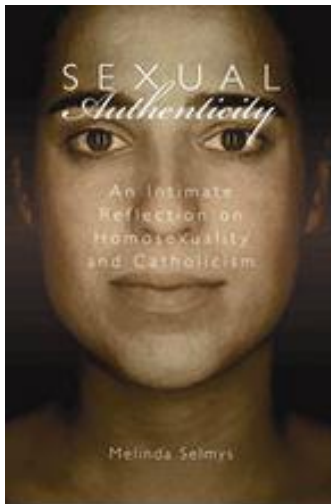


An Article by Melinda Selyms, author of the book ***Sexual Authenticity: An Intimate Reflection on Homosexuality and Catholicism***.



Twelve years ago, I converted to Catholicism and began a long dialogue with my own sexuality. At the time, I was involved in a lesbian relationship that had been going on for a little over six years. I had, in the course of researching the Catholic position with a view to refuting it, encountered the Church's teachings on homosexual relationships before, so when I decided to embrace the Church as my mother, I knew that meant giving up my lesbian partner. I called her that night and explained my decision.

At the time, I thought that I was signing up for a life of celibacy. I was okay with that: before I became a Catholic I was a hard rationalist, and it wasn't a long stretch to port my idealistic devotion to rational self-possession into an iron-clad commitment to Catholic sexual teaching. I would simply apply my will to the problem, subsume my passions to the rule of Reason, and everything would be fine. Right?

Of course, life doesn't work that way. The body is a sly customer, and when it found that I had completely dammed up the river of my sexuality in so far as lesbianism and masturbation were concerned, it went looking for another outlet. Within less than a year I had fallen in love with a man, and was merrily engaged in excusing myself from the Church's teachings on pre-marital sex. I'm happy to say that particular chapter in the catalogue of my personal sins was fairly brief. An unplanned pregnancy brought it to an end, and in spite of all of the traditional caveats about sex before marriage leading inexorably to divorce, I've been happily married ever since. After ten years of marriage, I'm more in love with my spouse than when I started, we have six kids, and we live in a little piece of paradise in Eastern Ontario.

Sounds nice, almost fairy-tale like. It's the story that so many same-sex attracted Catholics wish they could have, the "saved-by-the-grace-of-God" miracle that Catholic families of LGBTQ folks like to hear, because it gives them hope for their own loved ones. Take one sprinkle of Holy Water, pray a couple of Rosaries, make a few trips to the confessional, and presto chango, gay becomes straight.

So let's come back to the land of reality and look at some of the "bad news." I'm not attracted to *men*. Apart from my husband and Clint Eastwood, I still find the male sex pretty unattractive. I have not achieved complete freedom from the fell demon of homosexuality – in the past week alone, I've had three homoerotic dreams. I'm not comfortable with my sexuality; my femininity and I are only barely on speaking terms most of the time. I'm far from prepared to hold myself up as an ex-gay poster child.

Does that mean that I'm suppressing my true and fundamental self, or that I've entered into a neurotic relationship with my sexuality that is slowly gnawing away at the foundations of my identity? No. It means that I've made a decision: I will possess my sexuality; I will not be possessed by it. I happen to be working on the project of self-possession within the context of a heterosexual marriage. One of my best friends is working on it in a religious community. Others are doing it in the single life. We're all engaged in the same basic quest to become the owners of a truly integrated self, centered in Christ.

It helps, I think, to keep in mind that we're not alone. I'm hardly unique in being occasionally troubled by desires or dreams that I don't want. Few people believe that a woman is denying her authentic identity when she puts aside her attractions to other men in order to remain faithful to her husband. Few believe that a man who is striving to break his pornography addiction is stifling his integral sexual identity. The vast majority of

people, regardless of “sexual orientation,” are going to face a few stumbling blocks on the road to chastity. God doesn't generally go around handing out angelic girdles to all comers – *sed contra*. To the best of my knowledge St. Thomas Aquinas is the only man to have scored one yet.

