

**GOD'S LOVE REVEALED**  
**Reflections on being a Catholic Mother**

By Mary Ellen Lopata  
From *Homosexuality and the Catholic High School*,  
The Ontario Catholic Family Life Educator's Network, September 2001

In November 1983, my oldest son, Jim (then 19) sat on our living room sofa and, with tears in his eyes, said, "Mom, I'm lonely. I'm lonely for another man." He wasn't referring to any man in particular at that time. His words "I'm lonely" simply and poignantly described his personal experience of longing for companionship, partnership, and love, as a gay man. It was the beginning of my education. I was learning that being gay is not about just sex, but about love, affection, caring, nurturing, support, trust, good humor...all those things that we hope are present in healthy heterosexual relationships too.

It was a long time before I appreciated the pain *he* was in as he told me, how much courage it took for him to tell me, and how much trust he had in me and in our relationship. I wish I could say I took the news well. But I was shocked and confused. I cried and cried. Born and raised in a traditional German Catholic family, nothing in my 12 years of Catholic education had prepared me for that news. There was little talk of sex when I was growing up and I don't recall that I ever heard or even read the word "homosexual" before I was married and had children. I certainly was not aware of ever having actually met or talked to someone who was gay. All I had were what psychologist Mary Borhek calls, "unconscious assumptions" about homosexuality—all of them negative. But Jim was the first gay person I ever actually knew and just by being himself, he challenged all the stereotypes of gay people that I had picked up along the way.

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 it mean...for Jim...for his family? Is this a sin? What about Church? How can we ever tell our friends? What, if anything, should I do now? And what about AIDS? Each question raised more.

I prayed "God, please help me understand!" Understanding didn't come quickly, but I found comfort in knowing God loved my child.

I looked for information and support. Seventeen years ago there was little information on homosexuality available and even less that addressed homosexuality and the church.

Jim had confided in one of our parish priests and told me I could talk to Father Tom. Days later—still crying—I called him and simply said, "Jim told me." Father's response was quite pastoral, but what I remember most was his trying to comfort me by saying that at least Jim didn't have a terminal illness. This was true, and for that I was grateful. I knew Father was just trying to put my worries into a clearer perspective. But he really didn't understand what I was grappling with. I needed to talk to someone who understood . . .who had lived through the grieving, the fears, the emotional and mental upheaval and had come out on the other side of those emotions whole and healthy.

Finding that kind of person was virtually impossible, especially given my reluctance to even say the words "homosexual" or "gay." If Jim was the only gay person I knew, it followed, that I surely didn't know the parents of any gay person. Or maybe I did, but since nobody was about to tell me they had a gay child, there was no way to know. This self-imposed isolation just continues the cycle of unhealthy secrecy.

I satisfied my need for information by stealing books from the public library—afraid someone would wonder why I was interested in such books. I did return the books, but before I did, I learn many helpful things:

- An estimated 3 to 10 percent of the population is gay.
- Scientists while uncertain about the exact causes of homosexuality, generally agree that sexual orientation is set early in life and it is not caused by a domineering mother and weak or absent father, but by a variety of factors.
- The American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association declassified homosexuality as a "sickness" in the mid 1970's.
- Having a homosexual orientation **is not a choice**--and the church teaches that too.
- Scientific evidence does not show that conversion therapy works and that it can actually be harmful in some cases.
- Some people believe that a homosexual who prays hard enough can be changed. And then I read of 19 year old Bobby Griffith, who jumped off a freeway overpass into the path of a tractor-trailer. His community, his family and his church had all told him, that he was an abomination before God . . . and he believed them. In his diary he wrote: "Why did you do this to me, God? Am I going to hell? That's the gnawing question that's always drilling little holes in the back of my mind. Please don't send me to hell. I'm really not that bad, am I? Life is so cruel and unfair."
- The U. S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Report on Youth Suicide (1989) concluded that gay and lesbian youth are 2 to 3 times more like to attempt suicide.

Though my parish was a wonderful, warm community, filled with compassionate, caring people, this was a topic NEVER talked about. It wasn't until 1987, when our parish offered a workshop on homophobia and homosexuality, that I began to feel that my son was welcome in our church and that perhaps I wasn't alone. 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. That very silence perpetuated the isolation that sustained a sense of shame that encouraged the silence in a never-ending cycle of pain. After that workshop, it still wasn't easy to talk about, but I began to know it was possible.

It took a long time for me to overcome my fears. It was three years before I had the courage to tell my best friend, nine years before we told our entire extended family and total of ten years before we were completely comfortable talking about the joys of having a gay son and the sadness, anger and frustration that comes from the attitudes of society and our Church toward our gay sons and lesbian daughters.

How different things would have been if *Always Our Children*, the 1997 U.S. Bishop's Pastoral Letter to Parents of Homosexual Children had been available to us in 1983. The Bishops describe *Always Our Children* as "an outstretched hand . . . to parents and other family members, offering them a fresh look at the grace present in family life and the unfailing mercy of Christ our Lord . . ." As one reads of the emotions parents feel when they learn their child is gay, it is clear that someone in the institutional church is finally listening to the lived experience of these parents and heard their pain and struggle and their love. The document begins by admitting that church teaching on homosexuality may be a source of confusion and conflict and goes on to list emotions parents may experience: relief, anger, mourning, fear, guilt, shame and loneliness and, lastly, parental protectiveness and pride. Virtually all of these emotions were cited on a survey of 220 Catholic parents of lesbian daughters and gay sons, which I conducted

in 1998. The survey results showed parents experience these emotions: *fear* (78%), *confusion* (56%), *grief/mourning* (49%), *protectiveness* (47%), *acceptance* (43%), *guilt* (39%), *loneliness/isolation* (34%), *anger* (27%), *shame* (25%), and *relief* (13%).

