

Every Day CATHOLIC

ST. ANTHONY MESSENGER PRESS ■ www.AmericanCatholic.org ■ G0708 ■ JULY 2008

Stories From the Heart— Being Catholic and Gay

by Jim and Susan Vogt

To paraphrase Kermit the Frog:
It's not easy being gay, especially
if you're Catholic.

Homosexual persons, like all of us, are not defined solely by sexual orientation. While the Church teaches that "homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #2357), it also teaches that "the human person, made in the image and likeness of God, can hardly be adequately described by a reductionist reference to...sexual orientation" and "insists that every person has a fundamental identity: the creature of God, and by grace, his child and heir to eternal life" (*Letter on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, #16).

In the moral, philosophical and theological debate about homosexuality, what often gets lost is the personal: how having a same-sex attraction affects real people.

**"Our total personhood
is more encompassing
than sexual orientation.
Human beings see the
appearance, but the Lord
looks into the heart."**

—Always Our Children,
U.S. Bishops, 1997



Faithful Catholics who experience a same-sex attraction can find the life to which they are called, and their experience within the Church, challenging and painful at times. We offer some "stories from the heart" as a way of connecting with the pains and hopes of homosexual Catholics and those who love them.

The pain

"I went to a Catholic high school and participated in a parish youth group, but I could never admit to anyone in the group or at school that I was gay because I was afraid of being excluded," relates Dominic, a young adult reflecting on his teen years. "Whenever homosexuality came up, it was always described as disordered or unnatural. I felt like I was discouraged from sharing who I truly was. I always had to be on my guard."

Jim, a Catholic religious brother, has had difficulty reconciling his essential dignity with the Church's language about homosexual orientation: "Church documents tell people that having a homosexual inclination is 'objectively disordered'

(CCC, #2358). How can I, how can others, feel good about ourselves when we're described in this way? Many teen suicides are related to being gay and not being able to develop a positive self-image. Church language contributed to my negative self-image."

A negative self-image plagued Linda, who was unable to admit her sexual orientation even to herself until she was 40. She relates, "When I was in my 20s, I found a nice guy who loved me and wanted to marry me, but something didn't feel right. It wasn't until I had developed a greater sense of self-love through counseling that I realized I'd been suffering from 'internalized homophobia.' I had absorbed negative messages about my sexuality from both my Church and our culture. It would have been much better if the Church had helped me accept my sexual orientation."

Beth, a mother of three young adults, two of whom experience same-sex attraction, has been frustrated when dealing with parish leaders. "I feel like my voice

continued on back page

A Chorus Line

by Frank Frost

Before *Dancing With the Stars* came the movie *A Chorus Line*



based on a successful Broadway musical. It's the story of an extended audition of talented dancers struggling not for stardom, but only for a chance to find a place among an anonymous line of background performers. It's also an extended metaphor for the human search for acceptance—both self-acceptance and acceptance by loved ones.

The moment in the film that says it best is when one male dancer, Paul (Cameron English), pours out his hurt to the choreographer, Zach (Michael Douglas), on a darkened stage. Paul's love for dance springs from the musicals his father took him to each Saturday in Times Square. At the age of 15, struggling with being teased in school as gay, Paul got his break as a dancer—in a drag show. He dared only tell his parents he was a dancer in a show. They were so proud they couldn't stop bragging—until, with the show going on tour, Paul's parents came to see him off. Then both sides had to face the truth and the test of love.

Paul tells how shocked he was when his parents arrived early at the stage door and discovered him in his elaborate drag costume. As he changed to street clothes he was fearful of their rejection. "But there they were, standing in the middle of all these freaks.... My mother had the guts to look me in the eyes. I could tell she'd been crying. 'Make sure you eat good,' she said. But then my father couldn't even look at me. 'Take care of yourself,' he said. And he started out. Then my father turned around and went over to the producer. 'Take care of my son,' he said. That was the only time he ever called me that."

Men of Courage

by Joan McKamey

Living a chaste life takes courage. Men and women who experience same-sex attraction find support for chaste living from an organization aptly named Courage. Begun in 1980 and endorsed by the Holy See, Courage has over 110 chapters worldwide and reaches others through its Web site (couragec.net) and ListSrvs. Three members of Courage shared their personal stories with *Every Day Catholic*. Only first names are used here since, as one of them says, "Society has too much homophobia, and to reveal same-sex attractions or history can be detrimental."

DAVID was active in the gay lifestyle for 15 years, first seeking relationship and eventually settling for sex. He says, "That led to more despair." After hearing the Scripture passage "By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death" (Luke 1:78) as if it were written just for him, David left the gay lifestyle, got involved in the Church and joined Courage.

