The Face of the Other
Ministering to Those with Same-Sex Attraction

Rev. Paul N. Check

Abstract. The director of Courage International talks about the work of the apostolate in addressing homosexuality according to the mind and heart of the Church, which he calls “one of the most demanding aspects of education, formation, and pastoral care today.” But it is also an opportunity to attend to the often acute and persistent wounds of those who need healing within what Pope Francis calls the “field hospital” of the Church. The author points out that the work of Courage is not first about homosexuality but about what it means to be human. It is an invitation to consider the question of the fulfillment of the human heart according to God’s gracious plan. National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly 15.2 (Summer 2015): 221–230.

“This is the untouchable subject.”
“There is a need to connect. … You’ve got to get this out.”
“I needed to be wanted.”
“I have been given hope, and I want to do that for other people … to give others the same hope.”

These are the words of Dan, Rilene, and Paul, the three humble and courageous subjects of our recently released one-hour-long documentary film, Desire of the Everlasting Hills.¹ I will talk about the film from time to time throughout this essay.

¹ Desire of the Everlasting Hills is a film made in 2014 by the Courage apostolate. It can be viewed online without charge or purchased as a DVD at http://www.everlastinghills.org; a study guide is also available for free download, for use at the parish level, in university chaplaincies and high schools, and in other places where a thoughtful conversation about a difficult topic might be possible.

Rev. Paul N. Check is the executive director of Courage International. This essay is based on a talk given on February 4 at the twenty-fifth NCBC Workshop for Bishops in Dallas, Texas.
I am grateful to have this opportunity to offer some perspective from a parish priest and moral theologian who was asked to work in a particular part of the vineyard over a decade ago. The story of how that work began may be of some interest, though I am not sure it really establishes my bona fides.

Twelve years ago, I was serving as a parochial vicar in a downtown parish in my diocese and teaching part-time at our college seminary and in the pre-theology program when one day I received a letter in the mail: “Dear Father Check: Prayerful greetings in the Lord. We do not have a Courage chapter in our diocese. I would be very grateful if you started one. Sincerely yours in Christ, Your Bishop.” And that was it.

I like to tell that story for a couple of reasons. One is to encourage those with the fullness of the threefold munera, our bishops, to take heart: sometimes letters like that work!

So I am happily and gratefully in Archbishop William Lori’s debt for sending me that letter at the end of 2002. It has changed my priesthood, and not just in terms of serving the Church in an external assignment from my diocese for the last seven years. To be frank, I do not know that I would have volunteered for such work, either as a diocesan Courage chaplain or in my current position as executive director—and so those of our chaplains who have offered themselves in this way have my deepest esteem.

The Untouchable Subject

I have no intention to be self-serving in this observation, but objectively speaking, I believe that addressing homosexuality according to the mind and heart of the Church is one of the most demanding aspects of education, formation, and pastoral care today, and in my opinion, it will become more difficult as time passes. In Desire of the Everlasting Hills, Dan says, “This is the untouchable subject,” and I am sorry that in many cases, from what I see, he is right: few are eager to touch the question, and understandably so—except perhaps when it is absolutely unavoidable. In saying this, I am not passing any judgment as to why this is the case. In fact, the complexity of the subject matter alone, even before we consider the controversy that surrounds it, will deter people from becoming involved. For now, I would only say that I come to you, not so much as the executive director of the Courage and EnCourage apostolates (EnCourage is for family members), but as the advocate for an underserved population, one of those that I believe the Holy Father has located on the “periphery.” I don’t think we can wait for volunteers to undertake some aspect of this vital work. An episcopal request will go a long way, at least it did in my case.

I must also say, with regret, that some of the people who are eager to engage in pastoral care do not understand or do not share the Church’s anthropology. This only causes confusion and in some cases scandal. So that brings me to the point of my talk this morning: authentic pastoral care flows from an authentic understanding of the human person and, in this case, the virtue of chastity.

Unfortunately, the word most often associated with the Catholic Church on the topic of homosexuality is “no.” While of course there is a no that must be charitably preached, that no covers but one part of a much larger yes, which comprises the fullness of the Church’s pastoral charity to a group who are in special need. I do know...
how grateful our members are for the spiritual fatherhood of the priests at Courage and EnCourage meetings. Among other things, that presence bespeaks a commitment on the part of the Church to people who often are unsure where they belong in general, and who can be quite uneasy about their place in the Catholic Church in particular. The 2006 document from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination, which is superb both for its precise moral teaching and for its thoughtful practical wisdom, makes special mention of the primary role of the priest in ministries to people with same-sex attractions.²

And it is really for that reason—the opportunity to attend to the often acute and persistent wounds of those who need healing within what Pope Francis calls the “field hospital” of the Church—that I am grateful for the invitation from my former bishop. His gracious request called for something more than simple obedience: it became for me, in time, an invitation to a deeper understanding of the human condition, in all the good and the bad that implies, and a deeper appreciation and reverence for the truth and dignity of the human person and the mystery and efficacy of grace.

