

Lesbian Sisters in Poland, the U.S., or Anywhere Else

By Jeannine Gramick, SL

“Are there lesbian nuns in the United States?” asked Marta Abramowicz, a psychologist and author of two significant research studies on the social situation of LGB people in Poland.

The question was posed to me at the European Solidarity Center in Gdansk as part of an interview about the Catholic Church, LGBT people, and nuns. In 2016, I was invited by three Polish organizations for a week of public events and TV and radio interviews to talk about the status of the LGBT movement in the U.S. Catholic Church.

Although the 90-minute panel discussion covered a range of topics, the interviewer was fascinated by the subject of nuns, particularly lesbian nuns. Earlier that year she had authored “Nuns Leave Quietly,” a book about the stories of some Polish lesbian nuns. As would be expected in a country still feeling its way as it emerges from totalitarian rule, the book made sensational headlines.

“Lesbian nuns are rarely talked about in the U.S.,” I said. Some lesbian sisters are out publicly. For example, back in the early 1980s, Sister Mary Louise St. John, a Benedictine sister who is now deceased, came out in the *New York Times* and Sister Janet Rozzano, RSM, told her story in a booklet entitled *Out of Silence: God Has Called Me*. A handful of lesbian sisters have spoken publicly at New Ways Ministry symposiums. But mostly lesbian sisters are out in limited circles—to family, friends, and their communities.

This silence or obscurity about lesbian sisters is real also in Poland, according to Sister Jolanta Olech, President of the country’s leadership body of women religious. In researching her book, Marta had met, and came greatly to admire, Sister Jolanta, and arranged an introduction for me. After a welcoming dinner in her convent, Sister Jolanta told me that, in her many decades of administrative positions in religious life, she had met only one lesbian sister. As this was quite different from the experiences portrayed in Abramowicz’s book, Sister Jolanta and Marta, who had become good friends, had some considerable disagreements about Marta’s book.

I told Sister Jolanta about New Ways Ministry’s *Womanjourney Weavings* program, part of which included private weekends to bring lesbian sisters together with congregational leaders and formation and vocation personnel. Since 2005, these weekends had provided significant education to religious community leaders about sexuality and gender through discussions and listening to the stories of lesbian sisters.

As we spoke, I thought of the differences and the similarities about lesbian sisters in our two countries. It seemed to me that awareness among Polish religious in 2016 about sexuality was at a similar point in the 1960s and 1970s in the U.S. Because of political conditions and anxiety about the survival of religious life in Poland, Sister Jolanta explained, formation about sexuality took a back seat.

Yet religious life in the U.S. and in Poland share a common thread. In both countries, lesbian sisters do not yet feel totally free to be themselves, to be proud of who God made them to be.

Increased knowledge about homosexuality through psychology, biology, and other sciences gradually filtered down into mainstream U.S. society and even same-sex marriage became legal and accepted by a majority of Catholics. There has been a sea change of opinion about lesbian and gay “people,” but I do not sense a similar shift about lesbian “nuns.”

I believe this empathy for lesbian sisters has not materialized because there has been no serious public discussion about lesbian nuns. Until this issue is domesticated or normalized in our Church, lesbian sisters in the U.S., Poland, or any other country will not feel free to hold their heads up high and say to the world that they are as good as anyone else.

I am reminded of Albin’s song, “I Am What I Am,” in *La Cage aux Folles*. Like Albin, lesbian sisters are saying, “I don't want praise, I don't want pity... It's my world that I want to take a little pride in. My world, and it's not a place I have to hide in.”

Society and our Church need an extensive and loud public discussion about lesbian sisters. It’s time for a big publicity campaign!