

Angels in America – a theological reading in conjunction with Pope Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation on The Call to Holiness in Today’s World, *Gaudete et Exsultate* (Rejoice and Be Glad), and key Catholic writings on Homosexuality

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Abstract

This article is an inter-textual study of the play *Angels in America* (*Part One*), Pope Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* and key Catholic writings on homosexuality. I hope to show how the play might inform future Catholic understandings of self-identity, self-acceptance and self-love and how in turn, Catholic writings on the nature of love, sexuality and holiness can assist audiences to understand more deeply the themes and dilemmas in the play. The Catholic Church is immensely forgiving of the human failure to live up to the lofty demands of love and has a strong tradition of asceticism concerning the positive and transformative effects of self-control. However, due to the cognitive dissonance set up by its teaching on homosexuality, and in particular, its claim that there is an incompatibility between gay identity and ordained priestly identity, the Church has tended to retreat into a world of silence about the importance of self-knowledge to assuage the dissonance it feels. The dramatic deleterious consequences seen in the play about the failure to love oneself are a stark warning to the Church that this might not be the best or most pastoral path to take.

Keywords

self-acceptance, love, Pope Francis, seminarians, priesthood

Introduction

In 2017, a quarter of a century after its first showing, the National Theatre re-staged Tony Cushman’s play *Angels in America* for which it

won the Olivier Award for best revival and for Andrew Garfield (who played Prior, the gay lover) the London Evening Standard Award for best actor. Owing to its popularity, it was difficult to get a ticket for any performance. In this article I attempt to delineate why I believe the play has lasting impact (many years after the initial devastating shock of the AIDS crisis), and why it is instructive to read the text in relation to important Catholic writings on holiness and homosexuality, with particular, but not exclusive reference, to gay Catholic priests and gay Catholic seminarians. In this way, I hope to demonstrate how the play might inform future Catholic understandings of self-love and conversely, how Catholic perspectives on this matter might help audiences appreciate better some of the central dilemmas and themes in the play. Thus, the article is an exercise in inter-textual analysis and illumination, conducted with a pastoral intent – to understand more deeply the nature of love (especially its symbiotic relation to self-love), and how this might be demonstrated and expressed, especially in challenging circumstances.

The play raises the issue of the nature of love. Authentic human sexual love does not depend on its being intrinsically open to procreancy, but on its living up to the exacting demands of its constituency, often sorely tested in times of difficulty and suffering. The play's dramatic crux and the audience's angst throughout, hinge on Louis's apparent failure to associate his own flesh any longer with the newly scarred, sick flesh of his lover. Instead he flees. The play tracks the consequences of this fleeing. The demands of love are too great, it seems. Pope Francis is particularly interested in this issue and writes that love and its relatedness to holiness, consist precisely in identifying with those who are weak, sick and abandoned and in the recognition that 'the other is flesh of our flesh and are not afraid to draw near, even to touch their wounds' (2018, para 76). There is no ambivalence here; in contrast, 'The worldly person ignores problems of sickness or sorrow in the family or all around him; he averts his gaze' (2018, para 75).

Louis agrees with what Pope Francis is claiming and knows that he is betraying himself and his lover; yet he feels impotent (in face of the sheer enormity of sickness and death) to do anything about it. Like Hamlet, who feels assured he must avenge his father's murder and yet does nothing and which in turn leads to his anger and depression, Louis tests out his own self-understanding of love first by asking the rabbi at his grandmother's funeral, 'Rabbi, what does the Holy Writ say about someone who abandons someone he loves at a time of great need?' (2017, 25). The reply is all the more poignant because he does not get a definitive answer from Scripture which he can then choose to obey or disobey – he simply hears the further searching, puzzling question, 'Why would a person do such a thing?' (2017, 25). His emerging, guilt-ridden enigma is heightened not assuaged

by this question. And it is why he tells the audience later in the play the story of Mathilde who waited patiently for the return of her husband William the Conqueror. He comments, ‘... if he had returned mutilated, ugly, full of infection ... she would still have loved him;’ (2017, 54). In angry exasperation he concludes, ‘So what the fuck is the matter with me?’ (2017, 54).

