

Speaking to Teens about Homosexuality

The topic of homosexuality is at the intersection of two profoundly human questions: *sexuality* and *identity*. Adolescence is when these questions really come to the fore. Teens want to understand and be comfortable with their sexuality: *What does it mean to be male or female, a man or a woman?* At the same time, they struggle with broader identity issues: *Who am I?* Sprinkle into this mix the adolescent interest in justice and penchant for rebellion and you have something like a perfect storm: issues of sexual identity that generate demands for justice and occasions for rebellion. We must strive to address this issue, as always, with clarity and charity. The following are guidelines for navigating these rapids.

I. Know the Church's Teaching on Sexuality

Your foundation must be the Church's doctrine on sexuality. Moral truth follows doctrinal truth. Always address homosexuality within the context of the Church's teaching on sexuality in general. Be familiar with and conversant in that teaching.

Be confident in the truth and that the truth is good for souls. *You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free* (Jn 8:32). The Church's teaching on sexual morality is not her exclusive possession. It is a matter of the natural moral law (cf. J. Budziszewski's *Designed for Sex*). One does not need to be Catholic, Christian, or even to believe in God to understand the truth about human sexuality. When you speak these truths, you are witnessing to a truth of human nature – a truth obscured by original sin and a sinful world, but still able to resonate within every human heart.

The Church's teaching on human sexuality is simple, clear, and consistent. The human person's sexuality has a twofold purpose or end: procreation and union, life and love. *Procreation*, because the bodies of a man and woman are designed precisely for this purpose. Indeed, their bodies do not make sense apart from this procreative complementarity. *Union*, because physical intimacy is a sign and expression of a deeper, interior love. This twofold purpose of sexuality can only be accomplished by the complementary union of one man and one woman. To violate sexuality's twofold purpose of life and love in any way (e.g. masturbation, fornication, adultery, contraception, homosexual acts, etc.) is gravely immoral.

II. Know the Church's Teaching on Homosexuality

The Church's teaching on homosexuality has three distinct levels: the act, the attraction, and the person.

1. The *act*. Homosexual acts are *intrinsically* disordered – always and at all times immoral. No situation, circumstance, or affection can make them moral. They are disordered because they cannot – ever – realize either purpose of human sexuality. Indeed, they are ordered away from those ends.

2. The *attraction*. Homosexual attractions are *objectively* disordered. Such feelings or emotions are directed towards a use of sexuality contrary to its twofold purpose. Having such attractions or tendencies does not make the person immoral and is not itself a sin. Nevertheless, they incline individuals to unchaste actions and therefore are disordered.
3. The *person*. The human person is always a good and always to be respected – indeed, loved. The person – no matter his attractions – bears the likeness of God, is redeemed by the Blood of Christ, and (if Baptized) is a child of God.

Therefore, the most important work is to distinguish the *person* from the *attractions*. Most errors in this area arise from an equation of the person with the attraction: *A person who has homosexual feelings must be homosexual*. This reduces the human person to the sum of his sexual desires. It is a great temptation for youth, who want so much for these issues of identity and sexuality to be settled. To make such an equation short-circuits their sexual, emotional, and personal development. It locks them in a box that is very hard to get out of.

III. Beware of the Myths

In addition to knowing the truth, you must be familiar with the myths:

1. *Homosexuality is genetic and therefore must be accepted*. No scientific research has proven this assertion. Science tells us only that certain biological factors can predispose someone to homosexual attractions. Further, *even if* homosexual attractions were genetic it would not follow that homosexual behavior is moral – anymore than alcohol abuse would be permitted if alcoholism were genetic.
2. *The Catholic Church teaches that homosexuals are disordered*. Do not permit this calumny against the Church! As we have seen from the above, it is not the *person* that is disordered but the *acts* and *attractions*. The Church defends the dignity of the individual by refusing to reduce him to a sexual attraction.
3. *Homosexuality is an orientation*. Although our culture speaks about “sexual orientations,” there is really only one orientation: heterosexual. Anything apart from that is a *dis*-orientation – meaning it is not oriented to the proper purposes of sexuality. The culture’s seemingly endless proliferation of “orientations” (gay, straight, bisexual, pansexual, polysexual, transgendered, transsexual, queer, questioning, etc.) only confirms this.
4. *People cannot change*. In many cases the homosexual inclinations are so powerful and deep-seated that an individual may not be able to understand that they do not define him as a person. Nevertheless, research and experience indicate that, with effort and dedication, a person can achieve a greater or lesser degree of freedom from the attractions and even the development of heterosexual attractions.

