



# Homosexuality and the Catholic High School

A compilation of newsletters with new material

September, 2001



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# Homosexuality and the Catholic High School

A compilation of newsletters with new material

OCFLEN wishes to express its appreciation to the following people  
for their willingness to share their insights:

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## ***Introduction***

Colleagues,

This publication consists of a compilation of OCFLEN newsletters published in the 2000-2001 school year with the addition of extensive new material. Included are reflections by Catholic teachers, psychologists, chaplains and parents with children in Catholic schools. With the full support of her parents, a young lesbian person has shared her experience as a Catholic high school student. A final article from *America* magazine looks back on the life of a gay youth in a Jesuit Catholic high school years ago.

Guidance departments and school staffs are beginning to speak openly on meaningful approaches to this aspect of school life. Catholic schools often situate the issue of homosexual youth within the context of anti-sexual harassment education (e.g. *The Joke's Over*, *Catholic Edition*, *OCSTA*) and act within the guidelines of their Board's Safe Schools policies and procedures. The earlier the intervention, the more likely the school will successfully maintain a respectful environment for all students. Grade 7 and 8 is the recommended level since it coincides with the introduction of this topic in the *Fully Alive* program.

We all know that recognizing the dignity and value of all persons remains a foundational principle of the social justice teaching of the Church. Without this principle, we cannot have community; without community, we cannot truly nurture faith. Most adolescents struggle with their sexual identity, at times with painful or self-destructive consequences. Catholic schools in Ontario are showing a growing willingness to address the human reality of homosexual youth, called to be respected members of their school communities.

The Ontario Catholic Family Life Educators Network has been proud to contribute to this dialogue.

*John Podgorski,  
Ontario Catholic Family Life Educators Network*

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# God's Love Revealed

## *Reflections on being a Catholic mother*

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.

***I was learning that being gay is not about just sex, but about love, affection, caring, nurturing, support, trust, good humour...***

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.

***The only thing I knew for sure was that I loved my son.***

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 learned 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 likely 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.

*... if I loved my son as I said I did, I could not remain silent.*

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%).*

***... 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 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.

***The majority of parents experience fear and grief. They fear their child will be rejected, harassed, discriminated against, beat-up, perhaps even killed.***

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 "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.

***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."***

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### ***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.

***To be loved, one must first be acknowledged and that is where a welcoming environment begins.***

When a faith community is educated, when it offers affirmation to parents and reassurance to

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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."

Mary Ellen Lopata

## *PSYCHOLOGY Newsletter*

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*April 1999*

# Keeping Our Children Safe

## *Adolescent Suicide and Sexual Orientation*

### ***Ted's Story***

*The morning Ted's father found him hanging from a rope in the barn was unexceptional but for the crunch of leaves under the first snow of the season. Most people in this small southern Ontario community thought of Ted as a model teenager, a good student and athlete, popular with the girls and a leader among his peers. Apart from a quiet reserve, which did not seem unusual in someone from a farm family, there was nothing exceptional about Ted; certainly nothing odd enough to suggest he was suicidal.*

*The shocked community rallied around his family offering what comfort they could. People stood outside the small country church weeping and shaking their heads in disbelief. Boys like Ted were not expected to do such a thing. He didn't use drugs or hang around the pool hall like some of the others, killing time until they were old enough to head for the big city. Ted was a young person who everyone thought would stay on the farm, raise a family and eventually take over from his father.*

*There was no note, no fight with his parents, or girlfriend problem to explain this tragic action. Ted went to his grave with a secret he had never been able to share with anyone. He knew well what his family and community thought of his kind..*

*By the age of seventeen, he no longer thought his homosexual feelings were a phase he was going through or the result of inexperience with girls. Ted agreed with his family and friends: homosexuality is a sin and a perversion. On the rare occasions when the topic would intrude into his family's life during a TV talk show or gossip, Ted's father would get red in the face, and growl, "Someone like that would be better off dead!" For Ted, this seemed the only option.*

## **"Coming Out." The Hazards of Integrity**

*The courage to be is the courage to accept oneself as accepted in spite of being unacceptable.*

*Paul Tillich*

The high rate of suicide among homosexual adolescents and youth is a phenomenon which has only recently been studied.

An American Federal Health Department (2) report on youth suicide noted that "A majority of the suicide attempts by homosexuals took place at the age 20 or younger with nearly one-third occurring before age 17."

Studies in both the U.S. and Canada (1), (3) have found that between twenty to fifty percent of young male homosexuals (ages 12 to 24) attempt suicide.

Gay male teens are 16 times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers are. Homosexual teens account for at least 30% of adolescent suicides.

This rate is far above the estimated incidence of homosexuality in North America which varies widely depending on the definition used, but is generally recognized to be about ten percent.

