

3 Lesbian Nuns: A Gift to the Church

JEANNINE GRAMICK

New Ways Ministry

More than a Monologue

SEXUAL DIVERSITY AND THE
CATHOLIC CHURCH

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Edited by J. Patrick Hornbeck II

and Michael A. Noriko

Homosexual issues have gained increasing prominence on the Catholic Church's agenda in the last several decades, but when the topic of homosexuality and church ministers is raised, inevitably the conversation focuses on gay priests and male religious. This may be so for a variety of reasons. Gay priests and male religious are certainly much more visible or "out" than lesbian religious sisters. It may be that there are greater numbers of gay priests and brothers than lesbian nuns,¹ but the attention paid to gay priests and brothers may also reflect a sexist culture that is more interested in males than females.

Because so little public attention has been given to the subject of lesbian nuns, I believe they are the most invisible and silent subgroup in the community of lesbian and gay Catholics. This article will summarize the topic as it has surfaced in the public arena and in more closed circles in the United States since the latter part of the twentieth century and then will analyze what significance these events might have for the wider church.

Three books allegedly or peripherally dealing with lesbian nuns appeared in the 1980s. Judith Brown's scholarly book, *Immodest Acts*,² tells the story of Sister Benedetta Carlini, a nun in Presca, northern Italy, in the seventeenth century, who was elected abbess of the Mother of God Convent largely because she claimed to have visions or apparitions from an angel and from Christ. A church investigation brought to light not only her faked stigmata and bogus religious claims but also her erotic behavior, which she forced on another nun in her convent. The book's subtitle, *The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy*, given by the publisher presumably to increase sales, is misleading. The subtitle, as well as the book's content, unfortunately reinforces the false notion that what defines a nun, or any woman, as "lesbian" is sexual activity with another woman. Furthermore, the book's descriptions of erotic behavior confuse the category "lesbian" with "rapist" or "sexual predator."

The *New York Times Book Review* thought the book presented "a vivid picture of convent life and the Roman Catholic Church during the upheavals of the Counter-Reformation."³ While the picture may have been vivid, I like to think it was not typical because it paints a bizarre picture of seventeenth-century convent life. The descriptions certainly do not fit contemporary convent life or present-day lesbian nuns.

Another book, *Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence*,⁴ was published in 1985. Through a successful appearance on the Phil Donahue show and a subsequent national media tour, the book's editors, Rosemary Curb and Nancy Manahan, propelled the book to national attention. Interest in and sale of the book increased when the Catholic hierarchy in Boston influenced the NBC affiliate there to cancel the editors' appearance on a television show. In one interview, the publisher stated that after only three months, the initial run of thirty thousand books had been increased to 150,000. After four printings of the book, the small, lesbian-owned publisher sold the distribution and printing rights, and the book subsequently appeared in Australia, Brazil, England, France, Germany, Holland, Ireland, Italy, and Spain.

Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence consists of brief stories by fifty contributors. The title is somewhat misleading because all but nine of the fifty narratives were contributed by former nuns. Moreover, many of the women did not realize they were lesbian until after they had left convent life. Readers desiring salacious stories of lurid cloistered love affairs were disappointed with the book because relatively few of the articles contain references to physical contact or occasional kissing. Most of the stories describe platonic friendships, many from a feminist point of view.

The work received only two reviews from the Catholic press: from the *National Catholic Reporter* and *Sisters Today*.⁵ Both reviews were less than enthusiastic and essentially claimed the pieces in the book were superficial. Given the brevity of each testimony, such a critique was probably inevitable. The real value of the book lay in drawing public attention to the neglected subject of lesbianism, using "nuns" as the hook. Lesbian leaders acknowledged that many lesbians were inspired to come out as a result of reading the book. Furthermore, it was the first time that lesbianism was discussed openly in the mainstream media of television, radio, and newspapers in the United States and abroad.

