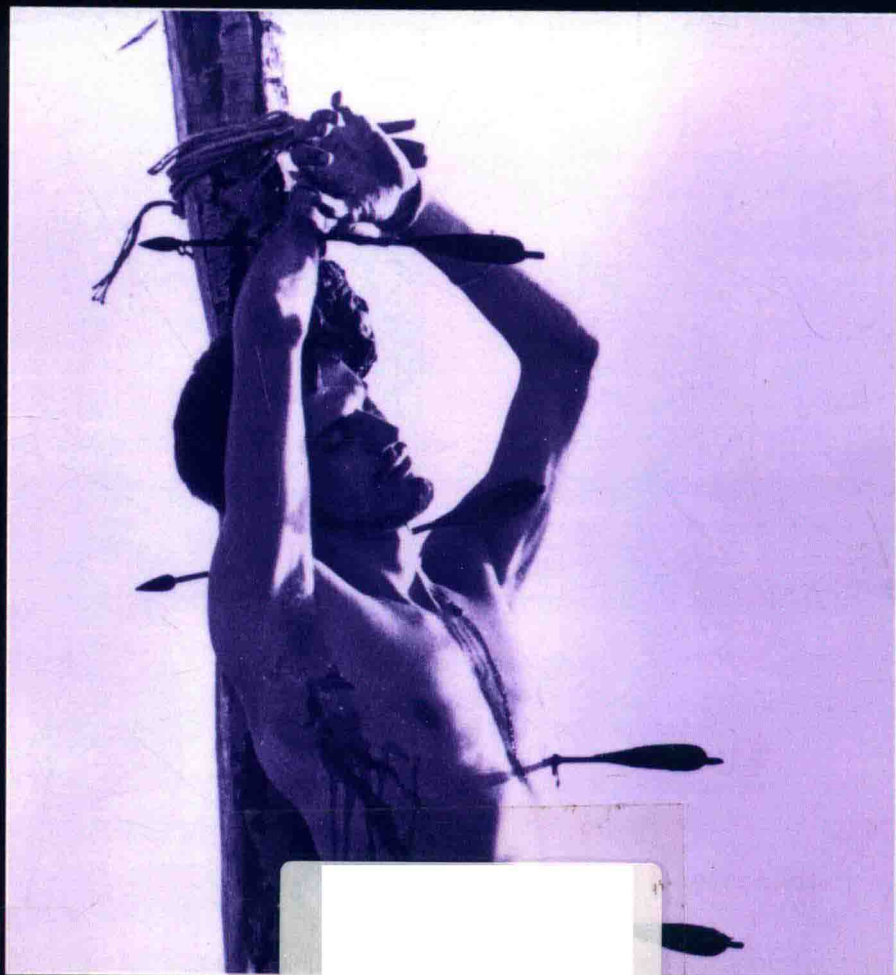


CHALLENGES IN CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY

# SEXUALITY AND THE CHRISTIAN BODY



*Eugene F. Rogers, Jr*



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# SEXUALITY AND THE CHRISTIAN BODY

