

Reconciling Agency and Tradition: A Critical-Liberative Theological Dismantling of the Contra Naturam and Complementarian Imago Dei Frameworks in Catholic Sexual Ethics

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Abstract

This article employs Critical-Liberative Theology (CLT) to conduct a systematic deconstruction of the two principal theological frameworks used to exclude same-sex relationships from sacramental recognition in Roman Catholic teaching: the *contra naturam* (against nature) argument from natural law and the complementarian *Imago Dei* (Image of God) argument from theological anthropology. Building on the analysis of ecclesial authority and moral diversion in *Fiducia Supplicans* this study integrates CLT's threefold method—critical rationality, liberative praxis, and attentive listening to conscience and the *sensus fidelium*—to demonstrate that these frameworks function not as timeless truths but as historically conditioned hermeneutics that protect institutional power, enforce heteronormativity, and inflict structural violence [1]. Through rigorous philosophical and theological analysis, the study demonstrates the internal collapse of the *contra naturam* logic when examined alongside the Church's own sanctioned practices of clerical celibacy and Natural Family Planning (NFP). Simultaneously, it dismantles the complementarian *Imago Dei* argument as a theologically reductionist interpretation of Genesis 1:27 that erroneously equates biological duality with the fullness of the divine image. The article further argues that these combined frameworks perpetrate epistemic injustice by silencing LGBTQ+ Catholic testimony while enabling a moral diversion that allows a credibility-compromised hierarchy to deflect scrutiny from systemic failures like the clerical abuse crisis [1]. Moving beyond critique, the study proposes an emancipatory reconstruction of Catholic sexual ethics centered on a plural theology of vocation, an expansive covenant-based understanding of the *Imago Dei*, and the primacy of the informed conscience as mediated through the *sensus fidelium*. The conclusion asserts that fidelity to the developing tradition and the Gospel mandate of liberation necessitates abandoning these exclusionary frameworks in favor of an ethic that recognizes the sanctity of life-giving, covenantal love in all its diverse forms.

Keywords: Critical-Liberative Theology, Contra Naturam, Imago Dei, Natural Law, Catholic Sexual Ethics, LGBTQ+, Structural Sin, Complementarity, Vocation, Sensus Fidelium, Epistemic Injustice, Moral Diversion

1. Introduction: Theological Conflict as Site of Liberative Praxis

The Roman Catholic Church's third-decade twenty-first-century crossroads, recently exemplified by the crisis surrounding is fundamentally a crisis of theological anthropology and moral imagination [1]. Beneath the immediate conflicts over authority and communion lies a deeper, more enduring tension: the clash

between two seemingly immutable doctrinal frameworks governing sexual ethics—the *contra naturam* argument from natural law and the complementarian *Imago Dei* argument—and the lived, faithful reality of millions of LGBTQ+ Catholics whose experience of love, covenant, and divine presence constitutes a sustained, peaceful contradiction to these teachings.

The encapsulates this dissonance [2]. It calls for persons with homosexual tendencies to be accepted with “respect, compassion, and sensitivity” (para. 2358), while simultaneously judging their intimate relationships as “intrinsically disordered” acts “contrary to the natural law” that “close the sexual act to the gift of life” and lack the “genuine affective and sexual complementarity” of male and female (para. 2357). This jarring juxtaposition of pastoral language and doctrinal condemnation represents what Critical-Liberative Theology (CLT) identifies as “doctrine without emancipation”—a commitment to abstract, ideologically rigid formulations that actively obstruct concrete human flourishing and spiritual liberation [3].

This article presents a systematic CLT analysis, extending the methodological framework applied to the [1]. Its central thesis is that the *contra naturam* and complementarian *Imago Dei* arguments are not neutral, objective theological truths but historically constructed, ideologically deployed hermeneutics. Their primary function is to maintain clerical and institutional control over the moral narrative, reinforce patriarchal and heteronormative social orders, and suppress the prophetic voices emerging from the marginalized within the *sensus fidelium*. Their persistence, despite causing demonstrable harm and lacking internal coherence, is symptomatic of a deeper ecclesial pathology identified in the *Fiducia Supplicans* analysis: the use of sexual boundary-policing as a moral diversion from systemic institutional failures, including the unresolved global crisis of clerical sexual abuse and cover-up [1].

