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21 Lesbian Nuns: Identity, Affirmation, and Gender Differences

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Joan sat tensely in the folds of the soft brown chair, caressing a Christmas mug of herbal tea more for physical and moral support than to warm her chilled hands and body. Joan appeared to be in her late forties. Over the phone she told me that she was a member of her religious community's committee on women's concerns, which had recently discussed sexuality, including lesbianism. After several meetings, much discussion, extensive private reflection, and prayer, she felt confused, upset, and frightened about her own feelings. How would she know if she was a lesbian? Could we talk?

The following day here was Joan, a confident, professional woman who worked in the health care system but felt vulnerable and fearful of having her suspicions of her own lesbian identity confirmed. Here was Joan with one big question, waiting and longing for a definitive answer: Was she a lesbian or not?

Many times I have searched with women religious who have lived in community for twenty or more years or with young novices or associates aspiring to religious life. I have answered countless letters over the years from nuns desperately seeking information and counsel to grapple with the question "How do I

know if I am gay?" I tried to help Joan as best I could, knowing that in the end only she herself could name her orientation.

As women religious venture into new professional fields and caring ministries, rub shoulders with people from varied walks of life, and become involved in the secular and religious women's movement, our care, concern, and interest in women and their needs can naturally cause us to question our own feelings and motives. We live and work with many dedicated, selfless, loving, dynamic women. Isn't it natural that we would admire and love these women tenderly, convinced that we have been gifted by God with their presence in our lives? We may have been extremely close to a few over the years. Or we may have developed a deep friendship with one woman in particular, even lived with her as companion for many years. As these situations are unfolding in religious life, we ask ourselves if this means that we are in a lesbian relationship.

In this chapter I explore the issue of lesbian identity, affirmation, and gender differences between lesbian nuns and their male counterparts. What does it mean to be a gay woman? How can I know if I am a lesbian? If I am, where and how can I find other lesbian nuns with whom to share insights and experiences? How can we institutionally support our lesbian sisters? Are there significant differences between lesbian nuns and gay priests and brothers in the ways they respond to and cope with their sexuality? If so, what are they?

Sexual Identity

For women religious who entered community life immediately after high school or before the effects of the sixties sexual revolution could be felt in religious formation programs, discerning a lesbian identity may take many years. Unlike males, who usually recognize their same-sex orientation in adolescence or puberty, most lesbians do not come to an awareness of their sexual identity until they are about twenty-one years of age (Gramick 1984; Peplau et al. 1978). Like a typical young woman entering religious life in the forties, fifties, or sixties at age eighteen, a lesbian may have assumed she was heterosexual. The young

novice probably had no knowledge of the phenomenon of homosexuality, little or no sexual interest in the opposite gender, but perhaps some experience of heterosexual dating as part of the socializing process. She may have experienced the usual crushes on older female authority figures whom she admired; but certainly there would have been no open discussion or exploration of sexual feelings during her convent formation. The young novice unconsciously learned to submerge her sexual energy, usually into productive work or the ministry.

I recall my own novitiate formation on the vows in the early sixties. After several months of detailed instruction on the vow and virtue of obedience, a biology professor delivered three lectures to the novitiate class on the mechanics of human reproduction. With a concluding comment by the novice director that there was "nothing forbidden by the vow of chastity that was not already forbidden by the Sixth and Ninth Commandments," we proceeded immediately to learn about the vow of poverty!

Such was our inability in religious life about thirty years ago to deal honestly with sexuality and celibacy issues. There is little wonder, then, that most women religious today do not consciously consider themselves sexual beings. Many nuns, I believe, properly fall into that 14 percent of the U.S. female population that Kinsey and his associates identified as asexual (Kinsey 1953, 473). An asexual person is one who not only has never engaged in genital sex, but also has never experienced any sexual feelings.