Pope Francis might not be as hard on Louis as he is on himself. However, like many in the play, the pontiff does recognise that love is the most important virtue of all, for he quotes St. Paul: ‘“The one who loves another has fulfilled the law ... for love is the fulfilment of the law”’ (*Rom 13:8.10*)’ (2018, para 60). But he also knows that this is ultimately impossible to achieve without grace. ‘Only on the basis of God’s gift, freely accepted and humbly received, can we cooperate by our own efforts in our progressive transformation’ (2018, para 56). Pope Francis is incredibly accepting of personal failures and limitations. He knows that we all fail. Who doesn’t recoil in the face of illness and death? As he writes, ‘In every case, as Saint Augustine taught, God commands you to do what you can and to ask for what you cannot ...’ (2018, para 49). If there is no heartfelt and prayerful acknowledgement of our weaknesses, it will prevent grace from working effectively within us. It will encourage a heretical pelagian or semi-pelagian mindset. Indeed, the audience might be very harsh on Prior’s failure to live up to the demands of love. In contrast, the Church sees this as completely understandable. The path to holiness is through humbly acknowledging our failings so that grace may increase within us. As the rabbi comments, ‘Catholics believe in Forgiveness’ (2017, 25). This is reflected in Pope Francis’ overriding concern during his pontificate to stress the reality of God’s mercy. Louis’ tragedy is that, despite his Jewish upbringing, he doesn’t feel able to call on any supernatural assistance to get him through the hard times. That’s why he feels so alone and helpless - and why he can’t forgive himself.

The Nature of Love

The play asks the audience to reflect on whether or not love can ever be ambivalent. Belize, a black nurse and former drag queen, believes it is never so. It is not a theory to be abstractly thought about; it is only made sense of and real in practical acts of compassion. Pope Francis would tend to agree: ‘Much energy is expended on fleeing from situations of suffering in the belief that reality can be concealed. But the cross can never be absent’ (2018, para 75) And he later adds, ‘Knowing how to mourn with others: that is holiness’ (2018, para 76). The comic parodying of the line, ‘“Real love isn’t ambivalent”’ (2017, 100) from the best-selling paperback novel

In Love with the Night Mysterious makes Belize's comment all the more tragic in light of the fact that he doesn't think Louis has ever read it! Instead he bemoans how he wades through the far more abstract *Democracy in America* in the bizarre hope of redeeming the world. The amusing, camp exuberance of Belize, who speaks from a heart of compassion, visits Louis in the hospital and reassures him that, 'Whatever happens, baby, I will be there for you (2017, 65). But he warns, 'Don't go crazy on me girlfriend, I already got enough crazy queens for one lifetime. For two.' (2017, 65). The audience senses here he partly knows what love consists in, even if he can't live up to it at every moment. And the audience might ask themselves at this point, is it really true to say, as Louis does, 'You can love someone and fail them' (2017, 82)?

The first scene in which we meet Prior and Louis together is one of the most dramatic and heart-rending in the play. It prefigures what the audience is about to witness throughout. It is the moment when the Prior reveals to his lover and the audience the deadly lesion on his arm – 'the wine-dark kiss of the angel of death' (2017, 21). The comic and dramatic irony of the cat who has gone missing because it senses something is wrong, foreshadows a deeper betrayal when Louis leaves Prior. Here we see the terror of not simply coping with a terminal illness, but the more devastating sense of not being comforted by the one you love in a time of greatest need. Prior is understandably scared of the diagnosis, but more scared that his lover will leave him: 'I was scared' he says. 'Of what?' replies Louis'. 'That you'll leave me' (2017, 22). Then, in muted anguish, he asks (after Louis tells him he is going to his grandmother's funeral), 'Then you'll come home?' Louis replies 'Then, I'll come home' (2017, 22). Watch this scene beautifully played out by two great actors, Andrew Scott and Dominic Cooper at the National Theatre: www.youtube.com/watch?v=aasE8hkL2DY. The play reveals gradually to the audience this is a falsehood - Louis never really comes home at all. And, sadly, Prior's anguished calling out to the cat to return home echoes his later desperate, foul-mouthed, shouting out in the hospital for his lost boyfriend: 'I want Louis. I want my fucking boyfriend, where the fuck is he? I'm dying, I'm dying, where's Louis? (2017, 63). The scene also points to the importance of naming. Comically, Prior says if you call a cat 'Little Sheba' you 'can't expect it to stick around' (2017, 20). Joe, the closeted gay, is unable to name his orientation just as much as Roy, the corrupt lawyer, is unable to name his (or in his eyes the shameful disease he is subject to). The hesitation to speak about truth is shown in the stuttering, hesitant language used in the dialogue between Louis and Joe: '– I mean you *sound* like a – '... 'Do I? Sound like a – ?' 'What? Like a ... Republican, or ...? Do I?' (2017, 30) and by Joe's response to Harper's (Joe's wife) questioning

of his identity: 'This is crazy. I'm not - ' and 'What if I ...' (2017, 37–38).