Adolescence is often a difficult time of life. It is a time when a young person is faced with the task of integrating the emotional, physical and psychological components of a developing personality into that of a young adult. This task involves the forming of a self identity by finding emotional attachments outside the family, asserting oneself as an independent member of the community, and expressing a sexual orientation which though established psychologically at an early age becomes integrated through puberty with the physical self.

Adolescents who find themselves emotionally and sexually attracted to members of their own sex, experience many hazards on this developmental journey.

**Adolescent suicide attempts result from the adolescent feeling that (s) he has been subject to a progressive isolation from meaningful social relationships, because of problems that he/she felt to be "unshareable." J. Jacobs (Adolescent Suicide, 1971)**

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CATHOLIC BISHOPS

**"... homosexual orientation is experienced as a given, not as something freely chosen. By itself, therefore, a homosexual orientation cannot be considered sinful, for morality presumes the freedom to choose".**

**"All in all, it is essential to recall one basic truth – God loves every person as a unique individual. Sexual identity helps define the unique persons we are. Human beings see the appearance, but the Lord looks into the heart". (7)**

**In a Survey of Homosexuals by the Canadian Justice Department 1994:  
21% reported having been punched or kicked  
78% had experienced verbal abuse.**

Unlike their heterosexual peers, most gay teens have neither social approval, family support, positive role models, nor safe social opportunities to assist them in their maturational struggle.

Heterosexual youth begin the process of establishing committed and mutually respectful relationships with the opposite sex without

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having to question the appropriateness of their desires. Homosexual youth must confront tremendous social pressure to deny or reject their feelings, actions and thoughts. For many these added pressures, coming at a particularly vulnerable time of life, are overwhelming.

While most young people worry about whether dad will let them use the car or stay out past midnight on a date, a gay or lesbian teen must consider the dire implications of even admitting to themselves the fact of their sexual orientation much less publicly expressing it. The consequences of this "coming out" often include physical and psychological abuse, rejection and removal from the family, as well as loss of friends and social ostracism.

Proctor and Groze (4) report that suicide attempts often occur within the first year of identifying as homosexual. Feelings of social isolation, anger, depression, low self esteem and difficult family interactions are common among these youths. In one study of gay youth in the southern United States (5) two thirds of the participants "repeatedly contemplated suicide in high school".

Many retreat to the relatively safe but ultimately self-defeating haven of denial and deceit. Sometimes, this denial leads gay boys to attempt to prove themselves as heterosexuals. They may take on a "macho" pose, become captain of the football team or a "Don Juan", with many girlfriends. Lesbian teens may become promiscuous or seek to prove they are "normal" through pregnancy.

Those who succeed in maintaining this "double life" may later experience an identity crisis. Some evidence (6) suggests that the process of identity crisis involved in "coming out" later in life is associated with a high risk of suicidal behaviours in gay adults. For some, the need to reject their inner feelings leads to violent behaviour towards other homosexuals. Many gays report having experienced a time in their youth when they were actively homophobic and even participated in "gay bashing".

Those who sometimes without intending to reveal their orientation to family and friends may find the response far more painful than living a lie. Hunter (3) reported that nearly half (46%) of gay and lesbian youth had been physically abused by their parents for being homosexual. The disproportionate number (25%) of gay youth who are among the "run away" and "throw away" kids in our cities represent the legacy of this abuse.

Recently (7), the National Conference of Catholic Bishops of the U.S.A has addressed this issue. The bishops released a pastoral letter in which they stated that people are homosexual because of "innate instinct" and admonished parents not to reject their homosexual children.

The response awaiting a gay teen in the schools and community is no better than in the family. U.S. data reveals that 28% of gay and lesbian youth drop out of high school. A Governors Commission in Massachusetts (8) found the attitudes of adults and students in the schools toward homosexuals to be so negative that it effectively denied equal educational opportunity to gay students. Similar findings in New York City resulted in the setting up of a special school for homosexual adolescents because it was "the only way to provide them with the education that state law requires". Locally, the Toronto District School Board offers the "Triangle" programme for gay and bisexual students who have dropped out of secondary school because of harassment and abuse from other students and teachers. The statistics on adolescent suicide show that for many homosexual young people the consequences resulting from their attempt to achieve normal developmental growth and emotional integration are not something they feel they can live with. The studies show (9), (10) that the gay teens that have the highest risk for suicidal actions are those whom because of appearance or mannerisms are early suspected of being homosexual or who at an early age reveal their sexual orientation.

***Someday, maybe, there will exist a well-informed, well-considered and yet fervent public conviction that the most deadly of all possible sins is the mutilation of a child's spirit.***

***Erick Erickson***

Some may not have had the option of denial because their way of speaking or appearance match society's negative stereotype.

Others may have naively "come out" or been inadvertently identified at an early age. For the lucky ones who find understanding and support, the transition to adulthood will be successful. But for many, faced with homophobic parents, community and peers, the price of integrity is more than their vulnerable emotions can afford.

