

**From impossibility to responsibility:
developing new narratives
for gay catholic living**

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If, on a Sunday evening, I go down to the street on which my apartment block stands in São Paulo, of one thing I can be sure. There will be acres of kids. Actually, gay and lesbian kids. The fourteen-to-eighteen year old variety. Emos, Goths, Mohicans, piercings, visible designer underwear waistbands, every conceivable variety of sartorial demonstration of the rage and glory of adolescence. Why just there? Well, there's a big club on the corner, in this, the more downmarket of São Paulo's two principal gay neighbourhoods, and it holds a “matinée de menor”, an “underage matinée”, on Sunday afternoons. There are actually several such clubs, but this one is the best located. So from about 4 p.m. until about midnight, the kids, who wouldn't be able to get into a regular club at normal night hours, can party. Which they do, both in the club and outside it, to the chagrin of local drivers, reduced to a crawl as the traffic lights become ineffective, and under the gaze of a discrete police presence mainly designed to protect the youth from occasional flare-ups. After all, from time to time skinheads decide to prove something or other by turning up for a little light Sunday Queerbashing. Rather to my surprise, I've never seen predatory adults hanging around on the prowl for underaged kids. Actually, I'm not at all sure that the kids would even notice if somebody tried, so completely in their own world do they seem to be. If somebody did try, then, well, attitude can be a withering weapon. And these kids have attitude in spades.

Why do I start with this picture? If you had told me, fifteen or twenty years ago, that something like this would be regarded as really quite normal in a major city, I would have thought “impossible”. The sheer normality, the cuddly, yet slightly hysterical adolescent banality of it all is what would have seemed impossible. Here is a generation for whom, as far as I can see, their introduction into the world of courtship, of

dating, and of pairing, is happening at the same time as that of their middle-school and high-school contemporaries. With the background of the same music, fashions, waves of angst, shrieking contests and so on. Even though the kids are able to be particularly free in their self-expression in my neighbourhood, the fact that their relationship pattern is same-sex doesn't seem to be, by any means at all, the most striking or important feature of what's running their lives.

Now let me take you further down the same street, just past my front door, in fact. You might not notice it at first, among all the normal parts of gay sidewalk life, large crowds of men standing chatting peacefully outside bars, spilling into the streets (lesbians tend to congregate in slightly different neighbourhoods). But if you hang around for long enough you're sure to become aware of it: the presence of a significant number of what in the UK we call "rent boys"; in the US I guess you call them "hustlers". In any case, male sex workers. One of them once pointed out to me something which I wouldn't have noticed for myself: if one of his colleagues has jewellery, of however simple a sort, then he's probably not doing drugs. Because these are poor people, the sort of drugs they can afford are the most evil and addictive kind – crack and meth – and the route from first fix to losing all self-respect, and with it, decent clothing and accessories, is dizzyingly fast. So, if the guy had started on drugs, selling his jewels for the next fix would have already happened.

Some of these guys exercise their profession at regular spots (and talk with respect about their regular clients) because it is a way of making a fast buck. For others, especially from the poorer peripheral neighbourhoods of the city where the pressures to be macho while growing up are very strong, this is their way of adapting both to "coming out" and to being able to afford a night out on the town. Since, in their own way of talking, if they do it for money, then they aren't really gay. After a bit they wise up, get used to being gay, and after that the money issue is a less defining part of their lives. Some will do it so as to splash out after a week of construction work, or hairdressing; others are into older guys, get used to having the tabs picked up for them, and settle into relationships. Others, having earned far too much, too soon, for a few tricks, and spent it as fast, get sucked into a cycle of self-loathing and unemployability, unable to countenance the sheer boredom, hard work, and humdrum low pay that attend the only sort of jobs for which they are qualified.

On the corner is an internet café, where all the denizens of the street can

get online, chat, arrange meetings, and update their home pages with new and ever more risqué photos. The constant potpourri of cellphone tones indicate that rendez-vous are being set up, deals struck and so forth. The sheer anonymity of the internet-and cellphone world seems to have taken a good deal of the shame out of male prostitution. After all, there's no way a casual observer can tell whether what is going on is just friendly, or has professional overtones. And this world jostles side by side with, overlaps with, and interpenetrates that world of Sunday adolescents that I described earlier. Often enough, indistinguishably. The same social factors as have made the one possible, have given its current face and shape to the other reality as well.

Welcome to my world. I love it, I love living in its midst. I am so relieved to share the sense of freedom which comes with the rapture of impossibility. I've come to delight in the unmissable sound of the three a.m. shriek of the imperial Brazilian drag-queen, more strident and yet more tender than the haughtiest banshee of the jungle cockatoo. And yet, in the midst of my privilege in living in such a neighbourhood, I am greatly challenged as to my responsibility.

