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New Ways Ministry: 'much to do with peoples' struggle, pain, little about sex'

by Francis DeBernardo

?I feel like they have slapped me in the face again.?

That sentence was emailed to me yesterday by a Catholic lesbian woman after she learned that Cardinal Francis George issued a negative ?clarification? concerning New Ways Ministry. Like many lesbian/gay Catholics, this woman perceived George?s statement as directed not so much towards the organization which I direct, but towards herself and her lesbian /gay sisters and brothers in the Church.

Judging from past experience, I know that this woman?s sentiment will be experienced many times over by the thousands of Catholic lesbian/gay people whom I have met in my 15 years of working in this ministry. These are faith-filled Catholics, many of whom have been active in church life for many years, who regularly feel beaten down by hierarchical statements which lack any evidence that their issuers know anything about the reality of lesbian/gay lives. These are people who continue to seek bread from church leaders and instead are handed stones.

Who are these people? Well, one such person is Karen, a youth minister I know who happens to be a lesbian. Karen is well-respected in the parish where she works. She is a quiet and steady presence not only to the teens she serves, but to her colleagues on the parish staff. When I?ve asked her where she gets her inner calmness, she says that she unexpectedly developed this spiritual gift when she came to an awareness of her lesbian orientation. Though she is an honest person, no one in the parish knows what her orientation is. Karen is afraid she will lose her job if it is revealed.

Then there?s Joseph, who had been a member of a religious order for several years and who was dismissed because it became known that he was a gay man. Joseph struggled for many years with depression following this turmoil in his life. Despite belonging to a gay support group in his parish, the

negative messages Joseph kept hearing from the hierarchy began to overwhelm him. At least that is what he said in the suicide note that he left behind him.

Elizabeth has been a Catholic for almost 70 years, but now describes herself as "on sabbatical" from the church. When her daughter revealed that she was a lesbian, Elizabeth found herself in a quandary. While she eventually found her way to accepting her daughter, Elizabeth's husband did not. Tension mounted between the couple, and, after several years of counseling, Elizabeth ended her marriage of three decades. When she turned to her church for support, she continually found none, and, instead, was greeted with negative messages about her daughter.

When Steve's partner Robert died, he turned to his parish for support. They had been together for 38 years. For the past 36 years, Robert had been confined to a nursing home because of a debilitating disease. Steve's faithfulness in visiting and caring for Robert impressed the staff, many of whom, especially in the earlier years, had no idea of the love these two men shared. When Steve went to seek spiritual assistance from his parish after Robert's death, he was turned away, saying that it was not appropriate for him to join the widow/widower's support group.

Stella and David had been Eucharistic ministers in their parish for over two decades. Their ministry ended after they wrote a letter to the local weekly newspaper in support of gay rights. They wrote how their faith in a God of justice impelled them to write in support of their gay son. After that letter appeared, their pastor told them they were no longer considered fit to distribute communion and were dismissed.

Sister Mary came to a New Ways Ministry workshop in the Midwest a few years back. The workshop was only a week away from Sister's golden jubilee of her entrance into religious life. At the end of the day, she approached me to say that though she knew she was a lesbian a half-century ago when she entered the convent, she had never told another person that truth about herself. As a jubilee present to herself, she said she would start to tell the leaders of her community this reality about herself. It wouldn't be easy, but she wanted to make the path easier for younger women in her community who might be experiencing the same spiritual journey that she has had.

When Eileen's 19-year-old niece was thrown out of her parents' home because she acknowledged that she was a lesbian, the young girl traveled across the country by bus and hitchhiking to live with her aunt, who is a pastoral minister in a suburban parish. Eileen, trained as a counselor, tried to patch up the family problems, but it would be months before there was even the slightest break in the wall of adamancy that the girl's parents had created. What made reconciliation so difficult is that these parents' actions were supported by what they had been taught in their parish as the proper thing to do if faced with a child who declared homosexuality.

What is remarkable about all these stories—and the many more that I can recount—is that none of them involve sexual activity. They all involve personal struggle, intense love, and, unfortunately, pain caused by the repetition of a teaching which fixates solely on sexual activity as the be all and end all of a lesbian/gay person's life.

Anyone who has taken the time to listen to the stories of the lives of lesbian/gay people will come to realize that guidance about sexual activity is not where they need help most. It is the areas of living truthfully, openly, honestly, and courageously—the areas which consume most of their time and energy—where they seek the support of the Church.

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For 33 years, New Ways Ministry has called on bishops to engage in dialogue with lesbian/gay Catholics so that these pastoral leaders can know the reality of the lives of whom they speak. A few have done so and have had their eyes opened up to a new world. Too many others have chosen to put their heads in the sand and have become oblivious not only to the lives which they so cavalierly discuss, but to the pain that such discussions add to these people's experiences.

[Francis DeBernardo is the executive director of New Ways Ministry.]

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