A third book, entitled *Homosexuality in the Priesthood and Religious Life*,⁶ presented historical, theological, pastoral, and ministerial dimensions of homosexuality in the clerical and religious life. Within this analysis, and at the heart of it, were seven lesbian sisters who told their stories of the dawning awareness and affirmation of their sexual identity. More substantial in length than the accounts in *Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence*, the chapters were authored by sisters who were still members of religious congregations. In most of these pieces, the authors used pseudonyms because they feared negative reactions from church authorities to their self-disclosure. The sisters tell of the integration of sexuality, celibacy, and spirituality in their lives. Some speak of the feelings of isolation they experienced in their journeys to self-acceptance. One sister said very simply, "I maintain that love is the greatest offering we lesbian religious have to bring to the Church."⁷ In one review, a lesbian sister commented that the essays by the lesbian nuns "mirrored for me examples of faithfulness, authenticity, integrity, and my own goodness and gifts."⁸

As these books were appearing in the public forum, two organizations were serving the needs of lesbian sisters. Both groups, Communication Ministry, Inc. (CMI); and New Ways Ministry, began in 1977. While the mission of CMI was to minister with both male and female religious or clergy, less than 5 percent of the six hundred members it had at its peak were female. Because of the heightened publicity of the clerical sexual abuse crisis in 2002, the Vatican's 2005 instruction from the Congregation for Catholic Education that basically said gay men should not be ordained to the priesthood and the subsequent fear among gay priests and religious, the membership of CMI dramatically declined in the 2000s. In 2009, the group dissolved and invited New Ways Ministry to continue its mission, an invitation that New Ways Ministry accepted.

As part of New Ways Ministry's mission of working for justice and reconciliation of lesbian and gay Catholics with the wider church, it fostered dialogue about lesbian nuns among Catholic institutions. The ministry's staff conducted workshops about lesbian religious for such groups as the Religious Formation Conference and contributed articles to the publications of the National Assembly of Women Religious,⁹ the National Sisters Vocation Conference,¹⁰ and the National Religious Vocation Conference.¹¹

In 1979, New Ways Ministry held its first retreat for lesbian nuns. This was followed by a series of regional workshops for lesbian women religious in 1984-1985 and three conferences for the leadership of women's congregations the following year. Every five years, New Ways Ministry sponsors a weekend symposium, usually drawing about five hundred church leaders, at which there is always a session about lesbian nuns.

Toward the end of the 1980s, small support groups for lesbian nuns appeared in a number of large cities. To foster these groups and to assist isolated sisters, New Ways Ministry published the first edition of a newsletter called *Womanjourney Weavings* in 1990. Over the years, the circulation of the newsletter has remained at about four hundred, with the mailings going to some heterosexual congregational leaders, formation directors, and vocation ministers, as well as to lesbian sisters. One of the most important features of this newsletter, which gives increased visibility to lesbian nuns, is a list of contact sisters in various geographic regions. ~~This enables sisters who feel isolated to meet and have conversations with other lesbian sisters in their geographic area.~~

In 1997, Sister Fran Pasolka IHM formed an online discussion group with approximately ~~seventy-five~~ ^{seventy-five} lesbian sisters subscribing.¹² Before her death in 2009, Sister Tobias Hagan CSJ conducted annual retreats for lesbian sisters for about twenty years. Between 2005 and 2011, New Ways Ministry sponsored annual conferences for lesbian sisters, their congregational leaders, and vocation and formation ministers to support lesbian sisters and to provide education within the Catholic community about the gifts that these women offer the church.

What is the significance of all this private and public discourse about lesbian nuns in the landscape of recent church history? What did these events mean for the Catholic community in general, and how did they affect lesbian nuns in particular? As I reflected on the historical overview I have just been tracing in the context of these questions and on my own involvement in this ministry for the past forty years, three issues emerged. The overriding question that surfaced for women religious during the first twenty years, that is, during the 1970s and 1980s, was sexual identity. During the next twenty years, "coming out" dominated the agenda, both in society and in the church. The topic of celibacy remained prominent in both periods. These three issues become a lens through which we can appreciate the gifts that lesbian sisters offer the church.

Celibacy

Sister Benedetta Carlini, the Italian Renaissance abbess in Judith Brown's work, is called a lesbian nun because of her erotic activity with another nun. In the 1970s and 1980s, many people believed, and some still believe today, that sexual activity defines a lesbian woman. At the time of the first retreat for lesbian nuns in 1979, it was evident that Vatican officials believed this idea. In a communication to the leadership of my religious community, the Congregation for Religious claimed that the published description of the retreat used the word "celibate" as a "slogan." To be lesbian, the congregation's communiqué implied, meant that a woman was sexually active. It is possible that many nuns would not name themselves lesbian because they too hold this idea and do not engage in sexual behavior. With such an activity-based definition, all celibates, whether lesbian or heterosexual, would lack a sexual identity. Both the scientific community and sisters themselves testify that this is obviously not true. Still, there is a lingering but misguided suspicion that lesbian sisters cannot or do not live celibately.

