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TSEBO: JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES

Vol. 2 No. 5 (2015)

PUBLISHED: 2015-01-01

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Roman Catholic Perspective of Sin and Homosexuality: Scrutinizing the Signs of the Times

Patrick U. Nwosu*

Abstract:

In a pluralistic world, in which the issues of homosexuality and gay rights have taken the centre stage of discourse in Sub-Saharan Africa, critical analysis is required to re-appraise the Roman Catholic perspective of sin and homosexuality. Again; the emergence of the study of homosexuality as a subfield within African Studies gives further vent to critical reflection to assess the merits and demerits of Church pronouncements on the issues. In the context of emerging fields of study and various sexual orientations of people of different cultures today, the issue of the Roman Catholic understanding of sin and her teaching on homosexuality has become problematic to many, especially the young ones in various higher institutions of learning. A growing number of them think that the recent comments of the Catholic Pontiff are not helping matters. The challenges seem to lie in balancing the teachings on homosexuality with the belief that God is merciful and loving. The relatively charitable disposition of the Pope calls for the re-evaluation of the Church stance on sin and homosexuality. Therefore, the paper, using historical and analytical methods, examines the basic meaning of sin and puts in context the chances of accepting homosexuals without indeed undue focus on their habits that may be in need of healing. Drawing on relevant literature and on the assertions of some students in my classes, the paper concludes that in a pluralistic society the homosexuals may make the human community richer when given the same opportunities accorded the majority orientation.

Keywords: **Community formation, goodwill, homosexuality, inside versus outside, pastoral justice, pluralistic world. Roman Catholic Church, search for God, sin, the youths.**

Introduction

Amory (1997), in the article: *Homosexuality in Africa: Issues and Debates* draws attention to the fact that the study of homosexuality or same-sex identity is a subfield within African Studies that has come to stay. The major happening that has given rise to this new paradigm in African Studies is the recognition of the reality and existence of gays and lesbians in Sub-Sahara Africa. In the context of theoretical framework, this reality is captured as Gays and Lesbians in African Studies, GLAS. Amory (1997:5) succinctly notes that, "current debates surrounding the study of homosexuality include local, pre-colonial same-sex practices and identities; the eminently queer nature of the colonial enterprise; the postcolonial politics of sexuality within African nation-states; the current emergence of human rights discourse based on lesbian and gay identities; and postcolonial gay and lesbian organizations in the African context." These facts, no doubt, influence the pastoral situation and concern of

* Dr.. Nwosu is a Lecturer, Department of Religions, at the University of Ilorin, Ilorin Nigeria

the Roman Catholic Church regarding homosexuality and sin. Given the intensity of feelings toward homosexuality, particularly in Nigeria, it is not out of place to hear undergraduates express the following reservations:

- Homosexuality is an abomination;
- To be gay goes against nature;
- I don't mind gay people, but why do they have to be forthright;
- Africa did not have homosexuals before Europeans went there.

The above assertions are what one hears each time the question of sin and homosexuality is raised among the young ones in higher institutions in Nigeria. They describe gay and lesbian persons as sinners, perverts, and wounded souls in need of healing. Yet, gay and lesbian people are human beings worthy of respect and love. Since they are and exist, their issues and concern cannot be avoided with integrity.

Essentially, scholars out-side of South Africa cannot afford to ignore this study because the shrinkage of time and space in 21st century has brought homosexuality and debates related to the phenomenon to the front burner. The myth of individual or group superiority is no longer fashionable. Hence, Davis (1998:131) acknowledges the relevance of homosexuality studies within the ecclesial community thus: "the fear of homosexuality perpetuated by the church is related to a generalized fear of sexuality. This fear of sexuality takes on new meaning when considered in the light of the fact that the freedom to choose sexual partner was one of the most powerful distinctions between the condition of slavery and the post emancipation status of Africans." In other words, the reality of homosexuality requires extensive study which this paper does not propose to do. Instead the paper projects integration in addressing gay and lesbian rights.

