



Pastoral Ministry to Young People with Same-Sex Attraction

Episcopal Commission for Doctrine of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops

Our Reasons for Writing

1. As Bishops, we wish to address the pastoral needs of adolescents and young adults who question their sexual identity or experience feelings of same-sex attraction. We are concerned for the spiritual good of all persons, and want to help them live out their call “to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity.”¹ Convinced that “only what is true can ultimately be pastoral,”² we offer this guidance, by way of general principles and pastoral guidelines, to all Catholics, pastors, parents and educators, as well as to young adults themselves.

2. In this document the expression “person with same-sex attraction” refers to one who feels an erotic and emotional attraction, which is predominant and not merely episodic, towards persons of the same sex, whether with or without sexual relations. The terms “gay” and “lesbian” are not used to define people in the Church’s official teachings and documents. Although these words are common terms in current speech, and many people use them to describe themselves, they do not describe *persons* with the fullness and richness that the Church recognizes and respects in every man or woman. Instead, “gay” and “lesbian” are often cultural definitions for people and movements that have accepted homosexual acts and behaviours as morally good.

This Letter does not address the debate about the origins or causes of homosexuality or same-sex attraction. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* recognizes that “its psychological genesis remains largely unexplained.”³

I. General Principles

Human Dignity of All Persons

3. In the eyes of the Church, every human person is a unique and irreplaceable gift created by our loving God and called to be his son or daughter. Created in the image and likeness of God and redeemed by the blood of Christ, every person possesses an intrinsic dignity which must always be respected. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms that persons with homosexual inclinations “must be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. These persons are called to fulfill God’s will in their lives.”⁴

1 Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, n. 40.

2 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* (1986), n. 15. This important document of the Magisterium contains guidelines on the Catholic Church’s teaching on the issue.

3 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2357.

4 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2358.

We exhort all those exercising a ministry in the Church or working in the pastoral care of young people to be especially careful not to perpetuate injustice, hatred or malice in speech or action – unfortunately still too common among us – against persons with homosexual inclinations.

We wish to stress that, although sexual identity helps situate the person as a unique individual, the human person “can hardly be described by a reductionist reference to his or her sexual orientation.”⁵ Those with same-sex attraction are first and foremost human beings, our brothers and sisters in Christ. Because of their inherent dignity, they always deserve our respect. By fostering this profound esteem we imitate the Good Shepherd’s love for his flock.

Human Sexuality in God’s Plan

4. While always insisting on respect and compassion for young people with same-sex attraction, the Church also reaffirms God’s plan for human sexuality. Our sexuality is a gift which God saw as “very good” when he created human persons in his image and likeness, “male and female he created them” (Gen 1.27). The complementarity of man and woman is inherent in the design of creation.

“To say that man is created in the image and likeness of God means that man is called to exist ‘for’ others, to become a gift.”

John Paul II
(*Mulieris Dignitatem* 7)

“One can understand the ‘spousal’ meaning of the human body only in the context of the person. The body has a ‘spousal’ meaning because the human person, as the [Second Vatican] Council says, is a creature that God willed for his own sake and that, at the same time, cannot fully find himself except through the gift of self.”

John Paul II
(*General Audience*
January 16, 1980)

Human sexuality belongs to God’s creative plan as a powerful sign of his self-giving love, as the Servant of God, Blessed John Paul II, wrote:

God is love and in himself he lives a mystery of personal loving communion. Creating the human race in his own image and continually keeping it in being, God inscribed in the humanity of man and woman the vocation, and thus the capacity and responsibility, of love and communion. ... Consequently, sexuality ... is by no means something purely biological, but concerns the innermost being of the human person as such.⁶

Human beings, then, in their sexual difference and complementarity, express what Blessed John Paul II calls “the spousal meaning of the body.” This means that the complementarity of masculinity and femininity, which encompasses both body and spirit, reveals the call of every human being to become a gift for another person. This fundamental truth is the foundation of the Church’s understanding of sexuality.

