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For Those Who Believe in Rational Argument: In Memoriam John Harvey OSFS

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John Harvey OSFS, *The Homosexual Person: New Thinking in Pastoral Care* (Ignatius Press, 1987).
John Harvey OSFS, *The Truth about Homosexuality: The Cry of the Faithful* (Ignatius Press, 1996).
John Harvey OSFS, *Homosexuality and the Catholic Church: Clear Answers to Difficult Questions* (Ascension Press, 2008).

Consider how swiftly American society has changed as regards homosexuality. The “Stonewall riots,” the touchstone and unofficial beginning of the gay rights movement, occurred in June 1969. Since then, the demands from the gay community have progressed from simple tolerance, to acceptance, to the right to marry, to now the silencing of any opposition as bigoted and “homophobic.” Those who once insisted on tolerance for their lifestyle will now tolerate no disagreement. Society now requires everyone’s approval of what not long ago was regarded as morally abhorrent.

In this radical transformation of society, one of the greatest casualties is the individual who experiences homosexual attractions but who desires to live chastity. He finds, on one hand, the homosexual community encouraging him to live out his sexual desires, to claim his gay identity, to embrace the lifestyle, and so on. Worse, even some in the Church will encourage him to do so. Unfortunately, among those to whom he turns for help, he may find insensitivity, ignorance, misunderstanding, or simply an unwillingness to help. This individual is caught in the crossfire of the broader battle. He suffers great loneliness and often despair in the face of a struggle that some see as futile and others ignore.

For over fifty years Father John Harvey, an Oblate of St Francis de Sales, worked with men and women in precisely this situation. In 1980 he founded Courage, the Catholic spiritual support group to help men and women with same-sex attractions live chastity. Well before founding the group he had already distinguished himself as a moral theologian. He had also been counseling same-sex attracted men and women for several decades.

Father Harvey came to the work of Courage, therefore, as a man of considerable wisdom and experience. His books reflect this. He does not write as a man who has only read and reasoned. He displays an integration of his deep intellectual learning with years of listening to and directing those with same-sex attractions. Through his reading and study he knew the truth about homosexuality from the outside. And through his years of directing souls beset by homosexual attractions, he knew it from

the inside as well. He knew both the truth to be communicated and those who need to receive it.

Father Harvey possessed that rare quality of simplicity, which made his mind all the more able to grasp the truth about morality and about the human person. He saw things clearly because he accepted the Church's teaching plainly and did not clutter his mind with worldly sophistication and vanity. Only such a man could forthrightly and peacefully present his writings, as he put it, "for those who believe in rational argument" (*The Truth*, p. 125) – knowing full well that, although many will not accept it, he must try to reach those who will... or who might someday.

Father Harvey wrote three books on the issue of homosexuality: *The Homosexual Person*, *The Truth about Homosexuality*, and *Homosexuality and the Catholic Church*. No other works provide an authentically Catholic examination of the issue with such depth and breadth. He not only presents the Church's teaching clearly but also examines the opposition with notable accuracy and fairness. And yet for all that his tone always remains placid and serene, presenting challenging truths and engaging the opposition without rancor or bitterness.

One is also struck by the variety of angles from which Father Harvey examines the matter: moral, philosophical, theological, biblical, sociological, psychological, and political. He considers the origins of homosexuality, the possibility of change, the importance of friendships, the best kind of counseling, the meaning of chastity, and so on. Unlike many writers and speakers on this topic, he never falls into the trap of thinking that it can be flattened out and made a one-dimensional issue (e.g. "Love is love"... "Born this way," etc.). Good son of St Francis de Sales, he knows that the human heart is more complex than that.

Further, Father Harvey shows a remarkable ability to integrate what many others consider opposed: solid theology and genuine pastoral charity, sound spirituality and good psychology, fatherly love for those with homosexual tendencies and a strong (and just as fatherly) opposition to those who would lead souls astray. Again, by this integration – a truly *Catholic* quality – he reveals his grasp of both objective truth and the complexity of the human heart.

His books can appear somewhat dated. Each one is indeed something of a period piece. Such is an inevitable downside of writing in response to the demands of the day. Thus the older books contain sections that we might now consider irrelevant, and the last book addresses matters unanticipated years before (e.g. the danger of internet pornography). And yet this "dated" quality does have some benefit. The spacing of the books (about one every ten years) provides an historical survey of the issue. The first book came out just as AIDS was hitting society, and the most recent as same-sex "marriage" was gaining acceptance.

Ignorance of history is a great danger, on this matter as with any other. These books tell the story of how the Church has responded to the challenge of homosexuality and – just as important – what threatened (and threatens) the Church's teaching and ministry. They also reveal how the approach of Father Harvey and of Courage developed over the years. In the second and third books you will find him explaining a correction or refinement of his thought. And that development reveals again what a good thinker and director Father Harvey was – always self-correcting and refining his approach so as to wed the truth to the person.

