



ARCHDIOCESE OF ST. LOUIS

**Hope and
Holiness:**
Pastoral
Care for
Those with
Same-Sex
Attraction

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The document, *Hope and Holiness: Pastoral Care for Those with Same-Sex Attraction* was developed as a resource by the Archdiocese of Saint Louis. It was reviewed by the committee chairman, Bishop Edward M. Rice, and has been authorized for publication.

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HOPE AND HOLINESS: PASTORAL CARE FOR THOSE WITH SAME-SEX ATTRACTION

PRELIMINARY: WHY THIS RESOURCE?

This resource exists because the Church cares. We know that people are desiring to apply the teachings and care of the church to very specific pastoral situations of same-sex attraction.

People often remark that they don't know what to do when someone says "I think I'm gay," or "My sister is a lesbian," or "I've been invited to a gay wedding" or ... whatever question or comment they may have. How do I give them the pastoral care of the Church? What *would* Jesus do?

Those are good questions. This resource is meant to begin providing some good answers and guidelines for care, and to initiate a deliberate conversation about finding the best answers and care.

Some notes before reading:

1. This resource will not focus on presenting and defending the teachings of the Church on the question of same-sex attraction. It will presume God's plan for sexuality as ordered toward the marital love of man and woman.¹ The teachings of the Church on that plan – which will be dealt with in another document – will be reflected here because they provide the channel for what pastoral care should look like. But the main focus will be on providing care in light of the teachings, not presenting and defending the teachings. We will never be more than a step or two from practical application.

2. Non-violence and non-discrimination are obvious yet necessary starting points of pastoral care for people who experience same-sex attraction. There is no room for harassment or bullying in our churches and schools!

But these are the starting points, not the end points, of pastoral care. The deepest question is not how do we prevent bullying, but how do we provide love? Jesus showed us that love *includes* doing no harm, but also *goes beyond* that. Love involves a radical commitment to the good of the other – a commitment that often involves sacrifice. We want to create an environment in our parishes and schools that reflects and fosters that radical commitment to love.

¹ See Catechism of the Catholic Church #2360

3. This resource is not meant to be exhaustive – it will not treat every aspect of every question. It is meant to provide answers to some key questions, and a framework for answering many more, in the hope of fostering a conversation that will help ministers and educators face all the questions their ministry asks of them.

The story of the woman caught in adultery (John 8: 1-11) provides a great template for approaching difficult pastoral issues. The crowd brought the woman before Jesus to stone her. There are three key features of Jesus' response that should shape our pastoral care.

Jesus protected the woman from violence.

We are called to do the same. Providing a safe *physical* space is an essential first step in providing pastoral care.

Jesus did not condemn the woman.

We are called to do the same. Providing a safe *psychological* space is also an essential step in providing pastoral care.

Jesus challenged the woman.

He didn't tell her that everything was OK; he wanted something better for her and he told her so. We are called to do the same. Providing a safe *spiritual* space – one that is on the path of the Gospel – is also an essential step in providing pastoral care, because anything that is not truthful cannot ultimately be pastoral.

PART I. WHO WE ARE

A nuanced understanding of the Church's teaching on sexuality is necessary to navigate difficult conversations on this topic. This document is not the place for a fully articulated presentation of that teaching. There are, however, a few key points that must be at the forefront of our minds when discussing human sexuality. They are summarized here.

A. Children of God

Who am I?

Each of us asks this question. Answering it provides the fundamental starting point for all of our pastoral care.

Faith tells us that the fundamental answer is this: each of us is a child of God, a beloved son or a beloved daughter of God. That is our identity. We respond to

that identity when we praise, reverence and serve God in this life, in the hope of being happy with him forever in the next life.

The fundamental task of our pastoral care is to help all of us accept our identity as a son or daughter of God and to live that identity. That also means resisting the attempt to label ourselves with any other identity.

B. FALLEN CREATURES

We are also fallen creatures. Even before any question of personal sin arises, faith and experience tell us that we have inherited a condition that is marred by original sin. All is not as it should be.

As a result, our desires do not always direct us to the good. We are left to discern which desires draw us toward God and which do not, which desires build on and reinforce our dignity and identity as sons and daughters of God and which do not.

Because of the legacy of sin, all of us struggle with some of our desires. Some we have control over and can change; some we may have to spend a lifetime struggling against. But desires are not self-justifying; the very fact of their existence does not make them good. We inherit both the dignity of a child of God and the slavery of a fallen creature. Therefore each of our desires needs to be measured against God's plan for us.

