

Spiritual reflection

Spiritual accompaniment for persons with same-sex attraction

JAMES MCTAVISH

Local Responsible of the Verbum Dei Missionaries, Manila, Philippines

Some persons with same-sex attraction (SSA) will seek spiritual direction for various reasons, whether to help them to understand their same-sex feelings or to seek guidance in other aspects of life.¹ Spiritual direction is defined as

help given by one believer to another that enables the latter to pay attention to God's personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with this God, and to live out the consequences of the relationship. The *focus* of this type of spiritual direction is on experience [...] Moreover, this experience is viewed, not as an isolated event, but as an expression of the ongoing personal relationship God has established with each one of us. (Barry and Connolly 1982, 8–9)

The Congregation for the Clergy in their document "The Priest, Minister of Divine Mercy" which serves as an aid for the spiritual director states further "The principal objective of spiritual direction is therefore to discern the signs of God's will for our journey of vocation, prayer, perfection, for our daily life, and for our fraternal mission" (Congregation for the Clergy 2011, 78).

Persons who experience SSAs may approach for a one-off spiritual dialog or conversation about his or her situation, or may request regular spiritual accompaniment. An initial meeting can be organized at which the person can express his or her needs. At times one meeting alone may suffice to answer a doubt or clarify a situation. Having listened to the person, the director may suggest that the person continue the sessions. It is prudent to allow two or three meetings to transpire before agreeing on regular spiritual direction sessions; this should be explained to the directee in the first encounter. This gives both the director and the directee freedom to say no for various reasons.

RESPECT FOR FREEDOM

The director must always respect the freedom of the person being directed (the directee). The director can never force or coerce a person to take a course of action — he may only advise or suggest. If the directee experiences SSAs, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* also advises that he or she "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" (Catechism 1997, 2358). It is generally a good sign that a person requests spiritual direction as it usually indicates a certain seriousness in the desire for spiritual growth and openness to be guided.

It is important to note that "The spiritual director is not making the spiritual journey; he follows it by assisting the person he is directing in his concrete life. The Holy Spirit is the one who directs souls, and therefore the spiritual director should always support the action of the Holy Spirit" (Congregation for the Clergy 2011, 103).

LISTENING IS THE KEY

The first and foremost task of the director is to listen. The director is to listen to the person and listen for the action of God in the directee's life. Sometimes what is shared can be painful: hard for the directee to admit, and hard for the director to hear. In a person who experiences SSAs, it is quite likely that details of his or her sexuality will be brought up: feelings, thoughts, struggles, including sexual experiences, and the like. The director should be mature and have a sound formation in human sexuality and solid grounding in the Catholic Church's teaching on SSA. It is highly inappropriate to advise a person who experiences SSAs to "just find a steady partner" as all Christians are called to holiness and to Christian perfection even if this growth is only achieved in stages.

An important question regards the frequency and duration of spiritual direction. A rule of thumb can be 1 hour once a month. This is not fixed in stone as when a director begins to accompany the person it may be that at the beginning the meetings can be more frequent until the

director gets to know the story of the directee.

Clarify terms

It is useful to clarify exactly what the directee means when he or she speaks of experiencing SSAs or why he or she is seeking guidance. It may be that the person is uncertain about his or her sexual orientation and unsure if he or she is gay or not. The late Rev. John Harvey, O.S.F. S., a recognized expert on homosexuality and founder of Courage — the Catholic support group for persons who experience SSAs and desire to live chastely — identifies three components of a definition of homosexuality:

- (1) "A persistent erotic tendency to persons of the same sex." A temporary or transient attraction is also possible — but SSA and the term *homosexual* are usually used of an enduring attraction.
- (2) "An insensitivity to persons of the other sex as far as physical attraction is concerned." Sometimes the insensitivity extends to the broader psychological order.
- (3) "A positive distaste for physical relations with persons of the other sex."

