

DignityUSA works for respect and justice for all gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons in the Catholic Church and the world through education, advocacy and support.

Why Churches Fear Gay Marriage

The crusade for Proposition 8 was fueled by the broken American family, explains gay Catholic author Richard Rodriguez.

By Jeanne Carstensen with permission from Salon.com
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For author Richard Rodriguez, no one is talking about the real issues behind [California's] Proposition 8.

While conservative churches are busy trying to whip up another round of culture wars over same-sex marriage, Rodriguez says the real reason for their panic lies elsewhere: the breakdown of the traditional heterosexual family and the shifting role of women in society and the church itself. As the American family fractures and the majority of women choose to live without men, churches are losing their grip on power and scapegoating gays and lesbians for their failures.



Richard Rodriguez

Rodriguez, who is Mexican-American, gay and a practicing Catholic, refuses to let any single part of himself define the whole. Born in San Francisco in 1944 and raised by his Spanish-speaking Mexican immigrant parents to embrace mainstream American culture and the English language, he went on to study literature and religion at Stanford and Columbia. His first book, *The Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*, explores his journey from working-class immigrant to a fully assimilated intellectual—angering many Latinos with his view that English fluency is essential. *Days of Obligation: An Argument With My Mexican Father*, which was a Pulitzer Prize finalist in 1993, continued his investigation into how family, culture, religion, race, sexuality and other strands of his life all contribute to the whole, a complex “brownness” of contradictions and ironies. *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*, completes the trilogy—but not his insatiable intellectual curiosity, which he is now shining on monotheism.

Rodriguez' stinging critiques of religious hypocrisy are all the richer for his passionate love of Catholicism and the Most Holy Redeemer parish in San Francisco, where he and his partner of 28 years are devoted members. Today, Rodriguez is at work on a new book about the monotheistic “desert religions”—Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Ever since Sept. 11, 2001, “when havoc descended in the name of the desert God,”

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Rodriguez said in one of his Peabody Award-winning radio commentaries for PBS's *News Hour*, he has been trying to understand the strands of darkness that run through these religions.

Salon spoke to Richard Rodriguez by phone at his home in San Francisco.

What was your reaction to California voters' going heavily for Obama and also passing Proposition 8, banning gay marriage?

I was like a lot of other Americans at the moment when the West Coast tipped the balance in favor of Obama. I didn't so much think it represented the end of racism but the possibility of change. At the same time, I also knew that large numbers of Californians in religious communities were voting against gay marriage and that Latinos and blacks were continuing to take part in this terrible tragedy. We persecute each other. The very communities that get discriminated against discriminate against other Americans.

The Spanish language newspaper *La Opinión* called the results an “embarrassment,” saying “California still has two faces.” Do you agree?

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La Opinión represents the opinion of a lot of Latinos who are more educated and—what should I say?—more cosmopolitan. But Latinos in both my family and the Catholic Church belong to a more traditional America. This is a troubling aspect of the way our country is formed right now. It is a time of great change but also a time when people are afraid of change.

You said recently the real issue behind the anti-gay marriage movement is the crisis in the family. What do you mean?

American families are under a great deal of stress. The divorce rate isn't declining, it's increasing. And the majority of American women are now living alone. We are raising children in America without fathers. I think of Michael Phelps at the Olympics with his mother in the stands. His father was completely absent. He was negligible; no one refers to him, no one noticed his absence.

The possibility that a whole new generation of American males is being raised by women without men is very challenging for the churches. I think they want to reassert some sort of male authority over the order of things. I think the pro-Proposition 8 movement was really galvanized by an insecurity that churches are feeling now with the rise of women.

Monotheistic religions feel threatened by the rise of feminism and the insistence, in many communities, that women take a bigger role in the church. At the same time that women are claiming more responsibility for their religious life, they are also moving out of traditional roles as wife and mother. This is why abortion is so threatening to many religious people—it represents some rejection of the traditional role of mother.

In such a world, we need to identify the relationship between feminism and homosexuality. These movements began, in some sense, to achieve visibility alongside one another. I know a lot of black churches take offense when gay activists say that the gay movement is somehow analogous to the black civil rights movement. And while there is some relationship between the persecution of gays and the anti-miscegenation laws in the United States, I think the true analogy is to the women's movement. What we represent as gays in America is an alternative to the traditional male-structured society. The possibility that we can form ourselves sexually—even form our sense of what a sex is—sets us apart from the traditional roles we were given by our fathers.

I think Proposition 8 was also galvanized by insecurity around gay families.

I agree. But the real challenge to the family right now is male irresponsibility and misbehavior toward women. If the Hispanic Catholic and evangelical churches really wanted to protect the family, they should address the issue of wife beating in Hispanic families and the misbehaviors of the father against the mother. But no, they go after gay marriage. It doesn't take any brilliance to notice that this is hypocrisy of such magnitude

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Begun in 1969 in San Diego, CA under the leadership of Fr. Patrick Nidorf, OSA, first as a counseling group and then a support group in Los Angeles, DignityUSA has been a national organization since 1973 uniting GLBT Catholics, their families and friends.

DignityUSA is an independent 501(c)(3) non-profit organization whose national office is located in the Greater Boston area, with chapters located throughout the United States.

Members gather at local chapters, periodic regional meetings and biennial national conventions.