***"Suicide is the leading cause of death among homosexual adolescents and youth." (1)***

### ***Current Understanding of Homosexuality***

For most of this century, homosexuality was considered to be a mental illness. Only after studies in the fifties and sixties demonstrated that the prevalence of homosexual behaviour was much greater than had previously been recognized did the inherent bias existing in studies about homosexuality become apparent.

The bias occurred because research on homosexuals drew from a population of men who were in mental hospitals, military barracks, or prisons. It was assumed that homosexuality was either the cause of or a product of other psychological problems. Only when Hooker (11) began to examine homosexuality in the general population did it become apparent that

homosexuals and heterosexuals did not differ in their psychological adjustment.

Even Sigmund Freud altered his perception of homosexuality over his lifetime. His early work judged homosexuality to be the result of "a certain arrest of sexual development." While toward the end of his life, he reversed his position on the issue of homosexuality as pathology. In his "Letter to an American Mother", (12) Freud states that homosexuality " ... is nothing to be ashamed of, no vice, no degradation, it cannot be classified as an illness."

Nevertheless, it was not until 1973 that the American Psychiatric Association removed the term "homosexuality" from its official manual of mental and emotional disorders. Over the next few years, regulatory associations in psychiatry and psychology in both the U.S. and Canada followed suit. Research since that time has affirmed the appropriateness of the declassification.

Unfortunately, the myth that homosexuality is a pathology of some kind is still prevalent in the general society. It underlies common homophobia providing a rationale for discrimination and adding to the many negative stereotypes associated with this orientation.

### ***The Roots of Homosexuality***

Recent research in a variety of scientific disciplines lends a great deal of support to the neurobiological basis of sexual orientation. The studies have examined theories of sexual development which include hormonal influences during fetal development, brain differences (size and function of specific areas), handedness, cognitive style, twin studies and genetic factors. While none of this research yields conclusive evidence of the biological basis of sexual orientation, researchers agree on two critical points: sexual orientation is formed at an early age and it cannot be changed. (1)

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In spite of these findings, some therapists and organizations claim to be able to change a person's sexual orientation from homosexual to heterosexual. The American Psychological Association (APA) examined this research and came to the conclusion that "many of the claims come from organizations with an ideological perspective on sexual orientation, rather than from mental health researchers; the treatment and their outcomes are poorly documented; and the length of time that clients are followed up after treatment is too short". (13)

In 1990, the APA which sets standards for the practice of psychology in the U.S. stated that scientific evidence does not show that therapy intended to change sexual orientation works and that it can do more harm than good. It also questioned the motivations and ethics of therapists who persist in trying to treat a trait that is not a disease. (13)

If not regarded as an illness, homosexuality is often described as a mere "lifestyle" choice. This notion is used to justify discriminatory practices and abusive behaviour toward gay people. It permits homophobic individuals and institutions to blame the victim and trivializes a deeply rooted personality dynamic. As a culturally condoned "explanation" for homosexuality, it adds to the confusion faced by gay youth struggling to come to terms with their sexual orientation.

These young people know too well that their same sex desires, emotions, and attractions were not freely chosen. All too often the real choice our society offers them is whether to accept their deepest feelings and face reaction and abuse, deny their orientation and live a lie, or leave this existence behind.

### **WHAT THE SCHOOLS CAN DO**

*It is not sufficient to avoid unjust discrimination. Homosexual persons "must be accepted with respect,*

*compassion and sensitivity". (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2358) (7)*

The Toronto Catholic District School Board's mission statement promises to provide "a safe and welcoming learning environment that is an example of Christian Community". Board directives have consistently mandated a policy of "inclusion" for all students whom because of disabilities or other differences are viewed as apart from the norm.

Policies also exist which deal directly with negative attitudes or behaviour toward minority groups including homosexuals. Specifically, the Violence Prevention Policy lists homophobia, as an example of hate motivated violence serious enough to be reported to the police. Board policy also requires school codes of behaviour to state that discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is unacceptable.

Still for school aged children emerging in awareness of their homosexual orientation, homophobia is the context at home and in school within which feelings of self worth, morality and affection are formed. For a gay student homophobia in an educational setting is proof that school is not a safe place to demonstrate a positive sense of self and form affectionate relationships, as do other students. The result is isolation, despair, arrested emotional growth, loss of faith, and for some suicide.

Teachers within the TCDSB have a number of resources to help them address the topics of homosexuality and homophobia. The Fully Alive program at the grade eight level includes the Catholic Church's teaching on homosexuality. This teaching stresses that homosexual persons deserve the same respect, compassion and rights as anyone else as well as emphasising that chastity is expected of all unmarried Catholics.

The secondary school religious education program also addresses Catholic teaching on homosexuality. Discussions on this topic are relevant in related program areas, such as family studies, history, and guidance.

