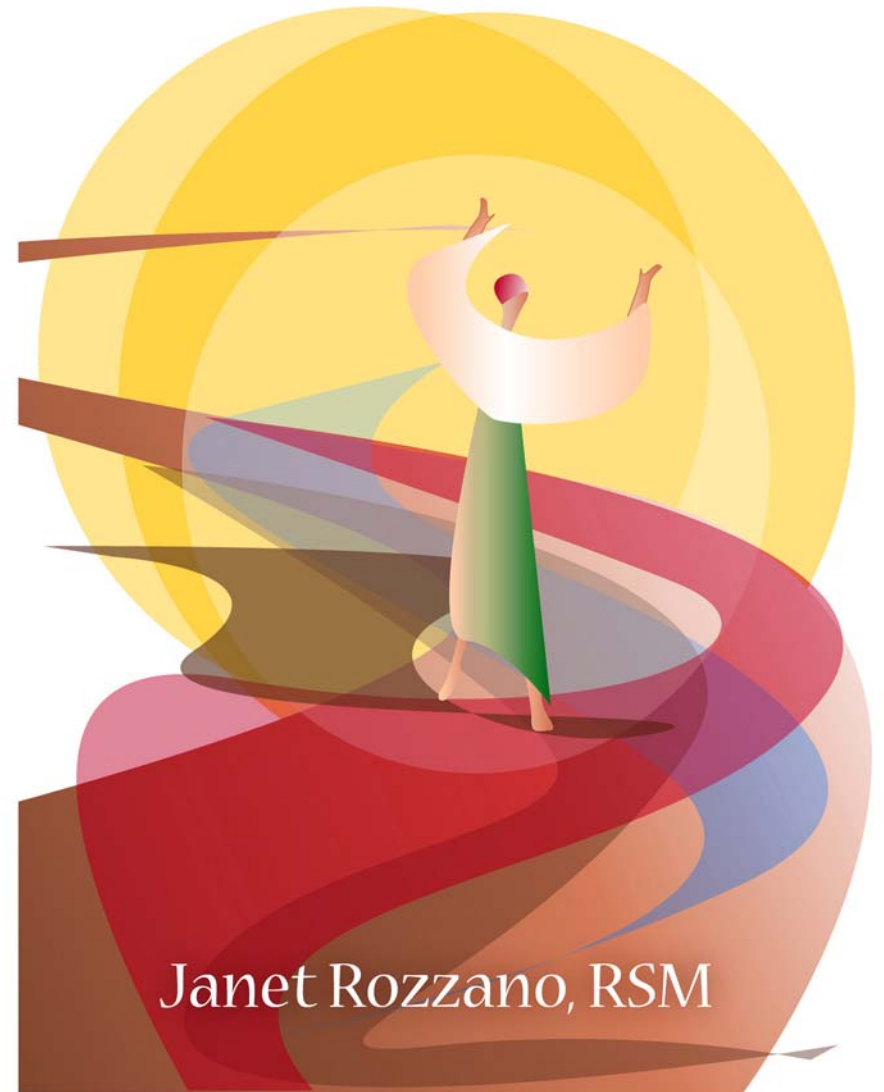


Out of Silence God Has Called Me

A Lesbian Religious Tells Her Story



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positive proclamation of what they, *and* we, are called to be in the world. They write:

- Blessed are they who stand naked and shame free before God and one another.
- Blessed are they who celebrate the rich diversity of all people as spiritual and sexual beings.
- Blessed are they who honor the sacredness of sexuality and the inherent need for intimacy.
- Blessed are they who value and celebrate all life-giving relationships and harmony with all creation.
- Amen, Amen I say to you: Listen to, acknowledge and respect your own and each other's experience and wisdom.
- Amen, Amen I say to you: Strive with all your heart to live lives of emotional honesty.
- Amen, Amen I say to you: Seek out and listen to the stranger within yourself and to the strangers in your midst.
- Amen, Amen I say to you: Be the embodiment of Christ in the world whose table included all—even his betrayer.

May our lesbian sisters move out of silence in this joyful spirit, and may we move with them in love and solidarity.

