

## The Spirituality of Courage

Rooted in the priestly heart of Fr. John Harvey, OSFS, whose spirituality was born of a profound personal relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ and drew inspiration from the spirituality of the Oblates of Saint Francis de Sales' fervent devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the spirituality of Courage reflects the urging of the Saint to "Live Jesus." In *The Introduction to the Devout Life*, St. Francis de Sales opens the way for persons living in the world to develop a Christian life founded upon the union of one's heart with the Sacred Heart of Jesus and in a daily striving marked by a total offering of one's life and all of one's works in union with God. In this manner, the Saint tells us, each Christian brings love and healing from the Heart of Jesus to others. He also demonstrates how each Christian's everyday life is not only a gift from God, but also a life that he or she can return to the Divine Giver. One's labor, toil, and sorrow, along with one's rest, triumph, and joy become a prayerful offering, an offering that can be dedicated to union with God. In this way every Christian assists in the renewal of the Church and the salvation of the world.

Fr. John Harvey possessed a simple goodness expressed in his spiritual fatherhood, especially for souls experiencing same-sex attractions. At the same time, he was a man with great spiritual strength, abiding faith, and noble character. He believed in treating these men and women the same way he treated every other human person facing a challenge—by responding "to the person." He found that by responding to each person as an intelligent and free child of God, by treating him or her as equal in dignity, by being willing to share in his or her difficulties, the walls of isolation, fear, and desolation subsided. And thus it is for us, the men and women of Courage, to imitate his spirit of fidelity, humility and compassion. Just as the understanding love of Jesus Christ for all souls knows no measure or limit, so might we too be filled with compassion and generous solicitude for every person who comes to us in his or her time of need.

Saint Francis de Sales believes that the essence of community life for the Oblate is lived most authentically by communion with Christ and with one's brothers. But the Saint also provides a path of community for all Christians, exhorting us to build a faithful and fruitful human community. This is best accomplished, he says, by bringing the love of God to all that we do. This love, offered to God and to each other, draws us together in a community of charity with Christ and with each other. Thus, we are to carry on Fr. Harvey's work of building spiritual support groups, communities founded in Christ for the

sake of assisting members to love as Christ loves—chastely, purely, and selflessly—never betraying in any way the faithfulness and perpetual care which are marks of Divine Love.

Fr. Harvey learned from Christ, the font of his love, that the gift of love to others first bound him to the universal Church, to the Pope and the Bishops in communion with him. Fr. Harvey never worked outside of an abiding obedience to Christ and to His Vicar on earth. The Courage Apostolate was, and still is, in the heart of the Church. So it is for us, the men and women of Courage, to remain ever the faithful sons and daughters of Mother Church, understanding this apostolate as Fr. Harvey understood it—not as his project, not as his invention, but rather as belonging to Christ, who had inspired and blessed its creation.

The heart of Courage and EnCourage spirituality, based on the writings of Saint Francis de Sales and The Five Goals of Courage, is the belief that sanctity is possible in everyday life. Through the Courage Apostolate those persons experiencing same-sex attractions are encouraged to deepen their Christian discipleship through participation in the sacramental life of the Church, particularly through the frequent reception of the Eucharist and frequent confession, as well as through a regular prayer life, witness, counsel, service, and self-giving. By developing a dedicated prayer life and seeking meditative and prayerful union with the Sacred Heart of Jesus, we come to recognize our true identity as children of God, men and women in Christ, understanding and experiencing the unconditional love of God, thus conforming ourselves to His will for our lives. Fr. Harvey recognized this transformation as a process requiring great patience and perseverance, where “white-knuckled chastity” will give way to “interior chastity of the heart,” when a soul truly seeks wholeness and holiness in Christ.

The community aspect of Courage extends to an appreciation, on a deep level, of the importance of assisting families with a member who experiences same-sex attractions. EnCourage provides support for family members and concerned individuals with sons, daughters, spouses, or friends affected by same-sex attractions, helping members to understand this struggle and the necessity of embracing a life of chastity (*Documents of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*, paragraph 16). Family members and friends also suffer, and they too need the support of a community rooted in a reverence for Truth, one founded upon, and faithful to, the belief that the human person, made in the image and likeness of God, should not be reduced to a reference to his or her sexual desires.

Families also benefit from understanding that we all have personal problems and difficulties which challenge us and sometimes present obstacles to our growth. At the same time, our difficulties and

challenges are also accompanied by strengths, talents, and gifts. When the Church provides a badly needed context for the care of the human person by refusing to consider individuals as “heterosexual” or “homosexual,” insisting that every person has a fundamental identity as a creature of God, and by grace, His child and heir to eternal life, we are wrapped in the loving embrace of God’s Truth.

Prayer of the heart is the way to union of heart with the Sacred Heart of Jesus. It is this union of one’s heart with the Sacred Heart of Jesus which also brings healing and strength to the family members and friends of persons with SSA. It was Fr. Harvey’s observation that it is important, when working with parents of persons experiencing same-sex attractions, to help them to further develop their own relationship with the Lord. Parents must turn over stewardship of their child to the Lord, allowing Him to bring healing to their own hearts first. In the glorious pierced Heart of Jesus, family members will find the gift which their suffering member most needs and, in fact, desires—the gift of love, purified and inflamed with Divine Love. Thus, the spirituality of Courage and EnCourage requires a steadfast plumbing of the second of The Five Goals of Courage:

“To dedicate our entire lives 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 of the Holy Eucharist.”

Through all of these spiritual practices, the deep beauty of a chaste life will be seen and embraced, and a heart will be prepared and sustained for true friendship.

The Twelve Steps of Courage, based on the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous,\* are set within the context of prayer and the sacramental life of the Church. Membership in Courage is an invitation to grow spiritually, and so in holiness. While the twelve-step program is an integral part of Courage discipline, the heart of the apostolate is always a personal relationship with Christ as a member of His Mystical Body—as He heals us and gives us the strength to grow in the virtue of chastity and all the Cardinal and Theological Virtues. The profoundly spiritual nature of Courage must continue to be not just a method for attaining sexual abstinence but a way of encountering Christ, the Chaste One, in order to live chastely in Him. The Twelve Steps open the space within our hearts to grow spiritually, to come to know Christ more fully, and to love Him more ardently. Chastity, made possible by Christ’s redemptive grace, is a liberating virtue and a source of joy and human freedom.

Also central to the spirituality of Courage and EnCourage is a deeper understanding of the origin, identity,

\*Used with permission of Alcoholics Anonymous

and destiny of human beings: That we are created male and female by God, and that the complementarity of married love between a man and a woman is a privileged participation in the being and procreative power of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who through the cooperation of the husband and wife, gives the gift of new human life to be formed and cherished. Such understanding not only assists members to recognize and respect their own identity as sons and daughters of God, brothers and sisters of Christ, but also aids our society in the struggle to overcome the secularization which attacks the sanctity of life and the integrity of marriage and the family.

And so we emphasize the importance of the continuing spiritual development of Courage and EnCourage members, a development which brings each believer a deeper knowledge of the Faith and its practice, to a deeper knowledge of Christ alive for us in the Church, Who accompanies us along our pilgrim way to our lasting home in Heaven. The love of Christ, flowing from His glorious pierced Heart into our often poor and confused hearts, will give us the clarity and strength to go forward. In the words of the emblem of the Oblates of Saint Francis de Sales, our hearts resting in the Sacred Heart of Jesus, will take hold of Divine Love and will not let go.