Their Way into the Triune God

*Eugene F. Rogers, Jr*

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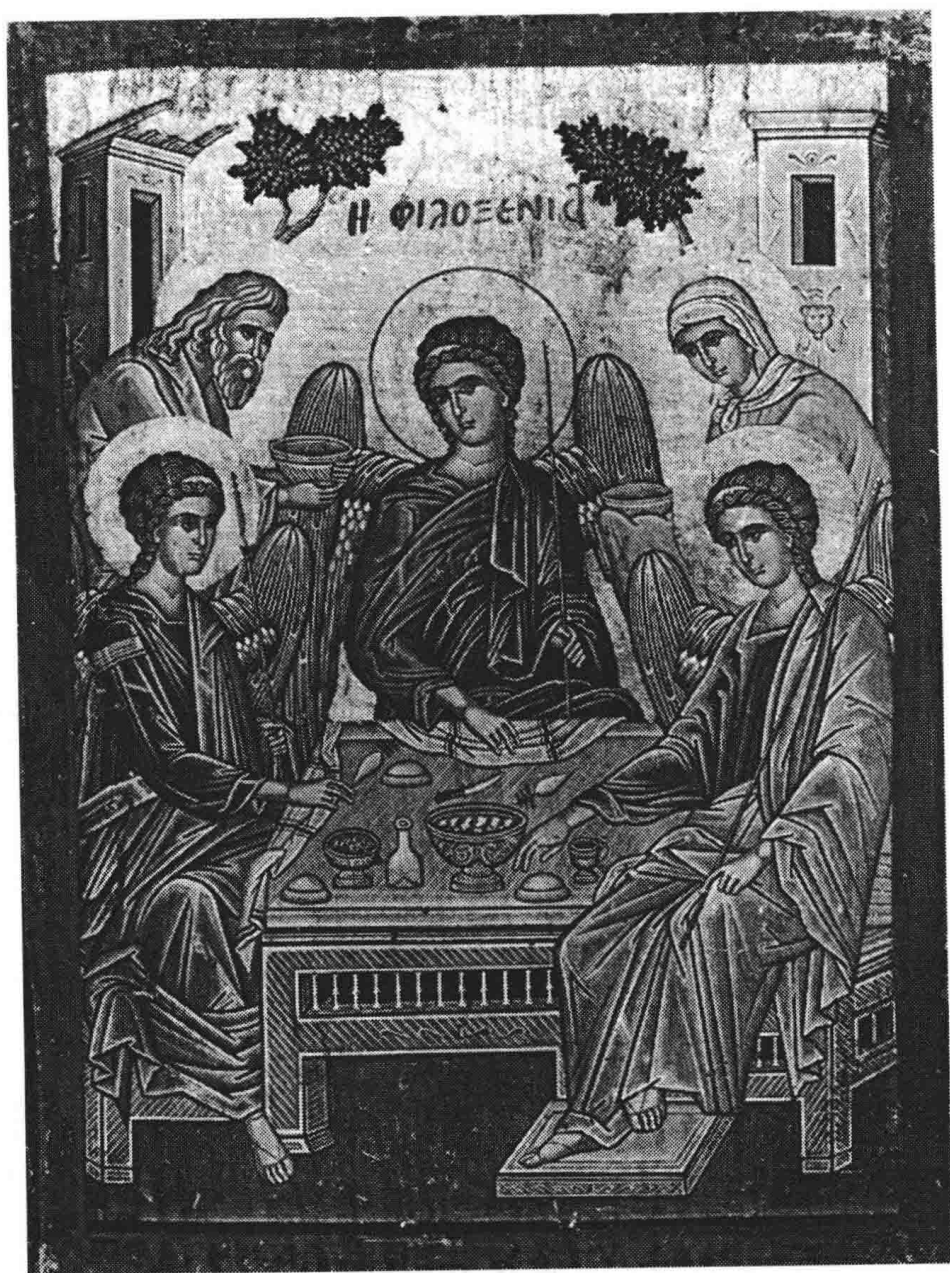
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Thanks are due also to the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation; with their support I ended up at Yale, where I learned a great deal about sexuality and its way into the Triune God from Rowan Williams, then Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Oxford, who had come to visit Yale for a semester on the death of Hans Frei. He delivered to me a copy of "The Body's Grace," another essay that figures heavily in these pages, when it was still available only as a pamphlet reprint of a public address.<sup>2</sup>

There, too, I began to encounter views of Christian sexuality of enough charity and sophistication as to compel me, when I disagreed, to think through why. To those friends I owe great thanks: then to Regina Plunkett-Dowling<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Paul Evdokimov, *Sacrement de l'amour: Le Mystère conjugal à la lumière de la tradition orthodoxe* (Paris: Éditions de l'Épi, 1952; Desclée de Brouwer, 1980).

<sup>2</sup> Rowan D. Williams, "The Body's Grace," 10th Michael Harding Memorial Address, pamphlet (London: Institute for the Study of Christianity and Sexuality, 1989), now reprinted in (and cited from) Charles Hefling, ed., *Our Selves, Our Souls and Bodies: Sexuality and the Household of God* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1996), pp. 58–68.

<sup>3</sup> Regina Plunkett-Dowling, "A Paradox of Grace: The Gospel Call to Homosexuals," *Sojourners* 20 (July 1991): 26–8.

and Richard Hays, and later, when I had come to the University of Virginia, to signatories of "The Homosexual Movement: A Response by the Ramsey Colloquium."<sup>4</sup> Of those, I wish to thank especially David Novak, with whom I had wonderful long conversations and with whom it is delightful to disagree; and Robert Jenson, perhaps the most constructive theologian working in English today, who inspired, and received with constructive seriousness, a ten-page letter that first put into paragraphs the argument of a book that I had previously only sketched. I should also like to thank the sponsors of Jenson's Dogmatics Colloquium and Richard John Neuhaus's Dulles Group, who have patiently suffered and supported in their midst a theological conservative who is a social liberal on issues about which we disagree. From the members of the Dogmatics Colloquium, as well as from another group, the Duodecim Society, I have learned a great deal.

