

The Blessings of Chastity

Courage's outreach to men and women with same-sex attraction continues to grow, as bishops like Thomas Olmsted of Phoenix promote its vital work.

By Chuck Weber

The 30-minute talk from the middle-aged man describing his journey from confused boyhood to sexually abusive adolescence, and ultimately into what is referred to as an active "gay lifestyle" left the packed room of priests and parish ministers in a state of awkward, stunned silence.

The man's deepest secrets included countless sexual liaisons, indulged in while under emotional, psychological, and even workplace pressures. Much like an alcoholic who hits rock bottom, he also spoke about his moment of conversion, the breakthrough toward a path of normalcy, and the rediscovery of the sacraments and the practice of his Catholic faith.

Standing self-consciously before his audience, he sipped a glass of water and awaited their reaction, the distant groan of an air conditioner the only perceptible sound in the room. Finally, a priest from a major metropolitan diocese broke the awkward pause, rose slowly, and spoke softly.

"Thank you for what you just shared," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "I cannot imagine what it was like for you to stand in front of strangers and share the deepest pains and the darkest hours you have ever experienced. My heart goes out to you and I am filled with gratitude for your willingness to reveal what you've been through."

"One of the great tragedies of the Church," he continued, his voice rising and trembling as he turned to his

brother priests, "is that we all hear stories like this repeated in the confessional more often than we care to admit. These penitents tell us that they are being told by *other priests* that the lifestyle they live isn't really sinful, isn't really wrong. And so they leave more confused and in more pain than before they came in."

The issue of such "misplaced compassion" among clergy and psychiatric professionals—as well as a range of other challenges confronting men and women with same-sex attraction (SSA)—took center stage in Chicago last August during the 23rd annual conference of Courage, a Roman Catholic apostolate for those living with SSA.

Courage and EnCourage (the companion support group for parents and loved ones) offers members an opportunity to express themselves in a distinctive atmosphere of peace and mutual spiritual support. When deeply personal, emotion-filled testimonials like the one described above are offered, this is done with the explicit understanding of confidentiality. Executive Director Father Paul Check says that understanding is crucial in making Courage a "place where men and women of like mind and heart can meet under the care of a priest and strive to live a life of fidelity to Christ and his Church."

Courage is widely considered to be the Church's most ambitious spiritual and pastoral effort on behalf of men and women with SSA, many of whom have been drawn into homosexual lifestyles that are increasingly celebrated and promoted by the entertainment

industry, news media, and modern culture. The mission of the apostolate and its emphasis on fostering personal purity, prayer, and chaste friendships is distinctly different from the tactics of those involved in political issues like the redefinition of marriage to include same-sex unions and other so-called "gay rights."

"We recognize and understand that homosexuality poses very real cultural problems," acknowledges Father Check, "but we go to great lengths in approaching the question of homosexuality not as a cultural problem or debate. Courage approaches the question of homosexuality as a lived reality in the daily life of individual people. Our purpose is help men and women who have a same-sex attraction discover and know they are not defined by these inclinations, that far more importantly they are children of God, redeemed in Christ and invited to grace in this life and glory in the life to come."

The roots of Courage can be traced back to the 1970s and late Cardinal Terence Cooke of New York, who became aware of and deeply concerned about the Church's lack of formal outreach to Catholics with SSA. This pastoral vacuum, he observed, imposed an unwelcome moment of decision for men and women: forge one's own path—which often led to a sense of exclusion and isolation—or accept the secular standard of homosexuality, which typically led to the acting out of same-sex desires.

Knowing of Father John Harvey's extensive on-the-streets ministry experience and background in moral theol-

ogy, Cardinal Cooke invited the Oblate of St. Francis de Sales to visit New York and explore pastoral ministry possibilities. Enlisting the help of others, including Father Benedict Groeschel, CFR, Father Harvey formed Courage International in 1980, gaining the endorsement of the Holy See not long thereafter.

Vatican approval and a relentless negative campaign from liberal theologians and laypeople have earned Courage much abuse from countless critics who view its mission and direction as repressive, “homophobic”—or worse. Ironically, says Father Groeschel, the initial pushback from within the Church against Courage was due to the misunderstanding that the group promoted tolerance or even acceptance of homosexual relations.

With this notion quickly dispelled, Father Harvey embarked upon a three-decade long career as leader of Courage, writing two compelling books during his tenure: *The Homosexual Person: New Thinking in Pastoral Care* (1987) and *The Truth About Homosexuality: The Cry of the Faithful* (1996).

