

The New Acceptance of Sodomy: Why?

By John F. Kippley

How could a Catholic priest ever come to think that it was morally acceptable for him to engage in sodomy? In the light of more than a dozen events or factors affecting one's thinking since 1960, a priest with a same-sex orientation might ask, "Why not?" This article reviews such factors and offers practical ways to reduce their effect.

If a Catholic Rip van Winkle had gone to sleep in late 1942 and awakened thirty years later, he would have thought he was in a different world. World War II was not only concluded, but the victors had helped the defeated countries rebuild and were now enjoying commerce with them. But now the Catholic Church was at war within itself. In 1968, Pope Paul VI had not only reaffirmed the perennial teaching against unnatural forms of birth control that had been previously reaffirmed in 1930 by Pope Pius XI, but there was an active war being waged against that teaching by dissenting priests and laity.

If our Catholic van Winkle thought he needed another long nap and woke up another 30 years later, he would have been shocked again. In 2002 we learned that a small number of priests not only accepted sodomy but engaged in this sin with children, mostly adolescent boys. Now, slightly more than 16 years later, we have been saddened by reports of bishops and even a cardinal who engaged in such immoral actions and/or covered up for others.

The first huge question is this: how did priests who took a promise of chaste celibacy come to think that it was now morally acceptable for them to engage in sodomy with consenting adults and even with minors—whether under the legal age of consent or psychological minors such as seminarians under their influence? I am assuming that they did not engage in these behaviors thinking, "I know this is a mortal sin but I am going to do it anyway." So my assumption is that somehow they rationalized their thinking so that they could call it acceptable. Another way of phrasing this question is this: how did they come to think they could accept the revised cultural practices as morally normative? My assumption here is that they were very much influenced by changes both in Western culture and also within the Church.

Cultural changes. The cultural changes have been huge and certainly predate the Second World War. In the 19th century there was a push by neo-Malthusians to promote a cultural acceptance of contraception. American cultural resistance was reflected in the state and federal anti-contraception Comstock Laws of the 1870s. The Church of England reaffirmed the Christian Tradition against marital contraception in 1908 and again in 1920 before caving and accepting it in

1930. (Their dissenting conservative bishops predicted that this would lead to **the acceptance of sodomy**, and how right they were!)

Margaret Sanger started her birth control movement in 1914 with actions that challenged the Comstock laws, gaining publicity and sympathy every time she was brought to court. Throughout the 1920s there was much talk about this, with increasing acceptance by the liberals of the day. In 1929, secular humanist Walter Lippmann wrote with great foresight about the revolutionary character of the acceptance of marital contraception. Noting the impossibility of keeping contraception restricted to married couples, he wrote: "Now this is what the Christian churches, especially the Roman Catholic, which oppose contraception on principle, instantly recognized. They were quite right. They were quite right, too, in recognizing that whether or not birth control is eugenic, hygienic, and economic, it is the most revolutionary practice in the history of sexual morals" (*A Preface to Morals*, 1999 ed. p.291).

The acceptance of marital contraception by the Church of England in 1930 wrought a tremendous cultural blow to the West. This was the first formal acceptance of marital contraception by an organized Christian body, and it led to the acceptance of marital contraception by the vast majority of Protestants.

Changes within the Church. Since July 27, 2018 when a Pennsylvania grand jury released its report on sexual abuse of minors by priests, we have been deluged by talk about the Scandal. I maintain that there are more than a dozen scandals right within the Church that have contributed significantly to the Scandals of 2002 and 2018. I use "scandal" in the sense of Matthew 18:6, an occasion of sin for another. I submit that when you consider all these stumbling blocks, it becomes easier to understand 1) how a priest with same-sex attraction could rationalize sodomy, even with minors; and 2) how a heterosexual priest could rationalize fornication and adultery for himself. I think the following chronology may be helpful for recognizing these stumbling blocks to chaste thinking and acting.