The gay liberation and feminist movements of the late sixties and seventies have affected the lives of women religious in the eighties. Called to justice by the 1971 Synod of Bishops, "Justice in the World," U.S. nuns are beginning to recognize the great societal and ecclesiastical injustices that have been perpetrated against the lesbian and gay community and to sympathize with their plight. Influenced by the women's movement principle that all women must be accorded equal rights, U.S. nuns are learning about and working alongside their secular sisters, some of whom erotically love other women. The issue of sexual orientation is being raised and respectfully addressed. As women religious listen to, champion the rights of, cry with, and deeply love other women, they naturally ask themselves, "Am I therefore a lesbian?"

What Lesbianism Is Not

Before we explore the dynamics of what contributes to one's being a lesbian, it is imperative to consider what does not necessarily indicate lesbianism. Because of a strong identification of women religious with the rights of women, because women religious generally live and work in a female environment, and because most women religious have their emotional and social needs met primarily by other women, I have seen a great deal of confusion in the last decade, even among some leaders in the Catholic women's movement who mistakenly conclude that these women are lesbian. To live and work in a homosocial environment does not necessarily mean that one is lesbian or gay. To have human affectional needs for touching, hugging, and dispassionate kissing met by someone of the same gender is not necessarily an indication of homosexuality, nor is it a display of immaturity. One of the hazards of a celibate life-style is the risk of losing natural warmth and affection through fear of touching others.

Lesbianism is not another name for exclusive relationships. Exclusive relationships should be recognized for what they are: relationships that separate two people in an unhealthy way from the rest of the community, one person often being extremely emotionally dependent on the other. Exclusive relationships can occur between two persons of the same or opposite gender, between two homosexually or heterosexually oriented people, or between a homosexual and heterosexual person. A friendship that allows room only for each other is hurtful not only to community life, but also to the persons involved.

Although it is theoretically easy to describe the divisiveness caused by exclusivity in community life, caution must be exercised to avoid labeling and denigrating healthy friendships that need time to grow. One must also be able to identify feelings of jealousy that may subconsciously prompt criticism or resentment of a wholesome relationship, especially if a closer friendship is desired with one or the other individual. As long as human beings struggle for growth and maturity, we will probably see instances of exclusive relationships in our communities. It is important, however, to distinguish lesbian relationships from exclusive ones

and to recognize the practical difference between the two so that healthy lesbian relationships are not mistakenly confused with neurotic dyads.

Lesbianism should be clearly distinguished from same-sex friendships. These have existed and will always exist in religious life. The time of formally condemning "particular friendships" has ceased, and women religious are learning to have a healthy respect for, and to rejoice in, same-sex friendships. A blessing to communities, friendships energize and empower sisters to dedicate their time and talents to serving God's people. To counteract the almost 100 percent professional atmosphere in which most nuns live, same-sex friendships provide a healthy and necessary outlet. It is important to move beyond the faceless masks and formal expression of community toward meaningful adult relationships. Intimate friendships invite sisters to discover who they really are and where their values lie. Providing opportunities to exercise receptivity and independence, close human relationships awaken one's capacity to care and to love.

Simply loving another woman or having a woman as one's closest friend and confidante does not automatically make a woman a lesbian. The fact that many heterosexual women enjoy primary relationships with women is socially acceptable in American culture and in most societies around the world. The crucial difference is that heterosexual women do not face the question of eroticism when they reflect on their female-female relationships. They may have strong emotional ties to their female friends, but their romantic feelings, if any, do not perdure.

Lesbianism is not the situation of living in community with only one other woman. Because of attempts by women religious to minister in far-flung geographical areas where our communities have not been previously established and because of a shift away from large institutional living in favor of smaller, close-knit communities, more and more religious are living as Jesus commissioned his disciples in the gospel: "two by two." Given the social fabric and the ministry goals of women religious as we approach the second millennium, the numbers of such living and/or working teams will only increase. Although some of these couple relationships may be genuine lesbian relationships, it would be a

grave mistake to assume automatically that *all* are. Such couple relationships must be accorded a respect for friendship by other community members, and the women so coupled must be careful and conscious about including other community members in their day-to-day life.