David commits himself to regular prayer, Eucharist, adoration and Reconciliation to keep his relationship with Christ "honest and vibrant." He adds, "I am deeply involved in several ministries at church that keep my faith

rooted and active." He says of Courage, "I rely heavily on my friends from Courage for candor about my struggles, for moral support and chaste friendship."

FRANCIS tried for years to eliminate his same-sex attraction without success. Of the period he spent in homosexual relationships, he says, "I felt these were most detrimental to my life" and came to understand that "living that lifestyle and being Christian are incompatible." He recently found Courage and has been "living a new life of chastity."

His Catholic faith, relationship with God and involvement with Courage are important to Francis. He says, "The Church supports my vocation as a single, celibate male. Courage has allowed me to share openly about my struggles. The group helps me to grow and experience the fullness of my state in life. I am encouraged to live a chaste life and participate in the sacraments of the Church. I've found the sacraments to be powerful in my struggle with same-sex attractions."

BILL learned about Courage over 13 years ago through an ad in his diocesan paper. He attended a day of recollection sponsored by Courage and got involved in his local group. Expecting to always struggle with same-sex attraction, he says, "You have to know your boundaries. You can have an attraction but need to keep it in the right place. It's a daily conversion, a daily walk."

Bill finds beauty in the Church's teachings. He says, "The Church is not out to get us. Its teachings are for our good. It's not about taking away from life; it's giving us a better way of life." Bill adds, "Your call and my call are the same. We're all called to live chaste lives. God has made us all for bigger and better things. Promiscuity is about using and being used. We're not made for that." He has learned not to label himself and says, "I had to accept myself as the person I am. I've come to see myself as a man of Christ, a child of God."

MOVIE MOMENTS, CONT'D.

Next time you watch *A Chorus Line*, ASK YOURSELF:

- When chorus-line finalists are forced to talk about themselves, what common threads are evident? Fear of rejection? Outcast status?
- In what ways do the main characters come to terms with themselves by the end of the film?
- Do I deny homosexuality among my family or friends? Why? What are my feelings about homosexual persons?

PASSING ON THE FAITH



©Shutterstock.com/Kudryashka

A Loving Struggle

by Jeanne Hunt

Scenario

Brian and Elizabeth are siblings in a Catholic family. Brian finished college and married Jen. Elizabeth completed graduate studies and began teaching. She hasn't married, and recently shared with the adults in her family that she struggles with same-sex attraction. Brian wants to love and support his sister, yet he wonders how to share Elizabeth's news with his

grade-school-age children. How can he explain to them about Aunt Elizabeth?

A response

Clarity and honesty are necessary as we talk to children about sexuality. Denying the presence of an issue in a family will only confuse a child. The child

will sense that the parents are being less than truthful. When we avoid or deny the truth, it underscores that there is something about which we cannot talk.

Parents should also do their homework. They need to learn what the Church teaches about homosexuality in order to be on sure footing for this family discussion. Parents should give time to personal prayer and discernment as they sort out their own loving response to a family member with same-sex preference.

Keep it simple. If a young child asks a specific question such as, "Why doesn't

Aunt Elizabeth have a husband?" answer this question by dealing with the immediate issue: "Aunt Elizabeth hasn't found a man she wishes to marry." A lengthy discussion may not be called for. It's best to let the child guide the degree of explanation. Yet, I offer a word of caution: Be accurate in your answer. The temptation to smooth over this difficult topic by creating a false impression causes even more questions. It's vital that parent and child keep the avenues of communication open. Your child needs to know that, no matter what the topic, he/she can confide in you and will always receive support and understanding.

Later in the year, Brian and Jen opened a family discussion concerning homosexuality with their young children. It was enough to explain to these young children that the Church teaches that only a man and a woman can be married and that Aunt Elizabeth has chosen to live the single vocation. They agreed that, when the children are older, they will speak to them again. In the future, they will share the Church's teaching on homosexuality with them. But Brian and Jen also agree that what is needed most is teaching their children to love their Aunt Elizabeth just as God loves her.

PRAYER

All Are Welcome

by Jeanne Hunt

(for praying alone or with others)

Preparation: Set up a prayer table with photos reflecting human diversity and bandages with classifications of people written on them (e.g., elderly, teens, homeless, racially diverse, disabled, etc.).

OPENING HYMN

Sing a hymn about unity such as "All Are Welcome."

OPENING PRAYER

"Father of Life, you have given us an amazing human family.

Within this family is so much diversity, and yet all of us are your own. Give us the insight and courage to love one another as you love us."

SCRIPTURE

Parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10:25-37

RITUAL

"The Samaritan was held in low opinion in Jesus' time. Yet, it was the Samaritan who acted with love. Our view of others requires seeing with the heart in the same manner in which God sees.

Who is my 'Samaritan'? Who is a person I find difficult to honor or respect?