The **QV** encourages the exchange of opinions, book reviews, reflections, background information, resource materials and essays and articles by established speakers and professionals touching on spirituality, human sexuality and its expression, and the mission of DignityUSA. Of special interest are personal experiences and what has worked well in areas of pastoral ministry, human and social justice issues, leadership, chapter and faith community building.

Opinions expressed in reflections, reviews, letters, etc., are those of their authors and not necessarily those of DignityUSA.

that you blame the gay couple living next door for the fact that you've just beaten your wife.

The pro-8 campaign calls itself the Protect Family Movement, even though the issue of family was the very reason gays needed to have marriage. There are partners in gay unions now who have children, and those children need to be protected. If my partner and I had children, either through a previous marriage or because we adopted them, I would need to be able to take them to the emergency room. I would need to be able to protect them with the parental rights that marriage would give me. It was for the benefit of the family that marriage was extended to homosexuals.

Religions have the capacity for being noble and ennobling but they are also the expression of some of the darkest impulses in us—to go after the “other.” For Christians, if the other isn't

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the Muslim, it's the homosexual. That is the most discouraging part.

Speaking of hypocrisy, churches have plenty of sexual skeletons in their closet.

Right. The Mormon Church has this incredible notoriety in America for polygamy and has been persecuted because of it. The very church that became notorious because of polygamy is now insisting that marriage is one man and one woman. That is, at least, an irony of history. But as a number of Mormon women friends of mine say, the same church that espouses the centrality of family in their lives is also the church that urges them to reject their gay children.

Then there is the Roman Catholic Church, my own church, which has just come off this extraordinary season of sexual scandal and misbehavior in the rectory against children. The church is barely out of the court and it's trying to assume the role of governor of sexual behavior, having just proved to America its inability to govern its own sexual behavior.

Look at the evangelicals. In their insistence that people be born again, they know Americans are broken. In their circus-tent suburban churches, you find 10,000 people on a Sunday morning. You find people who have been divorced, people who have had drug experiences, people who have been in jail. These churches touch upon a dream that people can put their lives back together again.

Now these churches are going after homosexuals as a way of insisting on their own propriety. They are insisting that they have a role to play in the general society as moral guardians, when what we have seen in the recent past is just the opposite. I mean, it's one thing for the churches to insist on their right to define the sacrament of marriage for their own members. But it's quite another for them to insist that they have a right to define the relationships of people outside their communities. That's really what's most troubling about Proposition 8. It was a deliberate civic intrusion by the churches.

I wonder if these churches sense they're losing some of the influence they've had for the past eight years.

To my knowledge, the churches have not accepted responsibility for the Bush catastrophe. Having claimed, in some cases, that Bush was divinely inspired and his election was the will of God, they have failed to explain why the last eight years have been so catastrophic for America.

Now I think evangelicals are falling back on issues that have been reliable for them in the past. Mike Huckabee, a Baptist minister, who said that children of immigrants should be educated, was essentially frightened away from that position by Mitt Romney. The tentativeness of the evangelicals on immigration only allowed them to be more vociferous on the

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gay issue. That's traditionally easy for them—to go after the sinner. But it doesn't convince me of their ascendancy; it merely convinces me that they are retreating. They don't know how to extend their agenda beyond gay marriage and abortion.

There's going to be an ongoing legal battle over Proposition 8. How do you think gay activists should proceed?

I think gay activists should be very careful with this issue. We should not present ourselves as enemies of religion. I am not prepared to leave the Roman Catholic Church over this issue. The Catholic Church is my church. I was a little concerned about the recent protests outside the Los Angeles Mormon temple. I've seen this sort of demonstration escalate into a sort of deliberate exercise of blasphemy.

For example, in the most severe years of the AIDS epidemic, activists from ACT UP went into St. Patrick's Cathedral, took the communion wafer and threw it on the ground. That is exactly the wrong thing to do. One should be respectful of the religious impulse in the world. If we decide to make ourselves anti-religious, we will only lose.

But religious communities must be challenged too. I was in Jerusalem a couple of years ago for Gay Pride. All the leaders of religious communities—Muslim, Jew and Christian—were brought together by their mutual animosity toward gay activism to protest the parade. There was the grand patriarch of the Eastern churches, the high rabbi of Jerusalem, the Roman Catholic archbishop, the mullahs, and they were all united in one cause. The police outnumbered the parade participants. One marcher was attacked and stabbed by an Orthodox Jew.

We have to be very clear about male violence within the monotheistic religions. This is a failure within churches and we can't be casual about it. But we can't be casual about the importance of religion either. We need to be both respectful of religion and critical of religion. Otherwise I suspect we won't get very far at all.

What do you think about gay rights as universal rights? Many argue that it's a cultural issue and that specific communities, such as Latinos and blacks, have their own understanding of homosexuality and shouldn't be messed with.

In my own my family, and my parents were not well educated, it would have been impossible for them to have dealt with the words "gay" or "homosexual" in my relationship with them. But there was no way for them to reject me either. I was a member of the family and I couldn't sin my way out of it.

Once my partner became part of my life, he became part of their life too. They didn't want it said, they didn't want it named or defined, but they assumed it and accepted it. At family events, when my partner wasn't there, my mother would get on the phone and call him and insist he come over.

These communities have very intricate ways of dealing with these things and they are not necessarily the highly politicized tactics that you see in traditional middle-class society in America.