Information and assistance is available from the program and service department: religious education, social work and psychology to support teachers as they deal with these complex, highly sensitive issues. As Catholic educators, we must ensure the safety of each one of our students.

## Definitions

**Sexual Orientation** - is distinguished by an enduring emotional, romantic, sexual or affectionate attraction to individuals of a particular gender (American Psychological Association).

**Homophobia** – a negative attitude toward or fear of homosexuality or homosexuals (Kroll & Warnke, 1995).

**Homosexual** - a male or female individual whose primary sexual and affectional attraction is to members of the same sex (Simpson, 1994).

**Lesbian/Gay** - preferred self-chosen terms to describe individuals whose primary sexual and affectional relationships are to members of the same sex. The term gay is sometimes used to refer to both men and women, although many women prefer the term lesbian (Simpson, 1994).

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#### SUMMARY OF CATHOLIC TEACHINGS ON HOMOSEXUALITY

1. Homosexual persons are made in the image and likeness of God as are heterosexual persons and deserve exactly the same concern, compassion and rights as any other human being.
2. A homosexual orientation is not in itself morally wrong as it is not freely chosen and is a part of a homosexual person's nature.
3. All Christians are called by God to be chaste and honor the gift of sexuality.
4. Sexual behavior outside of marriage is morally wrong and a sin.
5. The culpability of a sexually active homosexual person who is by nature inclined toward homosexual behavior must be judged with prudence. (14)  
[see Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2357-2359; also 2331-2350].



The **PSYCHOLOGY Newsletter** is an information bulletin prepared by the staff of the Psychology Department TCDSB. Its purpose is to inform the school family about developments and issues in educational psychology. **This issue was written by Ed Remming, M.A., M.E.S.**

**Critical readers:** Dr. Fran Rauenbusch, Chief Psychologist. Dr. Anneliese Blackwell, Gordon Brown, Paul Carlisi, Dr. Karen Gilmour-Barrett, Dr. Mary Ann McCarty Mayor, Dr. Mona Mclean, Isabelle Vieira – Faria.

## Homosexuality and the Catholic High School Setting:

### *A Clarification of the Teaching of the Catholic Church*

**Adolescence** is often a time of turmoil. One of the major challenges facing young people is the struggle to come to terms with their sexual identity. They are in real need of ongoing support and direction in this task from both parents and teachers.

**The emergence of the homosexual orientation** is a very complex and difficult thing to explain and no definitive origin has been discovered. It is important to understand that the task of establishing one's sexual identity is not completed at too young an age. Some youth may have homosexual feelings and attractions. From grades 7 to 9, early adolescents need to be assured that such feelings do not constitute a determination of sexual orientation.

***A pastoral sense of compassion for young people struggling with issues of sexual orientation must be balanced with a very clear challenge to chastity.***

It is equally important that students do not see the acceptance of homosexual persons as permission to engage in homosexual genital experimentation. The evaluation of **homosexual**

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**activity**, as is all sexual activity outside of marriage, as “morally wrong” or “sinful” must be made quite clear. A pastoral sense of compassion for young people struggling with issues of sexual orientation must be balanced with a very clear challenge to chastity.

You will also note the evaluation of the homosexual inclination as “**objectively disordered**”. A technical term of moral theology, it simply says that the homosexual inclination is not part of the natural order of man and woman mutually attracted, committed in marriage and open to procreation. The homosexual inclination is not part of this natural order. “Objectively disordered does not mean the same as “morally disordered”. Only free personal actions can be subject to moral evaluation. There is no moral disorder if there is no sexual activity. The term “objectively disordered” is applied, then, to homosexual behaviours and inclinations; it does not apply to persons, who by their very existence, are created and loved by God. **Due to the very real potential for confusion and misinterpretation around this language, this is best discussed at the grade 12 level.**

You might wish to consult the following references. In the book Ten Tough Issues, written by Archbishop Pilarczyk, there is a chapter on homosexuality which clearly states the Church’s position on homosexuality. It is a useful reference for teachers. Jim Auer’s article “Homosexuality: What’s A Christian to Think?” in Reaching Out, is aimed at students and summarizes the Church’s position in language that is both sensitive and clear. This would be a good classroom resource.

As with many issues in Family Life Education, the challenge is to balance a message that is both compassionate and engaging. The anti-homophobia component of the **A.I.D.S. education** program, for example, promotes just and compassionate treatment of all homosexual persons. The challenge of chastity, which includes a clear moral evaluation of homosex-

ual activity, needs to be presented with both concern and affirmation. Chastity is a message that all our young people need to hear.

