

An equal music

A career as an internationally renowned pianist has helped one gay man ameliorate the 'terrible light' of the Church's teaching on homosexuality – teaching that must change with changing times

The first message of explicit negativity I heard towards being gay came from my religious beliefs as I entered my teenage years in an evangelical Church. The teaching was that something growing within me (which was me) was disgusting and must be kept quiet, cured, squashed, punished ... anything will do. Reading my Bible I would fear opening the scorching pages of Romans 1 or 1 Corinthians 6. These brief passages shine with a terrible light for a gay person, until we look at what they aim to illumine rather than at the light itself.

Just as we can now see clearly the inadequacy of St Paul's teaching on women or slavery, and excuse his historical limitations, so we need not blame him for his lack of understanding of the concept of same-sex love. He was looking through a window at first-century Rome and Corinth with first-century Jewish eyes from a perspective of religious and cultural separation that had lasted for

centuries. It is highly unlikely that he saw gay couples in faithful, committed partnerships; and it is certain that he saw all kinds of orgiastic, abusive behaviour which would often have been linked to pagan rites and beliefs. What else could he have written in his situation?

I became a Catholic at the age of 19 and the teaching on homosexuality remained the same, although being unmarried now became a respectable, even glamorous option. Priests, nuns and monks were all able to live safely without the enquiries: "Why aren't you married?", "Have you got a girlfriend?" I even considered the priesthood myself, partly to avoid having to answer such terrifying questions. Yet I remained a musician, accepting the Church's prohibition, buried under my work, avoiding "occasions of sin", destroying certain friendships before there was any chance of them developing into anything intimate – in many ways a happy yet somehow shrunken life.

It was when reading Pope John Paul II's famous book *Love and Responsibility*, published in 1960 when he was an auxiliary bishop in Krakow, that I first began to think again about this issue. You cannot offer such a radiant and dazzling vision of love and human relationships to your readers, and then exclude those who happen to have "green eyes". Once you have affirmed, as he did controversially and courageously for a Catholic bishop of his time, the sacredness of the human body and its self-gift in the sexual act, you have opened a floodgate of recognition for all who have both bodies to reverence and "selves" to give.

"It is not good that the man should be alone," said God in the opening chapters of the Bible and of human history – the one blemish in an otherwise unblemished world, where everything was "very good". Such an affirmation of companionship at the beginning of time is fresh and inspiring still; and, combined with new discoveries about sexual orientation in the natural world, it opens up a radical challenge to previously confident assessments of the morality of gay relationships.

To share a life of intimacy with another is the way the vast majority of men and women, regardless of their gender preference, are meant to live whole and holy lives. Such relationships are about more than



making babies. They are about making love, because to do so is to be fully human, with sensitive, "musical" hearts attuned to vibrations that animals may hear but only men and women can hold. Celibacy is of value only as an affirmation of what is renounced – the best given up freely because it is the best gift one can give. If celibacy is not rare, and a totally free donation, it has the whiff of something slightly perverse about it – literally "contrary to nature".

We are subject to natural law as part of creation, but we are also able to contemplate it and relish it. It is the great epiphany of reality: what is actually there, not what we would like to be there, or what our forebears have told us is there. It can be full of surprises, and it has no favourites. The one who claims natural law as an ally in arguing for the sanctity of life might end up finding it an annoying foe in a discussion on homosexuality.

When the world in which we live tells a different story from what we were taught, we eventually have to break free. It isn't so much that law changes, but that the Church (from St Paul onwards) simply has not had the vocabulary to discuss an issue it neither named nor understood. (The idea that a person could actually be homosexual, rather than a badly behaved heterosexual, has been accepted by the Church only in the past 30 years or so.)