I have not been to a Mexican family without some suspicion of homosexuality in children or grandchildren. But people deal with it within the larger context of family. That's why I suspect the revolution will come not from the male church but from how women treat their children, and whether or not women are willing to reject their children. I don't think they are. I saw too many times during the AIDS epidemic that when death came and the disease took its toll, if one parent was there, it was almost always the mother and not the father. That bond is so powerful.

I also think about the role of gays as caregivers to the elderly parent while siblings are too busy with their children. At the Most Holy Redeemer Church in San Francisco, which is the gay Roman Catholic parish, a number of old Irish women essentially adopted the gay parishioners, and were adopted by them, because their children had moved to the suburbs, or Pennsylvania, or Orlando, and were no longer in a position to care for them. That's a bond that no one really talks about.

My partner has taken care of many elderly people over the years. They know who he is and they know who I am. But it's unspoken. I don't know how they voted on Tuesday, but I do think that it is their responsibility now to speak out.

Are you saying individual relationships will ultimately be more powerful than organized religion?

Well, I'm working right now in the Middle East on monotheistic religions because I'm very worried about the direction of religion. Ever since Sept. 11, when I heard that prayer being spoken at the moment the planes hit the World Trade Centers, I realized how much darkness there is in religion compared to how much light there is. I am very much concerned with whether or not these religions can be feminized.

The desert religions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—are male religions. Their perception is that God is a male god and Allah is a male god. If the male is allowed to hold onto the power of God, then I think we are in terrible shape. I think what's coming out of Colorado Springs right now, with people like Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council, is either the last or continuing gasp of a male hierarchy in religion. That's what's at stake. And women have a determining role to play. Are they going to go along with this, or are they going to challenge the order?

Well, yes, but then we have the rise of someone like Sarah Palin, who is just one example of how complicated things get in this issue.

Yes, you have Sarah Palin. But you also have women deciding to leave marriages. When a woman decides to leave the kitchen and seek a career outside the family, when a woman decides not to take on the name of her husband, when a woman

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wants to be more than simply the mother of children, when she wants to have some place in the world that is not defined by her family or her husband, that seems to suggest something comparable to what gays experience when they come out of the closet. Notice that both those metaphors of getting out of the kitchen and getting out of the closet are domestic images.

But are you saying Palin represents this?

I'm not that kind of optimist!

It does seem she wants to have a career separate from the family, but in many ways she embodies the old conservative order.

Clearly, what you say is true. I don't see women challenging the male order of things in every case. Wives tolerate all kinds of behavior of fathers toward their children. But I do think it's important that some women are starting to challenge that. The divorce rate suggests that women are not happy with the relationship they have with men. And whatever that unhappiness is, I would like people to know that, as a gay man, I'm not responsible for what's wrong with heterosexual marriage. On the other hand, whatever is wrong with the heterosexual marriage does have some implication for the world I live in. Women are redefining sexuality in a way that's going to make it easier for me to be a gay man.

The formal role of women is also undergoing change in some churches, right?

That's right. The Episcopal Church in America is now under the leadership of a woman. Feminism is going to change a great deal. The most radical people in the Roman Catholic Church are women. They're challenging everything from the priesthood to the male God to what it means to be married. I don't expect to see gay marriage enter these conservative institutions in my lifetime. But I do see change.

I belong to a Catholic parish in San Francisco, where my partner and I are acknowledged by the other people in the parish as a couple. We take communion together, the priests know who we are, they're supportive of who we are, and what we are, and they see us in various roles—giving eulogies to dead friends but also helping to baptize little babies. We're very much a part of that community. That's why I'm not prepared to lose it because some archbishop in Colorado or cardinal in Los Angeles is behind Proposition 8. It is not my church that they're talking about, it's not even my experience of love.

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Richard Rodriguez will be one of two keynote speakers at DignityUSA's 40th Anniversary Celebration Convention in San Francisco, July 2-5, 2009.

An Open Letter to Pope Benedict XVI, Cardinal Levada, Cardinal George and all Bishops of the Roman Catholic Church in the World on the Issue of Homosexuality

By John J. McNeill, January 2009, with permission



John McNeill

My initial open letter of November 2000 was addressed to the American Bishops at their annual conference. In the past eight-plus years, the contents of the letter have taken on greater relevance and force in the light of new scientific discoveries concerning the nature of homosexual orientation and the psychological and spiritual needs of GLBT people, their families and loved ones, as well as recent statements from the Roman Catholic Church's teaching authority out of touch with those discoveries.

As a result, I would like to readdress the letter to the following: Pope Benedict XVI; Cardinal William Levada, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF); Cardinal Francis George, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) and his fellow American bishops and, finally, to all the bishops of the Roman Catholic Church in the world.

Catholic gay and lesbian people demand that, if the Church wants to be seen as their loving mother, mediating to us God's unconditional love, the Church has no choice except to enter into dialogue with its gay members.

In 1974, the delegates of DignityUSA's first national convention requested in a letter that a dialogue be opened between the American bishops and the members of the Catholic gay and lesbian community. With very few exceptions that letter was ignored.

Now, 38 years later, once again I call for open dialogue.

For over 38 years, I have ministered as priest and psychotherapist to lesbians and gays. I helped found Dignity/New York to provide a safe and loving community within the Catholic Church for gay people. For over 33 years, I have given retreats for lesbians and gays at KirkrIDGE, an ecumenical retreat center.

