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THE PARADIGM OF COMPASSIONATE DENIAL

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To a casual reader of social media, it may appear that the culture war battles in the Orthodox circles around human sexuality have finally ceased, especially compared to the raging 2010s. I think that, rather, the lines have been drawn, and most of the combatants have retreated to their respective camps. Certainly the need for intellectual and spiritual freedom to continue the important anthropological and theological work in the Church is an issue that is much broader than the limits imposed by the nature of social media interactions. Yet I ponder what has emerged from the fray as the paradigm of “compassionate denial.” This position can be summarized along the lines of “My heart breaks for people in the Church who struggle with same-sex attraction, and we should counsel them and offer them support with love in their ascetic endeavor to carry the cross of chastity.”

It may be due to the temporary distance from this discourse that the pitfalls of the “compassionate” approach struck me anew. Of primary concern is that it provides the well-meaning “traditionalists” with a comfortable alternative to the toxic hatred propagated by a subset of Orthodox culture warriors. It allows the satisfaction of feeling loving and accepting while at the same time remaining within the comfortable confines of an officially prescribed position: we are fully accepting of our homosexual brothers and sisters as long as they satisfy the requirement to forsake their need for human companionship.



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Yet such “compassionate” denial of people’s identity is, in a way, even worse than toxic homophobia of avowed haters. First and foremost, because it makes people so much more vulnerable to abuse. “We love you, but only on our terms” is more damaging than honest rejection. A person who gets counseling in their “affliction” by the well-meaning “counselor” cannot benefit from counseling based on the conviction that this person is distorted, defective, and therefore their only path in life is to deny their humanity and follow the straightjacket prescribed for them by the ideology which rejects science and knowledge, but worse, rejects Christian love. The classic retort that every Christian is called to ascetic self-denial is hypocritical in this context, since no one demands of heterosexual Christians to submit to lifelong solitude.

As John Congdon writes in a discussion on Facebook, “The biological, psychological, and environmental factors that affect human sexuality are complex and highly variable, and the scientific study thereof is still comparatively in its infancy. One thing that science has shown is that it is highly unlikely that sexual orientation has a single cause, such as individual choice or a so-called ‘gay gene.’ It’s also been pretty conclusively demonstrated that such orientation cannot be changed merely by an act of the will or by such cruel methods as aversion therapy. One thing is quite clear, however, and that is that prepackaged ‘solutions’ to poorly understood conditions are never effective, either in spiritual matters or psychological, and the damage done by ideologically driven approaches is no less real for the good intentions of the counselor.”

To quote a popular Orthodox point of view, “Many believe there are genetic and environmental influences that cause homosexuality, but this is not provable scientifically. I believe same-sex attraction is the result of the fall, just as is all sin.” This, of course, is a position that deliberately confuses the issue. Science exists to describe empirical phenomena, but theological questions are not directly subject to scientific conclusions. Saint Basil the Great pronounced upon this matter quite decisively. The question for a Christian thinker is not whether people’s relationships are biologically determined, it is what those relationships mean in the context of our relationships with God.

And this is where we get to the most troubling aspect of this approach to sexuality. “I would like to say that the need for intimacy is often the driving force behind sexual promiscuity in all its forms. We all need intimacy, but to confuse this need with sex is the main reason why so many people succumb to sexual sin. The need for intimacy can be fulfilled in deep friendships, but must ultimately find true fulfillment in an intimate relationship with God.”

This statement, while not incorrect, serves to reduce intimacy to lust, thereby committing a logical fallacy. Intimacy with one’s partner does not cancel an intimate relationship with God. Moreover, this statement essentially equates homosexual sex with sexual promiscuity.

When “compassionate” Orthodox counselors reject outright the possibility of kenotic love between homosexual persons, and reduce their relationships solely to sexual attraction as if there were nothing else that happens between persons, they do not only denigrate same-sex relationships, but by extension do the same to heterosexual coupling. Sexual intimacy is part of *perichoresis* that happens between people. It is a wonderful thing enshrined in the Bible as part of KNOWING another (hence the very word in Hebrew that describes the intercourse in a marriage is “know,” as in “Adam knew his wife”). Erotic love is sacred, the terminology of erotic attraction is used by Jesus himself, and it is a great sin of the Neoplatonic captivity of Christian thought that it has been transformed into something dirty, equated with lust, and delegated to a straitjacket of regimented execution. Our theology needs to liberate the understanding of love and coupling from this misconception. The witness of the many Christian homosexual couples speaks against the concepts proclaimed by the rigorists of the binary mindset. Their witness is no less valuable than what they are up against.

In summary, the real emphasis of the discussion on gender and sexuality needs to shift from biological determinism to the more fundamental questions of the holistic nature of human

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coupling, and the theological significance of sexual intimacy apart from the begetting of progeny. Only if we liberate our discourse from the traditional disdain of human sexuality will we be able to approach it in a balanced and, most importantly, spiritually elevated manner free both from the legalistic fetters and the unhealthy fear. And, last but not least, to allow for this discourse to be guided and decided solely by the monastic elders is to handicap it by definition. The non-celibate Christians working out their salvation in the world can and should witness to their experiences.

Inga Leonova is editor of The Wheel, a quarterly journal of Orthodoxy and culture.

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