Again, based on historical and cultural specificity, one notes that theoretical frameworks and experiences of homosexuality are numerous, conflicting and ultimately complex. Hence, there is no one essential consciousness binding all gay and lesbian people. Bright (2003:5) supports this assertion when he notes that "same-sex attraction is imbued with multiple interpretations and layers of meaning, and these interpretations are historically and culturally specific." With the foregoing as overarching facts, the paper becomes informative to scholars and researchers who seek for their own understandings, conceptualizations and experiences of homosexuality and sin in their specific contexts.

It is noteworthy that at a historical time in South Africa, homosexuality was criminalized due to the legacies of colonialism, apartheid, and capitalist socio-economic structure of the country. But today, the story is different. This development is quite challenging to the rest of the African countries that are still short-circuiting the emergence of another subculture and identities in Africa. Consequently, the issues of homosexuality and the proper meaning of sin were among the challenges raised by the realization of the Enlightenment. These challenges are still very much topical today. Indeed, homosexuality and basic questions surrounding the orientation has become all

the more pressing given the multipath world of today that began with the voyages of discovery.

The traditional view of sex in Roman Catholic Church subscribes to the fact that the "main purpose of sex is the procreation of children within the context of marriage" (White 1991:333). In other words, non-marital sex which includes homosexuality is considered morally wrong in the Catholic Church.

The Vatican position on non-marital union is still being challenged by people both inside and outside the Catholic Church. For instance, Father Curran, a former Professor of Theology at the Catholic University of America, argues that it is an error to reject all non-reproductive sex as wrong without taking into account the person and his/her relationship with others. Responding to this argument in the book: "*Issues in Sexual and Medical Ethics (1978)*", the Roman Catholic Church suspended Father Curran from his teaching duties and issued a statement reaffirming its condemnation of homosexuality. Yet, homosexual priests and others continue to challenge the Roman Catholic Church's position. Some of the priests argue that while homosexual practices may be wrong for priests who have taken the vow of celibacy, there is nothing fundamentally wrong with being homosexual in orientation.

In the light of the troubling questions of homosexuality, homosexuals, and the concept of sin, a growing number of Roman Catholics are of the view that it is no longer appropriate to try to maintain the dogmatic stance that human sexuality and every genital act must be within the framework of procreation. The theological problem lay in reconciling the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church on homosexuality with the belief that a just and loving God would not condemn those who have goodwill towards the kingdom of heaven. In clear terms, *the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)* states, "under no circumstances can homosexual acts be approved" (CCC 2357). Yet, the teaching recommends compassion and respect for persons who have same-sex attraction. This relatively charitable perspective calls for the re-evaluation of Roman Catholic understanding of sin and homosexuality.

Within this framework, Pope Francis, during his return from the World Youth Day celebrations in Brazil said, "if someone is gay and he searches for the Lord and has goodwill, who am I to judge?" (Uba, 2013:10). Does this comment imply that the Roman Catholic Church now approves homosexual acts? Is sin now acceptable by God? Or is the Pope here merely expressing concern for those on the fringes, and the tenderness of a pastor who walks among his people?

The thrust of this paper is, therefore to examine the core meaning of sin and see how the proper perspective of it could enhance the acceptance of homosexuals without necessarily accepting their every action. The approach of the paper is historical and analytical. The paper x-rays the Biblical context of sin, the Roman Catholic Perspective of it and her stance on homosexuality. From these angles, the paper draws conclusion that condemning homosexuals on any ground violates pastoral justice and the mercy of God. Indeed, our pluralistic society may be improved if homosexuals would be given the rights and benefits of the majority orientation.

The Biblical Context of Sin

The idea of sin is an integral part of the religious understanding of the human situation in the world. For instance, under apartheid, the National Party in South Africa (formed on the ideals of Christian values) perceived same-sex attraction as sinful, unnatural and abnormal (Bright, 2003:7). From the biblical prism, it is expressed that the world as presently known, is not the world God intends for humans. Human selfishness and greed distorted the world God promised human beings. The distortion that exists points to the reality of sin. In this regard, Peschke (1996) writes:

> The Bible always conceives of sin in the framework of man's relationship to God. Its deepest nature appears as refusal to respond to God's salvific will. Sin therefore is an offence against God and unfaithfulness to him (p.288).