1. Oct 11 1962-December 8 1965: Vatican Council II. The Council indirectly played a part in the cultural change within the Church. The actual teachings of the Council supported in a general way the received teaching affirmed by *Casti Connubii*. However, the Council did not verbatim strongly affirm that encyclical. Instead, Popes John XXIII and Paul VI reserved to themselves the final word on that issue. In 1963, Pope John XXIII established a commission to study the factors that entered into the birth control discussion, and Pope Paul VI, after his election, renewed and expanded the commission. Unfortunately that led many to think that the Pope and his commission would somehow find a way to reaffirm the general principles but still allow the practice of marital contraception. Those who thought that change was coming wrote articles and brochures expressing their revisionist opinions but couched them with the reservation that they would accept whatever the Pope taught. Neither the change or the acceptance happened.

The biggest cultural change caused by Vatican II, however, had nothing to do with its actual teaching but with a vague cover-up phrase, “the spirit of Vatican II.” Regarding birth control, it went something like this: “Okay, in our ecumenical spirit we have admitted that the Protestants have it right about having the worship ceremony in the vernacular. We have also joined the Protestant practice and no longer bind meatless Fridays under the pain of a serious sin. So let’s be ecumenical and join the Protestants also in accepting marital contraception.” The necessary distinction between discipline and doctrine was lost by many.

2. 1966-1968: the two-year delay. The Papal Birth Control Commission gave its two contradictory reports to Pope Paul VI in the summer of 1966, but he did not issue *Humanae Vitae* until July 25, 1968. The intervening two years provided time for endless speculation. The fact that he took two years was interpreted by many as meaning that he was confused. I suspect that more than a few married couples used this delay as an excuse to practice contraception. Once the Reports were made public, I could not understand the delay. The Minority Report clearly showed that the acceptance of contraception involved the acceptance of sodomy. I thought that the Pope should have taken a day to read and reread the Reports, and then a week to cool off. Then, I think, he should have clearly stated that the reports of the Commission made it clear that the acceptance of contraception logically includes the acceptance of sodomy, and therefore there was no way he could change the teaching. I think he should have repeated the crucial words of *Casti Connubii* and promised a longer explanation within a few months.

3. 1967: A challenge to the meaning of fidelity. A radically new view of fidelity may have also played a part in rationalizing priestly immorality. A Belgian priest and theologian argued for a revised meaning of “fidelity” in a liberal weekly newspaper widely read by clerics. Formerly it meant being faithful now to a promise taken in the past. In the present age, he posits, it should mean being faithful to yourself as you are here and now. If persons including priests are encouraged to think that infidelity to their vows and promises can be thought to be fidelity, could this not also affect a person’s thinking about chastity?

4. July 25, 1968 and continuing: the public dissent. The summer of 1968 was a time of significant cultural battles. The murder of the Rev. Martin Luther King on April 4th. The murder of Robert Kennedy on June 5th. The near riots at the Democratic national convention in Chicago for a week in late August. But the most enduring protest has been the dissent from *Humanae Vitae* starting on July 25th. Due to leaks, the principal dissenters read the encyclical before it was formally published. Thus, Father Charles E. Curran and others were dissenting publicly even before the American bishops had time to read the encyclical. And they have never stopped.

5. Forever: The logic of contraception. A few questions may help to illustrate what the acceptance of marital contraception actually entails. Imagine asking a theist this question: “Who put together in the human sexual act what we commonly call ‘making love’ and ‘making babies’?” The theist has to reply, “God”. Next question: “What is contraception except the deliberate effort to take apart what God Himself has put together in this one act?” There’s only one reply:

“That’s precisely what contraception is all about.” Last question: “If we accept the idea that we can take apart what God has put together in the human sexual act, doesn’t this open the door, logically, to the acceptance of taking apart anything else related to the human sexual act?” I am not aware of any way to not apply that decision-making principle to any other imaginable sexual behavior. This obviously applies to the acceptance of sodomy, but it would also apply to the whole list of mutual-consent behaviors condemned in Sacred Scripture. In alphabetical sequence: adultery, bestiality, contraception, fornication, incest, prostitution, and sodomy.

