An Update for the Church

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In the original foreword to his book *Christian Faith and Same-Sex Attraction: Eastern Orthodox Reflections*, Fr. Thomas Hopko recounts a story about a gay man he received into the Orthodox Church and with whom he became friends.[1] On reading a manuscript for Fr. Tom's book, a memory came to the man. As a child, he and a friend had frequented a park where they hand-fed peanuts to the squirrels. One day, older boys took their peanuts from them and proceeded to feed the squirrels with one hand and beat them with sticks with the other.

Hopko doesn't explain the anecdote. He only notes that after years of a chaste and celibate life in the church, this was the memory that his writing brought to the man. Perhaps the story serves as something of an ink blot test, eliciting a variety of responses from those who hear it. On reading his account, I could see only one obvious metaphor: LGBTQ+ people are the squirrels, the boy and his friend feed them with the Gospel, while the older boys represent the institutional church.[2] To be fed the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ by one hand while being clubbed by another is a reality many LGBTQ+ Orthodox are well acquainted with.

There is a crisis within the Orthodox Church, one that has effectively robbed us of the ability to respond theologically and pastorally to people in the face of contemporary questions about gender and sexuality. The problem is not the Church's alone. The broader society has been embroiled in the same questions since the middle of the last century. In many ways, Orthodox are latecomers to the conversation.

Over the past six years, there have been a series of conferences and workshops in Europe with an academic component exploring contemporary questions of gender and sexuality in Orthodoxy. Of these six, only one has received funding from Orthodox sources, with the others sponsored variously by the European Forum of LGBT Christian Groups, the Oslo Coalition, the British Council, and the Luce Foundation. Other than the events sponsored by the European Forum, the rest have been held under a modified Chatham House Rule. This diplomatic guideline aims to protect the anonymity of a speaker by allowing attendees to report what was said, but without indication of who said it. The modification used at these meetings allows disclosure of the participant list as well, but still forbids linking a person's identity with any reported speech. The Chatham House Rule allows people to speak openly and honestly when discussing controversial issues. It makes it possible to

[1] The original foreword appears in the second edition of Hopko's book, published by Ancient Faith Press in 2014.

[2] LGBTQ+ is used here as an umbrella term for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning. The plus sign indicates a variety of other sexualities and nonbinary genders.

think out loud and to say things that might otherwise be detrimental to a person's public position or even life. But in an atmosphere as polarized as the current Orthodox scene, some within in the Church who claim there is nothing to discuss have instead used this confidentiality to stir suspicion and fear.

For example, the latest academic initiative to draw together Orthodox academics, clergy, and activists to discuss LGBTQ+ issues held a conference in Oxford, England in August 2019. While the modified Chatham House Rule was in effect, the organizers immediately issued a press release that included a group photo and the names of most of the participants. People who were present were also free to post pictures on social media and to quote (without attribution) things said during the discussions. Before long, the meeting was denounced in certain corners of the Orthodox blogosphere, and an ad hominem attack was launched against one of the participants for his Twitter bio and pictures from his social media account in which he was wearing a tutu as part of a performance. Eventually, a small group of Orthodox launched a petition, entreating the Orthodox bishops of North America to step in and publicly correct anyone under their authority who rejects or questions church teaching on these matters. Additionally, the petition requests pastoral guidelines for parish priests dealing with LGBTQ+ parishioners and those who question or reject church teachings.

It's not that Orthodox leaders haven't spoken. An *Orthodox Statement on Homosexuality* was published in *The Word* in 1984. The Orthodox Church in America released its *Synodal Affirmations on Marriage, Family, Sexuality, and the Sanctity of Life* in 1992 and a follow-up *Synodal Affirmation of the Mystery of Marriage* in 2013. Separate statements have been issued by the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of North America (2013), and the bishops of the OCA dioceses of Washington (2011), New York and New Jersey (2011), and Chicago and the Midwest (2011, 2015).

But the official pronouncements haven't been enough for many Orthodox. Some would be happy to draw lines in the sand, excommunicating those who do not live up to current Orthodox teaching. Some of those who support LGBTQ+ people would also like to hear more from our bishops, particularly condemning violence against minority genders and sexualities. Others wish to see a more nuanced theological anthropology that would then inform pastoral practice.

