

## **My Story as an EnCourage Parent 10/15/14**

Let me begin by expressing my deep gratitude to God for this journey with the Courage/EnCourage Ministry of the Catholic Church. It has been a huge part of my coming to a deeper understanding and appreciation for my Catholic Faith, and has led me to a more intimate relationship with the God Who loves me. It has also introduced me to so many wonderful people who love the Lord, who love the Church, and who are truly witnesses to the call to holiness. The depth of pain and suffering united with Christ's Passion, Death, and Resurrection that I've encountered in the people I've met is the most beautiful witness to the Power of God's grace and mercy that I can imagine. I see the "triumph of the Cross" lived out in their lives.

My desire to share the Truth of Jesus Christ was strengthened about 25 years ago. I was struggling with the Church's teachings on same-sex attractions. Someone who knew and understood Church teaching and loved the Church challenged and warned me, pointing to the way to Truth. I'm incredibly grateful for that! It has led me to a deeper faith and trust in Jesus and the desire to help others know the Truth. John 8:32 states, "You shall know the Truth and the Truth shall set you free," and that Truth is the Person of Jesus Christ. He is all we need to find the happiness God desires for us.

I come from a Protestant Baptist background, with great-grandfathers on both my father's and mother's side who were Baptist ministers. My parents taught me that God is real, He loves me, and He's always with me. I specifically remember my own Baptism at age 10, confessing Jesus as my Savior, and being immersed in the baptismal tub. I knew at that moment that something inside me had changed, and I felt a stronger sense of right and wrong, as well as the desire to be good. At age 17 I attended a Billy Graham movie that included an altar call; I was extremely shy and too fearful to make a public profession of faith, but that night in my heart I gave my life to Jesus in a deeper way, experiencing a new love for the Lord and a desire to serve Him. That desire has remained with me throughout my life, although I've taken many detours. I'm grateful to recognize that although I have not always been faithful, God has remained faithful and has never given up on me, or on those I love.

I married John at age 22, and we soon had our first child, a boy, followed 20 months later by our daughter Patti. Our first years of marriage were rocky, and something in our relationship changed negatively not long into our marriage. Years later John told me that early in our marriage he was disappointed with me sexually, and his attitude toward me reflected that disappointment. I no longer felt loved or respected and found myself fantasizing about other men and also about women, although I never went beyond the fantasies. John was Catholic, and I had joined the Catholic Church when our son made his First Communion. In a moment of grace, I confessed my fantasies to our pastor, and God's mercy took away those desires. (I had actually forgotten about this period of my life until I heard the testimony given at the 2012 Courage Conference in Baltimore.)

John was often angry and distant, and I was pretty subservient and timid. I was not a good model of femininity for our daughter. Both our son and Patti were excellent students, and our family life seemed relatively stable despite our marital challenges. In her sophomore year of college, we discovered that Patti and her good friend, whom we had welcomed into our home many times and loved, were, in fact, sexual partners. My first reaction was shock. I had no idea of the true nature of their relationship. I told her friend to leave, that I never wanted to see her again. I felt she had seduced my innocent child. The memory of my own homosexual desires of the past resurfaced, and I shared this with Patti, hoping she would end her same-sex relationship. We asked her to see the campus counselor and were surprised when we found the counselor assured her this lifestyle was normal, affirming her same-sex attractions.

This was 1991. Homosexuality was less openly discussed at that time. I talked to no one about it, except John, for at least six months. I felt it to be a dark secret that was destroying me, and I sought help from a friend who was a Methodist minister's wife. She looked in her resource book and found P-Flag, *Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays*, an organization that accepts same-sex attractions as inborn and unchangeable and celebrates it as a gift given by God. I so desperately needed to connect with others in this situation that I blindly embraced their philosophy. God's grace enabled me to exchange the hatred I had been harboring for Patti's friend into genuine care and concern. I embraced Patti and her friend and began to encourage her in this lifestyle. I didn't know my Catholic faith well and was searching for answers; P-Flag offered them, although in my heart there was an unsettled stirring that kept me from having peace about their position.

P-Flag invited John and I to serve on a panel to share our story with a school district. There were also young men and women on the panel who had same-sex attractions. They shared their own stories. My heart broke as I heard them speak of their pain and rejection, not only by peers but often, by parents. I determined to do something to help. I began reading everything I could find, mostly provided by P-Flag. I started talking to others about this concern. I gave P-Flag books to our pastor and pastoral associate, who put them on their bookshelves but offered no explanation of Church teaching. They never questioned my story.

