

**Fr. Thomas Hopko on Same-Sex Attraction:  
Speaking the Truth in Love, or Half-Truths in Fear?<sup>1</sup>**

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Much has been written (and is still being read by Orthodox pastors) in favor of an approach to dealing with homosexuality that is more *clinical* than *pastoral* in that it focuses almost exclusively on treating the patient, with little or no concern for protecting the flock. To treat a patient, you have to avoid offending him to keep him in therapy; to protect a flock, you have to sometimes chase away the wolves. This is the principal fault in the book, lectures, interviews, and articles on homosexuality by the late Protopresbyter Thomas Hopko.

In the English-speaking Orthodox Christian world, there is hardly a man of Hopko's generation more deserving of the Western title "Doctor of the Church." In his many lectures, catechetical works, scholarly commentaries on controversial issues relating to sex and gender, and frequent podcasts on Ancient Faith Radio under the title "Speaking the Truth in Love," Fr. Hopko demonstrated such broad knowledge of the Orthodox tradition, such keen insight into the subtleties and mysteries of the Orthodox faith, and such carefulness and clarity in expressing what he knew and thought as to earn near universal acceptance as the proto-pedagogue of the English-speaking Orthodox Church.

Yet despite strong traditional stands on some important issues related to homosexuality, Hopko came to represent the leftward limit of permissible opinion in the Orthodox Church on homosexuality, such that those who openly challenged the Church's teaching would describe themselves as slightly "left of Hopko." David Dunn, a self-identified "pro-gay" Orthodox lay theologian, characterized his own stand on gay marriage as "a quarter-step to the left" of Hopko. Dunn also wrote in *The Huffington Post* that he began his "holy disobedience" against the Church on homosexuality after reading Hopko's 2006 book *Christian Faith and Same-Sex Attraction*. Applauding Dunn in an online comment,

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this article appeared on the author's personal blog, [brianpatrickmitchell.com](http://brianpatrickmitchell.com), on October 2, 2012.

Rebecca Matovic, another well-known advocate of change in the Orthodox Church, claimed “there are many, many priests who think about these issues in a loving, pastoral way and increasingly find themselves moving to the ‘left’ of Hopko.”

If Matovic is right, it would seem that Hopko inadvertently positioned himself less as the gatekeeper of Orthodoxy than as the head usher for heresy. Indeed, both Hopko’s still influential 2006 book and his public comments on homosexuality before his passing in 2015 opened holes in the Church’s defenses through which the Enemy has shoved battalions of wrong ideas to confuse and confound the Church’s defenders and mislead pastors in counseling others concerning same-sex attraction.

This is a shame, as there was much else that Hopko said that the Church’s defenders could use. In *Christian Faith and Same-Sex Attraction*, Hopko summarily dismissed attempts to reinterpret Scripture and Tradition to make homosexuality acceptable. He wrote that God does not make people homosexual; that people are not therefore naturally homosexual as they are naturally male or female; and that same-sex attraction is a result of man’s rebellion against God (18). He called homosexual sex a “betrayal” of the love God intends for His people, saying it can never express divine love because it is “incapable” of edifying souls the way heterosexual sex can (25, 44). He likened acceptance of homosexuality today to the general madness famously prophesied by St. Anthony of the Great. (57, quoting Saying 25: “A time is coming when men will go mad, and when they see someone who is not mad, they will attack him, saying, ‘You are mad, you are not like us.’”) He declared that “those who publicly affirm and promote homosexual behavior (like those who publicly advocate abortion) cannot be sacramental communicants in the Orthodox Church” (106). He went even further to state that those “openly propagating teachings and practices contrary to Orthodoxy” may be excluded not just from communion but “from church gatherings” to prevent harm done to others, especially the young (121–122).

Most controversially, Hopko suggested an understanding of homosexuality consistent with sexual orientation change efforts (SOCE), citing the work of British research psychologist and theologian Elizabeth Moberly, who theorized that homosexuality is an attempt to “repair” a lack of childhood affection from persons of the same sex, especially parents. Hopko did not explicitly endorse “reparative therapy,” the SOCE based on Moberly’s theory, but he did explicitly endorse therapy “to deal with same-sex developmental issues that must be resolved for ... emotional and spiritual healing” (69). He also left open the possibility of sexual orientation change through therapy, saying in an

endnote that Moberly “thinks that I can be more optimistic” about the possibility of change (70). It was for these reasons that Hopko’s book bears a blurb from the late Joseph Nicolosi, an American psychologist and leading advocate of SOCE, who in 2006 was president of the National Association for Research & Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH), the organization gay activists most loved to hate. (NARTH has since become the Alliance for Therapeutic Choice and Scientific Integrity.)