5. November 15, 1968: The publication of “Norms of Licit Theological Dissent.” The dissent by many priests was bad enough, but it was compounded by the U.S. Bishops’ response to *Humanae Vitae* with a document titled “Human Life in Our Day.” Most of that document supported the encyclical, but it also included a section titled “Norms of Licit Theological Dissent.” The precise wording seemed harmless: “The expression of theological dissent from the magisterium is in order only if the reasons are serious and well-founded, if the manner of the dissent does not question or impugn the teaching authority of the Church, and is such as not to give scandal.” Clearly, the dissent movement could not have existed if the dissenters had followed those norms. But there were three major problems. First, with hindsight, we can see that the bishops should have foreseen the possibility of dissent and published these norms months before the encyclical was made public. Second, this response was not published until November 15, almost four months after *Humanae Vitae* with dissent raging and well accepted. Third, it did not respond to a key issue of the encyclical—the Totality Thesis.

6. 1963-1968: The Totality Thesis. A major problem with the dissent itself and any talk about licit theological dissent is that neither the dissenters nor the bishops were clearly pointing out to the Catholic public a core teaching of the encyclical—its condemnation of the Totality Thesis. In their search to find a way in which the Church could appear to uphold the received teaching and yet accept the use of unnatural forms of avoiding pregnancy, somebody developed a big-picture morality—the Totality Thesis. This looked at the marriage in its totality. If it was fruitful, then contraceptive acts could be considered as taking their morality from the non-contraceptive acts that caused pregnancy. In response to the Totality Thesis, Pope Paul reaffirmed the moral importance of individual acts. “The Church . . . teaches that each and every marriage act must remain open to the transmission of life” (HV, n,11) That “each and every” terminology is not found in *Casti Connubii*. It is clearly a response to the Totality Thesis.

It does not take much imagination to see that the adoption of such a big-picture morality could not be confined just to the marriage bed. What if one of the spouses is traveling? Can actions normally called adultery now be considered to take their morality from the overall fidelity of the spouses? What about _____? Just fill in the blanks. Logically, dissent from *Humanae Vitae* entails the acceptance of a completely privatized morality. That’s the “new morality” of the West in which there is no form of sexual behavior that is forbidden if the parties are of legal age and give mutual assent. How many priests and laity who dissented with their words and their actions realized what their dissent really entailed?

7. 1970: The logic of dissent— bestiality. Michael F. Valente captured the essence of dissent in his book, *Sex: the Radical View of a Catholic Theologian* (Bruce, 1970). According to the back cover, Valente was riding high at the time. He was the first Roman Catholic layman to receive a Ph.D. in Religion from Columbia University. He had taught at both Notre Dame University and Manhattanville College and was the Chairman of the Department of Theology at Seton Hall University, “probably the first, and perhaps the only, layman to hold such a position at any large Roman Catholic university in the United States.” He was also President of the Institute for the Study of Ethical Issues.

He writes well from his perspective of total individualism regarding moral decisions. “To say that there is no intrinsic moral valuation in any species of sexual act is to say that moral valuation of any act derives from the context of an individual’s life, not from an abstract code...”(p 24). “A new world view... makes it clear that each and every individual is uniquely capable of turning every interpersonal encounter into something new, something creative. . . The case of bestiality provides an interesting example. . . But, in any case, where is the harm in it?” (140). I have to give him credit for spilling the beans, so to speak, about what dissent from *Humanae Vitae* truly entails, and perhaps that’s why I have not seen him referenced by other dissenters. To repeat my question above: how many of those who rejected the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* have realized that the logic of the dissent movement cannot say NO even to bestiality?