5. Sexual relations belong within the marriage covenant between a man and a woman, for it is only within this covenant that the two inseparable ends of marriage can be achieved: the deepening of love between spouses and the procreation and education of children.⁷ Any genital act outside the covenant of marriage cannot fulfill this twofold purpose intended by the Creator and thus is morally wrong.

Scripture and Tradition teach that sexual relations between persons of the same sex are not in accord with God’s original intention expressed in the plan

5 Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* (1986), n. 16.

6 John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* (1981), n. 11.

7 Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2363; Pontifical Council for the Family, *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality: Guidelines for Education within the Family* (1995), n. 14.

of creation.⁸ For this reason, the Church has consistently taught that homosexual acts can never be approved.⁹

Distinguishing Inclinations from Actions

6. In her teaching, however, the Church never condemns persons with same-sex attraction. She carefully distinguishes between an individual's inclinations or feelings – some of which are transitory and/or situational and others which are deep-seated or permanent – and one's actions. While homosexual acts are always objectively wrong, same-sex inclinations are not in themselves sinful or a moral failing. To the extent that a same-sex attraction is not freely chosen, there is no personal culpability in having such an inclination. Nonetheless, when oriented toward genital activity, this inclination is "objectively disordered."¹⁰ This does *not* mean that the person as a whole is somehow defective or "badly made," or that he or she has in some way been rejected by God. Inclinations to homosexual acts in no way diminish the full human dignity or intrinsic worth of the person. For many people, same-sex attraction constitutes a trial. They therefore deserve to be approached by pastors with charity and prudence.

Fostering Chastity

7. Since chastity is a way of loving, it entails far more than the avoidance of sin. Like love, it can grow indefinitely. Becoming a chaste person follows the laws of growth and development and therefore requires not only self-control but also perseverance. The Triune God's presence in the soul of the baptized person, through the Holy Spirit, is the foundation of Christian life. That same Spirit assures us that living chastely is possible for everyone and can become a source of great joy.¹¹

"Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body."

1 Corinthians 6.19-20

Adolescents and young adults need to be taught by word and example that the virtue of chastity means "the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being."¹² Through a Christ-centred love Christians can be fulfilled in all aspects of life, including the gradual integration of their sexuality. On this challenging journey, only a greater love can heal a lesser love.

Through his life of self-giving and chaste love, Christ has left all of us an example to follow for living our sexuality, whether as single or married persons. For everyone, chastity means integrating one's thoughts, feelings and actions in the area of human sexuality so that they reflect the moral order. Chastity teaches the way of self-mastery and is "the spiritual power which frees

love from selfishness and aggression."¹³ It makes self-giving possible and is the prerequisite for generous love and true fulfillment.

8 Some scriptural examples include Gn 18.20-19.25; Lv 18.22, 20.13; Rm 1.24-28; 1 Cor 6.9-10.

9 Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2357; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Persona Humana* (1975), n. 8.

10 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2358.

11 Cf. the CCCB Episcopal Commission for Doctrine's *Pastoral Letter to Young People on Chastity* (2011). It is available for download at ccb.ca. Printed copies can be ordered from ccbpublishations.ca.

12 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2337.

13 Pontifical Council for the Family, *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality: Guidelines for Education within the Family* (1995), n. 16.

8. All young people, whether or not they experience an inclination to same-sex attraction, strive to understand and appropriate their sexual identity. The progressive maturing of a person's freedom is a long-term process that can be encumbered by numerous obstacles. These include pressures from the media (particularly on the internet), a widespread moral relativism, and the hedonism propagated by secular society itself.

For young people who experience a same-sex attraction and for whom marriage is not an option, choosing chastity as a positive value is even more of an ongoing challenge. We must encourage them to live their single lives chastely as disciples of Jesus, who followed the path of sacrifice to the glory of eternal life. Responding generously to the call to chastity involves suffering and difficulty, but Christ invites us to place our burdens on him: "Come to me, all you who are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ... For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Mt 11.28, 30). Countless Christians through the ages have found that Jesus' friendship and care bring inner healing and peace, and enable them to bear fruit for the life of Christ's Body, the Church (cf. Col 1.24).