I have written four books on gay spirituality: *The Church and the Homosexual*; *Taking a Chance on God*; *Freedom, Glorious Freedom* and *Sex As God Intended: A Reflection on Human Sexuality As Play*. I also published an autobiography on my own spiritual journey as a gay priest. As a result of my experience, I have come to the conclusion that what is at stake at this point in time is not only the spiritual and psychological health of many gay and lesbian Catholics and other lesbian

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and gay Christians, as well as their families and loved ones. What is at stake is your moral authority to teach on the issue of homosexuality.

In the past, when you undertook a listening process to hear what the Holy Spirit was saying through the People of God, you won our respect. We respected you when you made your statements on the economy, on nuclear warfare and, especially, your aborted effort to draw up a letter on the role of women in the Church. You listened carefully to what women had to say, and drew up your statements responding to what you heard from women. These actions gave us gay and lesbians reason to hope that the Holy Spirit would lead you into a spirit of willingness to listen to us gay and lesbian Catholics.

What is at stake now is your own moral authority! Unless we gay and lesbian Catholics receive the message that you take us seriously and are willing to listen carefully to what the Holy Spirit is saying to you through our lives and our experience, your judgments on homosexuality will be ignored, for the most part, and you will lose what authority you have left to deserve to be listened to with respect on this issue.

I have never heard the same level of courage from the American bishops in dealing with the Vatican as that shown by the Major Superiors of Religious Men in response to the egregious document issued by The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, entitled, "Some Considerations Concerning Homosexual Persons" as follows:

"We view (this document) as a hindrance to the Church leaders of the United States in this most difficult and sensitive area of human living. We are shocked that the statement calls for discrimination against gay men and lesbian women. We find the reasoning for supporting such discrimination to be strained, unconvincing and counterproductive to our statements and actions to support the pastoral needs and personal dignity of such persons. Far from a help to the bishops and other religious leaders in the United States Catholic Church, the statement complicates our already complex ministry to all people.

"Moreover we find the arguments used to justify discrimination based on stereotypes and falsehoods that are out of touch with modern psychological and sociological understandings of human sexuality. We regret such actions by the CDF and we reaffirm our support for the human rights of all our brothers and sisters."

As a gay Catholic theologian and psychotherapist, I am fully aware of the enormous destruction recent Vatican and USCCB documents, and news items, as well as actions taken by the USCCB and several state Catholic Conferences in the U.S. leading up to the November 2008 elections, have caused in the psychic life of young Catholic gays, and of the violence they will provoke against all gay people. This was compounded further by the initial Vatican reaction and announced opposition to the United Nations proposal sponsored by France and backed by 27 European Union nations which seeks to end the practice

of criminalizing and punishing people for their sexual orientation—their very human nature and spiritual being. I find myself in a dilemma—what kind of faith and trust can I place in a teaching authority that I see clearly acts in an unloving, hateful and destructive way toward my gay family and is more interested in defending its institutional interest than it is in truth and justice?

In the name of the thousands of gay and lesbian Catholics and other Christians to whom it has been my God-given privilege to minister, I make this statement:

At this point, the ignorance and distortion of homosexuality, and the use of stereotypes and falsehoods in official Church documents, forces us who are gay Catholics to issue the institutional Church a serious warning. Your ignorance of homosexuality can no longer be excused as inculpable; it has become a deliberate and malicious ignorance. In the name of Catholic gays and lesbians everywhere, we cry out "Enough!"

Enough! Enough of your distortions of Scripture. You continue to claim that a loving homosexual act in a committed relationship is condemned in Scripture, when competent scholars are nearly unanimous in acknowledging that nowhere in Scripture is the problem of sexual acts between two gay men or lesbian women who love each other, ever dealt with, never mind condemned. You must listen to biblical scholars to find out what Scripture truly has to say about homosexual relationships.

Enough! Enough of your efforts to reduce all homosexual acts to expressions of lust, and your refusal to see them as possible expressions of a deep and genuine human love. The second group you must listen to are competent professional psychiatrists and psychotherapists from whom you can learn about the healthy and positive nature of mature gay and lesbian relationships. They will assure you that homosexual orientation is both not chosen and unchangeable and that any ministry promising to change that orientation is a fraud.

Enough! Enough of your efforts through groups like Courage and other ex-gay ministries to lead young gays to internalize self-hatred with the result that they are able to relate to God only as a God of fear, shame and guilt and lose all hope in a God of mercy and love. What is bad psychology has to be bad theology!

Enough! Enough again, of your efforts to foster hatred, violence, discrimination and rejection of us in the human community, as well as disenfranchising our human and civil rights. We gay and lesbian Catholics pray daily that the Holy Spirit will lead you into a spirit of repentance. You must publicly accept your share of the blame for gay murders and bashing and so many suicides of young gays and ask forgiveness from God and from the gay community.

Enough! Enough, also, of driving us from the home of our mother, the Church, and attempting to deny us the fullness of human intimacy and sexual love. You frequently base that denial

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by an appeal to the dead letter of the “natural law.” Another group to whom you must listen are the moral theologians who, as a majority, argue that natural law is no longer an adequate basis for dealing with sexual questions. They must be dealt with within the context of interpersonal human relationships.

Above all else, you must enter into dialogue with the gay and lesbian members of the Catholic community. We are the ones living out the human experience of a gay orientation, so we alone can discern directly in our experience what God’s spirit is saying to us.

Today, in life-enriching, supportive environments and networks, you have gay and lesbian Catholic communities of worship and prayer who are seeking individually and collectively to hear what the Spirit is saying to them in their gay experience—what experiences lead to the peace and joy of oneness with the Spirit of God and what experiences lead away from that peace and joy!