Agreeing with Peschke (1996) in this context, Hellwig (1992:100) succinctly notes that, "the message of redemption does not have any meaning except in the context of a view of the human situation as distorted by initiatives and values that are counter to God's intent for the world." Sin obviously is the basic presupposition of the Old Testament, especially the prophets and this presupposition continues in the New Testament.

The drama of the fall of Adam and Eve is central to the Old Testament's understanding of sin. The Old Testament (OT) consistently regards sin as a transgression of God's law and purpose, (cf. Lev. 26:14-39; Is.1:4; 43:24). It conveys the perspectives which include:

(a) Sin as an act of unfaithfulness and adultery (Hos. 3:1; Is. 24:5); and

(b) Sin as foolishness.

Three Hebrew words are used to describe sin in the OT. They are: "hatta", "pasha", and "awon". Peschke (1992) notes that "hatta" expresses the idea of missing an aim or of falling away from a known path. Sin then is the by-passing of a rule, its transgression (p.289). Sin is disobedience against what God has put in place. "Pasha" means rebellion. It points to sin as human rejection of God's love. "Awon", on the other hand, means guilt and refers to the way sin twists the sinner's inner being. In the Book of Psalm 51:1-4 David, in his prayer to God for mercy, uses all the basic OT words to identify his sins. He prays:

> Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgression. Wash away all my guilt, and cleans me from my sin that is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight (Ps. 51: 1-4).

David acknowledges that sin is a terrible evil precisely because it offends God. Heagle (2010) gives a helpful insight of sin as entering the world of responsibility. He opines that: "Sin is simply another way of saying that, at crucial times in our lives, we have "missed the point" of what it means to be fellow pilgrims. The rest of the story in Genesis is what happens when

human beings lose this deeper purpose of life and instead pursue their own agenda at the expense of their sisters and brothers" (p.35). To buttress OT perspective of sin as missing the point in keeping God's commandment, Tolle (2006) describes the ancient symptoms of human brokenness:

> If the history of humanity were the clinical case history of a single human being, the diagnosis would have to be chronic paranoid delusions, a pathological propensity to commit murder and acts of extreme violence and cruelty against his perceived "enemies" – his own unconsciousness projected outward. Criminally insane, with a few brief lucid intervals (pp.11-12).

The most pointed outlook of the OT on sin derives from the covenant relationship established between God and human beings. Sin is considered as turning away from the alliance with God. In his apt description of the covenant relationship with God, Peschke (1996) submits that:

> God offers man his benefits and his grace again and again. In response he expects man to be faithful to his commandments. Yet man does not live up to this expectation. He disobeys God's commandments and breaks the covenant (p.289).

The OT perspective of sin is essentially that of offence against God. However, the extent to which OT perspective of sin is influenced by patriarchal and racial order remains debatable. Nardi, Sanders and Marmor (1994) submit that criminalization or sin syndrome can hinder the negotiation of a homosexual identity and prevent disclosure. Nonetheless, sin does not harm God in his inner being. Thus, God is always ready to show mercy and compassion if anybody repents of sinful ways. The theme of mercy and compassion is constant in salvation history. It culminates in Jesus Christ whose life and deeds dominate the New Testament (NT).

The New Testament (NT) conceives sin to be a deeply rooted disease that caused human beings to fundamentally deserve wrath from God. Sin in the NT makes people to lack the godliness demanded of them by God. Schreiner (2008) reflects this view when he opined that the sins of human beings "should provoke mourning and a hunger and thirst for the righteousness that they lack" (p.510). Put another way, the NT deepens the OT understanding of sin as separation from God. Thus, sin is seen as a refusal of God's love (Lk. 14:15-24). It is precisely in this refusal of God's love, as noted before now, that sin consists.