Still, the issue seems to be more complicated for someone with same-sex attractions. I guess there might be people out there for whom it really is just a biological thing, folks whose sexual orientation can be reduced to the way that their hardware reacts to sexual stimuli. If such people exist, my suspicion is that they are men. In my experience, however, sexuality involves the whole person, and attraction, particularly for women, is a response of that whole person to the totality of another.

This means that a gay/lesbian identity is not just a matter of sexual desires. There are a whole range of issues including gender-identity, aesthetics, interpersonal psychodynamics, ideology, spirituality, etc. that impact, and are impacted by, our sexual relationships and attractions. Some of these things may be an essential part of personality, and genuine harm can be done by trying to change them. Others may be more malleable, and in some cases changing them is a necessary prerequisite to overcoming compulsive homosexual desire.

It's my suspicion that in a lot of cases, people who struggle for years with SSA are struggling because there are other factors driving their attractions, and these factors are not being addressed. For some people, it seems, the issues are rooted in psychological wounds received in their family of origin, and for those people reparative therapy seems to do a lot of good. Resolve the psychological substrata of sexual orientation, and the attractions sort themselves out of their own accord.

That wasn't my experience, though, and talking to other Catholics who are in the same boat, I don't think it's a universal panacea. My best theory at the moment for what's behind my own attractions is that they arise out of a complex web of factors, including my neurology, sexual opportunities, the gender-expectations of my society, feminism, and a life-long attraction to highly masculine philosophies like those of Kant and Epictetus. It so happened that my conversion to Catholicism occurred through the instrumentality of the Virgin Mary, and that my relationship with her helped to smooth over my hostilities with traditional notions of femininity at least enough for me to lower the emotional walls and have a meaningful relationship with a man. That's what worked for me, but I suspect that it would be totally unhelpful for the average gay man, and probably not of much use to most lipstick lesbians.

There are several conclusions that I would like to draw:

1. Sexual identity is not just about sexual desire. A lot of the time people embrace a gay or lesbian identity because of real, genuinely foundational elements of personality that seem “queer” to other people. The LGBTQ community becomes a safety zone, and a gay identity becomes a security blanket, that protects the elements of personality that are under attack from mainstream culture. Anyone who is leaving a gay identity behind needs to find other ways of protecting those elements of personality, otherwise we just end up retreating back into the village when we come under fire.
2. There is no universal solution. I've encountered a number of ex-ex-gays who sincerely believe that it is impossible to abandon a gay lifestyle because they were offered a one-size-fits-all “cure” for homosexuality, and it didn't work. I understand their frustration. I think that we need to realistically acknowledge that what we're trying to do is very difficult, that the solutions are not obvious, and that we need to search for new, personalized approaches when our efforts aren't bearing any fruit.
3. There is no universal solution, because there is no universal cause. Honest self-examination and self-knowledge are essential if we're going to make any headway in achieving chastity, in or out of marriage. Keep in mind that although there is no strict biological causation for homosexuality, there are neurological and physiological factors that may contribute: these must be taken as givens. There's no point in driving yourself crazy trying to change the things that will not change.

4. Desires are just desires. Many people drive themselves nuts trying to eradicate all homoerotic thoughts, images and impulses from their psyche, presumably in the belief that any trace of homosexuality is an impediment to their spiritual development, or to finding and keeping a heterosexual spouse. If total, instinctual interior chastity were a precondition for sanctity (or marriage, or anything), heaven would be peopled by Christ, Thomas Aquinas and the Virgin Mary. Most of the angst associated with unwanted same-sex desires can be eradicated by acknowledging them, accepting them, and then teaching yourself not to take them seriously.

Most of these are things that I've wrestled with, in one way or another, for the better part of twelve years now. I suspect that if you ask me again, five years from now, I'll give you a different way of accounting for myself. It's a dialogue that's on-going. That can be frustrating, and there are times when I want easy solutions and pat answers, when I'm sick to death of trying to figure out how to rearrange things inside of my head so that they behave the way I want them to. There are times when I'm inclined to throw in with St. Augustine and declare all sexuality a product of the fall. Most of the time, though, I can see this for what it is, a call to explore that inner Kingdom, where there are dragons, and precipices, and the beast stirring in the depths, but also God and all of His angels, and the Tree of Life and Suffering and Salvation.