*John Podgorski  
in conversation with Marcel Gervais,  
Archbishop of Ottawa*

## Stories from Ontario Catholic High Schools

I have found that teens who are suicidal most often are dealing with some form of sexual abuse or sexual identity questions. Once they have gotten into counselling and named the issue, healing begins. It is unfortunate that homophobia “is”. I work with a school population, that is very homophobic. The worst thing students call each other is ‘gay’ or ‘fag’. When the topic is discussed by teachers or comes up, the ‘squeamishness’ surfaces, and even though the topic is sensitively presented for the most part, the students find it hard to listen. This ‘squeamishness’ is also reflected in the staff as well. Perhaps the idea is that if we don’t talk about homosexuality it won’t exist, but the reality is that it does exist.

*A Catholic High School Chaplain*

The students are not coming forward. Most are very afraid. We need to support them on this journey. They are struggling but guidance staff is not part of the process. Teachers find this very difficult and confusing. We need to address this issue as a whole school. Catholic school culture is homophobic. It is like racism: it may not always be open but it is definitely present. Guidance staff should definitely have a role in this by educating teachers and by including sexual orientation in all anti-sexual harassment education. Catholic schools need to be safe schools for all our students.

*A Guidance Counsellor*

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My most recent "teachable moment" regarding homosexuality was just a couple of weeks ago and involved a rather hard-nosed group of three grade nine boys. They were to make a poster that included their own "Ten Commandments" for good community relations. These boys wrote "Don't be "gay"; it isn't "right"."

I discovered this after the work had been submitted. I decided to hang everyone else's poster, but purposely did not hang theirs, assuming I would be challenged on it. I wasn't disappointed!

I spoke with them about the pain that a teenager struggling with his sexual orientation and identity would feel if he/she had to look at that commandment every day. They were initially belligerent, but in the course of our talk, I believe they came to see the difference between orientation and action, and of course I slipped in the message that all, themselves included, are called to chastity.

I think after all was said and done, they "got it".

*A High School Religious Education Teacher*

The issue of homosexuality can certainly be contentious in the classroom. Some Grade 9 and 10 students lack the maturity to express anything more than the prejudice experienced at home or through the media. They will typically use the Bible to try to back up their argument by saying the Bible tells us it is wrong. Students will use the term "fag" and "lesbo" on a regular basis as a means of disrespecting another boy or girl, who will then have to defend themselves about not being "homo". This name calling is what I have encountered the most when dealing with a lack of sensitivity regarding the issue. We can teach compassion, dignity of the person, how to treat others, and stop the name calling and be very successful at this, but acceptance of homosexuality is something people are afraid to approach.

*A High School Religious Education Teacher*

A 16 year old boy told me he was gay. I saw him for a long period of time as he tried to come to grips with this. He had issues of guilt from sexual experimentation, fear of rejection, low self-esteem, and a struggle with what to do and how to live his homosexuality in a positive way. This lasted almost an entire year.

*A High School Chaplain*

A 17 year old boy came to me when a friend of his died. He feared that he had killed himself because of prior homosexual activity. I was never able to verify that the death was due to suicide, but the friend felt that it was. I had some contact with the mother and father. Neither indicated that they had any sense of their son being homosexual. It was very difficult to bring closure to the death of his friend. A lot of questions were left unanswered.

*A High School Chaplain*

A mother and father came to see me to discuss the disclosure of their son as a homosexual. Their concern, amazingly, was how to protect their son while he was at school. They didn't want the word to get out and they didn't want their son harassed. They wanted assurances that the school was safe. I did my best to assure them, but had to admit that our school was as homophobic as the rest of society and that their son was 'at risk'. Student did indeed stay in school and eventually graduated.

*A High School Chaplain*

I must admit that I wish we could get this out into the general discussion in our schools more. I too often feel isolated and alone in trying to support individuals dealing with their homosexuality. This is not right. People need to be welcomed and received in community. How else can they grow and become all they are called to be!

*A High School Chaplain*

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A lesbian student approached me about the harassment she was enduring because of her sexual orientation. She wanted to start a support group for other gay and lesbian students. We talked about problems related to confidentiality. In the meantime, I assured her that harassment of any kind for any reason was unacceptable.

The student explained how she had gone to guidance and the administration about her concerns and they refused to help her. No reasons were given. She was told to stop talking about her life choices. When she came to me, she was expecting major condemnation because I was a chaplain. She was surprised by my reaction and accepted the advice I offered. I worked with the student to network with community resources. In the end, she quit school two months later. I have spent many hours trying to figure out how I could have been more helpful and supportive.

*A High School Chaplain*

## A Catholic Student's Story

I cannot begin to describe a gay, lesbian, bisexual or trans-gendered (glbt) student's experience in Catholic high school as a positive one. Nor can I, in all honesty, say we do not walk away harmed by prejudices perpetuated by our social and educational systems. I can, however, ensure you that there is hope to be found in every situation. What is essential is that students have the practical and spiritual support they need to learn to accept themselves and others.

When I came out four years ago in grade 9, the experience was overwhelmingly positive - my friends and teachers displayed nothing but respect for my decision to be open about who I was. Four years later, I can honestly say that I have never experienced hatred or discrimination

firsthand because I am a lesbian, but I also know that I am the exception.

