News
Spirituality



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An international group of theologians and scholars released an academic statement on May 4 alleging inconsistencies in the Vatican's arguments against same-sex relationships, and urging the church to review its stance in light of modern research.

"When people suffer ... because of doctrines, laws and disciplines, about whose correctness there are now well-founded doubts, the competent Church authorities have a religious and Christian duty to carefully and empathetically revise them," wrote theologian Fr. Krzysztof Charamsa, a former official at the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in the foreword to the statement.

The authors argued that the Bible never condemns consensual, faithful same-sex relationships. They also said evidence that non-heterosexual orientations occur naturally and the fact that the church allows infertile straight couples to marry undermine the Vatican's natural law arguments against same-sex relationships.

The statement was published by the Wijngaards Institute for Catholic Research and signed by 20 contributors and over 40 other theologians and academics representing more than a dozen countries worldwide including the United States, the Philippines, Germany, Australia, Malaysia and Brazil.

Most of the contributors and signatories are theologians and ethicists, some specializing in gender studies, while others are biblical scholars or biologists.

Signatories included Mercy Sr. Margaret Farley, a professor emerita of Christian ethics at Yale University Divinity School and author of *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*; Todd Salzman, a professor of Catholic theology at Creighton University and author of several books on sexual ethics; and Mary McAleese, former president of Ireland and current chancellor of Trinity College in Dublin.

"We need something new," Farley told NCR in a brief interview about the statement. "Because people are suffering and they're being harmed."

Salzman said it was "timely" that the Wijngaards Institute statement came out shortly after the Vatican's March 15 decree, released by the doctrinal congregation and approved by Pope Francis, that clergy are not permitted to bless same-sex unions because God "cannot bless sin."

"I think [the Vatican decree] was a final straw for a lot of people ... it was incredibly irresponsible and hurtful for the CDF to issue that statement," Salzman told NCR.

The authors of the new statement wrote that non-heterosexual orientations are part of the natural diversity in human sexuality.

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Scientists have found that sexual orientation is determined before birth, mainly by genetics and hormones, the authors wrote. Being gay, bisexual or queer is also not a choice — LGBTQ people are no more responsible for their sexual orientation than heterosexual people are, they added.

The statement separates the Catholic Church's official arguments that declare same-sex relationships "intrinsically disordered" into two main categories: natural law-based and biblical.

The Vatican's natural law argument says same-sex intimacy is intrinsically sinful because it can't produce a child, the authors stated. But the church says heterosexual married couples can have sex even if the act biologically can't lead to conception, the authors noted.

The authors add that infertile straight couples are also allowed to marry; they cite Catholic theology and canon law, quoting, "Sterility neither prohibits nor nullifies marriage."

"The church accepts married heterosexual relationships that don't have children because of infertility … that's a valid relationship for other reasons, like mutual support, commitment, love and shared work on the common good," said Kathryn Lilla Cox, a visiting research associate in theology and religious studies at the University of San Diego, who has studied infertility and helped review the statement.

"In non-heterosexual relationships, those things exist too — it's about identity, it's about love, it's about commitment," she said.

In light of the inconsistencies between church doctrine and modern scientific research and scripture scholarship, the statement's authors called for the church to start an "official consultation process" with a representative group of theologians and experts on the ethics of same-sex relationships "as a matter of urgency."

The opinions gathered in the consultation should be made public, they said.

Natalia Imperatori-Lee, a professor of religious studies at Manhattan College, who was a secondary signatory, said she saw the statement as part of an ancient tradition of theologians interpreting the Bible in light of new science and understanding of human nature.

"While I love the church, I think the church is wrong about this, and I'm proud to be part of a group of people who are trying to help the church through this morass," Imperatori-Lee said.

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