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A Survey of Gay/Lesbian Catholics Concerning Attitudes Toward Sexual Orientation and Religious Beliefs

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ABSTRACT. The negative assessment of lesbian/gay relationships in Catholic circles is most often based on scanty information gathered from folklore, the commercial media, and a narrow, literal reading of Biblical texts. Assumptions are made about the personal adjustment of individual gay/lesbian persons and the quality of their relationships without recourse to actual lived experience. This survey of 263 gay/lesbian Catholics and 20 controls was designed to receive direct feedback from lesbian/gay persons concerning their religious attitudes, personal adjustment, and relational quality. The results contradict many preconceptions, and a remarkable similarity is demonstrated between the gay/lesbian responses and those of the control group.

The Church should develop and encourage theologizing from our lived experience. From our own experiences and from our pastoral experiences with others, we need to look for threads and patterns and then have theological reflection on that experience.¹

The purpose of conducting this survey was to receive input from the gay/lesbian Catholic community on issues that related to their

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experience of sexuality, and how this impacts on their relationship to the church. The intent of the survey was to add to the understanding of gay/lesbian persons in the church by listening to their assessments, rather than to the presumptions of third parties. In the letter to the bishops "On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons," issued in November of 1986, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), an official body of the Vatican, assumed that they understood gay/lesbian sexuality, and that its expression was, in every way, a demented, compulsive and self-indulgent experience. As a gay Catholic this has not been my experience by any stretch of the imagination, and I suspected that others who were gay/lesbian had encountered their sexuality in ways more similar to my own than to the dark and forbidding "intrinsic moral evil" which was described in the CDF Letter mentioned above.

The survey was an important part of a more general response to the CDF Letter which I developed for my master's thesis in theology. The writers of this Letter, in addition to their profound alienation from the lived experiences of lesbians and gays, demonstrate a literalistic perception of the scriptures, and a calculated ignorance of the scientific data. Their portrayal of lesbian and gay people in every way reflects the irrationality and fear that has been characteristic of Western culture when faced with any sort of sexual variance. Although there was a time when masturbation, coitus during menstruation, *coitus interruptus*, excessive pleasure during procreative sex, etc., were considered sinful or "unhealthy" along with "homosexuality," today the culture, and to a lesser degree the church, has reconciled itself with most variant sexual behaviors, save one. Part of the problem, I believe, is the general lack of exposure to gay/lesbian people. This survey was one very small way of getting in touch with the way lesbian and gay Catholics perceive themselves and their church.²

THE SURVEY

The first three questions of the survey were simple demographic questions for the sake of defining the population I was surveying. The statistical methods used to analyze the data in the first 8 ques-

tions were simple summation (reporting the number of responses to a specific answer) and simple percentages (comparing the number of responses to a specific answer, to the total number of surveys).

1. How would you describe your sexual orientation?

- ☐ Homosexual
- ☐ Bisexual
- ☐ Heterosexual

YES NO

2. Are you a minister in the church who serves the homosexual community?

3. Are you a Roman Catholic, or have you been at any time during your life?

Questions 4 and 5 were included to expose any differences between the attitudes gay/lesbian persons had toward their own sexual orientation, and the perceptions they had of the church's attitude toward their sexual orientation. In addition to the method already employed, the various answers in questions 4 and 5 were checked to verify whether or not a certain attitude towards one's own sexuality, affected the way a person responded to other questions.

4. How would you describe your attitude toward your own sexuality?

- ☐ Accepting (Happy, well-adjusted, open, proud)
- ☐ Tolerant (I am what I am, but . . .)
- ☐ Negative (Wish I was born heterosexual)

5. How would you describe the church's attitude toward your sexuality?

- ☐ Accepting
- ☐ Tolerant
- ☐ Negative

Questions 6, 7, and 8 were included to investigate whether there may be any consensus of opinion in the lay/lesbian community in regards to the Letter issued by the CDF (in the Catholic faith the notion of the *sensus fidelium*, or the 'sense of the faithful,' is an

important concept in discerning the truth of a particular magisterial statement).