Dan, who spoke of “the untouchable subject,” occasionally gives his testimonial to priests in the context of the study days for clergy that we conduct at the request of bishops and seminary rectors. In his testimonial, as in the film, he recalls a moment, before he found his way to Courage, when he typed the phrase “I am gay and…” into the Google search engine. The first Google “suggestion” at the time was “…and I want to find a boyfriend”; the second was “…and I want to die.” Though Dan’s struggles and pain are far from over, he now understands why the Catholic Church is his home: because he is a member of the Church of the striving (not of the saved), just like the rest of us. The community of the Mystical Body and the fellowship of Courage have guided him away from dangerous alternatives presented by Google and the culture.

You notice the title of the film: Desire of the Everlasting Hills. This is one of the invocations of the Litany of the Sacred Heart and a phrase first spoken by the patriarch Jacob when he prophesies the coming of Christ, the fulfillment of the desire of all of creation, in Genesis 49:26, “until the desire of the everlasting hills should come” (Douay-Rheims). I point this out because the film, like the work of Courage, is really not first about homosexuality. Both address what it means to be human and to be a child of God, and so the film and the apostolate consider the question of the fulfillment of the human heart according to God’s gracious plan and invitation.

And here we are very much at the crux of the problem. To that point, I would suggest that there are two narratives at work in society today. One says man is made for satisfaction (or pleasure or enjoyment). The other says man is made for fulfillment (or joy). In the first narrative, there is no design for sex. In the second, there is. In the first narrative, virtue is only another word for “restraint.” In the second, chastity means freedom and peace.

Needing to Be Wanted

“I needed to be wanted,” we heard Rilene say in the trailer. When I give an introduction to Christian anthropology, I often say that Original Sin brings an amnesia to humanity, a loss of memory of our human identity, which the Incarnation is meant to cure: “Christ, the new Adam . . . fully reveals man to man himself.”3 So I would offer this distinction to you: homosexuality is not first about sex or about relationships, it is a misperception of identity. In turn, that misperception can lead to a misdirected search to answer the desires of the heart. How we understand ourselves—our identity—influences, even determines, how we try to meet the needs and wants of the heart.

Let me see if I can explain it this way. When I was a pre-theologian and taking the required philosophy courses, I could see, I am sorry to admit, no real connection between metaphysics and pastoral work of any type. Seventeen years of the priesthood, and the seven in this work in particular, have cured me of that mistaken notion . . . and this change of thinking is something I share with seminarians to urge them to study philosophy well! *Agere sequitur esse*, action follows being or, if I may formulate it this way, action follows identity, whether identity is properly understood or misperceived. I will act and make choices according to how I understand myself. So we return to what Rilene said: “I needed to be wanted.” Of course she did, and this is true for all of us, because we are, in the words of one moral theologian, “blessedly incomplete.”

The difficulty lay not in her need to be wanted but in how she came to understand herself. And here, before thinking about pastoral care, we need another part of our anthropology: we are changed by our actions, by our choices, by anything involving the will, including the way we think about ourselves, the way we *self-identify*. Choices consistent with our nature build up our humanity; the opposite is also true. This is one of the reasons why I recommend against the use of words like “homosexual,” “gay,” and “lesbian” as nouns to describe an identity or a class or group of people. I accept that the phrase “same-sex attractions” can be a bit cumbersome, and I am not recommending arguing or debating with people about the way they describe themselves, even as we hope to guide them to a fuller identity in Christ. At the moment, I am only suggesting that the answers to the foundational questions—“Who am I? What am I? Why am I?”—are of interest to everyone, even if they do not think in exactly those terms. They are metaphysical questions that Christian anthropology ultimately answers. I am also suggesting that through the careful choice of words, we can try to avoid furthering the commonly held misconception that the twofold expression of humanity is heterosexual and homosexual rather than male and female.