Whatever the reasons may be, our hierarchs have had relatively little to say on the record beyond repeating the established teachings of the Orthodox Church on limiting sexual activity to married couples. In one sense, this is good. It is an unfortunate fact that the hierarchy of the Church, by and large, is not well equipped to make pronouncements beyond repeating traditional teachings. And they are not alone. Most of us have not taken the time to prepare ourselves for this conversation. This becomes clear as various parties embrace talking points without doing the hard work of research and critical thinking.

In the rest of this essay, I'd like to offer a few suggestions for improving the quality of our conversation.[3]

Check your rhetoric. The debates that Orthodox are currently engaged in are

[3] I offered most of the suggestions that follow at the third Oslo conference, dedicated to the pastoral care of LGBTQ+ persons in the Orthodox Church.

often polemical and highly charged. Whether it's converts running from conversations about the ordination of women and gays in other Christian traditions or cradle Orthodox formed by a postcolonial reaction to "the West," the arguments sound similar. In light of these realities, I offer the following observations on rhetoric.

There is no such thing as a unified "gay agenda." LGBTQ+ folks do not share a common "lifestyle." And whatever our sins may be, referring to us as *sodomites* is a cheap rhetorical move. To this list, let us also add descriptors such as *depraved* and *reprobate*. And I would be remiss if I did not mention the conflation of consensual same-sex activities between adults with rape, pedophilia, bestiality, and necrophilia.

Likewise, there is no coordinated "gender ideology" that seeks to undermine popular understandings of male and female. Even under the LGBTQ+ umbrella there are a variety of conflicting viewpoints about gender and biological sex. Some members of the community are quite content with common cultural definitions and values. Others make the case that biological sex as a scientific classification is also a cultural production rather than a simple given. In this conversation, *no one* claims that there are not differences that broadly fall into a bimodal distribution of physical characteristics. Rather, the conversation centers on what sort of emphasis we should place on this distribution and a resistance to invoking biological determinism to shoehorn unique persons into ill-fitting gender roles.

We are also sometimes referred to as *heretics*. But heresy has a technical definition related to teachings that contradict dogmatic pronouncements of the seven ecumenical councils. These statements tend to be Trinitarian and Christological but have little to say about theological anthropology or human sexuality.

At the same time, kindly refer to us by the words that we have chosen for ourselves. For example, a priest once told me that a person committed to celibacy has no sexual orientation. His argument, specifically, was that one is neither *gay* nor *straight* if one is not having sex. Such idiosyncratic redefinition of words is completely unhelpful in the care of LGBTQ+ parishioners. It also has the effect of erasing our identities without offering viable alternatives.

Finally, it is common in Internet comments to suggest that LGBTQ+ folks and those who support us should go and join the Episcopal Church. This is an exercise in boundary enforcement that fosters a fractious us-versus-them mentality, undermining the unity of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. It is also disingenuous. Those Orthodox who suggest we become Episcopalians are quite often the very same people who deny that Episcopalians are members of the one true Church. For many, "Go become an Episcopalian" is the equivalent of telling us to go to hell.

These various rhetorical moves affect us in several ways. We are othered and demonized. Our experiences are erased. Most importantly, we are no longer seen as siblings in Christ, but instead as outsiders against whom Orthodoxy must be protected. This is a wound to the entire Body of Christ, both LGBTQ+ followers of Christ and those who seek to distance themselves from us.

Educate yourselves about the conversation. Following the tenet from the epistle of James that "few of you should become teachers," I make this plea—first to bishops, followed by presbyters and religious educators in the Orthodox Church: *Read broadly, study deeply, and learn all that you can.*

Biblical exegesis and cultural backgrounds. For many in the current conflict, proof-texting from the Scriptures is the first line of argumentation. Many LGBTQ+ Christians have personally wrestled with Scripture for many years. I have personally learned a modicum of ancient Greek and how to apply historical-critical methods embraced in contemporary biblical scholarship. I've educated myself about the cultures and contexts that produced the scriptures, and I've learned about the transmission and interpretation of our sacred texts within Orthodox tradition (along with many other Christian traditions). Not every LGBTQ+ person has studied the Bible and its reception and interpretation or the ancient cultures that produced it. And not every parishioner has the opportunity. But anyone attempting to interpret the Scriptures for the Church needs to have a firm grounding and can only benefit from such study.