The first characteristic is found in all persons with SSA, but the second and third characteristics are not found universally (Harvey 2007, 6–7).

I asked one young man, who had been assured he was gay, why he was seeking spiritual direction. He replied that he wanted to know how he would break the news not only to his father but also to his future wife. It turned out on later questioning that he did have a considerable degree of heterosexual feelings. He also had a total breakdown in his relationship with his father manifested by anger and a

lack of forgiveness. This is very important for a director to know as one proposed causative factor in the complex genesis of SSA is a poor relationship with the father and/or the mother (Catholic Medical Association 2000, 3).² These underlying situations were not readily obvious at the start, and surfaced with the passage of time and the establishment of trust. Exploring motivations and allowing the directee to speak freely about his or her personal history and experiences is an important foundation for the spiritual-direction relationship.

Psychological conflicts

It is important that spiritual directors have some background understanding of the psychological conflicts that predispose youth and adults to SSAs. Dr. Rick Fitzgibbons identifies them in males as “the lack of secure attachment with the father, same-sex peers or brother; poor body image; sex abuse trauma; mistrust in the mother relationship; severe betrayals by women, and narcissism. In females, background psychological conflicts include mistrust and sadness in the father relationship; lack of secure attachment with the mother; betrayals by important males with a fear of betrayal by males; weak female confidence; rejection by female peers; anger against men, and loneliness for comforting love.”³

One-off crush

A young woman approached me for spiritual direction as having a crush on her teacher she was convinced that she was “a lesbian.” I reassured her that a one-off crush did not equal lesbianism. As Rev. John Harvey advised “The adolescent girl often confuses a ‘crush’ she has on an

older girl or a female teacher as a form of homosexuality. She should be shown that she is simply going through a stage of strong admiration and needs to take care not to make an idol out of another person. Meanwhile, she must continue to seek friends within her peer group and learn to form good human relationships with both sexes” (Harvey 2007, 34–35). I enquired about her family relationships, explaining that sometimes behind a desire for the affection of another woman was the mirror of a desire for a stronger identification with the mother figure.⁴ She acknowledged the poor relationship with her own mother, and she herself felt this was the key to understanding her crush on the teacher. Where the maternal relationship is lacking, a stronger relationship with Mother Mary may be encouraged. This is beneficial for all, but may bear particular fruits in a woman searching for that experience of motherly love: “The experience of Mary’s love can fill the emptiness and loneliness in the mother relationship, become a new foundation to trust females, strengthen confidence, and resolve homosexual attractions and behaviors” (Fitzgibbons 2015).

Previous abuse and concomitant issues

Persons who are experiencing SSAs may often have been victims of abuse. Research indicates that around 50 percent of lesbian women report a history of prior male sexual abuse, which is twice as high as heterosexual women (Balsam, Rothblum and Beauchaine 2005; Hughes *et al.* 2000). The abuse can be physical, mental, or emotional. Homosexual abuse by an older male is a frequently cited factor in the genesis of later SSA in men. Abuse produces deep wounds in the psyche of the person, and the spiritual director should be aware of this and may need to refer the

directee to appropriate mental-health professionals.⁵

The director should know that persons with SSA are more likely to have or have had coexisting medical, psychological, and relational problems.⁶ Many of these problematic behaviors and psychological dysfunctions are experienced among homosexuals at about three times the prevalence found in the general population. These include substance abuse, suicidal histories, and other mental-health concerns, such as eating disorders, personality disorders, paranoia, depression, and anxiety (Diggs 2002).

Excessive anger is often seen as a result of rejections in secure attachment relationships primarily with same-sex peers, but also often with a parent or sibling. This anger is unhealthy, as the book of Sirach reminds us, “anger plunges a man to his downfall” (Sir 1:19). The resolution of this anger is essential to resolving the sadness, mistrust, and low self-esteem that often accompanies a person with SSA. Those harboring anger can be greatly helped by the sacrament of reconciliation. The grace of the sacrament acts like a soothing balm on the wounds of the person, bringing them peace and healing. Having been forgiven a penitent is then more conscious of the need to forgive others, leaving behind past hurts and taking steps forward to move on in life.