Law is living and flexible: always growing, adapting, changing shape; never abandoning its roots but never rigid either. Christ not only boiled theology down to the simple statement, "God is love", he also distilled the complex religious laws of his time to love of that same God and of neighbour as oneself. The spiritual liberty and simplicity that resulted from this new, unified vision led, in theory at least, to the breaking down of the divisive barriers between men and women, slave and free, Jew and Gentile. It is tragic that it took

SABBATICALS

Cenacle Retreat House, Palm Beach area
Eastern Florida, USA

3-month holistic program
starts 9 January 2007

2-week mini-art program
starts 1 November 2006

Email: CenacleFL@aol.com



WESTMINSTER ABBEY

The Twenty-first Eric Symes Abbott Memorial Lecture

A NEW SONG IN A STRANGE LAND
-the contribution of women to the
priestly ministry of the Church

Thursday 11 May 2006

6.15pm in the Nave of the Abbey
By The Very Reverend Vivienne
Faull, Dean of Leicester

Also to be given on Friday 12 May
at Keble College, Oxford at 5.30pm.

Details from the Dean's Office
King's College, London
Telephone 020 7848 2333

Admission Free All are welcome

Christians at least 1,900 years even to begin to explore or live this freedom in practice. The prison gates were open but we remained inside, either cowering in the corner or standing with arms outstretched, blocking the exit. Both responses came from fear, and both were betrayals of the Christian message.

Ultimately the only real argument against homosexual equality is a belief that God has told us it is wrong. All the other reasons given (destruction of the family, seduction of the young, unnatural behaviour, a genetic disorder like alcoholism) are attempts to find a common, secular currency to barter for what is an a priori, religious judgement. But the coins are fake and are being rendered obsolete by common sense and daily experience.

Actually I believe that the religious arguments are wrong too, and that, as with slavery, the Churches will have to re-evaluate their teaching on this issue – but that's for another chapter, indeed another book. That re-evaluation will probably take decades, but in the meantime the Churches cannot expect gay non-Christians in a secular world to abstain from sexual relationships from their teenage years up to the end of their lives; and thus they cannot exclude those same people from either marriage or a legal commitment and then complain that such relationships are unstable. Straight couples are no strangers to marital collapse, even with the cement of children and society's affirmation to encourage them to hold firm, so why should we expect even higher standards from gays?

To use "musical" as a euphemism for homosexual is rather flattering when you think about it. It suggests a sensitivity, a creativity, an ability to attune to sound and beauty. Of course it was originally an ironic, snide use of the term: a real man might whistle at work, or bawl a song in the pub after work, but to be touched or moved by music below the surface seemed weak, lacking in moral fibre of that tough, fearless type which was the male ideal.

It is not an accident that music and the arts were always a tolerant environment for gay men. It was a world where an appreciation of the "feminine" was not seen as weakness, and where strength did not have to manifest itself in violence and coarseness. (It also became a safe place for gay people to flourish among like-minded friends in the years – not that long ago – when blackmail and prison were an ever-possible threat.)

All of this is not to suggest that gay people are inherently more sensitive or artistic than straights but everyone draws on a central emotional core in the act of creativity, and when the normal outlet of intimacy is blocked, the heart will find alternative ways to express itself, sometimes with enormous intensity. At best, art can become a fountain quenching an inner, passionate thirst; at worst, it is a form of sheer survival – galoshes against the puddles.

■ This is an edited extract from *The Way We Are Now*, edited by Ben Summerskill, and published by Continuum.



New Directions Sabbatical

New spirit for a new world

Renew

your spirit in a flexible program, a global community, and the scenic San Francisco Bay area. Enjoy a wide range of spiritual, recreational, and academic resources.

JESUIT SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

at Berkeley

a member of the
Graduate Theological Union

1735 LeRoy Avenue, Berkeley, CA 94709
(800) 824-0122 (510) 549-5000
Fax (510) 841-8536
E-mail: admissions@jstb.edu
www.jstb.edu



UNIVERSITY OF WALES LAMPETER

Centre for Marian Studies

M.A. in Theology (Marian Studies)

A part-time course examining the place of the Virgin Mary in Western Christianity: theology and devotion from the first to the twenty-first centuries.

Available by distance learning from October 2005

Also available are shorter courses of study leading to the Diploma and Certificate in Theology (Marian Studies)



For further information contact:

Dr Sarah Jane Boss
Department of Theology & Religious Studies
University of Wales, Lampeter
Ceredigion, SA48 7ED

Tel: 01570 424742 Fax: 01570 424987

Email: s.boss@lamp.ac.uk

Please quote TAB06



www.lamp.ac.uk/trs