force combat la force, la plus puissante détruit la moindre; quand l'on oppose les discours aux discours, ceux qui sont véritables et convaincants confondent et dissipent ceux qui n'ont que la vanité et le mensonge: mais la violence et la vérité ne peuvent rien l'une sur l'autre. Qu'on ne prétende pas de là néanmoins que les choses soient égales: car il y a cette extrême différence, que la violence n'a qu'un cours borné par l'ordre de Dieu, qui en conduit les effets à la gloire de la vérité qu'elle attaque, au lieu que la vérité subsiste éternellement, et triomphe en fin de ses ennemis; parce qu'elle est éternelle et puissante comme Dieu même<sup>3</sup>.

What a long and strange war it is where violence tries to crush truth! Hard as it may struggle, violence cannot weaken truth, and its efforts only make truth stand out more clearly. Truth, however brightly it may shine, can do nothing to stop violence, and its light only irritates violence even more. When might is ranged against might, the stronger defeats the weaker. When discourse is ranged against discourse, what is true and convincing confounds and dissipates what is based only on vanity and lies. But violence and truth can do nothing, the one against the other. Nevertheless, don't be fooled by that into thinking that they are at the same level as each other. For there is this extreme difference between them: that violence only has a course marked out for it by God's command, such that its effects redound to the glory of the truth which it is attacking, while truth subsists eternally, and triumphs in the end over its enemies. Because it is as eternal and powerful as God himself.

The second is from Girard himself, commenting on Charles Péguy, a French Catholic writer who had stood up for the falsely accused Jewish officer in the French army, Dreyfus, against all the lies and inertia of an anti-semitic and reactionary Catholic culture in his country:

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<sup>3</sup> *Achever Clausewitz* (Carnets Nord, Paris 2007), Preface (p.7 unmarked) [My translation].

On ne peut d'ailleurs avoir défendu Dreyfus comme il l'a fait et être belliciste, sinon dans le bon sens: ce qu'il appelait "le combat pour la vérité". *Comme si c'était la défense acharnée d'un bouc émissaire qui lui avait donné ce goût du réel!*<sup>4</sup>

Besides, no one could have defended Dreyfus as he did, and still be a warmonger, except in the good sense: what he referred to as "the struggle for the truth". *It's as if it had been his no-holds-barred defence of a scapegoat which had given him this taste for what is real!*

May we be given to drink deep from this "goût du réel"!

Your brother,

James  
São Paulo, February 2009

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<sup>4</sup> *Achever Clausewitz* p 142, [my italics and my translation].