

## Responses from Bishops to *Fortunate Families* January 12, 2007 letter

Fourteen bishops (nine active ordinaries, one retired ordinary, two active auxiliaries, and two retired auxiliaries) responded to the letter that *Fortunate Families* sent to each U.S. Bishop on January 12, 2007. The letter asked the bishops to dialogue with persons affected by the document they approved in November 2006: *Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care*.

The purpose of posting these letters is to show the wide range of thoughts and feelings bishops have about this topic and this ministry. The fourteen bishops who responded all acknowledged our concerns. Our goal is dialogue, not confrontation. So, the bishops or their dioceses are not identified, and the letters are edited to preserve confidentiality.

We hope these postings will motivate you to encourage and challenge your bishop(s) to dialogue with Catholic LGBT persons, with their Catholic parents and other family members, and with Catholic pastoral ministers who minister with both of these groups.

What follows is the correspondence with each bishop who replied.

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Bishop A (Jan. 17, 2007)

Thank you for sending me a copy of your newsletter and of the *Fortunate Families* trifold.

I have a nephew...who is gay, although I did not know that until the Christmas after he withdrew from...seminary...at the end of his third year of theology and prior to his ordination as a transitional deacon. That Christmas he told his parents why he had withdrawn from the seminary. He told his parents, my brother and sister-in-law, that he is gay, and then asked them if they were angry with him.

I was never so proud of them as when they said, "No, son. You are still our son and we love you." He has a brother who is in the Marines, now on his second tour in Iraq; and five sisters. He told each of them personally, and each responded as his parents had. His mother told me that she told [him] that she was not surprised when he told her and his father that he is gay. She told him that when he was around 12 or 13 she suspected that he was gay and should have told him. He responded that if she had, he would have denied it. When his parents asked him how he felt when he told them that Christmas, he replied that he felt that he was out of prison.

The wonder and the beauty of this is that they live, as I did, in a culture...in which men generally speak disparagingly about "queers." One of his brothers-in-law did tell [his] parents the he would not come to an all-family dinner if [he] would be there. [He] stayed away.... He lives with a partner and is doing well.

[He] had graduated from...University.... He landed a job with a company which sent him to...to promote their products. While there he wrote to me to tell me he began to sense a call from God to go to the seminary. A wise young priest there advised him to reflect on it and pray about it. He did so, only to become convinced that he was being called to the priesthood. He wrote to me for advice on how to enter a seminary, returned, and soon thereafter entered...Seminary.... In the summer months he was assigned to

parishes for further pastoral training and discernment. People with whom he worked gave his bishop very positive recommendations for his pastoral care can down-to-earth sermons.

The tragedy of this is that [he] was denied his call to priesthood and the People of God were denied the ministry of a priest who could understand and reach out to its marginalized and outcast faithful.

I am sending the newsletter and a copy of the trifold to [his] parents with a letter suggesting that they join Fortunate Families.

... We are making progress, slowly but surely!

Peace and blessings on you and your ministry.

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Bishop B (Jan. 17, 2007)

May the peace of the Lord Jesus be always with you and your family.

Thank you for your kind letter introducing your organization.

I have been in dialogue with gay people for over thirty years, ever since I was a pastor.... Consequently, I have many friends now in the gay community.

I thought the document; *Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination* was good overall. I did, however, publicly attempt to eliminate the language that gay and lesbian people find offensive, that is references to the homosexual orientation as "disordered."

When it first appeared in a document from the Vatican in 1986, it caused much pain to gay and lesbian people and their families causing a negative reaction. Unfortunately in my opinion the Conference of Catholic Bishops on a vote of about 70% to 30% accepted the original text.

May the Lord continue to bless you and your family.

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Bishop C (Jan. 17, 2007)

Thank you for your letter and its attachments. Please know of my prayerful support for all of your efforts in your very important and worthwhile concerns,

May God continue to bless you and all of your loved ones.

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Bishop D (Jan. 17, 2007)

This is to acknowledge receipt of your letter dated January 12, 2007. The Bishops in their November meeting overwhelmingly endorsed the statement you referenced in your letter. *Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care* is in my view an excellent resource to bishops and dioceses. Ministry to persons with a homosexual inclination would not be 'care' or indeed 'pastoral' if it was not offered in the spirit of the gospel and if it was not coherent with the teachings of the gospel. In this

sense the statement is, in the words of Bishop Sarrartelli [sic] “positive, pastoral and welcoming.”