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<sup>4</sup> "The Homosexual Movement: A Response by the Ramsey Colloquium," *First Things* 41 (March 1994): 15–20.



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The National Humanities Center has graciously provided a fellowship for the year 1998–99: this will make it much easier to see this project through the press and get started on the next, which develops some of the constructive interventions of this essay on the role of the Holy Spirit in the triune life and the philanthropia of God. There I wish to thank particularly the Director, Robert Connor; the Chief Librarian, Alan Tuttle; and, for preparation of the bibliography, the Editorial Assistant, Karen Carroll. I am grateful also to Mary-Alice Talbot for granting a non-Byzantinist a reader's card for the library at Dumbarton Oaks.

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"Sanctification, Homosexuality, and God's Triune Life." For Martha Nussbaum and Saul Olyan, eds. *Sexual Orientation and Human Rights in American Religious Discourse*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 134–60.

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"Aquinas on Natural Law and the Virtues in Biblical Context: Homosexuality as a Test Case." *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 27 (1999): 29–56.



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# INTRODUCTION

This book will, I hope, help students of Christianity to answer such questions about it as these: What is the relation of the human body to the trinitarian life of God? To the incarnate body of God's Word? To the body of the Church? To the body of Christ in the eucharist? How does human procreation relate to divine creation? How does sex relate to grace? How does nature relate to redemption and consummation? What are gay people and celibates for? What does God want with sex, anyway? Not only Christians but students of the humanities from English to philosophy, medieval studies to politics can benefit from understanding better how Christian argument about the body works.

In accordance with the aims of the series, this book addresses challenges to trinitarian Christian warrants both by gay and lesbian Christians *and* by their traditional Christian critics. By "trinitarian Christianity" I mean Christianity of a sort that exponents as various as Thomas Aquinas, Karl Barth, and Eastern Orthodox liturgy hold in common. By "challenges" I mean ones to both conservative *and* liberal conceptions of the body and of sacraments that observers see already *within* the community. Both traditional and revisionist arguments about the body have proved too easy, when insufficiently disciplined by more central doctrines in Trinity and christology, nature and grace. Together, traditionalist and revisionist arguments call for help upon those within or without the Christian community who would like to see it flourish – who would like to see it renew its resources for internal coherence; who would like to see it recover rationales for marriage and celibacy in assumption of Christians' bodies into the trinitarian life of God; or who would like to see it rediscover what God wants with the body and bodily desires for the common good. Thus I issue the challenge of this book not to one side or the other but to both sides and to all who care about or study them.

Not autobiography, apologetics, reaction, or devotion, this book addresses

theology proper, offering a defense of marriage wide enough to include same-sex couples and committed celibates. Centrally concerned with Trinity, christology, hermeneutics, nature, and grace, it makes of the homosexuality debate an opportunity to rethink those things, because the debate raises profound and perennial theological issues. A sociologist has suggested that lesbian and gay theologies have, so far at least, fallen into four types: apologetic, therapeutic, ecological, and biographical.<sup>1</sup> I would argue that this work escapes such genres, because it seeks to recover for all those interested in the Christian community, and not just its lesbian and gay members, what it thinks sexuality is for at its best, how it interprets human bodies, what it means in affirming that God is Trinity, and whether it recognizes that the Church is (mostly) Gentile. The genre of this essay is not apologetic but (insofar as one can distinguish the two) dogmatic, where “dogmatic” means explaining to Christians and those who study them how Christianity’s constructive and self-critical warrants work internally.

Although the book focuses on currently controversial issues of homosexuality, it seeks to interest not only readers concerned with that topic, but also anyone who has worried about the ways in which Christianity may be for or against the body, how marriage might be recovered from individualism for the community, how it might be revitalized as a locus of sanctification, how the Spirit relates to the interpretation of Scripture. More elementally, it is about the point of sexual desire, the scope of Christ’s redemption, and the meaning of the Trinity. In order to construct my arguments, race, gender, and even Judaism (a traditional locus of Christian thought, to its peril, about “the carnal”) come in as heuristic clues.

