

# Family Life: Fortunate Families

By THOMAS C. FOX

Publication date: November 28, 2008

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Members of Fortunate Families join the Gay Pride parade in Rochester, N.Y., in July 2007.

This is a love story, shaped by sadness, pain and hope, and it began in November 1983 when a 19-year-old boy sat down with his mother on their living room sofa and with tears in his eyes, said, "Mom, I'm lonely. I'm lonely for another man."

As the mother, Mary Ellen Lopata of Rochester, N.Y., tells the story, her son, Jim, wasn't referring to any man in particular. His words, "I'm lonely," simply described his experience of longing for companionship as a gay man. Lopata recounts that it took years from that encounter for her to face and process her pain and years longer before she had the courage to share her story with others. "I was shocked and confused. I cried and cried."

That moment marked the beginning of what for Lopata has been a 25-year journey that has done nothing less than revolutionize her life, and give solace to countless other gay and lesbian children and their parents. Lopata's conversion -- and that's what it was -- has, by the accounts of many, reshaped the way countless Catholics, and in some cases their bishops, view and receive gay and lesbian persons.

At first Lopata, echoing stories of other Catholic parents of gay and lesbian children, felt isolated. Her son, she said, was the first gay person she had ever known, and just by being himself he challenged the stereotypes she had of gay people.

"The only thing I knew for sure was that I loved my son. Everything else was confusion. Why did this happen? How did it happen? Am I to blame? What does this mean for Jim ... for his family? Is this a sin? What about church? How can we ever tell our friends?"

If knowing other gay persons was a stretch, knowing their parents seemed a further impossibility. She started to research the subject at her local library, being careful not to be too public about the books she was checking out. She said little to outsiders.

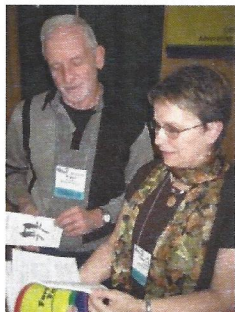
It was in 1987 that Lopata took another step. Her parish decided to hold a workshop on homophobia and homosexuality. She worked behind the scenes to publicize it. "The most important thing that workshop did was to break the silence around homosexuality. I came away from that experience knowing that if I loved my son as I said I did, I could not remain silent. Somewhere along the way, I began to realize what a special gift Jim is to me, to our family, and the whole body of Christ -- not in spite of, but because he is gay."

That's the conversion, or core insight, that comes to most parents of gay and lesbian children.



Lopata and her husband, Casey, got increasingly involved in gay and lesbian organizations: New Ways Ministry; Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG); and Dignity.

In 2004, the Lopatas, attempting to fill a gap in the gay and lesbian persons network, formed Fortunate Families, based in Rochester, with the mission of ministering to Catholic parents of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender children. It has grown since, becoming a national network that reached out with support and encouragement. As Fortunate Families states: "We connect parents to work for welcome and justice in the church for their lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) children."



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Fox

Casey and Mary Ellen Lopata offer information about Fortunate Families at the 2008 Call to Action conference in November.

Fortunate Families offers counseling, retreats and days of reflection for parents of LGBT children. It sends out a monthly newsletter that reaches some 2,100 people in seven countries on the Internet and by postal mail. It maintains a Web site, the hub of its networking information center, at [www.fortunatefamilies.com](http://www.fortunatefamilies.com).

Catholic parents of LGBT children are not just grateful for the organization, they are fervently so.

Terri and Rich Dalke, parents of a gay son, wrote in an e-mail: "Fortunate Families supports us as we value and treasure our family story, learn to speak it and share it with our friends, our family and our faith family. ... Casey and Mary Ellen are the lifeblood of Fortunate Families ... prophets of our day."

Deb Word, mother of a gay son, wrote: "Casey and Mary Ellen have great insight and a wealth of resource materials. By keeping in touch with Catholic parents on a monthly basis through their newsletters they remind us that the struggle still goes on in other homes. They remind us of the need to reach out to our church fathers, to tell our stories, to 'put a face' on the issue that our church would sometimes like to sweep under the rug."