I may have never felt completely alone, but I have had to watch friends struggle with depression. I may have never been suicidal but I have come all too close to losing some of the most beautiful people in my life. I may have never had to live in silence, but year after year at graduation it's guaranteed that at least one student will come over to me and finally be able to speak the truth about themselves - no longer afraid of the repercussions of high school.

We transfer to public schools, we hide who we are to still the rumors, we ignore the whispers behind our backs, we pretend. All that my dream is, is that you as educators and Christians do what you are called to do - teach your students.

Make resources available so they feel comfortable to ask questions. Discuss glbt issues in a positive light. Do not let discriminatory comments, however minor, go uncorrected. Finally, let that hope for a better future for gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans-gendered students be found readily in your classroom, office, team, club or chapel. All students deserve an education free of fear and we are only part-way there.

*Jubilee Jackson*

*Grade 12 student*

An Ottawa Catholic High School  
(with the full support of her parents)

Speaking as a father, how would I want my three children treated in a Catholic high school setting if they were struggling with their homosexual orientation? The answers are not difficult. I would want a safe and welcoming environment for them, one in which perceived sexual orientation would not be an issue. I would like them to have an adult that they would feel comfortable going to; an adult I could trust to give a message that was both supportive and challenging from a moral point of view.

I would like the issue to be discussed, from time to time, in Religious Education, in a manner that was respectful of the dignity and rights of homosexual persons. I would want my child to have rewarding friendships. I would want them to be happy people, willing to make a contribution to society with a network of supportive friends. The school would clearly have an important role to play in the human growth and development of my child, who might happen to be homosexual.

*John Podgorski*

After reflecting on the last two issues of the OCFLEN Newsletters focusing on the issues surrounding sexual orientation and adolescent suicide, I am reminded of the continued reading proclaimed a few weeks ago during the Second Sunday of Ordinary time. I was particularly focused on Paul's letter to the Corinthians where we read: For just as the body is one and has many members, and all of the members of the body, though many are one body, so it is with Christ. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it." (1 Cor 12:12,26)

I believe that we need to look beyond the specific issue of gay and lesbian students and realize the impact a lack of advocacy, compassion and concern regarding gay and lesbian students has on our school communities. When it is apparent through our actions and omissions of care towards gay and lesbian young persons that it is permissible to let one member of the community suffer, we all suffer. When the pastoral and social teachings of the church that oblige us to have a preferential option for the poor among us and the catechism which demands that "it is not sufficient to avoid unjust discrimination" and "homosexual persons must be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity" is somehow muted so that we may remain in our comfort zones, we all suffer. Until we are able to honor all in our community unconditionally simply because they are the body of Christ, we will all continue to suffer.

*Joe C. Jamieson*

faith in focus



## As God Intended

*Reflections on being a gay student at a Jesuit high school*

*by William D. Glenn*

**WILLIAM D. GLENN**, a licensed psychotherapist and a spiritual director, is the convener of Spirit Group, an interdenominational prayer community in the San Francisco Bay area.

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, while I sat at my desk one morning at Continuum, an AIDS agency in San Francisco where I served as executive director, the phone rang. The caller identified herself as a secretary to the First Lady and asked if I would come to the White House for a community leaders' forum later that month. After my initial startled reaction, I said, "Why, of course!" As you might guess, I was honored, felt privileged, saw this as an obligation and was very excited.

Fast forward to several weeks ago. My friend Robert Hotz, S.J., the president of Creighton Prep, the Jesuit high school that I attended in Omaha, Neb., where my younger brother Greg teaches, called me one morning. Father Hotz asked if I would return to Prep and speak to the faculty about my experience of being a gay student and offer suggestions

regarding what Prep might do to assist its gay students. Again I felt privileged; I was honored; I understood this as an obligation. But this time I was not excited. The hand that held the phone was trembling!

I hadn't been back to Prep for 35 years. I had been in Prep's gym for a Christmas midnight Mass and had visited the track to watch my brother John and my nephew Brian practice football, but I had never set foot in the school since graduation day in 1966. But several weeks later, there I was.

In thinking about what to say to the teachers, I realized that I wanted to say *one perfect thing* that would forever change the way all gay students are treated. But, of course, there is no *one perfect thing* to say, and I am one imperfect human being. So instead I decided to tell them who I am, a bit of my experience, some of what I have learned, and how I believe it is possible for them to serve all of their students better—particularly the gay students—at Prep.

***I wanted to say one perfect thing that would forever change the way all gay students are treated.***

After graduating from Prep in 1966, I spent four years at its mother institution, Creighton University. In 1970 I joined the Society of Jesus and spent the next 10 years in a variety of ministries, most satisfyingly as a scholastic at another Jesuit prep school.