*Out of Silence
God Has Called Me*

A Lesbian Religious Tells Her Story

by

Janet Rozzano, RSM

to prayer, asking that we might see it as God does, God who sees each of us as a beloved son or daughter. If we are moved to weep for all that is not right in things as they are, we are also called to envision a better future, full of hope for all of our members, and to take steps to make that future a reality. In all the years since Vatican II, women religious have given themselves time and again to this kind of creative work, sometimes in the face of misunderstanding and opposition from others within the Church. I believe our very efforts to heal any wounds caused by unhealthy silence in our own communities will give powerful witness to the importance of this work in the larger Church. In addition, we can provide models of welcome, acceptance and advocacy for lesbian and gay people, and inspire others in the Church to do the same.

I don't know where such prophetic work will lead us individually or as a body, but I am fairly certain it will set us on a path that leads us both to God and to the heart of some of our world's most pressing concerns. When I was preparing these reflections, I wondered whether anything I might say would seem relevant in a world torn apart by terrorism, violence, inequality, and poverty. What do the concerns of lesbian sisters and their communities have to do with the magnitude of these problems? I think the point of intersection in all of these things is at the place where, in the spirit of Jesus, we are called to accept differences, nurture inclusiveness, welcome the stranger, and celebrate the gifts of diversity. Wherever we take steps to break the barriers of fear, exclusion, and oppression, we unleash freedom and energy for love and for God's work in the world.

Proclamation

I want to conclude with a proclamation written in 1995 by some of our gay brothers and lesbian sisters at a conference sponsored by Communication Ministry. It is a vibrant and

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life. So I come out of the silence of the closet, through the call within the silence of prayer. My hope would be that others listening to the depths in their hearts will also be called to come forth and called to support those who take these steps out of their silence.”

Prophetic Vocation

Finally, I suggest that we are called to see this issue of lesbian sisters in our midst as an opportunity to exercise our prophetic vocation, both within our own communities and within the wider Church. In her book *Finding the Treasure*, Sandra Schneiders writes extensively of the prophetic aspect of religious life. To be prophetic is, in the words of Abraham Heschel, “to declare the word of God to the here and now.” Prophecy involves seeing and saying something about the discrepancy between what is and what God’s word calls us to. Sandra points out that prophecy is grounded both in contemplation which puts us in touch with God’s vision of things, and in the experience of marginality which “fosters immediacy with the oppressed.” The prophet speaks out about what is not right, not so much to condemn or to judge as to lament and to weep, as Jesus did over the city of Jerusalem. The prophet also speaks of God’s word or vision for the people, engendering hope for a better future. Finally, the prophet is deeply committed to this mission of “loyal opposition,” willing to give everything, even life itself, for the realization of God’s reign.

As difficult as it may be, I think we are called out of silence regarding our own lesbian members. We are called to acknowledge the discrepancy between our community ideals of sisterhood, respect, and loving acceptance on the one hand, and the closeted and fearful situation of our lesbian women on the other. We do this not to fix blame on one another or to sit in judgment. Rather, together we bring ourselves and this situation

When I was asked to share some ideas on lesbian women in religious life for the 2002 New Ways Ministry Symposium, I tried to think how I might best frame my remarks. The clearest and most apt approach seemed to be to move with the symposium theme: Out of Silence God Has Called Us. At first I was simply relieved to have a workable idea for my reflections. But as I began to think more about my task, this approach seemed quite relevant, both as a description of what is happening and a sign of what needs to continue to happen.

I’ve structured my reflections in the following way. First, I will describe my own journey out of silence and some learnings that have guided that journey for me. Then I will address the wider community of lesbian sisters, their ways of connecting and moving out of silence, and some of their hopes and challenges. After some analysis of the current situation, I will consider where God might be calling us as religious communities. At the outset I want to say that I write almost entirely out of my own experience, enriched by the experience of other lesbian religious who have graciously shared with me over the years. My perspective tends to be more experiential and practical than theoretical or academic. I say this without judgment, simply as a way of helping you understand my point of view.

