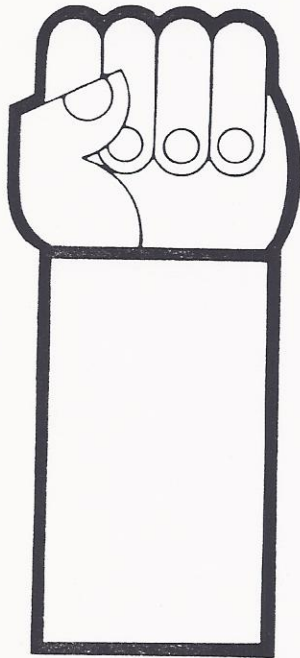


"On the Ordination of Lesbians and Gays to the Priesthood." Witness 63.10. (1980)

## On the Ordination of Gays

by Louie Crew



Louie Crew is founder of *Integrity*, a national organization of gay Episcopalians, and the author of over 200 published items.

## God's Left-Handers

Most of us are fussy about some rather silly things. As a composition teacher, I like to receive all essays written only on the front side of the paper. This requirement has not always sat well with my students, as I vividly remember from one episode some 17 years ago, when I was teaching at St. Andrew's School in Delaware. One rather bright lad repeatedly turned in all of his work written only on the back side of the notebook paper. Whenever I stacked the papers from the entire class, this lad's paper would turn up backwards, at first appearing to have no identification. Daily I would write the same complaint, *Use front side only!* But he persisted.

Exasperated, I summoned the offender to my study. "Philip, why do you insist on writing on the back side of your papers when I have expressly asked you not to do so?" I asked.

"But sir," he said gravely, "I don't ever use the back side. I have wondered why you write notes about this to me."

"Philip," I interposed, "Don't be cheeky. Look, here is the paper you turned in this morning as you ripped it from your spiral notebook. The frayed edges are all on the right-hand side. The frayed edges on your classmates' sheets are on the left-hand side. They have written on the front; you have written on the back!"

"But *they* are all right-handed!" Philip exclaimed.

"What does *that* have to do with it?" I asked.

I am delighted that our church has never gotten around to writing an official theology about left-handedness and left-handed persons. Judging from our practice with other minorities, I doubt that we would welcome participation in the dialogue from one so militant with the truth as was Philip. Philip was what we might call, if charitable, "a self-affirming" or, if uncharitable, "a self-professing" left-handed person. Even so, such persons as he would be no match for the biblical and other traditional evidence that we could dredge up to keep left-handed people in their place, requiring as many adjustments as possible to the right-handed standards of our Hebrew-Christian tradition. Theologians could

remind us that our Lord sits at the *right hand* of God. Of equal importance is the fact that God, too, is right-handed, as the psalmists emphasized repeatedly. For example, of God they said, "Thy *right hand* is filled with victory" (*Ps. 48:10*). "And thy *right hand* supported me" (*Ps. 18:35*). "Give victory by thy *right hand* and answer us" (*Ps. 60:5*), and "In thy *right hand* are pleasures evermore" (*Ps. 16:11*). Similarly, Jesus stressed his own claims to God's right-handed favor when he was asked by the high priest if he were the Christ. Jesus said, "I am, and you will see the Son of Man sitting at the *right hand* of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven" (*Mark 14:61-62*).

Furthermore, only one left-handed

"The location of the spiral determines which side is the front and which side is the back," Philip explained. "The side to the right of the spiral is the front side for right-handed people, so that they can avoid getting their hands caught in the spiral or the hooks of a loose-leaf notebook. The side to the left of the spiral or hooks is the front side for left-handed people for the same reason."

"Really," I muttered, wondering whether Philip had ever noticed that I am left-handed myself and had been catching my hand in spirals for years.

"Yes, sir. There are even some *left-handed* folks who don't know the front from the back, but of course, that is because we are usually taught by right-handed people. Why, some left-handed folks even have their lamps on the left side of their writing desks just as you do, sir, only because a grade-school health book said they should be there. Those books were written for right-handed people like you, to keep the shadow behind your hands; left-handed people need their lamps on the right for the same reason."

It was with no little embarrassment that I paused and quietly moved my floor lamp from the left to the right side of my desk. Philip looked on, much troubled.

"Thank you," I said.

"But I hadn't noticed, sir. I really hadn't!"

"Philip, I would be a real fool only if I didn't listen to your good sense. As you observed, we left-handed folks are usually taught all that we know about ourselves by right-handed people. I am very glad that you came along."

person in all of Scripture is given any honor. That was Ehud, in Judges, Chapter 3, who put his sword on his right side, the easier to stab fat Eglon, the King of Moab. Nevertheless, right-handed Hebrew scholars should have no difficulty in glossing this one lapse from right-handed standards, perhaps by discovering evidence that Ehud might at least have had the decency to be celibate or in some other way to "image" right-handed supremacy. After all, just 17 chapters away in Judges the offending Benjaminites, warring against their brother tribes, mustered 700 left-handed men—"everyone could sling a stone at a hair and not miss!" (20:16)—but the victory went instead to Israel and "the men that drew sword."

