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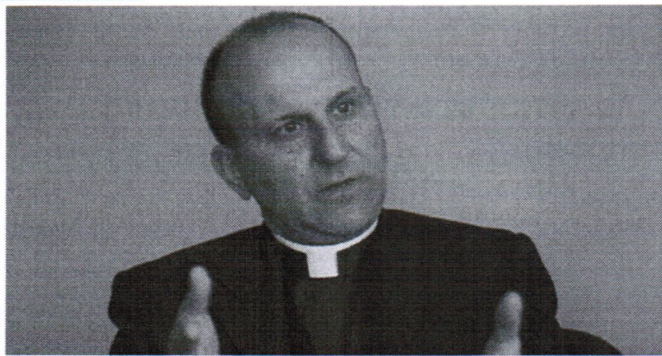
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Living the truth in love: The director of Courage on homosexuality and the synod

August 10, 2015

Fr. Paul Check discusses his hopes and concerns for the upcoming Synod on the Family and its consideration of pastoral approaches to those Catholics with same-sex attractions.

Kerri Lenartowick



Fr. Paul Check, executive director of Courage (CNS photo /Bob Roller)

Father Paul Check is the executive director of Courage, an international apostolate of the Catholic Church, which ministers to persons with same-sex attractions. This week, Courage is hosting a conference titled "Love One Another as I Have Loved You: Welcoming and Accompanying Our Brothers and Sisters with Same-Sex Attraction." Speakers at the conference include Dr. Janet E. Smith, Archbishop Allen Vigneron of Detroit, and Cardinal Thomas Collins of Toronto.

Father Check is the co-editor, with Dr. Smith, of *Living the Truth in Love: Pastoral Approaches to Same-Sex Attraction*, available later this month from Ignatius Press.

In light of the discussions surrounding the upcoming Synod on the Family, to be held in Rome this October, CWR spoke with Father Check about the Church's response to homosexuality and various related foundational questions and challenges.

CWR: Maybe you could start by telling us about the Courage apostolate and what it hopes to achieve.

Father Paul Check: The Courage apostolate represents an underserved part of our Christian community: a voice and a heart that is not well known, and that belongs to men and women with same-sex attraction who trust that what the Church teaches with regard to chastity is true and leads to fulfillment, the cross notwithstanding. We also represent another underserved group of people to whom we want to be available: parents, sometimes other family members, or friends of those who are living the homosexual life. Those loved ones feel the strain of separation, in the sense that they cannot rejoice in a way of life that they believe is contrary to the good of their son or daughter, family member or loved one.

Our work is to assist, in very practical ways, that expression of filial piety and trust, as well as a willingness to suffer, on the part of these two groups: to help them to know that they have a place in the Church, that they are loved by the Church, that they are loved by Christ, that their struggle is not in vain, that they are indeed walking with and

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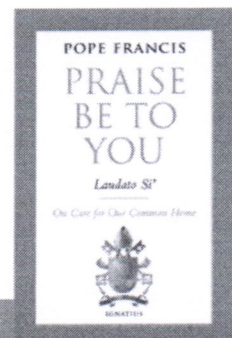
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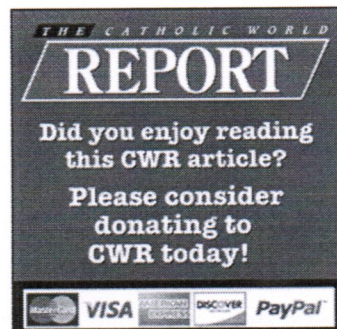
toward Christ, and that there are others who want to walk with them and assist them in growth and in intimacy with the Lord, and his mystical body the Church.

CWR: There has been a lot of discussion regarding the upcoming Synod on the Family, and the Church's response to homosexuality—but what do you think the relationship is between these concepts: the idea of "family" and the idea of "homosexuality"? Why is there a relationship there?

Father Check: At the foundation of this discussion, culturally and then ecclesially, is the reflection on the Church's role and ultimately her authority to speak in the name of Jesus Christ about marriage, family life, chastity, and sexual intimacy. While this is certainly a discussion about particulars of how people love and receive love, and who those people are, and what those relationships are, I think foundationally this is at least as much a discussion of ecclesiology as it is morality.

I think what the synod is investigating and ultimately what the Pope will write about it in a post-synodal exhortation when it comes is why the Church holds the position that she does: not to impede human happiness but to ensure it, to further it. Once we have questions relating to happiness before us, then we have to have a way to understand how it is that we can be sure that we are happy and where we will find fulfillment.

This is particularly important for the young as they are formed in truth. We do have some of those means, of course, internal to the human person, with regard to conscience and the virtues, but typically we need confirmation and guidance and example from outside ourselves to verify for us which path we're on. So I think that homosexuality, divorce and remarriage, alternative kinds of families, and other issues that the synod is investigating all join on the question of the Church's authority to be able to discuss this—which it implies, of course, by the synod itself.