Let me begin with a brief retelling of my own journey out of silence. It is indeed a challenge to compress twenty years into a few paragraphs and to say something that will give a helpful picture to you. I first came to know and accept my lesbian identity when I was in my 40s and a member of my community’s regional leadership team. The event that precipitated this turning point in my life was having another member of our community come to speak to our team about her lesbian identity and her desire to participate in a retreat for gay and lesbian religious. There followed for me an intense and

frightening several months when I suddenly knew that I, too, was lesbian. For years I had tiptoed around this reality, too afraid to name or explore it. I'd commented on it in my journal but never dreamed of mentioning it to another person.

Now something was changing in my psyche and spirit. The truth of who I really was demanded a hearing. This new understanding of myself seemed like a gift; a lost or hidden part of myself had been found, and, like the woman in the gospel, I needed to call my friends to celebrate with me. Though I am by nature introverted and reticent, I began to tell my friends and the other sisters with whom I worked about my orientation. Six or eight months later in 1983, I attended a retreat for gay and lesbian religious and clergy sponsored by Communication Ministry, and immediately following that, the Dignity national convention in Seattle, Washington. These were both powerful events that served to draw me further out of the silence of my closeted existence.

I began to attend weekly liturgies with the San Francisco Dignity chapter and got to know its members. I agreed to serve on the national board of Communication Ministry, a network for gay and lesbian religious and clergy. Gradually my journey out of silence became more challenging. The San Francisco Dignity chapter was asked to leave the Catholic Church in which it celebrated weekly Eucharist. Following their last liturgy at St. Boniface Church, the group marched in a candlelight procession to the cathedral with a letter for the Archbishop expressing our feelings about this decision. After prayer and discussion with others on our leadership team, I chose to participate in this event. On several other occasions I wrote letters to my bishop or to officials in Rome respectfully sharing with them my perceptions of the difficulties gay and lesbian people often experience in the Church.

Little by little, I told more members of my community about my orientation; it was just too difficult, for example, to keep

Community leaders can set an example by giving time to this work themselves, providing opportunities for their members to do so, suggesting good reading and encouraging sisters to attend classes and workshops in this area. Most ideally, there needs to be an experiential as well as a theoretical aspect to our learning. Sharing in small groups some of our own struggles to live celibacy in life-giving ways might provide a natural place to begin to talk about our own experience and to notice both what is universal and what is unique in each of our stories. Perhaps such conversation may eventually free our lesbian members for a similar sharing.

Jesus in the Gospels

Furthermore, I think the sharing we do around sexual issues also needs to be informed by the words and spirit of Jesus in the Gospels. I am convinced that our lesbian sisters' stories (indeed *all* of our stories) are an untapped source of spiritual richness, and that we would be enlightened and empowered by hearing them. We might benefit, for example, from hearing how lesbian members have coped and often blossomed in such an unfriendly environment. One aspect of their strength is a rich spirituality acquainted with suffering and steeped in the interplay of body and spirit. Many lesbian sisters I know are deeply prayerful women. Their prayer, relationship with God, and understanding of Scripture have often been shaped by their struggle to understand and accept their sexuality as a blessing rather than as a handicap.

These considerations point to an aspect of silence that we need to hold on to even as we seek to move beyond the silence that has negatively affected all of us. A lesbian sister expresses this idea well. She says, "I hear this phrase 'out of silence' as a reference to the silence of my heart at prayer where God speaks to me and calls me forth as someone blessed and sent from this deep place. It is this prayer that keeps balance and peace in my

The Present

First, I think we are called to begin where we are, with our present fears, questions and reticence. Until we are able to put into words what troubles our hearts, biases our thinking, and inhibits our action, we will not be able to move beyond these barriers. We need to name our fears, understand how they have come to be in us, and analyze the cultural and religious climates that continue to entrench them in our consciousness. This is a process that needs to occur both within us as individuals and among us in group settings. The groups in which such conversation occurs must be open, honest, safe, and dedicated to nonjudgmental listening. Most important of all, this reflection and discussion need to be set in the context of faith and prayer. We need to see these issues in the light of the Gospel.