A similar misgiving or hesitation comes from some heterosexual religious community leaders who ask, "Does a lesbian identity affect one's ability to be celibate?" or "Isn't it more difficult for a lesbian sister than a heterosexual sister to live in a community of women?" In my discussions with religious community leaders over the years, questions like these have surfaced. The assumption beneath these questions is the false notion that lesbian women are attracted to all other women. Such universal attraction is no more accurate for lesbian sisters in relation to women than it is for heterosexual women in relation to men. The important or relevant question is: "How do both lesbian and heterosexual sisters live out their celibacy in healthy ways?"

In preparation for writing this essay, I asked a small group of lesbian sisters this question, and all the responses were similar.¹³ Most felt that living a healthy celibate life meant living a healthy *balanced* life. They nurtured themselves with good books and films, sufficient exercise and leisure, rest, play, garden work, and enjoying nature. One artist said she used painting and creative expression to channel her sexual feelings. They believed that a principal aid for a healthy celibate lifestyle was fidelity to a life of prayer. Many spoke about a rich contemplative life, personal soli-

tude, being centered in God, or having an understanding spiritual director.

The obvious charism of a life of celibacy is that it enables a person to dedicate herself to the service of humanity. Without the obligations of spouse and family, she has more time to devote to others. But celibacy offers the community other gifts that may not be as apparent. All the lesbian sisters I know say that a key component of their celibate life is the ability to form close and warm friendships. Most have been blessed with intimate and trusted friends with whom they could share their journeys and natural frustrations, as well as the ups and downs of life along the way. Lesbian sisters can teach us the value of friendship.

In our society, so much emphasis is placed on the physical and sexual aspects of relationships. Television, films, novels, and other mass media are saturated with sex and imply that there can be no intimacy without sex. Physical closeness is often confused with and substituted for the intimacy of spiritual or psychological closeness.

This relationship of intimate friendship is, I believe, the preeminent symbol for the God-human relationship. Unlike the spousal relationship, which has historically been used as the principal icon for the God-human relationship, friendships can flourish without genital involvement; however, no deep spousal relationship can survive without genuine friendship. Friendship is the bedrock. Human companionship or friendship is the true meaning of the creation story. In Genesis 2:18, God says, "It is not good for the human to be alone." Persons need companionship and intimate friendships to quench the thirst of the human spirit. People can live without genital satisfaction, but it is difficult to imagine a psychologically healthy person who can live a fulfilled life without at least one good friend.

In addition to witnessing to the gift of intimate friendship, the celibacy of lesbian nuns reminds us of the personal boundaries that we must establish for ourselves and others. Those in recovery from addiction soon learn that boundaries are important and that setting them is a first step in loving oneself. Finding appropriate boundaries may be difficult because of deep inner wounds from childhood. The child within is terrified of fixing boundaries for fear the other will leave. At the other extreme, the inner child can set up huge boundaries to keep the other from getting too close or too intimate because of fear of being hurt again.

Over the course of life, we learn to put up walls and take them down. If we never become skilled at establishing proper boundaries, we will never define who we really are. Hopefully, if we learn how to manage our boundaries, we can feel self-worth, attain greater self-awareness, and form healthy relationships. The celibacy of well-balanced lesbian sisters is a sign of that need for appropriate personal boundaries.

Their celibacy is also a countercultural witness. In a society where sex is glorified, a celibate lifestyle is considered deviant. Lesbian sisters understand what it means to be considered abnormal or on the edge. They are in good company because Jesus also stood on the edge. Like Jesus, they empathize and connect with those outside the mainstream or dominant culture. Their unusual sexual status enables them to identify with the less-valued members of society.

For example, lesbian sisters have felt the hurt of exclusion or invisibility when heterosexual women comment on the charisma or sex appeal of male movie stars, and they feel unable to voice their comparable feelings toward female celebrities. They have compared such experiences to incidents Hispanic persons have when they are in an environment with predominantly white people and white privilege is unconsciously accessed. Both lesbian sisters and Hispanic people simply feel that they are invisible and their worth is unacknowledged. The outsider sexual status of lesbian sisters thus enables them to relate to and be in solidarity with minority racial groups, the economically poor, religious minorities, and others outside the powerful or dominant group.

Sexual Identity

Conversations about sexual feelings were not even entertained among women religious before the 1970s; however, the sexual revolution, the feminist movement, and the gay rights movement of the 1960s and early 1970s eventually affected women's congregations and the wider church. For the most part, women who entered religious life before the 1960s (who constitute the bulk of women in religious life today) presumed they were heterosexual because that was the assumption of society. Today, of course, there is greater awareness of sexual orientation, but this was not the case before the sexual revolution in the United States.