Lack of confidence is frequently an issue. A 2011 study by Parkes of 10,000 adolescents was notable for boys with some same-sex experience reporting less self-esteem (Parkes *et al.* 2011). A 2010 Israeli study by Rubinstein of 90 homosexual and 109 heterosexual men with mean age of 26 and with no significant differences with respect to country of birth, ethnic origin, education level, military service, or participation in psychotherapy, revealed homosexual young adults scored lower on the self-esteem

measure and higher on narcissism compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Rubinstein 2010). The director should be sensitive to low self-esteem in the directee, be ready to tackle any underlying issues, as well as offering copious encouragement in an effort to boost low self-confidence.

AVOID VICE

Dangers of an active homosexual lifestyle

An active homosexual lifestyle puts men who have sex with men at serious medical and moral risk. Worldwide, male-to-male sex accounts for the majority of new HIV infections among males as well as exposing the participants to a host of other infections including hepatitis B, gonorrhea, and syphilis (McTavish 2014).⁷ The director must always respect the freedom of the directee but in view of the serious health risks from homosexual activity is also free to counsel the person of its very real dangers.

Avoid proximate occasions of sin

The person should be advised to avoid all immoral behavior, including “proximate occasions of sin,” which can include watching gay pornography, frequenting bars or gay massage parlors, and entertaining openly gay friends who may have a corruptive influence on a person trying to break free from homosexual temptations. When a young person with SSA reports to me in spiritual direction that he or she is having many sexual temptations, I usually inquire about possible provoking factors, especially the use of pornography. Pornography fuels disordered sexual thoughts which may lead to lustful actions. “What you don’t see you will not

think of” is a useful spiritual maxim. One needs to be careful about what one looks at, especially in our sex-driven media culture of today. The prophet Jeremiah states: “Death has come up through our windows, has entered our palaces” (Jer 9:20). St. Alphonsus Liguori, the patron saint of moral theology in the Catholic Church, commenting on this passage, wrote: “For as to defend a fortification it is not enough to lock the gates if the enemy be allowed to enter by the windows.”⁸ The windows here are the eyes, and if the eyes are sound the whole body will be sound, but if the eyes are looking at pornography then the whole body will suffer (see Mat 6:22–23). Means which can help reduce pornography exposure include the use of a website filter, placing the computer in a more public place and having an “accountability partner.”

CULTIVATE VIRTUE

When we habitually do bad things, we form vices; and when we habitually do good things, we foster virtues. The person experiencing SSAs, beginning to leave behind vices, should be advised to grow in a life of virtue. Virtues are good habits and include the practice of prayer, frequenting the sacraments, cultivating healthy friendships, and participating in mission. The *Catechism* gives this same encouragement to persons experiencing SSAs: “By the virtues of self-mastery that teach them inner freedom, at times by the support of disinterested friendship, by prayer and sacramental grace, they can and should gradually and resolutely approach Christian perfection” (Catechism 1997, 2357).

Fruitful union

Our Lord promises us “Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit,

because without me you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5). A sacramental life, consisting of the Eucharist and regular confession (especially after a fall) helps maintain the union with Christ. Prayer and sacraments are essential for the person experiencing SSAs to receive the necessary grace.

Prayer with the Word of God is especially recommended, to allow the person to be led by the voice of God. *Dei verbum* teaches us that “prayer should accompany the reading of Sacred Scripture, so that God and people may talk together; for ‘we speak to Him when we pray; we hear Him when we read the Sacred Scripture’” (Vatican Council II 1965, 25). Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI said, “That is why it is important that every Christian lives in contact and in personal dialog with the Word of God, given to us in sacred Scripture” (Benedict 2007). Through a personal dialog with the Word of God, the person who experiences SSAs may be guided by the Holy Spirit to gradually walk the path of Christian holiness.

