

Courage Ministry a journey of discovery through same-sex attraction

All her life, Rachel had carried guilt about being attracted to women. She hadn't told her family or her friends, so opening up to strangers in a group setting made little sense.

To say she was nervous about attending a Courage meeting is an understatement. She fought the idea for months before joining the support group last September.

"I'm going to meet these people and I don't know them, and the first thing that they're going to know about me is that I have SSA (same-sex attraction)," said Rachel, 23, who has asked to remain anonymous. "I didn't know how they were going to treat me."

But her apprehension was quickly relieved.

"Not a single one of them said, 'OK, you'll go to hell for it.' And I was like, 'Really?'... Instead what they say is that they really admire my courage for saying that or for coming here and I'll pray for you that you solve your problems."

Rachel was amazed by the warm welcome. All her life, she had felt that she was expected to act in certain ways. At Courage she was simply accepted.

Courage International, founded by Oblate Rev. John Harvey in 1980, is a spiritual support ministry for adult men and women with same-sex attraction. Officially endorsed by the Vatican in 1994, the organization runs 12-step programs to help people with same-sex attraction live chaste lives in accordance with Church teachings on homosexuality. Like Alcoholics Anonymous, Courage is modelled on St. Ignatius of Loyola's Spiritual Exercises.

Even among Catholics, the pastoral care the Church offers for those who are gay or transgender is largely unknown. Instead, the Church is largely painted as "anti-gay" because it teaches that marriage was created by God and is a covenant between a man and a woman that is open to the gift of children.

As society in general has become more accepting of same-sex relationships and, in many countries, marriage, sexual orientation has become a controversial and polarizing topic within the Catholic community.

Courage International was formed as a pastoral response for Catholics who may struggle to stay faithful to Church teaching. It maintains 167 chapters in 14 countries, mostly in the United States (114 chapters), but Courage is also present in Mexico (16), Brazil (six), and Canada, Italy, Philippines and Great Britain (with five chapters each). Canadian chapters are located in Toronto,

Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton and Winnipeg.



Deacon Hilmar Pabel

“Canada needs more Courage, absolutely,” said Deacon Hilmar Pabel, co-ordinator of the Vancouver chapter.

“I would hope that each diocese would have at least one person who has the courage to take on Courage and EnCourage because we cannot leave our Catholic people by the wayside, to hide in the shadows of our parishes and churches.”

EnCourage is an accompanying apostolate for relatives and friends of people who experience same-sex attraction.

Pabel has been spiritual director of Courage Vancouver for almost three years. He serves about five members regularly who are mostly in their 20s and 30s.

When he was approached to take up the ministry after Rev. Bill Comerford retired in 2016, he was unfamiliar with Courage. But he said it didn't take long to realize the great need for it. Even in today's more inclusive and accepting society, Pabel said many faithful people don't fully understand the Church's teachings on homosexuality.

As people do not choose to be born with any particular sexual orientation, the Church teaches being homosexual is not a sin. However, all sexual acts must be open to procreation and express male-female complementarity in marriage.

Therefore sex between two people of the same gender is considered sinful or, as it is put in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, “objectively disordered,” and people with same-sex attraction are called to practise chastity.

The catechism emphasizes the importance of treating men and women who exhibit same-sex attraction “with respect, compassion and sensitivity” and states that “every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided.”

Still, Rachel maintains trepidations about coming out to her Catholic family and friends. She remains reluctant to share this most intimate part of her identity.

Joining Courage was a first step in talking about it.

At Courage meetings, she meets like-minded Catholics who strive to live a similar life of chastity. Some members are much older than her, but together they practise fellowship, prayer and sacramental grace. One older member in particular, says Rachel, has given her hope.

“She has been with this for much longer than I have and she knows exactly what I’m talking about,” said Rachel. “Even as she grew up at a time when the Church wasn’t as understanding about SSA and this ministry. She has given me advice and she tells me that my feelings are normal and that I can survive them.”

Rachel said the biggest lesson she learned at Courage meetings is that her identity is not rooted solely in her sexual orientation. It is rooted in her identity as a child of God.

Daryle Duke, 57, is open about his experience as a Courage member in Winnipeg. Raised as an Anglican, he never wavered from his relationship with God. But before he sought counselling and Church-based support groups, there was a time in his 20s when he said he began to “act out,” which led him to what he described as the “depths of sin.”

“From a conscionable being-raised-in Church point of view, knowing what the Scripture said about same-sex attraction and homosexuality, I was never comfortable with it,” said Duke.

“For many years, I didn’t understand it and it wasn’t until I went into counselling and started going to support groups that I realized I wasn’t alone and I began to understand.”