Passions are thus to be judged according to their relationship to good and bad acts, which themselves are judged based on an understanding of the human person and of the end of human existence. It is through the exercise of reason and by the gift of divine revelation that the Church can offer a true understanding of the human person and of the end of human existence, providing a criterion by which to judge which acts are good, natural, and thus conducive of human happiness, and which acts lead only to unhappiness. (Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006.)

C. GOD'S PLAN FOR SEXUALITY

How do we tell the difference between what is the legacy of creation and what is the legacy of sin in our desires?

God's plan for sexuality is written on the body and revealed in salvation history.

So we look at the actions that our desires would lead to, and consider whether those actions are consistent with God's plan or not.

God's Plan is Written on the Body

The bodies of men and women are both like and unlike. But in their differences they can come together in a one-flesh union. That one flesh union is the source of life for others.

More can be said, but we cannot say less: the bodies of men and women were made by God for each other, for forming a union that gives life. The body is a fundamental starting point in thinking about God's plan for sexuality.

God's Plan is Revealed in the Trinity

Likewise, Jesus revealed to us that God is Trinity. So we are not only made in the image and likeness of God, we are made in the image and likeness of the Trinity – an eternal communion of persons whose union brings forth life. And this image is not only written into our souls but also written into our bodies. Men and women are living icons of the Trinity.

Again there is much more to be said, but we cannot say any less: the Trinity must be a fundamental starting point in thinking about God's plan for sexuality and all of our lives.

God's Plan is Revealed in the Eucharist and the Cross

In the Eucharist and on the Cross, Jesus reveals to us who God is and – since we are made in the image and likeness of God – who we are. In the Eucharist Jesus becomes one flesh with us so that we might have life. On the Cross Jesus makes a complete gift of his body and blood so that we might have life. The union of man and woman echoes these mysteries.

There is more that can and must be said, but we cannot say less: the Eucharist and the Cross are fundamental starting points in thinking about God's plan for our entire lives, including our sexuality. Every action and every desire must be measured against them.

We long for and we were made for intimate communion with others. But we have to place that longing in the context of the central mysteries of the faith. Doing so enables us to discern which desires are aligned with God's plan for creation and which are aligned with the legacy of sin. If we set aside the body, the Trinity, the Eucharist and the Cross, our starting point will be something other than or less than fully Christian.

Christian, recognize your dignity and, now that you share in God's own nature, do not return to your former base condition by sinning. Remember who is your head and of whose body you are a member. Never forget that you have been rescued from the power of darkness and brought into the light of the Kingdom of God. (St. Leo the Great; CCC 1691)

PART II. HOW WE CARE

The Church should have the living face of a friendship that welcomes me as I am, that accompanies me so that I can become that which I ought to be, that knows how to speak the truth to me, and lifts me up after each fall with a mercy that is patience. (Msgr. Livio Melina)²

A. First Steps

The ultimate goal of the Church's pastoral care is helping each other follow Jesus in the midst of whatever struggles we may have. We're not meant to walk this path alone. Our fundamental identity as children of God makes us brothers and sisters. Our vocation is to love one another.

There are two fundamental steps in providing pastoral care:

Respect the person

We should be able to say, to each person we minister to: "You are always my son, always my daughter, always my brother, always my sister, always my friend. I will always love you. I will always be here for you. I will always want what is best for you. I will always see you as God's child, and treat you with the respect that is due to a child of God." Without this fundamental attitude no further pastoral care is possible. Unless a person is aware of this attitude in us it is unlikely that they will be able to receive anything further from us. We must indicate to everyone that they belong to our community and we want to embrace them.

Address issues

Love does not mean affirming a person's every thought, attitude or behavior. Love sometimes means challenging each other, searching for and helping to find a path to set things right.

The story of the disciples on the Road to Emmaus (Luke 24: 13-35) provides an excellent biblical template for pastoral care. Four elements in particular should be highlighted:

² Msgr. Livio Melina is President of the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family, a position to which he was appointed by Pope Benedict XVI. Having received the title of "monsignor" from Saint John Paul II, he is a leading moral theologian in the Church.

Jesus walked alongside the disciples

Out of love, he went to them and walked with them, even though they could not yet recognize him. We are called to do the same.