The play juxtaposes death, love, sex and religion in dramatic fashion. It begins with a Jewish funeral – that of Louis' grandmother. This preludes the first scene between Louis and Prior when the latter says, 'I figured as long as we're on the topic of death' I would mention my diagnosis (2017, 22). He has already referred to the lesion on his arm as the 'kiss of death.' You could say the entire dramatic tension of the play hinges on a waiting for death and how this is dealt with by the various characters, either successfully or not so successfully. Louis tells Joe that he has attempted to commit suicide in response, referring to the episode of casual sex with the anonymous Man in Central Park and the possibility of him contracting the deadly HIV infection. And when Prior tells Louis he is going to die, a series of expletives emerge from Louis' mouth, to which Prior responds ironically, 'Now that's what I like to hear. A mature reaction' (2017, 22). In their consoling, but at the same time, desperate embrace, arms clingly wrapped around each other, the audience witness a momentary glimpse of what will be become glaringly absent from then on – the intimate closeness of love in the face of death. In a later scene, Louis, referring to himself, tells Belize that in betraying what they love, people betray what's truest in themselves. He sees this as a form of self-imposed death-in-life which leads to the wish to be actually dead, for after this admittance he declares 'I'm dying'; Belize sardonically replies, '*He's* dying. You just wish you were' (2017, 104). Prior thus lives with a deep sense of guilt which is a form of death, the opposite of love. As Belize comments, '... love is very hard. And it goes bad for you if you violate the hard law of love' (2017, 104). Without love, death occurs; Louis painfully becomes aware of this truth.

The inability to name what you are results from a feeling of shame and the increased desire to be good to counter this. Joe's anguish comes about by his denial of his sexual orientation. His Mormon identity clashes with his sexual identity but as the play progresses we see how this self-denial has devastating consequences for his own self-love. The tension arises primarily in Joe because he believes his feelings are shameful and wrong. They must be fought against and repressed. He comments, trying to justify his actions, 'Does it make any difference? That I might be one thing deep within, no matter how wrong or ugly that thing is, so long as I have fought, with everything I have to overcome it' (2017, 40). But he later comes to realise that such a valiant denial is a form of death-in-life (just as Louis' sense of guilt leads him to a deathly impossibility to love himself); it strangles the heart. Andrew Sullivan has perceptively written on this when he comments, 'There was a time when I thought the closeted homosexual was a useful social creature ... But the etiolation of the heart which

this self-abnegation requires is enormous' (1995, 190). The more Joe represses his feelings the more they re-emerge at dangerously regular intervals. As he comments, 'I try to tighten my heart into a knot, a snarl, I try to learn to live dead, just numb, but then I see someone I want ...' (2017, 81). His repression leads to him walking alone in Central Park at night – just to watch, rather than return to his wife. This is a wasteland where love does not exist. And yet he is tempted towards it, because he cannot love himself anymore. His religion has taught him to try to be perfect, but in doing so has led him to deny who he is with the consequence that he finds himself abandoned and alone in a desolate park.

Self-Knowledge, Homosexuality and the Seminary

The Catholic Church fully acknowledges that self-knowledge is crucially important to healthy and holy living. Fr. David Oakley, a Rector in a Catholic seminary in the UK, on the question of priestly human formation with reference to *Pastores Dabo Vobis* writes, 'At the heart of human formation is the growth in self-knowledge which leads to a lifelong commitment to personal growth' (2017, 231). Priestly formation involves 'the necessary affective maturity needed for someone to live the life of a priest and to become an effective minister (2017, 231). Quoting from *The Gift of Priestly Vocation* he reiterates that it is essential 'that the seminarian should know himself and let himself be known, relating to the formators with sincerity and transparency' (2017, 232). Fr. Roderick Strange, Rector of Beda College, Rome, from 1998–2015, also writes of the need for human formation in the seminary, and specifically refers to sexuality: It is 'imperative that a healthy and responsible approach to sexuality be addressed during formation. People need to understand and value their own sexuality, who they are and how they behave, and the sexuality of others ...' (2015, 213). This preparation for celibacy calls for 'a significant level of sexual maturity' (2015, 213). *The Gift of Priestly Vocation* echoes this by saying it involves a journey of being honest with oneself and '... must be characterised by emotional balance, self-control and a well-integrated sexuality' (2016, para 94). Before someone can be recommended for ordination he must undergo a 'Scrutiny' which gives the seminarian an opportunity to discuss his ongoing formation and any issues which have arisen. Problems are likely to emerge, says Fr. Oakley, when the candidate is not transparent. Fr. Basil Pennington, a one time novice master, claims for a man choosing celibate priesthood, the question of heterosexuality or homosexuality is, in fact, irrelevant: 'What is important is that he have a mature grasp of his sexuality, know his orientation, and fully accept himself and his sexuality as something good. If this is lacking he can never

really give himself to God or anyone else' (quoted in Stuart, 1993, 66). Pennington adds that this might well be difficult for the gay seminarian since 'The message he has received from society, from his Church, and frequently even from his own parents and family is that his gayness is bad' (quoted in Stuart 1993, 66). Some in the Catholic Church might retort against Pennington, arguing to the contrary, that the Church continually encourages self-knowledge and self-acceptance, that this is demonstrated by its strong pastoral teachings on homosexuality and that therefore it is far from homophobic. Besides, it has a very vibrant underlying philosophy about the dignity of each human person. There is some truth in this. Nevertheless, the fact that it adheres to a view that homosexuality is a 'disordered' condition, that gay sexual relationships (even lifelong, monogenous and committed ones) are immoral, that homosexual couples should be denied the right to adopt children, should never even think of getting married, that it justifies the right to fire gays when they publicly disregard teachings on this matter¹, and that homosexuality is incompatible with the Catholic priesthood, it is probably not an exaggeration to say that many gay men and women will come to feel that their orientation is not a good thing at all, but rather a curse which it is better to deny and hide away from; certainly not something to be admitted in public.

