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Enfleshing Freedom

BODY, RACE, AND BEING

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ENFLESHING FREEDOM
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Sex and Sexuality

Insofar as race and gender are co-constitutive in empire, they are governed by political and economic displays of power; but sexuality in empire is subjugated through commercial exchange. Red, brown, yellow, poor/white, and black female bodies—violated and “occupied” in empire-building, poached in the process of globalization—function as exotic and standard commodities for trafficking and sex tourism, pornographic fantasy, and sadomasochistic spectacle.⁸⁰ Red, brown, yellow, and, especially, black male bodies lynched and castrated in empire-building, mechanized in the process of globalization, now are caricatured as “sexually aggressive, violent, animalistic.”⁸¹ Empire’s eager debasement of black flesh robs *all* human persons of healthy, dignified, and generative sexual expression. For

in empire, the primary function of sex no longer entails human communication, embrace, and intimacy (not even procreation), but the heterosexual service of white male privilege. Sex is amusement; its imperial purposes are distraction, entertainment, dissipation. Thus, homosexuality in empire undergoes particularly intense opprobrium. Empire entices and intimidates its *ordinary* subjects, and perhaps especially, its most wretched subjects, to react to gay and lesbian people with panic, loathing, and violence (malevolent homophobia); empire permits its *privileged* subjects to respond with curiosity, experimentation, and tokenism (benign homophobia). In empire, self-disclosure and self-disclosive acts by gay and lesbian people are penalized by repression, expulsion, and sometimes death.⁸² The vulnerability and marginality of gay and lesbian people makes a claim on the body of Jesus of Nazareth, on the body of Christ.

Catholic church teaching on sex and sexuality manifests ambivalence and disquiet toward the body—female and homosexual bodies, in particular. Such teaching signals a preference for celibacy and promotes marriage chiefly as a means for procreation. Certainly this teaching acknowledges the presence of gay and lesbian persons, accords them equal human dignity with heterosexual persons, and urges pastoral compassion in their regard.⁸³ Yet that teaching does little to contest the use and abuse of gay and lesbian people in empire.

⁸² Catholic church teaching distinguishes homosexual orientation from homosexual activity and deems the latter “intrinsicly disordered.”⁸⁴ Homosexual acts are deemed contrary to the natural law, and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* declares that such acts “close the sexual act to the gift of life [and] do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity.”⁸⁵ This teaching admonishes gays and lesbians to repress or sacrifice their sexual orientation, to relinquish genital expression, to deny their bodies and their selves. But, if the body is a sacrament, if it is the concrete medium through which persons realize themselves

interdependently in the world and in freedom in Christ, and if in Catholic sacramental economy “to express is to effect,”⁸⁶ then, on Catholic teaching, in and through (genital) bodily expression, gays and lesbians are compelled to render themselves disordered. For on Catholic teaching, the condition of homosexuality constitutes a transgression that approximates ontological status. Can the (artificial) distinction between orientation and act (really) be upheld? What are gays and lesbians to do with their bodies, their selves?

Consider the response of *Homosexualitatis problemata* to these questions:

Fundamentally [homosexuals] are called to enact the will of God in their life by joining whatever sufferings and difficulties they experience in virtue of their condition to the sacrifice of the Lord's Cross. That Cross, for the believer, is a fruitful sacrifice since from that death come life and redemption. While any call to carry the cross or to understand a Christian's suffering in this way will predictably be met with bitter ridicule by some, it should be remembered that this is the way to eternal life for “all” who follow Christ.

[The Cross] is easily misunderstood, however, if it is merely seen as a pointless effort at self-denial. The Cross is a denial of self, but in service to the will of God himself who makes life come from death and empowers those who trust in him to practice virtue in place of vice.

To celebrate the Paschal Mystery, it is necessary to let that Mystery become imprinted in the fabric of daily life. To refuse to sacrifice one's own will in obedience to the will of the Lord is effectively to prevent salvation. Just as the Cross was central to the expression of God's redemptive love for us in Jesus, so the conformity of the self-denial of homosexual men and women with the sacrifice of the Lord will constitute for them a source of self-giving which will save them from a way of life which constantly threatens to destroy them.

