



Homosexuals and the Faith That Welcomes “Friendship and Accompaniment in the Truth”

The Experience of Courage International: the way is the Word

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Homosexual persons: the great question. Or, as some of the synod fathers made clear in the course of their work, one of the very delicate themes on which the renewal of pastoral care is to be measured. It is useless to hide the reality. Today the proposals for persons with a homosexual tendency are sporadic, isolated and, in most cases, entrusted to the personal initiatives of parish priests and educators of good will. Still, the questionnaire sent out last December by the General Secretariat of the Synod, in preparation for the ordinary assembly next October, confronts the matter in explicit terms, with three questions (no. 40) that get right to the heart of the problem: “How can the Christian community give pastoral attention to families with persons with homosexual tendencies? What are the responses that, in light of cultural sensitivities, are considered to be most appropriate? While avoiding any unjust discrimination, how can such persons receive pastoral care in these situations in light of the Gospel? How can God’s will be proposed to them in their situation?”

We spoke with (Fr) Philip Bochanski, associate director of Courage International, among the few experienced groups involved in pastoral care for homosexual persons, which for more than 30 years has represented a safe haven, consistent with the teaching of the Church.

Father Bochanski, what response would you give to the questions in the questionnaire [of the Synod]?

An authentic response to the situation of persons with homosexual tendencies requires formation of the intellect and of the conscience. Courage seeks to provide a clear understanding of Christian anthropology, that is, of why and how the human being is created in the image and likeness of God, and of the Church’s moral teaching on sexuality and on virtue.

The second and third points recommend avoiding all “unjust discrimination,” while proposing to these people “the demands of the will of God in their situation.” What is the most important thing to keep in mind?

Courage also seeks to form disciples of the Lord Jesus by providing authentic pastoral care to those experiencing same-sex attractions, and to their families and loved ones. By encouraging our members to frequent the sacraments of Eucharist and Confession, we seek to strengthen their friendship with Christ and with his Church. Through our goals of support, fellowship and service, we encourage our members and their families to grow in love and mutual understanding, and to make generous gifts of themselves in service to others.

For 35 years the Courage apostolate has helped people who experience same-sex attraction to live the teachings of the Church. How has the cultural climate changed in those three decades in regard to people with questions of sexual identity?

It is a great joy to see how the Courage and Encourage have developed in these 35 years. From the first small meeting in New York in September 1980, our apostolate has grown to include more than 125 chapters in 15 countries on 5 continents.

Has the activity of the Courage apostolate encountered obstacles from gay activism? In which countries does this happen most frequently?

In the various countries where homosexuality is bound up with what Pope Francis called factions or "lobbies", gay activists sometimes criticize our efforts to provide formation and pastoral care, and even demonstrate against our conferences. We are careful to protect the privacy of our members by not publicizing the times and places of our meetings. Often the criticism we encounter is based on misunderstandings, and we are happy for a chance to dialogue with others in hopes of answering questions and resolving misunderstandings.

How can a homosexual person live peacefully the reality of his own sexual orientation in harmony with the teaching of the Church?

What we are talking about is an integrated understanding of what sexuality, sexual desire and intimacy are for, and a willingness to live according to the plan of God for sexuality. This has to begin with a deep appreciation of the fact that one is created, redeemed and called by God --- that one is always deeply loved and accepted as who he or she is. This is often a very difficult first step, as people experiencing same-sex attractions often feel isolated and marginalized, not only by society or their families, but even by the Church and by God himself.

And the second step?

Next comes a willingness to accept the Word of God as a norm by which to organize one's life and on which to build all of one's relationships. The truth is paradoxical, but also thrilling: the more a person hands his life over to God and to his will, the more he becomes who God has created him to be. The more one surrenders, the freer he becomes to pursue his real happiness. Having accepted God's plan and made a free decision to live by it, a person needs to grow in the virtues of hope and perseverance.

