

Has Ms. Spaulding Been Addressed?

CHRISTOPHER MORSE

The comment reported of the Virginia parish member with which my late and much respected colleague introduces his “Some Notes on the Current Debate Regarding Homosexuality and the Place of Homosexuals in the Church” prompts him to require of both self-styled “liberals” and “conservatives” on the subject that they now publicly acknowledge the reasoning informing their opposing judgments. This demand for a more explicit accountability, it may be noted, represents something of a shift for Richard Norris, who earlier on occasion was known to express a characteristic preference for “muddling through” some of these more contentious matters in good Anglican fashion by steadfastly maintaining a faithful focus upon the eucharistic reality of the Christian community, rather than for the pronouncement of explicit confessional declarations. Obviously, there is a time to speak and a time not to speak, and in light of what he sees as the outrage and possible schism currently confronting the church over sexual matters the time for a more explicit accounting of disputed positions Norris here finds to be upon us. To attempt such an accounting he suggests that consideration be given to (1) what one “takes the issues to be,” and (2) “in what direction” one “takes the solution to lie.” This, he admits, is not an easy task, but one that “Ms. Spaulding and others like her have, whether deliberately or not, pressed . . . upon us” (A.1.4). I will thus direct my comments to these two points and then ask to what extent Ms. Spaulding has thereby been addressed.

What One “Takes” the Issues and Solution to Be

In Norris’s view the primary issue raised by Ms. Spaulding’s reference to “a lot of gays in our parish” as “nice people,” but “living in sin,” has to do with how we go about judging what is good and bad, right and wrong. While a distinction may be made between homosexual inclinations and acts, it is still the fundamental question of moral judgment that is at the heart of the dispute. The basic contention, therefore, Norris takes to be a matter of ethics, and the direction, as

he puts it, in which he takes the solution to lie, so his “Notes” demonstrate, is that of moral philosophy. By framing the call for accountability in this instance in terms of the analysis of moral judgment, Norris thus sets the parameters for his own response to Ms. Spaulding. Though incomplete at the time of his death, it is, as those of us who have known him would expect, an admirably learned response of impressively articulated depth and clarity.

Concentrating upon the arguments of those in the church who take the position that homosexual behavior is *ipso facto* bad and wrong, Norris excavates their alleged grounds for doing so. Without claiming originality in an area where much has now been written, his analysis probes these logics with an eye to the inherent self-contradictions they pose to the warranting of their own negative case. In line with the traditional axiom since Augustine that, while reasoning cannot prove the truth of Christian faith, it can disprove the claims of its deniers, Norris essentially deploys what he calls “moral argument” not so much to settle the case *for* homosexual acceptance as to unsettle and dismantle the case against it. This analysis I find to be his major—and major it is!—contribution.

There are, as he presents them, broadly speaking, two ways of attempting to justify the negative case requiring examination that have been most influential in the church historically.

First, and most often heard, are appeals to “what the Bible says” about homosexuality, that is, that the Bible condemns it. In Norris’s consideration this form of argument boils down to the construal of the five usually cited texts of Leviticus 18:22; 20:13, Romans 1:26–27, 1 Corinthians 6:9, and 1 Timothy 1:10 as offering universal commands stipulating right and wrong that are context invariant. Such appeals to scriptural authority fail to recognize other factors that come into play, such as the degree to which “apparent” or surface meanings of discrete texts are being taken for granted that do not align with a more comprehensive canonical scriptural import, or how a preconscious “local cultural tradition” affects which texts are given prominence in a particular community, and how interpretations both within the Scriptures themselves, as well as within their subsequent history of usage, become “relativized” and “revised” over time. These are familiar points of scholarly hermeneutics that Norris emphasizes by illustration in Section B to lead, in sum, to the nonetheless still largely unfamiliar recognition that the modern word “homosexuality” in fact has

no exact antecedents in biblical Hebrew or Greek (B.4.3.1). *Sola scriptura* as a proffered sufficient basis for the church's condemnation of homosexuality by these counts is thus shown not to be so.