Christians who are homosexual are called, as all of us are, to a chaste life. As they dedicate their lives to understanding the

nature of God's personal call to them, they will be able to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance more faithfully and receive the Lord's grace so freely offered there in order to convert their lives more fully to his Way.⁸⁷

This is stern counsel: it calls for embrace of the cross, for bodily (sexual) asceticism, self-denial, and imposes strict abstinence. In a carefully argued analysis of the document, Paul Crowley affirms the meaningfulness of the cross not only for gay and lesbian people but for *all* Christians since the cross is *the* condition of discipleship. Crowley rightly objects to the peculiar application of "crucified living" (enforced abstinence) to the (sexual) fulfillment of gays and lesbians.⁸⁸ With regard to the last sentences quoted above, Crowley points out, "While penance is mentioned here as an aid to gay persons in attaining a chaste life, no mention is made of the graces accruing from one's baptism or from the life of the Eucharist."⁸⁹

Regarding the command of abstinence, Xavier Seubert reacts that "to prescribe, in advance, abstinence and celibacy for the homosexual person simply because the person is homosexual is to say that, as it is, homosexual bodily existence stands outside the sacramental transformation to which all creation is called in Christ."⁹⁰ The writing of *Homosexualitatis problema* surely was motivated by deep pastoral concern. But it echoes with what James Alison describes as a reproachful sanctioning ecclesiastical voice, which commands: "Love and do not love, be and do not be." He concludes: "The voice of God has been presented as a double bind, which is actually far more dangerous than a simple message of hate, since it destabilizes being into annihilation, and thinks that annihilation to be a good thing."⁹¹

Church teaching repels gay and lesbian (anti)bodies to the periphery of the ecclesial body and may well disclose just how afraid the church may be of the body of Jesus of Nazareth. Moral theologian Stephen J. Pope calls the magisterium's teaching about homosexual orientation "powerfully stigmatizing and dehumanizing."⁹² That teaching, he continues:

is also at least tacitly, if not explicitly, liable to be used to support exactly the kinds of unjust discrimination that the Church has repeatedly condemned. Describing someone's sexual identity as "gravely disordered" would seem to arouse suspicion, mistrust, and alienation. . . . One can understand why observers conclude that the magisterium's teaching about homosexuality stands in tension with its affirmation that each gay person is created in the *imago Dei*.⁹³

Church teaching on homosexuality exposes us to the manipulation of agents of empire, and coaxes our collusion in opposing and punishing gay and lesbian people who refuse to internalize homophobia and who live their lives without self-censorship. This teaching feeds innuendo and panic; it nudges us to discipline the body's phrasing and comportment, the curiosity and play of our children; it disturbs our families and relationships; it rewards our disingenuousness as we praise then mock women and men whose talents enrich our daily lives and weekly worship.⁹⁴ Seubert poses a grave critique, one that incriminates the very mystery of the church: the "denial of the homosexual body as this group's basis of spiritual, relational, historical experience is tantamount to impeding access to the reality of Christ in a certain moment of human history."⁹⁵ This charge brings the church much too close to betraying the great mystery of love that suffuses it and stirs up continually a longing to realize itself as the marked flesh of Christ. This situation provokes a most poignant, most indecent question, "Can Jesus of Nazareth be an option for gays and lesbians?" This question uncovers the pain, anguish, and anger that many gays and lesbians feel as we thwart their desire to follow Jesus of Nazareth, to realize themselves in his image. This question springs from the deep-seated feeling among many gays and lesbians that Jesus Christ is not an option for them, that he, as the embodied representative of God, hates them, and that they have no place in either Christ's church or the Kingdom of God he announced during his earthly ministry.⁹⁶

If Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ of God, cannot be an option for gays and lesbians, then he cannot be an option. An adequate response to this concern requires a different christological interpretation, one in which we *all* may recognize, love, and realize our bodyselves as Jesus' own flesh, as the body of Christ.

Marking the (Queer) Flesh of Christ

This section pushes the boundaries of our thinking about the homosexual body further. The words *queer* and *Christ* form a necessary if shocking, perhaps even "obscene" conjunction.⁹⁷ By inscribing a queer mark on the flesh of Christ, I *neither* propose *nor* insinuate that Jesus Christ was homosexual. By inscribing a "queer" mark, I recognize that this mark poses epistemological challenges for theology: Have we turned the (male) body of Christ into a fetish or idol? In an effort to discipline *eros*, have we disregarded "God's proto-erotic desire for us"?⁹⁸ Can a Christology incorporate all the dimensions of corporality?

These questions target some of the discursive limits of sex, gender, and sexuality in Christianity and disturb cherished symbols. Just as a black Christ heals the anthropological impoverishment of black bodies, so too a "queer" Christ heals the anthropological impoverishment of homosexual bodies.⁹⁹ Because Jesus of Nazareth declared himself with and for others—the poor, excluded, and despised—and offered a new "way" and new freedom to *all* who would hear and follow him, we may be confident that the Christ of our faith *is* for gay and lesbian people. Conversely, if the risen Christ cannot identify with gay and lesbian people, then the gospel announces no good news and the reign of God presents no real alternative to the "reign of sin."¹⁰⁰ Only an *ekklesia* that follows Jesus of Nazareth in (re)marking its flesh as "queer" as his own may set a welcome table in the household of God.