If the Church doesn't have authority to pass judgment on these questions, then it is nothing more than a deliberative body. (I mean the Church, not the synod. The synod is a deliberative body.) The authority rests with the Holy Father to make decisions. Implied in the synod, is, it seems to me, a clear statement that the Church has not only a role in discussing these things, but in laying forward a clear path. That's where we see, I think, a union of all these questions.

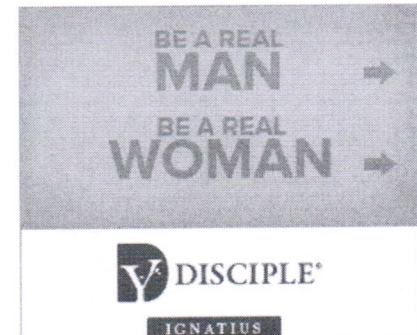
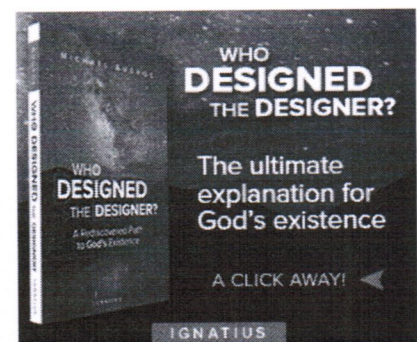
CWR: Do you anticipate that anything truly new will come out of the synod, in terms of the Church's teaching?

Father Check: Not in terms of doctrine. I think if there's anything that we might call unique—and that can be a bit of an ambiguous term—if there's something that would appear to be unusual, or what we haven't thought about before, then I think that we will only find that that will fall into the realm of pastoral practice. And that itself, pastoral practice, can be open to some vulnerability and ambiguity.

CWR: The working document that was just released recently recommends that "diocesan pastoral plans reserve special attention to the accompaniment of the families in which persons of homosexual tendencies live, and to those same persons." What do you think is meant by this?

Father Check: I can tell you what we try to do, and have been trying to do, in that regard. Part of our apostolate, which is called EnCourage, is devoted to family members and loved ones. If you look at the goals of EnCourage on the website, you see that they're really not directed toward the person with same-sex attraction or the person who is living a homosexual life. In other words, the Church doesn't view the parents or family members as means to get to someone else to effect change. When people come to us, understandably they're dismayed, or worried, or frightened, or angry, or confused, about what it is that they should do for their children. And that's understandable.

If a child is injured or sick, whether it's a young child or an adolescent, or an adult child, the parent quite naturally feels in his or her heart the proper desire to want to intervene



and get between the child and the source of danger. The difference here, of course, between bodily harm, in the form of illness or injury, and the question of homosexuality is that typically, the person who is the subject of the parent's concern does not see homosexuality as any kind of threat or danger to their happiness if they act on the feelings that they have.

In that sense it seems to me that we can't force people to accept things or do things or think about things in a way that's not attractive to them. Certainly we always have prayer and sacrifice—the good means that we have in the spiritual realm—but our concentration, to get back to your question about accompaniment, is to help the parents and loved ones deepen their own relationship with Christ, because that is what they have control over. We could say that the more that someone lives a holy life, the more they are available to God's grace to be instruments that he wants them to be in the lives of others, according to his providence. We're not trying to instrumentalize that relationship, we're only recognizing what we know from the communion of saints: that people who have lived a holy life are the ones that are most likely to have the most profound and lasting influence on the lives of others, as Christ himself did, and does. So that's where our emphasis is with regard to accompaniment.

In the family of Courage and EnCourage, we have quite a bit of experience—as well as all of the treasures of the Church's experience over 2,000 years—about how to understand these problems of the heart and how we can be in such pain on the one hand but at the same time have trust and hope. And that's where I think we really do our best work: instilling a deeper trust in God's providence, a deeper trust in the goodness of God, a deeper hope that again, according to his providence, as St. Paul said, nothing can separate us from the love of God.

CWR: Would you say that these pastoral forms of accompaniment can be adjusted, or ought to be adjusted, based on the culture in which they find themselves? The recent US Supreme Court ruling legalizing “gay marriage,” for example, has really ramped up the culture wars, so to speak. Is that going to change the environment in which the pastoral practice is done and therefore change the type of practice?

Father Check: That's a question where we'll have to wait and see what it looks like. On the one hand, yes, I have very real fatherly concerns for the future of our apostolate and how we will be allowed to do our work unimpeded and whether that will be the case down the line. On the other hand, I would say that nothing has changed, except that we now are perhaps a little bit more free of the concern that the Church has properly had about influencing things in the civil order: we are free just to concern ourselves with the bold proclamation of the Gospel.

While I understand and see the importance of the civil right called religious liberty, and the Church must avail herself of that, the complementary piece of the Church's work must be the proclamation of truth, of the moral teaching, so that we are helping people understand that chastity is part of the Good News. We are helping them to understand that only the complementarity of the sexes and only the rightly-understood procreative potential of the sexual faculty and its use will lead people to the fulfillment of the desire that they have, irrespective of their sexual attractions.

