

Seminar breaks down walls between gay Catholics, Church

By Teresa A. Parsons

Controversy has always been a double-edged sword for the gay community.

On one hand, much of the publicity they receive is negative and generates negative responses.

But on the other hand, as in politics, even bad press creates awareness.

And awareness is perhaps what has been most lacking in the historical relationship between the Catholic Church and its gay and lesbian members, who have remained largely invisible and alienated behind barriers of fear and benign neglect.

Last Saturday, nearly two-dozen Church ministers, teachers, and homosexual Catholics chipped away at those barriers through education and information during a seven-hour seminar at St. Mary's Church of the Deaf in downtown Rochester.

The event was sponsored by the Catholic Coalition for Gay Civil Rights, a national network of organizations and individuals who endorse legislation that guarantees basic human and civil rights to gay people.

Presented by Sister Jeannine Gramick, SSND, and Father C. Robert Nugent, SDS, the seminar offered both contemporary scientific research, and official Church responses and teaching on homosexuality.

Sister Jeannine called dialogue the best form of education. "By bringing people together, you can listen to the experience of gay and lesbian Catholics, and they can listen to the teaching of the official Church."

Homosexual orientation is morally neutral, according to Church teaching, while homosexual activity is considered morally wrong. But Father Nugent believes that too many people focus on prohibitions against homosexual behavior and ignore applicable teachings on such other issues as civil rights.

Gay Catholics are also victims of a double standard in the application of Church teaching, he said. Their sexual orientation is magnified out of proportion to the rest of their lives, and so their sexual transgressions assume greater significance than those of heterosexual people.

"We're not constantly harping that sex outside marriage is wrong," Father Nugent said. "Why should we expect God to give the gift of celibacy to all gay and lesbian people, when he doesn't give it to all heterosexual people."

"Basically, we're caught between making a judgment of someone's orientation and their expression of that," he added. "In one sense, the Church is not asking anything of them that it doesn't ask of widows, single persons or

young persons, except that they (members of the latter groups) have the option to move into a relationship."

Within the last five years, studies have shown that violence against gays has risen across the country, according to Father Nugent. While he doesn't believe the Church's teaching causes such violence directly, Father Nugent suspects that the way in which its teaching is conveyed and the atmosphere in which it is heard has had an indirect effect. When Church leaders speak of homosexuality in the same breath with words and phrases like "abomination," "the worse possible sin," or "a threat to the family," they generate hostility.

In many cases, Church leaders also have failed to speak out strongly against prejudice, Sister Jeannine added. "I feel very strongly that the Catholic Church has a lot of reparation to make to the lesbian and gay community," she said.

On the other hand, she called the climate of the Church in Rochester "very understanding and open and very supportive of Dignity/Integrity." For the past five or six years, the diocese has maintained an official liaison with local chapter of the international group for gay Catholics and Episcopalians. Founded almost 11 years ago, the chapter has built a solid base of support among diocesan clergy and religious congregations.

Despite the approbation they receive from the diocese, members of Dignity/Integrity remain frustrated by a lack of awareness at the parish level of their ministry. Representatives of the organization are available to speak in parishes, but according to local president Bill DeStevens, "we get more requests from the Episcopal churches."

Father Nugent agreed that parishes should be the place where ministry to the gay community begins. But he cautioned that such a ministry involves more than "stopping sin and getting people to confession."

"Even celibate gay people have problems," he said.

Ministry to the gay community also requires more than a bulletin announcement inviting gay and lesbian Catholics to form a support group. "No one will show up," Father Nugent said. "This issue has an added dimension of privacy. People won't come and ask for it."

Instead, parishes need to begin with indications of support. "Parishes first need to send out signals that they are open to discussing issues of sexuality," Sister Jeannine said.

Including prayers for persons with AIDS in the Prayer of the Faithful or including an article or a series of articles on gay issues in the

parish bulletin are among the small ways they suggest parishes can begin.

Instead of focusing solely on how they can serve gay persons, parish communities also need to realize that the gay community has gifts of ministry to offer as well.

"There's a real need for gay people to speak to the Church about themselves," Father Nugent said. "They could be helping parishioners understand what it is to be gay and thus minister to the rest of the Church."

"I think there are very few Catholic communities even now where someone who was following Church teaching could be comfortable if they were openly gay," he added.

After observing slow, but steady progress in Church attitudes during the last 20 years, many gay Catholics have seen their hopes dashed by the recent trend toward conservatism in the Church, especially as displayed by Vatican censures against Father Charles E. Curran and Seattle Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen.