Yet these brave stands by Hopko on key issues were undermined by other things he said that have the effect of (1) narrowing the category of unacceptable homosexual behavior, (2) discouraging preaching and teaching offensive to homosexuals, and (3) condemning Christian resistance to the gay political agenda. Let’s see how each of these faults appears in Hopko’s book.

### *1. Narrowing the category of unacceptable homosexual behavior*

Hopko helped narrow the category of unacceptable homosexual behavior by the obscurity of his brief “reflections” on the nature of homosexuality. In his book, he never quite nails down what he’s talking about, shifting from “same-sex attraction” to “same-sex feelings and desires,” then to “same-sex love” and even same-sex “eros,” referencing C.S. Lewis’s *The Four Loves*. Hopko briefly defines the four loves—charity (*agape*), friendship (*philia*), affection (*storge*), and romantic love (*eros*)—but he never clearly distinguishes them and instead defines eros as a “dynamic and passionate” combination of the other three (44). Orthodox theologians do sometimes use the language of eros to describe both the love of God for man and the love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for each other. Perhaps this accounts for Hopko’s confusion of eros with the other loves. In any event, the more Hopko says in his book about eros, the harder it is to tell whether same-sex eros is good or bad, sinless or sinful:

- On one hand, Hopko says that naturally good passions and desires “become evil only when they are misdirected and misused” (23), that “in Orthodox tradition, both conditions and actions can be ‘sinful’ without necessarily being ‘culpable’” (28), and that “involuntary and inculpable sinful desires ... including passionate feelings for sexual union with persons of one’s own sex” are a result of sin (31).
- On the other hand, he says that “attraction between persons of the same sex” can be “godly” (24), that “same-sex love” can be “pure and godly” (45), that “having loving desires for people of one’s own sex is not at all sinful” (34), that even “passionate love between people of the same

sex” can be “praiseworthy” (26), that only “same-sex attraction *in its fallen form* ... includes desires for genital sexual actions” (45, emphasis added), and that “same-sex love, *when properly experienced and purely expressed*, is always God’s sacred gift” (45, emphasis added).

It might be said in Hopko’s defense that inasmuch as there is in a particular person’s “same-sex attraction” an element of genuine, unselfish love for someone of the same sex, that love is godly. But such love is not what psychologists mean when they speak of “same-sex attraction,” neither is it what Hopko himself always means when he speaks of “same-sex love,” nor is it what C.S. Lewis meant when he wrote of “eros.” For Lewis, eros was a strictly male-female love, defined by “delighted pre-occupation” and intense desire for personal union, such that a husband would look upon his wife as his “other half,” and a wife might say to her husband, “I could just eat you up!” When would such a love be appropriate between two men? Even the iron bond of combat brotherhood does not fit the description of eros or match the infatuation of a young man with a young woman—or of a gay man with another man. A man might “properly experience and purely express” deep and intense charity, friendship, and affection for another man, but not eros, for eros (in man) is strictly sexual love and desire, which “become evil” when misdirected toward someone of the same sex.

Hopko, however, writes as if same-sex eros can be sinless and godly. In fact, the only aspects of homosexuality he explicitly condemns in the book are “lustful thoughts and feelings of a purely sexual nature” (34) and same-sex “genital sexual actions” (*passim*). This leaves open the possibility that “same-sex love” could be “properly experienced and purely expressed” by kissing, hugging, holding hands, and otherwise living and relating as a married couple. Hopko says nothing about such experiences or expressions. Perhaps this is just an oversight—something he didn’t think to cover—but perhaps the oversight was occasioned by his inadequate definition and application of key concepts. Either way, the oversight lends itself to abuse by gay activists, who, by stressing the condemnation of only “lustful desire” and “genital sex,” can effectively normalize all other gay behavior. If the only thing condemned were lustful desire and genital sex, gays would be free to live as gay as they please so long as they do not advocate sodomy or commit it in public.

