

SIN, REGRET, REPENTENCE

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Truth on Sexuality

The Real Nature of Catholic Reparative Therapy

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“Distinguo”—that curious Latin term that reminds us that we need to make essential distinctions between and among similar concepts in order to fully understand them.

And now, with the untimely passing of reparative therapy pioneer Dr. Joseph Nicolosi, which in turn met with an inhumane “glad-you’re-dead” response from ‘gay’-affirming ideologues who refer to Nicolosi’s life’s work as “torture,” faithful Catholics absolutely must make some crucial distinctions.

First, we Catholics must be willing to affirm unswervingly that those experiencing same-sex attraction deserve more dignity than the label “gay” affords them and that the psychological sciences can indeed help many people experience some semblance of liberation from the attractions themselves and more readily lead a life of authentic chastity.

Next, we Catholics must be willing to acknowledge that, unlike the *Catholic* foundation of Dr. Nicolosi’s pioneering work, some approaches to reparative therapy that are not based on Catholic anthropology have significantly missed the mark because of a fatal flaw in their understanding of the human person. In fact, the garden-variety perceptions of so-called “conversion therapy” or the notions of “ex-gay” and “pray-away-the-gay” really arise from this issue.

Homosexual Inclination: Sin or Temptation to Sin?

The misunderstanding is a direct consequence of the Protestant Reformation, not surprisingly. The rejection of the true understanding of original sin and its effects led a number of early Protestant theologians to accept the notion of human nature’s “total depravity”—that the Fall so corrupted man that the very *inclinations* we experience that tempt us to sin are actually *sinful in themselves*.

Here is the major distinction Catholics need to make between the *Catholic* understanding of reparative therapy and the understanding espoused by at least some Protestant Christian reparative therapy supporters: The competent and informed therapist will ground therapy in the understanding that the homosexual inclination itself is *not* an instance of personal sin but is a *temptation* to sin. As such, the Christian’s goal of therapy will be shifted—the goal will *not* be to completely eliminate

the erroneously perceived personal “sin” of *having* the inclination, by stopping the inclinations altogether. Rather, it will be to move the person toward a less-difficult pursuit of chastity *despite* whatever may remain of the inclination itself after therapy.

If a therapist misunderstands the fundamental truth that the objectively disordered homosexual inclination is not a form of personal sin, someone can indeed be harmed by such therapies, even in a Christian setting.

Marriage Is *Not* a Remedy for Same-Sex Attraction

The reparative-therapy arena can become even more destabilizing to a person with same-sex attraction when a practitioner not only attempts to eradicate completely the “sin” of homosexual inclinations but also attempts to steer the same-sex attracted person toward other-sex marriage as a blunt remedy for homosexuality instead of as a potential consequence of psychological and spiritual healing and recovery of one’s God-given sexual (complementary) inclination.

One of the rabbit-holes of misguided reparative therapy among some Christians is a basic mistrust of celibacy *for the sake of the kingdom*, as well as a dim view of being single in general (and it is important to recognize that these are two different categories). And yet the Catholic view is that chastity is fully attainable both for a single person who is open to marriage as well as for a single person who believes he or she is called to *not* pursue marriage and instead chooses to build up God’s Kingdom through the gift of celibacy.

Too often, some reparative-therapy efforts may have pressed people toward ill-advised other-sex marriages as a *means* of treating the homosexual condition rather than as a *possible goal* for at least some who can heal beyond the same-sex attraction to experience authentic eros-love for an other-sex spouse. In the Catholic view, however, this is by no means a one-size-fits-all measure of “conversion” success, but rather is a specific *blessing* that may well be experienced by some, but perhaps not by others.

Thus, there is a need to make a vital distinction between the *hope* that even a person with deep-seated homosexual inclinations might heal sufficiently to enter into a life-giving and fruitful marriage and the false *mandate* that marriage is somehow the measure of whether a particular form of reparative therapy is deemed successful.

At the Heart of Therapy: A Hypothesis

Okay, you may say, so chastity is the goal, not marriage, and it’s choosing to say “yes” to the disordered inclination that is the sin, and not the attraction itself. Then what is really the “stuff” of reparative therapy—what does it ultimately seek to address?

Though I am not in the field of reparative therapy,* I would offer this hypothesis: in some people the homosexual inclination could be the consequence of some form of same-sex relational deficit that is *eroticized* within the person. Successful therapy would then seek to discover the nature of that deficit and then look for ways to “de-eroticize” it in favor of authentic chastity and healthy same-sex friendships.

God gives us “eros-love” and the complementary human sexual inclination as part of our human nature. Eros is by definition necessarily complementary—for example, a man is attracted to a woman because she “is” something he “is not.” He desires to enter into communion with that which he “is not” and thereby possess or receive that gift of the other.