Here's what we can do: Recognize each other's struggles as significant to all of us. Approach each other as brothers and sisters, not as outsiders.

Jesus asked them their story

Before any other conversation, he wanted to know what was on their hearts. We are called to do the same.

Here's what we can do: If a person comes to us ask him or her: "Tell me about your experience." Listen attentively. Come to know the landscape of their heart. In doing so, we must always bear in mind respect for the person's privacy, and we must steadfastly guard against any invasive curiosity.

Ask: "Where are you finding God's love?" For many people it's helpful just to talk about where we are aware of God's love for us and where we are not. It can also be helpful in providing pastoral care to know the spiritual landscape of each other's hearts. Pay special attention to what brings good fruit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, fidelity, self-control, etc.) and what leaves the opposite in its wake (anxiety, envy, jealousy, outbursts of fury, dissensions, factions, etc.).

Jesus taught them

Once he knew the landscape of their hearts, Jesus challenged their understanding and interpretation of their experience. He saw that they were getting off the path of discipleship, and he told them so. He broke open the story of God's plan, shared himself with them and helped them get back on the path of discipleship. We are called to follow his example.

Here's what we can do: Ask: "What does it mean for you to follow Jesus?" This is a question each of us must ask. But often we do not. Don't be afraid to challenge each other – with respect to thoughts, desires, actions – where we are getting off the road of discipleship. Pay special attention to whether there's any part of life that we are holding back and not giving to Jesus. In the end, he is the only one who can set all things right.

The Power of Christian Witness

After their eyes were opened and they recognized Jesus, the disciples got back on the path of discipleship. They returned to Jerusalem. They strengthened the

community with the testimony of their encounter; in turn, they were strengthened by the community's testimony of how they, too, had seen Jesus.

We are called to do the same. None of us is meant to walk the path of discipleship alone. Each of us strengthens the community with our presence and witness; each of us needs to be strengthened by others in our weakness.

Here's what we can do: 1) Reach out to those who are or who feel isolated. They are in danger of losing the community of faith; the community of faith is in danger of losing them. 2) Share with others how we have been sustained by the Church in our own struggles. When others only know us in our strengths, they are more apt to feel excluded by their weakness. When they know that we have received mercy in our weakness, they are more likely to turn to the Lord in their struggle rather than turning from him because of it. 3) Encourage them to pray and frequent the sacraments.

*[T]he Gospel tells us constantly to run the risk of a face-to-face encounter with others, with their physical presence which challenges us, with their pain and their pleas, with their joy which infects us in our close and continuous interaction. True faith in the incarnate Son of God is inseparable from self-giving, from membership in the community, from service, from reconciliation with others. The Son of God, by becoming flesh, summoned us to the revolution of tenderness. (Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 88)*

B. Field Hospital Triage

Pope Francis has spoken of the Church as a Field Hospital. That's a great image to guide pastoral care!

But in a Field Hospital, triage is essential. Triage answers the question: what are the most important issues right now, and what can we wait and deal with later? There's a standard triage checklist for a battle field. Some things will cause death within minutes; some within hours or days; others are serious but long-term issues. Good medical care requires sorting out these issues and treating them in their proper order. Good pastoral care requires something similar.

Therefore we need to develop a triage checklist for the issue of same-sex attraction. Here's a start:

Level One: *Does the person believe in God's love for him or her? Are they aware of that love? Do they accept it?* Without these things the person will die a spiritual death immediately. (For some people, this alone is a long struggle!)

Level Two: *Does the person feel alone? Do they know that the Church cares for them and is a place where they can grow?* Since a person’s fundamental identity is as a child of God, our first community is the Church. Without knowing this, the person will feel alone in their struggle. This will make them spiritually vulnerable.

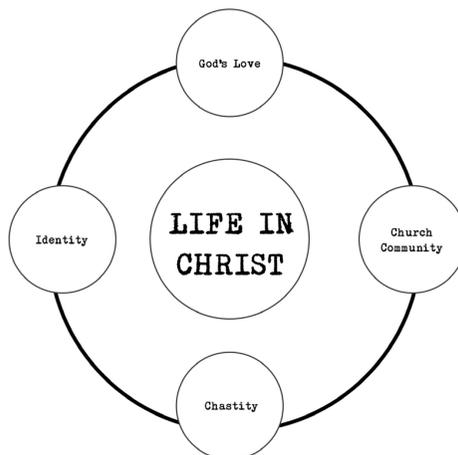
Level Three: *Is the person committed to chastity?* Without this the person’s actions will lead to a spiritual death relatively soon. (This struggle is not limited to those with same-sex attraction.)

