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Title

Karen Doherty Oral History Interview and Transcript

Date

December 10, 2004

Extant

2 hours 3 minutes interview (three files) and 1 transcript

Abstract

In this oral history, Karen Doherty discusses her work as the founder of the Conference of Catholic Lesbians. She reflects on her experience of sexism in Dignity which led Catholic lesbians to starting their own space, and the organizational challenges she faced as a leader of that space.

Biographical

Karen wrote these reflections in July 2021:

I am a co-founder of the Conference for Catholic Lesbians, Inc., usually referred to as CCL.

CCL took its name from a first-ever national gathering of Catholic lesbians. The Conference for Catholic Lesbians was held at Kirkridge Retreat Center in Bangor, Pennsylvania, in November 1982. Over 100 women attended that historic event. The spark behind the first conference was an unmet need for connection, support, and affirmation. At that time, no Catholic women's or gay organization spoke sensitively to the needs of Catholic lesbians, or in many cases, even acknowledged our existence at all. Except for a small presence at Dignity, we were invisible.

The goal of the first conference was to come together with others who identified as Catholic and as lesbian, but also to articulate how these two identifications were often at odds in our Church, in the gay and lesbian community, and in us. To be one, we often felt that we had to hide the other. This lack of wholeness and authenticity affected every part of our lives and spirituality. For many decades, my faith flickered like a tiny candle in a dark cold night. I could never understand why it did not go out, but it never did. One time on retreat, the woman who was my spiritual director asked me how I could call myself "Catholic" when I never went to church or received the Eucharist? I can't recall my answer, but it was probably something like I couldn't

stand the Church, but I felt connected to experiences and values that I received growing up and at school. But her observation bothered me because a part of it rang true.

Some years after her comment, acknowledging that there was a place inside of me that was empty and lonesome, my life partner, Lori (now my wife) and I began attending Mass at our neighborhood parish. We registered as a “Family.” As such, we received a box of weekly donation envelopes with both our names on it. Our good friend, Sr. Jeannine Gramick of New Ways Ministry, used our comment – “You know you’ve really made it when both names are on the envelopes” in the film, “In Good Conscience.”

After some months of attending Mass regularly, we volunteered to help out on the Social Justice Committee, and sold Fair Trade coffee after Mass. We made a lot of friends, got to know people, and they got to know us. Participating in the weekly liturgy, experiencing the welcoming community, volunteering with others, and being reminded of needs other than my own, helped me to return and belong more deeply to my faith.

I have stayed in the faith because I am happiest in the peace of the house of the Lord—whether sitting in a mountainside meadow, by a gurgling brook or in a pew watching sunlight stream through stained-glass windows. I have learned through difficult experiences to focus on the joy in our faith...joy in the Gospels, joy in saints and people we meet, joy in discovering God hidden in places and people where we would least expect, and the joy in feeling whole as Catholic and lesbian.

The Conference for Catholic Lesbians (CCL) ended as a membership organization in the mid-1990s. After that, it resurrected on the web – www.cclonline.org – as a repository of articles from Images, the CCL newsletter, and an online forum that I managed until 2008 or so when it was hacked and I closed the site down. The CCL papers, tapes, videos and photographs I had in my possession were donated to Marquette University, Raynor Memorial Libraries, Special Collections and University Archives.

Part of the CCL website was a blog I began, “Lesbian in a Catholic Sort of Way.” That early effort led to my current blog, Nihil Obstat where I have a lot of fun writing about history, personalities, and current events; particularly the salacious misdeeds of hypocritical and homophobic clergy. I also maintain a second blog, Green Canticle which focuses on Catholics and the environment. Many of the posts are about saints and their love of animals. Their incorporation of Christian love into their relationships with wildlife is heartening and inspiring. I love the way they incorporate nature into spirituality. I’m on Instagram as “CatholicinNature.”

I am a pro-life feminist, married to a wonderful woman for almost 35 years. I had many happy years as a hockey mom and teaching our son a love for the outdoors and the spirituality we find there. I’m now a grandmother, and look forward to showing my grandson the wonder and awe of the garden, and the tiny creatures that make their home there.

I am a “big tent” Catholic. Our Church is home to all and should not just welcome people from one viewpoint or another. Although I identify as a liberal Catholic, I appreciate and respect the efforts of conservative Catholics to install reverence and beauty in our liturgies and to help people discover or rediscover the practices of fasting, the Liturgy of the Hours, the rosary, and observing the Lord’s Day. They have also kept the issue of abortion in the public eye for 50 years; pointing out the incongruity of saving baby seals but not human fetuses.