God gave you the commission of discerning the truth. But there is no mandate from Jesus Christ to “create” the truth. We pray daily that the Holy Spirit will lead you to search humbly for the truth concerning homosexuality through dialogue with your lesbian sisters and gay brothers.

The only consolation I can offer gay and lesbian Catholics in the meantime is the profound hope that the very absurdity and hateful spirit of recent Vatican and USCCB documents, news items and political actions will lead gay Catholics to refuse them and recognize the contradiction of their message, and that of Jesus, who never once spoke a negative word concerning homosexuals.

I work, hope and pray that lesbian and gay Catholics and other gay Christians will exercise their legitimate freedom of conscience, discerning what God is saying to them directly through their gay experience. I hope, too, that they will be able to de-fang the poisons of pathologically homophobic religion, accepting the good news that God loves them and accepts them as gays and lesbians and refusing to be caught in the vortex of self-hatred vis-à-vis a God of fear.

I believe that we are at the moment of a special “kairos” [ancient Greek for ‘right and opportune moment’] in this matter. The Holy Spirit is “doing something new.” I was the guest at a gay ecumenical community that established homes for adult developmentally challenged people in the city of Basel in Switzerland. The extraordinary spirit of love and compassion that permeated that community was a foretaste of what lies in the future. I believe there is a vast reservoir of human and divine love that has remained until now untapped because of prejudice and homophobia. The Spirit is calling on you to help release that vast potential of human and divine love through your actions.

Please be assured that the actions of Soulforce and DignityUSA at USCCB national conferences are based in profound respect and love. The worldwide prayerful vigils in

December 2008 were to raise our concerned voices over the initial non-supportive posture announced by the Vatican U.N. delegation towards the proposal for decriminalization of homosexuality. We are encouraged by that part of the delegation’s statement of December 19, 2008, which states, “The Holy See continues to advocate that every sign of unjust discrimination towards homosexual persons should be avoided and urges States to do away with criminal penalties against them.”

We pray and hope that the same Holy Spirit who has graciously liberated us who are gay to self-respect and self-love will liberate in you, our Catholic leaders, a profound love for your gay brothers and lesbian sisters and melt away all prejudice and judgmentalism in your hearts. May you make us welcome as full members in your family in Christ.

May God bless your efforts!

Sincerely in Christ
 John J. McNeill

Editor’s Notes:

The open letter to the USCCB of November 2000 is currently popping up on several Internet user groups and blogsites and appears in the Appendix in John’s latest book, *Sex as God Intended: A Reflection on Human Sexuality as Play*.

Since the release of John’s November 2000 open letter, there have been numerous documents and communications promulgated by the Pope, Vatican offices and USCCB on matters related to homosexuality, even more so during 2007 and 2008. Except for minor nuances, they contain the same repetitive rhetoric. Repetition of falsehoods, erroneous interpretations, bad and misapplied logic doesn’t make for “the truth” and mitigates our trust and respect of “the teaching authority.”

It is important to recognize that John is addressing the implications, boundaries and use of the words “homosexual” and “homosexuality” by the Church’s “teaching authority.” While John makes reference to “gays and lesbians,” the Church “authorities” consider such words as cultural or political identification and distinctions. For the most part, homosexuals are adjudged to be defective or disordered heterosexuals. Homosexuality is generally relegated to homosexual behavior or activity. They by and large steer clear of the term “homosexual orientation” and prefer the reference to “homosexual inclination.”

I was in communication with John from the last week of December 2008 through early January 2009. I learned he had but one response from a bishop of the United States in response to his initial open letter. John has issued this update and said that while announced as an open letter to the Pope, Cardinals Levada and George and the bishops of the world, it was also directed to ordinary gay Catholics for their discernment and investigation of personal and collective lived experience.

John suggests that the more out-of-touch the hierarchy of the Catholic Church becomes, “...the more we learn in a painful way

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to let go and grow up spiritually.” He calls it “...the blessing of fallibility. We are witnessing the birth pangs of the Church of the Holy Spirit.”

I feel the updated open letter does more than challenge the “moral authority” or credentials of the “teaching church.” It reinforces the role of personal and collective conscience in moral decision-making. It revalidates the role and ministry of DignityUSA and its chapters, New Ways Ministry, Fortunate Families, parish ministries that are supportive of and welcoming to GLBT persons and other supportive Catholic faith communities and organizations. It may give pause to the continuing exodus from the Catholic Church by those exercising primacy of conscience in loving and supportive Catholic faith communities, rather than relying upon the validation or acceptance by the institutional church hierarchy.

Like a prophet, John McNeill calls and leads us to discernment of the Spirit, and to intellectual and spiritual growth.

John McNeill will present a workshop on his latest book Sex as God Intended at DignityUSA's 40th Anniversary Celebration Convention in San Francisco, July 2-5, 2009.

Parents of Gays, Lesbians: Stories of Love, Pain, Joy

By Thomas C. Fox, National Catholic Reporter Editor, with permission

NCR Publication date: November 28, 2008

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This is a love story, shaped by sadness, pain and hope, and it began in November 1983 when a 19-year-old boy sat down with his mother on their living room sofa and with tears in his eyes, said, “Mom, I’m lonely. I’m lonely for another man.”