A person with homosexual inclinations is not called to a "loveless" life, but to live in the love and grace of Christ Jesus. He alone fulfills our human personalities and lifts them up to the Father. Such a life entails both self-giving and self-sacrifice, the marks of true love for God and one's brothers and sisters.

II. Pastoral Guidelines

9. The whole Christian community has a call to guide its young members who experience same-sex attraction in their journey toward human maturity. We offer these reflections and guidelines for all Catholics, but especially for the priests, pastoral workers, parents and educators who wish to help adolescents and young adults facing difficulties in this regard.

To the Catholic Community

10. We wish to acknowledge in our midst the generous men and women with same-sex attraction who bear witness to the Gospel through their generosity and service to charity in the truth. At the same time, while recognizing the experience of persons with same-sex attraction and the turmoil it often causes in their lives, the Catholic community also has the responsibility of witnessing to the full truth of human sexuality. We must counteract false ideas of freedom promoted by secular society, ideas which can disorient and harm our youth. More than ever, the beauty of the Church's teaching on human sexuality, which leads to authentic freedom, needs to be lived and convincingly preached by everyone.

The moral and spiritual relativism of our society can make the Church's teaching on sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular appear bizarre, out of touch, and even intolerant. Yet when people cease to base their moral judgments on objective truth, confusion results. All too often they fall victim to lies about the meaning of true freedom and authentic self-expression. True Christian freedom is not first of all an acceptance of one's own desire to do what one wants, but an acceptance of the truth which sets us free (cf. Jn 8.32).

11. To assist young persons with same-sex attraction it is necessary to understand the enormous pressures to which they are frequently subjected: unjust discrimination, the sense of invisibility and isolation, and ignorance of their particular situation. We deplore all such attitudes and actions.

Hedonism and an obsession with the pursuit of pleasure, combined with an excessive consumerism for “as much as possible as soon as possible,” typify the mentality of contemporary Western society. Young people in particular are often the targets of solicitations, often through the media, which encourage them to consider sexual relations as simply another product of consumption, “a commodity, a mere ‘thing’ to be bought and sold.”¹⁴ To help them overcome this confusion, we ourselves must be mature in our faith and profoundly rooted in friendship with Christ (cf. Jn 15.15), a friendship that enables us to discern between truth and deceit.

Catholics ought to be exemplary in treating persons with homosexual inclinations first and foremost as human beings created by God and worthy of respect. The Church’s teaching emphasizes this attitude: “It is deplorable that homosexual persons have been and are the object of violent malice in speech or in action. Such treatment deserves condemnation from the Church’s pastors wherever it occurs. It reveals a kind of disregard for others which endangers the most fundamental principles of a healthy society. The intrinsic dignity of each person must always be respected in word, in action and in law.”¹⁵

To Priests and Pastoral Workers

12. Catholic parents testify that a welcoming, respectful and sensitive attitude by their parish community is especially important when they are dealing with a child’s disclosure of same-sex attraction. Offer your patient assistance to parents who are grappling with the challenges of supporting a son or daughter who is coming to terms with same-sex attraction and may experience isolation or repressing silence. Ostracism or the fear of being rejected or even hated, frequently contributes to the despair that all too often is felt by these young persons. We urge you to be attentive to their parents, reducing their isolation and worry by your counsel.

Bishops, as well as priests, deacons and pastoral workers, should commit themselves anew to being attentive to the needs of adolescents and young adults with same-sex attraction, who are found in our families, parishes and communities. Make them feel welcome in our churches. Listen to them and offer them the love of Christ.

13. Take the time to examine your own interior dispositions towards people with same-sex attraction. With the help of God’s grace, work hard to remove whatever may prevent you from welcoming them warmly. Be aware that your language and attitudes can inadvertently communicate a message that has nothing to do with the Church’s authentic teaching.

