

**OBSERVATIONS CONCERNING THE REVISED TEXT OF
ALWAYS OUR CHILDREN
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After reading the text of the Revised Always Our Children (RAOC), in *Origins*, vol. 28, #7, July 2, 1998, I regard it as a distinct improvement over the flawed October 1, 1997 document, but it is still characterized by a misleading use of terms and by failure to provide specific kinds of guidance for Catholic parents of children with same-sex attractions. I had noted that Bishop Thomas O'Brien, chairman of the Committee on Marriage and the Family, had consulted with the Sacred Congregation of the Faith on the revision, and that the Congregation was "satisfied" with it. I was curious to know what "satisfied" meant and so I wrote to Rome because I wanted to publish my reservations about the revision. I received a prompt response which said that I was free to do so.

In his introduction to the revised document, Bishop O'Brien said that "the core message, tone, and direction of Always Our Children remains the same as in the first printing." That is precisely why I have reservations about the revision, albeit certain objectionable statements and misuse of Vatican documents were deleted from the original.

I objected strongly to the use of the terms 'gay' and 'lesbian' in the original document, pointing out that the human person "can hardly be adequately described by a reductionist reference to his or her sexual orientation" (CDF 1986 Letter, sect. 16). The terms reappear in the revised document with a caution that they must be used "in honest and accurate ways." The document gives no indication what are "honest and accurate ways." The common connotation of the terms 'gay' and 'lesbian' as understood in the secular media, and as understood by those who label themselves such is that the most important thing about them is their homosexual orientation. The individual will tell you, "This is WHO I AM. I was born this way, and I will always be this way. I intend to live this way. I will find a lover of my own sex with whom I can express my natural sexual feelings."

As long as the individual thinks this way, he is prevented from seeing himself as he really is: a rational creature of God with free will, capable by the grace of God of controlling his sexual desires and, in some instances, as has been empirically established, of getting rid of the condition itself. Each of us is far more than a sexual orientation. Although the revised document acknowledges that "our total personhood is more encompassing than sexual orientation," its acceptance of the terms 'gay' and 'lesbian' undercuts that very message. Instead of instructing parents to merely "be sensitive to how your son or daughter is using" these terms, it would be better to advise parents to discourage their son or daughter from labeling themselves as 'gay' or

'lesbian'. The 1986 Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church carefully avoids these terms, as I have indicated above (sect.16).

My second reservation is concerned with the failure of the revised document to correct its misuse of the 1975 Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics. The revised document (RAOC) states that "Church teaching acknowledges a distinction between a homosexual tendency that proves to be 'transitory' and 'homosexuals who are definitively such because of some kind of innate instinct'." It is incorrect to say that this is a matter of Church teaching. In section 8 of Certain Questions, the document says that some psychologists hold to this distinction "not without reason." Certain Questions repeats the psychological opinion of that time, that some homosexuals "are such because of some kind of innate instinct or because of a constitutional defect presumed to be incurable." Both AOC and RAOC use the phrase "some kind of innate instinct." Such is an erroneous translation of the Latin, *quasi-innatus*, which should be translated, as if innate, in other words, not innate. The first Italian edition of the Catholic Catechism which used the word 'innate' in describing the homosexual orientation was revised. Explaining the reason, Cardinal Ratzinger said, "One objection was that we made people think homosexual tendency was innate, that it was already present at the moment of birth or conception of the person. Many competent persons said that this has not been proven." The revised document, however, does not take these points into consideration.

In the paragraph following the reference to Certain Questions, it is said that we should "understand sexual orientation (homosexual or heterosexual) as a deep-seated dimension of one's personality" and "recognize its relative stability in a person". Equating heterosexual and homosexual in the parenthesis seems to imply that in the view of the Committee on Marriage and the Family, heterosexual orientation and homosexual orientation are on the same level - both are "deep-seated" and both have "relative stability".

But heterosexual attraction is natural to man and woman (Catholic Catechism #2333), while homosexual tendencies are unnatural, although psychologically understandable. Heterosexual attraction is God-given, and for the vast majority of the human race, leads to marriage, children, and family; same-sex attractions are an objective disorder, but not sinful in themselves (CDF Statement, 1986, sect. 3). The revised document refers to this objective disorder in footnote no. 1, but it ought to be explained in the text, as it is in section 3 of the 1986 document. One often hears this objection to the term "objective disorder" being applied to homosexual tendencies: "If a man lusts for a woman or vice versa, this too is an objective disorder." But this is not so, because, if the man or woman controls this natural attraction, and wills to express it in the natural state of marriage, it is a good thing, desired by the Creator. But if one has a sexual-genital attraction to another person of the same sex, it can never lead to a morally good act

between the two individuals, but rather it will always lead to an immoral act. That is why it is called an objective disorder.

