

**The following homily was given by Fr. Paul Check of Stamford, CT, in the early part of 2003:**

“For these reasons,” writes St. Paul, “continue, my dear ones, to stand firm in the Lord.”

In the Name...

A little over a year ago, Bishop Lori asked me to establish a new apostolate for the diocese, a program called *Courage*. *Courage*, which began in New York City almost 25 years ago, exists in about one third of the Catholic dioceses in the United States. So out of a sense of genuine pastoral concern for some of the souls entrusted to his care, the bishop decided to bring *Courage* to Bridgeport. The program aims to provide spiritual, moral and fraternal support to those men and women who are attracted to members of the same sex, so that they can live chaste lives. To live *chaste lives*...this is a good time to recall that the virtue of *chastity*—which is addressed by the Sixth and Ninth Commandments—is a virtue for *all Christians*, according to their state in life, i.e. whether they are married or single. Indeed, many Catholics are uncertain or unclear about what the Church regards as *chaste behavior* in marriage. I commend to you an excellent pamphlet in the vestibule of the church entitled *Marital Sexuality*, which addresses this topic clearly and prudently.

Now that our *Courage* group has been meeting for several months, I thought it might be appropriate to give you a brief report of my experience. Obviously, some aspects of this work are of a very sensitive and personal nature and cannot be discussed from pulpit. The success of *Courage* depends on a level of strict confidentiality. For example, only the people directly involved in the program—who come from all over the diocese, by the way—know of the time and location of the meetings. We have to provide a forum where those participating can feel confident and peaceful about opening their hearts to others. And I believe that we do this.

But there are some things that I think it would be good for you to know. The number of people I work with has grown gradually over time, and I expect that it will continue to do so. In some cases, referrals come from priests, but many times people learn of *Courage* through other sources. Bishop Lori has asked every parish in Fairfield County to periodically advertise the program in its Sunday bulletin and elsewhere.

I regularly work with about a dozen men. A couple of women have been in touch with me. Statistically, however, we find the incidence of same-sex attraction considerably higher among men than among women. Finally, a few families who have concerns about their teenage sons have also been in contact. I am always happy to receive inquiries about *Courage*. Sometimes, requests for assistance even come from outside the diocese. The information we publish in the bulletin here at St. John’s is for you to use as you will. I do not intend it solely for members of our parish.

The problem of same-sex attraction does not reduce well to a few words. It is certainly no place for slogans or hastily formed conclusions. Most importantly, it calls for abundant and genuine charity, something that in my opinion tends to be conspicuous in its absence from much of the discussion of the topic. In fact, if someone cannot find the requisite level of charity—by which I mean a thoughtful concern for the current good *and* the immortal soul of another based on what is *true*—then I recommend that such a person refrain from making comments or forming impressions that might do grave harm to someone else. To be frank, there exists a great deal of ignorance concerning this subject on all sides of the question...ignorance that can lead to harm.

To *condone immoral behavior* or to *condemn a person* are both serious errors. Briefly, the Church considers *homosexual activity* gravely immoral (as she does all external violations of chastity—including those within marriage), but nowhere does she condemn to Hell those *disposed* in this way, simply on account of their appetite. (Perhaps that is worth repeating.) We do well to avoid either *softening* what the Church teaches or making it *more severe* than it is.

Among the people I work with are both single and married men. Sometimes the wife knows of her husband’s condition. Sometimes she does not. In all cases, the people who suffer from same-sex attraction find it vexing and fatiguing. They must be constantly vigilant in their emotions and behavior. Though they wish to

vanquish these feelings once and for all, this is generally not possible without great effort and specialized therapy (which falls outside the scope of *Courage*). They regularly fight discouragement and occasionally, despair. Suicide remains a major problem among this segment of the general population.

Perhaps the greatest enemy they face even now is loneliness. Those who lived (what's called) "the gay lifestyle" discovered that unchaste relationships led not to peace, but to sorrow and bitterness. The illusion of comfort and happiness held out by such relationships quickly turns to ashes. That reveals in part why the rate of promiscuity among men with same-sex attraction is considerably higher—an order of magnitude higher—than for heterosexual men. They search and long for what they can never find in a same-sex union.

Now you should also know that there exists no conclusive medical or scientific evidence to indicate the presence of a (so-called) "gay gene." Despite what you may have read or heard elsewhere, no one has established that men and women are born with same-sex attraction. If there were such a genetic explanation, then identical twins would always have the same sexual preference. Studies indicate that they do not. On the other hand, we do have much evidence to indicate that the environment or circumstances in the life of a child—especially a boy's relationship with his father—forms the sexual appetite and preference from a young age. I have plenty of scholarly material on this topic to share with anyone who asks.

All of this confirms for me by practical experience what I have always believed as a priest, and that is this: that the Church knows what is best for us in *all matters relating to sexual intimacy*, no matter how someone is disposed. When we put aside the wisdom that the Church earnestly wishes to share with us—in marriage or apart from marriage—we open ourselves to harm. Physical and emotional harm, yes, but most of all spiritual harm...wounds to the soul, the worst harm of all. I devote much of my priestly work to trying, with the grace of God, to heal the wounds that *always follow* failures in chastity of mind, heart, and body.