Above all, welcome these young adults and, if they are honestly striving to live in accordance with the teaching of Christ, encourage their full and active role in parish life. Such participation provides a source of support that allows them to make progress in living a chaste life.

¹⁴ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, n. 5.

¹⁵ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* (1986), n. 10.

We ask that you promote support groups that foster chaste living, such as “Courage” for individuals with same-sex attraction and “Encourage” for families interested in learning more about how to help their children. Where support groups already exist, give them your backing. Where they do not yet exist, make every effort to establish them at both the parish and diocesan levels.

To Parents

14. We wish to express our spiritual closeness to you, parents of children discovering a same-sex attraction. This can be a time of questioning for you as well. It will require from you patience, self-control, prudence and understanding. Remember that your child needs you and the family now more than ever. Children always remain a gift – God’s gift to you. At all times strive to respond lovingly and with trust in divine Providence. Continue to welcome your child into your home and family life in imitation of Christ, encouraging him or her to be faithful to the spiritual life and, if helpful, to seek the guidance of a priest or the assistance of a counsellor.

15. Counselling can be a valuable tool for struggling youth, who may experience a crisis as they grow increasingly aware of homosexual feelings. Young people, particularly adolescents and young men, may be tempted to commit suicide once they can no longer deny or ignore their deep-seated same-sex inclinations. Everyone must be alert to offer hope and assistance to these young people lest despair obscure their judgment.

Ensure that professional counsellors or psychologists who see young people are distinguished by their sound human and spiritual maturity. They must be committed to the Christian vision of the human person and sexuality, as well as the Church’s teaching on homosexuality and chastity. Their interventions can help your child discern the meaning of a same-sex attraction in a way that leads to greater clarity about sexual identity and the inherent dignity of all children of God.

To Educators

16. Parents have the principal moral responsibility of educating their sons and daughters in matters of human sexuality. As teachers, catechists and other educators, you play a role insofar as you carry out your responsibilities in the name of the parents and with their consent.

In the catechesis of young adults, it is imperative to present in a firm but charitable way the true nature and purpose of human sexuality in all its dimensions. Encourage them in the practice of chastity, especially since society often misunderstands and scorns this virtue. Avoidance of difficult questions or watering down the Church’s teaching is always a disservice. Such attitudes could lead young people into grave moral danger.” Moral conscience requires that, in every occasion, Christians give witness to the whole moral truth, which is contradicted both by approval of homosexual acts and unjust discrimination against homosexual persons.”¹⁶

We ask you to pay particular attention to guiding adolescents and young adults with same-sex attraction away from two specific dangers. First, help them see themselves as persons with a God-given dignity and not merely as individuals with sexual inclinations and desires. Second, help them avoid involvement in a “gay culture” opposed to the Church’s teaching, with its often aggressive and immoral lifestyle.

¹⁶ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Considerations regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions between Homosexual Persons* (2003), n. 5.

III. Words of Encouragement to Young People

17. Dear friends in Christ: we want you to know that we are close to those of you who are struggling with same-sex attraction or homosexual inclinations. We do not cease “praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding” (Col 1.9). We offer you the following practical advice grounded in the teaching of Christ and wisdom of the Church. Above all, hold close to your heart that being a Christian is about a relationship with Jesus Christ, who gives your life meaning and a decisive direction.

Accept that God loves you

18. Even if you have doubts or are troubled by feelings of self-rejection, remember that you are a child of God, embraced by his tender love. Even before the world was created, you were chosen “to be holy and blameless before him in love” and you were destined “for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ” (Eph 1.4-5).

“Pray without ceasing” (1 Thes 5.17)

19. Develop your personal relationship with God through persevering prayer. He speaks, hears and replies. Through his prayer, Jesus listened to God and was comforted by him. The Gospel teaches us that when Jesus was put to the test, he withdrew by himself to pray (cf. Mt 4.1ff; Mt 17.1ff). It was there, in dialogue with his Father, that he received the grace to accomplish God’s will.