You see, in the city in which I live, a city of eighteen million or so people, and one where the annual Gay Pride parade features a minimum of three million people - and that's the police estimate - there is no Catholic LGBTQ pastoral. In a city named after the apostle Paul which is also the largest city in the country with the largest Catholic population in the world, our Church is entirely absent from any realistic involvement in the life of the segment of society which in Brazil goes by the name of "GLS" - Gays, lésbicas e simpatizantes - Gays, Lesbians and those with similar affinities.

And here we are back to a different sort of impossibility. For of course, our Church is dependent on the same teaching in Brazil as it is everywhere else. The current teaching of the Roman Congregations, which has as its premise that all humans are intrinsically heterosexual, and that gay people are objectively disordered. Defective heterosexuals if you like. The recently named Primate of Belgium, Mgr Léonard, reported Church teaching quite accurately when he indicated, to consternation in the local press, that in his opinion being gay is like suffering from anorexia, in other words: a pathology of desire. Such teaching cannot recognise that being gay is a regularly occurring non-pathological minority variant in the human condition. Because if it were to recognise that, certain things would flow from it: the appropriateness of certain forms of relationship including a sexual element even though

these have no possible procreative function. And then the appropriateness of certain forms of civil and liturgical recognition of such relationships. In its very own language the relevant Roman document says that the claim that being gay is an objective disorder MUST be maintained in order to keep alive the claim that all possible sexual acts flowing from being gay are intrinsically evil and so prohibited. If you drop the objective disorder, you drop the absolute prohibition. They are logically wedded to each other.

Now of course, passing few people actually believe any longer the claim that being gay is an objective disorder in an intrinsically heterosexual human condition. In Brazil as everywhere else. Passing few clergy as well. Nevertheless, the teaching has a chilling effect on anyone wanting to get involved in possible pastoral work in this area. For few Bishops, however personally benign, dare to face down the wrath that is engendered, usually by self-hating gay clergy, but also by others who have been martialled into rigorist religious groups, at any pastoral initiative which treats gay people as humans for whom being gay is part of their becoming something much richer, rather than a terrible wound that they must fight against.

And thus it is that you have a burgeoning gay life, with everything that can be good about it, everything that needs encouraging, developing, mentoring, helping, pointing in the right direction, and alongside that, and oh-so closely intermingled with it, the traditional seediness of the underworld with the needs of its denizens for dignity, stability, a chance at an education or a profession, hints of life in family and community. All the ingredients, one would have thought, for a wonderful Catholic community-building pastoral outreach. And yet all this is mired in an apparent religious impossibility. One which I feel very deeply, and genuinely don't know how to resolve.

When in my title I referred to "impossibility" and "responsibility", and when I talk about developing new narratives for gay catholic living, I was thinking of sketching out routes, patterns of growth from one to the other, ways of describing where we think we are coming from and where we think we are going which make sense and have a quality of truthfulness about them. And I think that there are two sorts of route that I'm looking to traverse, though I'm longing for the moment when those two routes become one. The two routes are the personal route, and the ecclesial route. Let me explain.

The personal route is one that is well under way in many of our lives. I

think that many of us have been able at least to begin, however stumblingly and painfully, depending on our background, to travel this route. This is the route from being a person who was deeply scandalized at his or her own being, who was stuck in all the double-binds of “love, don’t love”, “be, don’t be”. The sort of person who, when he or she was growing up could never honestly imagine that what they most longed for, maybe long before puberty hit, – a husband or wife of the same sex as themselves – would ever be a reality that they might know. The route from this, to being a person peacefully-possessed of a stable sense of self who is able to contemplate courtship, relationship, partnership, employment, family and straightforward participation in the wider social polity with something to offer – this seems like a miracle. And for many of us, it has been.

I also think that accompanying this route, something rather important has been going on in the wider Christian sphere. Something which is not necessarily well-represented by the different religious leaderships of Christian groups, but is nevertheless increasingly present. I call this, in honour of Homer Simpson, the “Doh!” factor. By that I mean the increasing obviousness of the compatibility of Christianity with the emerging understanding of being gay. After all, as more and more people pick up that being gay is just something that is, no more and no less, so it becomes more and more difficult to present Jesus as being in some way particularly harsh and disapproving of gay people. Especially since Jesus was particularly prone to liking and to associating with those of whom the religious rigorists in his society most strongly disapproved. Not for the first time, the memory of who Jesus was and is constitutes a formidable stumbling block to rigorists in any culture.

I think, however, something richer and deeper than that is going on, and I want to flesh it out here, since it seems to me that our narrative is not one of how we somehow seek to be, and cling on to being, a tolerated exception to an overarching Christian narrative which doesn’t really include us. Rather what has been going on, in the midst of the normal secular sphere, and to the consternation of our religious leaderships, has been the Christian narrative bringing us inside itself, as it were.