It was also as a Jesuit that I befriended alcohol. I got sober in 1978, and for a multitude of reasons—but not because I did not greatly value Ignatius' vision—I decided the following year to leave the Society. Subsequently I served as principal at a black elementary school and vice principal of a large, multicultural Catholic girls' high school in San Francisco. For the past 17 years I have been a psychotherapist, working in private practice, in hospital-based substance abuse treatment cen-

ters and particularly, in the AIDS epidemic. From 1993 to 1999, I led an agency that cares for dual-diagnosed individuals with disabling H.I.V. disease in San Francisco's rough Tenderloin district.

Two years ago, in response to a call I first felt before entering high school in 1962, I left my formal work in the epidemic and focused on my interior journey. Last year I made a pilgrimage to Ireland, where in a small cottage on an island off County Mayo, I spent 30 days in silence, praying the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, saying again yes to the One whose call is irresistible. Nowadays I spend my time in a ministry of prayer and of presence with those discarded by the culture.

But back to Prep.

As I was preparing my remarks for that afternoon's talk, I realized that I was not the 52-year-old man that I appeared to be. Instead, I was once again the sophomore of 1963, a 16-year-old gay boy, thrown back in time. I re-experienced my old life, with feelings and memories that echo within and haunt me still.

Though I have since "butched up" pretty well, I was a sissy, and Prep was no place for sissies. After a difficult freshman year, I begged my parents to transfer me to the local public high school. That request was, for my father, tantamount to heresy. Little did he know how ashamed and deeply isolated I felt inside as a student in this revered high school. I lived in constant fear that I would be exposed and dread that I would be discovered as a despised *thing* whose name I did not know but whose negative effects I could see and feel all around me, mostly deep inside me.

***...I would be discovered as a despised thing, whose name I did not know but whose negative effects I could see and feel all around me, mostly deep inside me.***

All was not bad, of course. I had some wonderful teachers, Jesuits and laymen alike. (In my four years, there were no women on the faculty.) My senior English teacher, a coach, particularly impressed me: he taught us to write from our feelings, and he showed each of us respect and dignity. And at Prep, my faith deepened: I encountered Jesus in a profound way and was introduced to rudimentary Ignatian wisdom, that incomparable combination of spiritually and psychologically grounded understanding and intuition. I had lovely friendships. And I made my first forays into critical thinking.

But Prep was a difficult place for a gay boy. At the time, Prep strongly supported the values of the dominant culture, values anathema to the development of persons, values particularly suited to molding boys into narrow and constricted young men.

Let two incidents suffice as examples. At the Prep homecoming football game at City Stadium in my freshman year, I was sitting with a friend when two thugs from my homeroom approached. One said to the other, "This is the one," and grabbed my collar and stood me up in the bleachers. The other sucker-punched me in the gut, threw me back into my seat and walked away, laughing scornfully. They imparted the knowledge that I dreaded: "We're onto you." For four years I lived with that fear every day, always believing that somehow I deserved what I got for being the one, the one they were onto.

Though they were thugs, they were also the kind of minor celebrity that high schools produce. Both were touted athletes (the sucker-puncher became All-State Football in his senior year). But they were thugs nonetheless, thugs whom the dominant culture unconsciously encouraged. And still does.

In sophomore year, like nearly all high school boys, I fell in love, though in a different way from my friends. I did not fall in love with a girl from one of the local Catholic girls' schools. I fell in love instead with a boy who sat one row away from me. It felt overwhelm-

ing: I was alarmed, ashamed, guilty. There was no one with whom I could speak, no one with whom I could share these feelings, even to acknowledge that the feelings existed. I felt then the beginnings of what I would feel most profoundly for the next 15 years: I was alone. And I believed that I would always have to be alone: with no language, no community, no symbol nor myth, no conversation, no dialogue, no hope.

What I acquired at Prep were the messages proffered by the dominant culture. During puberty's final onslaught I came to believe that I was evil. And more: that I was sick, sinful and unacceptable in the eyes of the world. All our culture's words and notions and judgments came home to roost in me, a 16-year-old gay boy, whom the world, let alone his parents, could not know.

***... I came to believe that I was evil. And more: that I was sick, sinful and unacceptable in the eyes of the world.***

But finally, and primarily, I came to believe that I was unacceptable as a human being in the eyes of God.

The more I prayed to be changed, which was the concentrated content of my prayer (deeply aware that I had not chosen this but believing it was visited upon me because of my sinfulness), I regarded my *not changing* as God's judgment on me. My prayer and my life must be insincere, somehow beyond the pale. I had no access to the simple grace that everyone else seemed to merit.

The one I called God, and my companion Jesus, previously the source of such great comfort in my life, were taken away—or they had left. They had abandoned me to despair because the person I had become could effect no change, could not desist from either my feelings or my desires, no matter how hard I fought them or prayed to be delivered from them. In the end, I was utterly alone.