A life of prayer is needed to overcome the temptations of the flesh. Saint Alphonsus Liguori acknowledged the great power of prayer:

And it is especially to be remarked, that we cannot resist the impure temptations of the flesh, without recommending ourselves to God when we are tempted. This foe is so terrible that, when he fights with us, he, as it were, takes away all light; he makes us forget all our meditations, all our good resolutions; he also makes us also disregard the truths of faith, and even almost lose the fear of the divine punishments. For he conspires with our natural inclinations, which drive us with the greatest violence to the indulgence of sensual pleasures. Who in such a moment does not have recourse to God is lost. The only defense against this temptation is prayer. (Liguori 1992, 70–71)

Chaste friendships

The director, faithful to the Church magisterium, can remind the directee of the importance of chastity. A helpful image to explain chastity is drawn from Chapter 47 of the prophet Ezekiel. The prophet describes a powerful river giving life wherever it flows. "Wherever the river flows, life grows" (see Ezek 47:9). This river can symbolize the powerful flow of our sexuality with all its energy and vitality which, when guided in the right way, generates life. A chaste heart is a peaceful heart, which also flows over into an ordered life. Living chastely helps the person experiencing SSAs become more integrated. Previous wounds may heal and brokenness mend, as St. Augustine described: "Indeed it is through chastity that we are gathered together and led back to the unity from which we were fragmented into multiplicity" (Catechism 1997, 2340).

The US Catholic bishops in their guidelines for the pastoral care to persons with a homosexual inclination comment, "In our society, chastity is a particular virtue that requires special effort. All people, whether married or single, are called to chaste living. Chaste living overcomes disordered human desires such as lust and results in the expression of one's sexual desires in harmony with God's will" (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2006, 8). The Canadian bishops 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" (Episcopal Commission for Doctrine of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops 2011, 22). For balanced and mature affective growth such healthy friendships are good and necessary. Chaste friendships can be better found in a

community such as Courage.⁹ The goals of Courage include fellowship and support, so that no one should have to face the difficulties accompanying SSAs alone, but rather can find solace in supportive and healthy friendships.

Mission

The Congregation for the Clergy explains, "Commitment to the apostolate is a necessary part of spiritual counsel and direction. Thus motivations, preferences, and concrete realities ought to be examined so that the person receiving direction becomes more disposed towards mission" (Congregation for the Clergy 2011, 133). The person experiencing SSAs, being part of a missionary Church, may be encouraged to participate in service to others, as "the actual performance of apostolic and charitable works is an element of proven worth" (Harvey 2007, 23). Part of their mission is to give witness to living a life of holiness even if this necessitates carrying the Cross, as a person who experiences SSAs can "unite to the sacrifice of the Lord's Cross the difficulties they may encounter from their condition" (Catechism 1997, 2358). He or she can also exercise the prophetic mission of encouraging others experiencing SSAs to live chastely as well as helping to correct the many misunderstandings in society regarding homosexuality, by helping to spread the correct teachings of the Magisterium of the Church.

CONCLUSION

Thus, spiritual direction in the person with SSA can help him or her to grow in a personal relationship with God, allowing the person to savor, relive, and enjoy the deep affective touches of God in their lives. Sharing with a director allows him

or her to explore and unpack areas of un-freedom in their personal history. Growth in awareness of God's love and friendship can fill the inner void in males with SSAs who were bullied or who never experienced close male friendships in childhood and adolescence. Growth in a loving knowledge of the Father's and St. Joseph's love during childhood and the present can help to heal the deep sadness in many males who never felt close to their fathers and heal the deep mistrust of males in females who had abusive, angry, or selfish fathers. Growth in a loving knowledge of Our Lady's love can fill the void many women with SSAs have for comforting motherly love and help males with controlling, distant, or narcissistic mothers, who fear trusting women.