The revised document repeats that it is "a common opinion of experts that there are multiple factors, genetic, hormonal, psychological, that may give rise to homosexual orientation." But there is no "common opinion" among experts on genetic or hormonal factors, and certainly many schools of thought on psychological factors. This document, moreover, does little to distinguish carefully between personal identity and sexual orientation. Our uniqueness as persons is not rooted in our sexual inclinations, but in other intellectual, volitive and bodily characteristics. Our personhood is much more complex than our sexual identity. To center personal identity in a homosexual inclination is to accept a false identity. It may be said that a homosexual orientation is not part of one's uniqueness as a rational or Christian person.

ADVICE TO PARENTS

The revised documents' advice to parents needs further clarification. It is still not clear whether child refers to an adolescent or an adult. In practice, the approach that parents should take towards an adolescent is radically different from the way they relate to a grown son or daughter. It is said that parents should not "presume that your child has developed a homosexual orientation". Then, at the end of the following paragraph, parents are advised to "remain open to the possibility that your son or daughter is struggling to understand and accept a basic homosexual orientation". The use of the term "basic" in this context connotes a fixed condition. This may not be the case, especially in a young person.

Granted it is wise to advise parents not to presume that their child has a homosexual orientation, as well as to prepare the parents for the possibility that their child does struggle with such feelings; however, to refer to such feelings as a "basic homosexual orientation" is problematic. There is no reason why an adolescent should resign himself or herself to "accepting a basic homosexual orientation", even while acknowledging same-sex attractions are present. Instead, parents should send the adolescent to a reliable therapist who believes in the Catholic teaching on homosexuality for guidance, and later to an experienced priest for counsel.

When it comes to the question of how parents relate to the grown son or daughter who claims to be "gay" or "lesbian", it is important to consider factors not mentioned in the revised document. From many years of counselling such parents, I have learned that in most instances, the grown son or daughter has made up one's mind to live in a relationship with a same-sex partner. Parents are then faced with a difficult decision whether to approve this relationship or to say to their grown child: "I love you, but I cannot approve your behavior. Please do not ask me to do so." And the usual reply is: "If you love me, you will accept our loving relationship, which for

us is like your marriage. But if you do not accept us in our union, then you do not love me." Oftentimes, the grown child will refuse to communicate with his parents. This tragic situation lead other Courage members and priests to form Encourage, a spiritual support group in which parents seek pastoral guidance and support for themselves.

ADDITIONAL CONCERNS ABOUT THE REVISED DOCUMENT

(1) The revised document does not specify the kinds of retreats that would benefit Catholic parents of adolescents with same-sex attractions, that is to say, retreats in which the retreat master and the Catholic psychologists involved are known for their loyalty to the magisterial teaching of the universal Church. I have known of retreats for Catholic parents of children with same-sex attractions where PFLAG leaders (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) advised the parents how to respond to adolescent or adult children. PFLAG seeks to persuade parents to accept their children in the sense of accepting the lifestyle of the children. This organization sees homosexual orientation as natural and good in those individuals who identify themselves as "gay" or "lesbian". Parents are told they should accept such persons and their behavior as good and natural, especially in the context of a "faithful" relationship. Such advice is painfully seductive, especially in the case of young persons who are confused about their sexual inclinations.

(2) In outlining the various emotional responses of parents who learn that their son or daughter has same-sex attractions, one should include under the heading FEAR: "You may fear for the spiritual welfare of your child who is active in the homosexual lifestyle." From my dialogue with such parents, I know this is a real concern for them.

(3) It is not enough to seek a therapist who "has an appreciation of religious values". The therapist should respect the moral teaching of the Catholic Church on homosexuality. The therapist should be open to the possibility that a young person may be able to move beyond homosexual attractions towards heterosexual development, despite the opposition of the psychological establishment.

(4) Under the pastoral recommendations to parents, it should be clearly stated in point number 2 that, while demonstrating love for the child, parents should stand opposed to any kind of homogenital activity, not only because they find it "objectionable", but also because it is seriously immoral.

(5) Under the pastoral recommendations to church ministers, point number 5, the advice to them to seek agencies that "operate in a manner consistent with Church teaching" needs clarification. It should be made clear that the agencies recommended should be faithful to the magisterial

teachings of the Church regarding the immorality of homogenital acts. Some agencies sin by omission in that they stress the issue of discrimination, while neglecting the need for a program to promote chastity among persons with same-sex attractions.

(6) The advice to seek help from "special diocesan gay and lesbian ministries" is also cause for concern, as our experience has shown that such "ministries" do not provide a program for chaste living. Such programs tend to encourage individuals to define their personhood by their homosexual attractions, labelling themselves according to an objectively disordered inclination. Father Benedict Groeschel regards the term "gay and lesbian ministry" as an oxymoron.

Once again, we praise the spirit of compassion found in the revised version of Always Our Children, and the effort to offer help to every family affected by homosexuality. We hope, however, that a better document can be developed. Members of Courage/Encourage pray that the Committee on Marriage and the Family will be open to further revisions of this document for the common good of all those persons with same-sex attractions who desire to live faithfully by the teachings of our Catholic Faith.