6. Have you read all or part of the Vatican pastoral Letter on homosexual persons issued November of 1986? Yes No

7. How would you characterize your reaction to the statement?

- ___ Positive—generally positive statement confirming what I believe about homosexual persons and homosexuality.
- ___ Neutral—no particular reaction.
- ___ Negative—generally negative statement contradicting what I believe about homosexual persons and homosexuality.

8. Please indicate how you would characterize the contribution that this statement will make to the understanding of the homosexual Catholic?

- ___ Great increase in the understanding of homosexual Catholics.
- ___ Slight increase/decrease, or will have no effect on the understanding of homosexual Catholics.
- ___ Significant decrease in the understanding of homosexual Catholics.

The CDF Letter presumed that gay/lesbian sexual relationships were of very low quality and, of course, of very short duration. Questions 9 and 10 were designed to test this CDF hypothesis. In regards to question 9, the CDF used the following terms in their Letter in reference to sexuality:

- a. Neutral
- b. Good
- c. Sinful
- d. Disordered
- e. Complementary
- f. Immoral
- g. Thwarting God's purpose
- h. Giving
- i. Self-indulgent

- j. Fulfilling
- k. Happy
- l. Compulsive
- m. Loving

I added the following:

- a. A sign of God's love
- b. Natural
- c. Unnatural/sick
- d. Demeaning (lacking dignity)
- e. Growth-filled
- f. Convenient (merely)
- g. Liberating
- h. Alienating

I added "A sign of God's love" as an alternative to the CDF's "Thwarting God's purpose." I included "Natural" and "Unnatural/sick" because there was a strong undercurrent of natural law theory in the Letter. I added "Demeaning" as an alternative to "Fulfilling." I added "Growth-filled" and "Convenient (merely)" because these are the ways many people perceive straight marriage, and gay/lesbian relationships respectively. I added "Alienating" as an alternative to "Liberating."

The statistical method used for question 9 was simple averaging (adding up the responses and dividing by the number of responses) and standard deviation.

The statistical methods used on question 10 were the same as those used in questions 1-8, i.e., summation and percentage.

9. How would you describe your own experience of the quality of homosexual relationships? Rate the adjectives listed below on the following five point scale: 1. Strongly Agree, 2. Agree, 3. Neutral, 4. Disagree, 5. Strongly Disagree. *Homosexual relationships are . . .*

☐ A sign of God's love	☐ Demeaning
☐ Thwarting God's purpose	☐ Growth-filled
☐ Good	☐ Convenient (merely)
☐ Neutral	☐ Liberating
☐ Disordered	☐ Alienating

☐ Sinful	☐ Complementary
☐ Natural	☐ Compulsive
☐ Unnatural/sick	☐ Happy
☐ Loving/giving	☐ Life-giving
☐ Self-indulgent	☐ Immoral
☐ Fulfilling	

10. Given your sexual orientation, in which of the following relationships do you feel you would be most fulfilled?

☐ Heterosexual marriage	☐ Long-term homosexual relationship
☐ Casual short-term relationship	☐ Celibacy
☐ One-night stands	

The CDF Letter also stated, "No authentic pastoral program will include organizations in which homosexual persons associate with each other without clearly stating that homosexual activity is immoral." The CDF believes that these types of organizations too easily become "near occasions of sin" for the gay/lesbian person. Questions 11 and 12 were designed to test this assertion. The statistical methods used were summation and percentage.

YES NO

11. Do you belong to an organization or group serving the gay/lesbian community in the Catholic Church? (like Dignity)

12. Do you feel that the groups or organizations to which you belong assist you in growing as a Christian?

There are many limitations to my survey which should be kept in mind by the reader. First of all, the population surveyed was limited primarily, but not exclusively, to the gay/lesbian Catholic organization Dignity. I also had some of my friends and acquaintances do the survey, but they make up a small percentage of total respondents. This limited population could very possibly be an "ideal" population, rather than a true indication of general gay/lesbian Catholic consensus. For this reason I chose a young adult prayer

group in my local parish to make up a major portion (70%) of the control group, because they represent a somewhat "ideal" group of generally straight Catholics. The survey that people from the parish prayer group completed differs slightly from the survey given to gay/lesbian Catholics.