Lesbianism should not be equated with the human need for affection, with same-gender friendships, with exclusive relationships, with living or working couple relationships, although a lesbian can find herself in any of these situations. Lesbian nuns experience the same needs for love, touch, and affection as heterosexual nuns. They treasure deep friendships with heterosexual sisters with whom they are not romantically involved. They struggle, as all nuns do, to free their relationships from suffocating domination, control, and exclusivity. Some have a primary relationship with another woman with whom they may or may not live; others do not feel they have a primary relationship. In short, lesbian nuns are similar to heterosexual nuns in all things, except for the fact that they are lesbian.

Lesbian Identity

What, then, is a lesbian woman? In the nineteenth century and until the second half of the twentieth century, sexual researchers defined sexual orientation behaviorally; that is, an individual's orientation depended on genital contact or having sex. Thus, someone who engaged in genital behavior with another person of his or her own gender, no matter how often or how infrequently, was labeled a homosexual. Someone who had engaged sexually with members of both his or her own and the opposite gender was called a bisexual. And individuals who experienced only opposite-gender sex partners were considered heterosexuals. With such a behaviorally biased definition, virgins lacked sexual orientation! With increasing knowledge about sexuality, the old simplistic concepts had to be abandoned. We now know that sexual orientation is determined by inner psychological components, not outward observable behavior. Sexual orientation is not a cut-and-dried, one-of-three-category designation. Our sexual orientation

lies on a theoretical continuum, at one end of which is the heterosexual or opposite-sex pole; at the other, the homosexual pole. So it is possible to be "more heterosexual" or "more homosexual" than another person. Although two individuals may have orientations on the heterosexual side of the scale, one may be "more heterosexual" than the other. Many, if not most, basically heterosexual persons experience some degree of same-sex feelings, fantasies, desires, or attractions. What determines our location on this orientation rating scale?

Certainly not genital behavior, as was once believed! More than one-third of lesbian women have experienced marriage and heterosexual intercourse and more than one-half of these women are biological mothers (Bell and Weinberg 1978). In 1948 Alfred Kinsey shocked the world with his findings that 37 percent of U.S. males had homosexual experiences, although only 13 percent were constitutional homosexuals. If genital activity does not determine our sexual orientation, what does?

Sexual orientation is determined by the direction and strength of our romantic feelings, erotic desires, and sexual fantasies. The best guide in determining one's orientation is the answer to the question "With whom have I fallen in love?" If, in the course of her life, a woman has mostly fallen in love with other women, then her primary sexual orientation is lesbian.

Of course, a heterosocial environment is ideal for discovering one's true orientation. Most nuns entered religious life before the age of twenty-one, the average age at which most women discover their sexual orientation. At some period of their lives, most nuns have lived, worked, and socialized almost exclusively in the company of women. It is natural that same-sex erotic attractions, which most people have unconsciously buried, would surface at one time or another in the lives of nuns. If, however, these sexual feelings are extremely strong, perdure over long periods of time, and occur frequently with different women in the course of one's religious life, one's sexual identity most likely is primarily lesbian.

For lesbian women and gay men, erotic desire is not the sole factor attracting them to another individual. We often ask married couples, "Why did you fall in love with your spouse?" The same question can be asked of lesbian and gay couples, and similar

responses will be forthcoming. Certainly there is an erotic attraction, the "chemistry is right," but there are other reasons to explain the relationship.

In an attempt to include additional dimensions beyond the physical attraction, Martin and Lyon (1972) state that a lesbian is "a woman whose primary erotic, psychological, emotional, and social interest is in a member of her own sex, even though that interest may not be overtly expressed" (p. 7). Traditionally, the primary psychological, emotional, and social interest of most nuns has been other women. But these elements alone, without the erotic dimension, are not sufficient to define a woman as lesbian. Because of the lack of open discussion of eroticism, romantic or sexual feelings, fantasies, and desires, many nuns may have suppressed or repressed their homosexual and heterosexual erotic instincts. In the absence of an erotic dimension, it is impossible to identify one's sexual orientation.