I am not suggesting that historical-critical methods are the sole key to understanding the Scriptures. And, frankly, there are moments when the surface reading of a text is incontestable. As an academic theologian, one of the tasks I model for my students is wrestling with Scripture, a practice modeled for us by the fathers of the Church. The Bible is a collection of writings that witness to our forebears' journey of spiritual discovery. There are a variety of conflicting opinions preserved in the Scriptures, and there are moments when the plain sense meaning of a biblical passage is simply wrong. Rather than engaging in mere proof-texting debates, we must go deeper.

Moreover, the contexts of the authors of both the Scriptures and later texts are often quite different from our own. The contemporary Church, along with the broader world, is faced with a new phenomenon in committed, loving, consensual, and mutual same-sex erotic relationships. But this can only be seen clearly when we take the time to learn about the types of relationships that came before us. There are many different ancient and contemporary tropes that include same-sex sexual acts and homoeroticism: ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman cultic practices (some real and some purported), pederasty, prostitution, a search for novel pleasures, rape, coercion, and exploitation. To be sure, each of these appears to have opposite-sex sexual acts and heteroerotic counterparts. But none of these earlier categories reflects the experiences of most contemporary LGBTQ+ people.

Educating ourselves also includes learning about human sexuality and sexual health. This is particularly important for parents and clergy. Both are presented with opportunities to make a difference in the lives of those in their care. Abstinence-only approaches do not work. And, what's worse, they leave people open to myriad problems. What a different world we could live in if we took the time to learn about human sexuality and our bodies and then shared this information with our loved ones, rather than simply repeating our teaching that sexual activity is only licit within a marriage between a man and a woman, preferably both Ortho-

dox and blessed within the Church. Teaching our best and preparing for the realities of the world do not have to be mutually exclusive.

Get to know us as human beings. Rather than demonize us, get to know LGBTQ+ parishioners. If you think there are no LGBTQ+ people in your parish, then you might want to look at yourself. Often it is not the case that such parishioners do not exist. Rather, it is more likely that you have not made it clear that you are a safe person with whom they can be authentic.

In the absence of actual relationships with LGBTQ+ people, many Orthodox tend to set up straw persons on whom they can project a broad variety of cultural tropes and personal fears. However, these caricatures often have very little in common with actual LGBTQ+ people. Knowing a variety of actual LGBTQ+ Orthodox is a wonderful antidote to the polemical charges often raised against us. It allows pastoral caregivers to see the variety of our human experience that parallels other forms of diversity in the parish. And, given the opportunity, it allows LGBTQ+ parishioners to share our lives and experiences in ways that can move pastoral care beyond one-size-fits-all generalities.

We, too, are sinners . . . but perhaps not in the ways that many automatically assume. As the Apostle Paul noted, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. LGBTQ+ parishioners are no exception. We struggle with the same temptations as everyone else. We are sometimes unkind to our partners and our families. We, too, can be grouchy and un-Christlike toward our loved ones. We sometimes objectify our partners or compromise ourselves by acquiescing to our mates out of fear or insecurity. In these ways we are very much like everyone else. Considering these realities, what we need is the same sort of support as our straight family and friends in holding us to account where we miss the mark and encouragement in the Christian journey toward theosis.

Reparative therapy is a dead end for most people. Some Orthodox believe that reparative therapy can change a person's sexual orientation. The underlying theory suggests that lack of love during early childhood development from a parent of the same gender as the child is the root cause of same-sex attraction. As framed by Orthodox theologian Elizabeth Moberly, gays and lesbians (and to varying degrees bisexual and transgender individuals) fail to live into typical heterosexual identities when these early developmental needs are left unmet. Moberly has written for both secular and religious audiences.[4] Her theories have been endorsed by some Orthodox clergy. And why not? We can point to many examples of LGBTQ+ people who had poor relationships with a parent during childhood. Could this not be the solution we've been looking for?