I received valuable assistance in developing the survey from Dr. Robert Froh of Syracuse University, who conducts faculty evaluations at the University. He helped me eliminate some of the inherent bias in the language, and to develop questions which would be valid and reliable when statistics were taken. In spite of this aid from Dr. Froh, two of the questions were problematic for quite a number of people taking the survey.

Question 8 does not specify which statement I am asking the respondent to evaluate; it merely requests: "Please indicate how would you characterize the contribution that *this* statement will make to the understanding of the homosexual Catholic?" Deducing from the comments respondents made in the margins, apparently many thought *this* was referring to my own thesis. For this reason, results from question 8 should be compared to question 7 which requests similar, but not equivalent, information from the respondent. Also the results of question 8 will not carry as much weight as other questions because of the doubt surrounding the responses.

Question 9 also ran into a language problem. Although the question does ask: "How would you describe *your own experience* of the quality of homosexual relationships?" many were misled by the lead-in statement: *Homosexual relationships are . . .* I received many comments referring to this question, like the following: "This is difficult to respond to. I have observed relationships, both homosexual and heterosexual which appeared to be disordered and sinful. On the other hand, I have observed and experienced homosexual relationships which are loving and life-giving." Many understandably misunderstood the lead-in statement as a request for them to assess gay/lesbian relationships on a global scale. This was not the case. Fortunately, most respondents indicated that they could not answer for everyone, but would answer only for themselves—which is precisely what I had hoped for in the first place. This was a poorly worded question on my part, and the survey given to the control group reflects the changes I made to this question and to

others. The lead-in statement for question 9 in this survey now reads: *My Sexual Relationship(s) is(are)* . . .

The method of distribution was by mail to the individual Dignity chapters, and from there to the individual members. The control survey was similarly distributed. The limitations in this method of distribution is that common misunderstandings in wording cannot be circumvented, and there is no opportunity for face to face clarifications. However, surveys by mail also have their strengths. Mail surveys avoid the problem of surveyor bias influencing the respondents answers. Face to face surveys often encounter this problem. Another possible limitation is that the respondents had to be motivated and concerned enough to complete and return the survey to me. I may have missed out on the contributions of those who were not highly motivated, and I may have received cooperation from only a certain segment of the gay/lesbian population who tend to be more willing to participate in opinion polls.

Therefore, the reader should keep the following limitations in mind during the discussion of the results of the survey:

1. The size of the population is limited — 264 responses, 20 controls.
2. The population surveyed may reflect only an “ideal” group.
3. Some questions were not clear to some respondents — particularly questions 8 and 9.

RESULTS

1. How would you describe your sexual orientation?

	<u>Gay/lesbian Survey</u>	<u>Control Survey</u>
Homosexual	94.7%	0%
Bisexual	4.2%	10%
Heterosexual	1.1%	90%

2. Are you a minister in the church?

	<u>Gay/lesbian Survey</u>	<u>Control Survey</u>
Yes	15.1%	25%
No	84.9%	75%

3. Are you a Roman Catholic, or have you been at any time during your life?

	<u>Gay/lesbian Survey</u>	<u>Control Survey</u>
Yes	87.9%	95%
No	12.1%	5%

4. How would you describe your attitude toward your own sexuality?

	<u>Gay/lesbian Survey</u>	<u>Control Survey</u>
Accepting (Happy, open, proud)	82%	86%
Tolerant (I am what I am but. . .)	17.6%	14%
Negative (Wish I was different)	0.4%	0%

5. How would you describe the church's attitude toward your sexuality?

	<u>Gay/lesbian Survey</u>	<u>Control Survey</u>
Accepting	3.3%	71%
Tolerant	13%	19%
Negative	83.7%	10%

