

When a Child Says, “I’m Gay”

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I was grateful for Fr. Tom’s pastoral sensitivity. He didn’t condemn my son for being gay nor judge me a bad mother. Gently trying to put my fears in a clearer perspective, he suggested I be grateful that Jim did not have a fatal disease. I left his office with no information, no resources, no real support – just a vague comfort in knowing that things could be worse.

It’s been 15 years since our son, Jim, told us he is gay. We hugged him tight and told him we loved him. But fear, grief, confusion, and feelings of isolation assailed us. We prayed constantly, “God, please help us. Tell us what to do.” Questions consumed our waking hours: How did this happen? Why? What will happen to Jim now? What will happen to our family? For months tears were just under the surface – often breaking through. The priest I confided in was kind but not particularly helpful. Many parents of gay sons and lesbian daughters have similar stories: “Father was sympathetic, but simply said, ‘I’m sorry, but I just don’t know how to help you.’” Most Catholic parents do not even approach a pastoral minister, fearing judgment and condemnation of their child. Homosexuality is never addressed in most Catholic parishes – silently giving a loud, clear message that homosexuality is too awful to even talk about.

But it doesn’t have to be that way. In 1976 the U.S. Bishops called for pastoral care for and inclusion of gay and lesbian Catholics. Unfortunately, development of such ministry and recognition of the pastoral needs of parents of gay and lesbian children has been slow. But in October 1997 the U.S. Bishops published *Always Our Children, A Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children and Suggestions for Pastoral Ministers*. In the bishops’ words this document is “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.” (AOC, p. 1) This valuable resource assures parents they are not alone, and that God loves their child no less simply because he or she is homosexual. One parent responded to the document his way: “The Catholic Church has been so silent on homosexuality. The beginning paragraphs of *Always Our Children*...[are like] a love letter, an outward sign that somebody, anybody in the institutional church is listening and has some insight into what we parents know in our hearts and souls about our beloved children.”

They are gay people and parents of gay children in your parish. (Some research shows that one of every four families has a gay or lesbian member.) How can family life ministers help gay or lesbian Catholics and their families? Based on our experience and that of other parents of gay sons and lesbian daughters, we offer these suggestions:

1. Parents need your pastoral help and spiritual guidance. They won’t know your support is available if you don’t break the silence around homosexuality. Let people know you are not uncomfortable with the topic. Don’t be afraid to “use the words ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ in honest and accurate ways.” (AOC, p. 12) Put

copies of *Always Our Children* in the pamphlet rack at church or in a prominent place in your office – and mention it in the Sunday bulletin. This gives people permission to talk about homosexuality and signals that it is safe to talk to you. Such signals must be ongoing, it may take any particular person weeks, months, perhaps even years to be ready to approach you. And remember, there are many parents who don't yet know they have a gay child.

2. Most parents feel isolated and desperately want someone to listen to their story, and hear about their love for their son or daughter. That can be a pastoral minister, but it can also be other parents in the same situation. Encourage the formation of a support group, even if it is only putting two or three parents in touch with each other – always honoring their confidentiality.
3. Parents are often confused and conflicted. They may look to you for information about homosexuality and church teaching. The bishops urge pastoral ministers to “learn more about homosexuality and church teaching so your preaching, teaching, and counseling will be informed and effective.” (AOC, p. 12) What additional training might you or your staff need?
4. Parents fear most that their gay child will be discriminated against. They need to hear church teaching on discrimination and justice. “Nothing in the Bible or in Catholic teaching can be used to justify prejudicial or discriminatory attitudes and behaviors.” (AOC, p. 10)
5. Some parents may need more help than you can give. Know what resources are available. Develop your own if necessary. Develop a list of agencies, community groups and counselors. If your diocese or parish has no ministry, consider networking with others or developing one on your own..

Always Our Children is not just for families with gay children. It is just as important for the “wider church community.” (AOC, p. 3) Parishes foster family life, they are the place where children first find love, understanding, acceptance, support, affirmation and nurturance and where they first learn of God's unconditional love. The faith community reaffirms all those values for the child. But as children discover they are different in this particular way, they may no longer assume that the family is a safe and nurturing place. They may have gotten signals that the church is not a safe or welcoming place either. In every parish there are children like five-year old Mike, who is gay but doesn't know it yet, and seven-year old Mary, who is lesbian but doesn't know it yet. If Mike's mom and dad and Mary's mom and dad are a part of a Christian community that signals it is a supportive place, then 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. They will know that they are not alone. That God's all-embracing love is there to draw on and is manifested in the support of their faith community. They will know that in their child “God's love is revealed.” (AOC, p. 13)