How sisters came to discover their sexual identity is part of the charism of lesbian religious. They teach us the meaning of sexual identity and how to understand it. Sisters who had buried their sexual feelings and desires with their secular clothes when they donned a traditional habit began to question their sexual identity as they traded their long robes for modern dress. Because they generally lived, worked, and found emotional satisfaction in an all-female environment, some began to wonder if they were lesbian. Others asked, "If I am celibate, how do I know if I am lesbian or heterosexual? If I have had sexual relations with other women, am I lesbian? Are all nuns lesbian because they live with other women? If my emotional and social needs are met primarily by women, am I lesbian?" In short, who is a lesbian nun?

In the 1980s, I spent a great deal of time counseling individual sisters and conducting workshops to clear up the confusion surrounding sexual identity. Data at that time indicated that about one-third of lesbian women had been married, and more than half of these were biological mothers. So engaging in sex with men did not mean that these women were heterosexual. Today, far fewer lesbian women marry heterosexually because of less rigid social expectations, but the point is clear: sexual behavior is neither an essential indicator nor a determinant of sexual identity.

Sisters teach us that living or working in a homosocial environment does not necessarily mean that a person is lesbian or gay. Social relationships are not necessarily sexual. Having one's affective needs for touching, hugging, and passionate kissing met by another woman is not necessarily an indicator of lesbianism, because all human beings need to express affection. One of the hazards of a celibate lifestyle is the risk of losing natural warmth through fear of expressing affection through touch.

The crucial difference between a relationship of friendship and a lesbian relationship is eroticism. Psychological studies tell us that eroticism is not the most important part of a relationship for most women, whether they are heterosexual or lesbian. Women want to feel understood, to share stories and confidences, to enjoy common values, to feel close to another person. This valuing of the emotional over the erotic can lead a sister to conclude falsely that she is lesbian. The emotional component is the stuff of friendship. The erotic component is the necessary factor of a lesbian identity.

Psychology says that sexual identity is characterized by the gender direction and strength of romantic feelings, erotic desires, and sexual fantasies, but this definition sounds very clinical. Lesbian sisters give us an easier and more human way of understanding sexual identity. They encourage us to ask the question, "With whom have I fallen in love?" What defines a nun or any woman as lesbian is some internal sexual longing and desire, and "falling in love" is a good description of this hunger. Lesbian sisters have helped us sort out the pieces of what sexual identity really means.

In addition to educating the wider church about sexual identity, lesbian sisters have mentored others who are learning to embrace their sexuality and trying to accept it as the spiritual and religious gift that it is. This mentoring or spiritual companionship often includes sharing one's own story of discovering sexual identity. One such story, which I summarize here, illustrates these pieces of understanding sexual identity.¹⁴

Sister Mary described her growing awareness of her sexual identity as progressing through three stages. The first period she imaged as a foggy night in which she felt enshrouded in the clouds of the repression of her affective life. She experienced deep personal inadequacy and a continual state of depression. Her fear of relationships and sporadic attractions to other sisters, coupled with loneliness and a conviction that she was not loveable, were all interpreted as indicators of sinfulness, illness, or inadequacy. She was not aware of her sexuality, only of something alarming that she could not fully articulate but that needed to be controlled. She sought counseling and prayed frequently to a God who seemed distant from such a desolate and shameful person.

Gradually, a kind of dawn arose. In this second period, healing began to occur, which she attributed to God's grace, a certain readiness in her, and a fortuitous blend of people and situations. This was a time when the old structures of religious life came tumbling down, which meant that she could no longer keep life at bay. The departure of some very close friends from religious life brought grief and heartache but also unearthed long-hidden feelings of affection, tenderness, and care. The dawn broke upon her as she became aware that she could love and was indeed lovable. The depression passed, and she began to participate earnestly in life, to assume risks, to care about other people, and to allow them to care about her. She felt well and happy. She now sees this period of her life as God's

amazing providence at work, a period when people and events prepared her to accept herself and her sexual identity.