As the mother, Mary Ellen Lopata of Rochester, N.Y., tells the story, her son, Jim, wasn’t referring to any man in particular. His words, “I’m lonely,” simply described his experience of longing for companionship as a gay man. Lopata recounts that it took years from that encounter for her to face and process her pain and years longer before she had the courage to share her story with others. “I was shocked and confused. I cried and cried.”

That moment marked the beginning of what for Lopata has been a 25-year journey that has done nothing less than revolutionize her life, and give solace to countless other gay and lesbian children and their parents. Lopata’s conversion—and that’s what it was—has, by the accounts of many, reshaped the way countless Catholics, and in some cases their bishops, view and receive gay and lesbian persons.



Tom Fox

At first Lopata, echoing stories of other Catholic parents of gay and lesbian children, felt isolated. Her son, she said, was the first gay person she had ever known, and just by being himself he challenged the stereotypes she had of gay people.

“The only thing I knew for sure was that I loved my son. Everything else was confusion. Why did this happen? How did it happen? Am I to blame? What does this mean for Jim ... for his family? Is this a sin? What about church? How can we ever tell our friends?”

If knowing other gay persons was a stretch, knowing their parents seemed a further impossibility. She started to research the subject at her local library, being careful not to be too public about the books she was checking out. She said little to outsiders.

It was in 1987 that Lopata took another step. Her parish decided to hold a workshop on homophobia and homosexuality. She worked behind the scenes to publicize it. “The most important thing that workshop did was to break the silence around homosexuality. I came away from that experience knowing that if I loved my son as I said I did, I could not remain silent. Somewhere along the way, I began to realize what a special gift Jim is to me, to our family, and the whole body of Christ—not in spite of, but because he is gay.”

That’s the conversion, or core insight, that comes to most parents of gay and lesbian children.

Lopata and her husband, Casey, got increasingly involved in gay and lesbian organizations: New Ways Ministry; Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG); and DignityUSA.

In 2004, the Lopatas, attempting to fill a gap in the gay and lesbian persons network, formed Fortunate Families, based in Rochester, with the mission of ministering to Catholic parents of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender children. It has grown since, becoming a national network that reached out with support and encouragement. As Fortunate Families states: “We connect parents to work for welcome and justice in the church for their lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) children.”

Catholic parents of LGBT children are not just grateful for the organization, they are fervently so.

Terri and Rich Dalke, parents of a gay son, wrote in an e-mail: “Fortunate Families supports us as we value and treasure our family story, learn to speak it and share it with our friends, our family and our faith family. ... Casey and Mary Ellen are the lifeblood of Fortunate Families ... prophets of our day.”

Deb Word, mother of a gay son, wrote: “Casey and Mary Ellen have great insight and a wealth of resource materials. By keeping in touch with Catholic parents on a monthly basis through their newsletters they remind us that the struggle still

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goes on in other homes. They remind us of the need to reach out to our church fathers, to tell our stories, to ‘put a face’ on the issue that our church would sometimes like to sweep under the rug.”

Part of the Fortunate Families culture involves encouraging parents to honor, value and share their stories to break the silence of isolation and oppression. “Once parents reach a point of understanding and affirmation of their LGBT daughter or son,” Mary Ellen Lopata said, “we encourage them to channel their frustration and anger—which is part of the journey—into constructive action to educate others, especially in the church, about the whole and holy lives of gay and lesbian people, and then to stand together for justice.

“Parents are in a unique position to make a difference. Others may not agree with us, but no one, no institution can deny our experience. It is essential that parents first let those in authority know what it is like for parents of LGBT daughters and sons in the Catholic church; and second, be out-and-proud role models for other parents who may not yet know they have an LGBT daughter or son.”

Word says her son is a musician who teaches in urban minority schools. She writes that having a gay child has opened her eyes to other gay children in her parish and diocese who “can’t be out with their own parents.” She is more “out,” she adds, than her son, “because I feel like I can be an activist in ways a gay schoolteacher can’t.”

The Dalkes say that their son has provided “endless blessings,” among them “a deeper level of intimacy and trust among the three of us, an opportunity to face our own homophobia, to become educated, to live our own ‘coming out’ process as parents, a deepening of our faith, and experiences unlike any others we had ever taken.”

“The greatest burden,” they added, “was to learn that our son was in so much pain and we didn’t know it. That he felt his choices were to come out to us or to commit suicide. He said he felt that by coming out to us he risked losing us forever, due to our active involvement within the Catholic church, basing that on things he read and heard the hierarchy of the church write and speak regarding homosexuality.”

Ten years ago, the Dalkes began their own parish ministry called “Outstretched Hands,” ministering locally to the parents of gay sons and lesbian daughters. “What we have learned is that there are families further along in this process and others just beginning.”

Fortunate Families encourages Catholic parents of LGBT children to share their stories as a means of breaking their silence. In 2003, Mary Ellen Lopata wrote a book called *Fortunate Families*, a resource book that tells parents’ stories.

To get a wider understanding of the situations of these Catholic parents, Fortunate Families took a survey last year.

Through its growing network it sent out forms that were completed by 229 parents reporting on 242 LGBT children. Among the principal findings were these:

- Parents are significantly more comfortable now than when they initially learned they had a LGBT child.
- Parents who know at least one other parent of a LGBT person are significantly more comfortable now.
- Parents with higher comfort levels are more likely to share their stories.
- Parents said that advocating for justice in society and church were helpful experiences.
- About half the parents said they were willing to counsel parents of LGBT children.
- Asked if anything else would be helpful to them, one theme eclipsed all others: Parents want the institutional church to be more accepting of LGBT persons.

