

Decade after defiance, Jeannine Gramick as hopeful as ever

Jamie Manson | Jul. 11, 2011 Grace on the Margins

It's been more than a decade since the Vatican attempted to silence Sr. Jeannine Gramick and Fr. Robert Nugent from their work with gay and lesbian Catholics.

Though Nugent agreed in 2000 to abide by the church's prohibition on speaking and writing about homosexuality, Gramick politely declined. In a statement that has become a mantra for many Catholics who seek reforms in the institutional church, Gramick responded, "I choose not to collaborate in my own oppression."

A newspaper story about her struggle with the Vatican caught the eye of a straight, feminist, New York filmmaker. Barbara Rick, herself a lapsed Catholic, was stunned by the nun's courageous story of defiance. "A woman standing up to the church really got to me," she told the audience.

Rick's nonprofit documentary company, Out of the Blue Films, is "devoted to exceptional storytelling that explores, articulates, and celebrates humanity." Like a true documentarian, she saw film in Gramick's story.

Four years later, *In Good Conscience: Sister Jeannine's Journey of Faith* premiered at Lincoln Center as part of the 2004 Independents Night series.

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Gramick and Rick reunited in Manhattan during New York City's Pride Week this year in a program titled "Clips and Conversation," hosted by the Strand, a legendary independent book store in the heart of Union Square. Seeing the chemistry between the pair, with their equal wit and passion for justice, it is little wonder they were able to create a film that is as humorous and playful as it is moving and inspiring.

Rick recounted the story of bringing aboard Albert Maysles, considered by many the "dean of documentary filmmaking," to shoot the film. During a meeting with Maysles, Rick ran through a bunch of ideas for film projects. Gramick's story made him sit up in his seat and ask eagerly, "Do you have anyone to shoot it?"

Grasping Maysles attention was no small feat given that his works include the cult classic *Grey Gardens*, a

riveting portrait of an eccentric mother and daughter secluded in a deteriorating mansion, and *Gimme Shelter*, a profile of the Rolling Stones widely considered one of the greatest rock and roll movies.

With Maysles behind the camera, Rick followed Gramick for over two years. They shot some candid, amusing scenes, like Gramick's morning exercise regimen and her friend's poking fun at her new, "poofy" hairdo. But they also captured compelling moments, like when Gramick encounters anti-gay protestors on a picket line during the U.S. bishops' 2002 meeting in Dallas.

The picket line scene is the most popular episode in the movie, Rick told the audience at the Strand. It's also a scene that almost didn't happen.

"I didn't want to go talk to the protestors?I don't like conflict," Gramick laughingly admitted. But Rick knew well that all films need tension, so she sent Gramick over to talk with a particularly impassioned picketer. Her good direction proved to be revelatory.

Gramick approaches the man, named Michael, who is protesting gay priests, and tries to converse with him. At first, he is belligerent, insisting that there is an underground gay agenda ruining the priesthood. Gramick, seemingly with little effort, interacts with Michael at a human level.

After they talk for a while, he realizes that he is speaking to Sister Gramick, a woman he asked his bishop to remove from diocesan property years ago when she offered a retreat to parents of gays and lesbians. A flash of sorrow runs across his face as Gramick gently tells him how much that action hurt the families.

Though they ultimately cannot agree on their beliefs about homosexuality, they are able to hold hands and pray the Our Father, Hail Mary and Glory Be to God. Maysles positions the camera perfectly so that their hands were in the center of the frame.

The scene captures a living example of the beatitudes. Watching Gramick engage the protestor, one understands how blessed peacemakers truly are. Their joined hands brilliantly exemplify why Jesus asks us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. With her patience, Gramick finds compassion for this man and together they are able to find mutual respect for their mutual love of the Church.

For Gramick, the scene shows how crucial it is to establish a personal connection with our "opponents" before engaging in heavy intellectual disagreements with them. It is an opportunity increasingly lost in our virtual age where detractors can viciously attack one another anonymously, for all web surfers to read.

Reflecting on the clip of this scene, Rick still seemed struck by the power of its example: "Until Sister Jeannine, I have never met anyone who is able to get this positive message across and follow her conscience and what she believes in without rancor? To do this work without any venom?it's pretty close to Jesus."

For Gramick it is rancor that separates the holy anger of a prophet from destructive anger.

"Anger that eats you up inside and makes you feel badly about yourself and the person you're angry at," she says, is unhealthy for the spirit. "But anger that makes you want to do something positive, anger that "puts gas in your tank" is the type of anger that leads to justice."

Though the film centers on Gramick's defiance of the Church's edict, she believes it's time to move beyond negative terms when we talk about our conscientious objections to church authorities.

"It's following the call of God," she says. "It's thinking, studying, praying, in order to come to a decision which may or not be what a moral authority teaches. It's a positive thing. It's obedience to the Spirit."

While she maintains a remarkably hopeful disposition toward the institutional church, Gramick isn't unrealistic. When asked by an audience member whether she thought a greater acceptance of gays and lesbians by the hierarchy was on the horizon, Gramick said that she believes change will happen because change is part of church history.

"But because I know church history, I know change takes centuries," she says.

Of course, she cannot leave that thought without a positive spin.

"We are planting seeds for change at the upper level of leadership," she said. Gramick reminded her listeners that before of Vatican II, scholars and liturgists spent years laying the groundwork for the reforms brought about by the Council. Vatican II, she said, was "more evolutionary than revolutionary."

Gramick is also honest about the fears plaguing the laity when faced with challenging the clergy: "It's hard to go against those we have been trained to think are 'the experts.' But we have to learn to trust God within us."

As greater numbers of lay people discover the courage of their convictions, the church will continue to change because "the church" is the people of God.

"When we started this work, only 20 percent of Catholics believed in equal rights for gays and lesbians," Gramick said. "Now it's over 73 percent. . . . The church is moving."

So, these days, when Gramick is asked what the church believes, she always tells the person what the majority of the members of the Catholic community believe, rather than the teachings of the hierarchy.

For Gramick, it is more important than ever that the laity exercise their consciences because that is what truly leads to change.

Harkening back to her film's title, she reminded the audience, "That's what conscience is. It's the voice of God speaking in our hearts. We need to trust that and not separate ourselves from the spiritual treasures of the church. That's our spiritual heritage."

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

To learn more about *In Good Conscience*, including clips from the film, visit www.ingoodconscience.com [1]. Further information about Barbara Rick's work can be found at www.outofthebluefilms.com [2].

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