By extension, we can see the especial danger in so-called LGBT or gay–straight alliances or support groups in high schools and colleges, because they lack a proper understanding of human nature. Adolescence is a time of self-discovery, emotional and sexual development, and growth in virtue, with some predictable confusion and even missteps on the road to authentic self-knowledge. To assign a label to someone, or to

---

3 Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et spes* (December 7, 1965), n. 22.
encourage someone to adopt a label for himself or herself during the teenage years may lead to harm that could have been avoided, since such labeling may prompt the young person to travel down a path that he or she otherwise might well have avoided, having passed safely through the challenging season of self-discovery and confusion.

The 2006 USCCB document raises the question of and offers a caution about self-disclosures in a public way, the motive for which should always be considered carefully. Here is the relevant passage: “For some persons, revealing their homosexual tendencies to certain close friends, family members, a spiritual director, confessor, or members of a Church support group may provide some spiritual and emotional help and aid them in their growth in the Christian life. In the context of parish life, however, general public self-disclosures are not helpful and should not be encouraged.”

Elsewhere it says, “Persons with a homosexual inclination should not be encouraged to define themselves primarily in terms of their sexual inclination.”

In the realm of pastoral care generally, and with regard to language and vocabulary, I return to the idea that the use of certain words as nouns tends, even if inadvertently, to impose a template on someone. This might be another way to interpret the Holy Father’s well known, if not equally well understood, question “Who am I to judge?” A label is a form of judgment, collapsing a rich and complex identity—of which the homosexual tendency is certainly a significant part—that risks injury to both justice and charity. The threefold distinction that the Church makes with regard to homosexuality helps us further address the question of identity: person—inclination—action. The inclination, no matter how deep-seated it might be, does not describe the totality of the person. Nor of course do actions, although as we were considering a moment ago, choices do change us.

So back to Rilene: “I needed to be wanted.” Yes, that need is good, and in fact prompts us to step outside ourselves in search of relationships, which will be fulfilling to the degree that they are genuinely self-giving. But the embrace of a misperceived identity (“I am gay”) and the subsequent misdirected inclination brought Rilene into collision with her true self. And so now we can call on another part of metaphysics that is at work here: the universal and particular. The natural moral law and Christian anthropology (the universals) help me (the particular) to understand myself and to distinguish authentically human desires from counterfeits. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI defined moral relativism as “the skepticism about all things human,” and that skepticism, the belief that there is no universal human nature, leaves people a puzzle to themselves, especially in the sexual sphere, because unchaste behavior of

---

4 USCCB, Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination, 17.
5 Ibid., 22.
6 Francis, Press conference during return flight from Rio de Janeiro (July 28, 2013).
7 See Gaudium et spes, n. 24: Man “cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself.”
any kind leads to division and loneliness, estrangement from self, from others, and from God, any subjectively good intention notwithstanding.

The reason I offer this point is this: Our approach to the virtue of chastity must be consistent and coherent. Owing in large part to the efficacy of chemical contraception (and widespread sterilization), we probably have more physical “intimacy” than at any time in history. But I believe we also have more loneliness. From my practical experience as a moralist who teaches sexual ethics and as a pastor of souls, I think the two are related: contraception (and the promiscuity it fosters) and loneliness. My brother priests often ask me what we can do, pastorally speaking, about homosexuality, and one of the things I suggest is more and deeper Pre-Cana, the kind that helps couples see, among many other things, that marital chastity excludes contraception because it harms love and marriage, and so impedes the fulfillment of the heart. Said another way: to the degree I deliberately impede self-gift (which in turn impedes giving life, in whatever sphere of the human condition), I deliberately impede my heart. And I think it can be easily demonstrated that it is not too far a stretch from the deliberate separation of fertility from sex in marriage to the problem we face culturally about the nature of marriage.

I raise this point because my sense is that while justice, mercy, grace, and redemption, for example, are all readily accepted as part of the “good news,” I am not certain that chastity is widely and confidently viewed that way in the “visible” Church, including among many clergy. If this is true, then a practical problem follows: the no to same-sex unions, which must be preached especially when civil legislation is at stake, may appear not as part of a larger fabric of virtue but as an arbitrarily drawn line that ultimately fails the test of fairness. And so some preaching may ring hollow to many. One parent who contacted me about his son said, “Father, the teachings of the Church are making this hard.” I gently tried to suggest to him that it was a confusion about identity in the mind and heart of his son and a confusion about the Church’s teaching on chastity that were actually the sources of the tension.