The other real question here is: what does it mean to be human? Is there something which binds us all together as what might have been called in another time “the family of man”? Is it only a minimalist perspective that says you and I agree we won't inflict bodily harm on each other, or moral, spiritual, physical harm? Is it only sort of a minimalist perspective that's really very individualistic, that says you and I just have to agree that we're not going to hurt each other in these ways? Or is there something that might be called maximalist that suggests that we are united in a deeper sense by what distinguishes us as human: the desire for love, and truth and intimacy in ways are recognizable across culture, across religious boundaries, across ethnicity, across time? This of course was one of the major themes of St. John Paul II's encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, when he asserted just that—that there is a universal human nature that binds us all together in the family of man.

CWR: In the *relatio* from 2014, there was some interesting language regarding the idea that homosexuals have gifts and qualities to offer the Christian community. This was interpreted by homosexuals within the Christian community as saying that their sexual orientation was valuable in itself, and a gift to offer in itself. What do you think about that?

Father Check: This is a cause and effect question: working from effect back to cause, I

think, is something that we want to do very thoughtfully and carefully. What I would say here is that the assertion that the particular qualities and gifts of men and women of same-sex attraction are seated in the homosexual tendency—that assertion, to me, has not been demonstrated.

I would say that the good qualities that they have—there's no question about their many virtues—are seated in their humanity. They are seated in their response to grace and their own personal development of virtue and not in the hope of sexual inclination. It doesn't seem to me to make logical sense to say that that which the Church considers objectively disordered and leads to sin if acted upon can at the same time be the source of virtue. That is an assertion that is unproven and logically would be hard to demonstrate. There isn't any question of the virtues and the good qualities, and the gifts and talents, the thoughtfulness, and many different things that people with same-sex attraction have—but the cause and effect, I think, is another matter.

CWR: How would you respond to those practicing Christians or practicing Catholics who do feel that their homosexual inclination, even not acted upon, is part of their identities?

Father Check: That's also a foundational question. The Church believes and teaches us that the twofold expression of human nature is male and female, not homosexual and heterosexual.

In my work in this field now, for eight years in my current job and more than that, having started a Courage chapter in 2003, I understand homosexuality first to not be a question of chastity or sex. It is first a question of identity and someone's understanding of who they are.

I would say generally speaking, not just with regard to this topic, we can make mistakes about our identity. But in particular to men and women with same-sex attraction, I would invite them to consider St. Paul's words in Romans 8:28, when he says that God works for the good *in all things* for those who love him. So we're back to the question of cause and effect here. Can God bestow great grace on someone in and through a particular circumstance and their response to it? Yes! I think we can see that more obviously in things that are not so much related to the controversial topic of sex, where people transcend and overcome all kinds of very real struggles, whether they're bodily or moral or spiritual. But I would say that the hope is not in a mistaken notion of who we are, which would lead to a mistaken notion in cause and effect: it is the understanding that it is Jesus Christ who illumines the mind and heart to a proper and complete understanding of identity. This was a central theme of the second Vatican Council in *Gaudium et Spes* 22: "Christ the new Adam fully reveals man to himself in his most high calling." Then, it was a central theme in the pontificate of St. John Paul II. I think it continues now with a particular relevance to the topic of homosexuality.

CWR: If the synod fathers were to ask you for advice regarding pastoral practice, what advice would you give? In particular, advice about helping people find their true identity and deal with the difficulties of homosexual attractions?

Father Check: The first piece of advice I would give would be to listen to the voice of those people for whom this is a lived reality and who have placed their trust in Christ and in the Church. Their perspective is the one that, in my mind, has not yet been heard. It was not heard by the extraordinary synod, to my knowledge.

What I would want to say to the synod fathers is this: there are people, men and women, young and old, some married, many single, who have invested their trust in a truth that many have quickly set aside as being something unrealistic. That group of people have often—not always, but often—lived the life that now enjoys the protection of the civil law here in the United States. What they have found in living that life is that the fulfillment that they sought did not come to them. In fact, they often suffered greatly in different ways. And so in that sense I think they verify what we know, because the Church tells us this: sin leads to suffering. Sin leads to unhappiness. Sin leads to misery. And in this conversation of course, we need to make a distinction on the one hand—pleasure, satisfaction, amusement, entertainment, contentment—those sorts of words, none of which are necessarily bad, and on the other hand—fulfillment, lasting and deep fulfillment.

What I would say to the synod fathers is that the collective voice of experience of the people that we're trying to serve says very plainly: living the homosexual life does not lead to lasting and deep fulfillment. That shouldn't surprise us, because we have all of

the Christian anthropology to understand that that would be true. But the grammar of today is, even in some places in the Church, not the grammar of Christian anthropology. It is often based on lived experience or personal narrative: so let's make use of those things. I think in that sense we have a body of wisdom and lived experience that would be helpful.

About the Author

Kerri Lenartowick

Kerri Lenartowick is an Affiliate Professor of Theology at the University of Dallas in Irving, TX.
