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Courage needs to make a comeback to create change

by Mary E. Hunt

Perspective

Courage is an old-fashioned virtue that comes in many forms: physical, social and political. I have paid attention to it of late -- both its absence and presence -- in the hope that highlighting courage will make it multiply. A dose of courage would go a long way toward solving many ecclesial and civil problems.

Same-sex love is increasingly seen as part of human diversity, but ugly incidents continue to remind us that courage is still needed to love freely. Nicholas Coppola had been an active parish volunteer at St. Anthony's Parish in Oceanside, N.Y. He visited the sick, taught, raised money, acted as a lector, even served at the altar as an out gay man. Then someone anonymously reported to the local bishop that Coppola had married his partner.

This prompted an auxiliary bishop to inform the pastor, a Jesuit, that "it would be of concern" if someone teaching in a Catholic parish were known to be married in a same-sex union. Fair enough -- congratulations are in order for the happy couple -- but that was not what he meant. The pastor, claiming no options, relieved Coppola of his volunteer duties. Tens of thousands of people signed petitions in support of this generous man who only wanted to serve. Oddly, the bishop of the diocese of Rockville Centre mailed the signatures back without explanation.

I do not know any of these people personally. But what if some of them had acted courageously, standing up to a bishop who made a questionable pastoral judgment based on a timid tip? Both the pastor and the auxiliary bishop who did the dirty work for the bishop could have resisted. Imagine if either had refused to participate and simply told the local bishop he could deliver his own ultimatum to a faithful church volunteer. The shame alone might have stopped this unspeakable incident from occurring.

Feminist philosopher Mary Daly said as a person learns to swim by swimming, you get courage by acting courageously. She meant every dimension of the tautology. Agreed. It takes a certain gumption that these

fellows apparently do not have -- at least not yet.

Others have it. The Rev. Thomas Ogletree -- a theological ethicist, Methodist minister and retired dean of Yale Divinity School -- officiated his son's same-sex wedding. Conservatives in the United Methodist Church are protesting the act.

"Sometimes, when what is officially the law is wrong, you try to get the law changed," Ogletree said. "But if you can't, you break it,"

Thomas Ogletree said of his father, "He does the right thing because he believes in doing the right thing. And then, if there is any question about that, he is willing to stand up and place a claim for that in a public way."

That is a succinct definition of courage one parent passed on to his child.

Some people develop courage eventually. Cardinal João Braz de Aviz, prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for Religious, revealed recently he was not involved in the discussions that led the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to order a reform of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, an order that precipitated a massive negative reaction. By his account, the Vatican situation was a case of the left hand not knowing what the right hand was doing. He admitted humbly with obvious regret that at the time, he "didn't have the courage to speak." Pity, because it might have averted a major rift that will take a long time to repair. But now that he has summoned the courage, I hope the dynamics will begin to change.

Basketball player Jason Collins displayed what one sportswriter called "social courage" by coming out as the first openly gay man in a major professional sport. Good for him. Billie Jean King, Martina Navratilova, Brittney Griner and scores of other out lesbians in the women's sports world did not merit calls from the president and well-wishers by the thousands, but I will save that for another day. The point is that courage, wherever it is exhibited, is cause for celebration.

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Hunger striking prisoners at Guantanamo are a contemporary profile in courage. Regardless of their alleged crimes, it is high time to close the prison. Witness Against Torture has an active petition campaign designed to spur President Barack Obama to courageous action. What remains to be seen is just what the president's moral tipping point is in a complex situation. Guantanamo is a long, drawn-out political disaster that has been simplified quite dramatically by the unspeakable force-feeding of courageous inmates. Sometimes courage comes too late.

Anne McGrew Bennett, one of the great pioneers of feminist theology, was courageous on multiple levels. She was arrested for disorderly conduct trying to speak with draft records officials in 1970; was relentless in her efforts to bring about inclusive symbols and images in Christian prayer, worship and theology; and was a founder of the Gray Panthers.

"She insisted on things that other people postponed insisting on," her son said. Timing is all in acts of courage.

I ponder how or if one can compel another to act courageously. Do we have the right to expect that mere human beings will surmount self-interest and act for the common good? I am not naïve about how

complicated many decisions are -- weighing competing goods, preventing bad outcomes, limiting damage, and all the other complexities that make up a moral calculus. But I do know courage needs to come back into fashion in a big way in our wired time if we expect positive change.

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