Norris next turns to the appeal to Western philosophical traditions of judging right and wrong in terms of what is taken to be "natural" and "unnatural." Here Aristotle, the Stoics, Thomas Aquinas, and Immanuel Kant figure most prominently. In this second instance as well his analysis details how this sort of case exhibits its own complexities and finally also fails by its own logic to validate its use in defense of the judgment that all homosexual behavior is by definition *contra naturam*, and hence bad. The bulk of Norris's analysis in sections C through G is devoted to this logic of what he calls "the moral argument," and the greater attention he gives to it reflects his preference for this direction of inquiry into what qualifies as "natural" and "unnatural" as offering a more promising way ahead. Noting the distinctions between Aristotelian and Stoic conceptions of "nature," and their implications for the understandings of "natural law" that inform the influential teaching of Aquinas on the *telos* or intended good of human nature, Norris questions how logically consistent, precisely in its own terms, Thomas's reasons are for judging homosexual relations to be immoral because they exhibit an undue preoccupation with pleasure and do not result in procreation. If human "nature," according to Aristotle's theory, is not automatically determined by instinct the way other animal nature is, but is said to be able voluntarily to contribute to its intended good, then a "good" other than procreation may also in principle be held to inform sexual morality. And this, as Norris observes, the church today by and large has come to acknowledge. The voluntary and habitual disposition toward one's intended end, which Aristotle defines as "virtue," gets to the heart of Ms. Spaulding's comment, Norris implies, by raising the question of whether "the gays" referred to in her parish might not also be disposed, or "virtuous," in regard to their human well-being.

In his final Section G, Norris continues along this trajectory and enlarges the prospects of appeal to moral philosophy by discussing the Kantian deontological approach to the self-determination of good and bad acts by asking what the law of the self's autonomy demands as duty, in contrast to the Aristotelian teleological perspective of asking of what contributes to the result of human nature's flourishing and excellence. Norris's meticulous but unfinished "Notes" stop at this point

of observing that the Kantian categorical imperative to will no other end than to do what selfhood requires entails understanding the “good” to involve acting at all times toward not only one’s own self, but also that of others, as an inviolable “end” in a community or “kingdom of ends,” and never as a usable “means” for some other purpose. The reader is left to surmise that, in keeping with this logic as well, a “moral argument” case against homosexual relations is not supportable in Kantian terms.

It is likely that Richard Norris would have had more to say on this subject, with his usual thoroughness and precision, but what he has said within his selected parameters of moral reasoning in bringing to light the invalidity in the logics used to defend church condemnations of homosexual relationships cannot, in my judgment, be too highly appreciated.

Addressing Ms. Spaulding

To return now more directly to Ms. Spaulding’s comment, it is important to notice that she speaks of those who are “in our parish.” This means that her reference is to persons who like herself together have evidently heard themselves addressed as to who in God’s sight they are. Among what they have heard by being in church would have been some things that they could never have told themselves or each other. These include the claims that they have been created by God and destined to be conformed to the likeness of Christ, with bodies that are temples of the Holy Spirit. The threefold referentiality of the gospel testimonies proclaimed to them and expressed in their worship has testified to a God whose way of being is, so to speak, that of being one with another in a unity of spirit—a way said to be none other than that of love and freedom. In such an image, so they have heard, their lives have been created and called forth to live not alone, but in a covenant fidelity of love and freedom as one with another in a unity of spirit. Among the variety of ways in which this call to faithful covenant relation of being one with another is lived out, so the message to them has been, is clearly that of husband and wife, but not only that, for with explicit reference to sexual relationships the word to them has been that “each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind” (1 Cor. 7:7). In thus having heard who they are in God’s sight, they have had an ancient word regarding their creation

addressed to them that “it is not good that a human being (*adam*) should be alone” (Gen. 2:18).¹

For those within such a worshipping context there would be factors bearing upon their moral judgments that need to be taken into account. I will mention three.

Foremost is the fact that such judgment and its attendant reasoning would not be autonomous but would be a derivative of thanksgiving. This is but a simple way of saying that the church is most basically identified not by its morality but by its thankfulness (*eucharistia*). While not the topic of Norris’s particular “Notes” here being considered, his own acute reasoning as priest and pastor as well as scholar was notably inseparable precisely from this eucharistic life of the church. Approached from this direction the current debate over homosexuality and homosexual persons in the church, or “gays in the parish” whether viewed as “nice people” or not, it seems to me, is in the first instance a debate not over the practice of sex but over the practice of prayer, and more specifically over whose prayers of thanksgiving are being included in the common prayer of the church. Addressing the issues triggered and pressed upon us by Ms. Spaulding’s comment requires that moral considerations be addressed in a more comprehensive frame of reference.