6. Have you read all or part of the Vatican Letter on gay/lesbian persons issued November of 1986? (if yes answer quest. 7&8)

	<u>Gay/lesbian Survey</u>	<u>Control Survey</u>
Yes	80.4%	20%
No	19.6%	80%

7. How would you characterize your reaction to the Vatican statement?

	<u>Gay/lesbian Survey</u>	<u>Control Survey</u>
Positive	1.3%	16.7%
Neutral	5.2%	33.3%
Negative	93.5%	50%

8. Please indicate how you would characterize the contribution that the Vatican statement will make to the understanding of the gay/lesbian Catholic?

	<u>Gay/lesbian Survey</u>	<u>Control Survey</u>
Great increase	1.7%	0%
Slight increase/decrease	21.9%	66.7%
Significant decrease	76.4%	33.3%

9. How would you describe your own experience of the quality of sexual relationships? Rate the adjectives listed below on the following five point scale: 1. Strongly Agree, 2. Agree, 3. Neutral, 4. Disagree, 5. Strongly Disagree, *My sexual relationship(s) is (are)*. . .

	<u>Gay/lesbian Survey</u>	<u>Control Survey</u>
A sign of God's love	1.67 ± .845	1.55 ± .99
Thwarting God's purpose	4.59 ± .766	4.5 ± .94
Good	1.5 ± .684	1.7 ± 1.17
Neutral	3.57 ± 1.134	4.15 ± .87
Disordered	4.67 ± .677	4.35 ± 1.14
Sinful	4.75 ± .575	4.55 ± .99
Natural	1.44 ± .727	1.45 ± .82
Unnatural/sick	4.87 ± .353	4.7 ± .80
Loving/giving	1.37 ± .630	1.25 ± .55
Self-indulgent	3.9 ± 1.028	3.6 ± 1.39
Fulfilling	1.59 ± .725	1.75 ± 1.16
Demeaning	4.64 ± .612	4.55 ± .88
Growth-filled	1.63 ± .703	1.6 ± .75

Convenient (merely)	4.02 ± .929	4.4 ± .94
Liberating	1.92 ± .944	2.9 ± 1.07
Alienating	3.94 ± 1.127	4.3 ± 1.13
Complementary	2.01 ± .870	1.95 ± 1.36
Compulsive	3.94 ± 1.017	4.2 ± 1.11
Happy	1.67 ± .719	1.9 ± 1.37
Life-giving	1.7 ± .894	1.5 ± 1.05
Immoral	4.79 ± .506	4.75 ± .55

10. Given your sexual orientation, in which of the following relationships do you feel you would be most fulfilled?

	<u>Gay/lesbian Survey</u>	<u>Control Survey</u>
Heterosexual marriage	2.2%	80%
Long-term gay/lesbian relationship	90.4%	0%
Casual relationship	3%	0%
Celibacy	4.4%	20%
One-night stands	0%	0%

11. Do you belong to an organization or group in the Catholic Church?

	<u>Gay/lesbian Survey</u>	<u>Control Survey</u>
Yes	90.5%	70%
No	9.5%	30%

12. Do you feel that the groups of organizations to which you belong assist you in growing as a Christian?

	<u>Gay/lesbian Survey</u>	<u>Control Survey</u>
Yes	92.5%	89.5%
No	7.5%	10.5%

DISCUSSION

The first question is a demographics question which tells us the relative sexual orientation of the participants. Not surprisingly we find that, of those who participated in the gay/lesbian survey, 95% describe themselves as homosexual. In contrast, of those who participated in the control survey, 90% described themselves as heterosexual, and none identified themselves as homosexual.

The second question was of little significance because there was confusion over the definition of "minister." It was originally designed as a demographics question for the gay/lesbian survey because it was a survey for both gay/lesbians and for those who did ordained ministry within the gay/lesbian community. However, many eucharistic ministers, lectors, etc., rightfully included themselves in the definition of "minister"—while I am sure others did not. The results of this question are suspect, and no conclusions will be drawn from these figures.