The NT uses the Greek term "hamartia" for the concept of sin. "Hamartia", etymologically means "not to hit a mark" or "to miss" (Peschk, 1996:290). In all its books, the NT linked the concept of sin closely to the need for conversion. In other words, just as by sinning, one turns away from God. So by conversion one turns to God and cleaves to him. Within this context, sin manifests in the fundamental privation in the will. The decisions of the human will are meant to be caused by valid reasons. A privation of that causation is where the human will is moved by something other than good reasons. Hence, the absence of 'good reasons' in human actions is the basic

experience of sin. For example, when one looks at the acts of terror, such as the abduction of over two hundred school girls by *Boko Haram* in Nigeria, one simply cannot find any good reason why anyone would do such a thing. It is sin because it is pointless and misses the mark. Therefore, sin has no substance; rather it is the privation of being, the being of meaningfulness (Ormerod 2007:15).

In the light of the above, the NT portrays Jesus as one who purifies people from sin. "Jesus purifies as he recognizes only moral and not cultic transgressions"(Peschke, 1996:290). Heagle (2010) puts it succinctly when he writes that:

> As the blind, the lame, and the broken come to Jesus, Matthew explicitly…relates the fourth servant song to Jesus" "He took our infirmities and bore our diseases" (Matt. 8:17). Explicit or implicit references to the servant of Isaiah as realized in Jesus are found in many other places in the New Testament, including the Acts of the Apostles and the Pauline letters (pp.92-93).

The persistent notion about sin is that it emanates from the heart since human heart is diseased. The NT teaches that it is not purification of the external but interior purity that is required (Mk. 7:1-23).

Furthermore, the NT presents sin as a strong separation and ungrateful desertion from God. This is the central reflection of the parable of the lost son. In the parable, sin is represented by the loss of the very meaning of existence and separation from God. Hence, one who separates himself/herself from the saving will of God is lost and frustrates the meaning of human existence.

The teaching of the NT about sin is always followed by the invitation to ask for mercy. This thought is central in the whole of the NT. This NT hallmark is buttressed by Peschke (1996) when he described the messianic mission of Jesus Christ. According to him: "the life and passion of Christ is the combat of the servant of Yahweh against the power of evil. He reveals himself as the saviour of sinners"(p.291). Through faith and experience of the grace of God, human beings share in the life of Christ; aided by the Holy Spirit, they are freed from sin. In this regard, Christ in the NT calls people to conversion; and his death becomes a death for others, for the forgiveness of sin.

Roman Catholic Perspective of Sin

For centuries, the dominant Roman Catholic perspective on sin was derived from Augustine's famous definition. He says that, "sin is anything said, done, or desired contrary to the eternal law" (Augustine, 1950:30). This understanding of the meaning of sin no longer attracts the intellectual attention of many scholars. The attitude of contemporary scholars toward Augustine's definition is expressed by Keane (1977). In his assessment of current situations, he notes:

> many traditional moral text books defined sin as the breaking of God's eternal law. Moral theologians today do not dispute

> the fact that we human beings need laws or rules, nor do they dispute that sin takes place, laws are broken. What moral theologians do question today is whether law breaking should be understood as the most central or formal element in the definition of sin (pp.35-36).

Put another way, a significant number of catholic scholars toady would submit that it is inadequate to hold that the substance of sin is breaking God's commandments. Following the line of debate regarding the inadequacy of Augustine's definition, Gaillardetz (2011) opines that, "without wishing to deny the reality of human sinfulness, those who promoted this perspective were more willing to grant the limited, but still positive, natural potentialities of the human person and human society, even as they acknowledge the need for these potentialities to find their fulfilment in the life of grace" (p.52).

Evidently, Augustinian perspective of sin is too legalistic insofar as it sees sin as essentially the infraction of some externally imposed law. There are, in this context, many principles and laws that are inherent in the human person. However, the teaching of Vatican Council II is worth recalling.