Part I seeks to re-orient the debates. The initial chapter constructs a typology of recent arguments, both to orient the reader and to expose similarities in opposing positions. It attempts to get beyond them by considering the criteria for debate among differing members of the Christian community. The second chapter considers how that community has settled disputed claims to full membership in the past, in the shape of arguments about how moral and natural disqualifications for full membership relate. The third chapter considers the community’s claim that its members should exhibit holiness. Readers who find that the greater problem in the Christian community today is a lack of visible holiness among the baptized may like to read chapter 3 before chapter 2. Those who find, on the other hand, that the greater problem in the Christian community today is a lack of justice toward

<sup>1</sup> Donald L. Boisvert, “Queering the Sacred: Notes for a Typology of Gay Spirituality,” paper delivered to the American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, November 1997.

disfavored groups should read chapters 2 and 3 as they appear. Although I could have put the chapters in reverse order, I put them this way so that the call for visible holiness would come as climax.

Part II seeks to retrieve the good in both the traditional and the prophetic arguments critiqued. It finds surprising openness to new views of nature in Aquinas, and to particularity and the work of the Spirit in Barth.

Part III takes up again in more detail and with more constructive purpose the re-orientation proposed in part I. It continues a defense of marriage, begun in part I, wide enough to include same-sex couples, opposite-sex couples, and lives of vowed celibacy, all under the same rationale. It offers deeper constructive arguments, not for the historical presence or logical necessity, but for the fittingness in the Christian tradition of married same-sex relationships. The starting places of these arguments are radically theological, or contingent on claims peculiar to Christianity. They include the relation of Trinity to creation; God's acting "contrary to" or "beyond" nature in incorporating the Gentiles into the Jewish olive tree (Rom. 11:24); God's predilection for irregular sexuality in salvation history, as in the cases of the women named in the genealogy of Jesus; and the recovery of adoption as a theologically ramified Christian practice.

As an epilogue it offers a charge for a wedding incorporating some of those elements, and suitable for both same-sex and opposite-sex couples.

Both theologians like Rowan Williams, author of "The Body's Grace"<sup>2</sup> and member of the editorial board of a new journal called *Theology and Sexuality*, and sociologists of culture wars like James Hunter, author of *Culture Wars*,<sup>3</sup> have called for rethinking these matters to get beyond the impasse on such sexual issues as orientation. The present volume furnishes an immediate example.

While some scholars have treated homosexuality in the New Testament and in Christian history,<sup>4</sup> on both sides they have been inconclusive and

<sup>2</sup> Rowan Williams, "The Body's Grace," in Charles Hefling, ed., *Our Selves, Our Souls and Bodies: Sexuality and the Household of God* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1996), pp. 58–68.

<sup>3</sup> James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), esp. pp. 318–25.

<sup>4</sup> Famously, John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), and *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York: Villard Books, 1994). Most recently, see Mark D. Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in*

without theological depth. Meanwhile, “arguments to be found in the documents on sexual ethics produced by Protestant churches have, more often than not, [a] sort of purely occasional and scattershot quality to them.”<sup>5</sup> Among important revisionist works, John Boswell’s celebrated *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*, for example, never even poses the question: supposing the ceremonies described are sometimes used to bless same-sex households that include a sexual component – then how did Christians proceed when their liturgical practice conflicted with their high theology?

Conceptual analysis of Christian theological argument remains largely confined to popular genres.<sup>6</sup> Befitting the interest in and frustration with the topic of homosexuality in the Church, popular theology falls into liberal apologetics, conservative defense, and anthologies of essays on one

*Christian Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997). For a recent New Testament study that refers to some of the literature pro and con, see Dale B. Martin, “Heterosexism and the Interpretation of Romans 1:18–32,” *Biblical Interpretation* 3 (1995): 332–55.

<sup>5</sup> Kathryn Tanner, “Response to Max Stackhouse and Eugene Rogers,” in Saul Olyan and Martha C. Nussbaum, eds, *Sexual Orientation and Human Rights in American Religious Discourse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 161–8; here, p. 164.