The pain and discouragement many Catholic parents of LGBT children feel is difficult to measure from the outside. That’s why storytelling has been so important to them. To those on the outside, some background helps.

The church has taught that homosexual acts are immoral, and until only recently the church held that homosexuality was a chosen lifestyle. In recent years, most scientific evidence has shown it is not chosen, but the product of one’s genetic makeup, part of nature itself. No matter what, the church holds that homosexual persons must remain celibate throughout their lives.

Through the 1970s, as new understandings on homosexuality were entering the culture, Catholic leaders issued various statements that showed deeper understanding while offering more apparent compassion to gay and lesbian persons. Then, in October 1986, Pope John Paul II made his first major statement on homosexuality, marking a departure from some of the more hopeful statements coming out of the church in the decade before.

The statement was written by then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, now Benedict XVI. In harsh and uncompromising language, the document, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, written in English (not Latin) and aimed at the U.S. church, stated: “Although the particular inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin, it is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil; thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder. Therefore special concern and pastoral attention should be directed to those who have this condition, lest they be led to believe that the living out of this orientation in homosexual activity is a morally acceptable option. It is not.”

The key is the phrase “objective disorder.” The Vatican had not used such language before, and it outraged many. The word, in effect, from the Vatican was that even if homosexuality is not freely chosen by each individual, it is nevertheless inherently and objectively wrong. It’s not merely that homosexual activity is wrong, but homosexuality itself—the orientation of being

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emotionally, psychologically and physically attracted to members of the same sex—that is objectively wrong.

In the years that followed, many U.S. bishops used the document, taking a hard line on any gay or lesbian organizing in church institutions, further marginalizing the already marginalized.

In October 1997, in part reacting to the seeming lack of compassion toward LGBT Catholics, and getting input from people like the Lopatas, the U.S. bishops issued a 20-page pastoral message called *Always Our Children*, aimed at the parents of LGBT children. It is the most compassionate and welcoming statement of its kind. It reads in part:

“Every person has an inherent dignity because he or she is created in God’s image. A deep respect for the total person leads the church to hold and teach that sexuality is a gift from God. Being created a male or female person is an essential part of the divine plan, for it is their sexuality—a mysterious blend of spirit and body—that allows human beings to share in God’s own creative love and life.”

Especially encouraging to the Fortunate Family network of parents were words that described their children as children “of God, gifted and called for a purpose in God’s design.” The statement was supportive and compassionate, welcoming and embracing, and came under fire from conservatives in the church.

But the Catholic church’s continued official ambivalence in its response to gay and lesbian persons became clear in November 2006, when the U.S. bishops voted overwhelmingly in favor of a new document called *Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination*. In that declaration they asked Catholics again to welcome gay and lesbian persons into their organizations while using words taken from the 1986 Vatican statement about “disordered” orientations.

Adding to the pain felt by Catholic parents, their LGBT children and others, Bishop Arthur J. Serratelli of Paterson, N.J., chairman of the doctrine committee, which developed the document, admitted his committee never consulted a gay or lesbian person before writing the paper.

To get a sense of how it was received by parents, consider a letter written by a mother of a gay son, sent to the Lopatas about the same time.

“This has been a 10-year journey,” the mother wrote. “With the love and respect of those who came before us, we have been able to move from the pain and sadness, loss and grief, to joy, courage and passion, to have a voice in places that our son cannot, to carry the message that God’s love is given to every person, that this precious son of ours is the same son that we and God conceived, carried, gave birth to, and had baptized into the Catholic family. Although he feels too tired to fight for a place

at the table, we will spend our last breath carrying the message that God loves each of his precious children and we do too.”

In the final analysis, it’s difficult to gauge the impact of the Fortunate Families network, the Lopatas say. “Impact is not always tangible. We talk with people in person, or on the phone, or have e-mail exchanges. Sometimes, not often, we hear back from them that our conversation or the resources we had to offer were helpful in healing a relationship between a parent and a child. Sometimes, often years later, we learn that a parent has attained the knowledge, wisdom, confidence and tenacity to start or be a part of a local Catholic parents of LGBT children’s group, for faith-sharing and community. Most often we don’t know how the story ends.”

But the Lopatas are hopeful. “In the 24 years or so that we’ve been attending and facilitating parents’ retreats and days of reflection, the atmosphere has changed significantly. In the early years, Kleenex stock must have done well as most parents cried and expressed their fears. Now, stock of companies dealing in blood pressure pills must be doing well as most parents express anger, primarily at the institutional church, for how it treats their LGBT daughters and sons.”

Asked what parents without LGBT children do not know about families with them, the Lopatas were quick to offer a hefty list. On the list were these:

- Families without LGBT children may think of sexual orientation only as a “sexual issue.” In fact, this is not about an “issue,” but about who they are.
- They might not know of all the injustices suffered by LGBT persons. They might not realize their duty to stand up for the rights of all God’s children.
- Families with LGBT members know that “gay rights” are not “special” rights, but equal rights.
- Parents without LGBT children will never know that unique assurance that God’s love, of course, extends to an LGBT child exactly as he or she is—without footnotes or an asterisk. Parents of LGBT persons experience the revelation of God’s love in unexpected ways.
- Families not blessed with LGBT children do not realize that families with known LGBT members are fortunate families. Indeed, if you spend much time with a group of Catholic parents of LGBT persons, a whole new stereotype of gay people emerges—one where gay people are paradigms of love, caring and spirituality.

