

Homosexuality

by David Morrison



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HOMOSEXUALITY

**Christ Above all:
The Church's Teaching
on Same Sex Attraction**

by
David Morrison

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CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Same Sex Attraction: The Basics	6
Same Sex Attraction: The Context of the Church's Teaching	19
Living Out the Church's Teaching	33
A Word of Encouragement	43
The Five Goals of Courage	46
Suggestions For Further Reading	47

About the Author

David Morrison, is a writer and editor who lives, works, and worships in Washington, D.C. He worked as a gay activist for about seven years until, in his late twenties, he gradually became disillusioned with an actively gay life and, in self-acknowledged despair, turned to God. After his conversion experience Morrison grew in his knowledge and faith in Christ, at first while still homosexually active as an Anglican and, later, as he is today, a Roman Catholic committed to chastity.

He has written for many newspapers and journals and has spoken on issues of sexuality identity, faith, and culture across the world. His articles have been reprinted in over seventeen languages worldwide.

INTRODUCTION

The debate over homosexuality, or same sex attraction, may be among the most divisive confronting societies today. Those who practice and/or promote homosexuality have advocated the elimination of laws against the practice of sodomy, particularly same sex sodomy, and a general reduction overall of social disapproval of homosexuality. One result of this activism has been that citizens today find themselves facing some unexpected questions: a relative or friend has revealed that they are “gay”; what should my response be? A son, daughter, parent or other close relative has said they are gay and wants to bring their sexual partner to family events: what should I say? Is it uncharitable to oppose so-called “gay rights” legislation? What about parents who are gay and who have young children? Should homosexual men and women be allowed to teach in schools or to adopt children? Just what is homosexuality anyway? - and the list goes on.

Catholics in Western countries reel under the waves of revelations of clerical abuse of minor boys and the frequent inability of bishops to confront that abuse honestly and vigorously. What does the Church teach about homosexuality anyway? Is the Church too hard on people who define themselves as gay, or too soft? What does the Church say about “gay rights” legislation?

Many of these important questions go beyond the scope of this booklet, which will limit itself to addressing the nature of same sex attraction and what the Church teaches about it. What the Church teaches about homosexuality may be among the Church's most well kept secrets, and an explanation of the Church's understanding of same sex attraction can only expand the Kingdom of God.

A note about language

While the Church's official teaching on homosexuality uses the words "homosexuality" and "homosexual persons," a growing number of people who live with same sex attraction choose not to use those terms. They reject these terms because they find them needlessly reductive. No human being can be reduced to their sexual or emotional attractions and they refuse to allow their sexual attractions to define their lives.

There is also a sense in which the terms gay and lesbian, when used as labels, needlessly confuse and blur very complex and unique situations. The terms make it appear that all people living with some same sex attraction are essentially the same, which is a misconception.

Instead, some men and women experience their attractions on a daily and steady basis. Others encounter them only very rarely, or only under certain situations, or

only towards certain types of people. In addition, experiencing some degree of same sex attraction does not mean a person experiences only homosexuality. Many people who live with some degree of same sex attraction still experience some heterosexuality as well.

SAME SEX ATTRACTION: THE BASICS

Although some form of same sex behaviour has existed for millennia, there is a vigorous debate in the scientific community about whether same sex attraction has its roots in something “natural” about the human body or the world or in the ways parents and families rear their children.

According to the most recent and reliable research, a significant number of people in the United States (and likely Britain) live with some degree of same sex attraction. According to my most trusted statistics, and I admit I try to limit my errors to the side of undercounting, approximately three million Americans have a predominant sexual and romantic attraction to their own sex. This is a figure derived from the most recent National Health and Social Life Survey conducted by the U.S. government. The NHSLS found that 2.8 percent of the male population and 1.7 percent of the female population identified themselves as experiencing some degree of same sex attraction, whether defining themselves as “gay,” “lesbian,” or “bisexual.”

Various problems plague the task of arriving at reliable statistics as to how many people around the world live with some homosexuality.

