

Hidden Victories

Fr. Paul Check, the director of Courage, on the group's apostolate to men and women struggling with same-sex attraction who seek to live chastely

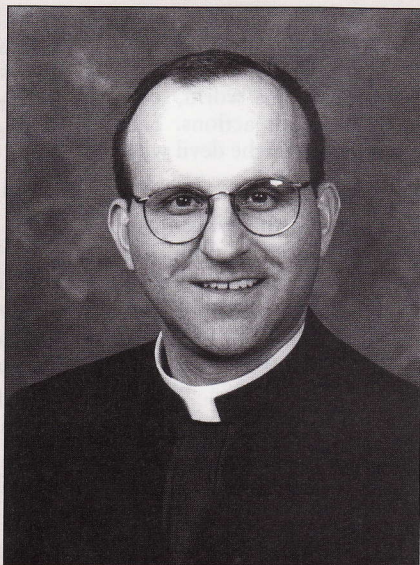
Interview by Jim Graves

The Catholic apostolate Courage (www.couragerc.net) helps men and women struggling with same-sex attraction live in accordance with the teachings of the Church. The group is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year. The apostolate was founded by Cardinal Terence Cooke, former archbishop of New York, and directed for many years by Father John F. Harvey, OSFS. There are 102 Courage chapters across the United States. Courage also offers an outreach program called EnCourage for spouses, relatives, and friends of persons with same-sex attraction.

Father Harvey, age 92, is retired. Three years ago, he handed the leadership of the apostolate over to Father Paul Check. Father Check is a former US Marine Corps captain who was ordained to the priesthood for the Diocese of Bridgeport, Connecticut in 1997. He became a Courage chaplain at the request of his bishop, William Lori, in 2003, and is now assigned full-time to the Courage apostolate. He spoke to CWR about the group.

How does the Courage apostolate work?

Father Check: It is well-known that the Church's teaching on homosexual activity, including same-sex marriage, includes a clear and direct "no." But that no is embedded in a larger "yes,"



Father Paul Check, director of Courage

to human nature and human dignity, to what is good, true, and beautiful, and, of course, to Christ himself.

The Courage apostolate is that maternal solicitude on the part of the Church to people who have a unique struggle, an often difficult and vexing one, and who want to know that the grace of Christ and his Cross is available to them in concrete and practical ways. This is part of the charism of Courage and what was in the mind and heart of our founder, Cardinal Cooke. It is a desire to express the Church's care and affection for a group of people who often feel isolated. I don't just say lonely, but isolated. They're uncertain about where

they can find assistance, who really takes an interest in them and who has a love for them. The Church does.

How does a person get involved in Courage?

Father Check: He (or she) contacts the local chapter of Courage and has a meeting with the chaplain who is appointed by his bishop to be a spiritual father and moderator of the group. He will receive a warm welcome and can discuss his desire to join the group.

Our members are on a wide spectrum with regard to the intensity of their same-sex attraction or inclination. Some have feelings and thoughts that they have never acted upon—what you might call the mild end of the spectrum—while others have had partners and lived in the so-called gay lifestyle for years. We don't, incidentally, use homosexual as a noun, because it does them an injustice to collapse their identity into a sexual appetite.

We welcome new members, whoever they are; trust, confidence, and confidentiality are hallmarks of the apostolate. The time and location the group meets is never published. This information is provided to new members after they have had the opportunity to talk with the chaplain. The presence of the local Courage apostolate should be advertised in church publications, but never the specifics of when and where they meet.

Once involved, Courage helps its members live chaste lives. They learn

about what the Church teaches, and come together in a 12-step program, fortified by prayer, the sacraments, and the spiritual fatherhood of the priest. It is not a voice of the Church in the culture expressing its opposition to same-sex unions, but is directed towards individual men and women who want to live chastely.

How do those living the gay lifestyle react to Courage?

Father Check: There is a lot of misunderstanding and confusion on their part as to what we do. They perceive the presence of a Courage chapter as a threat. Courage embraces Church teaching expressed in the catechism that same-sex attraction is a disorder, and that same-sex activity is inherently at variance with the good of the human person. Some people regard this as a direct challenge to those living the gay lifestyle, even if it is not intended that way.

What does the Church teach us about sexuality?

Father Check: The Church, as Pope Paul VI said some years ago, is an expert in humanity. She understands what it means to live and act in a human way, for the good and the peace of mind and heart of the human person. When she looks at the particular realm of human intimacy, she asks, "What is this for?"

After an examination according to right reason, she concludes that human intimacy is for the union of a man and a woman in a permanent, exclusive, and fruitful way. The complementarity of the sexes and the procreative potential of sexual intimacy tell us, based on human reason, what sex is for.