The analysis proceeds in five movements. First, it establishes the CLT methodological framework, synthesizing critical reason, liberative praxis, and the primacy of conscience as developed in *Beyond Doctrine* [3]. Second, it conducts a historical and philosophical deconstruction of the *contra naturam* argument, exposing its internal contradictions through examination of the Church’s own sanctioned exceptions (celibacy, NFP). Third, it dismantles the complementarian *Imago Dei* argument as a theologically reductionist and ideologically selective reading of scripture and tradition. Fourth, it analyzes the combined social function of these frameworks as instruments of structural sin, epistemic injustice, and moral diversion. Finally, it proposes an emancipatory reconstruction of sexual ethics based on vocational plurality, an expansive covenant theology, and obedient attention to the Spirit speaking through the *sensus fidelium*.

The ultimate aim is liberation: to free LGBTQ+ Catholics from stigmatizing doctrines that cause spiritual violence to free the Church from a self-inflicted credibility crisis rooted in ideological rigidity; and to free Catholic theology to articulate a vision of human love that is genuinely life-giving, just, and reflective of the boundless nature of divine agape [4].

2. Literature Review: Mapping the Battleground of Sexual Ethics

The theological debate surrounding homosexuality in Catholicism is vast and polarized. This review surveys key positions to situate

the CLT critique within the broader discourse.

2.1. The Magisterial Defense: Natural Law and Complementarity as Non-Negotiable

The official position is articulated in magisterial documents like, the and the 2003 Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons [2,5]. Its foundation is a classicist, Aristotelian-Thomistic natural law philosophy [6,7]. This tradition posits an objective moral order discernible through reason in nature’s teleology. Homosexual acts are deemed *contra naturam* because they violate the procreative and unitive ends of sexuality as inscribed in biological complementarity. This biological complementarity is then theologized through the *Imago Dei* in Genesis 1:27, where male-female duality is presented as constitutive of humanity’s imaging of God [8,9]. Proponents like and argue this position is scripturally grounded, metaphysically coherent, and essential for defending a coherent anthropology against modern subjectivism [10,11].

2.2. Revisionist and Proportionalist Critiques

Since the mid-20th century, moral theologians have challenged the classicist natural law approach. Proportionalists like argued for a more historically conscious understanding of nature, where the moral meaning of an act derives from its overall proportion of premoral goods and evils in concrete circumstances, not merely its physical structure [12,13]. Revisionist theologians, including and, have critiqued the tradition’s static view of nature, its neglect of empirical sciences, and its failure to adequately incorporate relationality and justice as central moral categories [14,15]. Their work opened space to question the absolute prohibition of homosexual acts but often remained within a paradigm seeking to reconcile experience with a modified natural law.

2.3. Liberationist, Queer, and Experiential Theologies

A more radical critique emerges from liberationist, queer, and experiential perspectives that center marginalized voices. Scholars like employed indecent theology to expose the heteronormative and patriarchal assumptions underpinning doctrine [16]. LGBTQ+ theologians, memoirists, and pastoral workers have foregrounded the lived experience of faithful Catholics, arguing that their love and fidelity constitute a form of practical moral wisdom and a locus of the Spirit’s work [17-19]. This tradition prioritizes praxis and the “hermeneutical privilege of the oppressed” as starting points for theology, directly challenging the magisterium’s epistemic authority on this issue [20].

2.4. Critical-Liberative Theology: A Synthesis for Emancipation

This article builds directly upon the CLT framework developed in *Beyond Doctrine* and applies it to the concrete ecclesial crisis analyzed in [1,3]. CLT synthesizes the critical rationality of revisionism with the prophetic, praxis-centered commitment of liberation theology, while maintaining a robust ecclesial and sacramental sensibility. It goes beyond identifying logical inconsistencies to analyze the power dynamics and ideological functions of doctrine. It asks not only “Is this teaching logically coherent?” but “Whom does this teaching serve? What harm

does it cause? What would its emancipation require?” [3]. This positions CLT to provide a more comprehensive dismantling of both the *contra naturam* and *Imago Dei* arguments than previous approaches, linking doctrinal critique directly to a program of ecclesial conversion and structural reform.

3. Methodology: The Triune Pillars of Critical-Liberative Theology

CLT is not merely a set of conclusions but a disciplined methodological approach. Its analysis of sexual ethics rests on three interdependent pillars, as systematized in *Beyond Doctrine* and applied to contemporary conflict in [1,3].