- First, there are no uniform definitions for how much same sex it takes to move one into the “same sex attracted” column in statistical tables. Is one encounter (however that is defined) enough? How about a fleeting crush or fantasy?
- Second, in the first world the topic is fairly political since gay and lesbian activists have promulgated the estimate that ten percent of the population experiences predominant homosexuality, a figure which is widely discredited in scholarly circles.
- Third, the question is no less political in the developing world where homosexuality is so heavily stigmatised that very few could be expected to report experiencing same sex attractions. For example, in China, the world’s most populous country, the government only recently admitted that homosexuality existed at all.

In Britain, recent surveys conducted by the National Centre for Social Research found that 2.6 percent of 11,000 people surveyed, a fairly small sample for such a large topic, reported having had some genital contact with a same sex partner in the last five years, a figure which would be roughly in line with data from the U.S. and other Western countries.

Investigations conducted along purely biological and psychological lines have offered several theories for the

causes of same sex attraction and whether such attraction can be diminished by way of psychological and spiritual counselling. Existing research on same sex attraction concentrates on the phenomenon of male homosexuality. Research focusing on the causes of female homosexuality has been rare.

Broadly speaking, study of the origin of same sex attraction (again, primarily in men) has fallen into two broad schools. Firstly, research usually within purely biological fields (such as genetics) seeking to establish that same sex attraction has a purely biological cause. This group is commonly known as the *nature* school, since they believe same sex attraction arises from some purely natural biological cause. This group's theories have generally been criticised often by socially conservative groups, and by other investigators, since their work has been given wide media coverage and because to date it has lacked sufficient replication to meet the general standard for scientific research.

The other school proposes that the origins of same sex attraction rest in relationships, specifically the failures in certain key relationships, for example with close relatives and/or peers. This group, the *nurture* school, holds that same sex attraction may develop from how children are raised or from key experiences in childhood. This hypothesis has been criticised since the early 1970's, because of the implicit element of blame

to be levelled against parents or other relatives, and blame is never popular.

Since the nurture school is among the most stalwart in working with same sex attracted men and women who wish to diminish the degree to which they experience homosexuality, it has met with vitriolic opposition from activists who firmly oppose the notion that same sex attraction can be diminished through a counselling or therapeutic approach.

The Nature Investigations

Four significant studies from the nature school (which have not been replicated) have fired the popular imagination and renewed interest in the natural theory as regards men. This is especially so, once an earlier theory - concerning the presence or absence of certain hormones in the prenatal stage of life - had been widely discredited.

In 1991, the neurobiologist Simon LeVay dissected the cadavers of thirty-five men, nineteen of whom were known to have lived with same sex attraction and who had died of complications related to HIV/AIDS. He discovered that a part of the hypothalamus (INAH3) in the brains of the men known to be living with same sex attraction were on average smaller than those in the brains of the other male cadavers and closer to the size of the region found in the brains of women. The study was published in the journal *Science* and has not since been replicated.

While LeVay did not claim that his study proved anything about the natural origin of homosexuality in men, media coverage advanced such claims. As a result the study was criticised by both socially conservative groups and other researchers.

A minority of critics noted that LeVay himself lived with a degree of same sex attraction and could therefore be reasonably interrogated as to whether he could objectively research the topic. Other critics observed that six of the sixteen men who were not known to be living with same sex attraction at the time of their death, and who had larger INAH3 regions, had also died of the complications of HIV/AIDS. How certain could LeVay have been that these other six men did not, in fact, live with any same sex attraction, they asked.

Further, critics pointed to problems of cause and effect in the study. LeVay's research could not show whether the smaller INAH3 regions *caused* the homosexuality the men experienced or were somehow the *result* of homosexual practice or some other cause, such as the complications of HIV/AIDS that killed them.

A similar study in 1992 was conducted by L. S. Allen and R. A. Gorski, and published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*. It reported that the bundle of nerve fibres between the hemispheres of the brain, the anterior commissure, was larger in the brains of thirty four male

cadavers who had been identified as living with same sex attraction when they died. The study did not receive the coverage that LeVay's had, and suffered some of the same problems. The researchers relied on some subjects who had died of complications of HIV/AIDS, for example. Again, the anterior commissure is not generally associated with sexual function or desire, so it was unclear what the results of the study, even if it were replicated, would mean.