At the same time, I value and admire what liberal and moderate Catholics have brought to the Church and wider world. Specifically, the example of tenacity and resilience by holding fast to the faith in an age filled with hostile clerics and skeptical secularists; the emphasis on Christ's teachings of love and mercy; and acting as the conscience of the Church to confront and bring to light the crimes of clerical sex abuse, all forms of discrimination, care for the environment and the need to be truly pro-life, not just pro-birth.

If we believe that we belong to a universal Church, it is vital that we get to know one another as people—not as representatives of hostile ideologies or strangers. If Christ took a risk by stepping outside of his society to encounter the Samaritan woman and Roman centurion, shouldn't we follow in his footsteps?

Karen wrote the following biographical profile in February 2005:

Karen Doherty was born in Elizabeth, New Jersey, on July 6, 1952. She was baptized at the same church where her father served as an altar boy, and her mother and father were married: St. Genevieve's in Elmora. Her religious heritage is a fusion; she has as many Protestant as Catholic forbearers and relatives. Karen notes that this mixed background served her well—the Episcopalian part saved her from some of the extreme kookiness in Catholicism; but it is the soaring, passionate spirit in her Catholic faith that inspires her and thrills her heart. "I love being Catholic."

After graduating from Princeton High School in 1970, she went to Trinity College in Washington, DC. Trinity was a physical and psychological oasis in the middle of a bustling urban environment. It solidified her foundation based on Catholic values, but also prepared her to dive into the world. As a student in a Catholic women's college, she felt a sense of worth as a person, and confidence in her thoughts and opinions. She also took for granted the leadership capacity of women.

At the end of her sophomore year Karen married a student at Georgetown Law. After graduation, they moved to Juneau, Alaska. Karen worked for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and became very involved in the Alaska lands legislation. She lived an outdoor life and had a lot of adventures canoeing, boating, camping and exploring .

She also learned a little of the Tlingit (Indian) language and culture. At 24, she was adopted during a potlatch, by a family in Angoon, the most traditional of all the villages. Angoon is located on Admiralty Island, known as "Bear Fort Island" in Tlingit. Admiralty Island then had the largest concentration of brown bears and bald eagles anywhere in the United States. Her everyday world included whales out in the bay, eagles soaring overhead, bears fishing salmon from pristine streams. Southeast Alaska is wild and vast and awe-inspiring. Karen told her son that she hoped we could travel north together someday. "I said on that land he would get to know the best of me, and he would also see where I felt closest to God."

The marriage had problems and, in 1979, Karen divorced and removed to New York City. It was a horrible, painful transition. She hated the city and missed the mountains. She had every intention of returning north, but fell in love and never went back.

In May of 1980, Karen met C.N. at Dignity/New York. They became lovers and partners in working for Catholic lesbian visibility and community. In 1983, they founded the Conference for Catholic Lesbians (CCL).

In 1987, Karen first met her spouse, Dr. Lori M. Lori then lived in Park Slope, Brooklyn, and had a 3-½ year old son, Robert. Karen started out playing with forts and dinosaurs with Robert, and progressed to Cub Scouts, Little League baseball and ice hockey. Robert calls Lori “Mother” and Karen “Mom.” He has his mother’s intelligence and intuitive understanding of people, and Karen’s love for the outdoors, collectibles, wild, faraway places and dogs.

Lori and Karen recently purchased their first house, an 80-year-old Craftsman bungalow in Greenport, New York. They are having loads of fun fixing it up and Karen is kayaking all over Hallock’s Bay. She doesn’t have the exciting adventures of her Alaska years, but she enjoys the feel of the paddle in her hands, the sun on her hair and wind in her face.

One of the things Doherty is most proud to be part of now is the Living Word Project. She volunteered to be a participant in Shelley Jackson’s book, *Skin*. (Read more about this project at <http://ineradicablestain.com/skin.html>.) Doherty wanted to be a Word for several reasons. She love books and words. She has been mentioned and quoted in books, but she notes that she has never really been part of a book. She also felt it would be a tremendous spiritual experience to be connected in such a way to other people, other words, and the story. A condition to being a Word was to have a word from the book *Skin* tattooed on her body in a book font. “I chose Garamond. I believe words are gifts of the Holy Spirit. The word I was given is ‘You.’”

Scope and Content

In this oral history, Karen Doherty discusses her work as the founder of the Conference of Catholic Lesbians. She reflects on the challenges faced by Catholic lesbian feminists which led them to starting their own space, and the organizational challenges she faced as a leader of the CCL.

This interview was conducted by Doris Malkmus, who served as LGBTQ-RAN catalog collection archivist and oral historian from 2002 until 2005. She earned a Ph.D. in history at the University of Iowa and an M.S. in Archival Science from the University of Michigan.

Access

Open to all researchers.

<https://lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/oral-histories/karen-doherty>

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