But this issue of self-acceptance also raises another serious dilemma particularly for the gay seminarian who either during his training or perhaps before that, knows himself to be attracted to men. He is likely to know or come to be aware of the document *The Gift of Priestly Vocation* which tells him, in no uncertain terms, that there is an incompatibility between homosexuality and Catholic priesthood. The text claims that the Church should not admit to the seminary or holy orders those who present 'deep-seated homosexual tendencies' (2016, para 199). Such persons find themselves in a situation that gravely hinders them from relating correctly to men and women (2016, para 199). One must in no way overlook 'the negative consequences that can derive from the ordination of persons with deep homosexual tendencies' (2016, para 199). In a spirit of sincere dialogue and mutual trust, the seminarian is obliged to reveal to his formators (the bishop, rector, spiritual director and to

¹ Fr. James Martin writes that, 'According to New Ways Ministry, since 2010 almost seventy people in Catholic institutions in the United States have been fired, been forced to resign, had job offers rescinded, or had their jobs threatened because of their orientation – often after years of service in these positions and being known as LGBT people. . . . as LGBT people. . . . Of course, Church organizations have the authority to require their employees to follow church teachings. The problem is that this authority is applied in a highly selective way. . . . Do we fire a straight man or woman who gets divorced and then re-marries without an annulment? . . . Do you give pink slips to those who practice birth control? (2018, 47–48).

other formators), any doubts or difficulties he has in this regard. If he admits to being gay, his spiritual director or confessor have the duty to dissuade him in conscience from proceeding to ordination: 'It would be gravely dishonest for a candidate to hide his homosexuality in order to proceed, despite everything, towards ordination' (2016, para 200). The desire alone to become a priest is not sufficient. It belongs to the church to discern the suitability of the one who wishes to enter the seminary (2016, para 201). In relation to these issues, one Rector of a Catholic seminary in the UK told me that although seminary policy is to regulate formation by the Church's magisterial documents, the matter is often one of interpretation, what is meant by deep homosexual tendencies?

But clearly, in light of this document, the Church's position becomes clear. It sees homosexuality as a bar to and at odds with priestly ministry, insisting that such a state would prevent proper pastoral relationships. However, it gives no evidence to show that homosexuals cannot relate well to men and women as a direct result of their sexual orientation. In fact, the evidence suggests the very opposite. It states that gay men can never be good priests, and that even if they have a long-standing prayerful sense of vocation to the priestly ministry, this should be overridden by formators who know better and who are duty-bound to persuade them otherwise. The 'problem' is only reduced if it is shown that the homosexual tendency is temporary, but even then it must be demonstrated that this 'problem' has gone away, at least three years before ordination to the diaconate. Here, the Church openly admits that homosexuality is a 'problem' to be addressed, and certainly not a gift. The only conclusion I can draw from such an attitude is that the Church is culpably homophobic in this regard. And, more curious, it denies its very own claims that gay people should not be discriminated against, but must be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity. If this occurred outside ecclesial structures, it would be accountable to the law on discrimination against homosexuals. One seminarian who was asked to leave the seminary because he was gay, even believes some parts of the Church associates homosexuality with paedophilia (Ford 2004, 17).

Legitimate questions arise from this situation. What evidence is there to suggest deep-seated heterosexual seminarians and priests relate better to men and women than gay men do? What is the seminarian to do when he comes to the realisation that he is gay? Be honest and tell his formator that he is and risk being asked to leave the seminary or remain silent on the issue, carry on with his training and contradict the recommendation always to be transparent about the struggles he is facing during his training? He is caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place. Of course, you might say that he simply needs, in obedience, to follow the teachings of the church

and not entertain the prospect of ordination. But if his prayer life, conscience and deep sense of vocation tell him otherwise, then he might convince himself that keeping quiet on the matter is the best way forward. Besides, he might know and admire many dedicated and inspiring priests who are gay and these would spur him on; he sees before his eyes the witness of such men and the good they do. This might persuade him that being less than honest with the truth is the right thing to do. He might also understandably think the Church has just got its thinking hopelessly wrong on this matter, like some other issues concerning gender and sexuality, and that in time, it will come to understand the nature of love more comprehensively. As a good Catholic, he believes grace can work wonders. If all this is the case, he can live in peace with his secret, forgiving the Church he loves, while still hoping that one day things will change for the better. In the meantime, he has no scruples about carrying on and learning to discern the ways of God, even if this means being on guard and silent about his sexuality. Priests are in short supply and are desperately needed in the world and he is not going to let discrimination prevent him from becoming one!

