In 1998 I published an article with the title “Homosexuality and Chastity: An Alternative Moral Criterion” in the New Theology Review (Selling). One of the reasons for writing the article in the first place was a moral reflection upon the text of the Catechism of the Catholic Church (hereafter, CCC) in its treatment of homosexuality which is titled “Chastity and Homosexuality” (n. 2357–59). This reflection was accompanied by a review of the literature about homosexuality, particularly the relevant documents of the Church, both those emanating from Rome that tend to address the issues globally and those of various bishops and bishops’ conferences which tend to utilize a more pastoral approach.

In the summer of 1999 I became aware that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had made some observations about my article in NTR and had asked for a clarification on those matters. Having responded to these observations as soon as I found the opportunity, I received a positive reply with respect to my clarification. In a subsequent communication, however, I have been asked to write a more extensive clarification for publication so that possible misunderstandings would not persist in the public forum.

The principal point made in the observations about which I have been asked to provide a clarification consists in the fact that I refer to the possible “unavoid-
ability of the homosexual orientation which would subsequently be withdrawn from the realm of free choice.” In some contrast to this, it is remarked that the editio typica of the Catechism

omitted an expression which is found in the vernacular versions of the text, namely “they do not choose their homosexual condition,” because this expression might lead to the idea of a general lessening of moral responsibility in this area, resulting in the subsequent impossibility or severe difficulty regarding the freedom to choose to pursue the tendency to that which the editio typica of the CCC refers to as “objectively disordered.”

Up until the very recent past in moral theology there was relatively little treatment of the so-called phenomenon of homosexuality and virtually no treatment of “the homosexual act,” unless one counts this as equivalent to the act of sodomy (which could be performed by a man and a woman). It was only in 1975, in the “Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics,” (Persona Humana, hereafter PH) that the official teaching of the Church explicitly took up the issue of homosexuality. In that document, a distinction is made between so-called transitory homosexuals who develop this way because of habit or bad example and “homosexuals who are definitively such because of some kind of innate instinct or a pathological constitution judged to be incurable” (PH, n. 8). Nothing else is written about this condition. When the observation is made that “some people conclude that their tendency is natural” (PH, n. 8) nothing is written to contradict this, and the document continues to the effect that “in the pastoral field, homosexuals must certainly be treated with understanding and sustained in the hope of overcoming their personal difficulties.”

The manner in which PH dealt with “homosexual relations,” on the other hand, was quite different. It specifically stated that “according to the objective moral order, homosexual relations are acts which lack an essential and indispensable finality . . . homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered and can in no case be approved of” (PH, n. 8). In this expression, it strongly appears that the phrase, “intrinsically disordered” is used to convey an explicitly moral meaning. Although the text acknowledges that any culpability for performing such acts must be judged with prudence, acts which are “disordered” are considered to be immoral in and of themselves.

Many people, myself included, found it significant that PH did not attribute the qualification “disordered” to the condition or tendency as such. To do so would have implied culpability for something that could not necessarily be attributed to personal choice or responsibility. Many were therefore rather surprised when the publication of the “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons,” (hereafter, “Letter”) in 1986 took a very different position. According to the “Letter,”
In the discussion which followed the publication of the declaration, an overly benign interpretation was given to the homosexual condition itself, some going so far as to call it neutral or even good. Although the particular inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin, it is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder (n. 3).

The publication of this document sparked a wide discussion among theologians and those engaged in pastoral ministry. For the terminology used in the earlier document implied the classical connection: disordered equals objectively immoral, so that any willful acceptance of such a thing would entail culpability, albeit sometimes diminished. Since this document now referred to the “inclination” itself as disordered, how could one avoid concluding that the inclination itself would constitute something objectively immoral?

