

Courage International

Over the past eighteen months or so, I have been involved in discussions with Bishop Toal, and others, about the need to develop a ministry within the diocese to men and women who experience sexual attraction to others of the same sex. My commitment to this has been borne out of experiences over these past four years, especially in the confessional and working with young people. Although I understand that we will all have different stories to share, my own experiences have often been of those who are striving to live according to the Church's understanding of human sexuality, but are finding it a struggle.

As I researched this matter, I found that there was, in fact, a worldwide Catholic apostolate which offered an answer to how we can help and support people who, while experiencing this attraction, are trying to live faithful to their understanding of human sexuality. This apostolate is called 'Courage International'.

When I first found out about Courage, I thought it seemed perfect. I quickly, however, encountered quite a lot of negativity - and even hostility - about it. For that reason, I would like to address directly what I believe to be two misconceptions about the Courage apostolate.

The first would be that Courage is an organisation which seeks to 'cure' homosexuality, or to change sexual orientation. This is not the case. Courage was founded in 1980 by Fr. John Harvey, an Oblate of St. Francis de Sales. It is my understanding that Fr. Harvey may have claimed that, in some cases, a change in sexual orientation could be effected. There have also been recent media reports bringing to light his suggestion that, after therapy, abusive priests could be returned safely to ministry. While this is regrettable, obviously the understanding of these issues has changed hugely in society and the Church in the past forty years. There would be something strange, therefore, if the approach of Courage had not also developed in that time. What remains at the heart of the vision of Courage is, rather, the positive affirmation of the fact that it is possible - with the grace of God and the support of a community - for all people to live faithfully according to the Church's understanding of human sexuality. Rather than change sexual orientation, Courage seeks to encourage all of us to understand our sexual desires in the wider context of our needs for human (and, indeed, Divine) intimacy and fruitfulness.

The second misconception would be that Courage operates as a 'one size fits all' approach. Again, this is not the case. Courage is very specifically a ministry for those who are striving to live according to Church teaching in the area of sexuality. It is definitely not suited to those who have decided to pursue sexual relationships. It does not, therefore, exclude the possibility of a different outreach or pastoral approach for others. But there are people in parishes throughout our diocese who want to live chastely, and their needs should not be ignored.

Another wider question which has been asked is why there should be a ministry to help people with same sex attraction to live chastely, and not other groups. I think the first response to this would be that we should indeed be finding ways to support all people - including married couples, single people, and young people - to appreciate the positive vision of human sexuality which is provided in the tradition of the Church. Perhaps beginning with the Courage apostolate might actually spur us on to examine how we might do this. By far the most compelling reason for having a specific ministry to those who experience same sex attraction, however, is the fact that, in many places throughout the world, this has proved to be an effective means of helping people to feel welcomed and affirmed

within the Church, as well as supporting them to live a chaste life. Again, while it might not be for everyone, this is no reason not to make it available for those who might benefit.

Courage normally operates at a diocesan level with the establishing of a 'chapter', which will have a priest chaplain. At a meeting last year, it was decided that the three dioceses of the Western Province would work together on this. This was because it was recognised that the specific approach of Courage would be unlikely to attract large numbers of people, at least initially. Someone interested in becoming a member of a group would contact the 'courage@rcdom.org.uk' e-mail address, and then would meet individually with a priest on a few occasions to assess their suitability to join a group.

The meeting of a chapter is a very simple affair. It begins with prayer and the opportunity for confession, and with the reading out of the 'Five Goals of Courage', that is "Chastity; Prayer & Dedication; Fellowship; Support; Good Example'. There is also some input from the chaplain, and a chance for sharing. Then there is a period of social time.

I hope that this letter might clear up some of the misconceptions about Courage, or some misgivings. Above all, I hope that it will allow you to see the ministry of Courage as a pastoral resource and you will feel comfortable encouraging those who might benefit to seek out this support, especially in the context of the confessional.

Fr. Martin Delaney.

For further information, please see the Courage International website, <https://couragerc.org>.

There are also some very good videos available online:

Desire of the Everlasting Hills, available at <https://everlastinghills.org/movie/>

The Third Way: Homosexuality and the Catholic Church, available on youtube.