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My community, the New Hampshire Sisters of Mercy, Region II, has articulated a feminist vision of life based on the gospel and focused on those most in need. Religious women attempt to identify with the poor as one group of persons in need. The fact that many sisters come from families of poor immigrants, laborers, and farmers strengthens this identity with the poor. When religious women listen to the stories of those of us who are physically or mentally disabled in our communities, there is increased awareness of the best way to reach out to other persons in need of healing. When we listen to those among us who acknowledge being lesbian, we can become sensitive to those who are oppressed by society for being gay.

Hope in the spirit of religious communities led me to believe that speaking the truth can change the horrible reality of prejudice toward lesbians, a reality that keeps women silent for fear of losing jobs, friends, and family ties. It was in this belief that speaking my truth could help eradicate antigay prejudice that I contributed an article to the anthology *Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence* (Curb and Manahan 1985). I would like to share some feelings that I experienced before and since the book's publication.

Being part of the groundbreaking experience of *Lesbian Nuns*, while living in an environment of misunderstanding at best and

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hostility at worst, is difficult to describe. The backlash against civil-rights-seeking efforts of gay and lesbian groups makes it even more imperative for people of conscience to speak out.

I suppose I should be grateful (and I am) that I am still allowed to be a member of the New Hampshire Sisters of Mercy. Several attempted and successful purges of sisters have occurred in the United States during the pontificate of John Paul II when sisters have spoken out on controversial or political issues. It is to the credit of our community's leaders, some of whom did not agree with my decision to publish the article, that they did not seek to dismiss me, even though they were criticized by many people both within and outside the community. Our community allows individual sisters to take public stands in one's own name; even though this was an embarrassing public stance because of the bigotry that exists in society, respect for the freedom to take a stand prevailed.

It is a powerful experience to have membership threatened for saying who I am, for expressing in particular language the aspect of myself that is sexual, that is loving, that is spiritual. To say publicly that one is lesbian is different from taking a stand on justice issues. Not a matter of being considered right or wrong, liberal or conservative, naming one's sexual identity is connected with the right to exist. It is saying: "Here I am. You have helped me to grow in strength and confidence all these years. Now I can share this gift of my identity with you. I hope it helps you to understand your gay students, clients, parishioners, relatives, friends, and perhaps yourself."

The message, however, was received by the sisters and others in an atmosphere that is, for the most part, fearful, for our society perceives gay and lesbian persons as a danger to children and as persons whose expressions of love somehow threaten those outside the relationship. I tried to respond to as many letters, calls, and visits from persons in and out of the community as I could. Their feelings ranged from anger to bewilderment to joy. Most of the happy people did not write or call the community leadership, whereas those who were angry did not hesitate to contact them.

A very close friend refused to read the article altogether. Some friends were concerned that they would be vulnerable to accusa-

tions of being lesbian themselves not only because of their association with me, but also because of their being Sisters of Mercy. Other friends of every age and political stripe sent messages of support. Most of my friends who were my age (forty) or younger were the most supportive, encouraging, and even delighted about the article. Many had gay friends and relatives who had told them they were gay. My parents, who are intelligent, caring, faith-filled people, do not always love what I do (for example, publicizing my sexuality), but they always make their love for me very evident. My sister and only sibling has been one of my strongest supporters. During the publicity for the book she went into her workplace and announced that it was indeed *her* sister and wasn't it wonderful! My family did not bring me up to be lesbian; they brought me up to be honest about who I am.

Although individual members of the New Hampshire Sisters of Mercy are spread out all over the world, the majority live and work in New Hampshire and see one another quite often. I have been a member who has served on numerous committees, visited most of our members in their homes, and been elected to assemblies and chapter. While I have been on the "fringe" of some parts of society—having lived in low-income housing, gone to jail for civil disobedience, and demonstrated for peace issues—I have never been a "fringe" member of the Sisters of Mercy. I was not surprised that sisters would be not only some of my severest critics, but also my greatest supporters.

We women religious have struggled to be able to discuss *any* kind of sexuality, especially a type of sexuality that many in society still consider aberrant. Sexuality was often considered a problem to be solved, a subject to be joked about, something too personal to be shared in open discussion. While we broadened some expressions of prayer from "Jesus-and-me" to global consciousness and extended our ministry from "my classroom" to "the future of humankind," discussion of who we are sexually remained as discreet as Kotex in a brown paper bag. It would not matter if there were not so many persons suffering from the misunderstanding and fear of sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular. Although individuals and small groups have shared informal discussions on sex, rarely in a community setting

have we discussed any aspect of sexuality. Only seventeen members attended a 1983 workshop presented by Jeannine Gramick and Bob Nugent on homosexuality, for example, and we have yet to have the community address the complex issues of abortion and birth control, though differing views on these issues are affecting the Roman Catholic church and the faith of women greatly.

North American women religious have attempted to be "one with" those who are economically, ethnically, and racially diverse from the middle-class white heterosexual majority. Gay and lesbian persons have often been in the forefront (discreetly, of course) of movements for equality and peace, often because of our own identification with the experience of those being excluded. Many lesbians and gay men are working for justice issues—for example, peace in Central America. Judith McDaniel expresses beautifully in her book *Sanctuary* (1987) the connections between her being a lesbian and being one with the people of Nicaragua, with whom she risked her life as a Witness for Peace.

The fact that I am still a Sister of Mercy of New Hampshire is due in part to my growth in feminist spirituality in general and in part to the integrity of my community in particular. My use of the word *integrity* here reflects the definition: "the avoidance of deception, expediency, artificiality, or shallowness of any kind; the quality of having spiritual wholeness, an organic unity." Although many sisters and others hailed the article I wrote as "courageous," I wrote very little that was risk taking when all is said and done. I was well aware of the level of publicity the book would receive and wrote honestly, yet cautiously, more cautiously than the women whose books and articles brought me from severe depression to more confident trust in myself, my sisters, family, friends, and God.

From the time I was in college, I was delighted to spend hours and hours in the company of other women. I thought there was something wrong with me, but thought it had something to do with receiving a vocation. How handy it was that I did not crave a man to have and hold. These feelings of certainty and satisfaction rapidly disappeared when I realized that I did want and need affection, but from a different source. Reconciling the religious life with normal sexual feelings was a ten-year process in which I read

voraciously until I read myself into the women's movement. Then there was light.

And then there was the day when two thirteen-year-old girls confronted me on the sidewalk of a battered urban New Hampshire neighborhood. One of them said, "Paula's mother says you're a lezzie. Are you?"

"No," I responded aloud to them, but "Yes," I acknowledged to myself.

Since there was no one I trusted with this information, I retreated to my books. From Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970) to Judith McDaniel's *Sanctuary* (1987) to Janice Raymond's *A Passion for Friends* (1987), women have shared powerfully with us and we, women religious, have reaped the benefits.

Our own experience as women religious and the way we love are tremendous gifts to share with other women not in religious communities. Our struggles, our bonds, our spiritual heritage, and our longtime connections are precious and yearned-for by many women. May the sharing, already begun, continue and deepen.

References

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