What such reflection and discussion may uncover might be painful, but acknowledging it is the first and necessary step to greater freedom and energy for next steps. What are the painful truths we might uncover? We may glimpse the heterosexism and homophobia that affect the thinking of all of us, lesbian and heterosexual alike. We will begin to see the ways we have subtly or not so subtly excluded some of our own sisters. We might recognize the areas where stereotypes rather than truth have colored our perceptions. We will get a hint of how jokes and judgmental attitudes may have effectively silenced and oppressed some of our members. We might better understand how not speaking about sexual orientation or assuming asexual attitudes has made all of us less whole, and rendered our lesbian sisters invisible in our midst.

Revisit Sexuality

Second, I believe God may be calling us to revisit the aspects of sexuality that we have too often ignored. Formally or informally, we need to address such topics as human sexuality, healthy celibacy, intimacy, friendship, and sexual orientation.

silent in my living community about the gay and lesbian events I was attending fairly regularly. How could I make up a story about the retreat for gay and lesbian religious I was helping to coordinate at our motherhouse? Over the years I participated in support groups of lesbian sisters. I agreed to speak to groups in formation, formation directors, and religious communities about my own experience and my thoughts about lesbian women entering religious life. I spoke at the New Ways Symposium in San Francisco in 1986 and in Chicago in 1992. The circle of people who knew I was lesbian was growing wider, and my ability to keep this a secret became less possible and also less important and desirable.

In 1994 I was given an award by the San Francisco Dignity chapter. The Pax et Bonum awards were given annually to a Dignity chapter member and to members of the Church or civic community whose work furthered justice or understanding of gay and lesbian people in the Church and society. The award was given at a dinner attended by my local community and several other sisters. Afterwards some of the sisters who attended thought that the event should be written up in our community newsletter, and so I was able to write a brief “coming out” testimony to all of my sisters to accompany an article about the awards dinner. By the time this happened, I was comfortable enough with myself that taking this step felt like a natural progression of things. The articles prompted some good discussion with individual sisters, and while I imagine seeing this in print made some sisters uncomfortable, all of my sisters were and have continued to be personally gracious to me.

Several years ago yet another challenge to move out of silence came my way. Within the larger group of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas there had been attempts over the past decade by members of our justice team to bring together Mercy Sisters who are lesbian. In early 2000, the time seemed right to see if there was interest in forming an Institute-wide

network for lesbian members. I was approached to write an article for our Institute newsletter announcing such a network and inviting interested sisters to contact me. The implication was clear in the article that I was a lesbian sister myself. So yet another step out of silence had been made.

Learnings

I'd like to mention here some learnings that have guided my journey out of silence. First of all, I've come to see that there is no one "right way" to be a lesbian religious. Gay and lesbian people are as varied as any other group of people and cannot be reduced to the limited stereotypes often depicted in the media. Lesbian sisters are equally diverse. I find support and solidarity with the lesbian sisters I have come to know, and together with them I celebrate the gift of my sexuality.

Yet it is also clear to me that each of us is called to integrate and live out that gift in unique ways, given our different temperaments, personalities, and talents. Early in my sexual journey, perhaps because this was an area where I found myself quite alone, I realized that there was no "crowd" to fall back on. Rather, I had to go alone to activities and events; I had to make decisions on my own and be willing to live with the consequences of those decisions.

This led to a second learning. I had to find a balance between my often naïve and unrealistic desires to end centuries of tyranny and make the world a better place for people like me, and my need to be true to who I am, with my abilities *and* my limitations. I could not do everything and I had to act prudently even as I took some risks. I could not go it alone like some sort of Superwoman or Lone Ranger.

It was foolhardy to come out, let alone to try to take on the hostility and ignorance of others, without a solid and loving base of support. The need for ongoing discernment in prayer and dialogue with others took on new importance for me. While I

aspect of their lives, but given almost no resources to do so. We want lesbian sisters to feel free to *be* who they are, but we hope they won't *say* much about who they are. We believe that every person is created in God's image and called to share their goodness with others, but we are confronted with a description of our lesbian sister as "objectively disordered" and we struggle to understand these words in a positive way. I am reminded of a refrain in *Cry, The Beloved Country*, Alan Paton's beautiful novel about South Africa: "It is fear that rules the land." The energies of genuine love are stifled in such a climate of fear.