During the turbulent years of this second stage, Mary had three powerful relationships of loving and falling in love that prompted her to think seriously about her sexual identity. Although these experiences were not genital and did not involve lesbian women, she discovered priceless truths about herself. She learned that intimacy meant sharing oneself with another and exposing one's weakness and vulnerability to another. She felt the warmth of holding another person and learned the value of human touch, an embrace, and physical closeness. All this showed her that she was not a disembodied robot and that to be fully human she needed to experience the bodily, as well as the spiritual, part of her nature. Both then and now she has viewed these relationships as treasured gifts and a wellspring of blessings.

The second relationship caused her to wonder more deeply about her sexual identity. With the third relationship she recognized that she was falling in love and named her feelings as erotic, but this was frightening. She described it to the other sister this way: "I know I do love and care about other people in my life, but the way I feel about you seems to have something distinctly different about it, something that has to do with the constancy of your presence to me and the intensity of my feeling for you."¹⁵ In her journal she wrote, "The conversation made me wonder again about the possibility that my own tendencies are more homosexual than heterosexual. I suppose I always wonder how people would react if I said this. Maybe the deeper wonder is in me though—what does or what might the fact mean in terms of my life? What if it is true and I admit and accept it? What are the implications of that for my life here and now?"¹⁶ She began therapy, and after about a year concluded that her sexual identity was lesbian.

During the third period of her religious life, when Mary was in her forties, the fog totally lifted, and the dawn gave way to a bright day. She was elected to the leadership team of her congregation. She felt she had integrated the intense relationships into her life in a healthy way and felt no need to think or talk more about it.

Then one day a sister in her community came to the Leadership Council to say that she wanted the council to know that she was attending a retreat for lesbian and gay Catholics. This information jolted Mary into

realizing that she needed to take steps to deal with her sexual identity with more than intellectual acceptance. She had commented on her feelings in her journal and had acknowledged her sexual identity to herself as a result of therapy, but she had never mentioned it to another person. Now she was confronted with a sister who was attending a retreat with other lesbian and gay Catholics!

Mary reread her journals and letters, studied all kinds of materials about homosexuality, and began therapy again. She said, "It was as if the floodgates were finally opened and all the thoughts, fantasies, and feelings I had never admitted or been able to articulate tumbled out. . . . I began to consider the implications of anything more than a detached intellectual understanding of being lesbian."¹⁷

The therapist helped Mary trust and validate her own experience. Her Leadership Council gave her personal affirmation and enabled her to become more involved with lesbian and gay groups and events.

She felt like the woman in the Gospel who had found her lost coin (Luke 15:8-9). Like the woman who called her neighbors to rejoice with her, Mary needed to tell her friends and some co-workers about her sexual identity. About six months later she attended a retreat for Catholic gay and lesbian religious sponsored by CMI and soon began to attend weekly liturgies with a chapter of Dignity, an organization for lesbian and gay Catholics. Little by little, she told more members of her community that she was lesbian.

For more than a few decades now, Mary has been providing Catholic resources, educating her own community, and talking with others about the goodness of lesbian and gay people and the gifts of a lesbian identity.

Coming Out

In 1999, a staff member of New Ways Ministry conducted an informal survey of ninety-four lesbian sisters from the United States and five other countries about the reality of being a lesbian in religious life.¹⁸ Fewer than 15 percent of the respondents said that they were generally known as an "out" lesbian. As 14 percent of the respondents had completed initial formation in the preceding decade, being fully out as a lesbian sister may depend on the time period of entering religious life. Unfortunately, there was no data analysis of correlation between the time of entrance to reli-

gious life and being out. Whether or not it is the newer members of religious life who tend to be generally out, indications are that more and more sisters, including those who have been in religious life for many decades, are coming out.

This increase in coming out was evident in the annual conferences for lesbian sisters and congregational leaders that New Ways Ministry held between 2005 and 2011. Each program included a sharing of coming-out stories by two lesbian sisters: one who came to realize her lesbianism while in community and another who was aware of her lesbianism before she entered the convent. At one event, a congregational leader was astonished and touched when a tiny, quiet, gray-haired woman in her seventies stood up and told the group that they were the first to know that she had just discovered she was lesbian. The participants felt that her coming out was a gift to them.

