

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

January 25, 2011 at 11:33am

The twelve steps of Courage: a stairway to denial

by Jamie Manson

Grace on the Margins

At a time when the Roman Catholic Church in the United States is alienating more people than welcoming them, they seem to have found a new friend in Bill W.

The Colorado Springs diocese has decided to launch "The Twelve Steps of Courage," one of the programs of Courage International, which was founded by Fr. John Harvey in 1980.

Courage boasts 110 chapters worldwide dedicated to helping gay Catholics lead celibate lives. As the new program's name indicates, it is modeled after the Twelve Step recovery process practiced by groups like Alcoholics Anonymous.

Given that Colorado Springs is the home base of Focus on the Family (for whom Christian-based, anti-gay propaganda is a cottage industry), and given that its bishop, Michael Sheridan, is the prophet of denying Eucharist to certain Catholic voters and politicians, it's a wonder they didn't promote the Twelve Steps of Courage decades ago.

Unlike their Evangelical neighbors, the priests facilitating this chapter of Courage insist that homosexuality cannot be cured through "reparative therapy" programs. They claim to support the Catholic doctrine that homosexuality is not a choice and is not a sin in itself.

"It's not about therapy and not about activism," said Fr. Larry Brennan, director of priest formation for the diocese of Colorado Springs. "It's about support."

And yet, if you put the Twelve Steps of Courage and the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous side by side, there is only one difference between the two lists. Courage places the word "homosexuality" where AA has the word "addiction."

The first step of the new program reads like this:

"We admitted that we were powerless over homosexuality and our lives had become unmanageable."

Since both programs use identical language, how could one not conclude that Courage encourages gay people to view their sexual orientations the same way addicts view their addictions? What other goal could there be than some form of recovery?

In his masterpiece, *Addiction and Grace*, psychiatrist and spiritual director Gerald May defines addiction as "a state of compulsion, obsession, or preoccupation that enslaves a person's will and desire."

He continues: "Addiction sidetracks and eclipses the energy of our deepest, truest desire for love and goodness. . . . it erodes an individual's freedom, will, and capacity for love."

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Programs such as AA help addicts find a way to admit their powerlessness against their addiction. An addict surrenders her will and her life to her Higher Power in the hope of driving herself toward greater personal and spiritual growth.

On the contrary, the Twelve Steps of Courage asks not for surrender to God, but for submission to a doctrine that demands that a gay person repress her God-given sexual orientation. Rather than helping a gay person find ways to integrate her sexuality into the whole of her being, it fractures any development toward a healthy relationship with her sexuality.

Programs like AA help addicts shatter the delusion that they can control their compulsive, habitual behaviors. It helps them break free of their fixation on self-destructive needs, and helps them regain their presence to themselves and their relationships. By moving away from the enslavements of addiction, they enter into a new freedom that allows them to begin to rebuild their lives.

The Twelve Steps of Courage, on the other hand, forces a gay person to treat his innate sexual orientation as negative, compulsive behavior that needs to be controlled.

Rather than freeing a gay person from the "burden" of his sexuality, the program enables him to fixate on his sexuality as something shameful and in need of suppression. By promoting such a painful, internal struggle, the Twelve Steps of Courage can limit a person's capacity to create healthy, loving relationships.

Rather than liberating him, this program ultimately stunts a gay person's freedom to develop into the beloved creation that God intended.

If there were a connection between addiction and homosexuality, it would be that some gay and lesbian people *become* addicts when they are made to feel ashamed of their God-given desires.

The emotional turmoil of being told that their acts of intimacy are intrinsically disordered has caused some to seek out drugs or alcohol to numb them from the pain. Others have become addicted to self-destructive behaviors as a way to cope with or avoid the spiritual agony of repressing an authentic desire to love.

Brennan, of course, would deny that Courage makes this connection between homosexuality and addiction. He insists that those coming to the program are seeking "self-acceptance and self-restraint." They need to practice such restraint, he says, because, "The exercise of sexuality is reserved for marriage and that can only happen between a man and a woman."

But like so many Catholic defenders of marriage, Brennan fails to mention that this same doctrine applies to heterosexuals who have sex outside of the bonds of marriage. As psychologist and systematic theologian Daniel Helminiak writes, "Just as it is objectively wrong for unmarried heterosexuals to engage in sex, so too are homosexual acts considered to be wrong."

Once again, the hierarchy conveniently forgets that all non-married individuals should practice chastity, not just gay and lesbian people.

We all know that many single heterosexual Catholics have active sex lives. Shouldn't the church also offer them support in their attempt to retrain their sexual needs? Surely some of them must feel that their lives are unmanageable because they, too, are powerless over their desires for sex.

If we follow Brennan's line of thinking, wouldn't it be equally pastoral to create Twelve Steps of Restraint for Straight, Single Catholics?

Of all of the problems and inconsistencies of the Twelve Steps of Courage, perhaps its most harmful aspect is the way it perpetuates denial -? ironically, the very behavior that addicts strive to overcome.

The Courage program aids the hierarchy in denying that same-sex relationships have as much potential for personal growth and spiritual depth as heterosexual relationships. The sad thing is, many Catholic clerics in the United States are already well aware of this truth. Some have seen it in their families and in their parishioners, and some have even experienced it themselves.

But denial is what the hierarchy seems to model best these days: whether it's denying communion to women religious who use their consciences, denying justice for sexual abuse survivors, or denying the dignity of women called to ordained ministry.

It is, of course, the prerogative of the hierarchy to continue to tow the denial line. I only wish that they would refrain from co-opting the value and the power of the Twelve Step tradition in the process.

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