<sup>6</sup> Four recent anthologies may constitute exceptions, covering among them both sides of the standard debates with some sophistication. See Jeffrey S. Siker, ed., *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1994); Robert L. Brawley, ed., *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1996); Choon-Leong Seow, ed., *Homosexuality and Christian Community* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1996); and Charles Hefling, ed., *Our Selves, Our Souls and Bodies: Sexuality and the Household of God* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1996). Two older Catholic anthologies are of similar caliber: Robert Nugent, ed., *A Challenge to Love: Gay and Lesbian Catholics in the Church*, with an introduction by Bishop Walter F. Sullivan (New York: Crossroad, 1984); and Robert Nugent and Jeannine Gramick, eds, *Building Bridges: Gay and Lesbian Reality and the Catholic Church* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1992). Of books by single authors in the popular genres, see the works of John McNeill, *Freedom, Glorious Freedom: The Spiritual Journey to the Fullness of Life for Gays, Lesbians, and Everybody Else* (Boston: Beacon, 1995), *Taking a Chance on God: Liberating Theology for Gays, Lesbians, and Their Lovers, Families, and Friends*, with a new preface (Boston: Beacon, 1996), and *The Church and the Homosexual*, 4th edn (Boston: Beacon, 1993); and Thomas M. Horner, *Jonathan Loved David: Homosexuality in Biblical Times* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978). Midway between academic and popular are the books of Carter Heyward, among them *Our Passion for Justice: Images of Power, Sexuality, and Liberation* (New York: Pilgrim, 1984), *Speaking of Christ: A Lesbian Feminist Voice* (New York: Pilgrim, 1989), *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as the Power and the Love of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), and *Staying Power: Reflections on Gender, Justice, and Compassion* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 1995).

or both sides. As one correspondent wrote, "My heart sank when I saw that you had sent me a proposal for yet another book on Christianity and Homosexuality."

Rigorous and comprehensive treatments are lacking. Even *Against Nature? Types of Moral Argumentation Regarding Homosexuality*<sup>7</sup> covers only natural law, does not seek to analyze liberal arguments critically, and treats the author's Dutch contemporaries at the expense of thinkers from Aquinas to Barth who influence the entire West. Meanwhile, a dozen pages of close, small-print bibliography in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* lists no religious studies at all.<sup>8</sup> Only "The Body's Grace," by Rowan Williams, begins to uncover with adequate conceptual rigor the connections between the social and high theological issues, and it is only ten pages long.

This book hopes, then, to make several contributions. It types and analyzes a wide variety of positions. It exposes similarities between opposing arguments. It considers the conceptual structure rather than the history or biblical basis of Christian arguments. It goes beyond narrow concerns to take up matters deeply ramified in Christian thought (the relation of law and virtue, between divine election and command). It contributes both to the understanding of Christian thought and to the civility of public debate.

I have described the genre of this book as "dogmatics." That designation may strike liberal readers as archaic, or conservative ones as inappropriate to the topic. It is neither, but a term of art, specifically what Karl Barth called "irregular dogmatics." "Irregular dogmatics" is:

free discussion of the problems that arise for Church proclamation from the standpoint of the question of dogma. . . . Perhaps for specific historical reasons it will take up a specific theme and focus on it. Perhaps it will be relatively free in relation to the biblical basis or its choice of partners in discussion. Perhaps it will be more of an exposition of results, and will take the form of theses or aphorisms, and will observe only partially or not at all the distinction between dogmatics and proclamation. Perhaps it will leave much to be desired as regards the explicit or implicit distinctness of its path of knowledge. In one respect or another, or even in many or all respects, it will be, and will mean to be, a fragment, and it will have to be evaluated as such. The dogmatic work that has come down to us from the early Church, even from the pens of its most

<sup>7</sup> Pim Pronk, *Against Nature? Types of Moral Argumentation Regarding Homosexuality*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin, eds, *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 653–66.



significant and learned representatives, is not for the most part regular dogmatics but irregular dogmatics in the sense described.<sup>9</sup>