One sister described coming out of silence and into speech as a sacrament—an outward sign and a source of grace.¹⁹ She said that “*Out of Silence*,” a phrase that became the title of a book she later wrote, describes what is happening among lesbian sisters more and more often in the twenty-first century. Some lesbian sisters are even providing sample coming-out rituals for others as one way of modeling the sacrament of coming out.²⁰

Lesbian sisters can be role models for those who meet rejection when they come out to family members. These sisters, who consider themselves within the religious family of the institutional church, find it extremely difficult to deal with a church hierarchy that calls them intrinsically disordered. Feeling depressed, resentful, or angry over these labels, some have written respectful letters to bishops or other church officials about the hierarchy’s stance. One sister told me she learned to “just consider the source” of hateful speech. She felt that there is a great deal of shame to be borne by the organizational church but that it is Jesus Christ and Gospel values that anchor her to her religious family, which she said is the entire People of God. For the most part, lesbian sisters resist the hierarchy’s labels by ignoring them and working in supportive and nourishing church environments, such as their religious communities. Many say that the sacraments, the social teachings of the church, and a worldview of openness and the honest search for truth promoted by Vatican II give them hope and reason to stay in their Catholic family.

Except for some lesbian women who entered religious life in the last couple of decades, most lesbian sisters experienced a time when their orientation was hidden from the people with whom they lived and worked. They learned how to keep a deep and personal part of their humanity secret. While priests were taught that the “seal of the confessional” applied to sins confessed during the Sacrament of Reconciliation, it seems that many lesbian sisters applied this kind of seal to their sexual identity.

A priest friend of mine once told me that an eighty-year-old nun came to him for the Sacrament of Reconciliation because he was a visiting priest unknown to her or her community. She confessed the sexual desires she had felt toward women, which she had carried in her heart for her entire adult life, distressed by the fact that she thought these were “sinful” feelings. Not coming out to another person until age eighty can be considered a tragedy, just as all suffering is tragic. No human being can escape suffering or pain, whether emotional, physical, mental, or psychological. This is the suffering that Christ showed us how to endure. “Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass from me. But not my will, but thine be done” (Matt 26:39). The long coming-out process of lesbian sisters, even at age eighty, teaches us to be strong, courageous, and faithful in the face of seemingly unbearable suffering. In hiding from the temple authorities who were pursuing him, Jesus knew the fear of exposure, just as he now understands the worry and apprehension experienced in hiding one’s sexuality. Coming out has been a recurring theme in the *Womanjourney* newsletters for lesbian sisters. In one essay, a sister describes how she navigated the bumpy waters of coming out in a quiet way and came through the process with a renewed enthusiasm about life. Her story is quoted extensively below because it poignantly illustrates how the witness of others can ultimately overcome the fear of coming out.²¹

I was sitting in my room one day, watching the sunshine pouring through the windows and feeling rather gloomy. I was thinking how I had lived in the closet as a lesbian for almost fifty years and how afraid I was of being out. I felt discouraged because I like being a sister and I like being a lesbian and I could not see how I could openly be both. It was not because I wanted to have a partner. It was because, somehow, it didn’t seem as if a person is supposed to be a sister and a lesbian at the same time. I was afraid that being out as a lesbian would lead to my being out of the community, and I felt much pain over that possibility.

When I was younger, knowing I was lesbian had been a secret about the size of a penny inside my pocket. I would take the penny out and think about it once in a while, but mostly I was just as happy to leave it hidden in my pocket. . . . I was afraid of people's reactions. Only after I met lesbian women who were happy and excited about being lesbian did my feelings begin to change. Gradually, my penny became as large as a Susan B. Anthony dollar and, in time, filled every nook and cranny of my thoughts and feelings. There weren't pockets enough to hold it! At this time in my life, I came to a turning point.

As I sat in my room, I thought about going into my bedroom closet and praying. Why not pray in that small closet with two louvered French doors since that was where I was living? Wondering how it would feel to go inside, I squeezed myself into the closet and closed the doors. . . .

I began to notice little cracks of light showing through the louvers of the door. As I looked through the louvers into my room, I could see light flooding my room. I thought, "Why am I here in the dark when I could be out enjoying the sunshine?" I imagined one of the sisters in the house saying through the louvers, "Linda, what are you doing in there? Come on out!"

. . . I felt a profound sadness. My efforts to avoid everything that could identify me as lesbian had led me to be only half known by all but a few people in my life. I thought about the gay and lesbian people I knew who were out and who were risking everything to be themselves. I wanted with all my heart to be like them. I thought, "I don't want to die in the closet."

Praying in the closet that day was the beginning of a steady resolve to take steps to live out and to find ways to integrate being lesbian with being in a religious community.

Linda began to conquer her terror and take some risks. She participated in social, spiritual, and political activities with other lesbian and gay people, introduced herself by name, and shared that she was a sister. Linda gained strength to come out because of her association with and admiration for other lesbian women.

