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NOWHERE NEAR HEAVEN'S COAST

Homosexual Memoirs for Catholic Freshmen: Why?

December 1999 By Katherine Kersten

Katherine Kersten is a Senior Fellow at the Center of the American Experiment, a think tank in Minneapolis, and writes for the Star-Tribune of Minneapolis, The Wall Street Journal, and other publications.



I have always looked to the Christian university as a haven of sorts. But there are many signs that all is not well on Christian campuses. As the mother of teens who are approaching college age, I'm disturbed by the extent to which the moral relativism of our popular culture has made inroads at Christian universities. One example is the reading required of freshmen this year at the University of St. Thomas, Minnesota's largest Catholic institution of higher learning.

Each fall, St. Thomas requires freshmen to read a "common text." This is a book that all freshmen in English classes must read and that is recommended as reading for the whole campus community. The book becomes the focus of a semester-long discussion, culminating in a series of campuswide activities during "common text week." In fall 1999 the freshmen are required to read a book with the pleasantly celestial title of *Heaven's Coast* by Mark Doty. *Heaven's Coast* is Doty's memoir of the death from AIDS of his homosexual partner, Wally. The book chronicles Doty's grief and offers his musings on life, death, and sex.

Consider the notion of sexuality that Doty presents to freshmen at this Catholic university. In Doty's eyes, sex is about pleasure, period. Sexual desires are — in his would-be poetic phrase — "the ties by which the body threads us to the world." For Doty, the ultimate metaphor for pleasure is in the dreamy words uttered by another homosexual after a massage: "My whole body feels like a penis." Even on his deathbed, Wally lusts for other men: his male nurse, the handsome guy next door, indeed "anything in pants." But Doty is not jealous. This is just "Wally's way of loving the world."

Sex, in Doty's and Wally's view, has no moral component. Rather, it is "a way of entering the present, of moving through this moment's offerings toward the next." At a writing workshop for men with AIDS, Doty talks with a homosexual man who has lost many acquaintances to the disease. As the two exchange accounts of their ordeals, they agree about the "persistence of desire, about still wanting, no matter what." His companion concludes: "It was my dick that kept me alive." Which moves Doty to wonder, "Is lust a form of hope?"

But Doty makes it clear that sex is not always a matter of life and death. Sometimes it's just darned good fun, and Doty routinely engages in "quick, congenial" sexual encounters with other men. He writes fondly of the "narrative of casual cruising.... [the] story of possibility and of flirtation I love." And he recalls the "erotic

adventures that Wally and I used to enjoy together, when the need for sexual variety had presented itself, as it usually does, for gay couples who stay together for years. We'd learned...to relax about sex, and to know the difference between our commitment to each other and casual, playful sex outside the relationship."

Whether the need is for sexual variety or for funereal solemnity, homosexuals rise to the occasion superbly. Doty writes that "gay" people have a "real advantage" over straight people when "it comes to memorial services.... We don't have a big tradition looming over us.... So ritual occasions, not hidebound by church or tradition, tend to look a lot like the person they celebrate...."

Now, an annual common text — some fine book, assigned to all incoming students, read by the whole university, and discussed campuswide — is a good idea. Amid the jumble of disparate courses that the modern college curriculum has become, it could be a vehicle for introducing students to some enduring questions at the heart of the human condition. But to merit such a central role, the book should be indubitably great, a classic to which students are likely to return throughout their lives as a source of wisdom and insight.

So why did the English Department at St. Thomas choose *Heaven's Coast* (published in 1996) as this fall's common text? The chairman of the department says that the book will encourage "tolerance for diversity." The university, it turns out, has decided to devote the common text program to promoting the standard sort of politicized "diversity" that already governs secular campuses, the sort of diversity that divvies us up by race, gender, and sexual orientation. Common texts required in the past few years have included such pop hits as Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. One can almost see the boxes being checked off on some Verification of Political Correctness form: African-American, check; Latino, check; female, check; Asian, check. One could predict that homosexuality, subdivision male, would be due up soon. And here comes *Heaven's Coast*.

The predictability of the project is so obvious that it leaves a supporter of Catholic education embarrassed. Wouldn't we expect a Catholic university to show more imagination? And another question arises for anyone watching this utterly conformist searching after diversity: Has the Catholic university forgotten that by being Catholic it is an incarnation of diversity on the American academic landscape, and that in mimicking secular universities it is no longer diverse?