The evidence for God's preference for right-handed people is truly formidable. The preacher reminds us: "A wise man's heart is at his right hand; but a fool's heart is at his left" (*Eccl. 10:2*). St. Paul talks about the "right hand of fellowship" (*Gal. 2:9*). Jesus suggests that the left hand is untrustworthy: "But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing" (*Matt. 6:3*). Note that the right hand enjoys the privilege of agency. The Latins were so wise as to name the left direction *sinister*, suggesting the evils that attend it. Yet nowhere is the correct theological indictment of left-handedness clearer than in Christ's vision of the Last Judgment in *Matthew 25:32-24, 41*:

*Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. . . ." Then will he say to those at his left hand, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. . . ."*

Against such evidence, surely the left-handed are stupid to claim that they are included equally in any of the other promises of the New Testament. Surely God did not mean, "Whosoever believes in God shall have everlasting life" (*John 3:16*). The clearer implication is that such blessings are reserved for "whosoever is right-handed" or "whosoever has the proper psycho-sexuality and believes!" How dare anyone suggest that such second-rate folks be considered for ordination? How could they possibly "image" forth a God who is at once right-handed and heterosexual?

Of course the analogy of homosexuality to left-handedness is imperfect, as are all analogies. Notably, acts of left-handedness have never been crimes in our culture, while homosexual acts are still felonies in over half of our United States. My humor may be risky in a discussion of such grim reality, but humor can perhaps preserve us.

I firmly believe that in raising the issue of whether to ordain lesbians and gay males we are as silly as we would be in asking whether to ordain left-handed people. Knowingly and unknowingly we have been ordaining persons from both groups — the left-handed and gays — throughout all Christian history.

Members of both groups have served as well and as badly as anyone else. Their only claims to special attention are the examples of stupid prejudice which the right-handed and heterosexual majorities have heaped upon them.

To debate even the possibility of ordaining persons by such secondary criteria is to obscure the important principle that ordination is a privilege, not a right, and it is a privilege the church bestows upon those in whom it recognizes God's calling. Neither heterosexuals nor homosexuals, neither males nor females, neither blacks nor whites, as categories, can lay any legitimate claims to special rights of ordination. Bishop William White affirmed this principle in 1795, when he ordained Absalom Jones, a black; Bishops Robert DeWitt, Daniel Corrigan, and Edward Welles affirmed this principle when they ordained 11 women to the priesthood in 1974; and Bishop Paul Moore affirmed this principle when he ordained the Rev. Ellen Barrett, a lesbian, in January, 1977. Even Presiding Bishop John Allin, hardly a revolutionary, told me only recently, "Of course anybody who had the decency to read Paul Moore's own explanation of what his diocese was doing knew that he was ordaining a person, not a class!"

People frequently ask my gay male spouse, "Why did you marry a white man?" He didn't: he married *a person* who is white. Likewise, I couldn't marry Ernest Clay's blackness even if I were fool enough to want to. We ordain *persons*. We marry *persons*. God loves *persons*.

Of course one's color, gender, and sexual orientation are important gifts that one brings to ordination, marriage, baptism, and confirmation. Color, gender, and sexual orientation potentially augment who we are, but we are not reduced to them.

In the past five years I have talked with at least a dozen bishops who admitted that they have knowingly ordained persons who are gay, some with the tacit understanding that the gays were committed to celibacy, others with the hope that the gays would exercise discretion. Many scores of heterosexual bishops and other clergy have acknowledged their awareness of many gifts to our church from gay persons, both bishops and priests, through past and current ministries. The 1976 General Convention stated: "We make grateful recognition of the substantial contributions which homosexual persons have made and are making to the life of our church and society." Certainly we are foolish to debate whether to do what we have been doing for centuries and what we will continue to do for more centuries, whether we know it or not, whether we want to or not. Ordination of homosexual persons is a simple matter of fact.

#### More Credible Focus

What is at issue is not ordination, but a narrower, more political phenomenon: the fact that more and more left-handed people are learning to avoid the spiral wires and notebook hooks, that more and more gay bishops, priests, deacons, ordinands, professors, and seminarians are asking why heterosexual outsiders should be allowed to set the sexual parameters for a group whom they do not know or understand. We would have a more credible focus if we debated whether the church should allow ordinands to be candid or what kinds of penalties should or should not be imposed on those gay clergy who are becoming candid after ordination. Better still, we might discuss how the church can become a safer place for gay and lesbian honesty.

At this time in history most gays are

not about to challenge the heterosexual majority and thereby risk their bishoprics and cures. (Some of us left-handed folk still fork our food with our right hands, just to avoid the hassles.) Nevertheless, sexuality embraces deeper recesses of one's identity than does left-handedness, and thus accommodations to heterosexual expectations are potentially more threatening to one's wholeness, one's integrity, than are accommodations the left-handed make to the world of the right-handed. In counseling scores of gay clergy and in becoming friends to dozens more over the last five years, I marvel at the strength that most of them muster, often through very dire circumstances. I would like to see us prepare a space for the candor of those who are ready to be candid. Those committed to celibacy seem no less desirous and in need of such a space for candor than are those committed to relationships.

People often grow irrational in estimating what a space for candor might mean, say, for a parish priest. I asked a close friend who is vicar of a mission in the Chicago Westside how his parishioners had taken his increasing visibility as a gay spokesperson, and he chuckled: "Darling, I have been at the side of every person in that parish at a time of real crisis many times over our 17 years together. We have never made it our business to hide our humanity and our common needs from one another. They would never think of being hostile upon learning a bit more about my humanity, and many rejoice at the obvious growth that I am experiencing as a full person."

Another parish priest who lives with his lover as a racially integrated couple in another city has shared reports of the slow but clear progress that is being made as more and more parishioners discern that they are not merely roommates and that the warmth of their relationship together is even more