8. 1971: The logic of dissent—spouse-swapping. While Valente clearly pointed out the consequences of his individualism and was largely ignored for being so open about the reality of dissent, others were less forthcoming. Father Charles E. Curran, the poster boy for the dissent movement, wrote widely but did not always point out the logical consequences of his arguments. So I tried to help. In 1971 I showed that his principles for decision making could not say NO to spouse swapping, and no one, including Fr. Curran, accused me of creating a straw man (“Continued Dissent: Is It Responsible Loyalty?” *Theological Studies*, 32:1. March 1971).

9. 1977: Rejection of the natural moral law. The confusion caused by the dissent was amplified by the publication of *Human Sexuality: New Directions in American Catholic Thought* by the Catholic Theological Society of America in 1977. In my opinion, it simply mirrored secular writing about sexuality, disdaining the biblical norms and the natural moral law, and looking instead at surveys and anthropological research to attempt to come up with a sociologically based new morality. They wouldn’t condemn even adultery; they wanted more sociological evidence. I keep this book in my Forbidden Books box with 20 other sexuality books written between 1963 and 1977. Only six of these were published before *Humanae Vitae*. I would not recommend any of them to anyone looking for reasons to believe and practice in accord with the Commandments and the Catholic Tradition. Taken together, these books added to the difficulty of forming a right conscience during this time of social and theological ferment.

10. 1968-1987: CUA. In addition to their inadequate *Human Life in Our Day*, the U. S. Bishops added to the confusion by keeping Fr. Charles Curran at Catholic University of America for 19 years until pressured by Pope John Paul II to remove him. Yes, they transferred him from the theology department to religious studies, but that still left him as a symbol of the bishops' acceptance of dissent. A priest once accused me of being a dissenter because I had opined that Curran didn't belong at CUA.

11. 1968-2018: Fifty years of episcopal laryngitis. In the face of surveys showing that a huge majority of fertile-age married Catholics were practicing contraception, there was relative silence on the part of the American bishops. Cardinal Timothy Dolan summed it up well not long ago by saying that he and his fellow bishops had laryngitis regarding *Humanae Vitae*.

12. Consequentialism. The defense of the received teaching regarding sexuality has been largely consequentialist—pointing up the bad and sometimes tragic consequences of adultery, fornication, incest, prostitution, and sodomy. There is no question that the consequences of these sins provide solid reason to avoid those behaviors. The problem is, however, that in an age of effective contraception, the risk of pregnancy from contraceptive adultery, fornication, incest and prostitution is erroneously thought to be almost nil, thus greatly reducing the effectiveness of the consequentialist approach. Granted, *Humanae Vitae* 17 has also used this approach persuasively, and its negative predictions have certainly been validated.

13. The lack of preaching and teaching an intrinsic meaning. As part of his response to the Totality Thesis, Pope Paul VI taught that “it is an error to think that a conjugal act which is deliberately made infecund and so is intrinsically dishonest could be made honest and right by the ensemble of a fecund conjugal life” (n. 14). If marital contraception can be described as *intrinsically dishonest*, then we need to describe the marriage act that is *intrinsically honest*. I have tried to do so.

The thesis I propose can be stated in 17 words: “Sexual intercourse is intended by God to be, at least implicitly, a renewal of the marriage covenant.” This was first published in “Holy Communion: Eucharistic and Marital” 17 months before *Humanae Vitae* (*Ave Maria*, February 25, 1967; it is explained more completely in *Covenant, Christ and Contraception* (Alba House, 1970) and in *Sex and the Marriage Covenant: A Basis for Morality* (Ignatius, 2005). This covenant theology of the marriage act is what helped Kimberly and Scott Hahn accept Catholic teaching on birth control when they were still Protestants, and then started them on their way to entering the Catholic Church. If this simple concept was that helpful to the husband who considered himself the most anti-Catholic student on his seminary campus, I suggest that it can be helpful to many Catholics as well. It needs to be said, however, that the Hahns had a great advantage over many Catholics. Kimberly's father, a Presbyterian pastor, had taught her a prayer of discipleship that essentially said, “You call, and I will do it.”

