

Towards a church apology for gay prejudice

DONAL GODFREY MARCH 03, 2008

Some years ago I spent a year in Australia and presided at the Acceptance Mass from time to time. Acceptance is the Sydney gay Catholic caucus. Hence my interest in the 100Revs Statement of Apology to the gay community, the courageous initiative of Baptist pastor Mike Hercock and other Christian clergy. The Statement is carefully worded, and in line with Catholic teaching. It recognises that churches have not been places of welcome for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) people.

Indeed churches have often been profoundly unloving toward the GLBT community. Many Catholics and other Christians long for their churches to be places of welcome for all people and commit themselves to pursuing this goal.

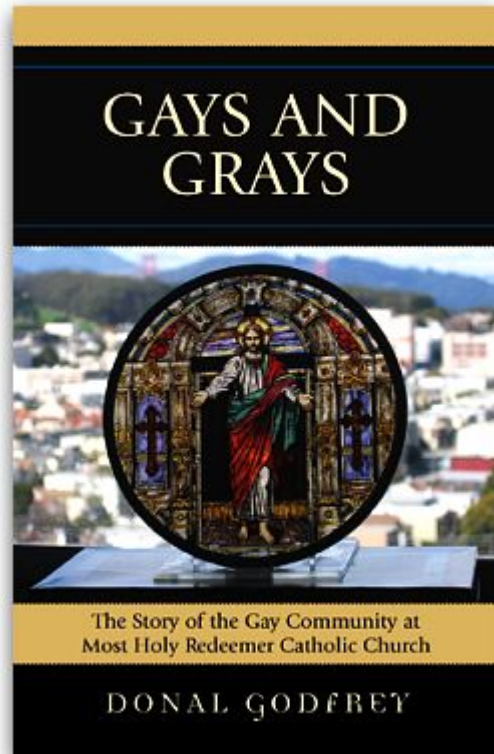
The 100 Revs Statement adds that signatories are *not* taking a biblical position on gay and lesbian relationships. It is a pastoral document, rather than a teaching one. It brings together clergy who have very different views on the issue of gay relationships, who nonetheless recognise the value of a church apology to gay people.

For some years, I have been associated with the Most Holy Redeemer Catholic parish in the Castro district of San Francisco. Approximately three quarters of the parishioners are openly gay. One — Patrick Mulcahey — spoke to me about his return to the Catholic Church, at Most Holy Redeemer, some years ago. He described the experience as 'what any Catholic would feel after 20-odd years away'.

'It was the church itself, in all its majesty and mystery and ordinary goodness; in the sturdy beauty of a well-wrought liturgy ... for the first time since I was old enough to understand myself as a sexual being, it was a church that wasn't pushing me away.'

He suggested that any Catholic who'd been on a desert island for 20 years would have felt the same thing upon walking into a church where a decent priest was saying mass. But it was something he believed he could not have felt in any other church.

'People don't understand why gay men and lesbians migrate to San Francisco, Los Angeles, Miami, New York, cities all around the world that have flourishing gay ghettos,' he said. 'To be with 'others of our own kind?' To have wild sex and go to great parties?'



'The truth is, mostly we come here to forget about being gay, to just drop that burden — to just be human. For us, Most Holy Redeemer is the church where you can go and just be Catholic.'



Pastoral practices are changing in some places. Nonetheless parishes like Most Holy Redeemer remain the exception. At Acceptance and Most Holy Redeemer I constantly hear the stories of Gay Catholics who were pushed away through a mixture of hostility, ignorance and denial. Usually this homophobia adversely affected their relationship with God.

These Catholics are happy to have found a Catholic community that is safe and where the healing, liberating, and unconditional love of Jesus is understood as being for all people, regardless of sexual orientation.

Church teaching is generally condemnatory regarding homosexual acts. But the Catechism, following the practice of Jesus, says this concerning gay people: 'They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided.' (2358)

The US Bishops echoed this back in 1976, when they said: 'Homosexuals, like everyone else, should not suffer from prejudice against their basic human rights. They have a right to respect, friendship and justice. They should have an active role in the Christian community'.

Around the world gay people struggle to find a place at the table of our churches. In Christian faith, the challenge is to follow Jesus. This means being like him — a person who spent a lot of time with people the rest of society rejected.

The challenge in this case is for the church to be a community that confesses its own brokenness and reaches out to minister a healing reconciliation between the races, between the young and the old, between liberal and conservative, gay and straight, lesbian, bisexual and transgender. The 100Revs Statement is a commendable response to the alienation many gay Christians experience.

A truly prophetic Christian community can hold firm to the gospel, and at the same time embrace people regardless of difference. The prejudice gay people often experience in church parishes and congregations has nothing to do with the gospel of Jesus.

LINKS:

- [Acceptance](#)
- [100 Revs](#)



Donal Godfrey SJ is Executive Director, University Ministry at The University of San Francisco. He is author of "Gays and Grays: The Story of the Inclusion of the Gay Community at Most Holy Redeemer Catholic parish," which is to be republished by Lexington Books in a paperback edition this month