Erotic attraction, a distinguishing and necessary element in a lesbian identity, is certainly not the most important feature, as the personal testimonies of the lesbian nuns writing in this book demonstrate. Because the quality of the emotional relationship is of primary importance to a lesbian as well as to a heterosexual woman, it may be confusing for many women to determine their true sexual orientation. Because spiritual bonding is central, and physical bonding secondary in a lesbian relationship, many lesbians incorrectly believe that most nuns and feminists are latent lesbians. In the early seventies when the women's movement was embroiled in a controversy about supporting the lesbian cause, Ti-Grace Atkinson coined the term *political lesbian*, which proves useful in explaining the dedication and identification of heterosexual women with lesbian women. A political lesbian is a woman totally committed to all women, even though she lacks any sexual interest in other women.

Whereas erotic interest is a discriminating but subordinate feature of a lesbian orientation, genital behavior is not a necessary one. For this reason, many people, including nuns, mistakenly equate lesbianism with homosexual activity. It is therefore possible that many nuns in our communities would not name themselves

lesbian because they do not engage in same-sex genital behavior.

Many ask, "How can nuns know they are lesbian if they are not homosexually active?" Consider the parallel situation: if nuns do not engage, or have never engaged, in opposite-sex genital behavior, how do they know they are heterosexual? In each case the answer lies in an analysis of physical and erotic feelings and romantic or sexual fantasy life. If a woman's erotic fantasies, feelings, and physical attractions continually and repeatedly center around other women, then she probably is lesbian.

What constitutes homosexuality, then, is a deep, innate erotic attraction for persons of the same gender, which translates into strong sexual desire and possibly action when the "right person" comes along. Lesbian and gay people fall in love just as heterosexual people do; the only difference is that they fall in love with someone of their own gender. Being a lesbian does not mean sexual attraction to every woman, just as a heterosexual woman is not attracted to every man. Being a lesbian does mean powerful erotic attraction to some particular woman in one's life and then making a choice of whether or not to act sexually on those feelings. A woman religious who has faithfully observed her vow of celibacy can still know that she is a lesbian. If she has fallen in love with women over the years, if she resonates with what she reads about lesbianism, if she can identify with some of the experiences lesbians relate, she will begin to suspect that these are good indicators of her sexuality. It is not necessary to have a sexual affair to confirm one's sexual orientation. The process of reflection on one's feelings, fantasies, and romantic desires can provide the foundation for the discovery of one's orientation.

Because of the age of entrance into community life prior to religious renewal, most nuns may be middle-aged or older before they realize their lesbian orientation. The ambiguity, meanwhile, may feel extremely uncomfortable. But there is no immediate need to label oneself or to find the right box. It may take many years for nuns to awaken from their asexual identity to a gradual realization, acknowledgment, and acceptance of their sexual orientation. The best advice during one's journey of sexual exploration is: "Don't be anxious; in due time all things will become clear."

Affirmation of Lesbian Nuns

Once a woman religious has discovered her lesbian orientation, what support does she have? Who affirms her goodness and worth? How can and should we minister to our lesbian sisters in community?

The false assumption that everyone is basically heterosexual is painfully oppressive to lesbian sisters. Retreats or workshops that treat of the vowed life automatically presume the participant's heterosexuality and discuss celibacy and sexuality in the context of heterosexual relationships. Keeping lesbian sisters in their anonymous locked closets, because of fear or prejudice, deprives them of some of the ease, relaxation, and joy that community living is meant to provide. If surrounded by a community that neither knows nor wants to know a significant part of her personal identity, a lesbian nun is forced to seek her primary support group outside her community. Returning home to understanding and loving friends should not be a luxury reserved for a few. A lesbian sister anticipates the day when she, who has faithfully served God and God's people for ten, twenty-five, or more years, can freely share with others her lesbian identity and the deepening of love and dedication that her same-sex friendships have brought. For most sisters that day may be long in coming. At present most lesbian nuns, ever cautious and unwilling to risk total rejection, share personal information with only a trusted and proven friend, and some with no one at all.

Because of social misunderstanding and ecclesial apprehensions about homosexuality, lesbian nuns have been forced to remain virtually unknown among us. Most nuns are totally oblivious of the alienation caused by demeaning jokes and derogatory remarks about lesbian and gay persons. For example, derision of homosexual people voiced by community members during a TV program will undoubtedly be interpreted and internalized as self-rejection by a lesbian sister and result in even further loneliness and isolation.