The panel discussion had strengthened my compassion for those with this struggle, and my heart broke as Patti's did, when she attended the marriage of the young man with whom she had felt a deep kinship and who John & I had agreed would be her perfect match. She had broken their relationship because she believed her identity was as a lesbian and would never allow marriage to a man.

One of my friends, a good Catholic, knew what the Church taught, and she challenged my acceptance of the gay lifestyle. She encouraged me to pray that the Lord would lead me to the Truth. I desperately wanted to help, but I didn't want to lead anyone astray. Matthew 18:6 haunted me: "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me

to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.” I didn’t want to lead others into sin.

At a Charismatic Day Of Reflection, I asked for prayer to know the Truth and how to best help Patti. I was given Proverbs 3:5. “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding...” I had tried so hard to figure this out in my head, and it had only left me confused. With that prayer, it was as if a shade was lifted. I received Light. I knew in my heart that what the Catholic Church taught was the Truth. With this new recognition of Truth, I received a peace in my heart that I hadn’t known for a very long time.

A series of providential circumstances led me to the Courage Ministry where I began to learn clearly what the Catholic Church teaches about same-sex attractions, interior chastity, and holiness. Our first Courage Conference was in 1995, and it was filled with blessings and affirmation. My relationship with the Lord deepened, and my love for the Church and her teachings grew. I began to understand what it means to love the sinner but hate the sin and to experience with others the pain of a discipleship that calls us to stand firm in the faith. I had to tell Patti about my change of thought. She was deeply disappointed. Our relationship became strained and distant. Courage was helping me to understand her identity as a child of God, not to define her by her same-sex attractions. Courage was also teaching me how to love her, without accepting her choices, and in time our relationship was restored, although some tension still remained.

During one of the EnCourage workshops at a Courage Conference, we were asked to share something positive we had experienced as a way of encouraging each other. My heart started pounding. I felt compelled to relate God’s goodness in a challenging time. I recalled a time during Advent when I was wondering what gift I could offer the Lord that season. Our family members were all healthy, our finances looked good, John and I were doing better. Life seemed perfect. And then I received an e-mail from Patti expressing her joy that she had exchanged engagement rings with her partner. It was like a knife in my heart, and I cried, but then recognized this as the gift I could offer to Jesus: The pain in my heart united with the pain He suffered as He hung on the cross, gazing at all those who would reject Him. I blurted this story out amid a few choked-back tears and was met with silence. This was a positive experience? For me it was. I felt so close to Jesus in this time of pain and suffering, and I recognized how it was drawing me more deeply into His Sacred Heart.

Patti was in her second same-sex relationship at that time. She and her partner wanted to get married. Because our relationship had been restored and we were trying to show our love for her, she interpreted this as acceptance of their marriage. I had to tell her we could not attend a ceremony that we felt was deeply harmful for her spiritual well being. She felt rejected and could not separate our rejection of her choice from the belief that we were rejecting her as a person. This was about ten years ago. It remains a stumbling block for us. However, our continued efforts to keep communications open and to show

our love for her have allowed a restoration in our relationship again. We talk frequently on the phone, and Patti and her current partner have been joining us for holiday celebrations and family connections. We don't talk about sexual orientation. We focus on our lives and adventures and keeping up with the family.

We have two other children, four in total, and all three of her siblings accept Patti's same-sex attractions as normal, rejecting the teachings of the Church. I'm sure my early ignorance, confusion, and misguided compassion, as well as the culture that surrounds us, have played a role in their attitudes. John and I are divorced after 38 years of marriage. Despite our fractures, our family is committed to keeping in touch and supporting one another.

Patti is currently in her fourth same-sex relationship, and was "married" a year ago. John and Patti's siblings attended the ceremony; Patti and I had a good conversation, recognizing that it would be too uncomfortable for both of us if I attended. I stayed home. The whole family knows of our different views on same-sex relationships and respects that difference.

I've met so many talented and caring people through Patti, and have tried to listen and be present with them. Our Diocese has an EnCourage Chapter, and I hope to devote my energy to helping get the word out and educate others about the beauty and Truth of the Church's teachings. I'm so aware of how many detours I've taken, and I hope to help others find a straighter road to Truth and Peace than the one I took.

In conclusion, I can echo a testimony given by Dan at the 2010 conference. I thank God for the pain and challenge of dealing with same-sex attractions, both within myself and with our daughter. These have brought me to a level of faith and love of God for which I am profoundly grateful. Dan also quoted Romans 2:4 in his testimony: "The kindness of God will lead you to repentance." God is faithful, and I trust Him to continue to call and draw our loved ones to Himself, even as He, in His kindness and mercy, has done for me.