The third question was designed to assure that I was surveying a predominantly (Roman) Catholic population. Both surveys yielded a high percentage of positive responses; however, the gay/lesbian survey shows a somewhat smaller proportion of Catholics. This is probably due in part to the relatively large number of responses from Dignity members identifying themselves as Anglican or Episcopalian Catholics. They made up a significant minority (about 7%).

The fourth question was created to assess an individual's attitude toward her/his own sexuality. The gay/lesbian group and the control group responded to this question in a nearly identical manner. By and large, both groups were predominantly "Accepting" in their attitude toward their own sexuality. A significant minority described their attitude as "Tolerant"; and a negligibly small minority described their attitude as "Negative." This data suggests that, in spite of the numerous obstacles placed in the way of gay/lesbian persons by the culture and the church, their level of self-acceptance is indistinguishable from that of the general population.

The fifth question goes hand in hand with the fourth. It was developed to assess how individuals perceive the church's attitude toward their sexuality. Not surprisingly, the gay/lesbian responses,

as a rule, perceived that attitude as "Negative," while the control group's perceptions were inversely positive. It is interesting to note the diametric relationship between the gay/lesbian person's self-acceptance and the perceived antipathetic attitude of the church toward gay/lesbian sexuality. It is also intriguing to notice that a significant minority of persons in the control group (30%) experienced the church's attitude toward their sexuality (which was predominantly heterosexual) as something less than "Accepting." This may suggest that there are still tenaciously negative attitudes circulating in the church about sexuality in general.

Questions six through eight are concerned with the CDF Letter which is the topic of this thesis. Question six merely asks whether or not the person read the statement. Among gay/lesbian persons 80% had, and 20% had not. Those figures were reversed for the control group in which only 20% had read the statement. These percentages obviously reflect the amplified interest which any minority group would be expected to show toward a document that addressed their issues directly. Question seven asked the respondents to offer their reaction to the CDF statement. By a significant majority (93.5%) the gay/lesbian population in this survey viewed the Letter as negative and contradictory of what they believed about gay/lesbian sexuality. In a less convincing way, the control group also negatively appraised the contents of the Letter. Half of those responding to the question considered it negative, while only one person described it as positive, confirming what they believed about gay/lesbian persons. Finally, question eight turned out to be rather confusing for some of those being surveyed. It is a similar question to number seven; however, it asks the respondent to indicate how they would characterize the contribution that the Letter will make to the understanding of the gay/lesbian Catholic. The less reliable results of question eight nevertheless lead to the tentative conclusion that an appreciable majority of gay/lesbian Catholics believe that the statement will result in a decrease in the understanding of gay/lesbian Catholics.

Question number nine is by far the most important, and it is also the most revealing. If one compares the gay/lesbian responses in the left column with the control responses in the right, one will find that there are no consequential differences between the averages. In fact

the close correlation between some of the averages is astounding. When one takes into account the statistical deviation allowed for each figure, all of the adjectives must be treated as though there are no significant differences between the gay/lesbian answers and those of the control group. The most divergent figures are in response to the adjective "Liberating." The answers fall at the outer edges of the statistical deviation, and one could argue that gay/lesbian persons apparently experience their sexuality as more "Liberating" than others. This possible difference could be explained by the fact that many gay/lesbian people have experienced the "coming-out-of-the-closet" event, in which they encounter their sexuality as a liberating factor, enabling many to feel whole and personally integrated for the first time in their lives. Straight persons do not have a similar countercultural experience of their sexuality. Therefore, one could reasonably expect that their responses would reflect this in a more neutral response—which, in fact, is precisely the case. The close correlation between the gay/lesbian answers and those of the control group suggests that there are no considerable differences between the sexual experiences of gay/lesbians and those of the general population—at least to the extent that the adjectives used in this study can determine.