Or it is an exercise in what Cardinal Ratzinger and the Catholic Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith would call “the ecclesial vocation of the theologian.”<sup>10</sup> In describing the questioning aspect of the theologian’s ecclesial vocation, the document of that title avoids the word “dissent,” which it reserves for “attitudes of general opposition to Church teaching which even come to expression in organized groups,” “the weight of public opinion,” and “the mass media.”<sup>11</sup> Contrary to its portrayal in the popular media, the Vatican here opposes attempts to foreclose reasoned theological argument. On the contrary,

the theologian has the duty to make known to the magisterial authorities the problems raised by the teaching in itself, in the arguments proposed to justify it or even in the manner in which it is presented. . . . His objections could then contribute to real progress and provide a stimulus to the magisterium to propose the teaching of the Church in greater depth and with a clearer presentation of the arguments. . . . [I]f the truth really is at stake it will ultimately prevail.<sup>12</sup>

Although I am not a Catholic, as a student of Christianity I find the “Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian” a useful description of the sort of intellectual discipline that is likely to gain a hearing in the Christian community over the very long term. It is even a discipline that I am not alone among non-Catholics in attempting to emulate.<sup>13</sup> The “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons,” furthermore, explicitly invites such an exercise: “[T]he phenomenon of homosexuality, complex as it is and with its many consequences for society and ecclesial life, is a proper focus for

<sup>9</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols in 13, trans. G. W. Bromiley, et al. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956–75), vol. I/1 (rev., 1975 trans.), p. 277. In the original, the last sentence begins a new paragraph.

<sup>10</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian,” *Origins: CNS Documentary Service* 20 (1990): 120–6. I cite with both page and section numbers.

<sup>11</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian,” p. 123, § 32.

<sup>12</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian,” p. 123, § 32.

<sup>13</sup> See for example Stanley Hauerwas (a Methodist), “Virtue, Description, and Friendship [formerly “Gay Friendship”]: A Thought Experiment in Catholic Moral Theology,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* (1998): 170–84.

the Church's . . . attentive study, active concern, and honest, theologically well-balanced counsel." The Letter calls on "theologians who, . . . by deepening their reflections on the true meaning of human sexuality and Christian marriage with the virtues it engenders, will make an important contribution to this area."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons," reprinted most conveniently in Jeannine Gramick and Pat Furey, eds, *The Vatican and Homosexuality* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), pp. 1–10; here, §§2, 17. – As I revise this section, newspaper and radio reports wax sensational about a new apostolic letter from the pen of John Paul II, "Ad tuendam fidem," dated July 1, 1998 (*Origins* 28 (1998): 113, 115–16). It speaks of the "infallibility" of the definitive teachings of the ordinary magisterium. Although non-Catholic Christians, especially those in ecumenical dialogue with the Catholic Church, can scarcely be happy about the wording, the news media have missed several crucial matters of context. (1) Technically, the document only adds oaths of adherence for "those who exercise an ecclesiastical teaching ministry," that is, in Catholic institutions of certain limited sorts. The ecclesiastical teaching ministry is not the same as the ecclesial vocation of the theologian, and the existence of the one does not deny the existence of the other. (2) It would be wrong to interpret the document as in conflict with either the "Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian" or the "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons." Since "Ad tuendam fidem" aims to strengthen the teachings of the ordinary magisterium – including those on the ecclesial office of the theologian – it also strengthens, rather than undermines, those documents. (3) The word "infallibility" must not be understood in too broad a sense. It means that Catholic Christians are required to exercise the virtue of hope that infallible pronouncements will not prove so inadequate to the truth as permanently to separate them from the grace of Christ. Indeed, all Christians should hope, to put it crudely, that the Holy Spirit will preserve Catholic Christians from going to hell for believing the magisterium. Indeed, no less an authority than Thomas Aquinas usefully distinguishes between "infallible" and "irresistible" movements of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is resistible as long as human freedom lasts. But God will infallibly bring the predestined into the divine fellowship (*Summa Theologiae*, part I, question 22, article 4 [hereafter I. 22. 4] *ad* 1). Applied to the magisterium, Thomas's distinction would mean that its human ability to resist the Holy Spirit does not go away in this life, but the Spirit will also keep it from going so far astray as to thwart God's saving purpose. For more on the structure of authority in Catholicism, see Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1992), pp. 384–7, and "Magisterium and Theology," in his *Theological Investigations*, vol. 18, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Crossroad, 1983), pp. 54–73; Francis Sullivan, *Creative Fidelity: Weighing and Interpreting Documents of the Magisterium* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), and *Magisterium: Teaching Authority in the Catholic Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985); Richard R. Gaillardetz, *Teaching with Authority: A Theology of the Magisterium in the Church* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1997), esp. pp. 101–28.