3.1. Critical Rationality and Historical Consciousness

CLT adopts a critical-realist epistemology. It affirms the capacity of reason to discern truth while insisting that all reasoning, including theological reasoning, is historically situated, culturally conditioned, and subject to bias [3]. Following thinkers like it embraces a dynamic view of tradition where doctrine develops through an ongoing dialectic of experience, understanding, judgment, and decision [21,22].

Applied to sexual ethics, this means:

The “nature” invoked in natural law is not a pure, pre-cultural datum but a hermeneutical construct. It must be critically examined in light of contemporary anthropological, biological, and psychological knowledge.

Scriptural texts, including Genesis 1-2, must be interpreted with historical-critical awareness of their genre, cultural context, and theological purpose, not as blueprints for a timeless sexual ethic.

Any theological claim must be logically coherent and internally consistent. Contradictions within the magisterium’s own teachings (e.g., between the treatment of celibacy and same-sex unions) are not minor flaws but fatal to the claim of possessing a unified, rational framework.

3.2. Liberative Praxis as Theological Criterion

Drawing from liberation theology CLT posits that the truth of a doctrine is verified pragmatically, in its fruits for human flourishing and liberation [20,23]. Orthopraxis (right practice) precedes and judges orthodoxy (right belief). This aligns with the biblical injunction to judge a tree by its fruit (Matthew 7:16-20).

The evaluative questions become:

Fruitfulness: Does this teaching promote love, justice, dignity, and spiritual growth?

Harm: Does it produce spiritual violence, self-hatred, alienation, family rupture, or social marginalization? [4,24].

Emancipation: Does it empower the marginalized or reinforce their oppression?

A teaching that consistently yields “bad fruit” of psychological and spiritual harm, as documented in numerous studies and narratives of LGBTQ+ Catholics fails this fundamental test and demands

radical metanoia (conversion) from the teaching authority [24,25].

3.3. Conscience, *Sensus Fidelium*, and Epistemic Justice

CLT places the informed conscience, what called the “aboriginal Vicar of Christ,” at the center of moral discernment [26]. Conscience is not a license for individualism but the personal locus of encounter with divine law, formed in community and tradition.

This extends to the ecclesial community through the *sensus fidelium*—the sense of the faithful. Vatican II taught that the entire People of God, anointed by the Spirit, shares in Christ’s prophetic office and “cannot err in matters of belief” when manifesting a universal consensus [27]. Theologians like emphasize this as an active, participatory source of theological insight [28,29].

Therefore:

The lived experience and moral discernment of LGBTQ+ Catholics and their families constitute a vital *locus theologicus* (theological source).

The widespread dissent from official teaching among the laity and many theologians, coupled with the peaceful, faithful witness of same-sex couples, represents a profound collective act of conscience that the magisterium is obligated to heed, not dismiss [3].

To systematically ignore or disqualify this testimony is to commit epistemic injustice denying a marginalized group the capacity to contribute to the communal knowledge base—and to stifle the Holy Spirit [30].

This tripartite method—critical, pragmatic, and communal—provides the tools for the thorough deconstruction that follows.

4. Deconstruction I: The *Contra Naturam* Framework-Ideology and Internal Collapse

The *contra naturam* argument remains the linchpin of the official prohibition. A CLT analysis reveals it to be philosophically unstable, historically conditioned, and ideologically functional.

4.1. The Hermeneutics of “Nature”: From Classical Teleology to Modern Reductionism

The Thomistic natural law tradition, rooted in Aristotelian biology and metaphysics, viewed nature as a rational, purposive order. The “natural” was equated with the “rational” fulfillment of a being’s inherent telos (purpose). For sexuality, the primary teloi were procreation (procreatio) and the fostering of marital union (fides). Acts that deliberately frustrated these ends, like contraception or non-procreative sexual acts, were deemed “contrary to reason” and thus sinful [31].

CLT’s critical rationality exposes three fatal problems with applying this framework today:

An Outdated Cosmology: The medieval “Great Chain of Being” and Aristotelian biology that informed Aquinas’s thought have been utterly supplanted by modern evolutionary biology,

psychology, and relational anthropology. To base a definitive moral anthropology on a pre-scientific understanding of “natural purposes” is an exercise in anachronism [15].