## 2. Discouraging preaching and teaching offensive to homosexuals

Even Hopko’s condemnation of sodomy is greatly weakened by the limitations he places on what the Church should do about it. His stated principle that those who promote homosexual behavior

“cannot be sacramental communicants” (106) appears to mean in practice that such people should be “asked to refrain from the sacraments” (107) but not turned away if they decide not to refrain. He writes:

It may be necessary, however, as we [*sic*] indicated above, for the person to abstain from participation in the Eucharist when his or her convictions and actions are in conscious and willful contradiction to the Church’s doctrine and discipline. If there is any question about this, the benefit of the doubt belongs to the person being counseled. [121]

Here the emphasis is clearly on the person’s responsibility to decide whether to commune or abstain. The Christian pastor is relegated to an advisory role and authorized to deny communion only as a last resort, when there is no question that a person’s words or deeds are “in conscious and willful contradiction to the Church’s doctrine and discipline” (121).

Through three chapters on same-sex attraction and “church community,” “pastoral care,” and the “counseling process,” Hopko’s sympathies remain with those struggling with same-sex attraction. He says nothing about how Christian pastors are to care for and counsel others on the issue of homosexuality—nothing about preaching against sodomy, teaching others about homosexuality, advising parents of the importance of bonding with their same-sex children, warning of the danger of being too tolerant of sin, or urging the maintenance of traditional sex roles supporting normal sexual identities. His chief interest is keeping those with same-sex attraction in the Church. He is obviously concerned that they will be turned off by negative statements about homosexuality. He never uses the morally pejorative word *sodomy*, preferring the morally neutral but no less distasteful phrase “genital sexual actions.” He could have pointed out that no Christian should be offended by the word *sodomy*, that repentant sinners can’t complain about hearing their sins condemned, and that sinners do need to be reminded from time to time that their sins are actually bad, lest they take them too lightly. Instead, the whole point of his chapter “Same-Sex Attraction and Religion” is the necessity of not judging or offending homosexuals with hard words about homosexuality.

To make this last point, Hopko invokes the late Fr. Alexander Schmemmann’s doctrine that Christianity is not a religion but rather “the fulfillment of all religions in their search for divine truth and human meaning” (95). Of course, Christianity *is* a religion by every definition of the word in the dictionary, which Hopko admits when he writes that it is “not a ‘religion’ (except in the conventional

everyday use of the word)” (95). In fact, Christianity is not a religion only in Schmemmann’s peculiar apologetic use of the word, which was intended to distance Orthodoxy from the caricature of “religion” in the minds of Schmemmann’s New York neighbors and upper East Coast academic colleagues. According to that caricature, religions are backward, rule-bound, obsessive, and intolerant, focused entirely too much on getting things right in this world instead of on Orthodoxy’s glorious eschatological goal. Hopko encourages this caricature in his book, writing:

Those who consider their Christianity as a religion . . . inevitably see themselves as somehow superior to others who do not see things as they do. . . . They do not allow themselves even to consider that they may, in fact, be mistaken about one or another, or even all, of their convictions. As such, they are never in dialogue. They never listen. They never converse. They are never at peace in themselves or with others. They are always in a crusade and a war that they must win at all costs. [96–97]

In contrast, Hopko writes, Orthodox Christians “if they be truly Christian and Orthodox” are “terrified of being guilty of ‘casting the stone,’” “live in the constant awareness that they may be mistaken in their most heartfelt convictions,” and “resist every temptation to identify themselves as anything other than an assembly of sinners without competence or calling to judge anyone for anything” (97–98).

One practical effect of these caricatures of prideful, hateful, judgmental “religion” versus humble, loving, nonjudgmental Orthodoxy is that Orthodox Christians cannot say anything against homosexuality or take any action against homosexuals without assuming the appearance of the first caricature. Another practical effect is that Christians taught to think by such caricatures will of course incline toward tacit acceptance of homosexuality—perversely paired with vocal intolerance of Christian preaching and teaching against homosexuality.