14. Sodomy and the logic of dissent. The purpose of this article is to explain some factors that contributed to the acceptance of sodomy not only in the secular culture but also within the Church. Imagine a priest with a same-sex orientation. Review the list of factors confusing the issue of human sexuality. The “Totality Thesis”. A new idea of fidelity to vows. The de facto acceptance of marital contraception both before and after *Humanae Vitae*. Add to this a new acceptance of same-sex orientation by seminaries. In all of this, where was a person with a same-sex orientation finding clear and open teaching to support the traditional teaching of the Church regarding chastity, both lay and priestly?

All of this constitutes the intellectual and moral environment of the person who is afflicted with same-sex attraction. Since my work as a parish lay evangelist starting in 1963, I have sympathized with such men. One such person called me, identified himself—“I’m what they call queer,” assured me he was a chaste practicing Catholic, and then stated the problem. All the parish social activities were oriented toward heterosexuals. His was a very lonely situation. So I applaud the work of Courage (couragerc.org) that provides moral support and social contact to such men in a completely Catholic environment.

The second big question is this: What can bishops and priests do to correct this situation so that at least there are no grounds for confusion about what the Church teaches regarding sexual morality? I think our ecclesial leaders, both individually and collectively, can do much to correct the current situation both in the United States and around the world.

1. Reaffirm *Humanae Vitae*. Point out that the Pope simply had to reply to the Totality Thesis. Point out that the acceptance of the “big picture morality” logically involves the acceptance of any imaginable sexual behavior between parties of legal age and mutual consent and give some examples. What parents want a Catholic teacher telling their high school students that occasional acts of fornication take their morality from a life of most-of-the-time chastity? What teenagers want their parents thinking that it’s permissible for traveling parents to have sex with others?

2. Use marriage preparation as a wonderful occasion for one-on-one evangelization. Insist that any and all NFP programs explicitly evangelize and explain why Catholics believe what the Church teaches; that is, teach that Jesus continues to keep his threefold Last Supper promise of the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Also, insist that all NFP programs be explicit in teaching about specific actions that constitute unnatural forms of birth control. Fertility awareness as an organ recital is insufficient. Insist on teaching that contraception contradicts the covenant meaning of the marriage act, and insist on promoting and teaching Ecological Breastfeeding—the pattern of breastfeeding that truly does space babies. Engaged and married couples have a right to know these things.

3. Condemn the whole idea of licit dissent from *Humanae Vitae*. There simply is no such thing as licit dissent from its teaching against the Totality Thesis and contraception.

4. Reaffirm the permanence of vows—both marital and priestly. Condemn the proposition that fidelity means being faithful to myself here and now as contrasted with being faithful to a promise made years ago. Let the mass of the laity know what sort of ideas were being promoted in certain circles back in the Sixties and may still be in play.

5. Reaffirm *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*. Reaffirm what Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen is purported to have told Catholic parents—that it's better to hear the Church attacked at a public college than to hear the faith undermined at a nominally Catholic college. Parents should not have to fear the local Catholic college as a danger to the Faith.

6. Preach and teach 1 Cor 12:26. "If one member suffers, all suffer together." What if 95% of the members of the body are suffering the sin of marital contraception? In my opinion, such massive deliberate sinfulness not only fails to build up the body of Christ and support the priest in his vocation of chaste celibacy but actually increases the difficulty of priests remaining faithful to their promises. All of us, laity and priests, are in this together, and each of us has an obligation to do our part to build up the Body of Christ.

7. Preach and teach personal discipleship. Is chaste abstinence sometimes a daily cross? Of course! Teach and explain the covenant theology of the marriage act. It gives a positive meaning to the human sexual act, and that in turn gives meaning to the negative teachings against all sins of unchastity. None of them are true marriage acts.

When pastors do these things, they will see a rejuvenation of Catholic parishes and schools.

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