There were several attempts to deal with this problem, not the least of which was an article by Archbishop John R. Quinn of San Francisco. Archbishop Quinn suggested that the “Letter’s” statement about the disorderedness of the inclination was not moral language but “philosophical language,” implying that this had nothing to do with immorality, culpability, or sinfulness. Unfortunately, the examples that the archbishop used to illustrate his point were somewhat misleading. He wrote that, “every person has disordered inclinations. For instance, the inclination to rash judgment is disordered, the inclination to cowardice, the inclination to hypocrisy—these are all disordered inclinations” (94). These examples refer to things, inclinations or tendencies, which are clearly learned and accumulated by habit. As the same author points out, the document itself teaches that the homosexual orientation may not be the result of deliberate choice (“Letter,” n. 11; cf. PH, n. 8). It is thus not in the same category as the examples cited. Furthermore, the type of inclination or tendency spoken of with regard to the homosexual person need never be expressed in concrete action for it to be a genuine inclination, whereas the inclinations offered by the archbishop are dependent upon the performance of “disordered actions” for the habit to be acquired.
One must also admit that regardless of how one wishes to define the meaning of “objective disorder” with respect to the inclination, the same terminology is used for the evaluation of homosexual acts and thus the same connotation is bound to be concluded on the pastoral level. Referring to the inclination or condition as disordered would imply that it was objectively immoral at the same time. Although the “Letter” is careful to state that “the particular inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin,” on the pastoral level there was a huge problem of communication caused by the use of this language. It became impossible to explain how one disorder was immoral and another disorder was not.

When the vernacular versions of the CCC appeared between 1992 and 1994, many pastors and theologians thought that they detected a fresh view of this issue that was expressed in what they then considered to be pastorally sensitive terminology. First, there was the fact that homosexuality was dealt with in the CCC not under the rubric of “offenses against chastity” (2351–56) but under a separate heading, “chastity and homosexuality” (2357–59). This seemed to emphasize that homosexual persons can indeed live their lives in a chaste manner without denying who they are or whatever inclinations they might experience.

Secondly, while the first paragraph dealt with homosexual acts and referred to them as intrinsically disordered, the following paragraph on the homosexual condition itself avoided that terminology:

The number of men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies is not negligible. They do not choose their homosexual condition; for most of them it is a trial. They must be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity (CCC, 2358).

The same meaning is present in the earliest French version as well as in the Dutch and English versions which are supposedly based upon the former. The composition of this text effectively avoided the ambiguity of stating that both the homosexual act and the homosexual condition are “objectively disordered,” an expression that implied sinfulness and culpability. The pastoral problem that was presented by the use of this terminology therefore seemed to be recognized and put to rest.

It was on the basis of these observations that I wrote the article on “Homosexuality and Chastity.” In retrospect, it appears that the U.S. bishops were thinking along the same lines when they published “Always Our Children: Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children and Suggestions for Pastoral Ministers” in 1997, the same year that my article was written. Commenting specifically on the homosexual orientation, the bishops observed that this “is experienced as a given, not as something freely chosen. By itself, therefore, a homosexual orientation cannot be considered sinful, for morality presumes the freedom to choose” (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1997).
At the end of 1997, the Latin version of the text of the CCC, the *editio typica*, was published. In that text, the second sentence of paragraph 2358 was amended to read, “*Haec propensio, obiective inordinata, pro maiore eorum parte constituit probationem.*” (“This inclination, which is objectively disordered, constitutes for most of them a trial.”) On the basis of this text, it now appears that the authors of the CCC did not wish to abandon the terminology that was invoked in the 1986 pastoral letter. The American bishops have accordingly amended the text of their own letter to include a footnote referring to this text of the *editio typica*. In the revised version of their letter, the America bishops repeat the observation about the homosexual orientation being “experienced as a given” and once again state that the orientation itself “cannot be considered sinful.” At this point in the text, however, an added footnote draws attention to the amended text of the CCC (2358) which refers to the inclination as “objectively disordered” (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1998).

In the same spirit I also draw attention to the text of the CCC. It seems that the teaching has evolved to the point where the terminology “objectively disordered” can be used without any immediate association with sin or moral culpability. Therefore I would follow the example of the American bishops and submit to the teaching of the Catechism.

**References**