### *3. Condemning Christian resistance to the gay political agenda*

If Hopko teaches acceptance of homosexuality *implicitly* in his chapters on church community, pastoral care, counseling, and religion, he does so *explicitly* in his chapter on civil rights, which begins with the following assertions:

Whether or not men and women with same-sex attractions are struggling to resist engaging in

erotic sexual activity, their civil rights, and the rights of the children in their care, must be guaranteed and safeguarded. Homosexual people must have the same access to housing, employment, police protection, legal justice, tax benefits, and visitation privileges at institutions that all members of society possess and enjoy. Those desiring to be joined in “civil unions” or “domestic partnerships” for such purposes should be allowed to do so, with the social and legal benefits that are guaranteed by such arrangements. This is especially important today, when the safety of homosexual people and their children largely depends on legal and social recognition and protection. It is also important because those in same-sex relationships, whether or not they are sexually active, almost always understand a denial of such public recognition and protection as an expression of hatred and contempt toward themselves and their families. [83]

So the civil rights of all homosexuals must be “guaranteed and safeguarded,” which means the same rights to “housing, employment, police protection, legal justice, tax benefits, and visitation privileges” that everyone else enjoys. It also means “civil unions” with all the “social and legal benefits” of marriage. Further on, Hopko grants that Christians can’t quite consider same-sex unions “marriages,” but he advises against resisting the same-sex use of the word *marriage*, calling such resistance “unreasonable and counterproductive” (85).

Hopko names three reasons for extending legal and social recognition and protection to homosexuality—justice, safety, and fear. He writes that (a) “Orthodox Scriptures and saints unanimously witness that justice and charity are to be extended to all human beings, without condition or discrimination” (83); (b) “the safety of homosexual people and their children largely depends on legal and social recognition and protection” (83); and (c) the denial of recognition and protection is “almost always” understood “as an expression of hatred and contempt” (83). Each of these reasons is highly suspect, to say the least.

The first reason only makes sense if “justice and charity” means always treating everyone exactly the same way, but nothing in the Orthodox tradition requires us to treat homosexuals exactly the same way as heterosexuals, “without condition or discrimination”; quite the contrary, one need look no further than First Corinthians to find the Apostle Paul telling the faithful “not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator . . . with such a one no not to eat” (1 Cor. 5:11).

The second reason begs for explanation: Just how is the safety of homosexuals or their children

threatened by society's denial of special recognition and protection for homosexuality? It is not as if this denial makes homosexuals outlaws with no rights at all, whom any man might beat and rob with impunity. If Hopko has some particular threat to safety in mind, he does not mention it. If he is thinking of the "hate crimes" and suicides played up in the pro-gay press from time to time, the case still needs to be made that special "legal and social recognition and protection" for homosexuality will diminish such events. We have good reason to expect that they won't. Having seen how quickly forced acceptance of homosexuality led to forced acceptance of transgenderism, even more people are now outraged by the LGBT agenda. And even if gay rights laws could achieve their purpose of coercing public approval of homosexuality, that is hardly a purpose Christians should wish to accomplish.

But the third of Hopko's reasons for endorsing gay rights—fear—is most surprising. Three times in this brief chapter, Hopko sounds the alarm about the danger of Christians having to endure hatred and contempt, returning to it again and again to advise against opposing gay rights. He writes that a "Christian's noblest work is to intercede with the Lord" on behalf of "everyone and everything," and that we cannot do this "with impunity if we are at the same time denying basic human and civil rights to anyone, especially to those who may hold us and our convictions in greatest contempt and derision" (84).

This is a very odd argument for a Christian pastor to make. Christians have endured hatred, contempt, and derision for bearing witness against the sins of the world from the beginning, in imitation of our Lord Himself. Countless martyrs were murdered for offending unbelievers by disrespecting their gods, disobeying their laws, and disapproving their way of life. Should those martyrs rather have gone along with immorality so that their worst enemies would have thought better of them? Would they have shown greater love for the world by hiding the truths it hated?

And are we really "denying basic human and civil rights" when opposing special legal protections of specific categories of persons? Here, some reflection on the historical reality of civil rights laws is needed. As the U.S. Supreme Court found recently in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard College*, civil rights aren't always enforced fairly, and special civil rights creating and advantaging "protected groups" like women, ethnic minorities, gays, and transgenders are as much about non-freedom as they are about freedom. Such rights deprive some people of freedom to do some things so as to give other people freedom to do other things.