A love story, indeed.

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Mary Ellen and Casey Lopata will present a workshop titled “Catholic Parents’ Journey: From Angst to Advocacy,” at DignityUSA’s 40th Anniversary Celebration Convention in San Francisco, July 2-5, 2009.

For more information on Fortunate Families, see their website www.fortunatefamilies.com.

The Gay Catholic Insurgency

By Brian McNeill, president of Dignity/Twin Cities;
organizer of Rainbow Sash Alliance USA

In a fascinating book I am reading that compares the Soviet Union in its death throes to the current economic and political situation in the United States, I found the following quote. The author is describing the lessons the Red Army learned in Chechnya and Afghanistan.

"A military effort alone can never defeat a popular insurgency. The insurgents never have to win, they just have to continue to fight. In fighting them, the military is forced to fight the people of the country, and by perpetuating a state of war it continually thwarts its stated purpose, which is to establish peace. There is no room for victory in this scenario, but only for an ever-widening spiral of murder, hatred and shame."

Reinventing Collapse, Demitry Orlov (p.40)

We cannot exactly equate the situation of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) Catholics with that of the insurgents of Afghanistan in the 1980s, or Chechnya in the 1990s. However, I think we benefit from thinking of ourselves as insurgents confronting a huge, monolithic adversary. Most gay Catholics who stay in the Church prefer to think of themselves as the loyal opposition rather than insurgents, but during the last twenty years it is clear that the hierarchy does not view us that way. Some might abjure the idea of being in a fight with Church authorities, but I would like to suggest that is exactly where we are. Since the publication of then-Cardinal Ratzinger's 1986 "Halloween Letter," which first described us as "objectively disordered," and "oriented towards an intrinsic moral evil," we have been treated as the enemy.

If, in the above quote, we substitute "church authorities" for "military," and "the Catholic faithful" for "the people of the country," our current situation begins to come into clearer focus. The above quote would then read as follows:

The church authorities can never defeat a truly grassroots movement of the faithful. We, the GLBT insurgents, never need to win, we just have to continue to fight. In fighting against us, the hierarchy is fighting its own people, which thwarts its stated purpose of proclaiming the Gospel, and creating the Reign of God. They will never win as long as we continue our efforts. The harder they fight us, the more they alienate the Catholic faithful and reveal themselves as hypocrites.

I reached these conclusions after a recent, brief exchange with Fr. Thomas J. Kessler, director of Pastoral Formation at the St. Paul Seminary School of Divinity (St. Paul, Minnesota).

Fr. Kessler presided at the 9:30 Mass at my parish, Holy Rosary, August 3, 2008. Dominican Brother Kevin, introduced him to the congregation as "an important guy" at the seminary. In light of our unsuccessful efforts to begin a dialogue with the

seminary authorities in 2006, I asked to speak with Fr. Kessler after Mass, and he obliged.

I introduced myself as the president of Dignity/Twin Cities and the organizer of the Rainbow Sash Alliance USA. He had never heard of Dignity. When I explained that Dignity is a group of GLBT Catholics, and that I am a gay Catholic man in a committed relationship, his immediate response was, "You are sinners!" and there is nothing to talk about. I pointed out there is a great deal to talk about on a pastoral level since there are GLBT Catholics at most Masses in most parishes everyday. I said that Dignity and the Catholic Pastoral Committee on Sexual Minorities (CPCSM) would like to have a formal dialogue with the seminary about pastoral, not doctrinal, issues. There is no need to discuss doctrinal issues because the doctrine is completely clear, but there are GLBT Catholics in the pews each Sunday who reject that doctrine, and his priests need to understand their lives and their issues. [CPCSM is a lay-led, independent, non-profit group in the Twin Cities dedicated to promoting ministry to, with, and on behalf of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons and their families and friends.]

At this point, realizing I was taking him somewhere he did not want to go, Fr. Kessler began pulling out the excuses. He said I was like a Jehovah's Witness who recently cornered him for the purpose of trying to convert him. I replied that he was dealing with baptized Catholics who show up in church each Sunday just as I had showed up at Holy Rosary. He then tried to dismiss me as an "activist," obsessed with an issue not important to anyone else. He said he was too busy. He said he was not authorized to initiate the kind of dialogue I was requesting; only the rector could do that. Finally, he said that gay Catholics are not really a minority group like African Americans or Latinos, and therefore do not deserve a dialogue. I ended the discussion by saying I would send the rector, Fr. Aloysius Callaghan, and him, a follow-up letter.

My letter to Fr. Kessler and Fr. Callaghan included the following quote from the November 14, 2006, document issued by the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care*. "It is important that Church ministers listen to the experiences, needs, and hopes of the person with a homosexual inclination [sic] to whom and with whom they minister. Dialogue provides an exchange of information, and also communicates a respect for the innate dignity of other persons and a respect for their consciences."

I do not hold any illusions about the possibility of the Archdiocese engaging the Catholic GLBT community in a serious dialogue through the seminary staff. Their counter-insurgency tactic is to ignore us, call us sinners, and hope that we will go away. Many of us have gone away, for reasons I completely understand.

The insurgency-war metaphor is not completely apt, because we are loving, not fighting. The priests and bishops are our brothers. Some honestly believe the Church teaching, and some know it is seriously in error. The Gospel calls us to teach them the truth of our lives, even if they have locked themselves in a dungeon of false theology and thrown away the key.