

The Theology of Weakness: Courage Reparational Prayer Group

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By Susan Brinkmann -- CS&T Correspondent

Their prayer has been continuous for the last 12 years. It takes place once a month in five U.S. cities — Philadelphia, Boston, New Jersey, Pittsburgh, and Washington DC — and its focus is on some of the most critical aspects of human existence: suffering, weakness and sexuality.

The Courage Reparational Prayer Group was formed a decade after its parent organization, Courage, was begun by Father John Harvey, O.S.F.S. in New York City in 1980. This ministry provides spiritual support to persons with same-sex attraction who desire to live chaste lives in accordance with Roman Catholic teaching.

Responding to the Church's call to chastity is hard for anybody in our sex-saturated culture, which is one of the main reasons this group was formed.

"We come together to offer up our struggle with chastity and use it as reparation for the sins of the world," said Vera, the group's founder, who asked that her last name be withheld. "We offer up our own pain and struggle, and unite it with the passion of Jesus to bring life to others. It gives meaning to our suffering."

The monthly meetings include a talk on the interior life, personal sharing and a holy hour. "We pray for the conversion of others who are struggling with homosexual feelings, and we also pray against the political agendas that are bringing a lot of deceit and ruining people's lives," Vera said. "We've never stopped since 1992. It'll be 12 years in November. Our prayer never stops."

A pastoral counselor and member of the Catholic Therapists Association, Vera struggled with same-sex attraction as a teenager and got involved in a relationship with a woman that went bad. "I was in a lot of pain and I remember praying and saying, 'Lord, if You hear me, You have to help me out of this pain.'"

God answered her prayer with a series of events that led her into the charismatic renewal movement, where she experienced a conversion experience. "I met Jesus, and He loved me for who I was — in that time and in that pain. Even feeling homosexual, I felt accepted by God. That was a big lesson for me. And that's why, in my ministry, I always say that we have to love people through this stuff — not react."

At the time of her introduction to the charismatic renewal, she also became a member of a lay community. "During that time the Lord fed me a lot of graces and helped me to understand the whole chastity picture."

Trying to live chastely, especially in contemporary society, was a struggle, but a fruitful one for her, because it deepened Vera's spiritual life and helped her to acquire a much deeper understanding of the redemptive process, she said. Suffering, when united to Christ's passion, has enormous value: Suddenly, Vera's struggles began to have meaning for her.

"Struggle is okay and when we're struggling in our feelings and our desires, we have to embrace who we are and accept our weaknesses," she said. "It's okay to struggle. That's how God brings us to holiness. I call it the theology of weakness. We all have our problems and weaknesses and limitations. Our problem is that we don't face them. Our concept of holiness is that we can't face God with all our imperfections. We have to be perfect. It's in the acceptance of that struggle — ours is in homosexuality — but no matter whose it is, we need to accept the struggle and not fight it off or deny it or try to change it."

Vera slowly began to build a new life, this time much closer to God. One morning she saw an ad in the paper about a new group named Courage that was forming for Catholic homosexuals. "I was the first woman to call and I became very active with Father Harvey. We opened an office in 1983, and I worked with him until 1989, developing groups across the country."

The early years of Courage found the group on the firing line, particularly from other groups for Catholic homosexuals such as Dignity. "Dignity doesn't follow Church teaching that you have to be chaste," she said. "They say it's okay to have a steady lover — just one. They don't promote promiscuity. But that's not what the Church teaches."

It was to counter such groups that Terence Cardinal Cooke and Father Benedict Groeschel encouraged Father Harvey to form a group that taught the truths of the Catholic Church. Vera was very involved in spreading the Courage ministry throughout the country. In fact, it was during the first anniversary of Philadelphia's chapter that she received the inspiration for the reparation group.

"I was at the Cathedral with Father Harvey, and author Elizabeth Moberly, and the Courage members — and I got this sense from God that He was very pleased, but He wanted more." Her impression was that Courage should go deeper into the interior life. After discussing it with Father Harvey, she approached John Cardinal O'Connor, of New York, who gave the new group his blessing. The first reparational group meeting was two months later, in November, 1992.

The groups gradually grew and formed in other cities such as Pittsburgh, Boston and Washington DC. The Philadelphia group meets at 3 p.m. on the second Sunday of every month at St. Rita's Shrine in Philadelphia. Richard Gerst, who facilitates the local chapter of Courage, was one of the people who used to drive 70 miles to attend the original reparation group held in North Jersey. The experience has been spiritually cleansing for him, he said.

"When you come out of the gay life, you make your confession and start engaging in regular prayer. It's easy to forget all the bad stuff you did. But we have to make reparation for all that. We have to make reparation for the gay life in general. There's so much that we have to do if anything is going to be moved. It's so important," Gerst said. "If we don't do it, nobody will."

Anyone may attend a reparational group meeting, and its members say it is especially soothing for anyone who is suffering from too much "life in flesh."

Having grown up in the '60s, when it was fashionable to believe that individuals had to have sex to be happy, Vera has discovered that this is not true.

"In fact, it's just the opposite," she said. "Chastity brings us into a certain sobriety in our relationships and helps us to get more in touch with ourselves and with God in our interior lives. Sex isn't everything. We're living chastely and it's enough for us. We're happy, we're growing, we're vibrant and we're complete human beings."

For more information about the Courage Reparational Group, visit the Courage web site at www.couragerc.net and follow the "[Reparational Groups](#)" link. You may call Vera at 347-210-1127.

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