

Beyond Courage to Authenticity

A Position Paper on the Courage Apostolate

prepared by the

Catholic Pastoral Committee on Sexual Minorities

(www.cpcsm.org)

1. Courage's Mission and Philosophy

- The Courage apostolate purports to help people move beyond “same-sex attraction” by encouraging a life of “interior chastity in union with Christ.” The movement labels itself a “pro-chastity ministry” and equates chastity with celibacy.
- Although Courage acknowledges that the “inclination” of “homosexual attractions” is “psychologically understandable,” such attractions are nevertheless considered “objectively disordered” – a view that, though promulgated by the Vatican as church teaching, is widely questioned throughout the Church as the people of God.
- Courage insists that it “does not provide professional therapy” while, at the same time, maintaining the discredited belief that “some people, especially young people, are able to further their psychosexual development [i.e., “move beyond homosexual attractions”] with spiritual and psychological aid.”
- Courage shares with Protestant ex-gay/transformational ministries the belief that homosexuality is pathological, and not a natural, normal sexual orientation. However, unlike many of the other ministries, the Courage apostolate recognizes that adult sexual orientation is fixed and does not claim that adult gays and lesbians’ sexual orientation can be changed. Nevertheless, it still teaches that the only valid path for homosexuals is to seek celibacy.

2. Courage and NARTH (National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality)

- Courage discourages the use of the terms “gay” and “lesbian,” believing such labels reduce individuals to their “sexual attractions.” Given this rationale, it seems odd that Courage uses the term “same-sex attracted” when talking about the homosexual orientation. It’s important to know that the phrase “same-sex attracted” was coined by the largely discredited U.S.-based National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH). It’s a term that is unrecognized by any professional health association. Following NARTH’s lead, Courage likens homosexuality to alcoholism, and conducts its “support group” using the 12-Step format developed by Alcoholics Anonymous. Some members of Courage even consider their “disorder” to be curable, and explain its origin using debunked psychoanalytic theories of dominant mothers, distant fathers, and abusive family relations.
- NARTH, itself, is a sham organization of “therapists” that teaches that homosexuality is a disorder that is not only chosen, but can be changed through effort. Not surprisingly, NARTH’s findings and methodology are seldom, if ever, offered to peer-reviewed journals for critical analysis. In short, the group lacks any respect from the wider scientific community.
- Despite this, the founder of Courage, Fr. John Harvey, frequently invited to his workshops, as a major presenter, the late Peter Rudegear, a member of NARTH and a clinical psychologist who was

a major proponent of discredited (by all mainstream medical and mental health professional associations) theories advocating reparative, or change, therapy for gay men and lesbians.

- Since last November the archdiocese has attempted to promote NARTH as a credible scientific organization. For instance, in the November 8 issue of *The Catholic Spirit*, Fr. Jim Livingston (lead chaplain to the local chapter of Courage) endorsed NARTH by citing the organization as a useful resource and by encouraging people to visit its website so as “to learn . . . about the emotional root causes of homosexuality.” Fr. Livingston also recommended an audio CD of a talk given by NARTH co-founder Joseph Nicolosi, an individual whom Archbishop Nienstedt, when he was a bishop in Detroit, invited to speak to the priests of the archdiocese as an “expert” on homosexuality. As deacons, you need to be aware that many Catholics are concerned by the archdiocese’s increasing reliance on the discredited perspective and “findings” of NARTH to support and validate Church teaching on homosexuality.
- Although Courage itself does not attempt to change adult homosexual orientation, its website has a link to NARTH’s website and to the websites of many non-Catholic so-called “ex-gay” conservative religious groups—such as, Exodus International, Homosexuals Anonymous, Hope Ministry, International Healing Foundation, JONAH, People Can Change, Parents and Friends of Ex-Gays and Gays (PFOX), and Straightway. Furthermore, Courage is yet to refute the pseudo-science of reparative therapy these “ex-gay” groups advocate. From the perspective of all mainstream medical and mental health professional associations, homosexuality is not a disorder requiring either curing or repairing. Furthermore, many of these professional associations even hold that to attempt such “cures” is unethical and verges on malpractice.
- Yet Courage does not dissuade its members from pursuing such “therapy,” and linking to NARTH’s and other ex-gay group’ websites from its own website. We consider this to be not only unethical, but morally reprehensible. Courage is basically saying to its members that the unhealthy and damaging practice of reparative therapy is okay, but, under no circumstances are its members to consider pursuing and maintaining a loving committed same-sex relationship – relationships which, as a number of recent and reputable studies have shown, are “not atypical, psychologically immature, or malevolent contexts of development.” (Glenn I. Roisman, PhD, American Psychological Association media release, January 22, 2008.)