Linda's story confirms some of the findings of a research study of the lives of fifty-seven lesbian sisters.²² The analysis in the study showed that the model for coming out is relational; moreover, progress in sexual development is made through key relationships. Just as Linda gained

strength from key relationships with lesbian and gay people who were out, her coming out as a lesbian sister now gives courage and strength to others to come out.

Linda is fully out. She no longer fears being out. She knows she can be a lesbian and a religious sister at the same time. Like other lesbian sisters, Linda is currently experiencing a contentment and enthusiasm about life that she had not known before.

What Lies Ahead?

If lesbian sisters experience such a sense of freedom and grace in coming out, why do more lesbian nuns not come out? There are certainly many reasons, all centering around the perceived risks involved. Sister Linda said she was afraid that she would be dismissed from her religious community. Sister Mary wondered how people would react. Other lesbian sisters fear losing the ministries they care deeply about. Some are worried they might taint the reputation of their communities because some in society may assume they are sexually active. If more lesbian sisters came out more publicly, there would be opportunities for religious congregations to educate society about lesbianism and celibate commitment. If being lesbian is as good as being heterosexual, why would the community's reputation be harmed? This is the question that the leaders of women's congregations are asking the church to consider.

The Vatican has not commented on the merit of admitting lesbian women to religious life. Not surprisingly, because it is more concerned about males than females, the Vatican has taken a position on admitting gay men to priesthood or religious life, essentially, men who have "deeply rooted" homosexual tendencies should not be accepted into seminaries, but those who have overcome "transitory" homosexual tendencies can.²³ Such a policy treats homosexual identity as shameful and gay persons as reprehensible. Faced with the extension of such a possibility to their communities, the leaders of women's congregations would most likely attempt to engage in dialogue with the Vatican about the intrinsic dignity and worth of a lesbian or gay orientation.

Lesbian women who are already open about their identity have been accepted into many women's congregations for the last several decades. Leaders in these communities have come to understand that a homosex-

nal identity is natural and normal for some people, just as a heterosexual identity is normal and natural for others. They reject the outsider status to which the male hierarchy has relegated lesbian and gay people.

The advocacy position of these leaders was one factor that induced the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) to initiate a doctrinal assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) in 2008.²⁴ LCWR has approximately 1,500 members, who are elected leaders of their religious orders, representing approximately 80 percent of the 57,000 Catholic sisters in the United States. This group has been at the vanguard of social justice and Catholic Church renewal since it began in 1956.

The CDF was concerned about certain areas of dissent, it said, that had been expressed at various LCWR assemblies. For example, Sister Mary Ann Zollmann BVM, in her presidential address at the 2009 LCWR assembly, told the story of conversations she had with some bishops about an alternative ethic to the traditional church position on homosexuality. In her remarks, she said:

As some of the participants made their appeal to ethical directives based in natural law and the intrinsically disordered nature of homosexuality, I found myself tapping into a place of grief and alienation. In my heart's eye, I saw faces of men and women I know whose sexual orientation is gay or lesbian and who live compassionately, justly yearning for a return of compassion and justice on the part of a church they love. I thought of men and women whose passion for wholeness in relationship is lived in deep commitment to life-long same-sex partners. I heard deep in my own being, their struggle to find a home in our church.²⁵

Another mark against the sisters of LCWR was their support of New Ways Ministry. The CDF was displeased that the LCWR officers, in addition to the leadership teams of various sisters' congregations, had written letters supporting New Ways Ministry and its programs. The letters, the CDF said, suggested that the sisters do not agree with the church's traditional teaching on human sexuality.

In making its displeasure public in April 2012, the CDF, in one sense, did an enormous favor for lesbian sisters and the entire church, because the news that the leaders of U.S. nuns are advocates for lesbian and gay

people soon spread across the globe. This public support will, I believe, give further courage to lesbian sisters to come out in greater numbers in the future.

When a lesbian sister overcomes the fear of coming out, she gives the church a myriad of gifts. As described more fully above, she becomes a mentor for others who struggle to acknowledge their sexual identity. She gives the gifts of service to humanity and identification with the marginalized. She is an educator in the truest sense, as she is teaching us the meaning of sexual identity and the value of intimacy, friendship, and personal boundaries. She becomes a role model for dealing with rejection and pain and for finding an enormous passion for life. She is an example that the sense of freedom, peace, and joy she experiences in coming out far outweighs the pain or anguish she felt in the days of being hidden.