Studies that seemed to claim that same sex attraction in both men and women could be carried in genetic material had also appeared in 1991. J. M. Bailey and J. C. Pillard compared 110 men who had self-identified as living with same sex attraction and who were members of either monozygotic (identical) or dizygotic (fraternal) twin pairs. The researchers reported in the *Archives of General Psychiatry* that 52 percent of the identical twins and 22 percent of the fraternal twins had brothers who also experienced same sex attraction. Similar studies, while not replicating Bailey and Pillard precisely, delivered similar results.

Critics have pointed out that these studies lend support to the arguments of the nurture school as much as to those of the natural school. If the origins of same sex attraction in both men and women lie in the genes, why wasn't the correlation even stronger. Since both fraternal and identical twins would usually be raised in the same family, couldn't the presence of same sex attraction among the

twin brothers be a result of similar family and relationship conditions, which is part of the nurture theory?

In 1992, a research team led by D. Hamer, responded in the journal *Science*, and they argued that there was a genetic link for male homosexuality across generations. Researchers found that thirty-three of forty pairs of brothers, both of whom lived with some same sex attraction, had the same DNA markers (on a region of the chromosomes called Xq28) as relatives on their maternal side, who also lived with some degree of same sex attraction. Reactions to this study ranged from sceptical to optimistic.

Apart from replicating their work, the researchers also faced the challenge of establishing which of the base pairs that reside in that region of the DNA actually was responsible, if only one, for the rise of same sex attraction. They also had to explain why, if same sex attraction is solely a matter of the genes, why has the correlation been less than one hundred percent.

But the biggest challenge facing the nature school is not empirical as much as behavioural. Simply put, critics point out, human beings are more than the sum of their genes. Having a genetic tendency to something may not mean a person has to choose a given course of behaviour, or that they would not be happy in another course of behaviour. Human behaviour and identity cannot be explained simply by genetic equation.

The Nurture Theories

Nurture theories are more willing to address the phenomenon of same sex attraction in women. A common theme of nurture theories is that both male and female homosexuality has to do with reconciling different aspects of *maleness*. Thus same sex attraction in both men and women has its roots in an inability to comprehend or trust different aspects of what, at a deep level, is understood by being male.

The generally well-known advocate of the nurture camp is probably Sigmund Freud, the most famous and controversial founder of the psychiatric discipline. Freud first hypothesised same sex attraction in men as possibly originating from having an absent or distant father and overbearing and/or cloying mother. The intervening years have not been kind to Freud's reputation, but the nurture camp has kept his basic model for the origin of same sex attraction in both men and women; broken, conflicted and failed relationships between the child and his or her parent(s) leading to the development of same sex attraction.

The nurture theory argues that this failure creates a wound in the boy's understanding of himself as a boy, as well as a feeling of not being fully loved and valued as a boy. In some boys, this theory holds, this wound can lead to feeling a lack of connection with other boys and with other males in general. A persistent lack of connection, can become a longing, a powerful emotional desire for

emotional and relationship intimacy. In a certain percentage of boys, this strong desire for emotional intimacy in their closest relationships with other boys and men can become sexualised at the advent of puberty. Thus in the nurture theory, same sex attraction in males has much less to do with a man's sexual drive than it does with a desire to connect with other males at an intimate level and find the degree of intimate acceptance that might not have been available in their earlier years.

In women, the nurture theory argues that the failures are similar but the dynamic is slightly different. Girls, who experience an absence of their fathers through death or abandonment, or through abuse, can grow up without the affirmation as girls that they need from their fathers. They can also grow up with a profound and deep distrust of males. Other experiences of abuse or abandonment as they grow older can exacerbate the underlying difficulty and confusion, and can foster same sex attraction as a method of defense or strength, the nurture school argues.

Same sex attraction in men and women also differs in that a minority of women have self-defined as lesbian out of a political or social motive. This is generally unknown in male homosexuality.