The gospel message is one great joy and hope to all; but at the same time it demands conversion from all. The gospel does contain “hard sayings.” As followers of Christ we cannot change the gospel. We do, however, trust in his love and mercy, and we do implore his grace that the gospel might change us.

I would encourage you to read over again the statement carefully. You will find no unkind or derisive words describing people who experience same sex attractions. On the contrary, you will find, the conviction expressed by the bishops that no one is excluded from God’s love. He calls all to salvation through the merits of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

*Fortunate Families* reply to Bishop D (Feb. 8, 2007)

Thank you for taking the time from your busy schedule to respond to our letter concerning the document, *Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination*. We appreciate your dialogue with us. We write you again for clarification.

In your January 17, 2007 letter, you refer to the “gospel” many times and say, “we cannot change the gospel.” We do not understand your reference to the gospel in this context because the Gospels say nothing about same-sex relationships, nor is Jesus recorded as saying anything about them.

You also say that in the document we “will find no unkind or derisive words describing people who experience same sex attractions.” The *Fortunate Families* newsletter sent with our original letter contains the comments of many Catholic gay and lesbian people and their parents who seem to disagree with that. Here are three examples:

- 1) “I don’t believe much will happen until the gay priests ultimately decide they have had enough of being called ‘disordered’ and begin the real work of banding together and forcing the Vatican to retract such harmful language.”
- 2) “Until we get rid of the awful language ‘objectively disordered’ and making terrible comparisons, nothing will happen.”
- 3) “I urge you [bishops] to not succumb to inaccurate and often false stereotypes, like those purporting the existence of a universally promiscuous and hedonistic lifestyle.... I urge you not use terms that are purposefully demeaning and discriminatory, like ‘inclination’ or ‘tendency.’ These terms assume, often wrongly, that homosexual persons do not have informed consciences. They are derogatory and patronizing.”

Your letter says, “I encourage you to read over again the statement carefully.” Most Catholic gay and lesbian people and their families that we know would respond by asking you to reread the statement as if you were one of them. Reading it from their perspective, would you recognize in it the compassionate love of Jesus?

As you indicate, the document says no one is excluded from God’s love. Catholic gay and lesbian people and their family members have no doubt of that. However, their comments indicate many of them feel they are excluded from the institutional Church’s love. That’s why we strongly endorse the hopeful call to dialogue expressed in the

document. We hope you offer an opportunity in your Diocese for Catholic gay and lesbian people and their family members to describe their lived experience to you.

Thank you again for your time and willingness to respond to us. We look forward to a clarification of your response.

Reply from Bishop D (Mar. 1, 2007)

I have received your letter of February 8<sup>th</sup> asking for further clarification of my original January 17<sup>th</sup> letter. I do not believe any further clarification is needed. The bishops' document, *Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination*, speaks for itself. It is clear that you are not in agreement with it, but it does state Catholic teaching on the matter.

The document does not call any person "disordered." But it does call same sex attraction as disordered and homosexual activity as sinful. This is Church teaching which faithfully interprets the Scripture and the Tradition of the Church. As I said, our task as Catholics is not to change the gospel but to allow the gospel to change us. Pope Benedict said at the beginning of this Lenten season, "Conversion is not an effort for self-realization because the human being is not the architect of his own destiny." We are not our own "makers"--to affirm this does not detract from any respect, friendship or justice due to those struggling with same sex attractions.

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Bishop E (Jan. 18, 2007)

Thank you for your letter and for sharing the materials you enclosed providing background information on *Fortunate Families*.

I am forwarding your enclosures to the director of our Family Life Office for their review.

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Bishop F (Jan. 18, 2007)

Thank you for your letter and offer of assistance. Fortunately, I meet with a small group on a regular basis (monthly) to discuss and act on outreach to GLBT members of the Church.

You and members of *Fortunate Families* are to be congratulated for your interest and support of our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters

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Bishop G (Jan. 19, 2007)

I am in receipt of your letter to me of January 12, 2007. Your presumption that bishops are not in communication with homosexual persons and others is simply not accurate. Furthermore, there was serious consultation when the Committee and then the bishops worked on the document *Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination...* Your Organization seems to call for a change in Church teaching in matters sexual. That would be unfaithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But, certainly we can agree that all

persons should be respected, know friendship and be treated justly. That is a clear part of the message as entrusted to the Church.

Fortunate Families reply to Bishop G (Feb. 8, 2007)

Thank you for taking time from your busy schedule to respond to our letter concerning the document, *Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination*. We appreciate your dialogue with us. We write you again for clarification.