It is not that a group of wicked rebels is trying to change the teaching of the Church, or a group of the faithless trying to alter the Gospel. Instead, I suspect we are actually finding ourselves on the inside of the power of the Gospel working something out in our society. And following exactly the pattern that Jesus predicted.

The power of the Gospel is this: that God occupied the place of the cast-out one, of the rejected one, of the condemned one so as to show how God's goodness and God's creative power and God's ability to harmonize different realities in a peaceful order has little or nothing to do with the "wise", the "powerful" and the "righteous" of our world. On the contrary, it is principally manifested among those of poor repute, those with little to lose, those who, in the marvellous words of St Paul "are not".

And the way this works itself out in any of our societies as a form of learning is as follows: normally, when someone finds themselves occupying the space of shame and death that the group creates so as to hold together its fake goodness, they are simply held to be evil, contaminating, deserving of punishment. However, ever since God occupied that space himself in Jesus, and showed that it could be occupied and dwelt in, painfully but forgivingly, God pulled the plug on our way of constructing goodness over against people like himself. And that means, God introduces suspicion into our midst, suspicion that our goodness may be fake, and our "evil ones", after all innocent, or at least, no more guilty than everybody else.

It sounds weird to some, but the direct result of being able to accept that God revealed himself to us as the shameful victim of the ganging up of the political and religious forces of law and order, themselves scarcely controlling a surging mob violence – the direct result, then, of Faith in the Son of God – is *loss of faith* in the innocence of those involved in the lynching and the goodness of the culture they were shoring up. Things that seemed to be sacred are shown up as having been idols all along. Idols demanding sacrifices.

Well, this means, and has meant, that over time, people under the influence of grace become suspicious of their own motives when they find themselves forming a righteous unanimity against some evildoer. Somewhere in the back of our mind is the strange notion that God can't really be the back-up for such things, because this was what happened to God. Now what is both curious, and glorious, about this is that this moment of suspicion of self, of doubt about the seemingly convincing currently-held majority opinion about how things are caused, such that problems can be resolved by a lynching, this moment is the condition of possibility of real knowledge.

It is not that people first acquire scientific knowledge about things, and then, from a position of rationality, dismiss their previous superstitious

beliefs. So, it is not as though people worked out that weather worked in certain predictable ways and patterns, and then started to scoff at those who thought that such and such a hailstorm was caused by a witch putting the evil eye on a particular farmer and his land. Just the reverse, it was because people found themselves unable to believe in the efficacy and thus the guilt of witches that it became possible to ask the questions leading to other explanations of causality. In other words, a victimary answer to any question will always close down the possibility of learning, confirming a group in its darkness. The loss of belief in the victimary answer is what opens up the possibility of truthfulness, of learning, and of moving into a bigger, wider world, a world created by God rather than populated by weird demons and unpredictable sacred forces which must be satisfied and negotiated with.

Well, I hope you can see that over the last fifty years or so, something very like this has been going on for us LGBTQ people. While fear of violence, loss and devastation kept alive the informal “don’t ask, don’t tell” which is common to most societies, of course there were no gay people, as there famously “aren’t” in Iran, or Uganda today. Yet, as, over the last fifty years or so, people have been prepared to run the risk of being identified, have been prepared to face the excoriation, stand up through the shame, as these things have happened, more and more people have stood back from the threat of the lynch mob and begun to ask the scientific rather than the sacred questions. And as the moralistic explanations – deviance, pathology, vice, and the sacred solutions – incarceration, electric shock treatment, conversion therapy, have worn thin, so it has become possible for people to ask the sort of questions which might actually stand us in good stead for learning about being human. Questions such as “I wonder what the neurological, endocrinal and hormonal bases for this configuration are?”; “What, if anything, do genes have to do with it?” “I wonder whether there is any marked difference in incidence of people like this from culture to culture?” “Are there any particular pathologies, physiological or psychological, which are proper to, intrinsic to, people of this configuration, rather than attendant on them owing to the circumstances in which they have been forced to live?”

Well, as you know, the movement out of victimary thinking and towards scientific thinking in this sphere is comparatively recent, and yet it does seem to be yielding firm results. Just as Jesus promised, the Holy Spirit, by undoing the victimary mechanism, is opening up all truth, and making us free. We do now have a firmer sense that being gay or lesbian is a regularly occurring non-pathological minority variant in the human

condition, and we are beginning to get a sense that there are forms of flourishing proper to that condition – for instance, being allowed to live honestly and to undergo the humanization of desire openly in relationships with other such people. We also more and more instinctively react against those who hold on to the shards of the old moralistic thinking, those who insist on regarding as pathological something which is not, because we are aware that the pathological labelling is part of a victimary pattern, and is untrue. In short, we find traditional Church teaching, whether in its Catholic or Protestant guise, in this field to be unconvincing, not because we are particularly rebellious or faithless, but because the Christian shape of truth is asserting itself, and in its light, both the official characterizations of who gay and lesbian people are, and official patterns of behaviour towards them are shown up as neither Christian nor truthful.