The Council Fathers, reflecting on Augustine's definition and other thoughts, submitted that "the highest norm of the human life is the divine law whereby God orders and governs the entire universe and all the ways of the human community by a plan conceived in wisdom and love". Going on, the Council Fathers said, "man has been made by God to participate in this law, with the result that under the gentle disposition of divine providence, he can come to perceive ever more increasingly the unchanging truth" (Flannery, 1982:16-17). Thus, the Council Fathers teach that natural law is the way in which human person share in God's divine law. Through the natural law, people come to an ever deeper appreciation of what they are to do if they are to be fully the beings God wills them to be. Be that as it may, in the optimism of the Council Fathers, they affirmed the reality of human sin thus:

> Often refusing to acknowledge God as their source, men and women have also upset the relationship which should link them to their final destiny; and at the same time they have broken the right order that should exist within themselves as well as between them and other people and all creatures (p.13).

When external law is perceived in the above light, one begins to see how sin is, in essence, a morally negative act; that is, a freely chosen act known to contradict the eternal law.

The Biblical stories that refer to homosexual practices as contrary to the divine commands are the Leviticus Holiness Codes (Lev. 18:22; 20:13), the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:1-9), and Paul's letter to the Romans (1:26-27). The passages point to the essential order of human nature and call for its respect. In this regard, there is strong challenge to sustain the fact that despite evolution of morals, the immutable principles based upon every person's constitutive elements be unchanged. The Vatican II Fathers offer a plausible explanation of the position of divine law on human sexuality.

In *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in Modern World* they said, "moral goodness of the acts proper to conjugal life, acts which are ordered according to true human dignity, does not depend solely on sincere intentions. It must be determined by objective standards. These, based on the nature of the human person and his acts, preserve the full sense of mutual self-giving and human procreation in the context of true love".

With the stance of the Council Fathers on sin, would it be said that homosexual acts are tales of humanity's struggle with the powers of evil? Are homosexuals part of God's greatness and the fulfilment of divine mysterious design? In the pluralistic society of today, what is the Roman Catholic Church's teaching on homosexual orientation? The answers to these questions would be the focus of the next subheading.

Roman Catholic Teaching on Homosexuality

Given the intensity of feelings towards homosexuality in various faith based communities, many have suggested that homosexuals be banned and excluded from the normal societal realm. Exclusion or sanction is, in the minds of many, the only way to think of this highly explosive but realistic issue that has the propensity to tear apart social and ecclesial communities. In shaping the faith based response to homosexuality, the East Synod of the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria commended the National Assembly for enacting law against homosexuality in Nigeria. In a communiqué issued at the end of its 26th Synod meeting, with the theme: "Living by Faith", the church described the action of National Assembly as meeting "the cultural belief of Nigerians". Going further, the synod communiqué described homosexuality as an end-time evil.

The above stance, throws up the paradigm of "exclusion versus inclusion", "them versus us", and "inside versus outside"; and is this the most adequate way to think about homosexuality and homosexuals? As Knauss (2012) opines, "there seems to be a very large grey area between being "inside" and "outside" the church as a homosexual and both homosexual believers and church communities appear to use various strategies to bridge the gap that is opened by official church pronouncements on the matter"(p.183). In place of the conflict between being a homosexual believer and non-homosexual believer, the practice of integration is suggested. Integration encourages reconciliation of sexual identities as a process that continues over time. The most important factors in the process are trust in one's personal experiences and an emphasis on God's love. Integration also includes interaction with other people who can support identity formation process. This implies that both homosexuals and non-homosexuals would change in the process to result in something new. This development requires much more research. It is a process that will most likely continue for a long time given to diverse human beings on earth.

Essentially, Roman Catholic Church defines homosexuality as "relations between men or between women who experience an exclusive or predominant sexual attraction towards person of the same sex" (CCC.2357). Her teaching on homosexuality reflects the basic truth about human nature as the basis for morality. For her, a homosexual act violates the integrity of

human nature by divorcing the two naturally united aspects of the essence of the sexual act, which is the unitive and the procreative. In other words, the acts negate personal intimacy and reproduction.