Robert Goss takes the experience of homophobic oppression of homosexual bodies in culture, society, and church as a starting point for a "queer" christological reflection.¹⁰¹ He grounds this articulation in the "generative matrix" of the *basileia* praxis of Jesus and in the real suffering of gay and lesbian people.¹⁰² The immanent and transcendent scope of that praxis allows Goss to detach the radical truth of Jesus Christ from all forms of hegemony and ideology—whether cultural, social, ecclesiastical, biblical, or theological—that might seek to master Infinite God present among us. Further, he constructs a "queer" biblical hermeneutic through which to unmask and discredit any heretical use of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures to justify bigotry and violence against gay and lesbian people.¹⁰³

Goss challenges the abusive use of the cross to justify explicit or implicit oppression and violence against gay and lesbian people as well as gay and lesbian acquiescence to interiorized oppression.¹⁰⁴

The cross symbolizes the political infrastructure of homophobic practice and oppression. It symbolizes the terror of internalized homophobia that has led to the closeted invisibility of gay and lesbian people. It indicates the brutal silencing, the hate crimes, the systemic violence perpetuated against us. The cross now belongs to us. We have been crucified.¹⁰⁵

Crucifixion was the response of imperial power to Jesus' "*basileia* solidarity with the poor, the outcast, the sinner, the socially dysfunctional, and the sexually oppressed."¹⁰⁶ The death of Jesus "shapes the cross into a symbol of struggle for queer liberation" and Easter becomes the hope and fulfillment of that struggle.¹⁰⁷

From the perspective of Easter . . . God identifies with the suffering and death of Jesus at the hands of a political system of oppression. For gay and lesbian Christians, Easter becomes the event at which God says no to homophobic violence and sexual oppression. . . . On Easter, God made Jesus queer in his solidarity

with us. In other words, Jesus 'came out of the closet' and became the 'queer' Christ. . . . Jesus the Christ is queer by his solidarity with queers.¹¹⁸

All Christology is interpretation and, in these passages, Goss articulates an understanding of the cross and resurrection from the perspective of the homophobic suffering of gay and lesbian persons. His theological analysis turns on the scandal of the body particular: Jesus of Nazareth, in all his marked particularity of race, gender, sex, culture, and religion, teaches us the universal meaning of being human in the world.¹¹⁹ In Jesus, God critiques any imperial or ecclesiastical practice of body exclusion and control, sorrows at our obstinacy, and calls us all unceasingly to new practices of body inclusion and liberation. In Jesus, God manifests an eros for us *as we are* in our marked particularity of race, gender, sex, sexuality, and culture.

In contrast to christological formulations that avoid or distort sexuality and sexual desire, Goss's work offers an opportunity to honor what Sarah Coakley calls the "profound entanglement of our human sexual desires and our desire for God."¹²⁰ For as Sebastian Moore insists, sexual desire is always a "hint of the ultimate mystery of us that is love."¹²¹ A "queer" Christ is not scandalized by human desire but liberates that desire from cloying common-sense satisfaction, misuse, and disrespect.¹²² This liberation begins in regard and esteem for the body and comes to proximate fulfillment in authentic love of the body, as authentic love and loving.¹²³ Thus, a "queer" Christ embraces *all* our bodies passionately, revalorizes them as embodied mystery, and reorients sexual desire toward God's desire for us in and through our sexuality. This is not a matter of fitting God into our lives but of fitting our lives into God. Homosexual and heterosexual persons are drawn by God's passionate love for us working in us to bring us into God's love.¹²⁴ To live in and live out of this reorientation demands refusal of isolating egoism, of body denial, and of whatever betrays spiritual

and bodily integrity. Moreover, living in and out of this reorientation leads us, even if fitfully, toward virtue; helps us to grow lovable and loving; and, in fulfillment, we are gift and gifted with and in love.

In his relationships with women and men, Jesus embodied openness, equality, and mutuality. In his suffering and death on the cross, Jesus showed us the cost of integrity, when we live in freedom, in love, and in solidarity with others. In his resurrection, Jesus became the One in whom "God's erotic power"¹²⁵ releases bodily desire from the tomb of fear and loathing, the One who fructifies all loving exchange, the One who, in his risen body, quiets the restless yearning of our hearts.