The Reduction of Person to Biology: This framework privileges a single biological function (reproductive potential) as the defining moral criterion for ethically evaluating complex human acts of love, intimacy, and commitment. It reduces the multi-dimensional reality of human sexuality—with its psychological, relational, spiritual, and unitive dimensions—to a crude biological mechanism. As CLT asks: Why is the “natural” purpose of genitalia morally decisive, while the “natural” purposes of other faculties (like intelligence or speech) can be used in manifold, creative, and non-literal ways?.

The Myth of Neutral Deduction: The move from observing biological structures to prescribing moral norms is not a neutral deduction but a normative leap. The selection of procreation as the paramount good is a value choice, one that consistently serves to sacralize the heterosexual, procreative family unit as the exclusive sociological and theological ideal. It functions as an ideology—a system of ideas that legitimates a particular social order (in this case, heteronormativity) by presenting it as natural, objective, and divinely ordained.

4.2. The Cracks in the Foundation: Celibacy and NFP as Sanctioned Contradictions

The internal incoherence of the *contra naturam* logic becomes unmistakable when examined alongside two universally sanctioned practices: consecrated celibacy and Natural Family Planning.

4.2.1. Consecrated Celibacy: The Transcendence of Biological Teleology

The Church venerates celibacy “for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 19:12) as a “supernatural” vocation and a “superior gift” (1 Corinthians 7:7-8; CCC, 1997, para. 1579, 1618). Here, the entire biological teleology of sexuality is not merely bypassed but actively and virtuously transcended. The celibate person voluntarily forgoes the procreative and unitive goods of marriage to achieve a “higher” spiritual good: total dedication to God and ecclesial service. Their sexuality is channeled into spiritual fruitfulness—agape expressed in community, prayer, and ministry.

The CLT analysis exposes the double standard: The operative moral principle in celibacy is the hierarchy of goods and vocational discernment. A higher spiritual good justifies the voluntary setting aside of the biological good. If a gay or lesbian Catholic discerns a call to a life of covenantal partnership—characterized by fidelity, mutual sanctification, hospitality, and service—they are making an analogous vocational choice. They are directing their capacity for intimate love toward a permanent, life-giving union. Yet, the magisterium denies the possibility that such a union could constitute a “higher good” or even a licit good. The only difference is the heterosexual complementarity of the partners, which appears not as a rational principle but as an arbitrary, non-negotiable

boundary marker. The logic that sanctifies the non-procreative celibate simultaneously condemns the non-procreative partnered gay person, revealing the *contra naturam* argument to be not about “nature” per se, but about the sanctification of heterosexuality.

4.2.2. Natural Family Planning: The Intentional Dissociation of Union from Procreation

The approval of NFP is even more devastating to a strict *contra naturam* logic. In NFP, a married couple deliberately restricts sexual intercourse to the wife’s infertile periods to avoid pregnancy for “just reasons” [32]. The magisterial defense hinges on a metaphysical distinction: contraception is wrong because it involves an intentional intervention to impede procreation, whereas NFP involves simply accepting the infertile state of the act.

From the perspective of biological teleology, however, this distinction is ethically vacuous in terms of the act’s finality. In both cases, the couple engages in sexual union with the intention and certain knowledge that procreation is impossible. The physical structure of the act is identical; only the cause of infertility differs (artificial intervention vs. natural cycle). The outcome—a non-procreative sexual act—is the same.

The true justifying principle, once again, is not the physical act but the context of vocational discernment within marriage. The “unitive good” of the spouses—their need for intimacy, communication, and mutual support—is deemed sufficiently important to justify the systematic, lifelong avoidance of the “procreative good.” The Church thus officially authorizes a praxis where the unitive and procreative meanings of sexuality are not only separable but are intentionally and repeatedly separated for responsible, pastoral reasons.

This creates an indefensible contradiction:

A heterosexual married couple may morally build a lifelong sexual relationship that is *de facto* and intentionally non-procreative (via NFP or post-menopausal sex), morally justified by the unitive good of their relationship.

A same-sex couple, whose union is also intrinsically non-procreative, is categorically denied the possibility that their profound unitive good—their love, fidelity, and mutual sanctification—could provide any moral justification whatsoever.

The *contra naturam* framework thus collapses. It cannot withstand the scrutiny of its own sanctioned exceptions, which reveal that the Church’s operative moral reasoning, in practice, already prioritizes relational goods, vocational discernment, and personal conscience over a rigid, act-based biological teleology when it comes to heterosexuals. The refusal to extend this same logic to same-sex couples is exposed as prejudice, not principle.