While there are other examples of healthy and integrated sexuality, lesbian nuns model this sexual integration in a way not found elsewhere in the church. The gifts that lesbian sisters offer the church are authentic, desirable, and valuable. One sister told me simply and humbly, "I have something of great price to offer." In many ways, lesbian nuns are the church's pearls of great price. They are treasures that have been hidden in our convent fields for centuries but that are now being unearthed. I believe that increased public discussion about lesbian sisters, which seems inevitable, will bring these gifts and many more to further attention and much deserved recognition.

3. Lesbian Nuns: A Gift to the Church

JEANNINE GRAMICK

1. For a discussion of gender differences, including the numbers of gay priests and brothers compared to the numbers of lesbian sisters, see Jeannine Gramick, "Lesbian Nuns: Identity, Affirmation, and Gender Differences," in *Homosexuality in the Priesthood and Religious Life*, ed. Jeannine Gramick (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 219-236.
2. Judith Browa, *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).
3. Frederika Randall, "Divine Visions, Diabolical Obsessions," *New York Times* (January 19, 1986).
4. Rosemary Curb and Nancy Manahan, eds., *Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence* (Tallahassee, Fla.: Naiad, 1985).
5. Jean Turner Balfuss, "Lesbian Silence-Breaking Makes Little Noise," *National Catholic Reporter* (May 17, 1985); reprinted in *Bondings* (Spring-Summer 1985): 7. Judith [no last name given], "Lesbian Nuns: Another Perspective," *Sisters Today* 59, no. 6 (February 1988): 344-348.
6. Gramick, ed., *Homosexuality in the Priesthood and Religious Life*.
7. Mary Louise St. John OSB, "Patent Weavers," in Gramick, ed., *Homosexuality in the Priesthood and Religious Life*, 113.

8. Sister Sharon Marie, "Recommended Reading," *Womanjourney Weavings* 1 (1991): 4.
9. Jeannine Gramick, "Our Lesbian Sisters," *PROBE* 7, no. 6 (March 1978): 5-6; "Gay and Celibate," *PROBE* 9, no. 4 (January 1980): 5-7.
10. Jeannine Gramick, "Cracks in the Convent Closets," *News/Views*, National Sisters Vocation Conference (November-December 1982): 1-7.
11. Jeannine Gramick, "Homosexuality, Religious Life, and Vocation Ministry," *Horizon* 14, no. 2 (Winter 1989): 18-21.
12. To connect with the listerv, e-mail lesters@iname.com.
13. I wish to acknowledge and thank these sisters and the countless lesbian sisters who have provided information and inspiration to me for more than thirty years.
14. Sister Mary, "The Lost Coin," in Gramick, ed., *Homosexuality in the Priesthood and Religious Life*, 59-70.
15. *Ibid.*, 63.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*, 64-65.
18. Cynthia Nordone, "Organization Surveys Lesbian Sisters," *Womanjourney Weavings* 10, no. 1 (2000): 1, 4.
19. Janet Rozzano RSM, *Out of Silence God Has Called Me: A Lesbian Religious Reflects on Her Experience* (Mt. Rainier, Md.: New Ways Ministry, 2008).
20. Gertrud Ayerle MMS, "Ritual: Coming Out-Coming Home," *Womanjourney Weavings* 6 (1996): 3-4.
21. Linda Taylor CSJ, "Prayers from the Closet," *Womanjourney Weavings* 2 (1992): 2, 4.
22. Mary Kay Hunyadi, "The Navigation of Sexual Orientation Issues by Roman Catholic Women in Religious Orders: A Study of the Lives and Psychologies of Lesbian Nuns" (PsyD. diss., the Wright Institute, 2004), chap. 6, http://il.proquest.com/products_uni/dissertations/dsexpress.shtml, no. 3156914.
23. Congregation for Catholic Education, "Instruction for the Criteria for the Discernment of Vocations with Regard to Persons with Homosexual Tendencies in View of Their Admission to the Seminary and to Holy Orders" (November 4, 2005), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20051104_istruzione_en.html.
24. The Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued the results of its "Doctrinal Assessment" of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious on April 18, 2012. <http://www.usccb.org/loader.cfm?csModule=security/getfile&pageid=55544>. An accompanying statement by Cardinal William Levada, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, is available at <http://www.usccb.org/loader.cfm?csModule=security/getfile&pageid=55673>.
25. Mary Ann Zollmann BVM, "Tending the Holy Through the Power of Sisterhood," Presidential Address, Leadership Conference of Women Religious Assembly (August 22, 2003).