In my hypothesis, with some cases of same-sex attraction, a man can experience some kind of relational deficit first within *himself*—he feels he does not fully possess that which he really “is”—he seems at odds with his own manhood. Thus, when he encounters another *man* who appears to be that which he “is not,” he experiences the desire to enter into communion with the other man and thereby possess or receive his manhood. He eroticizes his interior desire for self-completion.

The core of the word “complementarity” is “complete-ment,” basically. Perhaps this is why such deep-seated interior deficits become eroticized—eros-love is by nature designed to attract us toward communion with the other sex, allowing us to receive that which we ourselves “are not.” Similarly, eros-love is the means by which we then *give* that which we *are* to “complete” the other person (self-gift).

All this becomes massively disrupted if a man (this principle would apply to women as well) experiences the pervasive feeling that he *doesn’t*, in fact, possess his own manhood as possible gift to a woman. The entire contour of eros-love would be short-circuited. There could be no complementary eros-love because a man would not yet perceive the “other sex” truly as “other,” since he would not yet perceive his *own* sex as fully his own possession.

Thus, he would become greatly invested in seeking to attain, at least vicariously, the “being-man” he feels is absent in himself. This isn’t merely a desire for male *companionship*, though this is also very important. Rather, it’s primarily an eroticized deep desire for male *self-possession*. In such a case this interior, eroticized desire would also become a major impediment for developing the very appropriate, chaste, and healthy same-sex friendships that are often the best forms of strengthening one’s own sexual identity (for both man and woman).

In these circumstances, confronting and resolving deeper issues could be a vital part of the process of inner healing. It may well bring a person great relief and a realistic possibility of experiencing some tangible level of the other-sex attractions that remain rooted in his or her God-given human nature.

Reparative Therapy: A Vital Resource for Many

If this hypothesis has merit, then clearly there are circumstances under which and ways in which psychological counseling and reparative therapy would be absolutely appropriate helps for those with same-sex attraction who seek authentic chastity. Chastity is utterly dependent upon self-mastery, and self-mastery is dependent upon self-possession of our sexual identities as either man or woman.

Simply stated, reparative therapy—grounded in a Catholic understanding of the human being—is one vitally important tool in the toolbox for anyone seeking both healing and chastity from the *inside out*. It is important to note that the Church doesn’t see reparative therapy as a form of healing that *every* same-sex-attracted person should or must choose. But the Church’s view of the human person clearly reveals the potentially great value of reparative therapy for those who may choose it.

With these distinctions in place, Catholic—and non-Catholic—practitioners of reparative therapy can honor the pioneering and ground-breaking efforts of people like the late Dr. Joseph Nicolosi, and faithful Catholics everywhere can help stem the secular tide that seeks to prevent this kind of healing in the name of preserving a corrupt and dangerous sexual ideology. Together, we can help our same-sex-attracted brothers and sisters move closer to self-mastery and chaste living.

Author’s Note: While I’m not a therapist, the hypothesis I present is based largely upon what I continue to read from those who are professional Catholic therapists—this includes a timely April 1 interview in the National Catholic Register of therapist David Pickup, himself a board member of the National Association for the Research and Treatment of Homosexuality (www.narth.com). Pickup’s interview appears to echo and align with the hypothesis I present above.

Editor’s note: Pictured above is a billboard sponsored by Exodus International, a Protestant “reparative therapy” ministry that ultimately closed shop after admitting that their approach was unsuccessful.

Fr. Paul Scalia on Regret and Repentance

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Fr. Paul Scalia

Today, we remember Palm Sunday, Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem, that brief moment before he was betrayed. Every Gospel writer points out that our Lord’s betrayer was one of His closest friends. At the beginning of our Lord’s public life, when He calls the Apostles, Judas is already pegged as the one “who became traitor.” (Lk 6:16; cf. Mt 10:4; Mk 3:19). In the account of his going to the chief priests, he is “one of the twelve.” (Mt 26:14; Mk 14:10; cf. Lk 22:3). In John’s Gospel it is the Lord Himself Who makes this observation: “‘Did I not choose you, the twelve, and one of you is a devil.’ He spoke of Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was to betray him.” (Jn 6:70-71)

In a sense, the repeated phrase “one of the twelve” states a simple historical fact. Jesus was not just put to death by His enemies but betrayed by one of His own. In a deeper sense, however, the line serves as a warning to all who follow Christ – and, indeed, to those closest to Him. Judas was with our Lord for the same three years as the others. With them, he heard the sermons, witnessed the miracles, and was sent forth by Christ. And yet he betrayed our Lord. We should never think ourselves beyond the wickedness of Judas. Proximity to Jesus does not always mean intimacy with Him.