What "prescription" does Courage provide to help homosexual persons who want to live fully their belonging to the Church?

The first Courage members settled on five goals, which provide the framework for an integrated, peaceful embrace of virtue and for authentic relationships with others. The first goal is chastity, and so the journey begins with an understanding of what sexuality means and what it is for, and a willingness to respect God's plan for sexuality to such a degree that one reserves all sexual intimacy for the context of fruitful married love. This requires a commitment to holiness that is both physical (avoiding homosexual acts) and spiritual (keeping custody of mind and heart, of thoughts and desires).

You're not talking about a small task ...

This goal of chastity can only be attained if one is also striving for a life of prayer, founded on the sacraments, the Word of God, and spiritual direction. These sources of grace also strengthen one's relationships with God and with the Church, which provide the context for other human relationships.

With what results?

Courage and Encourage members share with one another their experiences of trying, and sometimes struggling, to live chastity and prayer. In the process, those who are succeeding may assist those who are struggling, and each shares the other's burden, like Simon of Cyrene helping Jesus to carry his cross. This mutual support is enriched by an authentic fellowship that creates bonds of friendship both in and outside the group. Finally, Courage members strive to be of service to the Church and to their neighbors, seeking out especially those who are marginalized and isolated. This giving of self in works of charity goes a long way to fulfilling the deep desires for intimacy, creativity and fruitfulness that one sometimes tries to answer in unhealthy ways through sexual acts and relationships.

Can the people who come to your meetings also derive benefits from participation in one of the various programs proposed by so-called reparative therapy? In other words, can your spiritual approach be in harmony with those of psychotherapy or psychoanalysis?

The authentic meeting point of spirituality and psychology with regard to same-sex attractions is in what we might call "chastity-based therapy." This is very far from an attempt to "repair" or "fix" someone as if he or she was dealing with a mental illness. Rather, those with a deep understanding of the way human beings think and relate to others have demonstrated many ways in which habitual ways of coping with feelings or situations can make one more susceptible to temptations or more likely to seek gratification in ways that are not good for him or her. Some people find that, in addition to spiritual direction and the sacraments, an ability to talk about their experiences and their present situation with someone who understands these ways of coping, thinking and acting --- well-trained, ethical psychologists and therapists --- gives them insights that help them in their striving to be chaste.

The Initiative

Founded in the USA by Archbishop Cooke in New York

Courage and EnCourage are spiritual support groups. Courage was founded in 1980 by the Servant of God Terence Cooke, archbishop of New York, to help Catholics with same-sex attraction to live chastely according to the teachings of the Church. EnCourage is the affiliated group for family members, spouses and friends of men and women with same-sex attraction. "The dignity and the identity of Christians," Courage says, "is not determined by their sexual inclination, but by their relationship with Jesus Christ in faith, hope and love." An oft-repeated premise is that "to experience attraction for the same sex does not constitute a sin. The Church distinguishes between having attraction for the same sex and committing homosexual acts." In Italy, the Courage Apostolate has been present since June 2012. The number of members is gradually increasing. At present there are active groups that meet regularly in Roma, Turin and Reggio Emilia.

The Plan

A Formative Way to Live One's Condition in Peace

The plan proposed by Courage sets five goals: 1) To live chaste lives in accordance with the Church's teaching on homosexuality. 2) To dedicate one's entire life to Christ through service to others, spiritual reading, prayer, meditation, individual spiritual direction, frequent attendance at Mass, and the frequent reception of the sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Eucharist. 3) To foster a spirit of fellowship in which all may share with one another thoughts and experiences, and so ensure that no one will have to face the problems of homosexuality alone. 4) To be mindful of the truth that chaste friendships are not only possible but necessary in a chaste Christian life; and to encourage one another in forming and sustaining these friendships. 5) To live lives that may serve as good examples to others. Of this experience Saint John Paul II said, "Courage is doing the work of God."