Duke is now married. He has been honest with his wife Laurie about his past, and the couple has two children.

“There are a lot of Christians that are living a double life but they don’t like it. They’re ashamed of themselves and they confess their sins in Church. And I remember doing that for years, revolving in and out,” said Duke.

As Duke began to look for more teaching on the scriptural response to homosexuality, he found himself attracted to Catholic teachings on love, relationships and the sacrament of marriage. He and his wife slowly began to fall in love with the Catholic Church.

Last year, he enrolled in the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA) and was confirmed into the Catholic Church this past Easter. He joined Winnipeg's Courage chapter at around the same time.

"We don't hate being gay. We just think that (the sexual act) is wrong and through the mercy of Christ, there are ways to deal with this," said Duke.

As part of his ministry, Pabel often visits parishes in the Vancouver archdiocese to preach about Courage ministry and the Church's response to the gay and transgender community. He said his great love for his brothers and sisters means he cannot allow the ministry to be hidden.

"Courage may strike you as hidden because we tend to treat homosexuality as a problem, a problem in the culture wars that we would rather avoid, instead of beholding men and women who experience same-sex attraction as people to be loved, just as God loves you and me unconditionally," said Pabel.

But being a Courage co-ordinator also requires a thick skin. Pabel said although he is mostly met with support, not everyone in the Church is welcoming.

Two years ago, Pabel was invited to preach about Courage at Sunday Mass in a local parish. In the middle of his homily, a man stood up and shouted three times: "Same-sex marriage is a sin!" Then he stormed out.

"I said nothing of the sort and had he hung around for another minute, he would've heard me say that marriage is between one man and one woman.

But this topic, which we don't talk about, drives people crazy," said Pabel. "It was the last time I preached on Courage."

The Vancouver chapter has been supported by the archdiocese since it was established in 1988. The oldest chapter is in Toronto, established in 1986. It has met its own opposition over the years.

In 2013, Courage Toronto was invited onto University of Toronto's Newman Catholic Chaplaincy Centre. Several members of the chaplaincy parish, St. Thomas Aquinas, lodged a complaint with the University of Toronto.

Although the Newman Centre is independent of the university, public outcry prompted the university to urge closure of the program, calling it "inconsistent with the university's values."



Rev. Kevin Belgrave

But the program still operates at the centre today. Chaplain Rev. Kevin Belgrave estimates that he serves a regular group of about 10 to 15 people in the Archdiocese of Toronto. Some regularly attend the group meetings, while others seek one-on-one spiritual direction. The age range is diverse, from the 20s up to founding members in their 70s.

Belgrave, a professor at St. Augustine's Seminary, said he frequently preaches about the Courage ministry in seminars and other speaking engagements. It is not a hidden ministry, he said, but it is also important that the ministry safeguards the confidentiality of its members.

"Courage is not a secret. Courage is confidential. There's a huge difference," said Belgrave, the Courage Toronto chaplain for five years.

"Find me one person in the world who will open up to you about some of the hardest parts of their past and present so that you will go and parade them as some kind of mascot. So like any support group, we afford to the members and each other that level of confidentiality that makes possible the work of Courage."

Belgrave said it is not the confidential nature of the ministry that prevents it from spreading across Canada as it has in the United States. Part of the reason why Courage thrives in the United States, he said, is because the American Church is 10 times the size of the Canadian Church, but also because Courage International is based in Connecticut, where it has a full-time staff dedicated to promoting its mission to American dioceses in a way not yet available in Canada.

The United States holds an annual national conference that attracts thousands of members and supporters from around the continent. This year's conference

(July 18-21), *Courageous Friendship: Inspiring Hope and Renewal*, will be held at University of Saint Mary of the Lake in Mundelein, Ill.

"In these difficult days, Courage is a sign of hope," Toronto Cardinal Thomas Collins said in a statement for the July conference, which he plans to attend.

Deacon Gilles Urquhart feels like he's been trying to get the Winnipeg chapter off the ground for almost a decade. Officially, he has been listed as the co-ordinator of the Courage chapter for 10 years, but it is only over the past few years that members have established a regular meeting schedule.

With four or five regular Courage members ranging in age from 20 to 72, Urquhart is working with the Archdiocese of Winnipeg and the neighbouring Archdiocese of St. Boniface to promote the apostolate.

"I think the number one thing is that they realize that they are not alone and that other people are sharing in a similar journey," said Urquhart. "They might've gone to the gay scene and go, 'I don't fit there and I don't want to live that,' and then they go to Mass and think, 'Nobody here understands my experience.' In Courage, you can figure out who you are in both."