

Gay Washington senator remains rooted in faith

Julie Gunter | Oct. 11, 2012
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Two churches in Elma, Wash. -- one Catholic, one Episcopal -- share a bond of flesh and blood: Both were built, in part, by state Sen. Ed Murray's paternal and maternal grandparents, respectively. The town commemorates his family in other ways, too: a road, a park, huddled-together headstones in St. Joseph's Cemetery. From these grandparents -- all Irish-born Catholics except for one Protestant grandmother who later converted -- as well as other relatives, Murray inherited an awareness of the "different faces of Catholicism," a keen sensitivity to nuances of faith, ranging from his father's family's traditional stance to his mother's lively theological debates.

Chair of the Washington Senate Ways and Means Committee, Murray holds a position of influence and power, yet he has made it his life's work to represent the vulnerable and marginalized. Since his election to the state's House of Representatives in 1995, he has focused on issues such as affordable housing, transportation and civil rights, including sponsorship of a "marriage equality" law, passed by the legislature in February 2012, that would grant civil marriage to same-sex couples if Referendum 74 is upheld this fall (*NCR*, Sept. 28-Oct. 10).

As a devout Catholic, his decades-long position on this last issue has also invited much scrutiny and debate, not least because he's gay.

Murray's resilient faith and his willingness to speak out on complex issues can be traced to his mother's love of dialogue, especially when related to Blessed Pope John XXIII (whom she adored), and her affinity for Catholic writers such as Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton. At church and at school, Murray's childhood was also infused with Catholic teachings focused on ministry to the poor. Beloved nuns and priests, representative of "a larger family in the best sense of that word," offered support and care, encouraging Murray and his six siblings "to grow in our prayer lives and our commitment to other people," he said.

Murray recalled struggling as a "Latin Mass altar boy" to adjust to a turned-around altar and an English liturgy following the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). Later, as an adolescent, he participated in a popular "Search" youth program, where he met Fr. Michael G. Ryan, a Seattle archdiocesan priest who would become a trusted mentor and friend. That weekend of fellowship and insight proved a prelude to future spiritual retreats of a more cloistered sort that Murray would seek out one weekend each month while completing his studies at the University of Portland, a Catholic institution in Oregon.

Situated near Lafayette, Ore., on acreage that includes old-growth forests, walking trails, creeks and ponds, Our Lady of Guadalupe Trappist Abbey has served as a spiritual sanctuary since 1955. There, Murray explored the contemplative and mystical traditions of prayer, structured his days according to the *horarium*, and read of John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila and Francis of Assisi, as well as Buddhist writers. He learned to listen in a new way, from within. "Through silence, solitude, prayer and meditation, you learn things about yourself -- not always easy things about yourself -- that help you become a more authentic person," Murray said.

At this time, he also encountered official church teachings regarding sexual orientation, in the catechism and

elsewhere, describing homosexual orientation as not sinful, yet deeming homosexual activity "intrinsically disordered." The unavoidable sentence for gay Catholics: a lifetime of celibacy. For years, Murray wallowed in anger and avoided church, deeply hurt.

Then, while staying alone at a cabin for a few days after his second legislative session, Murray picked up *The Cloister Walk* by Kathleen Norris. The Protestant author and poet records her time spent living in monasteries, steeped in Catholic tradition and liturgy. "It was as if a glass wall shattered in front of me," Murray explained. "I realized: This is me. This is my tradition." It was a spiritual homecoming that has, nonetheless, led him to feel at times partially accepted, destined to "always have one foot in and one foot out." Prayerfully grounded yet nimble, possessing an informed conscience that takes into account both doctrine and discernment in light of experience and convictions, Murray continues to set aside time for reflection and renewal at remote monasteries and hermitages when time permits.

Murray said three aspects of his faith keep him rooted: fellow Catholics who "continue to affirm me as a human being and continue to affirm my 21-year relationship with my partner, Michael"; the belief that followers of Christ are called to live with, and love all people, regardless of other factors; and the fact that his prayer life and spirituality continue to be fed and challenged. Murray acknowledged, "My faith has helped me see people who strongly disagree with me as important and wonderful people, even when I can't stand them and they can't stand me."

Just after Easter, Archbishop J. Peter Sartain of Seattle asked for a meeting to discuss a letter the archdiocese had sent to Catholics urging them to vote against legislation granting same-sex couples the right to civil marriage. The archbishop and senator met in the senator's office. After Murray was thanked for his work on social justice issues, the conversation turned to what Murray referred to, simply, as "their disagreement." After some discussion, Murray asked, "Are you going to deny me the sacraments?" According to Murray, Sartain answered, "We're going to continue to be clear on our message but we're going to continue to be welcoming." Murray said he was left "feeling that at least the door hadn't been shut in my face." Sartain's office did not respond to *NCR*'s questions about his meeting with Murray.

Months later, Murray strode toward the entrance of Seattle University's Chapel of St. Ignatius, past its tolling bell tower and reflecting pool. Within, shadows played against eggshell-white walls and the glossy floor; cubes of colored glass splashed prisms of light. The Gospel reading told of Christ drawing a child to him, instructing his disciples to care for others in their midst. Soon, Eucharist preparations would begin to unfold like the altar's ceremonial cloth.

In the raised host, soon to be broken, Murray's own journey toward wholeness offered an apt reflection: "The mystery of Christ, to some extent, is the mystery of finding hope and joy in very, very difficult situations," he said. "Sometimes, I'm very discouraged as a Catholic. Other times, I try to sit in hope and anticipation that we will come around the table and celebrate the Eucharist and heal each other."

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