So it is a healthy thing to look at Judas’s negative example. Not with a view to condemning him all over again or to feel our own superiority. Rather, we do so with a certain empathy, aware

that we labor under the same human weaknesses and are likewise capable of grave sin – of betrayal. What then do we find in the betrayer that we might also find in ourselves?

First is Judas's failure to persevere in his conversion. Our Lord chose him just as surely as He chose Peter and John. He did not do so begrudgingly or out of necessity. When our Lord addresses Judas as "friend" in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mt 26:50), He does intend it as irony or sarcasm. At some point, Judas's conversion seems to have faltered. Perhaps it was simple sloth. Perhaps it was a teaching he couldn't accept. John hints that the Bread of Life discourse was Judas's undoing – hence the Lord's reference to him as "a devil" at the end of it.

Or maybe Judas felt betrayed by the Lord. He may have had expectations of the Messiah that Jesus did not fulfill – expectations of glory and power hard to square with the repeated references to the Son of Man suffering, being rejected, and killed. For three years, he followed this rabbi and the anticipated glory had not arrived. He grew impatient with the Lord's talk about suffering. In this regard Romano Guardini observes: "That he did not leave, but remained as one of the Twelve was the beginning of his treachery. Why he stayed, we do not know. Perhaps he still hoped to muddle through inwardly, or he wanted at least to see how things would develop – unless he already dreamed of profiting by the situation." (*The Lord*)

Which brings us to the next point: Judas's greed. Judas objected to Mary's anointing of Jesus with costly ointment not out of concern for the poor but "because he was a thief, and as he had the money box he used to take what was put into it." (Jn 12:6) Greed is grasping. It's really not so much about possessions but control – about having such means at our disposal that we do not need to rely on others, or even God. It is "practical" in the worst sense of that word. And Judas was an eminently practical man. In fact, one theory is that he foresaw our Lord's coming defeat and was hoping to set himself up politically and financially by the betrayal. A very practical consideration.

Further, there seems to be a superficiality or shallowness about Judas, a tendency to see things in only natural, worldly terms (not surprising in the practical man). At the Last Supper, our Lord says to His Apostles, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me." They ask Him one after another, "Is it I, Lord?" Except Judas. He asks instead, "Is it I, *Rabbi*?" (Mt 26:21-25) The others saw Jesus as Lord. Judas saw Him as only a rabbi, a teacher.

Of course, a teacher is important. But one does not worship a teacher. A teacher's words can be powerful, perhaps even life-changing. But they are ultimately human, limited by the world's wisdom and time itself. Jesus' words endure: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." (Mt 24:35) Judas does not seem to have realized the depth of our Lord's words or have entrusted himself to their authority. They were for him perhaps interesting and challenging, but not authoritative. How often we hear that about His teachings today?

Finally, and sadly, Judas fails to repent. No doubt, he feels remorse over what he has done. And this is no small thing. In the tangle of his heart he still bore at least some love for Jesus. But notice: he returns not to Jesus but to the chief priests – to his coconspirators. To *them*, he acknowledges his sin. Judas possesses not repentance but regret. By repentance we look to the good God, to the Redeemer, to the one Who is Mercy. In His light, we reject sin. By regret we look to ourselves, turn further inward, and close ourselves off from the reconciliation and healing that come from God alone.

In Holy Week, we would like to be more like John, who stood faithfully at the foot of the Cross, or like Mary Magdalene, who kept a sorrowful vigil at Calvary. But that would be to give ourselves too much credit. This is the hour to think not of our strengths but of our weaknesses. It is no time to look askance at Judas but to realize that we labor under the same wounded human nature as he.

Like Judas, we fail to persevere in our conversion. We settle for piety instead of holiness. We turn aside if things get difficult and fail to deepen our devotion. We may even feel betrayed by the Lord – if He has not answered a prayer the way we want or catered to our own imaginings of Him.

Like Judas, we grasp for things – for money, possessions, power. In a word, for control, trying to keep our dependence on God at bay. Like him, we tend to superficiality, making our faith only a matter of human wisdom, interesting insights, psychological comfort rather than an encounter with the Word made flesh. We adopt a worldly view of religion rather than put on the mind Christ.

Hence, we do not entrust ourselves to His words as we should: *Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. . . . He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. . . . Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock,*

and it will be opened to you. . . .as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.

And most of all we fail to deepen our repentance. We feel regret for our own sake, because our sins made us look bad. For all these failings and sins the Lord has granted us now the opportunity for real repentance. "Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation." (2 Cor 6:2)

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