Not long ago, after our four-hour study-day presentation in one diocese, a priest asked me, “Father, do you think the anthropology of the Church will ever change?” I am not precisely sure what lay behind that question, but it is troubling that it would occur to a priest to ask. In his last encyclical, Benedict XVI makes the distinction between sentimentality, on the one hand, and charity or compassion on the other, the difference being the truth. Here we find one of our greatest challenges within the Church when it comes to understanding homosexuality, including among some clergy, Mass-going Catholics, and especially Catholic teens: sentimentality. While I think a consistent approach to teaching sexual ethics will help foster understanding and compassion, more will be needed, particularly the witness of those who are willing to speak publicly about the effects of unchaste living, like Dan, Rilene, and Paul.

---

9 Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate* (June 29, 2009), n. 3.
Giving and Receiving Hope

Years ago, I recall our founding executive director, Father John Harvey, OSFS, of happy memory, saying, “Our best ambassadors are our members.” I know he was right, and that is one of the reasons we made the movie: it puts a face on Church teaching. In the trailer, Paul was quite sincere: “I have been given hope, and I want to do that for other people . . . to give others the same hope.” Over time, more of our members have become willing to share their stories in public or quasi-public settings (like a youth group or high school) because they feel a sense of urgency to reach others whom they know are at risk in one way or another. Thankfully, the personal narrative still receives respect culturally, even when the content of the message is not necessarily welcome.

Unchaste and promiscuous behavior of all types—not just those related to homosexuality—is both a reason for and a consequence of the confusion about identity, and also, therefore, the widespread confusion about the fulfillment of the human heart, no matter one’s attractions. In the pastoral setting, we find it most helpful for those who have suffered the effects of promiscuity to share their stories in the hopes of preventing further suffering.10

And so that brings me to another relevant part of metaphysics: cause and effect. The Catechism of the Catholic Church refers to the “psychological genesis” (n. 2357) of homosexuality, while leaving it to the natural and empirical sciences to study the origins of or factors leading to homosexuality. Within the Courage apostolate, I think we maintain a thoughtful reserve about the question of causality, because we do not want to impose templates on people and because of the complex character of the development of masculine and feminine identity. But we are also mindful that we live in a world of cause and effect. Thus, the Catechism’s phrase “psychological genesis” is useful in our reflection on identity. It seems to me that it means, among other things, that homosexuality is not “ontological,” that is, it is not a natural or normal variant of human sexuality.

So “homosexual” cannot, therefore, be an authentic human identity. The phrase “psychological genesis” can also be understood to confirm what the data from psychological sciences certainly seem to indicate: that same-sex attraction is a symptom of, or a reaction to, something antecedent to the tendency or inclination. I think we can even take a step further. The Catechism describes homosexual attraction as “objectively disordered” (n. 2358), words that I know fall hard on many ears, even after an explanation. My point here is to say that if an effect is bad (an objectively disordered tendency—a poverty, if you like), then by logic the cause is likely to be bad, because “the tree is known by its fruit” (Luke 6:44).

Please understand that I am not attempting a diagnosis for same-sex attraction, which is not among the goals of Courage. I am thinking in more philosophical terms, but with an eye on pastoral care. Let me offer one example. Under that rubric of

---

10 See, for example, Romans 8:28: “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”
pastoral care, I raise the question of causality for a couple of reasons. First, without entering a particular discussion of what is causative or simply correlative here, there are data to indicate that a man who has the homosexual inclination is seven times more likely to have been the victim of sexual abuse as a child or adolescent than a man who does not. So if a young person discloses that he thinks he or she is “gay,” then there may be something behind that disclosure that requires attention and thoughtful care.

Second, the 2006 USCCB document mentions twice the important role of counseling services as a part of pastoral care, especially for adolescents. I do not see this as any kind of endorsement for “reparative therapy”—something with which Courage is not involved—but rather as an acknowledgment that there may be attendant and antecedent difficulties, psychological and emotional, that accompany same-sex attractions.

In the Christian context, we have mercy, compassion and forgiveness, service and self-giving, and the strength of the Cross, all of which form big pieces of the work of our apostolate and have great power to heal spiritual and moral wounds (not to vanquish same-sex attractions), especially when there is honest, humble, and courageous self-knowledge. We know that we cannot make real progress in the spiritual life unless we know ourselves in the light of grace. Some of that knowledge may be painful or very sensitive or even embarrassing, and so we may turn away from the light of truth in discomfort. But that light is also a source of hope, and it brings some degree of liberation (see John 8:32). Father Harvey used to say that the hardest thing to do is accept the permissive will of God. But a peaceful resignation to the will of God opens the door to grace, as St. Paul says in Romans 8:28, where he reminds us that for those who love him, God works for the good in all things.