Religious administrators need to validate the topic institutionally by initiating private, informal discussions on a communitywide basis, by referring positively to the reality of homosexual-

ity in community newsletters or communication bulletins, by sponsoring educational events on sexuality, and by generally creating a climate in which their sisters sense a permission to talk about sexuality. Though flawed in a literary and analytical sense, the book *Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence* (Curb and Manahan 1985) served as a springboard for discussion of lesbianism in many religious congregations. In this alone the book made a momentous and historical contribution. We hope that the present book will be used by religious administrators to stimulate forums for discussion of the topic.

Particularly in the past ten years, the leadership of women's congregations has been increasingly concerned about its lesbian sisters and willing to be of support, though often feeling at a disadvantage concerning how to proceed. This mounting concern may be due to greater awareness of the issue as more lesbian religious are confiding in their leadership. To the credit of women's congregational leadership, the response of most provincials, councilors, presidents, and the like has been overwhelming solicitude and support. Congregational leaders have provided financial resources to enable their lesbian sisters to attend workshops, retreats, or counseling sessions of the sisters' choosing. They have eagerly sought education for themselves and have provided educational experiences for the larger community. For example, in the academic year 1985-86, more than 150 women's congregational leaders attended a New Ways Ministry-sponsored symposium on homosexuality, priesthood, and religious life. As with parents of lesbian and gay persons, religious congregational leaders show more interest in the subject of homosexuality when they discover that some of their own community members are lesbian.

Congregational administrators may subconsciously fear the possibility of more public disclosures of their community member's lesbianism. Although no lesbian nun is presently contemplating an announcement in the *New York Times* or planning TV appearances to declare her orientation, it may be an eventuality with which some congregational leaders will have to deal in the future. Some administrators may be apprehensive about projecting a homosexual image, both internally and externally. Like parents of lesbian daughters and gay sons, they will be asking a similar

version of "What will the neighbors say?" And just as parents of lesbian and gay children must eventually come out to relatives and friends, women's congregations may soon be in the same position of having to decide whether or not they will publicly acknowledge and affirm their lesbian religious family members. Lesbian sisters are asking only for the legitimate right to be open and honest about their sexuality if and when the occasion naturally arises.

Like their lesbian and gay counterparts outside religious life, lesbian nuns need peer-support groups to combat loneliness and isolation and to facilitate the exchange of insights regarding special needs or problems. Lesbian religious need the support of knowing and talking with one another since they develop their sexuality differently from heterosexual religious. Religious administrators can serve as connectors and put lesbian nuns in touch with one another.

In 1984-85 New Ways Ministry coordinated four regional workshops for lesbian nuns in Pittsburgh, San Francisco, Milwaukee, and New Orleans. Although only about fifty nuns attended these workshops, they were important in that they contributed to the nuns' psychological and spiritual growth and formed a basis for a national network of lesbian nuns that has helped reduce their fear, negative self-esteem, and lack of self-acceptance. Some nuns who were confused or unsure of their sexual orientation left the workshops with a greater understanding and appreciation for their own sexuality.

The only existing local support groups for lesbian nuns are located in the San Francisco Bay area, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Boston, and New York City. This serious lack of group support for lesbian nuns illustrates one of the many differences between lesbian nuns and gay priests or brothers. Almost every major U.S. city has monthly support group meetings for gay clergy and male religious. Some congregations of male religious even sponsor gay "caucuses" for their membership. No women's congregation has identified and organized its lesbian members in sufficiently large numbers, even though there are more than twice as many U.S. nuns as priests and brothers.

Gender Differences

There are at least three possible reasons why there are many more support groups for gay priests and brothers than for lesbian nuns. These reasons illustrate some of the gender differences regarding homosexuality in religious life. First, gay priests and religious seem to be much more visible or "out" to one another than are lesbian nuns. This visibility is probably due to male-female socialization in which males learn to be comfortable in more public forums, whereas females are accustomed to small private settings. Such social patterns usually prompt males to organize more readily than females.

