

The Unbidden Prayer

Frances Lee Menlove

A few years back, I was assisting the Ethics Committee of a large metropolitan hospital. The second case on our agenda one afternoon was presented by a pediatric nurse. Two weeks earlier, a baby in her care had been too quickly pronounced a male by the pediatrician attending the birth. The baby's gender was, in fact, ambiguous. Though the visible genitalia appeared to be male, the infant had a uterus and ovaries. Both surgery and hormone treatments would be needed regardless of assigned sex. The nurse was concerned because, after consultations with geneticists and other specialists, the medical team told the parents the infant would best be served by a female designation. This had been explained to the parents. Twice. The parents were adamant. They had been told they had a boy and they wanted a boy. The infant had been baptized a boy and the birth announced as a boy. The nurse was disturbed by this decision, foreseeing unnecessary medical trauma in the years ahead—hence, her decision to request an ethics review.

After about an hour of presentations by the medical specialists, the committee decided to approach the parents again. A Jesuit priest on our committee offered, along with their pediatrician, to meet with the family.

At our next meeting, they reported back on this family meeting. Initially, the doctor had gone over the medical issues one more time. The priest then explained gently to these parents that in the Catholic tradition their baby had not been baptized as a male, but as a child of God. Male or female the infant *was* baptized. "If you decide to have the child raised a girl, it would simply be a matter of changing the name on the parish records from Paul to Paula." Then he added, "Whatever you decide, know that your infant is precious in the eye of God." The parents decided to have the name on the baptismal record changed to Paula.

I remember exactly the moment of my silent unbidden prayer of gratitude. It sprang fully formed from my heart, bypassing my head, as the

pediatrician was quoting the priest's statement, "Whatever you decide, know that your infant is precious in the eye of God." My prayer was simply this. "Thank you, thank you, God. Thank you that these parents are not Mormon." I was deeply grateful that the confused, struggling parents of our tiny infant would not be living inside the Mormon story of eternal gender.

"The Family: A Proclamation to the World" states that "gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose."¹ What might this statement mean to a child whose gender was the result of a decision on the part of her earthly parents and their doctors? Does this mean that this infant's ambiguous gender was not simply biological miscues, but some giant cosmic mistake? If gender is "essential" to the premortal condition, what does it mean when it is ambiguous at birth? How would living inside a story of gender essentialism affect the parents and their child's understanding of her divine nature? How might this theological frame influence the self-perception of a growing girl whose gender was determined by a human decision? Sounds like a nightmare to me. A toxic spiritual burden. That's why I was grateful the parents were not Mormon.

Jan Stout, in an article on the complexities of human sexuality, cites a similar case, although in this situation the child was raised as a male. "A pseudohermaphrodite, known to be genetically female, received hormonal therapy and a hysterectomy and eventually proceeded, as a male, to priesthood ordination and a temple marriage."²

These are stories of two similar infants but with very different outcomes and religious implications. Both cases contradict the common understanding that male and female are always discrete, binary categories. In essence, a parental and/or medical decision at birth determined if the child would be eligible for priesthood ordination. How should Mormon theology and practice take intersex people into account as God's children? The Mormon notion that maleness and femaleness are core (eternally present) to personhood raises theological and moral issues not faced by other Christian groups that do not hold such specific ideas of pre- and postmortal existence.

I believe there are some parallels between what is happening now with respect to sexual minorities (including homosexual, transgender, and intersex) and what was happening in the mid-twentieth century when

Church doctrine precluded black males from ordination to the priesthood.

It became clear during the 1950s, '60s, and '70s that the doctrine of denying priesthood ordination to worthy black males was unsustainable, both scientifically and practically. Biologists said that trying to sort blacks from nonblacks was a scientific impossibility; there is no dividing line. Social scientists said it was foolish to try and racist to boot. I remember talking to returned missionaries who reported they didn't know whom to ordain and whom not to ordain. Just how far back in a member's genealogy must one go to determine if the potential priesthood holder was really white? What should be done when a priesthood member in good standing starts doing genealogy work and finds he has a black ancestor? Should he be unordained? You get the picture. Religious issues aside, it was pragmatically unfeasible to both bar black males from the priesthood and also become a truly global church.

Once again empirical evidence, reason, and conscience are pushing and shoving at a Church policy. Just as we learned about the complexity and ambiguity of racial designations in the mid-twentieth century, we have learned about the complexity and ambiguity of sexual designations in the late twentieth century. Issues of race are complex. Issues of sexual identity are complex. Apparently God's comfort with diversity is greater than ours.

In his article on the complexities of human sexuality, published in 1987, Jan Stout foresaw many of the current ethical problems Mormons are facing. He wrote that research on the development of human sexuality, including homosexuality, has "enormous implications for our perception of sin and responsibility. No one should ignore the dilemma."³ Stout challenged the widely accepted LDS assumption that homosexuals have chosen their lifestyle and knowingly entered into sin. He called for a rethinking of our understanding of the relationship between homosexuality and moral responsibility. Homosexual, transgender, and intersex Mormons are coming out of the closet, a closet into which they won't return. Mormon families are being wrenched. Members are realizing that people they know and love have been given labels that are supposed to equate with sinfulness but that the labels don't fit.

All communities of faith struggle with the challenge of being sensitive to their social and historical context while remaining true to their core beliefs. Each generation must interpret the meaning of the gospel to

meet current challenges and morally complex issues. In each generation, issues arise in which Church authority is held in tension with the demands of an informed conscience. Faith communities experience crisis when the doctrine they teach contradicts experience in significant ways. I believe this is happening now.

During times of tension within the Church over morally complex issues like those surrounding sexual designations, it is tempting to cherish certainty over truth. Certainty alleviates the anxiety and the fear that frequently accompany ambiguity. But certainty is difficult to maintain when reason and experience don't support it. Reality has a knack for pushing truth up through the underbrush, a knack for trumping false certainties. We can't anchor Church teachings to bad science. The demands of the real world and the obligations of conscience won't be trumped.

How do I feel now, after these few years, about my sudden burst of gratitude that Paula was not born into a Mormon family? I stand by it.

Notes

1. The First Presidency and Council of the Twelve Apostles, "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," announced September 23, 1995, retrieved March 18, 2005, from <http://www.lds.org/library/display/0,4945,161-1-11-1,00.html>.

2. Jan Stout, "Sin and Sexuality: Psychobiology and the Development of Homosexuality," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 20, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 37.

3. *Ibid.*, 29–30.