**Needing to Connect**

Claiming that people are “born that way” (an unproved assertion) or that “homosexuality is a blessing” (which is ambiguous) can leave someone a puzzle to himself. I am not suggesting that everyone needs therapy or counseling by any means, and I am a long way from suggesting that someone can “change,” another term that can be ambiguous. What I am saying is that a thoughtful and peaceful setting where people can bring things into the light to better understand themselves will be of practical help, because those questions we considered earlier—“Who am I? What am I? Why am I?”—are always at work. Recall Dan’s words: “There is a need to connect. … You’ve got to get this out.”

He was looking for the right forum to better understand himself, where he could trust that he would be accepted and understood, and where two of the biggest enemies faced by men and women with same-sex attractions—shame and isolation—could be eased. “Acceptance” is a third word that can be ambiguous in meaning, which is why the frame of any ministry must clearly reflect the Gospel and teachings of the Church. In the 1986 document from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* (a title that I think might be phrased differently today, for example, *On the Pastoral Care of Persons with Homosexual Attractions*), Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger warned of what he called a “studied ambiguity” with regard to the relationship between certain groups that would like to enjoy the
mantle of the Catholic Church and the teaching of the magisterium.\textsuperscript{11} He wrote, “No authentic pastoral program will include organizations in which homosexual persons associate with each other without clearly stating that homosexual activity is immoral. A truly pastoral approach will appreciate the need for homosexual persons to avoid the near occasions of sin.”\textsuperscript{12} I like to think that the goals of Courage and EnCourage express the “intellectual charity” (another “Benedictine” phrase) of the Church. Pope Paul VI wrote in \textit{Humanae vitae}, “Now it is an outstanding manifestation of charity toward souls to omit nothing from the saving doctrine of Christ.”\textsuperscript{13}

Three additional brief comments are in order here: First, to make plain the teachings of the Church and the goals of the ministry is fully in harmony with what Pope St. John Paul II called “the law of gradualness,”\textsuperscript{14} because the expectation is not that everyone who joins the group is already living all the virtues, but rather that they acknowledge the truth and good in the teachings of the Church and indicate their sincere desire to strive for them. Second, Courage members have told me that other groups—Dignity comes to mind, but it would not be the only one—that do not make plain their relationship with the content of the Church’s teaching on sexual ethics can function as meeting points for relationships that are not chaste. Finally, wherever such other groups exist, my impression is that Courage suffers, because its fidelity to the magisterium looks too severe or simply unrealistic.

**Needing the Other**

The need for community is strong in each of us, all the more so in those who, for any number of reasons, may find forming relationships a challenge. Those on the other side of this question (and I am not demonizing them) offer a community that seems welcoming, understanding, and supportive. I think we are in real danger of losing people from the faith because we do not appear to have something vital and attractive to offer as an alternative. I have done numerous clergy study days, and I do have the sense that Courage is providing a useful service to the Church in this regard. I am much more concerned about how that translates to our work on the ground. Most of our Courage and EnCourage groups are small, and lack the benefit of sufficient advertisement and promotion to regularly bring in new members. We have so many good means at our disposal to make known the Church’s yes to men and women with same-sex attractions and their families, including websites and social media, periodic bulletin announcements, confessionals, sermons, RCIA programs, vestibule bulletin boards and pamphlet racks, and diocesan newspapers. But of course, we need to use them.

The film \textit{Desire of the Everlasting Hills} is available free on the internet, and it has Spanish subtitles. Please do watch the movie or put it in the hands of someone

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, \textit{On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons} (October 1, 1986), n. 14.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Ibid., n. 15.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Paul VI, \textit{Humanae vitae} (July 25, 1968), n. 29.
\item \textsuperscript{14} John Paul II, \textit{Familiaris consortio} (November 22, 1981), n. 34.
\end{itemize}
you trust to review it for you. I am not very savvy about the world of social media, but I know that links from Facebook pages and diocesan websites will help to reach many people who will benefit from seeing it.

In the film, along with the voices of Dan, Rilene, and Paul, you also see the words of Benedict XVI: Look at the face of the other. Discover that he has a soul, and a life, that he is a person and that God loves this person. I think this expresses the strength of Courage: to meet people and accompany them on their walk to the Lord, to the fullness of truth and charity. We avoid addressing homosexuality as a cultural or political issue, but rather look at it as a daily, personal reality in the lives of many people and seek to give voice to those whose lived experience includes both the homosexual tendency and trust in the maternal wisdom and charity of the Catholic Church.

\[15\] Benedict XVI, Remarks after the Angelus (January 10, 2010).