Second, the attrition rate for lesbian nuns appears higher than for gay male religious or clergy. Religious women and men, I believe, often make different choices once they establish a close primary relationship with another individual. Religious men have typically been able to integrate a significant relationship into their communitarian and ministerial lives. Perhaps because women usually desire to live with the person of primary relationship and because this arrangement may not always be possible in religious life today, lesbian nuns frequently leave their religious congregations to establish a life-style with a partner. Having witnessed such a scenario many times before, I anguished with a lesbian who sincerely loved her congregation, who cherished every year of her thirty in community, and who stated that in her heart she would always be a sister. Her community leaders deeply respected and valued her and wanted her to remain in religious life. Since there was no viable way to live with the woman she loved, which, she believed, was necessary for her own growth and development, she left the community she considered home and family.

Third, there is probably a greater number of gay priests and brothers than lesbian nuns. In the absence of any reliable scientific data on the incidence of homosexuality among all clergy and religious today, we can rely only on estimates from church workers in lesbian and gay ministry and from church administrators who are dealing with their lesbian or gay members. A 1985 survey by the National Conference of Religious Vocation Directors

revealed that 1 percent of the women and 5 percent of the men admitted during 1980-85 into postulancy or residency programs acknowledged a homosexual orientation. These figures pertain only to those in the early stages of religious formation or clerical vocation: discernment and rely on knowledge actually shared with authorities. The actual numbers and percentages of lesbian and gay religious or clergy may be much higher. These percentages may indicate a higher concentration of homosexual males than females in religious orders.

The patriarchal nature of ecclesial life may help to explain this concentration. Until the Second Vatican Council, male as well as female religious, and even diocesan seminarians, were schooled in a theology of celibacy and religious life that portrayed the relationship between Christ and the individual priest, sister, or brother as a spousal relationship. This wedding imagery depicted the individual as a bride spiritually uniting with Christ, the Bridegroom. This romantic notion of a heavenly marriage to a divine male figure would appeal to heterosexual women and to homosexual men. Similarly, a conception of God as male, reinforced by masculine God language, would be less attractive to lesbians and heterosexual males. In its extreme form such a patriarchal theology could lead to an ecclesial community of gay men around the altar and heterosexual women in the pews.

If indeed there are fewer lesbian nuns than their male counterparts, several questions naturally arise. Are there more lesbian nuns than heterosexual ones? How many lesbian nuns are there? How does the percentage of lesbian nuns in our convents compare with the general population?

In one informal study of women religious in mid-life transition, 144 religious between the ages of thirty and sixty from approximately 15 active and contemplative congregations in the Midwest, South, and West completed questionnaires to ascertain a variety of issues concerning psychological, sexual, and spiritual adjustment. In dealing with their intimacy needs and related sexual desires, 69 percent of the sample, or 99 women religious, engaged in some form of physical or affectional behavior that they considered to be specifically sexual. Of these, 21 percent indicated a female partner,

another 30 percent indicated both female and male partners, and 49 percent indicated a male partner (Murphy 1983, 11, 133).

These data imply that 51 sisters of the sample size of 144 or 35 percent reported sexual experiences with other women, but do not imply that 35 percent of women religious are lesbian or bisexual. There is no reason to suspect that the questionnaires were completed by a random sample of U.S. nuns. In fact, the sample is most likely skewed by including disproportionate numbers of women likely to experiment sexually because they are most interested in interpersonal relationships and personal development in religious life. A more cautious, though still tentative, conclusion could be drawn from an analysis of the numbers and percentages of women religious who experienced sexual intimacy and those who did not. Of those nuns who have dealt with their increased sexual desires and interests during mid-life, approximately one-third act on their heterosexual desires, one-sixth on their lesbian desires, one-fifth on their bisexual desires, and one-third choose to have no sexual involvement at all. These tentative statistics, however, probably do not take into account the vast numbers of women religious who may be frightened of intimacy and sexuality and have subconsciously chosen to avoid confronting these issues in their lives.