As in all processes of growth, time and patience are needed. The director should be patient with the directee, and the directee with him- or herself. Setbacks will inevitably occur, and the director should be a living reflection of the "God of all encouragement and consolation" (see 2 Cor 1:3–5), constantly animating the person to keep running the race and fighting the good fight (see 2 Tim 4:7). The director should advise the directee to avoid immoral behavior and encourage him or her to grow in virtuous living, as well as motivate efforts to develop a stronger masculine (or feminine) self-identification. The directee can be supported in their desire to live chastely and in fulfilling the will of God in their life. As Rev. John Harvey noted:

It is by regular spiritual direction, moreover, that the person with SSA can formulate and begin to live this plan of life. Very often, people with SSA have already experienced the loneliness and incompleteness of either of the two patterns of homosexual activity, namely promiscuity or a steady same-sex relationship. Dissatisfied with these experiences, they are ready to listen to the sympathetic

proposal of a new approach, difficult though that new way may seem on the surface. The spiritual director's task is to show the man or woman with SSA that it is possible to live a chaste and happy life without being isolated from society. (Harvey 2007, 23–24).

ENDNOTES

1. Spiritual direction can be known by various terms such as spiritual accompaniment and guidance, and the director is also known as a companion, friend, etc. Specialist texts on spiritual direction may be consulted for further information regarding the pros and cons of varying terminology.
2. The statement *Homosexuality and Hope* notes that alienation from the father in early childhood is frequently found in the history of a person who experiences same-sex attraction (Catholic Medical Association 2000, 3). For Rev. John Harvey one of the principal factors which individually or collectively contributes to SSA is the "inability of the child to identify with the gender of the same-sex parent" (Harvey 2007, 12).
3. Dr. Richard Fitzgibbons, e-mail message to author, May 23, 2015.
4. Janelle Hallman remarks "women with SSA regularly report feeling deprived of maternal nurturing and affection" (Hallman 2008, 64). She discusses her experience from therapy with women who experience same-sex attractions and notes that they often experienced excessive closeness with their moms or excessive distance, there being no middle ground (Hallman 2008, 61–62). Andria L. Sigler-Smalz, a clinical pastoral counselor, cites the following "There is often a desperate quality to the emotional attraction in women that struggle with lesbianism. One client, who recognized that her lesbian relationships re-enacted her need for maternal love, explained to me, 'When I meet a woman that I feel drawn to, it is as if a place inside me is saying, 'Will you be my mommy?' It is a compelling and powerful feeling, and a helpless one. Suddenly, I feel little. I want to be noticed by her, I want to be special

