

National Catholic Register:

Courage and Homosexuality

By Gail Besse

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Father Paul Check is the incoming director of the apostolate Courage.



Courage embraces Church teaching that same-sex attraction is not in itself sinful, but that homosexual acts are. The program aims to provide spiritual, moral and fraternal support to men and women who are attracted to members of the same sex, so that they can live chaste lives. Its affiliated group, Encourage, helps relatives and friends.

Register correspondent Gail Besse talked to Father Check, 48, of the Diocese of Bridgeport, Conn., about his plans for this spiritual apostolate, the challenges it faces, and the contributions of Father John Harvey, who founded Courage 28 years ago at the request of New York Cardinal Terence Cooke.

What are your immediate plans for the ministry?

I hope to continue doing what Father Harvey has done for decades; he has touched so many hearts and brought many souls to Christ.

The apostolate's work is two-fold. One part is the support groups, Courage and Encourage, which are the A.A. and Al-Anon of Courage. The other part is education. Much of the director's work is to go out to talk to priests, seminarians and lay people about same-sex attraction, and to encourage bishops to appoint a priest as chaplain to a chapter. I'm concerned that because Courage is not yet in every diocese, Catholics are going to Protestant groups, like Exodus, that do very good work in this spiritual ministry.

How can you most effectively expand the work?

I'm blessed to have had Father Harvey as an example. He's been more than a mentor in this very complex matter; he's been a good father to me. I'm inspired by the way he lives his priesthood. He's worked steadfastly, with great charity, cheerfulness and graciousness in a field that people aren't eager to enter. He brought a good intellect and true sense of Christian compassion to the ministry. He understands the reality of sin and has a great love for the soul that's burdened and made miserable by it.

How did you get involved with Courage?

One of my favorite Gospel characters is the centurion (Luke 7:1-10), because for me, fidelity to the Church as the bride of Christ is everything. If the Church has asked me to do something, then I know it's the will of God. In 2002, Bishop William Lori decided to bring Courage to the Diocese of Bridgeport. He asked me to establish the apostolate here, and I've been chaplain to our diocesan chapter since then.

How do Courage support groups work?

The apostolate is for those who struggle with same-sex attraction in different measure. Some are trying to leave the lifestyle, or to overcome addictions to pornography or masturbation. Many struggle with loneliness. It's also for those who left the lifestyle or who were never in it, but who want to deepen their interior chastity and prayer life. We provide a forum where people can feel confident and peaceful about opening their hearts to others in strict confidentiality. No one knows the time or location of the meeting except the people there, and participants attend only after having been interviewed by the chaplain.

Did you have training in this field?

Well, the principal work of the priesthood is to help people live a holy life and get to heaven, so this is what I've been trying to do as a parish priest for 10 years. After the example of Christ the high priest, a priest's vocation is to bring health to souls. Jesus said, "It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick" (Luke 5:31). So while SSA [same-sex attraction] is complex, and we must learn a lot from psychology, ultimately the goal of Courage is to produce saints.

I've been studying the psychological roots of same-sex attraction, and I have the advice and assistance of top practitioners in this field. My priestly graduate work was in moral theology; I earned a licentiate in sacred theology from the Atheneum [Pontifical University] of the Holy Cross in Rome. I've been teaching moral theology to seminarians and deacon candidates at St. John Fisher Seminary Residence for all of my priesthood. Also, serving as an officer in the U.S. Marine Corps before entering the seminary taught me a great deal about fatherhood, because my Marines were my sons.

You keep mentioning fatherhood. Can you explain in more detail?

One thing we see over and over in the background of men with same-sex attraction is that they've suffered first because of a deficit or void in their relationship with their father, and that has caused an estrangement. The main problem is not the acting out of genital sex; that's a symptom.

The main problem was a loss of something these men were very eager for — the "shared delight" of a father-son relationship. They often suffer from what's called "defensive detachment." The boy knows something's wrong with the relationship with his dad, so to defend himself, he puts up an emotional wall. That desire for masculine love, acceptance

and affirmation doesn't go away; it manifests itself in a distorted way when men seek homosexual relationships.

Courage members find the Church has great sympathy and compassion for their suffering.

What's one main challenge you face in the laity's reluctance to embrace Church teaching on same-sex activity?

The Church is clear and consistent within herself in all matters touching sexual intimacy. For example, marriage and procreation are intimately united in nature's design. It's a short step from separating procreation from marriage to separating sexual intimacy from marriage. Contraception makes this possible, and we can see that its widespread use, even among Catholics, has brought disorder to the human heart.

We have to return to an understanding of what it means to be human, particularly with regard to spousal love. If we're not faithful to God's design for our humanity, then many problems arise: sexual promiscuity, divorce, pornography, masturbation and same-sex activity.

Are there any other difficulties you face?

Regrettably, many of my brother priests don't accept the Church's teaching with regard to sexual morality: contraception and same-sex activity.

A number of them have espoused themselves to a bride, the Church, whom they love very much, but don't trust her as being the authentic voice of Christ in the world. This produces a division in their hearts — and can confuse the souls entrusted to their care, who need the truth spoken with charity and conviction.

In your experience, what has most encouraged people with same-sex attraction?

People are relieved to know the condition is both treatable and preventable. Science has never determined there is a so-called "gay gene." Those who have same-sex attraction can find peace, but they'll never find it in a same-sex union.

You know, we admire virtue. We're drawn to the virtues because we're made for them. Courage holds up the human and theological virtues to its members and says, "It's possible for you to live these, and this apostolate can help you."

People see that chastity means real freedom when they appreciate why the Church teaches us to approach human love and physical intimacy with great respect and reverence — for our peace, our protection and the good of our immortal souls.

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