By praying, you turn towards God and through him to your neighbour. Prayer becomes hope in action. Keep Christ as your constant Companion, with whom you can converse at every step of your journey. Leave yourself the space to hear his whisper, calling you to follow him. Let his word shape your journey as an unfolding of holiness.

Prayer to the Blessed Virgin Mary, who is “our life, our sweetness and our hope,” is particularly helpful for those who struggle with same-sex attraction and earnestly desire the grace to live chastely. Mary teaches us that chastity is not “love-less,” but love fulfilled, love made fruitful.

“Be Vigilant” (1 Pet 5.8)

20. Because chastity is not only a journey but also a battle, be on guard against temptations that will continually arise. Realistically assess your weaknesses, and avoid circumstances that might lead you to fall. When using the internet, be on guard against pornography, as well as certain chat rooms and social networking sites that promote immoral lifestyles. Chastity is a challenge, but God’s grace will give you the strength to overcome temptation.

Celebrate the sacraments frequently

21. As visible signs of God’s grace active in your lives, the sacraments are gifts to make you holy. A life centred on the Eucharist sustains and increases your closeness to Jesus, helps to separate you from sin and commits you to a life of service of your brothers and sisters.

When you stumble on your way, the Lord is with you. Never give in to discouragement, but return frequently to the Lord for forgiveness. Growth in holiness is a long and arduous journey.

Because we are all sinners, God continuously calls us to conversion when we give in to weakness and sin. God always offers you his grace, especially in the hardest moments of your lives. Confess your sins with contrite hearts, resolved not to repeat them again. Try to find a stable confessor or spiritual director with whom you can discuss your difficulties honestly and so receive help in overcoming them.

Through the sacrament of Reconciliation, the Lord tells every Christian: “Go your way and from now on do not sin again.” (Jn 8.11). With forgiveness you will experience the joy that comes from the God “who is rich in mercy” (Eph 2.5).

Cultivate virtuous friendships

22. Friendship is a precious gift from God, a way of loving necessary for every person. “Whether it develops between persons of the same or opposite sex, friendship represents a good for all. It leads to spiritual communion.”¹⁷ To equate friendship with genital expression, however, distorts its meaning. We recommend therefore that you nurture virtuous and chaste friendships, though not exclusively with others of the same sex. True friendship enhances your ability to live chastely, while living in isolation, fear or bitterness undermines a healthy and holy life.

Conclusion

23. As pastors, we have the mandate from Christ to help each and every person receive the Gospel’s message of hope and accompany them toward the “fullness of life” (Jn 10.10) that Jesus promised. That fullness of life cannot avoid the path taken by the Lord himself, namely, we must be united to the paschal mystery of his death and resurrection.

All those who seek to follow the Lord “are called to enact the will of God in their life by joining whatever sufferings and difficulties they experience in virtue of their condition to the sacrifice of the Lord’s Cross. That Cross, for the believer, is a fruitful sacrifice since from that death comes life and redemption.”¹⁸

As a final word, we express our profound gratitude to all those who wisely and lovingly guide young people with a same-sex attraction: priests and pastoral associates, parents and educators. May the Lord grant all of us wisdom and strength in understanding, educating and loving all youth entrusted to our care. The future of the Church and society depends on them and on our efforts to help them on their journey to “live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us” (Eph 5.2).

Some Church documents on Same-Sex Attraction

- Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* (1986).
- Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Some Considerations Concerning the Response to Legislative Proposals on the Non-Discrimination of Homosexual Persons*, 1992.
- The Pontifical Council for the Family, *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality: Guidelines for Education within the Family*, 1995.
- *Catechism of the Catholic Church* no. 2357-2359.

All of these documents are available at the Vatican website, www.vatican.va

¹⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2347.

¹⁸ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* (1986), n. 12.