From this perspective what is recognized as good and not to be rejected as God’s creation by those who believe and know the truth is that which is received with thanksgiving (1 Tim. 4:3–4). What is happening today is that the ancient test of Christian faith and practice traditionally expressed since the fifth century as *lex orandi est lex credendi et agendi* (the rule of prayer is the rule of belief and action) is currently being rendered inoperative with respect to “gays in the parish.” Their no longer denied and deniable thankfulness for being one with another according to their “particular gift from God,” as the Apostle puts it (1 Cor. 7:7), is not seen to be the occasion for communal thanksgiving. That I take to be the real issue to which all considerations of ethics and morality are subordinate. Reconfigured within the parameters of this more comprehensive framework, undoubtedly the

¹ See Christopher Morse, “Being Human Sexually,” in *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1994), 273–283.

moral and ethical questions that Norris so ably examines will need to be faced. One can, for example, anticipate the objection that at our most perverse we can be thankful for sin. But that, it seems to me, is to mistake and trivialize the reality of the eucharistic context where sin and grace are not reducible to moral categories. When a time comes in the life of any community identified by *eucharistia* that there are those in its body who have been given the gift of a love for which in faith they can do no other but express their thankfulness to God, and that thanksgiving is excluded from the common prayer of the community, there occurs what most truly can be called a crisis “of biblical proportions.” This I take to be the current situation. Has it not been so from the pages of the New Testament itself throughout the church’s history?

A second factor involves a different understanding of virtue in such a eucharistic context. It was precisely within a frame of eucharistic reference that John Calvin in the sixteenth century distinguished between *virtus* as the efficacious power of the Holy Spirit in making the ascended Christ in heaven truly present in the Lord’s Supper, and virtue as within the power of human disposition, “up to us and voluntary,” as Aristotle characterizes it.² Within such a eucharistic frame of reference, virtue is not seen as a natural capacity but as a gift.³ How this logic comes to bear more concretely upon issues of sexuality is evidenced by Calvin’s rejection of clerical celibacy as a mandate for all rather than as a particular gift to some: “But this is to tempt God: to strive against the nature imparted by him, and to despise his present gifts as if they did not belong to us at all.”⁴

Calvin’s redefining of virtue theologically in contrast to anthropologically or morally calls to mind a third distinguishing factor that figures into moral judgments made in a eucharistic context. It is the

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, The Library of Christian Classics, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster, 1960), Vol. 21, Bk. 4, Ch. 17, Par. 10, 1370–1371. For Calvin’s rejection of Aristotle’s and “the philosophers’” attribution of virtue to our powers, see Vol. 20, Bk. 2, Ch. 2, Par. 3, 257–258, and Bk. 2, Ch. 5, Par. 2, 318–319. The words quoted from Aristotle come from his *Nicomachean Ethics*, III.5.1113b., ed. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1985), 66.

³ See James F. Kay’s exegetical note on Paul’s “virtues” as “charisms” in *The Lectio Commentary: The Second Readings*, ed. Roger E. Van Harn (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 261–264.

⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, Vol. 21, Bk. 4, Ch. 13, Par. 3, 1257.

factor of heaven. By the *virtus* of God's Spirit, Calvin argued, and not by our own powers, the heavenly presence of Christ is confessed to be known in the Lord's Supper. For communities that pray "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven," ethics cannot be oblivious to a heavenly doing, nor can moral judgment take its bearings except from a righteousness that is apocalypsed (Rom. 1:17).

The fact that women, children, and household slaves were not only present but addressed in some of the earliest Christian congregations provided the necessary occasion for the master to be addressed in relation to them before God as having "the same Master in heaven," with whom "there is no partiality" (Eph. 6:9). Thus social mores reflective of the household codes prevalent in the prevailing culture had the seeds of their undoing sown by the address of the gospel, though not, as Norris rightly explains, when construed noncontextually as abstract moral admonitions.

When a shared thanksgiving for all God's gifts becomes the sexual orientation that most identifies a community, the members of Ms. Spaulding's parish, as well as every other, will all know themselves addressed and welcomed home in righteousness as "sinners of God's own redeeming."