The bishops showed great insight by bracketing the more painful emotions, with feelings that emphasize parents' love and concern. Initially they acknowledge that some parents feel relief after experiencing an often-lengthy period of concern for their child. When they finally know what their child is dealing with, a heavy burden is lifted or, more accurately, shared, and with a loving trust in each other, they begin building a closer, more honest relationship.

The majority of parents experience fear and grief. They fear their child will be rejected, harassed, discriminated against, beat-up, perhaps even killed. They also fear that they themselves will be rejected by friends, family and the church . . . that people will "blame" them, when in fact, they have done nothing wrong and there is nothing wrong with their child.

Most parents grieve (at least a little) when they learn their child is gay. That's not to say they behave as if their child has died -- though some do. But parents grieve their lost expectations. Most of us just assume that our children will have lives just like our own—only better. We have this feeling that if our children do things differently, they are rejecting us. We assume our kids will marry and have a family. You don't even think about it. Loss of those expectations is a very big adjustment. I discovered, over time that my expectations for Jim really haven't changed . . . they are the same expectations, the same hopes, I have for all my children . . . that they will be good, people, happy, healthy, striving to know God and their place in God's household.

Of the many encouraging and healing statements in *Always Our Children*, two touched me most deeply. When I read the Bishops words calling our gay sons and lesbian daughters are "gifted and called for a purpose in God's design," I cheered. For indeed, Jim is, as are all my children, "gifted and called for a purpose in God's design." Jim, in the depths of his heart and with God's grace will discern that purpose. And I wept when the Bishops closed their pastoral letter by telling our lesbian daughters and gay sons that "In [them] God's love is revealed." A profound and simple truth never before heard from Church leadership.

#### *What Parents Need From The Church*

Parents need acknowledgement and affirmation from their Church when they initially learn a child is gay. But the crucial role of faith and the critical need for support from the faith community do not diminish, and often increase, with time. Many parents draw strength from their faith and the sacraments even while their Church, their parish, ignores, dismisses or denies their need.

Some Vatican documents can be confusing, even hurtful and parents may have great difficulty distinguishing between the philosophical and psychological meanings of words like "disordered." They may long for more compassionate and pastorally sensitive proclamations from Rome, but what they want and need most is the support of their local Church: their diocese, their parish, the faith community that is (or should be) the loving hand and heart of Christ in their day to day lives.

In the survey mentioned earlier, parents were asked what they need and expect from the Church. The ideas and suggestions they offered fell into four general areas of concern: education, affirmation & reassurance, support, and being welcome.

Parents see a critical need for education, for everyone from the pastor and parish staff to the people in the pew. They ask for ministers who are knowledgeable and non-judgmental, able

to answer questions, and trained as good listeners. They expect pastoral ministers to learn about homosexual people and their families especially by talking to parents of gay sons and lesbian daughters. And finally, they want education for the whole faith community through workshops, and other informational forums.

Lesbian and gay Catholics and those who love them expect to be treated with the dignity and respect due all God's people. At the very least, they deserve to be safe from fear-based statements and actions. Indeed, parents deserve to have their love for their gay child affirmed, and declaration from church ministers that God loves their gay child. They need to know they have done nothing wrong. They expect their church to be strongly supportive of their children and themselves, assuring all that gay and lesbian people are God's children. And they hope to see sincere appreciation for the gifts their lesbian and gay children bring to the faith community.

Isolation is one of the biggest impediments to understanding and peace that parent's face. Parents clearly articulate the need for support groups or networks of parents who are willing to share their experience, listen to and encourage others. They want the silence broken and the secrecy stopped. They encourage publishing notices of support groups in the parish bulletins.

As Christian communities, we all want to be welcoming, and on the surface, we may appear to be welcoming. Perhaps the test case for being welcoming is how a parish responds to gay and lesbian Catholics and their families. Often in Catholic parishes the very existence of gay people and their families is denied; the first hurdle to being welcoming is to get past the denial. To be loved, one must first be acknowledged and that is where a welcoming environment begins. The silence must be broken. Don't be afraid to have discussions about homosexuality. Acknowledge and celebrate the gifts of gay and lesbian people who have served the church in the past as well as those who are serving the church in silence. And always condemn homophobic patterns of behavior and belief structures that support it.

When a faith community is educated, when it offers affirmation to parents and reassurance to their lesbian daughters and gay sons, and when it provides support for those who feel confused and isolated, that community has broken the silence and is on the way to welcoming all.

That knowledge, affirmation, support and welcome will be felt most keenly in families. The family is the arena where children first find love, understanding, acceptance, support, affirmation and nurturance and where they first learn of God's unconditional love for them. And the faith community reaffirms all those values for the child. But as a child discovers she or he is different in this particular way, she or he may no longer assume that the family is a safe and nurturing place and may have picked up signals that the Church may not be a safe or welcoming place either.

The whole faith community needs to understand, to affirm, to support and to welcome because there are children in every parish, like Mike, who is gay, but doesn't know it yet, and Mary, who is lesbian, but doesn't know it yet. If Mike's mom and dad and Mary's mom and dad have experienced a supportive Christian community and have access to resources, when they suspect their child might be homosexual, or when they actually hear those words, "Mom, Dad, 'I'm gay.'" or "Mom, Dad, 'I'm lesbian,'" they will be able to reach out to their child in love, knowing that they are not alone, that God's all embracing love is there to draw on and is made manifest in the support of their faith community. And they will know that theirs is a fortunate family with a child "gifted and called for a purpose in God's design," in whom "God's love is revealed."

Reproduced by permission of Mary Ellen Lopata