

Sexual diversity, the Catholic Church, and all that remains unsaid

Jamie Manson | Sep. 14, 2011 | Grace on the Margins

If you've visited the *NCR* Web site recently, you may have noticed an ad for a series of conferences entitled "More than a Monologue: Sexual Diversity and the Catholic Church." This Friday, the first of four conferences kicks off at Fordham University's Lincoln Center campus.

The Fordham gathering will center on the theme "Learning to Listen: Voices of Sexual Diversity and the Catholic Church." It will feature a full day of panel discussions from a diverse group of writers, scholars, ministers, and lay Catholic leaders.

Some panelists are gay and lesbian Catholics. Of that group, some are in committed relationships, while others proudly lead celibate lives in accordance with the church's teaching.

Some panelists are heterosexual. One panelist is a Catholic parent of a gay son, and another ministers to gays and lesbians in a Catholic parish.

Hearing the words "sexual diversity" and "Catholic Church" in the same phrase, it would be easy to write off such a conference as another attempt to challenge the church's teaching on homosexuality.

Not so, says Paul Lakeland, professor of theology at Fairfield University and one of the key organizers of the entire "More than a Monologue" series. As one of Lakeland's colleagues at Fairfield this semester, I had the opportunity to chat with him about the impetus for the conferences.

For Lakeland, none of these conferences has as its agenda to attack the church's teaching on homosexuality.

"All of these conferences are addressing issues that are left open by the church teaching," he said. Though the hierarchy is explicit in its understanding of same-sex relations, he said there are questions that arise out of its teaching that have not and will not go away.

"The title 'More than A Monologue' means that there is so much more to be said."

"The official church teaching recognizes that what they are calling gay and lesbian Catholics to do is difficult," Lakeland points out. "What we're doing is exploring aspects of the challenges of the life of gay and lesbian Catholics in the church."

The organizers of "More than a Monologue" have designed the conferences to respond to a number of these challenges: What is the actual experience of gay and lesbian Catholics? What can be done about the rates of suicide for teens and college age gay and lesbian students? What is the appropriate relationship between the church and the state over same-sex marriage? How do we care pastorally for gays and lesbians in the church in the light of the hierarchy's teaching? How do gay and lesbian ministers feel about caring pastorally for people?

"These issues are important even for gays and lesbians who have decided to do what the church has asked of

them," Lakeland said.

I will be one of the many panelists welcomed at Fordham this weekend. As I prepare my presentation, I am struck by the truth of Lakeland's argument. Both my own story as a lesbian Catholic and the dozens of stories that I have encountered during my years of ministry show me how much of the gay, lesbian, and transgendered Catholic experience remains unexamined.

One experience, in particular, remains seared in my memory.

When I worked as director of faith formation at a Catholic parish in Manhattan, among my responsibilities was preparing parents for the baptism of their infants. The parish was known in many circles for its ministry to gays and lesbians. And, through some grace, even gay people who stayed away from the church for years knew that this parish would welcome them to receive the sacraments and to find community, without fear of judgment or rejection.

From time to time gay parents would come to have their children baptized. This was not insignificant since baptisms were performed publicly during regular weekend Masses.

One day a lesbian couple called to ask if it was true that they would be allowed to baptize their child at the parish. I assured them that they and their child would be welcome. At the time, one of the women was about three months pregnant with twin boys. Since it wasn't our practice to schedule baptisms before birth, I asked them to call me after the babies were settled in at home.

About two months later, I received the sad news that the mother had miscarried. So great was this couple's grief that they felt a need for some kind of liturgy, some form of a ritual that would bring them comfort, and assure them that their boys had been received into heaven.

These women did not attend church regularly, but in their time of deepest need, they turned to the church of their upbringing for comfort. They turned to a church that had done so much to turn them away. Yet, still, the church's liturgy spoke to their hearts. All they wanted -- for themselves and their children -- were the same rites that would be offered to any grieving Catholic parent.

A priest on staff and I crafted an appropriate liturgy for the women and their family and friends. Since I had worked closely with the couple, the priest invited me to read parts of the service. Dozens of mourners streamed through the doors, many still in disbelief that such an event could take place within the walls of a Roman Catholic parish.

Of all of my experiences in ministry, this was perhaps one of the most clarifying. I saw that the real power and promise of the church flourishes when it transcends its preoccupations with personal morality, and lovingly reaches out to those facing their profoundest moments of despair, confusion, and sorrow.

This one small story is in some ways a meta-narrative about the church's willingness to bestow the sacraments on anyone who approaches them with an authentic desire to share in their God-given grace.

Should the church refuse to offer baptisms to infants if their parents violate a church teaching? Should grieving parents be denied the comforts of the church's rites if those parents are of the same sex? How should the institutional church act on the biblical and theological conviction that nothing can separate us from the love of God?

These are just a few of the challenges that may arise throughout the discourse presented throughout these four conferences. After the Fordham conference, Union Theological Seminary will consider the suicide rate among

LGBTQ teens and college students. Experts from the fields of law and ethics will discuss gay marriage at Yale Divinity School. The final conference, to be held at Fairfield University, will contemplate the relationship between sexual diversity and ministry.

Though it is likely that no consensus or unequivocal solutions to these challenges will be reached, *More than a Monologue?* offers something that is perhaps much more crucial: A dialogue that exemplifies just how much still remains unsaid about sexual diversity and the Catholic Church.

[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.]

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