From that, the Church develops a clear, coherent, and consistent teaching with regard to human love. She makes it plain to us that same-sex activity is at variance with the human good, as are pornography, contraception, masturbation, fornication, and adultery.

Do any Courage members marry persons of the opposite sex?

Father Check: Yes, but that is not a goal of Courage. In my own group, I know a man who has been a member of Courage for many years, and he has also worked with a good psychologist. He got married. His wife knows about his circumstances, and they had many

long and thoughtful conversations before the wedding took place. He still comes to Courage meetings.

What are some common problems Courage members have?

Father Check: Just like our Lord in the Gospel, the Church and the Courage apostolate treat each person as a unique individual. We want to understand why a given man or woman has a same-sex attraction and where it came from.

In addition to the realm of the psychological sciences, the Church offers a theological reflection. The Catholic catechism uses the word "disorder." The Church does not disregard the work of the psychological sciences conducted according to a proper anthropology, but the word "disorder" indicates that something is at variance with human nature. Therefore, it is both just and charitable to reflect on what might be done to restore what has been lost.

That said, in talking to our members, we discover that there are things in their backgrounds that do tend to repeat themselves. The first is that there is some estrangement, difficulty, or tension between a son and his father. Every boy has it in his heart to want to be pleasing to his father, learn about manly or masculine things from his father, to be approved by him, and to be a source of pride to him. When something impedes or inhibits that, a boy can feel a sense of loss or void. That's understandable.

It may be merely a perception on the part of the son. Many good fathers have to work long hours in order to be able to support their families. Their absence from the home does not necessarily imply a lack of love. However, a young man with a sensitive temperament may perceive it as such.

A second thing that tends to repeat itself is the situation of a mother who is overly emotionally involved in the life of her son, such that the mother and son's relationship has become distorted. I'm not suggesting anything sexual, but an emotional involvement that has hampered the development of his masculine character.

Even though we're born male or female, we acquire masculine or feminine personality and character traits based on a number of factors. Among the most important of these is the way our fathers love our mothers, and the way our mothers love our fathers. Next

is the relationship between the parent and the child, and then siblings, peers, and friends. If any of these things is disfigured, it may present a risk factor with regard to same-sex attraction.

A third situation that tends to repeat itself among our members is sexual trauma. In many instances a young man or woman with same-sex attraction has been roughly or violently introduced into the realm of human intimacy. This can leave a wound such that there is confusion about one's sexuality.

What is a typical Courage meeting like?

Father Check: Father Harvey, the founding father of Courage, built the program around the 12 steps, so we adopt that as the frame for discussion. Courage has its own steps based on the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (e.g., Step 1: We admitted that we were powerless over homosexuality and our lives had become unmanageable). We'll also bring in the Church's theological reflection about who we are as children of God. We need grace; the Cross is a rallying standard for us. In fact, St. Paul tells us in Colossians (1:24): "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the Church."

We need to maintain a sense of hope in our personal sufferings and the Cross our Lord has allowed us to bear. With his grace we can carry it for the good of our souls, the glory of God, and the help of others. That's why prayer and the sacraments, particularly the Holy Eucharist and penance, are part of Courage.

Courage also offers fraternal support and encouragement to its members to persevere, understand themselves better, and not feel isolated. Members offer to one another the love and encouragement that we all need to grow in virtue.

Have you seen many successes among Courage members?

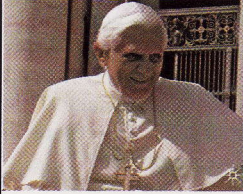
Father Check: Yes. Many members offer testimonials about the transformation of their lives at Courage conferences. We just held our annual conference over the summer. We had 300 participate, including many priests and three bishops. We hear many wonderful stories of conversion at these gatherings.

Additionally, members talk about the progress they've made over the past

THE THEOLOGY OF POPE BENEDICT XVI

The Christocentric Shift

EMERY DE GAÁL



The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI

The Christocentric Shift
Fr. Emery de Gaál

Many refer to Pope Benedict XVI as “the Mozart of Theology.” Who are the personalities and thinkers who have informed his theology? What events, and which religious devotions, have shaped his personality? What are the central themes of his complex scholarship encompassing more than 100 titles? This study attempts to shed light on the unifying melody of the policies and positions of a pontificate charged with spiritual and theological depth. Especially in the 1980s an anthropocentric shift had occurred. Emery de Gaál argues that, amid a general lack of original, secular ideas stirring public opinion, Benedict XVI inaugurates an epochal Christocentric shift; by rekindling the Patristic genius, he provides Christianity with both intellectual legitimacy and the scholarship needed to propel it into the twenty-first century.

“Pope Benedict XVI’s theological work and his pastoral and spiritual writings are here placed in the perspective of the mystery of Christ. Father Emery de Gaál has beautifully and exhaustively clarified the fundamental interpretative key to the Ratzinger texts and to the life of Pope Benedict XVI.”