The dilemma is further exacerbated by the recognition of some priests that many gay people make excellent ministers. Fr. Donald Cozzens' honest and ground-breaking book *The Changing Face of the Priesthood* claims there is a disproportionate number of gay men entering the seminary and religious life compared to other professions. He writes, 'Should our seminaries become significantly gay and many seasoned observers find them to be precisely that, the priesthood of the twenty-first century will likely be perceived as a predominantly gay profession' (2000, 103). With reference to John Boswell's acclaimed historical study, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, he says that homosexually oriented men and women of faith quite naturally find religious life and celibate priesthood attractive. As the Dominican priest Fr. Weston, said to the aspirant novice, Mark Dowd, when he admitted he was gay, 'Put it this way, I don't think you'll be the only one' (Dowd 2018, 71). Often deeply spiritual with a desire to be of service to others, gay men can avoid awkward questions about why they are not dating or why they are not married. Cozzens writes, 'The discipline of celibacy and being a spokesperson for a Church that insists on celibate chastity for its clergy is a powerful help to holding in check sexual inclinations that are disturbing, even frightening, at least to some' (2000, 106). The question is whether this 'holding in check' is based on an honest acknowledge of who they are or on a potentially dangerous and misguided sublimation of desire borne out of self-repression. Cozzens refers to the Trappist monk Matthew Kelty who finds it totally unsurprising that many homosexuals are attracted to the priesthood. The institutions of vowed religious life and celibate priesthood have

provided attractive lifestyles and a means of sanctification. The Jesuit priest Fr. James Martin also points to the fact that many great spiritual figures were probably gay. He writes, 'We need, therefore, to consider the fact that some of the saints were probably gay or lesbian or bisexual' (2018, 44). And some great modern-day priests, like Henri Nouwen and Mychal Judge were gay (Martin 2018, 45; Ford, 1999, 2016). There is no contradiction between gay identity and holiness. Martin writes, 'I know many celibate gay priests, chaste gay brothers, and chaste lesbian sisters. At times, they have been my spiritual directors, my confessors even my religious superiors. Some of them are the holiest people I have ever met' (2018, 43). Besides, the personal experiences of many gay people make them especially suited to pastoral ministry. They have often been marginalised, ridiculed, misunderstood, even been subject to violence themselves, which makes them particularly compassionate to the weakest and most vulnerable (Martin 2018, 41). And non-judgemental. This is what I mean by the tradition of the Catholic Church informing the play – gay identity can sit quite 'naturally' with a celibate lifestyle within the ordained priesthood (since it is one very positive way of dealing with sexual attraction to the same sex) or indeed outside it – but not the only one, of course. Joe, once he has left his wife, could choose to live a celibate lifestyle and be very happy doing so. Perhaps Cushman knows this, but it is rarely hinted at during *Angels In America*.

Donald Cozzens also points to other implications of having gay men in seminaries. He argues that ignoring the proverbial elephant in the room is potentially harmful and simply delays the time when circumstances will demand that it be given attention. He contends that straight and gay seminarians have different formational needs and these should be addressed: 'Gay seminarians face specific challenges . . . and their concerns, needs and anxieties, deserve the focussed attention of formation faculties' (2000, 101) It is worth asking how many Rectors of Catholic seminaries follow his advice. And while I wholeheartedly agree with his recommendation, this surely becomes very difficult to put into practice in light of the statement that there is an inherent incompatibility between homosexuality and the Catholic priesthood. Why would you want to admit that a significant number of seminarians are gay and need to be formed differently, in some ways, to heterosexual seminarians in light of this teaching? Is it tantamount, too, to encouraging a distinctive gay culture in the seminary that no-body really wants? Of course, many gay seminarians and priests might be able to work through their orientation without publicly disclosing it to anyone else and I am sure some have done this quite successfully and even managed to live happy and fulfilled priestly lives. Credit needs to be given to such men. But this does imply that secrecy is always the right path to take and I am not convinced this is the best way forward or helpful to many. They will

probably share Joe's recognition of his secrecy as ultimately unsustainable and want to do something about it - they just 'can't *be* this anymore' (2017, 76). It's simply too dishonest. And its self-harming. Elizabeth Stuart might be overstating things when she remarks that the Vatican is intent on keeping its priests mentally ill by not addressing the issue openly, but she has a point when she says that when seminaries do not give their candidates the opportunities to face the reality of their sexuality it is bound to have a damaging effect. The text *Angels in America* might persuade a seminarian not only to acknowledge, squarely and honestly, his sexual orientation, but also to accept it lovingly. Self-denial leading to self-hatred would have terrible consequences for ministry – they can see on stage what happens to people like Joe or Roy who refuse to accept their sexual identity. Most likely this would encourage seminarians to be honest with themselves and with trusted others.