Level Four: *Does the person understand that his or her identity is not “gay” or lesbian” or “transgendered” or any other label – that their identity is child of God, son or daughter of God?* This is a longer term problem of spiritual health. But, if it is longer term, it is still serious. It is like the seed and soil of larger problems – unless it is addressed, bigger issues will keep growing back.

It’s important to develop a triage checklist, and to keep it in mind when providing pastoral care. Without an awareness of a triage checklist there is the real possibility of providing a truthful treatment at an improper time – which results in poor pastoral care. But keep in mind that the checklist is also a cycle, and a person can enter at any point. Pay attention to the Holy Spirit, and where the Spirit is guiding you to begin.

Today we can think of the Church as a “field hospital.” Excuse me but I repeat it, because this is how I see it, how I feel it is: a “field hospital.” Wounds need to be treated, so many wounds! ... Mercy first means treating the wounds. When someone is wounded, he needs this immediately, not tests such as the level of cholesterol and one’s glycemc index.... But there’s a wound, treat the wound, and then we can look at the results of the tests. Then specialized treatments can be done, but first we need to treat the open wounds.

(Pope Francis, March 6, 2014.)



C. The Law of Gradualism

But man, who has been called to live God's wise and loving design in a responsible manner, is an historical being who day by day builds himself up through his many free decisions; and so he knows, loves and accomplishes moral good by stages of growth.

(Pope Saint John Paul II, Familiaris Consortio, #34)

The notion of triage implies that there is a timeline in the recovery, growth and development of spiritual health just as much as there is in physical health. In thinking about the timeline of spiritual health, it's important to be aware of two kinds of development.

Age Development

We expect different things cognitively and emotionally from a 6-year old, a 12-year old, an 18-year old and a 50-year old. We can also expect different things from them spiritually and morally. With questions of same-sex attraction, it is important that our pastoral care be age-appropriate.

One special reason this is important is that *labels are sticky*. Someone who is labelled as “fat” or “unattractive” or “dumb” in their childhood may have a hard time getting over that label – whether they give it to themselves or others give it to them, and whether it is true or not. This is also true of someone who is labelled as gay or lesbian or transgendered. One element of pastoral care is to help people resist adopting a label as anything other than a child of God, a son or daughter of God.

Faith Development

Even among those of the same age (whether children or adults) people are at different places in their journey with the Lord. Some may be merely going through the motions of their faith while others are living it from the heart. Some may have walked through great suffering with the Lord while, for others, “taking up their cross” is just an idea. Some may describe their faith in simple words which they have considered very deeply, while others have considered it only briefly.

Because people are at different places in their faith development, it's important to have a “discipleship roadmap.” What does that mean? It means that good pastoral care doesn't only involve knowing what the **final goal** is. It also means knowing where a person **is** in their age and faith development, and what their **next step** is toward the final goal. A discipleship roadmap helps us hold together the final goal, where the person is now, and the next step for them to take toward the final goal.

This does not mean that morality changes. God’s plan remains what it has been, and is valid and binding for all. But the Israelites advanced by stages toward the fulfillment of God’s plan in Christ. So, also, most individuals advance by stages from sinfulness to conformity to Christ. In a given conversation or encounter, we will rarely bring a person to a perfect expression of faith. Usually, our job is to help them take the next step.

The Christian life is a progressive journey toward a deepening of one’s discipleship of Christ. People do not move forward at the same pace, nor do they always proceed in a direct line toward their goal. Those who stumble along the way should be encouraged to remain in the community and to continue to strive for holiness through conversion of life. (Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006.)

PART III. SOME PRACTICAL QUESTIONS

A. Coming Out.

What should I do if someone “comes out” to me?

First, recognize that this is a moment of tremendous intimacy and an act of tremendous trust. A person who comes out to you has invited you deeply into their life. It’s important, as a first step, to be grateful for their trust and express your love for them.

But it’s also important, in the midst of that love, not to accept or reinforce something contrary to the faith and contrary to their dignity. In other words, “coming out” is not a self-evident good, though it is often treated that way. It can be good if a person is telling you their struggles, and inviting you to help them carry their cross. But if the person is telling you “This is who I am: I am gay” – they are labeling themselves in a way that’s inconsistent with the faith and inconsistent with their dignity as a child of God.