5. Deconstruction II: The Complementarian Imago Dei Argument—Theological Reductionism

The second major argument posits that the “complementarity of

the sexes” is not merely biological but theological, constituting an essential part of the *Imago Dei* (Genesis 1:27). Same-sex unions, lacking this duality, are therefore argued to be incapable of fully imaging God. A CLT analysis dismantles this as a theologically reductionist and ideologically selective interpretation.

5.1. A Narrow Reading of a Rich Symbol

Genesis 1:27 states: “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” The complementarian argument isolates the final clause (“male and female he created them”) and elevates it to the defining characteristic of the *Imago Dei*. This is a hermeneutical overreach.

Descriptive, Not Exhaustively Prescriptive: The Genesis narrative is a profound mytho-poetic account of human origins. It describes the creation of humanity in gendered duality as the vehicle for procreation and companionship (“It is not good that the man should be alone,” Genesis 2:18). It establishes a primary and fundamental mode of human relating. However, it does not provide an exhaustive ontological definition of the divine image, nor does it prescribe that all holy relationships must mirror this biological pattern. To claim otherwise is to engage in a form of biblical literalism inconsistent with Catholic hermeneutics.

The Multifaceted *Imago Dei* in Scripture and Tradition: The biblical witness describes the *Imago Dei* in diverse ways: as rationality and dominion (Genesis 1:26-28), as moral capacity and holiness (Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:10), and, most fundamentally in the New Testament, as the capacity for love and relationship, conformed to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29; 1 John 4:7-8). The theological tradition, from Irenaeus to Aquinas, has explored these dimensions—intellectual, volitional, relational—without reducing the image to sexual differentiation. The complementarian reading represents a modern contraction of this rich tradition.

5.2. The Problem of Celibacy and the Logic of Analogy

The complementarian argument faces its most direct theological challenge from the Church’s veneration of consecrated celibacy and virginity. If male-female complementarity is essential to imaging God, then a celibate man or woman is rendered theologically deficient, an incomplete image. This is a position the Church has never held. Instead, it has viewed celibacy as a special participation in the eschatological reality, where marriage gives way to direct union with God (Matthew 22:30). The celibate person images God not through gendered complementarity but through spiritual union, single-hearted devotion, and love for the community.

This reveals that the *Imago Dei* is analogous and participatory, not univocal and structural. Humans image God in a plurality of ways: through creative work, through justice-doing, through self-sacrificial love, through intellectual pursuit, through community, and through covenantal fidelity—whether that covenant is between God and the soul, between friends, or between spouses. The biological structure of a relationship is one possible symbol of divine love (e.g., God’s covenant with Israel as a marriage), but it

is not the sole reality of it. A same-sex covenant of lifelong fidelity, mutual self-gift, and fruitful love can image the faithfulness, creativity, and committed love of God just as powerfully as a heterosexual marriage, albeit through a different symbolic form.

5.3. Ideological Function: Sacralizing Heteronormativity

When deployed to categorically deny the God-imaging capacity of same-sex love, the complementarian argument serves a clear ideological function. It sacralizes heterosexuality, granting it a unique, theologically unassailable status. This:

- **Reinforces Patriarchal Structures:** Historically, the male-female complementarity argument has often been tied to hierarchical and essentialist gender roles, reinforcing patriarchal power dynamics within the family and the Church.
- **Creates a Theological Underclass:** It implicitly constructs LGBTQ+ persons as existing in a state of anthropological and theological deficit, unable to participate fully in this core aspect of representing God. This is a foundation for spiritual marginalization.
- **Blocks Theological Reception:** It provides a pre-emptive theological veto against any empirical evidence of grace, holiness, and divine presence in same-sex relationships. By definition, such relationships cannot image God, so any testimony to the contrary must be dismissed. This is the epitome of epistemic closure.

The complementarian *Imago Dei* argument, therefore, is not a robust theological anthropology but a theological boundary marker. Its purpose is less to illuminate the mystery of God’s image in humanity and more to police the borders of legitimate intimacy, protecting a specific social order by declaring it divinely mandated.

6. Synthesis: The Combined Frameworks as Structural Sin and Moral Diversion

Analyzed separately, both frameworks are found wanting. Analyzed together through a CLT lens, their combined social and ecclesial function becomes clear: they constitute a system of structural sin that enables moral diversion, a dynamic analyzed in the context of episcopal resistance to *Fiducia Supplicans* [1].