Critics of the nurture approach, like those of the nature school, point out that if nurture theories about the origins of same sex attraction were correct, why don't they fit all cases? What about men who live with same sex attraction

and who testify to good, solid relationships with their parents? Or, conversely, what about men who experienced abandonment from their fathers or had distant fathers and yet who don't experience same sex attraction? Critics say that just as the genetics model suggested answers for only a portion of the population, so too does the nurture school fail to cover all situations.

A very much more recent, popular interdisciplinary theory also exists. This theory argues that there are likely to be a multitude of different reasons for the rise of same sex attraction in men and women, perhaps as many reasons as there are men and women. Some men and women may, in fact, have a genetic predisposition to same sex attraction which will show itself if the right familial and relationship circumstances exist. But human beings are not just integers in scientific formulas, these advocates point out, so it may remain virtually impossible to understand completely the possible mixture of genetics and experience which cause some men and women to experience same sex attraction and others not.

Can Same Sex Attraction Be Diminished?

Whether same sex attraction can be diminished through therapy or counselling provides another controversial question. Critics of so-called "reparative therapy" or counselling have alleged that advocates of this approach do not stand on a sufficiently professional or

scientific foundation. The critics have lobbied professional therapeutic societies in the United States, the American Psychological Association and the American Psychiatric Association to ban or at least partially condemn trying to reduce same sex attraction through therapy or counselling.

Nonetheless, a number of scholarly journals in the United States have recently published favourable research into the experiences of men and women who have sought to diminish same sex attraction through a therapeutic or counselling approach. Journals such as the American Psychological Association's *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* (June 2002), and *Psychotherapy: Theory/Research/Practice/Training*, (Vol. 39) have published research reviews, as has the *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* (January 2003). All the articles have pointed out that therapy or counselling have helped some men and women who experience same sex attraction to reduce the degree of those attractions they experience.

The researchers who have published their studies built upon a 2001 study conducted by Dr Robert Spitzer, a professor of psychiatry at New York City's Columbia University. Spitzer, an early advocate of the American Psychiatric Association's 1973 decision to remove homosexuality from the diagnostic manual of mental disorders, presented his findings to a crowded session of the 2001 APA conference in New Orleans,

Louisiana. He remarked in a press release about the change in his thinking:

“Contrary to conventional wisdom, some highly motivated individuals, using a variety of change efforts, can make substantial change in multiple indicators of sexual orientation. Like most psychiatrists, I thought that homosexual behaviour could only be resisted, and that no one could really change their sexual orientation. I now believe that to be false. Some people can and do change.”

Spitzer interviewed 200 men and women who had experienced a significant diminishing of their same sex attraction for at least five years and found that 67 percent of the men who had rarely or never felt any opposite-sex attraction before the change effort, now report significant heterosexual attraction. Even those whose orientation did not change - but who gave up homosexual behaviour - experienced a significant improvement in emotional health.

Spitzer’s work attacked the notion that sexual attractions can be viewed as existing solely as either heterosexual or homosexual. A better way to conceptualise change “is to see it as a diminishing of unwanted homosexuality and an increase in heterosexual potential,” he argued. Some people are more likely to experience sexual attractions, including change in those attractions, along a continuum rather than as a fixed phenomenon.

In general, practicing therapists or counsellors in this area report that 33 percent of men and women who

approach them for help in diminishing their same sex attraction, experience little or no change. Another 33 percent experience some significant change with some increase in heterosexuality. The remaining 33 percent see their same sex attraction virtually disappear with a strong increase in heterosexual interest.

Advocates of this approach point out that these results are close to those achieved when people seek therapy or counselling to help address behavioural problems like smoking, over-eating or abuse of alcohol or drugs.

SAME SEX ATTRACTION: THE CONTEXT OF THE CHURCH'S TEACHING

The Church's teaching on homosexuality and homosexual acts cannot be understood outside the overall context of the teachings on meaning and purpose of human sexual expression. A very high, and indeed holy, view of human beings underpins all of the Catholic Church's teachings on sex and the human person. Human beings in the Church's teachings possess self-awareness, free will and a soul with an eternal destiny.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (henceforth CCC) addresses it this way:

“Being in the image of God the human individual possesses the dignity of a person, who is not just something, but someone. He is capable of self-knowledge, of self-possession and of freely giving himself and entering into communion with other persons. And he is called by grace to a covenant with his Creator, to offer him a response of faith and love that no other creature can give in his stead.”