Moreover, coming out to a family member, friend, spiritual director, youth minister, teacher and so on in a private environment is one thing. Coming out in a public setting such as school or PSR, on a retreat or on social media is another matter. Coming out in a public setting can pigeon-hole a person into an all-encompassing identity that is difficult to change later. This can also make it harder to come to grips with the fact that a person’s actions are not determined by their passions. Because a key goal of pastoral care is to protect a person from harm, we must guard their privacy and good name. We must guard against gossip

and idle curiosity. And, most especially, we need to respect the integrity of the family and the role of parents as primary educators.

Of course, a person may already have come out in a public setting. That's an important element in knowing where they are, and how best to respond.

Whatever the particular situation, it's important to have a discipleship road map and to apply the law of gradualism. It's one thing to know, in faith, that a person's deepest identity is "son or daughter of God." It's another thing to determine the right time and the right way to raise that challenge.

For example: if a person is not aware of God's love for them, our first step probably shouldn't be to challenge them on the question of identity – they may experience that as a rejection of them as a person. If a person already labels themselves as gay or lesbian, we might simply respond: "But you're a child of God first."

For the person who is aware of God's love and accepts it, the next question might be whether they believe the Church cares and is there for them. For the person who knows they belong to the Church, the next question might be about their understanding of the virtue of chastity. For the person who accepts God's love and is committed to chastity, the next step might be an affirmation of where they are, and a question about identity.

Whatever the particular steps are it's important to have a "discipleship road map" so that we can ask: given the final goal, and in light of where this person is, what is the next step for him or her in drawing closer to Jesus?

For some persons, revealing their homosexual tendencies to certain close friends, family members, a spiritual director, confessor, or members of a Church support group may provide some spiritual and emotional help and aid them in their growth in the Christian life. In the context of parish life, however, general public self-disclosures are not helpful and should not be encouraged. (Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006.)

B. Origin of the Label

When a person presents themselves as gay or lesbian, it can be helpful to help them understand the origin of that label.

It's possible that the person may have a deep-seated tendency. A deep-seated tendency may be indicated if someone experiences an "exclusive or predominant sexual attraction toward persons of the same-sex." (CCC 2357) The attraction is characterized by a romantic or sexual arousal pattern that is persistent/

predominant beyond adolescence or early sexual development and is not the result of mislabeling by self or others.

It's also possible that they may have misunderstood their experience. A person may erroneously self-label or be mislabeled by others for a variety of reasons.

Self labelling

Early Experience: As a normal part of development, children sometimes go through same-sex sexual exploration. This may lead to arousal. The experience of that, or the memory of that, may lead to mislabeling.

Envy: Because children develop at different times, and because some people suffer from a poor body image, it can happen that a child is drawn to the body of a same-sex individual. But this may be envy, not sexual attraction. The experience of that, or the memory of that, may lead to mislabeling.

Developmental Issues: Especially during adolescence, it often happens that a person is drawn to the abilities, privileges, skills and/or gifts of another person of the same sex. Due to the normal increase of sexual feelings during puberty these feelings may become eroticized. They may feel like they are falling in love. It may also happen that a young person is experiencing deep friendship for the first time. They may feel like they are falling in love with a best friend. The experience of that, or the memory of that, may lead to mislabeling.

Attention getting: Most of us desire to fit in and be accepted by others. Sometimes a person labels themselves, in the absence of any same-sex desires or inclinations, for the purpose of drawing attention to themselves or harming others (e.g. parents).

Sexual Abuse: When sexual abuse is perpetrated by a same-sex offender the victim's response may include both repulsion and arousal. They may misinterpret arousal as an indication of a same-sex attraction. They may also mistakenly think that a same-sex perpetrator sees a same-sex inclination in them of which they are not aware.

When sexual abuse is perpetrated by a member of the opposite sex the victim may generalize a negative response to the opposite sex. In such cases a person may mistakenly label themselves.

Internet Pornography: It can happen that one is exposed to same-sex pornography on the internet. This experience can lead to arousal, especially in a young person's sexual development, especially if this is their first exposure to this kind of portrayal of the human body in the context of sexual activity. This experience, or the memory of it, may lead to mislabeling.