This is what I mean by the play informing future Catholic understandings of *self-love*; I underscore this claim with reference to Schopenhauer's view that art 'invites a moment outside time and holds before the world a glimpse of what is true' (Torevell 2013, 933) In a Church which finds it difficult to discuss openly and honestly the issue of homosexuality, partly because of the cognitive dissonance². this sets up, partly because of its own teaching and partly due to the embarrassment that many of its own Catholic priests are gay, the play comes to the rescue. It dramatizes the perils of self-denial leading to self-hatred in an agonisingly poignant way. Self-knowledge and honesty to yourself and those you trust is essential to your well-being and future happiness. The opposite is likely to lead to a diminishment in self-love, and thus love of others and love of God. Redemption is only possible for Joe after he telephones his mother to reveal his homosexuality. Roy never does this and the dismal consequences become apparent on stage. Henri Nouwen's perceptive analysis of accepting gay feelings and desires is illuminating. He poses the important question, how can a person meaningfully relate to his/her own sexual feelings and how can the

² I am grateful to Lieven Boeve for his explanation of this concept (2016: 221–234). It comes from social psychology and describes a situation involving conflicting attitudes, beliefs and behaviours, which cause stress and discomfort. One way of dealing with this is to change one's views somewhat so that one is able to live more peaceably with opposing views. This leads to dissonance reduction. The Church is unlikely to do this - the opposing attitude of the modern world with regards to homosexuality is mistaken. Why capitulate to it, even in the slightest degree? But it has to do something, otherwise the dissonance can lead to unhelpful alienation and even frustrated despair. And anyway, aren't Christians, according to Vatican Council II, encouraged to live in the modern world and read the signs of the times? Who wants to live alone with one's own views and have no contact with others? My view is that the Church tends to deal with cognitive dissonance in the area of homosexuality by simply *not talking about it*. But at what cost?

homosexual make his feelings available to himself so that he can meaningfully relate to them? (1971, 2). He refers to the psychologist W. G. Senger, who argues that 'deep-seated resistance against the existing homosexual feelings in man is one of the main reasons for the great suffering of the homosexual' (1971, 4). By denying the feelings to himself, a person 'cuts himself off from his own personal, intimate and creative feelings and forces himself to "evacuate" to safe places of cerebral life' (1971,6). In contrast, once a person makes his feelings available to himself in a non-judgemental way, he is able to 'make a moral decision about the way of life he wants to live' (1971, 8). 'Christian morality in no way advocates the denial of feelings, but only a responsible way of relating to them' (1971, 8).

Thus, seminaries should foster self-love within its seminarians. Without this they will be unable to love others and to love God. Seminarians do not enter as finished products, but as men who are in a process of development and ongoing human formation. As Elizabeth Stuart writes, 'It must be remembered that seminaries and religious congregations are not places where candidates are supposed to arrive perfected' (1994, 67). They begin to learn about themselves through a life of prayer and devotion. This is the basis of learning about God. Accepting their humanity, as the Trappist monk Michael Casey says is crucial: 'If we do not accept our own concrete humanity, we will be less capable of appreciating the humanity of Jesus. . . . We project onto Jesus a "perfection" that is, in fact, incompatible with humanity. Jesus becomes more like an angel than a man. . . . We also weaken the link that our common nature gives us' (2004, 7). Jesus had sexual feelings and desires – if he had not he would not have been fully human, which is a heresy. Human formation, therefore, has to include sexual self-understanding – it is an integral part of its constituency. Once people begin this ongoing journey of self-discovery, they step onto the road of inner freedom. And if they come to a gradual realisation or a re-confirmation that they are gay, they will need assistance in coming to accept lovingly their condition. As Sipe alludes to in his study of celibacy, there is sometimes a way to go from self-knowledge to self-acceptance. I might come to realise I am gay during my seminary formation, but actually owning this positively is a further stage in human growth (Sipe 1990, 124). This is why seminaries ought to be in the business of promoting self-love and pointing to the paths to attain this; it is an act of love for those in their care. I am not advocating that gay seminarians should be 'outed', but what I am saying is that they should, at the very least, be assisted in admitting it to themselves and a few trusted friends. What is clear in all this, as Sipe points out, is that 'A person who aspires to celibacy will sooner or later have to come to grips with the question of his sexual identity, even in spite of limited or no sexual experience' (1990, 124). As the sociologist, Fr. Thomas, told

Richard Sipe, 'A celibate should know everything there is to know about sexuality short of experience' (quoted in Sipe 1990, 250). As I have shown, this is particularly difficult in light of the Church's teaching on homosexuality and the Catholic priesthood.