Question number ten asks the respondent to choose the type of sexual relationship in which s/he would feel most fulfilled. Again the similarities between the groups are striking. Both opted predominantly for long-term relationships as opposed to the shorter term selections, or celibacy. Over 90% of the gay/lesbians chose "Long-term gay/lesbian relationship," and 80% of the control group chose "Marriage" as the most fulfilling type of relationship for themselves. In both cases celibacy was the second most popular choice making up a small minority in the gay/lesbian survey (4.4%), while comprising a surprisingly significant minority in the control group (20%). It is interesting to note that those persons who identified themselves as bisexual in the control survey, also chose celibacy as the relationship in which they felt they would be most fulfilled. This data possibly reflects an internalization of the negativity surrounding sexuality in the church, and the fear of being labelled "sinful" or "immoral" because of their unconventional expression of sexuality. It is also important to mention the fact that those who identi-

fied celibacy as their choice of sexual expression tended to evaluate their own sexual experiences negatively in question nine. Although for some, celibacy seemed to be a valid life choice, for many it appeared to be an option that was compromising "Love," "Fulfillment," "Happiness" and "Growth."

The last two questions were developed to respond to the unfavorable assessment of gay/lesbian Catholic organizations on the part of the CDF in their Letter "On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons." Question eleven simply asks the respondent to identify whether or not s/he is a member of a group in the Catholic Church. Question twelve asks whether or not the respondent believes that the group to which s/he belongs contributes to their growth as Christians. This is an important question because the CDF apparently believes that gay/lesbian Christian groups, as they exist presently, are a compromise of the Gospel, and that they lead their members into "near occasions of sin."³ Apparently the assumption is that gay/lesbian church organizations are prospective vehicles for sexual "cruising," and should, therefore, be avoided at all costs. Those who were members of gay/lesbian church organizations, and who answered question twelve, tended to give a different evaluation to these organizations. A large majority (92.5%) believed that the group or organization to which they belonged assisted them in growing as Christians. This corresponds closely with the assessment made by those who answered this question in the control survey and who belonged to the parish Bible study (89.5% answered positively). From my own experience, and from the experiences of other gay/lesbian persons, one must conclude that gay/lesbian groups, like other organizations in the church, are opportunities for Christian growth, not easy sex.

In summary, the data here strongly suggests that there is very little, if any, appreciable difference between the way gay/lesbian Catholics experience their sexual relationships, and the way straight Catholics experience theirs. The greatest difference is the way in which society and the church manage these respective sexual orientations. Both survey groups are generally accepting of their respective orientations and both have a primarily positive outlook on their sexual relationships. In the case of gays and lesbians, this self-acceptance is achieved in spite of the negative attitude of their church

toward them. This data contradicts the common misperception that gay/lesbian persons are, as a group, unhappy with their lot in life, and wish they had been born with a different sexual orientation. A large majority of respondents from both groups felt that they would be most fulfilled in a long-term relationship. These findings rebut the popular notion that gay/lesbian persons will be found to be compulsively promiscuous and sexually shallow when compared as a group to the rest of the population. One's sexual orientation seems to have no effect on one's capacity to be faithful in a relationship. As a final note, if I were to erase question #1 (and to a lesser degree #5) from all of the returned surveys, it would be impossible for me to distinguish between gay/lesbian and straight respondents. From the data collected in this survey, the experience of gay/lesbian and straight Catholics seems remarkably similar (and similarly diverse). I am led to the conclusion that religious attitudes, personal adjustment, and relational quality are not determined in an unambiguous way by one's sexual orientation.

NOTES

1. Edward Bachelor, Jr. et al., *Homosexual and Ethics* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1980), p. 17.
2. It is important to note that the respondents to this survey are predominantly members of the organization Dignity, and may or may not represent the beliefs and attitudes of gay and lesbian Catholics in general.
3. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), "A Letter To the Bishops On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons," *L'Osservatore Romano*, n. 45 (962), 10 November 1986, p. 3.