This freedom to act as both subject and object of actions, and to choose our actions freely and not be bound to instinct, extends to sexuality as well. Human beings are singular among creatures in that we can express ourselves sexually without necessarily tying that expression to reproduction.

Very few other creatures do this. And in the teaching of the Church this freedom we have over sexual choices gives our sexual expression a moral dimension it would otherwise not have. Essentially, the Church considers that human sexual expression is and is meant to remain *sacred*.

A few key ideas play into the Church's reasoning about the overall sacredness of human sexual expression:

First, that God created human beings with a body and that the physical body has a dignity by virtue of its divine creation and the fact that Christ became incarnate in a human body. The Catechism again:

“The human body shares in the dignity of “the image of God”: it is a human body precisely because it is animated by a spiritual soul, and it is the whole human person that is intended to become, in the body of Christ, a temple of the Spirit,” (CCC 364). The Catechism's paragraphs cited particularly the Church's Second Vatican Council Document *Gaudium et Spes*:

“Man, though made of body and soul, is a unity. Through his very bodily condition he sums up in himself the elements of the material world. Through him they are thus brought to their highest perfection and can raise their voice in praise freely given to the Creator. For this reason man may not despise his bodily life. *Rather he is obliged to regard his body as good and to hold it in honour since God has created it and will raise it up on the last day*” [emphasis added].

Here the Church recognises that the human body is not just a random collection of molecules and compounds but that it exists in all its parts for a given set of purposes. Further, these purposes cannot simply be morally ignored because we want to use the body in order to attain a specific economic, social or sexual end.

Second, the Church recognises the sacredness in human sexual expression because it is through that expression that human beings join with God in the creation of the bodies and souls of new human beings. This is a key aspect of sexual expression widely misunderstood and too often disregarded today. God did not create sexuality only to give pleasure or even to solely edify the couple's love for one another. Rather, the Church understands sexual expression to give human beings a chance to share in creation. Creation, true creation, where God wills into existence something from absolute nothing, rightly belongs only to God. But God has given human beings a tiny share in that joy by allowing human love to spill over into procreation.

Finally, human sexual expression must be seen as sacred because, in lifting marriage to a sacrament, Christ elevated the institution from being a merely legal contract to that of a specific channel of God's grace. Sacraments, as the Church says in part, "are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us. The visible rites by which

the sacraments are celebrated signify and make present the graces proper to each sacrament.”

Beginning with the public miracle at the wedding at Cana, Christ taught consistently that marriage represents the relationship between God and humanity. Christ used the miracle at the wedding at Cana to provide a visible sign of an important metaphor Christ used frequently and which Saint Paul, the other apostles and the early Church Fathers built upon. Marriage, the Church insisted from the beginning, is meant to be a bodily, earthly sacrament of the relationship with God that culminates in heaven.

Same Sex Attraction: The Church’s Teaching Itself

What the Church teaches about same sex attraction can be found in a relatively small number of documents and in three paragraphs of her most recent *Catechism*. They stand as a subset of the historic Christian understanding about chastity and sexual expression. Here they are, paragraphs 2357-59:

“Homosexuality refers to relations between men or between women who experience an exclusive or predominant sexual attraction toward persons of the same sex. It has taken a great variety of forms through the centuries and in different cultures. Its psychological genesis remains largely unexplained. Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity, tradition has always declared that

“homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered.” They are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved. (2357)

“The number of men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies is not negligible. This inclination, which is objectively disordered, constitutes for most of them a trial. They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. These persons are called to fulfill God’s will in their lives and, if they are Christians, to unite to the sacrifice of the Lord’s Cross the difficulties they may encounter from their condition. (2358)

“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.” (2359)

The Difference Between Being and Doing

Now rather than address different points in the teaching in order, I want to leap to paragraph 2359 because, hidden here, is what I believe may be the most important and revolutionary teaching of the Church on this issue: people living with same sex attraction *can and should gradually and resolutely approach Christian perfection.*

To put it simply, while a man or woman might live with a degree, maybe even a high degree of same sex attraction, in the Church's teaching those attractions do not define them nor determine their eternal fate. People living with same sex attraction face the same sorts of temptation that every other Christian faces, and can attain the same success. In the call to chastity, the Church does not single out the men and women who live with same sex attraction, but includes them in the broader Christian story.