Part of the Fortunate Families culture involves encouraging parents to honor, value and share their stories to break the silence of isolation and oppression. "Once parents reach a point of understanding and affirmation of their LGBT daughter or son," Mary Ellen Lopata said, "we encourage them to channel their frustration and anger -- which is part of the journey -- into constructive action to educate others, especially in the church, about the whole and holy lives of gay and lesbian people, and then to stand together for justice."

"Parents are in a unique position to make a difference. Others may not agree with us, but no one, no institution can deny our experience. It is essential that parents first let those in authority know what it is like for parents of LGBT daughters and sons in the Catholic church; and second, be out-and-proud role models for other parents who may not yet

know they have an LGBT daughter or son."

Word says her son is a musician who teaches in urban minority schools. She writes that having a gay child has opened her eyes to other gay children in her parish and diocese who "can't be out with their own parents." She is more "out," she adds, than her son, "because I feel like I can be an activist in ways a gay schoolteacher can't."

The Dalkes say that their son has provided "endless blessings," among them "a deeper level of intimacy and trust among the three of us, an opportunity to face our own homophobia, to become educated, to live our own 'coming out' process as parents, a deepening of our faith, and experiences unlike any others we had ever taken."

"The greatest burden," they added, "was to learn that our son was in so much pain and we didn't know it. That he felt his choices were to come out to us or to commit suicide. He said he felt that by coming out to us he risked losing us forever, due to our active involvement within the Catholic church, basing that on things he read and heard the hierarchy of the church write and speak regarding homosexuality."

Ten years ago, the Dalkes began their own parish ministry called "Outstretched Hands," ministering locally to the parents of gay sons and lesbian daughters. "What we have learned is that there are families further along in this process and others just beginning."

Fortunate Families encourages Catholic parents of LGBT children to share their stories as a means of breaking their



silence. In 2003, Mary Ellen Lopata wrote a book called *Fortunate Families*, a resource book that tells parents' stories.



Fortunate Families logo

To get a wider understanding of the situations of these Catholic parents, Fortunate Families took a survey last year. Through its growing network it sent out forms that were completed by 229 parents reporting on 242 LGBT children. Among the principal findings were these:

- \* Parents are significantly more comfortable now than when they initially learned they had a LGBT child.
- \* Parents who know at least one other parent of a LGBT person are significantly more comfortable now.
- \* Parents with higher comfort levels are more likely to share their stories.
- \* Parents said that advocating for justice in society and church were helpful experiences.
- \* About half the parents said they were willing to counsel parents of LGBT children.
- \* Asked if anything else would be helpful to them, one theme eclipsed all others: Parents want the institutional church to be more accepting of LGBT persons.

The pain and discouragement many Catholic parents of LGBT children feel is difficult to measure from the outside. That's why storytelling has been so important to them. To those on

the outside, some background helps.

The church has taught that homosexual acts are immoral, and until only recently the church held that homosexuality was a chosen lifestyle. In recent years, most scientific evidence has shown it is not chosen, but the product of one's genetic makeup, part of nature itself. No matter what, the church holds that homosexual persons must remain celibate throughout their lives.

Through the 1970s, as new understandings on homosexuality were entering the culture, Catholic leaders issued various statements that showed deeper understanding while offering more apparent compassion to gay and lesbian persons. Then, in October 1986, Pope John Paul II made his first major statement on homosexuality, marking a departure from some of the more hopeful statements coming out of the church in the decade before.

The statement was written by then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith, now Benedict XVI. In harsh and uncompromising language, the document, "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons," written in English (not Latin) and aimed at the U.S. church, stated: "Although the particular inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin, it is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil; thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder. Therefore special concern and pastoral attention should be directed to those who have this condition,

lest they be led to believe that the living out of this orientation in homosexual activity is a morally acceptable option. It is not."

The key is the phrase "objective disorder." The Vatican had not used such language before, and it outraged many. The word, in effect, from the Vatican was that even if homosexuality is not freely chosen by each individual, it is nevertheless inherently and objectively wrong. It's not merely that homosexual activity is wrong, but homosexuality itself -- the orientation of being emotionally, psychologically and physically attracted to members of the same sex -- that is objectively wrong.