Labelling by others

Male/Female Stereotypes: Some people don't fit the usual societal expectation of male/female body and behavior. These individuals are often mislabeled by their peers: pansy, sissy, butch, gay, etc. These labels may influence the individual's self-perception.

Bullying: Sometimes a person is labeled by others who intend to hurt them or their reputation. These labels may influence the individual's self-perception.

Having a same-sex admirer: If a person is vulnerable – lonely, or suffering from a poor self-image, etc. – they may find themselves enjoying the attention or affection of a same-sex admirer. This attention or affection may influence the person's self-perception, and he or she may willingly accept an erroneous label.

Finally, when doubt or curiosity lead to experimentation, these experiences form memories which shape the person's self-understanding. This is why chastity is essential to forming healthy self-understanding.

Erroneous self-labeling or labelling by others is not always the root of same-sex attraction. Whatever the cause, however, such labels are “sticky” – they tend to endure with ourselves and others. In a person's quest for truth and healing it's important that the meaning of his or her experiences be accurately understood. A person may experience a deep-seated same-sex attraction. But the issues named here come up often enough that we should be attentive to the possibility that they are factors in a person's embracing the label gay or lesbian.

C. Support Groups

Should our parish/school sponsor a support group?

Answering this question well requires an awareness of the benefits and dangers of saying Yes or No to support groups.

First, there is the danger that might be expressed this way: “I feel alone in this struggle.” One of the reasons to have a support group is that it can be tremendously helpful to know that we are not alone in our struggles, and to have the support and wisdom of others. This is one of the reasons why groups like Alcoholics Anonymous have been so valuable to so many. This is why the USCCB document *Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination* says:

It can be helpful for persons who find themselves with homosexual attractions to gather together in mutual understanding and support. This can be particularly the case because persons with a homosexual inclination may feel “different,” which can lead to isolation and alienation, which are risk factors for an unhealthy life, including unchaste behaviors. Support groups, noted for their adherence to Church teaching, for persons who experience same-sex attraction continue to be an important part of Church ministries and are to be encouraged.

Second, there is the danger that might be expressed this way: “This is who I am – gay/lesbian/transgendered/etc. I want to be with other gay men/lesbian women.” One of the reasons not to have a support group is that it can reinforce this kind of labeling. In a subtle but real way, this can undermine a person’s true identity as a child of God. In a subtle but real way, therefore, it can reinforce an obstacle to virtue. So the same USCCB document also says:

Persons with a homosexual inclination should not be encouraged to define themselves primarily in terms of their sexual inclination, however, or to participate in “gay subcultures,” which often tend to promote immoral lifestyles. Rather, they should be encouraged to form relationships with the wider community.

Third, there is a question of age. It’s one thing to talk about a support group for adults, and another thing to talk about a support group for adolescents³. Adolescents need support as much as anyone in their struggles. But adolescents are apt to suffer in a particular way from labelling themselves as gay. Because adolescence is a time of rapid change and affective immaturity, the boundaries between transitory same-sex attraction and more deep-seated tendencies are not always clear. It is not unusual for a young person to experience attraction to a person of the same sex. It is important not to assume that such experiences are the result of a deep-seated tendency.

Finally, there are dangers that come up not simply for individuals but from the group dynamic. Every group requires proper facilitation, and support groups like this are no exception. Whether or not a support group will be helpful depends not only on the presuppositions individuals bring to the group, it also depends on the group dynamic. The group dynamic is shaped, in no small part, by the presuppositions and skills of those who will facilitate the group. Facilitators who support Church teaching are essential. Facilitators who are skillful with group dynamics are essential.

Pope Francis has said that he wishes for parishes and communities to be islands of mercy. Sponsoring a support group can be one way to do that. But not every parish or school will be equipped to sponsor a support group. Sponsoring a support group where the proper conditions are met can be a great help to those who experience same-sex attraction. Sponsoring a support group when the proper conditions are not met is not offering mercy; instead, it is likely to result in confusion and hurt or worse, reinforcing obstacles between a person and God.

Parishes or schools should not sponsor a support group without Archdiocesan consultation.

³ Keep in mind that adolescents would need parental permission to participate in such a group.

D. Further points.

There are a few further points that should be mentioned, even if they can only be treated briefly.

1. A person who experiences same-sex attraction may ask: “Is the Church saying that I can never have love and intimacy? How can the Church deny me those essential human goods?”