IV. Language is Power: Use It Properly

1. *Avoid insulting words* – and teach young people to avoid them. Words such as *fag, homo, queer, etc.* can be extraordinarily damaging – especially since they may harshly confirm someone in his mistaken view of sexuality.
2. *Avoid politically charged words.* Certain words used in popular culture have a political or philosophical bias. Such words as *gay, lesbian, queer, transgender,* etc. (used by the homosexual community) all presume a sexual orientation or identity based on attractions rather than on the objective truth about sexuality. They also carry certain political implications associated with “homosexual rights.” Even the terms *homosexual* or *homosexual person* are insufficient because they reduce the person to his sexual tendencies or attractions.
3. *Use precise, non-labeling terms.* It is better to speak of people having *same-sex attractions* or *homosexual inclinations* than to label them *gay, queer, etc.* Do not allow youth (who are inclined to do so) to label themselves or others.

V. Respond Properly to a SSA Teen

1. *Do not label...or permit the labeling.* Communicate as clearly and strongly as you can that SSA is something that the teen *experiences* and not something that defines him. The slang terms *lug* (Lesbian until graduation) and *gug* (gay until graduation) indicate the awareness (even in the homosexual community) that SSA for young people can be a passing phenomenon that disappears as one matures.
2. *Beware of abuse.* The rate of sexual abuse among people with SSA is very high. It is an aggravating factor in the development of SSA. If a teen comes to you with SSA, there is the possibility also of sexual abuse. For this reason (among others), a child should be encouraged to speak with his parents.
3. *Be aware of the propaganda.* Typically, teens experiencing SSA will go online to find out more about it. They instantly find those groups that confirm (i.e. trap) them in that identity and provide the phrases and concepts to defend it.
4. *Have referrals on hand.* Always be ready to hand this one off to someone with more expertise. Knowing certain priests and/or counselors that can help is essential.

Catholic Teaching on “Gender Identity”

The Church has no teaching on “gender identity” *per se*. She has doctrine on the human person and human sexuality. It is within that teaching that we find authoritative guidance on how to think as Catholics about the transgendered issue. This teaching on the human person – although confirmed, deepened, and defended by divine revelation – is nonetheless entirely accessible to human reason. Several principles should help guide our discussions and pastoral practices.

1. First, the human person is *created*. “Man does not create himself,” Pope Benedict bluntly stated. Yes, we have arrived at such a point that this needs to be said. To be created means to accept ourselves as possessing a certain nature and design – those defining features that make us human. This is indeed the most fundamental principle. If we do not accept humanity as a created nature with certain essentials and defining characteristics, then we will claim complete authority over ourselves and become our own creators.
2. Second, the human person is *body and soul*. Most people would probably accept the mistaken notion that the human person is a soul with a body. In fact, the human person is both body and soul as *one organic whole*. The body is essential to who we are. Transgender advocates argue that people can be one gender physically and another interiorly. This posits an opposition between body and soul that has no place in the Catholic understanding of the human person. “It needs to be emphasized that ‘biological sex and the socio-cultural role of sex (gender) can be distinguished but not separated’” (Pope Francis).
3. Third, the human person is *male and female*. This truth, confirmed by divine revelation (cf. Gen 1:27), is known by human reason. “*Being man*” or “*being woman*” is a reality which is good and willed by God (CCC 369). Further, this “being man” or “being woman” does not apply to the body and soul separately but to the body/soul unity (see #2). It is the entire person – body and soul – who is either man or woman, male or female.
4. Fourth, the human person is *wounded*. Reason looks at creation and sees not only a design, but also that not everything lives according to its own design (birth defects, medical anomalies, etc.). The Church’s teaching on the human person confirms and deepens this: original sin brought about a rupture of the harmony between body and soul. In place of that harmony we know we should have in our body/soul unity, we experience a *disharmony*, a conflict between body and soul. We all experience that to some degree or other.

This doctrine of our fallen human nature provides the context for understanding the division some experience between their physical sex and their “gender identity.” We should not make light of such division. But, acknowledging it as a departure from the design of our created nature, neither do we affirm it as normal or good.

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