6.1. Structural Sin: The Systemic Production of Harm

Liberation theology defines structural sin as the embodiment of injustice in social, economic, political, and religious systems, perpetuating oppression regardless of individual intent [20,23]. The *contra naturam* and complementarian *Imago Dei* teachings form a powerful religious structure with devastating effects:

- **Spiritual and Psychological Violence:** Internalizing the messages of being “intrinsically disordered” and incapable of fully imaging God inflicts profound wounds, leading to self-hatred, anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation among LGBTQ+ Catholics, particularly youth [24,25].

- **Ecclesial Alienation:** These teachings justify exclusion from sacraments (Eucharist for those in relationships, matrimony, holy orders), creating a permanent state of second-class membership. This forces many to choose between integrity of love and integrity of faith.
- **Social Complicity:** The teachings provide moral and theological rationale for discriminatory laws, family rejection, and cultural stigmatization, especially in contexts where the Church holds significant social influence [33].
- **Redirect Scrutiny:** They deflect attention from their own institutional crimes and failures of accountability (abuse, financial corruption, political complicity) toward a safer, less powerful target: LGBTQ+ laity.
- **Perform Purity:** They enact a public drama of defending “orthodoxy” and “the family,” constructing a facade of moral rigor that contrasts with their laxity or silence on other grave injustices.

This harm is not accidental; it is the direct, logical outcome of the doctrines. By the CLT criterion of liberative praxis, such consistently “bad fruit” necessitates a prophetic condemnation of the doctrines themselves as sinful structures in need of dismantling.

6.2. Epistemic Injustice and the Silencing of the *Sensus Fidelium*

These frameworks enact a profound epistemic injustice [30]. They systematically deny LGBTQ+ Catholics hermeneutical credibility—the capacity to contribute to the communal understanding of love, covenant, and God’s image based on their lived experience. Their testimonies of grace, fidelity, and God’s presence in their relationships are disqualified as subjective, disordered, or irrelevant. The hierarchy speaks about them, defining their reality from without, while refusing to learn from them.

This constitutes a direct violation of the *sensus fidelium*. The peaceful, faithful, and often heroic witness of LGBTQ+ Catholics and their allies—their persistent prayer, their service to the Church, their committed relationships—is a massive, global act of communal conscience and discernment. To label this entire movement of the Spirit as mere “dissent” or “cultural capitulation” is to repeat the error of those who opposed Vatican II’s teachings on religious liberty or the end of the extra *ecclesiam nulla salus* formulation. It is to prioritize doctrinal immutability over the Spirit’s movement within the pilgrim People of God.

6.3. Moral Diversion: Deflecting Scrutiny from Institutional Crisis

CLT insists on analyzing theology within its political and social context. The fierce defense of these sexual boundaries occurs within a Church whose moral authority has been catastrophically undermined by the global clerical sexual abuse crisis and systemic institutional cover-up [34,35]. As argued in the analysis of Fiducia Supplicans, resistance to pastoral development can be understood as a form of moral diversion [1].

By concentrating moral energy and rhetorical fire on the “scandal” of blessing same-sex couples, certain elements of the hierarchy:

- **Reassert Clerical Control:** They reclaim the role of definers and gatekeepers of morality, a role eroded by their failure in the abuse crisis.

This diversion reveals that the defense of the *contra naturam* and *Imago Dei* frameworks is not merely about theology but about power, control, and institutional survival. It is a clericalist strategy that sacrifices the well-being of a marginalized minority on the altar of institutional reputation.

7. Reconstruction: Toward an Emancipatory Catholic Sexual Ethic

Deconstruction must lead to reconstruction. CLT moves beyond critique to propose the contours of a just and life-affirming sexual ethic for a pilgrim Church.

7.1. A Theology of Vocational Plurality

The Church already acknowledges multiple sacred vocations: ordained ministry, consecrated life, marriage, committed single life. It is a theological failure to not discern that God may call some to the vocation of a covenanted same-sex partnership. This vocation would be discerned by its evangelical fruits (Galatians 5:22-23): permanence, fidelity, mutual sanctification, hospitality, and service to the community. Like celibacy, it involves a conscientious commitment of one’s sexuality to a life-giving path of love. The Church’s role should be to assist in this discernment and to celebrate and support these covenants, not to forbid them a priori. This requires abandoning the monopoly of the heterosexual procreative model as the sole legitimate form of holy intimacy.