God's Call

I want to turn now to my final topic: To what might God be calling us as women religious in the Church in the first years of this millennium? The documents of Vatican II and long Church tradition urge us to search out God's will in our lives through prayer, reflection on the signs of the times, and assessment of our own gifts and talents. Attempting to discern God's will demands honesty and humility and is best done in the context of community. In preparing this reflection, I invited the responses of lesbian sisters I know and of regional community leaders in my own congregation to this question about where God is calling us. Their comments inform what I say here. I'm aware that I am one fallible person commenting on a complex topic, and I feel a bit like a lone voice in the wilderness, drawing attention to something that strikes many sisters as peripheral, threatening, or at least uncomfortable. Yet I am also aware that we must initiate conversation around this topic if we are ever to move out of the harmful silence that holds all of us captive. The steps I suggest are small, but undertaken with the wholehearted seriousness that has so often characterized the actions of women religious in the past, I believe they would begin to move us beyond the present unhealthy situation in many of our communities.

expression of this is the difficulty heterosexual sisters have in understanding why lesbian sisters want to make their sexual orientation known. Heterosexual sisters ask: “Why do they need to talk about their orientation? Aren’t sexual issues or orientation a personal, private part of our lives, something one might only speak of with a close friend, spiritual director or counselor, especially since women religious are celibate anyway?”

Finally, concern about how greater openness among lesbian members will be perceived by the official Church further clouds this issue and pushes both lesbian sisters and their communities deeper into the realm of fearful silence. The specter of “what if” arises and makes otherwise courageous women hesitate or pull back. What if our lesbian sister mentions her sexual orientation to co-workers in the parish school where she teaches? What if she associates with a gay/lesbian group that has been in trouble with Church authorities? What if she raises questions or expresses any dissent from Church teaching on this issue? What if longtime community supporters, or some members of our own communities, criticize our lesbian members for involvement in ministries to gay and lesbian persons or simply for being more open on this issue? What if our community is taken to task by Church authorities for the activities of a lesbian member? The events of the past several years make these “what ifs” more than mere theoretical concerns, and they present very real challenges, especially to religious community leaders.

I think this unfortunate situation of fearful and unhealthy silence contributes to a subtle, often unconscious, oppression of lesbian women in our communities. While I am convinced that the majority of women religious sincerely want to accept and support their lesbian members, they are often at a loss as to what form acceptance and support might take. As a result, lesbian sisters are expected to be well integrated in a major

felt free to do some things without consultation with my community, there were other moments when it seemed important to make known what I was thinking of doing and ask for advice and response from friends and those in leadership.

Third, I’ve learned that integration of one’s lesbian identity is a major life task. Like other major life tasks, it has its own time frames, its own particular intensity, chaos and confusion. In the process of achieving this integration, we can experience a fair amount of anguish and uncertainty and sometimes cause the same in those around us. On the other hand, each step toward integration brings with it greater self-knowledge, freedom, and joy.

Fourth, I’ve come to devise my own checklist for what I consider to be signs of healthy integration in myself and my lesbian sisters. The following are things I look for:

- A sense of our own goodness as lesbian religious; joy in who we are; freedom from persistent attitudes of shame, self-deprecation and victimhood;
- An ability to communicate about our sexual identity in open and appropriate ways;
- An understanding that we are not defined only by our sexuality; our lives do not revolve around this issue alone;
- An ability to bring our sexual self freely to God in prayer;
- Some humor; not an overbearing seriousness about our lesbian identity;
- Enough personal strength not to be devastated by the homophobia that exists in the Church and society;
- A growing willingness to assist other gay and lesbian people and to address homophobia in formal or informal ways.

Another guiding principle, perhaps the central one, has been the grace to see my sexual orientation as a gift from God. I use

the word “grace” deliberately. Many years ago, when I was first dealing with this issue, still full of fear and self-doubt, I asked, a bit skeptically but with deep desire, that God would give me a sign to help me know I was on the right path. When I opened the Scriptures to the gospel of that day, there were the words of Jesus to his followers: “The gift you have been given, give as a gift” (Matt. 10:8). Through two decades now, though my involvement with gay and lesbian people has waxed and waned at various times, that sense of my sexual orientation as grace and as gift to be shared has remained constant and has both grounded and motivated my ministry in this area.