Chastity, after all, is what the Church asks of all Christ's disciples, depending on their station in life. Single people are asked to live chastely in refraining from sex before marriage. Married people are asked to live chastely by leaving their sexual communication open to life and by honouring their vows of sexual fidelity. The Church instructs people in all stations of life to refrain from sexual acts that are closed to the transmission of life, (e.g. masturbation and the different forms of sodomy).

A distinction needs to be made as well between celibacy and chastity, since the two are widely misunderstood and frequently confused. The Church does not ask Catholics to live celibate lives. She does ask that they live chastely. Celibacy is more akin to a discipline; it is a promise a priest or layperson makes to refrain from sexual intimacy or marriage while they are in a given state of life. Chastity, by contrast, is a virtue and runs deeper than celibacy, to the heart, and is applicable to all

sorts of Christian life. It is possible, for example, to live celibately but not chastely, to refrain from sexual intercourse in a faithful promise of celibacy, but still to have lust raging in the heart and to engage in masturbation and view pornography. Celibacy and chastity are related, but chastity is the heart of the matter.

Catholics need to keep a clear distinction between chastity and celibacy because it is in the Church's teaching on chastity that men and women with same sex attraction are not only just like every other Catholic, they are called to the same ends. After all, what is "Christian perfection" mentioned in paragraph 2359, but Sainthood?

The Roman Catholic Church teaches that men and women living with same sex attraction, can and should become *saints* - not because they are "oppressed" and not because the Church subscribes to any sort of doctrine of universal salvation. But because the same sex attraction they experience cannot determine their actions or their fate and does not remove from them free will. To put it bluntly, in a world where very many people have adopted a deterministic understanding of these attractions and feelings, the Church steadfastly refuses to do so, and that is a revolutionary position to take on this issue.

Other Facets of the Church's Teaching

First, the Roman Catholic Church recognises the worth, value and eternal destiny of every human person. Many

men and women living with same sex attraction have been victimised. Peers, their own Christian communities or, even their own family members have often made boys and girls, men and women who experience same sex attraction feel alienated, dirty, and ashamed of having the feelings they have. The overwhelming majority of people living with same sex attraction have no more, or less, control over their feelings than any other person; and the Roman Catholic Church, who looks at people living with same sex attraction, says “they must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity.”

Second, the Catholic Church’s teaching on homosexual acts speaks from the depth of sacred tradition, illustrated earlier in this book. Based on the Church’s understanding of sex as having dual and sacred purposes, the Church’s teaching on homosexuality briefly sets out the Church’s objections to same sex acts:

‘They are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved.’

Same sex acts are contrary to the natural law because the natural law reflects the world and human beings as God created them. God created the human body to be good and to perform certain actions also deemed to be good. God did not create the human body to be abused or made into a means to an end for others. In other words,

natural law prohibits same sex activity because same sex activity does not include the full purpose of sex, as it exists in its bodily reality.

The natural law objections to same sex activity are not so much a matter of opinion as of molecules and cells, less a matter for bishops or legislators to debate as for anatomists to describe. Take for example anal sex, which people may practice whether they live with same sex attraction or not. Natural law speaks to the immorality, *per se*, of something like anal sex not on the basis of the attractions its participants have, but because anal sex does not employ the biology of the active or passive partner to the purposes for which it is clearly prepared. Anal sex is immoral in natural law terms, not because it violates mere opinion or human laws but because it violates natural biological boundaries, which arise from human bodily creation itself.

The teaching's observation that same sex acts are contrary to natural law flows into the following observation: those same sex acts are closed to the transmission of life. This appears obvious but it is still often misunderstood.

The Church does not teach that conception *must* occur for sexual expression to be moral, only that those sexual acts must remain *open* to conception of a new human being. In other words, in the Church's view, when a husband and wife make love they should be willing to

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