- to her, and that want takes over my mind” (Sigler-Smalz n.d.).
5. Abuse produces many wounds in the victim. Serious issues arising include the need for healing and for justice against the perpetrator(s) for the offence committed.
 6. Janelle Hallman comments that “Depression and anxiety are common in the lives of women with SSA.” (Hallman 2008, 60–61). See also page 4 and footnote 43 of Catholic Medical Association (2000). Garofalo *et al.* (1999) report that gay, lesbian, bisexual, or not sure youth report a significantly increased frequency of suicide attempts.
 7. “Although MSM represent approximately 4 percent of the male population in the United States, in 2010 male-to-male sex accounted for 78 percent of new HIV infections among males. [...] In the Philippines, 84 percent of all new sexually transmitted HIV infections in 2013 occurred in MSM, with Manila being the epicenter of the epidemic” (McTavish 2014, 637–638).
 8. Saint Alphonsus Liguori writes further “Hence holy Job made a compact with his eyes not to look at any woman, even at a chaste virgin; because he knew from looks evil thoughts arise” (Liguori 1888, Instruction III, II, 1).
 9. For more information, see their website: <http://www.couragerc.net>.
- ## REFERENCES
- Balsam, Kimberly F., Esther D. Rothblum, and Theodore P. Beauchaine. 2005. Victimization over the life span: A comparison of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and heterosexual siblings. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 73.3(June): 477–487.
- Barry, William A., and William J. Connolly. 1982. *The practice of spiritual direction*. New York: Harper-Collins.
- Benedict XVI, Pope. 2007. General audience, Wednesday, 7 November, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2007/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20071107.html.
- Catechism of the Catholic Church. 1997. 2nd ed. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.
- Catholic Medical Association. 2000. *Homosexuality and hope*. Needham, MA: Catholic Medical Association.
- Congregation for the Clergy. 2011. *The priest, minister of divine mercy*, http://www.clerus.org/clerus/dati/2011-08/08-13/sussidio_per_confessori_en.pdf.
- Diggs, John R., 2002. *The health risks of gay sex*, <http://catholiceducation.org/en/marriage-and-family/sexuality/the-health-risks-of-gay-sex.html>.
- Episcopal Commission for Doctrine of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops. 2011. Pastoral ministry to young people with same-sex attraction. Ottawa, Ontario, Canada: Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops.
- Fitzgibbons, Richard. 2015. *The origins and healing of homosexual attractions*. <http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?id=3112>.
- Garofalo, Robert, R. Cameron Wolf, Lawrence S. Wissow, Elizabeth R. Woods, and Elizabeth Goodman, 1999. Sexual orientation and risk of suicide attempts among a representative sample of youth. *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, 153(5): 487–93.
- Harvey, J.F. 2007. *Same sex attraction: Catholic teaching and pastoral practice*. New Haven: Knights of Columbus, <http://www.kofc.org/un/en/resources/cis/cis385.pdf>.
- Hallman, J. 2008. *The heart of female same-sex attraction: A comprehensive counseling resource*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity.
- Hughes, Tonda L., Ann Pollinger Haas, Lisa Razzano, Roberta Cassidy, and Alicia Matthews. 2000. Comparing lesbians’ and heterosexual women’s mental health: Results from a multi-site women’s health survey. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services* 11.1: 57–76.
- Liguori, Alphonsus. 1888. Discourse on the necessity of mental prayer for priests. In *Dignity and duties of the priest, or selva*, ed. Eugene Grimm. New York: Elias Frederick Schauer.
- Liguori, Alphonsus. 1992. Oppitz, Joseph. *Alphonsus liguori—the redeeming love of Christ*. New York: New City Press.
- McTavish, James. 2014. Chastity and homosexuality: Combating the scourge of HIV and AIDS. *National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 14.4(Winter): 637–645.
- Parkes, Alison, Vicki Strange, Daniel Wight, Chris Bonell, Andrew Copas, Marion Henderson, Katie Buston, Judith Stephenson, Anne Johnson, Elizabeth Allen,

- and Graham Hart. 2011. Comparison of teenagers' early same-sex and heterosexual behavior: UK data from the SHARE and RIPPLE studies. *Journal of Adult Health* 48.1: 27–35.
- Rubinstein, Gidi. 2010. Narcissism and self-esteem among homosexual and heterosexual male students. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy* 36.1: 24–34.
- Sigler-Smalz, Andria L. n.d. *Understanding the lesbian client*, <http://www.pfox.org/sidebar-pages/understanding-the-lesbian-client/>.
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. 2006. Ministry to persons with a homosexual inclination: guidelines for pastoral care. Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.
- Vatican Council II. 1965. *Dei verbum*, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Fr. James McTavish, F.M.V.D., M.D., is a Scottish missionary priest with the Fraternidad Misionera Verbum Dei. He originally studied medicine at Cambridge University, later gaining his fellowship in surgery from the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh, before specializing in plastics and reconstruction. He then heard the call of the Lord to heal the wounded Body of Christ through evangelization — “Give me life by your Word” (Ps 119). Having studied moral theology and bioethics in Rome, after priestly ordination he was then assigned to Manila in formation work, biblical apostolate, and teaching morality and ethics in various medical and theological schools.