Lesbian Sisters

I want to consider now the wider group of lesbian sisters, who they are, how they connect and move out of silence, and what they see as their hopes and challenges. Let me begin by saying again that lesbian sisters don’t fit any one mold that you might imagine. I know some lesbian sisters who are golden jubilarians, others who are just coming into religious communities, and still others at various points along the way. They work in ministries of health care, education, pastoral ministry, social work, and congregational leadership. Some lesbian sisters are out to community, co-workers, family and friends, while others share their sexual identity with only a few trusted individuals. Some feel free to speak out about sexual issues; others tend, for a variety of reasons, to remain silent.

It has not been easy for lesbian sisters to find and communicate with one another. They may have connected through New Ways Ministry events or through *WomanJourney Weavings*, an occasional publication of New Ways Ministry for lesbian religious. Some have met at Rockhaven, a retreat center in Missouri that has offered summer retreats for lesbian sisters. Still others have found one another through the newsletter, retreats or convocations of Communication Ministry, Inc., a

Second, issues of sexuality are seldom spoken of among women religious; this contributes significantly to ambiguity and lack of freedom. Because of this, we sometimes give the impression that we are asexual, that we do not have sexual feelings, concerns or challenges in our lives. Or we give the impression that all of us are heterosexual. Even if individual sisters believe that this is not true, groups or their leaders often unwittingly speak, write or act out of this heterosexist perspective. In such an atmosphere, even conversations about more general topics such as friendship or intimacy are not easily initiated, and sisters will hardly feel comfortable when the more threatening question of sexual orientation arises.

Third, the silence within our communities only allows hurtful stereotypes and misconceptions to go unchallenged and uncorrected, ironically among one of the best educated groups of women in our society. As a result, there are at least some sisters in most of our communities who believe such erroneous things as the following:

- Lesbians are always sexually active.
- A lesbian sister always has sex on her mind and is likely to try to proposition other sisters. Therefore, lesbians are not well suited to religious life.
- It is sinful to be lesbian. We don’t want or need them in our community.
- Women who are friends with lesbians are probably lesbian themselves.
- If lesbian sisters are more open, people will think all of us are lesbian.

Fourth, around this issue of lesbian sisters among us, I think heterosexual members of our communities are in a position analogous to that of a dominant culture trying to deal with a minority culture in its midst. They often don’t see the way their own culture operates until it is seen in contrast to the needs or desires of the minority culture. One frequently heard

justice committees to bring up issues of homophobia or discrimination. A high school teacher advocates for gay and lesbian students and describes herself as “outspoken without coming out.” Many sisters are tuned in to the “teachable moments” of every day—the moments in any setting when issues of homosexuality or homophobia come up. These sisters offer their perspective and understanding as a help or a corrective to others.

In this sampling of comments, one thing we notice is the reality of silence in which our lesbian sisters so often exist. Unfortunately, much of that silence is not a desirable or healthy silence, but one filled with the fear, mixed messages, and moral ambiguity that permeate the institutions of society and culture. Certainly within our Church and our religious communities we are not immune to these negative influences. I want to focus here on the situation within women’s religious communities and share some of my perceptions with you.

Women’s Religious Communities

First, I would venture to say that lesbian sisters are perhaps the most silent and hidden subgroup in the gay and lesbian Catholic community. For many women religious this creates the illusion that there really aren’t any, or only a very few, lesbian sisters and that this is not an important issue among us. Not only are the lesbian sisters among us hidden, so also are resources that might help them and other members of our communities. Many leaders, in spite of their desire to assist and support lesbian members, have no idea of available resources geared to the needs of religious women. It is often only by accident or by anguished and isolated searching that lesbian sisters themselves find out about people, groups, or written materials that can answer their questions and help them integrate their sexual orientation.

national network of gay and lesbian religious and clergy. In a few urban areas of the country, lesbian sisters have formed support groups, providing a place of welcome for lesbian sisters in their area. National or diocesan ministries to gay and lesbian people or local Dignity chapters have also been places where lesbian sisters might meet. Some sisters meet in cyberspace through their participation in a list serve for lesbian religious. Beyond these few resources, lesbian sisters can be quite isolated, and it is easy for them to assume that there is no one else like them in their congregation or geographic area.