Of course, at a time when the law has significantly changed with regard to homosexuality (gay marriage would be just one example) and when well-known political and well-balanced, intelligent sporting and musical figures such as Olympic diver Tom Daley and singer Sam Smith are publicly 'coming out' (with no obvious deleterious effect on their standing), one would think that talking about gay issues and helping others to own their orientation, might be less troublesome for the Church, even if it has to restate its position on gay chastity. At the very least it would be admitting to and agreeing with much popular opinion that self-knowledge and self-acceptance are invariably the paths towards human growth and happiness. On the other hand, the Church might think this approach makes the dissonance between public opinion/attitudes and the Church's teaching more severe and recognisable, and thus recommend, as I have suggested earlier, that silence is the best way forward, lest it alienate itself further from the modern world. I believe, to my chagrin, that many with influential positions in the Church have opted for the latter.

The Ascetic and Mystical Tradition

Let me now move on to the question of some of the possible consequences of self-knowledge and self-acceptance. The ascetic tradition in Christianity has always, rightly in my view, acknowledged that 'holding in check' natural desires can be highly beneficial and humanly and spiritually transformative. As post-Freudian children we are often led to believe that any 'unnatural' suppression of our 'natural' sexual inclinations is a retrograde step and will lead to future unhappiness and self-damage. This is a one-sided view and does not do justice to the whole picture. The Catholic Church has a strong spiritual tradition of contemplative asceticism which offers a positive way forward and it becomes particularly relevant when dealing with the issue of homosexuality. The tradition of *enkrateia* (self-control) offers the possibility that our natural appetites can be transformed by self-denial, not done violence to. Kallistos Ware's helpful distinction between natural and unnatural asceticism in which he gives the example of the former by referring to sexual abstinence and to castration as an example of the latter, saves the tradition from being seen as wildly inhuman and pathologically self-destructive (1998, 9). The Catholic Church's teaching on homosexuality ultimately rests on its conviction that although it might be difficult, sexual abstinence is the only moral way forward for the gay person and this can

be achieved by self-control and the assistance of God's grace. The Catholic catechism teaches that the way to chastity is through 'the virtues of self-mastery . . . the support of disinterested friendship, by prayer and sacramental grace' (quoted in Shinnick 1997, 79). This, of course, is the legitimate and the only teaching that can be given to those who have chosen a priestly celibate lifestyle. In fact, as I have already hinted at, it might be the very reason why some gay men enter the seminary in the first place – to be given support and to find a haven where they can live up to the demands of sexual abstinence, particularly when they feel strongly that their self-recognition as gay men most appropriately leads to a such a lifestyle and to their pursuit of holiness. In other words, some gay men believe their homosexuality leads to and reflects a vocational, deeper purpose in life and allows them to give themselves to God and others as much as they are capable of, especially through their willingness to surrender their actively sexual lives to a greater good. The teaching of the Church refuses to accept this reasoning.

Seminarians and non-seminarians alike, also have the advantage of drawing on the great mystical tradition of erotic desire for God. The erotic sense is never denied in Christianity, for it is often the basis of our encounter with God. The Song of Songs, the most read and commented on book of the Bible in the Middle Ages is wholly contextualised within the erotic search for God who is found and yet never found, who is longed for and always escapes our full capture. As the Benedictine monk, Jean Leclercq comments, it is about 'the dialogue between the bridegroom and the bride who are seeking each other, calling to each other, growing nearer to each other, and who find they are separated from each other just when they believe they are finally about to be united' (2011, 85). Desire is the stuff of the human search for the divine. And it is true, although many mystics, as Loughlin claims, put aside their sexual wants, in pursuit of spiritual gratification 'their bodies remained the measure and later, the figure of their mystical devotion' (2004, 9) In attempting to find God, they also found the deep sexuality of their bodies. In getting closer to God, they got closer and got to know better their sexual selves. This is why the mystics refer to their ascent to God in blatantly erotic terms. Note Richard Rolle's description of his love for Christ which he prays will increase: ' . . . develop in me, your lover/An immeasurable urge towards you/ . . . A fervour that throws discretion to the winds/ . . . Reason cannot hold it in check, fear does not make it tremble . . . ' (quoted in Loughlin 2004, 11). This is mad love.; love out of control and it is exhilarating; something to be admired and emulated. The Catholic Church knows this and it is why its theology of marriage is understood in terms of the erotic inter-penetration and comparison of God's love for us and human love for each other. The erotic is the means and the bridge of human fulfilment.