In your January 19, 2007 letter, you said our “presumption that bishops are not in communication with homosexual persons and others is simply not accurate” and that “there was serious consultation when the Committee and then the bishops worked on the document.” This was not a presumption on our part, but is based on the NY Times article (Nov. 14, 2006) that said Bishop Arthur J. Serratelli, chairman of the doctrine committee which developed the document, “acknowledged...that the committee did not consult with gay men and lesbians on the document.” This was reinforced when we found that not one of the many Catholic gay and lesbian people, family members, or pastoral ministers we know was consulted.

You also indicate that our organization (*Fortunate Families*) “seems to call for a change in Church teaching on matters sexual.” *Fortunate Families* has not formally called for a change in Church teaching. We do, however, want the bishops to listen to experience of Catholic gay and lesbian people and their parents, and that’s why we encourage them to tell their stories. From their comments in the newsletter we sent you, you can see that many of them believe the teaching does not reflect their lived experience.

You go on to say such a change in Church teaching “would be unfaithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.” We do not understand that because Church teaching in sexual matters is not infallible and has, in fact, changed. Just one example is the Vatican II elevation of the unitive aspect to a primary purpose of marriage when, previously, only the procreation and education of children was the primary purpose. We also do not understand your reference to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in this context. There is no record of Jesus saying anything about same-sex relationships, nor are they addressed in the gospels.

We certainly do agree “that all persons should be respected, know friendship and be treated justly.” May we all continue to pray for that.

Thank you again for your time and willingness to respond to us. We look forward to a clarification of your response.

[Bishop G has not replied]

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Bishop H (Jan. 22, 2007)

Thank you very much for your cover letter dated January 12, 2007, your brochure and newsletter on behalf of *Fortunate Families*. I am sorry that the recent statement of the USCCB, namely, *Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care*, has caused you some distress. Certainly the document was meant to be a clear teaching of the Church in such a way as to be pastorally sensitive. The Bishops took much pain to make sure the document clearly stated that every individual is loved by

God and cherished by the Church. At the same time, the Bishops put forward the teaching of marriage as a special gift between a man and a woman given by God for their mutual support and for the bringing of children into the world.

The document, though, does not exclude those with homosexual inclinations from the work of the Church, “the fullness of Christian life and the perfection of charity” elaborated in *Lumen Gentium*.

Thank you again for your letter and for the materials enclosed with your letter, and I ask the Lord’s continued blessing on you and the families of *Fortunate Families*, as we all continue in our ministry proclaiming the word of God to all the People of God in our communities.

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Bishop I (Jan. 24, 2007)

...has asked me to acknowledge receipt of your letter sent on behalf of *Fortunate Families* and the enclosed materials. Thank you for the time that you took to share your thoughts with...and your offer to be of assistance in facilitating dialogue concerning the recent United States Conference of catholic Bishops’ document, *Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care*.

It is good to know of your great love for your son. Surely, family life is one of God's greatest gifts to us. May parents always strive to be signs of God's love to their children and help them to grow in the ways of faith and holiness. ...on several occasions has publicly affirmed the dignity of homosexual persons as members of God's family and invited them to full participation in the life of the Church. Please be assured of our prayers for you, your son, and all whom you hold dear.

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Bishop J (Feb. 2, 2007)

Thanks for sending me the materials *Fortunate Families* sent to the bishops. I hope many of them will read the letter and newsletter and accept your offer to begin a dialogue with gay and lesbian Catholics. These men and women have much to offer the Church. Their exclusion is our loss. I am very grateful that you continue to encourage dialogue. May your efforts bear fruit. Be assured of my continued support.

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Bishop K (Feb. 5, 2007)

Thank you for your letter of January 12<sup>th</sup>. I appreciate your message to me, and I have examined the material you included. While I agree with the tone of your charitable assertions, I find nowhere in the material or your letter, the expression of a desire to incorporate into your own lives or the lives of those for whom you profess concern, a deeper understanding of the Church's teaching on the nature of homosexual inclination, or the value of following the Church's guidance with regard to the nature and the spiritual danger of homosexual acts. I also would note, especially in much of the material accompanying your letter, errors about the marital union, and who may be rightfully entered into the Sacrament of Matrimony.

While all the bishops of the Catholic Church are committed to the acceptance of homosexually-oriented individuals as full members of the community of the Church, at the same time, when faced with the challenge of those who wish the Church to accept the commission of sexual sin, or who continue to urge the Church to bless unions that cannot be acceptable, either in the natural order of things, or according to the teachings of Scripture, the bishops cannot fail to raise the warning that arises from our duty to Christ, to His Church, and especially to those at great risk, would resist the Church on these fundamental teachings. The denial of truth is incompatible with the Gospel, and can only hurt in the quest for personal salvation.