Well, that's part of the story. It's the story of how many of us, personally, find ourselves borne up by a tide not of our making, riding waves which were gloriously agitated for us by someone else. In terms of the scene from my neighbourhood with which I started, it is, what I think underlies the huge social change which has turned a certain sort of impossible into a certain sort of normal.

And of course, for many, if not most of us, we ride the wave of this extraordinary blessing superciliously, unaware of what made it possible in terms of others occupying, standing in, a place of shame, detoxifying it by their patience, their forbearance and their perseverance.

But being Catholic does not only mean rejoicing in what someone has done for us – though it does principally mean that grateful rejoicing. It means becoming the friend, becoming configured to the heart, of the One who did that for us, by doing for others what He did for us. This also, and inevitably means, for there is no Catholic faith without this – a stretched love for the poor and the precarious. And this brings me back to the other half of my neighbourhood scene. The excitement and the thrill of new possibilities opening up also creates a dangerous world of unmoored lives. The sort of unmoored lives in whose midst Our Lord is clearly delighted to mix, and yet a world of impossibility for our Temple authorities. For how can you help to flourish that which your very Temple architecture proclaims should not really exist?

And this for me is the challenge, and it is one for which I have as yet no clear answer. Given the impossibility, from the point of view of formal ecclesiastical structure, of healthy involvement in this reality, what is

going to be the shape of my responsibility for helping to birth the ecclesial sign of Christ's presence? An ecclesial sign that I hope, one day, the ecclesiastical carapace will be able to recognise as part of what it's really all about.

Let me flesh this out a little, since it is personal for me, as I hope that it is going to be personal to you, who are starting your lives as LGBTQ Catholics, receiving both the education and the poise of Georgetown University, and thanks to the Jesuits, the sense of the importance of loving service for those most vulnerable and in need.

What is personal is that, the longer I spend living in the reality I have described to you, the more I find myself enjoying and liking the people who I live alongside, the more I am pulled and heart-strained by what they go through, the more I am humbled at how easily I misread their needs, at how little I am able to do for anybody. The more I am genuinely challenged by how I am to be responsible as a Catholic in the face of impossibility, in an ecclesiastical dead zone. In short, God seems to be gifting me with a heart, a terrifying thing, since hearts only grow as they break. And God only gives such hearts as the beginnings of bigger things God wants to do. And yet, what, practically, is the shape of the sign that I am being asked to birth, that we are being asked to birth? Of course, there are elements of it that are specific to my city and my neighbourhood. Nevertheless, I can't help but think that a similar confluence of realities – increasingly happy, healthy, self-accepting and productive gay people, and all the flotsam and jetsam of modern urban life, are also present in most, if not all of our major cities – here in Washington DC for example.

How does a Catholic, who is by baptism a priest, regardless of whether they have been formally ordained to the presbyterate or not, and whatever their gender, fulfil the Lord's command to "Feed my sheep", or honour the priestly memory of "How I would bring the rejoicing crowd into the courts of the Lord"? Given that nothing is impossible for God, and in fact one of the sure signs of the presence of God is the undoing of impossibility, the gradual making liveable, breathable and upright of what seemed strangled, bound down and fated, how is God going to breathe us out of the ecclesiastical impossibility and into the creation of the ecclesial sign?

I mean, of course, things like our moving from receiving the social icing of acceptability, with things like our civil rights and marital arrangements fully respected, to the baking of a rich Catholic cake that

will hold that icing up, in terms of discovering our talents as developers of marriage preparation and a whole healthy culture of understanding and sustaining differing patterns of same-sex relationships, along with the appropriate, new, liturgical formulations which will enable us to Bless God for having blessed us through the gift of each other's partnered witness.

But even more than that, I mean groups of us, with some sort of common life and common prayer, who are able to create sustained patterns of generosity to those who can be helped into education, into courses of professional formation, to those who can be helped out of drugs, to those whose talents can be unleashed from beneath the slag heaps of self-loathing which cover them over. How are we, together, in our different places, and not minding too much the visible collapse of a certain ecclesiastical structure all around us, going to create "parish"? Going to create communities where we, whose imaginations have so often been paralysed by impossibility, can dare to imagine what might be good and fun for our sisters and brothers, and actually start to create the sort of family values which give genuine glory to God?

We are receiving the blessing; now how do we allow the One who has blessed us to nudge us into creating the ecclesial sign? Where two or three are gathered together, asking this in His Name, he will surely do it.

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