In the years that followed, many U.S. bishops used the document, taking a hard line on any gay or lesbian organizing in church institutions, further marginalizing the already marginalized.

In October 1997, in part reacting to the seeming lack of compassion toward LGBT Catholics, and getting input from people like the Lopatas, the U.S. bishops issued a 20-page pastoral message called "Always Our Children," aimed at the parents of LGBT children. It is the most compassionate and welcoming statement of its kind. It reads in part:

"Every person has an inherent dignity because he or she is created in God's image. A deep respect for the total person leads the church to hold and teach that sexuality is a gift from God. Being created a male or female person is an essential part of the divine plan, for it is their sexuality -- a mysterious blend of spirit and body -- that allows



human beings to share in God's own creative love and life."

Especially encouraging to the Fortunate Family network of parents were words that described their children as children "of God, gifted and called for a purpose in God's design." The statement was supportive and compassionate, welcoming and embracing, and came under fire from conservatives in the church.

But the Catholic church's continued official ambivalence in its response to gay and lesbian persons became clear in November 2006, when the U.S. bishops voted overwhelmingly in favor of a new document called "Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination." In that declaration they asked Catholics again to welcome gay and lesbian persons into their organizations while using words taken from the 1986 Vatican statement about "disordered" orientations.

Adding to the pain felt by Catholic parents, their LGBT children and others, Bishop Arthur J. Serratelli of Paterson, N.J., chairman of the doctrine committee, which developed the document, admitted his committee never consulted a gay or lesbian person before writing the paper.

To get a sense of how it was received by parents, consider a letter written by a mother of a gay son, sent to the Lopatas about the same time.

"This has been a 10-year journey," the mother wrote. "With the love and respect of those who came before us, we have been able to move from the pain and sadness, loss and grief,

to joy, courage and passion, to have a voice in places that our son cannot, to carry the message that God's love is given to every person, that this precious son of ours is the same son that we and God conceived, carried, gave birth to, and had baptized into the Catholic family. Although he feels too tired to fight for a place at the table, we will spend our last breath carrying the message that God loves each of his precious children and we do too."

In the final analysis, it's difficult to gauge the impact of the Fortunate Families network, the Lopatas say. "Impact is not always tangible. We talk with people in person, or on the phone, or have e-mail exchanges. Sometimes, not often, we hear back from them that our conversation or the resources we had to offer were helpful in healing a relationship between a parent and a child. Sometimes, often years later, we learn that a parent has attained the knowledge, wisdom, confidence and tenacity to start or be a part of a local Catholic parents of LGBT children's group, for faith-sharing and community. Most often we don't know how the story ends."

But the Lopatas are hopeful. "In the 24 years or so that we've been attending and facilitating parents' retreats and days of reflection, the atmosphere has changed significantly. In the early years, Kleenex stock must have done well as most parents cried and expressed their fears. Now, stock of companies dealing in blood pressure pills must be doing well as most parents express anger, primarily at the institutional church, for how it treats their LGBT daughters and sons."

Asked what parents without LGBT children do not know about families with them, the Lopatas were quick to offer a hefty list. On the list were these:

- \* Families without LGBT children may think of sexual orientation only as a "sexual issue." In fact, this is not about an "issue," but about who they are.

- \* They might not know of all the injustices suffered by LGBT persons. They might not realize their duty to stand up for the rights of all God's children.

- \* Families with LGBT members know that "gay rights" are not "special" rights, but equal rights.

- \* Parents without LGBT children will never know that unique assurance that God's love, of course, extends to an LGBT child exactly as he or she is -- without footnotes or an asterisk. Parents of LGBT persons experience the revelation of God's love in unexpected ways.

- \* Families not blessed with LGBT children do not realize that families with known LGBT members are fortunate families. Indeed, if you spend much time with a group of Catholic parents of LGBT persons, a whole new stereotype of gay people emerges -- one where gay people are paradigms of love, caring and spirituality.

A love story, indeed.

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