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MINISTRY

Team works to spread teachings

It took Casey and Mary Ellen Lopata nine years after their teenaged son's announcement before they were able to talk freely about his homosexuality.

Mary Ellen recalled crying time and again. Casey's biggest worry was whether his son, Jim, could be gay and still be Catholic.

"When gay children come out of the closet, the parents go in," the Lopatas observed.

Last month, 13 years after Jim made his announcement, his parents found themselves in a position to help other Catholic parents struggling with the same issue.

The two helped conduct a day of reflection Oct. 26 for parents of gays and lesbians. The day was sponsored by the Catholic Gay & Lesbian Ministry — comprising the Lopatas and five other individuals — with which the Diocese of Rochester announced a formal collaboration in September.

The ministry's members joined forces in 1992 while in Chicago to attend a national symposium on gay and lesbian Catholics. They include Father Gary Tyman, Newman Community chaplain at the University of Rochester; Sister Kay Heverin, SSJ, pastoral associate at Sacred Heart Cathedral; Father Robert Kennedy, assistant professor at St. Bernard's Institute; Cheryl Lee, educator and conflict resolution trainer; and Sister Dorothy Loeb, RSM.

"What we are about is welcoming everyone," Mary Ellen Lopata said of the ministry. "And by welcoming everyone, help everyone, including ourselves, to live as best as we can the message of Jesus, which doesn't say anything about sexual orientation, but how to treat one another."

The ministry team serves as a resource for parishes, and diocesan officials have announced they will seek its advice regarding pastoral ministry. The team also hopes to develop a network of ministers and to work more with parents and parish staff.

It also proposed a Day of Dialogue for March 1997, when Bishop Matthew H. Clark will meet with gay Catholics to hear their concerns.

The Oct. 26 reflection day symbolized a focus of the ministry, Casey Lopata said, that is, to provide Catholics confronting homosexuality in their families with a safe place to find support. For many of the 28 parents attending from Rochester and other dioceses, the event was their first chance to meet and share with Catholics in similar situations.



One of the participants, Ann Rohnke of St. Paul's Church in Webster, called the ministry long overdue and said such gatherings are vital for people who "might be sitting at home thinking their child is condemned forever."

"I think everyone (at the program) felt the church has to speak out more so people are aware of how they feel about this, and not just say it in books people won't read," she said.

Explaining that her oldest son is gay, she said, "Especially in the beginning when you first find out, it would be really great to have something like this team to talk to. ... Having been brought up Catholic, you worry about what this means."

Also at the program was Shirley Snyder. "It was really good for me to be (at the day of reflection) with other people who were sharing some of the same concerns," said Snyder. But, she recalled, "It was pretty emotional for me."

A parishioner at Church of the Resurrection in Fairport, she has two grown daughters who are lesbians. And despite realizing this for nearly 15 years, she was still dealing with it. She likened the process to grieving over the death of a loved one.

"It is because your children aren't going to live up to your expectations and you have fears because you don't know how society is going to treat them," Snyder said. She added that parents also face the fear, at least initially, that the church will excommunicate their children.

Leaders in ministry to homosexuals and their families say most Catholics seem to understand church teaching that homosexual actions are a sin and "intrinsically disordered," as stated in the Vatican's 1975 "Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics." But they don't know much else about church teaching on homosexuality.

"A lot of Catholic people, parents and gays and lesbians, believe the church has said it is wrong to be homosexual," Father Tyman said. "It is not something they heard. It almost comes from the silence." They may also be unfamiliar with these Catholic teachings:

- A homosexual orientation, "because not freely chosen, is not sinful," according to the U.S. Catholic Conference's 1991 document "Human Sexuality: A Catholic Perspective for Education and

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to homosexuals & their families