

## **Canadian ministry to parents of homosexual children**

By Rosemary Ganley

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Three people with a long-standing ministry to parents in the Catholic church with gay sons and lesbian daughters visited our office on August 21.

It was a meeting to remember with humility and admiration.

Mary Ellen and Casey Lopata, co-directors of the Rochester Catholic Gay and Lesbian Family Ministry [Website note: formerly co-directors], came to *CNT* with Toronto social worker John Montague. The Lopatas were on a visit to facilitate a day of reflection for Canadian parents of gays and lesbians.

The Lopatas—parents of four and grandparents of seven [Editor’s note: actually ten!]  
—have graduate degrees in social work and theology [Editor’s note: actually Mary Ellen has a Master of Arts in Liberal Studies with a focus on homosexuality and the family, and Casey has a Master of Science in Career and Human Resource Development and a Master of Divinity], and are members of the National Association of Catholic Diocesan Lesbian and Gay Ministries in the U.S.

They have been working to support parents of homosexual children since 1992.

For John Montague, who organizes an annual day of reflection at Manresa Retreat Centre in Pickering, Ont, which now attracts almost 30 persons from Southern Ontario, the Lopatas were a natural choice for the conference.

They have recently completed a book, colourfully presented in rainbow colours, entitled *Fortunate Families*, which tells the stories of parents who often believe they must choose between their gay child and their church. It shows the struggles parents have in a usually hostile church environment to “come out” as parents of a gay child.

Although this is most often the case, there is also the phenomenon of increasing numbers of Catholic parents, as seen in the parents of gay teen Marc Hall in Oshawa two years ago, affirming their gay children and stating what they need from their parishes: education, affirmation, support and welcome.

“When we began these gatherings 15 years ago”, Mary Ellen says, “there was the necessity for parents to break the silence, to say how isolated they were, how discouraged about official church teaching, to cry together. Now there is a change. Parents want to do something to change the dilemma their children face. The children, of course, are leaving the church in large numbers, no longer willing to suffer the abusive words and statements.”

“There is, happily, another track,” said Casey, “the awakening of parish communities, the acceptance and a desire to serve their homosexual members and their families.”

“Our high point was perhaps in 1997-98, when the American bishops issued a pastoral letter, *Always Our Children*, and in Rochester, at least, Bishop Matthew Clark celebrated a Mass for gay people and encouraged pastoral staff to meet their needs as full members of the church.”

“Today, sadly, there is a chill over all progressive ministries. Even those clerics we call “institution-friendlies” are afraid to speak out. But the conversations continue at the grass roots.”

The day of reflection in Pickering will be “couched in prayer,” said Mary Ellen, “in sharing experience in an atmosphere of trust, and in the Eucharist. Education for parents will include a summary of church teachings, including those on conscience.”

For John Montague, the greatest need now in Canada is for parents, once they are comfortable and well informed, to assume leadership in the movement here. “It is a call,” he says “to help others.”