There are several problems, though. Reparative therapy plays to a set of heteronormative biases within the larger community. It casts typical relationships as universals, obscuring the realities of unique human persons and their relationships. Moreover, Moberly's attempts at providing theological underpinnings for her theory are poorly constructed and border on Christological heresy.[5]

But the proof of the problem is in the legacy of reparative therapy. Its effects are deleterious at all ages, but

[4] Moberly's clinical description is found in Elizabeth R. Moberly, *Psychogenesis: The Early Development of Gender Identity* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983). Her theological reflection is found in Elizabeth R. Moberly, *Homosexuality: A New Christian Ethic* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1983).

[5] See Bryce E. Rich, "Beyond Male and Female: Gender Essentialism and Orthodoxy" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2017), 244–6.

especially damaging to the young. Our sexualities may be culturally constructed to a significant degree, but they are quite complex and rarely open to substantial change. Failure to change through reparative therapy has resulted in countless cases of psychological distress and, in the most extreme cases, suicide.

Make space to mark the significant relationships and events in our lives. Several years before I was received into the Orthodox Church, I was partnered with a man named Gary who had four children from his previous marriage. During our time together, Gary's children visited us often. Several years later, after our romantic relationship had ended, Gary's youngest son, Jason, was killed in an automobile accident.

There is no word in the English language that describes the relationship between Jason and me. His father and I were never legally married, nor were we even romantically partnered any longer. But a bond had formed between me and Jason. And I grieved intensely over his death. I added his name to the list of the reposed for whom my local parish prayed, and I let my priest know what my relationship to Jason had been. To his credit, this is where he did something very precious.

My priest and presvytera invited me over for dinner. And after the meal, they asked me to tell them about Jason. They listened as I told stories of the time we had spent together: his early reactions when Gary and I started dating, how I had won him over, and episodes from our life together. I mentioned the lack of an English word to describe the relationship between the two of us. And the presvytera responded, "It doesn't matter what it's called. This is someone important to you, someone that you loved." She got it. Her acknowledgment was like a balm to my soul.

After 40 days, we prayed a Panikhida for Jason in our parish. I made a *kutya* for the occasion. The priest placed it on the altar and blessed it. And after the service, the members of my parish shared in it. I cannot fully describe to you the feeling of accep-

Blessing a *kutya.*

tance and belonging I experienced in those moments. This is an example of compassionate and effective pastoral care.

I first shared this story with one of the Oslo gatherings that I mentioned above. Later, one of the other participants in the seminar approached me. She wanted me to know she was sorry—sorry that things are so bad for LGBTQ+ people in the Orthodox Church that an act as simple as recognizing the loss of a loved one and praying a Panikhida seemed remarkable to me when she considered it to be one of the most basic of our practices.

Make spaces in your parish that are gender inclusive. Finally, for both trans and gender-nonconforming parishioners, a trip to the restroom can be anything from awkward to dangerous. While most cisgender persons take for granted their access to gendered restroom facilities, this is not always a given for those who "read" as a gender other than the one they wish to present.

If your parish has single-user restrooms, an easy fix is to remove signs indicating the gender of the persons who may use them. Even one such restroom in your church can make a huge difference for those who may need it. As a bonus, mention where your gender-inclusive facilities are located somewhere on your website and in the announcements for visitors in your bulletin if you have one.

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The suggestions I've offered here are but the start to a conversation that may take many more years for Orthodox to sort out. My prayer is that the Spirit will guide us as we continue to explore both the more abstract questions of theological anthropology and formulate responses to LGBTQ+ persons within the Church. ❋

Bryce E. Rich holds a PhD in theology from the University of Chicago. His doctoral dissertation, "Beyond Male and Female: Gender Essentialism and Orthodoxy," examines patristic and contemporary Orthodox models of gender, sex, and sexuality in conversation with the personalism of Vladimir Lossky and contemporary gender and queer theory. He is currently preparing a manuscript version for publication. Bryce has participated in six European consultations on gender, sexuality, and Orthodoxy. Some of his shorter essays can be found at BryceRich.com.