Today, Courage maintains more than 100 local chapters in the United States and nearly a dozen more internationally, each under the care of a Catholic priest. The annual conference is a central event for Courage and EnCourage members who come to hear presentations from fellow members, Church leaders, and professionals from the psychological and medical communities on the personal, spiritual, and psychological dimensions of life with SSA. Mass is celebrated daily, the sacrament of reconciliation is available, and the Eucharistic Adoration chapel draws large numbers of members throughout the conference.

One day is typically dedicated to a special pastoral seminar that includes personal testimony from a Courage member and insights from psychological professionals and clergymen.

The 2011 Courage conference was a bittersweet gathering, as it was the first gathering without the organization's beloved founder, Father Harvey, who died on December 27, 2010. His life's work and dedication to the Courage mission were recalled in numerous tributes and reflections offered by Father Check, Courage and EnCourage members, and several Church leaders including Cardinal Raymond Burke, prefect of the Supreme Tribunal of the Apostolic Signatura at the Vatican, as well as Father Groeschel.

Among the other Church leaders presenting at the conference this year was Bishop Thomas Olmsted of Phoenix, a man Father Check describes as a model for pastoral compassion for those with SSA on the diocesan and parish level. Like other bishops who have waded into the controversy surrounding “gay rights,” Bishop Olmsted has endured harsh, sometimes personal attacks from within the Church and outside of it for his support of Courage and his pastoral concern for people with SSA.

Shortly after his arrival in Phoenix 2003, Bishop Olmsted became aware that as many as nine of his priests had signed a statement drafted by area clergy (primarily from mainline Protestant congregations) known as the “No Longer Silent Phoenix Declaration,” described in media accounts as “pro-gay rights.” In response, Bishop Olmsted privately contacted the priests, requesting that they withdraw their support from the statement.

The confidential letter was promptly leaked to the press. Some of the priests publicly defied Bishop Olmsted's request to withdraw their support for the declaration, accusing him of “turning his back” on “LGBT brothers and sisters.”

Undaunted, Bishop Olmsted wrote and published in the diocesan newspaper a three-part series of articles titled, “The Blessing of the Chaste Life.” The sub-titles for each segment were “The Call to Holiness of Homosexual Persons,” “The Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons,” and “Difficulties Faced by Homosexual Persons.”

Drawing upon Scripture and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Bishop Olmsted laid out a theological, spiritual, and practical framework for understanding and ministering to those with SSA that Father Check hopes other dioceses will consider adopting. This pastoral approach begins, as the series' title notes, with embracing the chaste life as a blessing.

The challenge to the Church as a whole is putting this philosophy into practice on the parish level, in confidential settings like the confessional or through spiritual direction. In these settings, drawing a distinction between the homosexual inclination and the action is crucial.

“The person is always good—an authentic child of God,” says Father Check. “But if a person acts upon the homosexual inclination, when he

makes a deliberate choice to engage in homosexual activity, that action is gravely immoral, and it is a responsibility of Mother Church to protect her children from harm.”

Of the nine priests who signed the “No Longer Silent Phoenix Declaration,” two are still serving in the Diocese of Phoenix. Some former priests of the diocese claim in the secular press to have been “forced out” because of their views on homosexuality. During his presentation at the 2011 Courage conference, Bishop Olmsted reflected upon the clerical reaction to *Humanae Vitae*, drawing the comparison to contemporary attitudes toward homosexuality. Citing one of the encyclical's great defenders, Bishop Austin Vaughan, who served as president of the Catholic Theological Society when the encyclical was released, Bishop Olmsted explained, “Bishop Vaughan later said that most priests didn't preach against *Humanae Vitae*—they just lost confidence it was good news.”

In Bishop Olmsted's diocese and in Courage chapters across the United States and internationally, the “good news” of chastity is alive and well. “I am deeply grateful for the positive way that our priests have responded to my initiatives,” Bishop Olmsted said. “Four of our priests have been directly involved with support for Courage; and many others offer support to members of Courage in their individual parishes.”

The men and women of Courage face a hostile world that tells them homosexuality is all they have. In Courage they find community, support, and grace many thought they would never know. Some share their stories reluctantly, fearful of summoning demons that await a chance to haunt them again.

“When I think back on the lifestyle, it was a way of life that ate you up and spit you out,” shares one Courage member. “And one day I just stopped and asked myself, ‘How did I get here?’ And that is why Courage is so vital. It is a community of people where there is one grace-filled moment after another, especially after a fall. It's not easy, but Courage has given me back my life, a life rooted in chastity and reality. And there's nothing like it.” ■

CHUCK WEBER is a freelance writer and film producer based in Wichita, Kansas.