Please come forward and take an adhesive bandage. Read the name for all of us to hear. As we hear each name read, let us pray silently for these people.

You are invited to come forward to the prayer table.

CLOSING PRAYER

"O Divine Redeemer, place within our hearts the desire to love others as you love them. Give us the courage to break down the barriers of prejudice that keep us from understanding others and living together as one family. Amen."

the elderly

unemployed

homeless

disabled

continued from front page

is not heard, that I am ignored," she says. "Our associate pastor offered talks on moral issues, one being homosexuality. He included a therapist who promoted reparative therapy, which maintains that gays can be changed into heterosexuals. My husband, who is also a therapist, pointed out that leading professional medical and mental health organizations don't support reparative therapy and have serious concerns about its potential for harm. The priest ignored his comments. It's much better to be listened to and disagreed with than ignored."



The possibilities

Gay people are not defined solely by their sexual orientation, nor by their hurts. Many have fulfilling lives, even while struggling to live chastely and faithfully in a culture that is increasingly accepting of both heterosexual and homosexual promiscuity. While many have experienced prejudicial, hurtful and even condemnatory attitudes and actions from members of the Church community, they still find ways to remain in relationship with the Church, participating in its life and sacraments.

Although Dominic felt alienated in his Catholic school and youth group, he found a youth minister who was understanding and supportive. He says, "She showed me that there were people even in Church leadership positions with whom I could be myself."

While Dominic had a negative experience in his Catholic school, Dave's experiences were more positive: "My Catholic schooling, especially in high school and college, enabled me to trust my God-given instincts about myself." This helped Dave to develop a sense of self-worth despite the challenges

of his same-sex attraction.

Dave was enormously encouraged when his parish reached out to its homosexual members one Sunday to make them feel welcome. "The pastor welcomed us at the beginning of Mass. This conveyed a strong positive message for me," he says.

Jim finds great support from retreats his religious order offers its members who experience same-sex attraction. He says, "It's been a way to develop a healthy integration between sexuality and spirituality."

Challenges for the rest of us

Where does all this leave the heterosexual majority in the Church? We need to become more sensitive and respectful in the way we talk about homosexuality. Remember that Jesus accepted all people and challenged them to deeper conversion, even though some of his followers questioned his association with the outcasts of their day. The Church says, "They [homosexual persons] must be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity" (CCC, #2358). It's up to members of the Church community to take this teaching to heart and put it into action. We suggest:

- The Church needs to reach out to parents of children who experience same-sex attraction. These parents often get messages that they did something that contributed to their child's homosexual orientation. They can feel ashamed and isolated.
- Parishes can offer resources and programs to help members understand the Church's call for "respect, compassion and sensitivity" toward its members with homosexual inclinations, explore ways to be more welcoming and supportive, and encourage chastity for all—whether homosexual or heterosexual, married or single.

- Catholics must acknowledge in all others the essential dignity given them by our loving Creator. All humans are created in God's image, and every person is "the creature of God, and by grace, his child and heir to eternal life."

Remember, it's not easy being gay.

Permission to Publish this article, "Stories From the Heart—Being Catholic and Gay," by Jim and Susan Vogt, received from Rev. Joseph R. Binzer, Vicar General, Archdiocese of Cincinnati, 4-8-2008.



Jim and Susan Vogt have four adult children and live in Covington, Kentucky. Jim directs the Marianist Social Justice Collaborative. Susan speaks and writes on marriage, parenting and spirituality. Learn more at susanvogt.net.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

When do you find yourself judging people as a group or labeling others rather than considering them as individuals?

How faithful are you to your personal call to live a chaste life—as single, married, vowed religious or clergy?

What more can you do to acknowledge and affirm the essential dignity of all persons within your family, friend and work relationships?

Extra copies of this issue of *EVERY DAY CATHOLIC*:
1000 or more: 14¢ ea.
500-999: 17¢ ea.
300-499: 22¢ ea.
200-299: 28¢ ea.
100-199: 33¢ ea.
10-99: 39¢ ea.

EVERY DAY CATHOLIC
1-year subscriptions:
Single: \$14.00
2-9: \$10.00 ea.
10-99: \$5.40 ea.
100-199: \$4.20 ea.
200-299: \$3.60 ea.
300-499: \$3.00 ea.
500-999: \$2.40 ea.
1000 or more:
\$1.80 ea.

Bulk rate copies must be mailed to same address.
Order by telephone
1-800-488-0488
or use address below.

©2008
St. Anthony Messenger Press
28 W. Liberty St.
Cincinnati, OH 45202
Photocopying prohibited

EDITOR:
Joan McKamey

ART DIRECTOR:
Constance Wolfer

FREE GROUP PROCESS:
catalog.AmericanCatholic.org/guide