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“He was already one of the most important theologians of the past century before his election to the papacy as Benedict XVI in this century. But now Joseph Ratzinger must count as perhaps the most important postconciliar theologian, bar none. de Gaál gives us the most comprehensive study of the pope’s theology now available. But even more, he places the pope’s thought in the context of the revolution in Catholic theology that started well before Vatican II and has continued on to this day: the revolution that abandoned neoscholasticism and shifted its focus to Christology. That story is indeed a dramatic one, and here it is dramatically and comprehensively told. This book is a ‘must purchase’ for every theological library – and for all admirers of that perhaps greatest of great theologians, Joseph Ratzinger.”

—Fr. Edward T. Oakes, S.J., Chester & Margaret Paluch Professor of Theology, University of St. Mary of the Lake/Mundelein Seminary

“Father de Gaál’s work is indispensable for anyone who wishes to understand the Christocentric shift in the papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI and in contemporary theological anthropology generally. It is the deepest analysis of the topic currently available.”

—Tracey Rowland, Professor and Dean, John Paul II Institute for Marriage and Family, Melbourne, Australia

Fr. Emery de Gaál is a Catholic priest of the diocese of Eichstätt, Bavaria, Germany and is currently Associate Professor of systematic theology at the University of St. Mary of the Lake, operated by the Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago and located in Mundelein, Illinois.

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week when they meet in their private groups. We also hear from parents of children in the gay lifestyle, who have persevered, often over many years, hoping, waiting, and praying that their sons or daughters will return to Christ and the Church. These are often hidden victories in the Mystical Body of Christ, but they’re nevertheless very real. They give hope to others who are struggling that grace can transform them into a closer union of hearts with our Lord. That is why Christ came into the world, not for the healthy, but for the sick (Mark 2:17).

How do you advise your members to safeguard the virtue of chastity?

Father Check: Chastity is one of the virtues under the virtue of temperance. Chastity regulates the sexual appetite. Its purpose, like all of the moral virtues, is to help us to gain a certain level of self-possession in preparation for self-giving.

The virtue of chastity is often heard in a way that is burdensome, but actually it is directed towards a person’s peace of mind and heart, and it gives true freedom. Not the kind of freedom

that is license or self-indulgence, but the freedom that is generosity and self-forgetfulness. Chastity gives us the capacity to love in a pure-hearted, generous and self-forgetful way.

In preparation for this, we need to protect the virtue of chastity. We need to guard our senses from such things as pornography. This is difficult in our society, because it is everywhere. It can be accessed easily and anonymously. We must be careful what we take in through the Internet or television. Pornographic images are easily burned into the mind and heart and can remain for a long period of time.

Additionally, we must regulate the kinds of conversations we have. We must also be careful about the kind of music we listen to. Such safeguards prepare the way for generosity and gift of self.

But chastity is more than continence, more than just not venturing into the realm of sexuality in the wrong way. The virtue of chastity is that self-possession that leads to self-giving. In the words of one moral philosopher, “We are blessedly incomplete.” We find ourselves, as Pope John Paul II said, in the sincere gift of self. We are made for others. And chastity, as part of the virtue of

temperance, is essential for friendship and love in the way in which our human nature and our Creator intended.

Is it a great help for people who want to get out of the gay lifestyle to develop friendships with people of the same sex who do not battle same-sex attraction?

Father Check: Yes. It’s one of the goals of Courage to foster chaste friendships. These friendships are necessary for all of us to grow in virtue and feel that kind of fulfillment that comes from being able to give one’s time, ideas, energy, or heart to another person.

Such friendships can help those struggling with same-sex attractions not to lose hope, even if they keep falling again and again. St. Paul says “where sin abounds, grace abounds more” (Romans 5:20). We must always believe that the power of God’s love and mercy far surpasses the power of sin.

It doesn’t happen mechanically. Our Lord came to Mary and asked for her consent, as he does for each of us. He wants us to cooperate with grace. But he’s gracious. He doesn’t force his way into any mind or heart.

Remember the parable of the Prodigal Son. When we turn our minds and hearts to God in a hidden and even partial way, he rewards us with all kinds of assistance, both in nature and in grace. People with same-sex attraction should never lose hope. There are many good people in Courage and in the Church who want to render assistance. If they persevere in finding them, grace will follow.

So-called gay marriage has been in the news frequently of late. Has this created difficulties for your apostolate?

Father Check: Although we’re not involved in policy or politics but focus on the individual, there is still a tension. Courage is not welcome everywhere. But our intention is to be faithful to Christ and his Church. Members of Courage are aware of the cultural climate, but they trust that what the Church teaches about human sexuality is true. They are grateful for the clarity with which priests and bishops speak on this question. ■

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