In responding, it’s important to distinguish clearly between love and sex, and between intimacy and sexual intercourse or sexual activity. Yes, the Church teaches that sexual activity with a same-sex partner is not God’s plan for anyone. (Just as sexual activity with an opposite-sex partner outside of marriage is not God’s plan for anyone.) But love is much broader than sexual activity, and so is intimacy. It’s important to see through the cultural lie that equates love and intimacy with sex.

2. A problem arises when we fold the issue of same-sex attraction under the umbrella of “diversity:” there are some kinds of diversity Catholic teaching supports and some kinds of diversity it does not.

That’s why “celebrating our differences” is an ambiguous slogan. Saint Paul, for example, is quite clear: there are differences in the body of Christ that we celebrate because they help us more fully express Christ’s mission and ministry in the world (see 1 Cor. 12), and there are differences that pull us outside the body (see Galatians 5:19-20). A general endorsement of “diversity” tends to blur that distinction.

Some will say “we want to learn how to get along in a diverse world, so we have to learn to tolerate differences.” But we also want to see the world through Gospel eyes, to let the Gospel shape our attitudes, beliefs and actions. If we’re going to learn to follow the Gospel in a diverse world we need to learn to understand the perspective of others; but love also requires that we charitably challenge false assumptions about truth and reality. While we never reject the sinner, we do reject sin.

3. What should I do if a family member is in a same-sex partnership?

There are often two tendencies. One is to say “You are a problem (because you experience these attractions).” This does not express the Church’s teaching! The other is to say “There is no problem – I celebrate this relationship.” This, also, does not express the Church’s teaching.

In between these two extremes we find what the Church actually teaches – a more measured response to the interior (desire, inclination) and exterior (choices, actions) dimensions of the situation. It's important to develop a two-step approach: affirming the person, not affirming all of his or her choices.

It's natural for this situation to cause strong feelings. We should ask: Am I able to control my emotions or do they control me? It's important to be able to process our emotions constructively so they don't impair our ability to think and act with clarity and compassion.

We should ask: Do I really know the Church's teaching on this? Am I willing to study to understand it more fully?

We should ask: Are my thoughts and feelings governed by the whole truth of the matter: that God is loving the person where they are, and calling them to holiness – both exteriorly and interiorly?

We should ask: Am I willing to apologize, and to forgive, when mistakes have been made?

There is no simple response to the question of what to do when a family member is in a same-sex partnership. But the points listed here are crucial components to living well in the tension this situation creates.

The discovery that a family member has homosexual tendencies can pose a serious concern for parents, siblings and spouses. The Church reaches out to them, seeking to help ensure that the bonds of love among family members remains intact. A helpful way of addressing this issue is through the formation of support groups for individuals and families, where they can also learn the full truth of the Church's teaching regarding the human dignity of persons with a homosexual inclination and the moral principles regarding chastity that lead to the fullness of authentic human living. (Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006.)

4. If I'm invited to a gay wedding, should I go? If a gay couple wants to use my services at work, should I provide those services?

In order to answer these kinds of questions well, we have to ask another question:

Will my action support the person *as a person*, or will it support the person *as gay*? To support a person as a person – a child of God – is simply to follow the Church's teaching on promoting human dignity. To support a person as gay – in his or her identity or lifestyle – is to depart from the Church's moral teaching.

How do we walk that line? There may be some cases that are clearly on one side of the line or another. There will also be a great many cases where we simply don't know enough about the situation to make a clear decision. At that point we have to make a prudential judgment, and some other factors come into play.

For example: How will this impact the serenity and moral formation of our children? Will our action or inaction give scandal – that is, will it lead others to sin (for example, by suggesting the moral equivalence of marriage and same-sex partnerships)?

Each situation is unique and requires careful discernment as we try to walk the fine line of affirming the dignity of the person and not affirming behavior contrary to chastity. As with other situations – e.g. divorce and re-marriage – there is no simple answer to this question. There are, however, more and less thorough ways of considering the question.

5. Should a same-sex attracted person cultivate same-sex friendships?

The first answer to this question is obviously: Yes! Friendships are a great gift from God. As the Catechism states: “Whether it develops between persons of the same or opposite sex, friendship represents a great good for all. It leads to spiritual communion.” (2347)

At the same time, the Catechism places this discussion in the context of chastity. Why does that matter?