According to the conservative estimates, approximately 13 percent of the American male population and 7 percent of the American female population are predominantly or exclusively homosexually oriented (Kinsey et al. 1948; Kinsey et al. 1953). Since these estimates are generally considered reliable by sexual researchers, gay men are twice as numerous as lesbian women in the general population. The number of gay priests and brothers in the United States, however, currently constitutes only half the number of U.S. women religious. If the percentage of homosexually oriented religious and clergy is consistent with general population norms, one would expect the number of lesbian nuns to be approximately the same as the number of gay priests and brothers.

If the membership of Communication Ministry, Inc. (CMI), a national network for gay clergy and religious, is any indication of the relative distribution by gender of homosexually oriented

persons in religious life or priesthood, then the percentages do not match the general population. Of approximately five hundred individuals on the CMI mailing list, not more than fifty are women religious. Unlike the general population, in which gay men outnumber lesbians two to one, gay priests and brothers may outnumber lesbian nuns by ten to one, if the mailing list of CMI serves as a random sample of homosexually oriented clergy and religious. This may mean that the percentage of gay priests and brothers is much higher than 13 percent in the general male population or that the percentage of lesbian nuns is lower than 7 percent in the general female population, or both.

For women religious, however, all discussion and interest in the relative numbers of lesbian nuns contrasted with the number of gay male clergy and religious may be premature and misleading because women religious, as a group, have not adequately addressed personal sexuality issues. As noted above, Kinsey (1948, 656; 1953, 473) identified 14 percent of the American female population as asexual compared to only 1 percent of the American male population. I believe that more than 14 percent of U.S. nuns have not reflected on their sexual identity. When women religious explore sexuality issues and acknowledge that celibates cannot be fully human with repressed sexual feelings, more lesbian sisters may emerge.

Conclusion

Lesbianism is a sexual, erotic, or romantic attraction more toward women than toward men. A lesbian has not merely *loved* women in her life; she has fallen *in* love with them. Although this sexual attraction is a feature of a lesbian orientation that differentiates it from a heterosexual one, it is important secondarily to other aspects of lesbian loving, such as emotional and affectional female bonds, which heterosexual women also experience. Because what is most vital and valued in lesbian relationships is also of primary importance to heterosexual women, it is often confusing for a woman to identify her true sexual orientation. Because lesbian and heterosexual relationship values are so similar, lesbians often have more in common with heterosexual women than with gay

men. There are more elements that unite lesbians with heterosexual women than separate them. This explains why many lesbians feel more committed to the women's movement than to the gay movement.

Many women religious today do not believe they are lesbian because they are not sexually active. Like society in general, they erroneously believe that one cannot be homosexual without overt, genital expression. Compound this myth with the fact that women, unlike men, attach less value or importance to sexual desire or activity in a relationship and greater value to emotional, psychological, and spiritual bonding and one can easily understand how a lesbian nun may not realize her true orientation.

The distinguishing mark of sexual orientation—genital desire—is not the basis of what is most treasured in most females' relationships. This is decidedly different for most males. Unlike females, whose genital organs are internal and whose sexual feelings are more diffused, subtle, and integrated throughout the entire body, males' sexuality is localized in the external genitals. For this biological reason and probably for socialization reasons as well, males may place more importance on sexual desire and specific genital responses. Men may thus be able to determine their sexual orientation more readily because of obvious physical changes during sexual arousal. Women, especially nuns, live with sexual ambiguity longer than men do.

Once women religious realize their lesbian identity, they generally receive support and affirmation from their leadership. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of the general membership of women's communities. Mammoth educational programs in sexuality and in respect for differences are needed before congregations can become safe and nourishing places where lesbian sisters can grow into the freedom of the daughters of God.

I sat and observed Joan, no longer clutching her half-sipped mug of tea and seeming more relaxed than she had been an hour ago. Instead of the Danish pastry that lay untouched on the coffee table, she had eagerly consumed our conversation. Some of her questions had been answered, some were still unresolved, others seemed irrelevant now. As she closed the front gate behind her,

her grateful brown eyes registered a contented peace. She had promised God that she would be more patient with herself until she could fully understand and accept the sexual gifts with which she had been blessed.

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