This can be revelatory to seminarians who might mistakenly think that their erotic selves are being denied by their adoption of celibacy. Nothing could be further from the truth. Seminarians can be assisted in their re-ordering of desire by contemplation on the symbolic texts of spiritual ascent in the Christian mystics. And anyway, as we all know, sexual desire does not cease when one trains to be a priest or one chooses to live a chaste lifestyle as a lay person. In fact, after much prayer, it might increase. This is fine and can usefully be the platform for ascent to God. The challenge is to re-direct it towards God and not lustfully towards others, those one is most attracted to. The fact that this might emerge from a heterosexual and homosexual foundation is irrelevant. Desire is the thing to be nurtured. It leads to holiness. And it should be encouraged.

Seminarians therefore can feel very much at home in accepting their eroticism (gay or straight) in celibate terms and right in seeing their priesthood as the place where this can be encouraged and owned. I see nothing wayward or awkward about this reasoning or decision whatsoever, and applaud those who attempt to walk this admirable, if at times, difficult and lonely path, *if* they are allowed to. Whether this can be said to be appropriate to *all* gay men is disputable. Clearly, not all Catholic gay men believe they are called to a celibate priesthood or indeed to a celibate lifestyle. Indeed, they might think that one very positive way of dealing with their gay identity is to form and cement a loving sexual relationship (sometimes even through marriage) with another person which will set out the supportive contours for self-giving and service. The Catholic Church thinks otherwise. Homosexual identity must lead to chastity; this is the only way forward and help will be forthcoming to attain this end. And it is *not* suited to the priestly life. This position, is, of course, linked to its teaching about sexual activity outside marriage – co-habitation is wrong. Sexual relations should only take place within marriage. Since it is impossible for gay men to be married in the eyes of the Church, they should, like others outside marriage, refrain from sexual activity. Doing otherwise is a sin.

Whichever position we take, the plain truth is that 'success' rests on self-knowledge, self-acceptance and self-love. Desire is best served by these three virtues. Without this, no healthy living is possible, whether chaste or not. Which Catholic marriage preparation course does not recommend to those about to be married, honesty to each other as the basis of a fruitful relationship? What I am arguing for, therefore, is that the Church acknowledges an urgent pastoral duty to assist others and especially gay people in their gradual attainment of self-love – far more than it does at the present time. As I have said, *Angels in America Part One* makes real and vivid this central truth and the catastrophes that emerge from it being stunted or never spoken about. It is something from which the Church might learn. In

the Church's partial defence, it is only fair to acknowledge that the Church *has* spoken out on this matter. The 1979 text *An Introduction to the Pastoral care of Homosexual People* produced by the England and Wales Catholic Social Welfare Commission, explored the topic within the framework of love. Pastors, it claimed, should be helpful in the process of 'coming out' and homosexuals should be encouraged to accept their condition positively. Although homosexuals can never experience *truly* loving sexual relations (despite their protestations that they in fact *do*) because love can only exist within marriage and must be always open to the transmission of new life, homosexuals do need to accept lovingly who they are. This is an admirable thing for the Church to state. However, I believe it will prove very difficult to convince others that it means business in this regard in light of its earlier negative language about homosexuality and especially its teaching on the incompatibility of homosexuality with the Catholic priesthood. It's probably impossible to achieve, unless it reverses its teaching on the latter and apologies for its mistakes in the past on the former. Not talking about it either in the seminary or in the pulpit is most likely to lead to further denials (or secrecy) among Catholic gay people, rectors, seminarians, priests and teachers and will probably further increase entrenched negative attitudes to the issue from people within the Church itself. Teaching and open discussion about self-knowledge, I am insisting, is an important plank in the encouragement to strive for human growth and its sibling, holiness. And this applies to heterosexuals as much as homosexuals. When Joe admits to his mother that he is a homosexual, we see on stage the beginnings of human freedom and joy – and the audience sigh with relief. It is an attractive, revelatory moment of truth.

Conclusion

What I have attempted to show in this article is that art (in this case, *Angels in America, Part One*) can disclose a glimmer of truth about the nature of self-love, which might in turn assist the Church in coming to its own self-understanding. And conversely, that the Church can help us to appreciate the claims of the play more comprehensively and perhaps more deeply than we originally thought possible. My inter-textual analysis has sought to illuminate the point that self-knowledge and self-acceptance are invaluable dimensions of human and spiritual growth and that the emergence of self-love is a vital step on the road to love of others and to love of God. I have contextualised this thesis in relation to Catholic gay self-identity, but I could have chosen other scenarios to do the same. What I also hope to have demonstrated is that love is an immensely challenging thing and that we should not be too hard on ourselves or others, as Pope

Francis reminds us, when we see glaring failures to measure up to its inscrutable and lofty demands. It is a good and very Catholic thing when the gay seminarian is able to forgive his Church for failing to love sufficiently, even if this leads him to living a life of priestly secrecy as a result. I hope, too, my article will guide us firmly away from agreeing with Joe that 'I don't think I deserve being loved' (2018, 123). If this comes about, even in the slightest way, I shall feel content.

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