The Church asks of us, not what is impossible or burdensome, but only what can truly be achieved for both peace of soul and the protection of the heart. She instructs us, out of her great maternal love and solicitude, to approach the realm of human love and physical intimacy with great respect and *reverence*. I must be plain with you. The *most important thing* that I can ever tell you as a priest is this: the doctrinal and moral teachings of the Catholic Church are "pearls of great price," (cf Mt 13:46) entrusted to her by Christ for the good of our immortal souls. To set aside these teachings in favor of our private judgment or in favor of the "wisdom of the age" constitutes a *failure in faith*, and thus is very dangerous to salvation. Sadly, many, many Catholics have established for themselves the following first principle in moral reasoning: that the Church can be "wrong" in matters relating to sex, marriage and family life. Again, let me be plain: such an idea cannot be considered "Catholic thinking," properly speaking. But may I just suggest three things?

First, Cardinal Newman said that a thousand difficulties do not constitute a doubt (i.e. a lack of faith). We can distinguish between having difficulty understanding or living a moral teaching of the Church—on the one hand—from a *deliberate, willed doubt* that what she teaches is true, on the other. Sincerity of heart—which Our Lord looks for in all of us—will go a long way to resolving doubt and strengthening faith. Would we say that someone has *prudently* set aside Church teaching without having first investigated it *diligently* and *prayerfully*? The future of my soul and yours depends on the effort that you and I put forth to seek and embrace the truth.

Second, many—even inside the Church—want her to revise or relax her doctrines to accommodate prevailing cultural norms. Much could be said about this, but for now just one thought: serious breaches of Church teaching by anyone in matters relating to sexual intimacy—including those by clergy and religious—always bring sadness and often, grave suffering.

Thirdly, the common practice of periodically substituting one's private judgment for the authoritative instruction of the Church brings to mind for me the words of Jesus Himself from the Sermon on the Mount: "No one can serve two masters." (Mt 6:24; cf Mt 23:8) My salvation depends on which "master" I decide to serve: my opinion or the wisdom of the Church.

Pending legislation and recent court decisions indicate a frontal assault on the traditional and widely accepted understanding of the essence and purpose of marriage. And this is why Msgr. DiGiovanni asked me to preach what I realize is a long sermon at all the Masses this weekend: to tell you about Courage and to review the Church's teaching on marriage. Catholics who defend the institution and Sacrament of Marriage do not give evidence of bigotry, but of charity for souls and fidelity to the truth. We heard St. Paul encourage us in the second reading today to "stand firm in the Lord." (Phil 4:1) Now is the time for such steadfastness.

Much of what we believe about marriage is not uniquely Catholic. For example: nature, the Jewish religion of the Old Covenant before us, and Christianity all associate marriage with parenthood, and therefore with sexual intimacy. A man and a woman joined in a permanent and exclusive covenant of love, which arises from the free exchange of their consent, for the purpose of sharing their lives with each other and raising children...this is the natural and scriptural plan for marriage, not just the Catholic plan. To that end, nature and God (to the extent that we distinguish them) both intend that children be the fruit of the union of a man and a woman united in a stable, faithful relationship. Therefore, children have these rights: to be conceived in the natural way and to be raised by their father and mother in a stable home. Children have a right to a father and a mother because they receive different things from each parent.

Whatever might attempt to separate marriage from sexual intimacy and parenthood—including contraception—subverts this plan and runs contrary to both nature and Sacred Scripture, not just the teachings of the Catholic Church. To assert a "civil right" of marriage for same-sex couples is, among other things, to sacrifice the rights and best interests of children to a distortion of what both nature and God intend.

What remains unique to the Catholic Faith is our conviction that Christ raised the human institution of marriage to a sacrament...which means that marriage not only has something to do with this life, but also with the life to come. In their most important role and privilege, husband and wife assist each other in achieving their salvation, in getting to Heaven. Much of this noble undertaking involves bringing new life into this world and preparing and guiding that new life safely into eternity.

The moral teachings of the Church do not oblige what is foreign to human nature, but rather they guard and fulfill our nature. They "impose" nothing from without, but bring clearly to light that which is already within us. For instance, it is against our nature to lie, cheat, and steal. Likewise, to attempt to redefine the essence and purpose of sex, marriage and family life offends against *both* human nature and God. We might also recall here that that law serves as a teacher. It shapes character and culture. I suspect that a revision in the marriage laws of this country will produce many more inquiries for my work with *Courage* from parents concerned for the welfare and future of their children.

When Simeon held the child Jesus in his arms at the Presentation, he told our Blessed Mother something I imagine that she pondered in her heart all the way to Calvary: that this child was destined to be a sign of contradiction, a sign that would be opposed, which of course, Our Lord was. (cf Lk 2:34) That explains why He was nailed to the Cross. If Christ the Bridegroom was a sign of contradiction, then we can also expect this to be true of His Bride the Church and all of her faithful members...signs to oppose and contradict those aspects of a fallen world that are not good, true and beautiful.

The most important question in human history came from a sincere young man who asked Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Mk 10:16) I think we heard the answer in today's Gospel in the voice of God the Father who said of Jesus, "This is my Son, my Chosen. Listen to Him." (Lk 9:35) In the very next chapter of St Luke, Jesus tells us *exactly* how to find his voice. In speaking to and about the Apostles, the first bishops of the Church, He says, "He who hears you hears me." (Lk 10:16) That means: to listen to the voice of the Church is to listen to the voice of Jesus, the Father's Chosen and Beloved Son. My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, the doctrinal and moral teachings of the Catholic Church—pearls of great price—securely mark the narrow and challenging path to our salvation, and faithfully adhering to them will ensure that we approach each other with respect, reverence, and compassion.