I know you feel disagreement with the teachings of the Church, when the matter is taken to the inevitable conclusion that although the inclination is not sinful, the disordered nature of the inclination can lead to sexual acts that are sinful. I can only reproduce here what we have recently agreed to say, and tell you that I sincerely hope you will reconsider your own opinions, and see that they fall short of the entire truth expressed by the Church. We have not been put on earth to be united with our own wills, but with the will of God. That this requires sacrifice from everyone, is the first fact of our relationship with Christ, and the first step on anyone's path to salvation.

“All ministry to persons with a homosexual inclination must be guided by Church teaching on sexuality. The basis of this ministry, if it is to be effective, has to be a true understanding of the human person and of the place of sexuality in human life. 'Departure from the Church's teaching, or silence about it, in an effort to provide pastoral care is neither caring nor pastoral.' Love and truth go together.” (*Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination*, p.13)

*Fortunate Families* reply to Bishop K (Mar. 2, 2007)

Thank you for your Feb. 5 response to the *Fortunate Families* letter requesting dialogue with Catholic gay and lesbian people, their families, and those who minister with them. Unfortunately, it seems that you missed the point of our letter.

The intent of the newsletter enclosed with our letter was to show that many Catholic gay and lesbian people, their family members, and those who minister with them have a lived experience of truth that is significantly different than what is expressed in *Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination*. That's why dialogue is necessary.

We also were surprised and disappointed in your telling us that our opinions (actually the collective opinions of the many responses to the document that we compiled in our newsletter) “fall short of the entire truth.” As the document itself says, reflecting the doctrine of the pilgrim church described in Lumen Gentium chapter VII): “Such dialogue facilitates an ongoing, interior conversion for ALL parties engaged in the exchange” [our emphasis]. And as Dei Verbum #8 says: “as the centuries succeed one another, the Church constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her.”

We again ask that you dialogue with Catholic gay and lesbian people, their families, and those who minister with them. This seems to us to be a necessary corrective to the failure to do so during the development of the document.

[Bishop K has not replied]

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Bishop L (Feb. 7, 2007)

May God's blessings be with you. Thank you for your letter of January 12, 2007 in which you shared with me your perspectives concerning the recent document of the Bishops' Conference, *Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care*. I regret that you have not found the document pastoral. I believe that the document, developed by the Bishops' Committee on Doctrine, seeks to be pastoral within the context of Catholic Church Teaching. You were also good enough to send me a copy of your newsletter and asked that I read some of the stories and reflections. I have done so and associate myself with the feedback in the final column on page 8 in which the writer's words encourage the pastoral approach of Courage.

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Bishop M (Feb. 26, 2007)

I write to acknowledge your thoughtful letter of January 12, 2007 and to thank you for your communication and concern. I have been in private discussion with any number of local individuals with experience and interest in the issue of homosexual family members and friends here.... Anyone engaged in pastoral ministry would inevitably have that opportunity and that grace. I pray that this year's Lenten journey may be grace filled for all of us.

Thank you for writing.

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Bishop N (Mar. 1, 2007)

I have carefully read your letter concerning your son and the establishment and mission of *Fortunate Families*. I respect your personal circumstances as you have continued to love and embrace your son and his journey.

Catholic teaching is clear on the matter of same sex orientation and sexual relationships. The Church teaches that every human person must be afforded the dignity of being made in the image of God, a dignity that must never be diminished by any human circumstances or condition in this world. Thus, no person can be condemned because of their sexual orientation. At the same time, while people of same-sex orientation must be afforded the dignity in accord with our creation as human beings in God's image, same sex sexual relationships cannot be condoned. They are intrinsically disordered.

As you stated in your letter, *Lumen Gentium* calls as Christians "to the fullness of the Christian life," a fullness dependent on one's relationship with Christ according to the degree that the will of God is active in each Christian's life.

At the same time, the Church teaches that "The conformity of the self-denial of homosexual men and women with the sacrifices of the Lord will constitute for them a source of self-giving which will save them from a way of life which constantly threatens to destroy them." (Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual*

*Persons*, October 1, 1986). Christians who have same sex sexual orientation are called, like all of us, to be chaste according to their state in life.

Let us pray for the strength and courage to follow the will of God for us all as taught by Church and as expressed in the lives of those who have gone before us, “marked with the sign of faith” in the Church’s way of life the cross that leads to eternal life.

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