In the light of the sacred scripture, the Roman Catholic Church describes homosexual acts as "acts of grave depravity" that are "intrinsically disordered" (CCC.2357) and contrary to the natural law. Put another way, Roman Catholic Church teaches that homosexual acts are against the natural law not because it is a rational human choice or orientation rather than an irrational biological and psychological process, but because the acts are contrary to right reason. The right reason here points to human participation in the eternal life of God. The life of God is the basis of moral character and it challenges human beings to be moral. Therefore, for the Roman Catholic Church and many faith-based communities, homosexuality is a sin.

But the irony is that some people opine that the Bible is not clear in its position on homosexuality. Scholars like Douglas (1999), from a womanist perspective, argue that:

> The meaning of the biblical stories customarily referred to as proof against homosexual practices has generally been misconstrued or distorted. Biblical scholars have painstakingly shown that the Leviticus Holiness codes (Lev. 18:22; 20:13), the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:1-9), and Paul's Epistle to the Romans (1:26-27) do not present a compelling case against homoeroticism (p.90).

In fact, the pro-homosexual scholars and activist submit that even the New Testament shows Jesus to be generously indifferent about matters of sexual orientation. For them, since Jesus neither made pronouncement nor condemned homosexuality, why invoking biblical authority to censor a group of people, in this case, homosexuals? Is the Bible actually a weapon to censor the behaviour of others?

While there is certainly no excuse to misuse and misinterpret the Bible to favour or disfavour a particular style of life, the Roman Catholic Church makes a clear distinction between sin and the sinner. The issue of sin has been highlighted earlier in the paper. As regards the sinner, the church shows a pastoral concern that is worth noting. The church states that "if a person has committed a sin and then that person experienced conversion, the Lord forgets" (Okogie, 2013:51).

Given the pastoral obligation of the Roman Catholic Church, she embraces the homosexuals with that same love and compassion of God. Thus, *the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)* discussing the pastoral care of homosexuals states:

> Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. These persons are called to fulfil God's will in their lives and... by the virtue of self-mastery that teach them inner freedom; they can and should gradually... approach Christian perfection (CCC. 2358-2359).

In the light of the above, the Roman Catholic Church recognizes the conflict between a person's religious and sexual identities; and she adopts the pastoral approach of integration rather than exclusion. She allows homosexuals to come to terms with one being homosexual and catholic in spite of magisterial responses. Thus, while for many faith based and secular communities alike, "being homosexual and being Christian indeed appear mutually exclusive", (Knauss,2012:183) the Roman Catholic Church has found ways to integrate every sexual identity through pastoral care aimed at leading homosexuals to experience conversion. The pastoral care approach is a process both on the individual level of identity formation and on the social level of community formation; it centres on hating sin and loving the sinner.

Conclusion

Following the logic of the findings of this paper, the facts of homosexuality, homosexuals, and being a believer are not supposed to be seen as mutually exclusive, except that a lot of people and scholars easily lose sight of the real meaning of God's mercy and compassion. Recognizing the fact that the world is not as intended originally, God offers mercy and redemption to all people. It was from these points of brokenness and compassion that human beings face the challenging tasks of developing civilization. They confront their brokenness and finitude in various ways. For good or for ill, the flame of sin and sexual orientation now burn in the human psyche. What this means is that human beings are on a long journey toward maturity. Part of the challenges in a pluralistic society becomes integrating different aspects of sexual identity without undue apprehensions. In addition to this is the responsibility to address objectively discrimination against homosexual. If discrimination stops, homosexuals would emerge to the mainstream of the human society openly and with self-confidence. The energies that a typical homosexual wastes in the anxiety of daily living in disguise would be released for use in finding lasting solutions to the more pressing human problems of corruption, climate change, and terrorism. Therefore, human society would be richer for acknowledging another aspect of human diversity since God hates monotony and loves diversity.

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