3. Alternative Catholic perspectives on homosexuality

- CPCSMM has always supported those who feel called by God to live a celibate life. Yet we have serious concerns when Courage and the hierarchical Church insist that *all* gay and lesbian people are called to lifelong celibacy as a result of their God-given sexual orientation. We believe that this reflects an extremely limited and ultimately unhealthy understanding of human sexuality and of God’s presence and call in the lives and relationships of LGBT people.
- With the vast majority of LGBT Catholics, their parents, loved ones, and allies we recognize and celebrate human sexuality – gay and straight – as a God-given gift that we are called to holistically integrate into our lives. For the majority of people – gay or straight – such wholeness and authenticity means seeking and cultivating an intimate relationship with another – a relationship which by its love and commitment is pure in thought and conduct, i.e., chaste. Being authentic in this way – as many LGBT people will attest – requires great dedication and courage.
- LGBT people, along with heterosexual people, can and do experience sexual relationships marked by justice, wholeness, and life-giving love. We believe that such experiences, along with current scientific understanding of homosexuality, can and should inform church teaching on human sexuality.
- Recent data (2007) published by the Pew Forum in its study of Religion in America show that a majority of U.S. Catholics (58 percent) currently favor acceptance of gay people and relationships

and that such approval is proportionately greater in the Catholic Church than in other Christian churches or in the nation as a whole. It would seem that many Catholics concur with *National Catholic Reporter* editor, Tom Roberts, when he states: “[Some insist] that current thinking that is tolerant of homosexuality [is] ignoring ancient wisdom. I happen to think that current wisdom that welcomes homosexuals is, more correctly, finally dropping centuries of ancient ignorance.” (*NCR*, January 2006.)

- The editors of the 1994 anthology *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources of Theological Reflection* suggest that this ignorance stems, in part, from the fact that “throughout most of Christian history the vast majority of theologians who wrote about sexuality tried to approach the subject from one direction only: they began with affirmations and assertions of the faith (from scriptures, from doctrines, from churchly teachings, and so on) and then applied those to human sexuality. Now, theologians are assuming that the other direction of inquiry is important as well: What does our sexual experience reveal about God? About the ways we understand the Gospel? About the ways we read scripture and tradition and attempt to live out the faith?”
- Such questions, we admit, can be unsettling. But we think that it is not the Catholic way to shy away from them and to retreat instead into some fantasy world where, despite both scientific and experiential evidence to the contrary, we insist that we have all the possible answers (and thus knowledge) available to us about what it means to be sexual, what it means to be human.

4. Church teaching on homosexuality

- In his November 1 column in *The Catholic Spirit*, editor Joe Towalski notes that homosexuality is a “hot button issue for the church,” yet he does not say why this is the case. We’d like to suggest that one reason why many issues related to human sexuality remain controversial is because the majority of Catholics intuitively sense that the teachings of the church about these issues lack credibility. The reason for this is simple: the laity has had no part in shaping these teachings.
- The belief that the laity should be consulted in matters of doctrine, especially when teachings concern their lives intimately, is part of Catholicism’s rich heritage. For instance, the great English theologian, Cardinal John Henry Newman (1801-90) wrote that: “The body of the faithful is one of the witnesses to the fact of the tradition of revealed doctrine, and . . . their consensus through Christendom is the voice of the Infallible Church.”
- With regards to the issue of homosexuality, the “body of the faithful” is still very much engaged in the journey towards “consensus.” (As noted above, recent data published by the Pew Forum shows that 58 percent of U.S. Catholics favor acceptance of gay people and relationships.) And in other areas, what can reasonably be viewed as consensus is actually at odds with the teaching of the hierarchical church. For instance, the US Conference of Catholic Bishops concedes that 96 percent of married Catholics use birth control. Clearly, the church’s teachings on a range of sexual issues are not set in stone. This shouldn’t be surprising, for as Jesuit Philip Endean reminds us: “Dogmas of tradition exist not as truths complete in themselves, but rather as resources for helping us discover the ever greater glory . . . of the God whose gift of self pervades all possible experience.” And “all possible experience” includes gay people’s experiences of love, intimacy, and relationship.
- All of this should serve to remind us that truth is discovered through time and that tradition evolves. The Church is currently teaching in Section 2358 of the Catechism, that homosexuals should be treated with compassion and sensitivity. That, in itself, represents an evolution of the tradition. There is no reason why the moral teaching should not evolve beyond the “intrinsic disorder” of “homosexual acts,” and there is plenty of scientific evidence and moral/pastoral reasoning that it should evolve quickly.