It matters because a married man may develop a genuine friendship with a woman who is not his wife, and a married woman may develop a genuine friendship with a man who is not her husband. It can also happen that genuine friendship begins to give way to romance, either interiorly or exteriorly. If and when that happens, the relationship ceases to be a genuine friendship. It violates the bounds of chastity. It violates true love.

The same thing is true of the cultivation of friendship within the context of same-sex attraction. There is a natural desire for friendship that should be cultivated. Sometimes that desire can be confused with, or can cross over into, a desire for romantic involvement – a desire that cannot be cultivated within the bounds of chastity. Saint John Paul II's commentary on Matthew 5:27-30⁴ can be very helpful here: the holiness to which Jesus calls us is not only a holiness of action, but a purity of heart.

4 In audiences 34-50 of the Theology of the Body Saint John Paul II takes up the saying of Jesus about committing adultery and looking at a woman with lust (Matthew 5:27-30). Here, as elsewhere in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus drives the issue relentlessly inward, to the human heart. He indicates that we are not only called to morality of action but also to purity of heart.

One way in which the Church can aid persons with a homosexual inclination is by nurturing the bonds of friendship among people ... Friendships of various kinds are necessary for a full human life, and they are likewise necessary for those attempting to live chastely in the world. There can be little hope of living a healthy, chaste life without nurturing human bonds. Living in isolation can ultimately exacerbate one's disordered tendencies and undermine the practice of chastity. (Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006.)

PART IV. CONCLUSION: A VISION OF HOPE

We want and need to know God's plan for us. We also want and need to know that that plan can be attained. Cooperating with God's grace is what is ultimately life-giving to soul and body – and putting people in touch with that is the ultimate goal of our pastoral care.

It's important, in providing pastoral ministry to those with same-sex attraction, to hold out hope. God has a plan for each of us. That plan is for us to be united with him on every level of our being for all eternity. Every son and daughter of God needs to know that, by cooperating with grace, we can reach this goal. Without this hope it's hard to have the courage to live according to the Gospel.

In providing pastoral care, we are called to be islands of mercy. That involves empathetic listening. It involves forgiveness. It also involves the truth about human sexuality. We cannot deny a person any of those things without denying them the full pastoral care of the Church.

If you experience same-sex attraction, know that you are wanted! God wants you. Christ is calling you. The Church needs you, believes in you, and expects great things of you.⁵ You are made for love and communion. There are authentic ways to satisfy the longing for love and communion that God has built into us and there are ways that, in the end, will never satisfy us. In the Eucharist and on the Cross Jesus shows us the way – the way of self-gift – and gives us himself as the way. Together, let's strive to follow Jesus, and never give up on his mercy when we fall.

Homosexual persons are called to chastity. 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. (CCC, 2359)

⁵ See Saint John Paul II, Second Address at the Kiel Center, Papal Visit to the Archdiocese of Saint Louis. Available at <http://archstl.org/archives/page/holy-fathers-second-speech-kiel-center>

FURTHER RESOURCES

Institutional Resources:

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2337-2359

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith

Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons. 1986.

Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons. 2003.

USCCB

<http://www.usccb.org/marriageuniqueforareason>

Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care (November 14, 2006)

Archdiocese of Saint Louis REAP Team: “Common Questions on Same-Sex Attraction.” <http://www.reapteam.org/common-questions-on-same-sex-attraction>

Living the Truth in Love: Pastoral Approaches to Same-Sex Attraction. Janet Smith & Fr. Paul Check, eds. Ignatius Press, 2015.

Courage apostolate:

www.couragerc.net

Desire of the Everlasting Hills. (1 hour testimonial video from Courage.)
<https://everlastinghills.org/>

“Invited to Courageous Love”: Five-Part Video Study Series.
<https://couragerc.org/invited-to-courageous-love-dvd-series/>

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<http://www.firstthings.com/article/2010/11/bearing-better-witness>

Edward Sri: *Men, Women, and the Mystery of Love: Practical Insights from John Paul II's 'Love and Responsibility.'* Servant Books, 2015.

Christopher West:

Heaven's Song: Sexual Love as It Was Meant to Be. Ascension Press, 2008.

Theology of the Body for Beginners, Ascension Press. 2009.

General Works:

St. Francis de Sales: *Introduction to the Devout Life*. TAN Books, 1994.

Jacques Philippe: *Interior Freedom*. Scepter Publishers, 2007.

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