This is the terror for gay boys and girls: that they are alone. We suffer without the comfort and love of a mother or a father, of friends or even the odd solace of the cosmos. No one with whom to share this terrible fate: we believe all the culture's heinous images, holding our young selves responsible for this sick and perverted condition. There is no symbol to transform the experience, no story to provide context for it, no person to explain it or bear it away.

***This is the terror for gay boys and girls: that they are alone. We suffer without the comfort and love of a mother or a father, of friends or even the odd solace of the cosmos.***

Sometimes I think: Who would wish this on an enemy?—let alone a child or a friend. But this is what happens to gay boys and girls in this culture.

On the inside, I experienced a circular existence of guilt, shame, expiation. On the outside I "straightened" up as best I could, and forced into being the image of the "good boy," "one of you," as much as possible, knowing all the while I was not nor ever would be.

Eventually, I discovered the immense relief alcohol brings, with which I was finally able to mask and relieve the constant pain. I drank for 12 years, culminating in a near-fatal auto accident in June of 1978. Even then I continued to drink.

But that same summer, on Labor Day, while riding my bike early in the morning on the shores of Lake Michigan, nursing a particularly brutal hangover, I heard the words: *You never have to drink again.*

I knew it was over.

A few weeks later, back in Berkeley studying theology as a Jesuit, I went to a rally to de-

feat Proposition 6 on the California ballot, not so unlike the recent initiatives against gay people disguised as being about something else (like the sacredness of marriage) that have been popping up everywhere. The initiative would have required firing any teacher in California discovered to be gay. That afternoon I went to San Francisco in my Roman collar, not wanting anyone to think I was a gay man, though I had in truth never been anything else. Harvey Milk, the soon-to-be assassinated gay supervisor, gave what was his standard speech. He proclaimed that we didn't have to be afraid anymore, for we were together, alive and free. He asserted we were there for the little boy in Fresno and the little girl in Sacramento who tonight believed they were all alone.

I was deeply moved, really undone; Harvey Milk, in those few words, was telling my story. Tears streamed down my cheeks. I pulled the white tab out of my clerical collar and wept.

I went home on the subway that evening, entered my room in my Jesuit community, put a piece of paper in the Selectric and typed out the words: "I am a gay man." I was 30 years old.

That day I vowed with the conviction only a reformed drunk can muster never to live in fear again and, at all costs, to be myself, no matter what or who would say no. For I knew the dominant culture says no every day. And everyday, I began to pray for the grace to say yes.

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My story is a version of the "coming out" story of every gay boy or girl, and these stories will continue until the dominant culture, which suffers exquisitely from its own homophobia, withdraws its enormous and blinding sexual shadow.

Homophobia, the stepchild of misogyny, exists for a simple reason. Society projects the enormity of its unconscious sexual shadow—its desires and fears and taboos—onto gay persons. It stigmatizes, scapegoats, labels as degenerate, makes laws against, violates both the

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dignity and humanity of, and demands (as cultures do of their scapegoats) that gay people bear its oppressive burdens. If you wonder how this collective model works, look at the history of the Jews in the West since the time of Paul, or consider the way that patriarchy regards the humanity of women.

From seventh grade to the age of 30, nothing was worse than being gay. But, as Providence would have it, I now understand this biological, psychological and spiritual dimension of myself, my *gayness*, as the source of enormous grace and wisdom for me. I am deeply grateful, almost in inverse proportion to my previous regret, for being gay. I am grateful for the grace of my particular path and for the deep freedom that coming to terms with this gift has afforded me. And I have had returned to me my compelling and demanding companion, Jesus, who of course had never left me at all.

***... I now understand this biological, psychological and spiritual dimension of myself, my gayness, as the source of enormous grace and wisdom for me.***

The overwhelming thrust of the Gospels, Jesus' ministering in the margins to the unrecognized, is no longer just a model for me but has become an outward sign of grace, a sacrament. So my story comes in ways, though skewed, full circle. I am even today that 14-year-old boy who came to Prep in 1962 to become a man.

I concluded my remarks at Prep by offering some suggestions to the faculty, premised on the following truth: that all gay kids and most gay adults believe they are damaged goods and, as a corollary that all gay kids and many gay adults feel (and are) isolated and alone. The head of the school asked me to say what I had needed to hear at Prep in 1963 and what gay

Prepsters need to hear today. I believe they need to hear three things. First: You are created exactly as God intended you to be. Second: You are not damaged goods, neither sick, nor evil. Third: You and the love you provide are essential, mysterious graces in God's plan for the world.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, I asked them to accept my gratitude and admiration for the courageous way in which they had received me so graciously that day, for inviting me to tell my story. They have perhaps unwittingly healed an old wound in me, and I am in their debt. I asked that God bless the work they are doing in making the school a sacred place for every student who enters those doors each day, boys they have been given the charge of helping to become men for others.

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