For example, our so-called "equal employment opportunity" laws deprive employers of the opportunity to hire people they want so as to force them to hire people they don't want. Granted, it is

an open question whether an employer's reasons for not wanting to hire someone are fair or good, but there is no question that laws forcing him to ignore differences between people take away his freedom to run his business the way he thinks best.

Even worse, such laws take away an employer's freedom of association, forcing him to work daily with people he would rather not be around. And by taking away his freedom of association, they take away his freedom of speech and expression, because people must, of course, watch what they say and do in mixed company. And with his freedom of speech and expression goes his freedom of conscience and religion. He can no longer be himself, freely living and sharing his life and faith with his employees, without fear that one of them will bring in the law to make him stop. What's more, his employees are in the same boat, forced to spend five days a week with people unlike and maybe even hostile to themselves, who might invoke their "civil rights" to silence and punish coworkers for offending them.

The past twenty years have shown us where gay rights lead. Bakers, caterers, photographers, wedding planners, and even officiants have all been sued for declining work for gay weddings (and now also gender transitions). An online dating service run by Christians (eHarmony) was forced to spend \$2 million to make amends for not helping gays find mates. Government agencies and many private corporations have raised the rainbow flag and now put their employees to work on celebrations of "pride." One way or another, directly or indirectly, legal protection of homosexuals means forcing people to pay money to support homosexuality, do things to support homosexuality, and keep quiet about homosexuality (unless, of course, celebrating it).

Hopko overlooks all such practical realities of gay rights. He never mentions any negative consequences of extending special legal protection to homosexuality, only negative consequences of not extending it. He considers the issue only abstractly and sentimentally, assuming that gay rights are axiomatically good, a matter of manifest fairness needing no analysis, deliberation, testing, or historical review. The only source he cites on the subject is a book by an editorialist in Vermont who won a Pulitzer Prize for championing civil unions for homosexuals. He does not dare to consult two thousand years of Orthodox political experience to ask how "pious kings and right-believing queens" treated homosexuality; instead, he recommends a bitter rant in a Vermont newspaper, telling his readers that they "must listen carefully to what this mother of a gay son" has to say (86).

Missing from his discussion of gay rights is any acknowledgment of our responsibility as Orthodox Christians to bear witness publicly to the true nature of manhood, womanhood, and marriage when

the minds of so many believers and unbelievers alike are turned to these topics by political events. What about the responsibility of Christians as citizens of a democracy to participate in its governance by proposing and supporting civil laws consistent with divine laws? What about the responsibility of Christians to balance the public debate so the voices heard defending Christian teaching are not only the most ignorant and intemperate? And what about the responsibility of Christians to offer all people a clear choice of truth to accept or reject, so as to call the faithless to repentance and encourage the faithful not to waver? It is hard to see how any of these responsibilities can be fulfilled without offending someone. Should we therefore keep silent while the most aggressive gays get their way?

### *Ideas have consequences*

After publication of *Christian Faith and Same-Sex Attraction* in 2006, Hopko continued speaking publicly about homosexuality in lectures, interviews, and articles. Little in his message changed, although over time he had less to say about the therapy available to those suffering from same-sex attraction and more to say against offending the sufferers by condemning homosexuality. His pastoral focus never shifted from the few souls with same-sex attraction who are supposedly open to the truth about homosexuality but deeply resentful of having that truth spoken too plainly. He pleaded for dialogue, for listening, for not saying anything publicly for fear of offending, and for relying solely on person-to-person contact so that our love can pave the way for our truth. He advised against proof-texting the issue with citations from the Scriptures or the Fathers and often counterbalanced the little he said bad about homosexuality with something bad said about some other sin like greed, gluttony, or heterosexual lust. He frequently invoked the worst examples of witnessing against homosexuality—people who preach that gays will all “burn in hell”—to discourage us from participating in “this culture war business.”

Most disappointing was his continued trimming of Church discipline and sacramental sanctity. He still allowed that priests may deny the sacraments to militant gays who become “really offensive” and vocal in declaring their rejection of Church teaching. But he said that we should be “incredibly merciful” and “do whatever we can to keep people in the orbit of the grace of the Church,” to the point of communing people who live gay less openly. And he insisted the faithful “must trust their priests” in this matter and that what gays do privately is none of their business. This is a dangerously naïve expectation, given (a) the doubtful faithfulness of several notorious priests, (b) Hopko’s own estimate that as many as 20 percent of students at Orthodox seminaries suffer same-sex attraction (!), and (c)

the overt and covert efforts by some Orthodox communicants to undermine the sound parts of his teaching.