7.2. An Expansive Imago Dei: Covenant as Key

The *Imago Dei* must be recovered in its full, Trinitarian richness. God is relational love—a communion of persons (perichoresis). Humans image God most fully when they participate in self-giving, faithful, creative love. The central biblical paradigm for this is covenant—the binding promise of steadfast love (hesed).

A same-sex couple who, against societal and ecclesial prejudice, make a lifelong covenant of love, who practice forgiveness, who welcome the stranger, and who support each other in holiness, are powerfully imaging the covenantal God. They reflect God’s fidelity to the marginalized, God’s creative love that brings forth new life in non-biological ways (community, art, justice), and God’s commitment to relationship. Their love is a legitimate, incarnate symbol of divine love, expanding the symbolic repertoire beyond the male-female analogy.

7.3. The Primacy of Conscience and the Duty of Reception

Teaching on conscience is paramount [26]. For many LGBTQ+ Catholics, entering a committed relationship is the result of

anguished, prayerful discernment—a choice for integrity and love in obedience to how they experience God’s call. This is not “dissent” but conscience in its most profound form.

The magisterium has a corresponding duty of reception and obedient listening. When a teaching causes widespread anguish, is rejected by the moral sense of a vast portion of the faithful, and is contradicted by the observed fruits of holiness in the lives it condemns, the burden of proof shifts. The hierarchy must ask, as it has in past developments, whether the Spirit is leading the Church to a new insight. The *sensus fidelium* is not a democratic vote; it is a spiritual discernment of the truth lived in the life of the Church. The current widespread conviction among the faithful that same-sex love can be holy is a theological reality that cannot be ignored.

7.4. Prophetic Praxis: Accompaniment, Inclusion, and Sacramental Justice

Theory must translate into practice. An emancipatory ethic demands:

- **Full Sacramental Inclusion:** The blessing of same-sex unions (*Fiducia Supplicans* is a first, limited step) and, ultimately, their recognition as holy matrimony. All ministries, including ordained ministry, must be open to LGBTQ+ persons living in covenanted relationships.
- **Pastoral Conversion:** Replacing “conversion therapy” and pastoral approaches focused on celibacy-as-only-option with authentic accompaniment that helps individuals integrate their sexuality and faith in life-giving ways [4].
- **Ecclesial Repentance:** Acknowledge the harm caused by traditional teachings and the complicity of the Church in social discrimination.
- **Public Advocacy:** The Church must become a consistent prophetic voice against laws criminalizing homosexuality or permitting discrimination, just as it advocates for other human rights.

8. Conclusion: Beyond Exclusion -A Church of the Baptized in Pilgrimage

The *contra naturam* and complementarian *Imago Dei* arguments have served as the twin pillars of exclusion in Catholic sexual ethics. This CLT analysis has demonstrated that they are not immutable truths but historically conditioned, ideologically functional constructs. They are philosophically incoherent, theologically reductionist, and pastorally destructive. Their continued enforcement perpetuates structural sin, inflicts epistemic injustice, and serves as a moral diversion for a hierarchy struggling with a catastrophic loss of credibility, as seen in the *Fiducia Supplicans* crisis [1].

The path forward lies not in tinkering with these frameworks but in a courageous metanoia—a conversion of heart and mind. It requires embracing a theology humble enough to learn from the

margins, a sexual ethic centered on the quality of covenantal love rather than the configuration of biology, and an ecclesiology that trusts the Spirit speaking through the conscience of the faithful.

The controversy over documents like *Fiducia Supplicans* is, in essence, a struggle over the Church’s soul: Will it be a fortress defined by the power to exclude, or a field hospital and a pilgrim people defined by the mission to accompany and liberate? To choose the latter is to believe that the God of the Exodus is still at work, hearing the cry of LGBTQ+ Catholics. It is to trust that the Spirit who guided the development of doctrine on usury, religious freedom, and the salvation of non-Christians is guiding the Church now toward a more inclusive understanding of love.

Liberating the Church from the *contra naturam* and narrow *Imago Dei* ideologies is not a concession to the world but a return to the Gospel’s core mandate of liberation. It is the necessary step toward becoming a community where all the baptized can flourish, and where the diverse, surprising, and life-giving ways in which human love images divine love can finally be recognized, celebrated, and blessed [36,37].

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