But the deeper question is: How does forcing freshmen to read *Heaven's Coast* serve the unique mission of the Christian university? Today most universities are communities of learning in name only; they are Towers of Babel that can do nothing more unified than to "celebrate diversity." A Christian university, by contrast, is — or should be — a community rooted in a unifying vision. This vision sees man as made in the image of God, and as a moral agent called to grapple with questions of right and wrong in light of Christian teaching and tradition. As a result, at a Christian university, students and faculty are (or should be) committed to a search for the truth about the truly good life for man.

How should a Christian university go about its task? First, it can hold up a deeper and more nuanced vision of the virtues than the wider culture provides. It can speak to the importance of having a framework to integrate the virtues, so as to balance their sometimes competing requirements. Without such a framework, as G.K. Chesterton observed, moral confusion is inevitable. "The modern world," he wrote, "is full of the old Christian virtues gone mad. The virtues have gone mad because they are isolated from each other and are wandering alone. Thus some scientists care only for truth and their truth is pitiless. Thus some humanitarians only care for pity and their pity is often untruthful." In teaching about the deeper meanings and the real relations of the virtues, a Christian university can expect little help from a book like *Heaven's Coast*.

The university's president, Fr. Dennis Dease, has defended the choice of *Heaven's Coast* by saying, in a letter to donors, that in reading the book students may hear the call to "compassion" that the U.S. Catholic bishops asked for in their 1989 statement on AIDS, wherein the bishops wrote that "the compassionate person has a heart for those in misery." Says Fr. Dease: "A powerful way to gain this kind of experience is to listen to another's story — to read a memoir such as *Heaven's Coast*." (By the way, Fr. Dease is President-elect of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities.)

But an understanding of Christian compassion is exactly what the book does not contain. Doty's memoir is founded upon the very assumptions that underlie our moral confusion today. The book seeks to sever compassion from truth, sacrificing the latter in an effort to create the former. In Doty's world, compassion wanders alone, blind to the requirements of the truly good life and trumping every other virtue — among them honesty, temperance, prudence, chastity, and justice.

Given its allegiance to the good of the whole man, the Christian university cannot be satisfied with such a one-dimensional and ultimately unfruitful view of compassion. From a Christian perspective, true compassion requires attention not just to our fellow man's physical or emotional needs, but to deeper needs, both moral and spiritual. These include the need for a sexual ethic rooted in something greater and more sublime than pleasure: an ethic that understands sex as a unique and committed form of self-giving between a man and a woman that in its fecundity and its singularity mirrors God's love for us.

Helping students achieve a clear vision of the virtues is an important component of the Christian university's mission. But to effect it, a university must ask students to consider an even more fundamental tenet of Christian belief. For 3,000 years the Judeo-Christian tradition has placed the reality of sin at the center of the human condition, seeing sin as the primary obstacle to both happiness in this life and eternal salvation in the next. Today's students, by contrast, have grown up in a society that — from the highest reaches of government to the magazine rack at the grocery store — outspokenly denies the very existence of sin. This society proclaims in myriad ways that there is no right or wrong, only a range of personal preferences.

The modern age's denial of sin is dangerous because, as the U.S. Catholic bishops have said, it "makes sin easy." Today the depressing but predictable results of this denial are all around us. Consequently, one of the greatest services a Christian university can perform is to name sin forthrightly and speak about the struggle with sin as a key ingredient in human happiness.

Opening students' minds to the reality of sin — difficult in any circumstances — becomes even harder when a book like *Heaven's Coast* inaugurates their college career, for Doty is a standard-issue moral relativist. He sees man not as a moral agent but as a bundle of impulses and desires. Far from viewing Wally as a moral agent, Doty states categorically that "Wally did not have a choice, could not through any powers he might muster have changed a stroke of his history...." For Doty, "freedom" means freedom from rules or constraints, especially in the sphere of sex. Like other moral relativists, he tends to view self-induced suffering not as the result of his or his friends' irresponsible behavior, but as someone else's fault, the result of bigotry, or simply bad luck. In Doty's view, the antidote to suffering is "therapy" of one form or another: a visit to a psychiatrist or masseur, or to a "casual" sex partner, for the momentary solace that comes from "respite...in other bodies."

At the Christian university, students have the opportunity to hear an idea that the larger culture has forgotten — that if we wish to alleviate suffering, we must take sin seriously. It is precisely the recognition of the reality of sin that gives us cause for hope. For once we recognize sin, we can, with grace, turn from it. Once we understand the need to struggle against temptation — against what is harmful even though attractive — we can see where true liberation lies: in the freedom to live consistently with God's plan for us.