Before Hopko's passing in 2015, his own jurisdiction, the Orthodox Church in America (OCA), was already providing ample evidence of where the unsound aspects of his teaching were leading. An OCA parish in Los Angeles was paying members of the Gay Men's Chorus of Los Angeles to sing for divine services as members of its choir. A layman sharing a home with another man, who was identified as the "son-in-law" of the layman's mother in her obituary, was serving on the OCA's Metropolitan Council. Until the summer of 2011, the several priests at the OCA's primatial cathedral in Washington, D.C., were knowingly and regularly communing two women who had married other women. One had a webpage celebrating her nuptials and sometimes brought her mate to church; the other frequently talked about her marriage to parishioners and visitors. When parishioners asked why these women continued to commune, they were told to mind their own business. Nothing in Hopko's teaching permits us to be outraged by these scandals or to speak out against them, as any expression of outrage will appear judgmental and unloving to those taught to see the world according to his caricatures.

Since Hopko's passing, gay activists have gone on the offensive, openly challenging the Orthodox Church's teaching on sexuality on a half-dozen new English-language websites (most notoriously, The Wheel, Public Orthodoxy, and Orthodoxy in Dialogue) and at international gatherings of sympathetic academics such as the "Bridging Voices" conference held at Oxford, England, in 2019, which included Nik Jovicic-Sas, gay activist and self-styled "Orthodox Provocateur" whose Facebook page advertised rainbow-flagged icons and drag-queen revues. Then in early July of 2022, Archbishop Elpidophoros of the Greek Archdiocese of America shocked the Orthodox world by baptizing two infants born to surrogate mothers for a famously gay celebrity couple in Athens.

This last outrage seems to have been too much for the OCA's Holy Synod, which later that same month, in the midst of the OCA's 20<sup>th</sup> All-American Council, issued an encyclical stating:

We call upon all clergy, theologians, teachers, and lay persons within the Orthodox Church in America never to contradict these teachings [on sexuality] by preaching or teaching against the Church's clear moral position; by publishing books, magazines, and articles which do the same; or producing or publishing similar content online. We reject any attempt to create a theological framework which would normalize same-sex erotic relationships or distort

humanity's God-given sexual identity.

The encyclical furthermore declared that “those who teach these errors become participants in the sin of those whom they have tempted or whom they have failed to correct,” calling them to repentance and threatening discipline against those who persisted in such error.

Fr. Thomas, of course, never himself challenged the Church's historic teaching on homosexuality and cannot be blamed for all that others did to undermine that teaching. But his strictly clinical concern for just the same-sex-attracted patient, his continued trimming of the Church's sacramental discipline, and his public disparagement of the anti-gay side in “this culture war business” did contribute significantly to the climate of tolerance for homosexuality and intolerance for its condemnation, in which climate gay activists could expect to successfully push the envelope, confident that more than a few priests and also a few bishops were on their side.

Unfortunately, Hopko's 2006 book (never revised) is still available and still the only English-language Orthodox book providing pastoral guidance on dealing with same-sex attraction from a non-gay perspective. One should hope that the book's readers will heed its advice on the available therapy and disregard Hopko's ill-considered opinions on gay rights. One would also hope that Orthodox pastors would leave the worrying about keeping patients in therapy to qualified clinicians affiliated with the Alliance for Therapeutic Choice and Scientific Integrity ([therapeuticchoice.org](http://therapeuticchoice.org)) and focus their own attention on looking after their flocks.

After all, in the current climate, the greater danger is not that Orthodox Christians will succumb to self-righteous pride and add their voices to the angry oddballs telling gays to burn in hell, against all social and legal pressure on Christians to conform to this world, but that they will succumb to cowardice, complacency, and self-righteous pride in their tolerance of sexual sin, thinking themselves saintly for “speaking the truth in love” when they are actually speaking only half-truths in fear. In all his writing and speaking on homosexuality, Fr. Thomas Hopko gave little indication that he was aware of this danger.

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