(Re)Marking the Flesh of the Church

If theological reflection on the body cannot ignore a Christ identified with black, brown, red, yellow, poor/white, and queer folk, neither can it ignore reflection on "the flesh of the Church."¹²⁶ For as Gregory of Nyssa tells us, whoever "sees the Church looks directly at Christ."¹²⁷ And as the flesh of the church is the flesh of Christ in every age, the flesh of the church is marked (as was his flesh) by race, sex, gender, sexuality, and culture. These marks differentiate and transgress, they unify and bond, but the flesh of Christ relativizes these marks in the flesh of the church. These marks may count; but the mark of Christ, the baptismal sign of the cross, counts for more, trumps all marks. Still, counting and trumping marks in the body of Christ must give way before *basileia* praxis. These acts of justice-doing, empire critique, love, and solidarity mark us as his flesh made vivid leaven in our world.

In a letter to followers of "the way" at Corinth, Paul hands over the gift he has been given: "For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke

it and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me" (1 Cor 11: 23-24). This is the Tradition: the body of the Lord is handed over to us, handled by us as we feed one another. Further on Paul declares: "You are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (1 Cor 12:27). We are the body raised up by Christ for himself within humanity; through us, the flesh of the crucified and resurrected Jesus is extended through time and space.

In the very act of nourishing our flesh with his flesh, we women and men are made new in Christ, emboldened to surrender position and privilege and power and wealth, to abolish all claims to racial and cultural superiority, to contradict repressive codes of gender formation and sexual orientation. In Christ, there is neither brown nor black, neither red nor white; in Christ, there is neither Creole nor *mestizo*, neither senator nor worker in the *magnificadas*. In Christ, there is neither male nor female, neither gay/lesbian nor straight, neither heterosexual nor homosexual (after Gal 3:28). We are all transformed in Christ: *we are his very own flesh*.

If my sister or brother is not at the table, we are not the flesh* of Christ. If my sister's mark of sexuality must be obscured, if my brother's mark of race must be disguised, if my sister's mark of culture must be repressed, then we are not the flesh of Christ. For, it is through and in Christ's own flesh that the "other" is my sister, is my brother; indeed, the "other" is me (*yo soy tu otro yo*). Unless our sisters and brothers are beside and with each of us, we are not the flesh of Christ. The sacramental aesthetics of Eucharist, the thankful living manifestation of God's image through particularly marked flesh, demand the vigorous display of difference in race and culture and tongue, gender and sex and sexuality. Again, Gregory of Nyssa: "The establishment of the Church is re-creation of the world. But it is only in the *union of all the particular members* that the beauty of Christ's Body is complete."¹¹⁸

The body of Jesus the Christ, both before and after his death, radically clarifies the meaning of being embodied in the world.

His love and praxis releases the power of God's animating image and likeness in our red, brown, yellow, white, and black bodies—our homosexual and heterosexual bodies, our HIV/AIDS infected bodies, our starving bodies, our prostituted bodies, our yearning bodies, our ill and infirm bodies, our young and old and joyous bodies. To stand silent before war and death, incarceration and torture, rape and queer-bashing, pain and disease, abuse of power and position is to be complicit with empire's sacrilegious anti-liturgy, which dislodges the table of the bread of life. That desecrated anti-liturgy hands us all over to consumption by the corrupt body of the market.

The only body capable of taking us *all* in as we are with all our different body marks—certainly including the mark of homosexuality—is the body of Christ. This taking us in, this incorporation, is akin to sublation, not erasure, not uniformity: the *basileia* praxis of Jesus draws us up to him. Our humble engagement in his praxis revalues our identities and differences, even as it preserves the integrity and significance of our body marks. At the same time, those very particular body marks are relativized, reoriented, and reappropriated under his sign, the sign of the cross. Thus, in solidarity and in love of others and the Other, we are (re)made and (re)marked as the flesh of Christ, as the flesh of his church.

We have drawn out some implications of the relation between Christology and anthropology by focusing on the marked body of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus was born of people subjugated by the Roman Empire; an itinerant and charismatic preacher and teacher, his strenuous critique of oppressive structures—whether political or religious or cultural—along with his fearless love of ordinary people provoked those in authority to brand him a criminal. Jesus mediated God's presence among us through a body marked by race, gender, sex, sexuality, culture, and religion. His radical self-disclosure constitutes the paradigm for all human self-disclosure in contexts of empire and oppression, exclusion and alienation, slavery and death.

The body of Jesus provokes our interrogation of the new imperial deployment and debasement of bodies. The flesh of his church is multilayered. Pulling back layer after layer, we expose the suffering and groaning, outrage and hope of the victims of history. In them we glimpse the flesh of Christ and we are drawn by that eros, his radiant desire for us, and we too seek to imitate his incarnation of love of the Other, love of others. The body of Jesus of Nazareth impels us to place the bodies of the victims of history at the center of theological anthropology, to turn to “other” subjects.