In today's moral climate, helping students develop an integrated vision of the virtues and awakening them to the reality of sin is a tall order. But in carrying out this task, the Christian university enjoys a unique advantage, because the Christian university has so much to offer. It needn't exhort students to "listen to another's story" devoted to pop hedonism, for the students already are and will continue to be inundated by such messages coming from our culture. The Christian university has its own stories to tell — timeless stories that embody the accumulated wisdom of the Christian tradition.

On the subject of sexual sin and compassion, for example, consider John 8:3-11. In this well-known scriptural passage, the scribes and Pharisees take a woman accused of adultery to Jesus, telling Him that the law requires her to be put to death by stoning. Jesus answers, "If there is one of you who has not sinned, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." The scribes and Pharisees depart, shamefaced, leaving Jesus alone with the woman. "Woman, where are they?" asks Jesus. "Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," she replies. "Neither do I condemn you," Jesus answers, "go, and sin no more."

Here is real compassion in the face of sexual disorder and sin. Jesus wants to do more than prevent the offending woman's humiliation and death. He wants to save her immortal soul. Significantly, He does not exhort the parties to the dispute to "celebrate their differences," nor does He condemn the woman who has sinned. Instead, He admonishes her accusers for their self-righteousness, while instructing her, in His powerful parting words, to go and sin no more. In ten short lines, this Gospel passage says more worth pondering about suffering and compassion than *Heaven's Coast* can deliver in 300 pages. What a fine "common text" the Gospel of John would make!

Not to ponder the complex issues, and not to grapple with questions of right and wrong, of sin and virtue, is to avoid the process by which one is educated. Are Doty and Wally "diverse," "different," and "divergent"? As

homosexuals, of course they are. To say that homosexuals diverge sexually from the rest of us is simply to state a tautology. What merits exploration is the meaning of this difference and the consequences of their life of divergence. Such exploration is the stuff of education. And its failure to explore these questions is among the many reasons why Heaven's Coast is not educational.

In Heaven's Coast Doty neither raises nor answers questions about the homosexual "lifestyle" he and Wally have chosen. He does not depict human beings engaged in making decisions about it, and he doesn't examine its consequences. Instead, Doty constantly demands the reader's sympathy for his and Wally's plight, expressing anger at the behavior of everyone from Wally's family to his doctor. Yet he is unwilling to scrutinize his own behavior, or Wally's, and continues to celebrate a life of promiscuous sex. Heaven's Coast simply fails to examine diversity in a nuanced way.

In short, despite Fr. Dease's claims, it is hard to imagine a book less likely to open students' minds than this one. Far from revealing a new way of looking at the world, the book is utterly conventional. Doty is a doctrinaire moral relativist. His view of sex as recreation and his self-absorption are the essence of today's popular culture. His book offers the same sappy combo of sexual licentiousness and sentimentality purveyed on the tabloid rack.

If a Catholic college wants students to read about male love, it could, of course, present the subject in a substantial and thoughtful way. The love between men is explored in some of the great works of the Western canon. For example, freshmen could read Plato's Symposium, which depicts an all-male dinner party at which love is frankly and profoundly discussed. In Homer's Iliad, they could read of the love between Achilles and Patroclus and of Achilles's deadly grief at Patroclus's death. Or they might turn to the Bible. In the First and Second Books of Samuel, they could consider Saul's love-hatred for David, as well as the passionate friendship between David and Saul's son Jonathan. And David's poem eulogizing Saul and Jonathan after they fall in battle with the Philistines is greater by far than anything in Heaven's Coast. Unfortunately, the Author of the Bible won't make a special visit to the St. Thomas campus to be wined and dined and fêted, as the author of Heaven's Coast is (as of this writing) scheduled to do this fall.

The Christian teaching is that out of particular evil God may bring particular good. And there are (as of this writing) signs of good things at the University of St. Thomas. Faculty who object to Heaven's Coast are attempting to focus attention on the need to re-evaluate the university's mission. They are planning a Web page for students who want access to an orthodox Catholic perspective as they write about Doty's book and the issues it raises. Faculty have also discussed inviting nationally recognized speakers to make the case for modesty and chastity, as well as sending faculty couples into dorms to talk about the importance of marriage. Some parents and alumni have registered their displeasure over Heaven's Coast, and a few trustees have added their voices. As a result, the English Department has come up with some plans for having students read some Catholic documents (or parts of them).

Pluralism in higher education — as opposed to politically correct "diversity" — is indeed a worthy goal. But the best way for Christian universities like St. Thomas to promote academic pluralism is to rededicate themselves to becoming institutions of a kind all too rare these days — truly Christian universities which deal with morally serious topics in morally serious ways. For if Christian universities become mere copies of secular universities, pluralism in higher education will vanish, and true diversity will be no more.