Many in the gay community consider Father Curran's views on homosexuality moderate. While he regards heterosexuality as the norm, Father Curran believes the Church must hold up some viable sexual ethic for homosexual relationships as well. Thus, he argues that homosexual activity between individuals in a long-term relationship is not necessarily sinful.

In contrast, more radical theologians argue that any just and loving relationship is the norm, whether heterosexual or not.

Archbishop Hunthausen, on the other hand, challenged none of the Church's teachings on homosexuality. "He simply offered a compassionate response when he allowed Dignity to use the cathedral three years ago," Sister Jeannine said.

But both she and Father Nugent believe that incident could have set off protests from that area's conservative Catholics. "This is an issue that drives people up the wall," Father Nugent said. "It's very threatening, and I think it's where a lot of people want to 'draw the line.'"

As a result of these censures, diocesan leaders throughout the United States have become even more cautious than usual on issues related to homosexuality. As an example, Sister Jeannine pointed to Cardinal Joseph Bernardin's recent statement opposing Chicago's gay-civil rights bill, an action she called "uncharacteristic."

"The anger and shock among the Catholic community there was very strong," Father Nugent said. "As one person said here today, 'It's easier to be called a communist or a Marxist than to be called a homosexual.'"

As ministers who have reached out to the gay community for more than 15 years, Father Nugent and Sister Jeannine have also faced a certain liability.

In 1984, both were dismissed from New Ways Ministry, which they co-founded seven years earlier in the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C., to promote reconciliation between the Church and gay Catholics. By their account, Archbishop James Hickey requested that their respective congregations reassess them because he believed New Ways Ministry was ambiguous about Church teaching.

Both congregations found the archbishop's assertions groundless, Sister Jeannine said, but when asked by the Vatican to make the transfers, the congregations complied.

Since 1984, the pair has worked as consultants for the Catholic Coalition for Gay Civil Rights as well as parishes, colleges and other institutions. During their current tour, they have already spoken in Albany and Syracuse. From Rochester, they planned to go on to Buffalo, Erie and Scranton.

At the last minute, however, they were forced to relocate their Buffalo seminar when the religious congregations hosting their visit were prohibited from using the diocesan Peace and Justice Center.

"It's the only ministry with a stigma attached," Father Nugent explained. "It's a no-win situation ... I tell people if they get into this to be ready for that."

Whether or not they are welcome, Sister Jeannine and Father Nugent hope that by taking their seminars around the country, they can change attitudes, create networks of support and prompt concrete action on the diocesan level.

"If we are to be true to the gospel, we need to welcome those people society considers outcasts," she said. "Let's remember how Jesus treated those people."

Dinner-dance at Sodus Bay for 3 Finger Lakes churches

The Trinity Activities Society of the Catholic Community of the Blessed Trinity is sponsoring a dinner-dance at the Sodus Bay Heights Golf Club on October 24. The community consists of St. Thomas Church in Red Creek, St. Mary Magdalene in Wolcott, and St. Jude Chapel in Fair Haven.

Cocktails will be available from 6 p.m. on and dinner will be served at 7 p.m.

For reservations call (315)483-4391.

'Bowl-for-Breath' scheduled as cystic fibrosis fundraiser

The Cystic Fibrosis "Bowl-for-Breath" is scheduled for the week of October 24 to 31.

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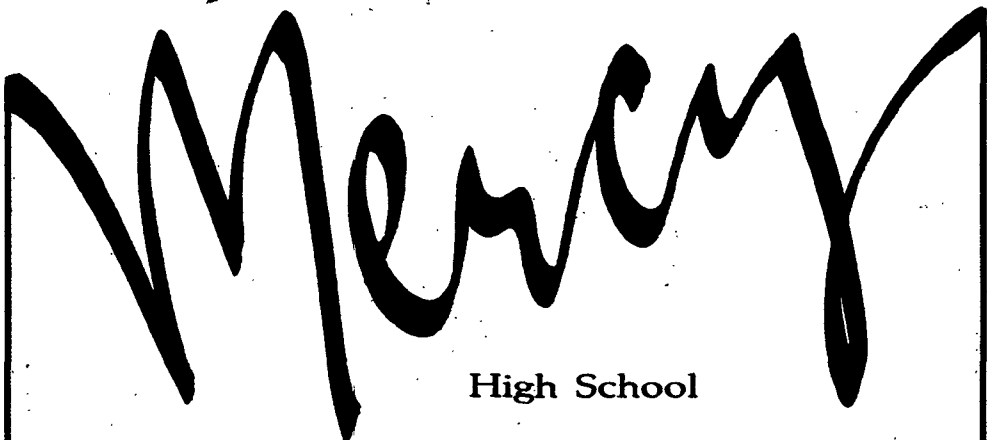
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