Hopes and Challenges

I would like to share with you a sampling of some of the hopes and challenges of lesbian sisters. I asked for their ideas in preparing these reflections, and their responses touch on issues that are important for our awareness.

One sister writes, “My first hope is to be accepted and embraced as a lesbian sister by my own sisters.” Another speaks of a similar hope: “I want to be ‘out’ and to be who I am completely, without fear of being judged, ostracized and excluded. I’d like to be able to stand with my gay and lesbian brothers and sisters and be proud of the gifts we...offer to the people of God.” A third sister says, “I hope that our sexual orientation eventually will be as matter-of-fact as the color of our eyes. I’d love to be open and truthful with everyone...to be known as a lesbian sister just so it would be [clear] that we are everywhere and in every walk of life.” Finally, one sister states, “Lesbians are here among us and we as sisters have an obligation to create a community and a home where all feel welcome...to share their story and...the image of God that they are. I wish we could create an environment of acceptance that is real and not simply the latest banner we are walking behind. I wish we could create an environment where women, our sisters, don’t have to feel embarrassed or ashamed of

themselves, where they can bring the truth of who they are to the table.”

In an atmosphere that often dashes these very basic life hopes, lesbian sisters face real challenges. Here are some of the things they note. “I am just beginning to live into my identity as a lesbian and as a woman religious,” one sister writes. “I’ve found it hard to talk about my journey because we as women religious are not comfortable talking about our sexuality. So it is difficult to speak of my awareness of myself as a lesbian if I’ve never heard others speak of their own sexual tensions, desires, and attractions....I think we need to take the risk to open the conversation—even if it is just about sexuality, not homosexuality.” The same sister has a public ministry in her diocese. She lives in silence for fear of being fired by her bishop if he should find out about her lesbian orientation. In spite of this, she feels “called to be more open at some point in the future so that folks can see what a ‘real’ lesbian looks like and how she lives.”

Another sister has grown more cautious in her process of coming out. She says, “I recently realized that I need to be safe. I no longer come out to people when the subject of homosexuality comes up. Subtle oppression happens even among us women religious.” Regarding the challenges presented by her sexual orientation, a sister writes, “I believe that I have been called to move more and more out of silence since I first came out to myself in the early 1970s. Each step is taken with thought and prayer. At appropriate times...I continue to reveal more of who I am with more of my sisters and friends. Personally, I found the early years of my coming out to myself and a few others very painful and frightening. Even without knowing the word, I had a highly developed case of internalized homophobia. I just wanted to die, quite literally, attempting suicide and being hospitalized for depression. Once I could begin to name and claim who I was, this continued to be scary

but not obliterating. My concerns continue to be remaining firm in not internalizing the negative aspects of the Church’s teaching about who I am, and listening to the other teachings that speak of me as ‘child of God,’ as one called to follow Christ in public service and witness within the Church, the People of God.”

Another sister is challenged by her own feelings as she struggles to integrate her sexual identity. She says, “I don’t like feeling different, especially feeling ‘less than.’ I don’t like being referred to as abnormal...and having words like ‘evil’ attached to the person that I am. I don’t like the conflict this causes when I look in the mirror at myself, a lesbian woman, and know myself also as created by God in God’s own image. I don’t like the hiding. I don’t like feeling that I have to protect and always be careful in case someone finds out. And I don’t like myself for feeling afraid and ashamed or that I have done something wrong when I haven’t. What the hiding says to me is that if I can’t be free, even within my religious community, to be able to share some experience or thought, or to pray in a way that might expose me, then that speaks of shame and fear. When all is said and done, I wear the scars that come with the hiding. Perhaps the most significant of these is a deep loneliness. It is a loneliness that comes when it feels like people don’t really know me, and that they can’t ever be allowed to really know me.”

Some sisters face the challenge of ministering in small towns, in areas they perceive to be conservative, or in places where their congregation is well known. Because of these things, seeking support or being more open with anyone about their sexual identity seems threatening and keeps them in silence. Another sister is challenged by the lack of awareness and homophobia among her own sisters. “Sometimes I feel invisible,” she writes.

In spite of these deterrents, sisters find ways to exert their influence. Some work through community structures such as