Father Harvey's first book, *The Homosexual Person: New Thinking in Pastoral Care*, came out soon after the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*. The timing was merely coincidental. And yet the book serves as the perfect companion to the magisterial document. Father Harvey has a chapter examining the

document and its attendant controversy. But more importantly, the other chapters examine in more depth the issues addressed by the document itself.

The book is dated in its treatment of certain dissenters from Catholic teaching. Thanks to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the influence of dissenters and their apostolates (most notably Sister Jeannine Gramick and Father Robert Nugent of *New Ways Ministry*) have diminished in the intervening years. Which is not to say that dissenters have disappeared... but merely that they, like dissenters in every age, have simply become more nuanced and discreet. Father Harvey's examination of the dissenters (updated in his subsequent books) helps the reader understand and appreciate the constant threats to the truth... and therefore the need to be vigilant.

This exception aside, *The Homosexual Person* is remarkably prescient. To read Father Harvey's discussion of the gay rights movement and same-sex "marriage" in light of the past five years is shocking. Although little heard or read, he saw decades ago what we are now seeing fulfilled. The entire book anticipates the deep societal and pastoral challenges that most in the Church are only now coming to realize. After eight years of involvement in the work of *Courage*, I am amazed to find many of our current questions and challenges examined if not answered in this book.

In his second book, *The Truth about Homosexuality: the Cry of the Faithful*, Father Harvey both updates and deepens the work of the first. As the title indicates, he had come to realize the faithful's thirst for truth on this issue. He desired to make the insights – both theological and pastoral – accessible to more people and thus promote the assistance needed for people with same sex attractions and those who care for them.

The third book, *Homosexuality and the Catholic Church: Clear Answers to Difficult Questions*, differs from the first two. It has the same clarity as the others but is presented in question-and-answer format. In my opinion, this format does not fit Father Harvey's style. The questions seem too forced to fit the answers. Nevertheless, the book delivers what it promises: clear answers to difficult questions. It continues the updating ("so much has happened," he says in the intro) not only of the difficulties faced by the Church but also of best pastoral practices.

In these books Father Harvey repeatedly articulates and explains the principle that guided his work and the work of *Courage* – namely, the distinction between the person and his homosexual attractions or tendencies. Those who advocate the goodness of homosexual acts and lifestyle do so because they identify the *person* – always a good – with the homosexual inclinations. They therefore conclude that such inclinations must be good and so also, of course, the actions. Likewise, those who feel shame and loneliness do so precisely because they have come to identify themselves (their very *persons*) with their same-sex attractions, which they know (both intellectually and affectively) to be wrong. The work of *Courage* (and of the Church as a whole) turns on the person/attraction distinction. We can fairly summarize that work as distinguishing the person to be loved from the attractions to be resisted and even overcome.

In this regard we must note the unfortunate title *The Homosexual Person* (and therefore also the unfortunate title of the CDF document). In short, we should not predicate "homosexual" of any person. That does a disservice to the dignity of the human person by collapsing personhood into sexual inclinations. The chronology of the books helps us to see the development in this area of language. Indeed, the Church is still trying to find the right vocabulary to speak about this modern phenomenon. Thus in his last book, Father Harvey ceased using the term "homosexual" or "homosexual person." His thought and ministry brought him to realize that it is better to speak of someone with "same-sex attractions." Although lacking brevity and ease of speech, this phrase has the virtue of precision. It

acknowledges both the person/attraction distinction and the complexity of the condition – not fairly summarized as an “orientation.” Which brings us to another matter of vocabulary....

Father Harvey’s use of the term “orientation” also underwent a deserved change. In his first two books we find the use of this word to describe homosexual inclinations or attractions. In the last book, however, he deliberately avoids it. This reflects the increased appreciation for the fact that homosexual tendencies (to use a term from magisterial documents), do not constitute a fixed, unchangeable aspect of the person and therefore should not be considered an “orientation.” Further, the term does violence to a proper understanding of human sexuality. Either our sexuality is *oriented* in a certain direction (i.e. toward the one-flesh union of marriage), or it is not. We cannot speak of more than one sexual “orientation” any more than we can think of the sun rising in more than one place (i.e. the orient).

Indeed, one of Father Harvey’s contributions is his discussion of the possibility for healing of homosexual attractions. He deftly navigates the extremes (on one hand, that change is impossible... on the other hand, that it is morally obligatory) to present the simple truth that many have found freedom, to varying degrees, from homosexual attractions. Thus we cannot speak of it as a fixed, unchangeable, unchanging “orientation.” (For this reason also the Church made a similar correction in the second edition of the *Catechism*, removing unfortunate language that implied homosexuality is a fixed orientation.)

The confusion in the Church on the issue of homosexuality seems to be no less than in broader society. Many, if not most, Catholics cannot provide a reasoned and reasonable response to their inquirers or accusers. Father Harvey’s books strengthen the ability of both clergy and laity to respond confidently to the questions and accusations they encounter. The subtitle of his second book – *The Cry of the Faithful* – really indicates what he sought to do in all of his books: to respond to the faithful’s desire for truth. And so he does, using his intellect and his pastoral charity to bring forth the beauty and goodness of the Church’s teaching.

