

Appeared in
*Homosexuality in the Priesthood
and Religious Life*,
Edited by Jeannine Gramick
(New York: Crossroad, 1989)
pp. 59-70.

4 The Lost Coin

SISTER MARY

What woman, if she has ten silver pieces and loses one, does not light a lamp and sweep the house in a diligent search until she has retrieved what she lost? And when she finds it, she calls in her friends and neighbors to say, "Rejoice with me! I have found the silver piece I lost."

Luke 15:8-9

I find in myself much of that urgency and joyfulness of the woman in the gospel. In coming to understand and accept my sexual identity, I have experienced the good news in my life in a way so powerful that I find myself saying and doing things I would never have dreamed of saying or doing a few short years ago. It is as if the words of Jesus to the possessed man have been personally spoken to me: "Go home to your people and tell them all that the Lord in his mercy has done for you" (Mark 5:19). What follows is an attempt to do just that, to tell of my own experience, and in the course of that story to touch on some questions and issues about homosexuality in religious life.

At the outset I wish to state a few things about my experience. First, my sexual identity is a part of my whole self. My experience in coming to grips with this identity has impressed me deeply with

the connectedness of all aspects of my life: my relationship with God, others, myself; my ministry and community life; my physical and psychological health; and so on. So, if these pages sound more like a brief autobiography than an essay on lesbian nuns, in a very real sense that is what they are. Second, coming to understand and accept my sexual identity, though not without much pain and darkness, has been and still is for me at once a religious experience; an integrating experience; a joyful, freeing, and opening experience. The positive aspects of this self-discovery far outweigh the negative ones. At this time I am happy to be and to know that I am a lesbian woman. Finally, I consider myself still very much in process, still exploring questions rather than announcing answers.

Where to begin? I am the daughter of an Italian immigrant father and first-generation French mother. I am the third of four children, two boys and two girls. I was raised in a lower-middle-class family, attended Catholic grammar school and an all-girls Catholic high school, and it seems to me I always knew I wanted to be a sister. I was a good student and very active in school activities in high school. I dated a little, just enough not to stand out as odd or different in my circle of girl friends. The summer after high school in 1956 I entered the convent.

To help the reader focus more clearly on what I have to say, I have divided my life in religion into three time periods. The first period covers my first twelve years in the convent, the second spans the next fourteen years, and the third and shortest is from late 1982 until the present.

If I chose an image to describe the first period, which extends from 1956 until 1968, when I was about thirty-one, it would be the image of a foggy night. Though I entered, like most eighteen-year-olds in the 1950s, full of idealism and enthusiasm, things inside me soon seemed to change. Always a responsible and obedient girl, I tried to be a responsible and obedient sister, and fell easily into the expected and formalized patterns of behavior characteristic of "good sisters" in the 1950s. Externally, I went through all the right motions, was professed, taught for a couple of years in elementary school, then moved to secondary school teaching and did fairly well. I was seen as a good, responsible, hardworking sister, though perhaps a bit too shy and retiring.

I did not realize then, or for a long time to come, how much of my still-developing affectivity, sexuality, and sense of myself as an embodied person were being buried and repressed in the process. What I *did* begin to experience was an overwhelming sense of personal inadequacy, a growing lack of belief in my own loveableness and ability to love, a sort of holding back and lack of initiative in my relationships with others, a constant state of depression. Such feelings, coupled with an overwhelming sense of guilt about occasional masturbation, served to confirm my assessment of myself as a sick and sinful person beyond all proportion to reality. My feelings of loneliness, occasional attractions to other sisters, struggles to know how to communicate and relate to different people, to express the love and affection I often felt—by a crazy twist of thinking, all of these things became for me not normal challenges to growth, but signs and symptoms of illness and inadequacy. What I was blindly repressing was demanding to be heard in these symptoms, but I was unable then to deal with it. During this time I do not think I was at all conscious of my sexuality, except as a frightening something that needed to be hidden or somehow controlled. I would never have dreamed then of the possibility of homosexuality in myself or in anyone else in religious life. And so for a long time I tended my symptoms, felt very alone and vaguely different, sought counseling, and prayed to a God who seemed infinitely distant from such a weak and sinful person as I. I was constantly looking and longing for something I could not even articulate then.

The second period of my religious life extends from around 1968 until 1982. It is a time I would image as a kind of dawn. In this period more than in any other, I can now see what I believe is God's wonderful providence, timing, and planning of the events of my life so that I could be gradually readied to accept myself and my sexual identity more fully. There is also at about this time a sense of the mysteriousness of how it all happened. What I *can* say about these years is that gradually healing began to occur in me, healing that was the result of grace, a certain readiness in me, and perhaps the right mix of people and circumstances. Little by little the depression lifted and I began to actively engage in my life, to take risks, to care about people, and, more importantly, to express that care.

As for all of us in the late 1960s and early 1970s, religious life as we had known it was turned upside down. Old structures were dropped; habits were modified; sisters were leaving in large numbers. The world quite literally came crashing in on us. Life during those years became something I could no longer hold at a distance. The loves, the joys, the sorrows, the departures of many sisters, some of them longtime companions or close friends, deeply touched and affected me, and uncovered long-buried feelings of love, tenderness, care, outrage, grief—feelings that for so long had been repressed. Through this “best and worst of times” it gradually dawned on me that I could love and was lovable, that I was capable, that though I might be sinful, that was not the overriding reality about me. I began to feel well again, and happy and excited to be so!

I believe this getting well served to set the stage for me to take the next more direct steps in coming to deal with my sexuality. During these turbulent years, I had three very powerful experiences of loving or falling in love with other women in my community that led me to consider more directly the issue of my sexuality. Through these experiences I learned invaluable truths. I discovered something of what intimacy meant: sharing myself as I was, allowing myself to be vulnerable and weak in the presence of another person. I explored the intimacy of touch: holding another person, embracing, physical closeness. Finally, I discovered the intimacy of loving expression of my feelings, of saying in a hundred different ways, “I love you.” All of these relationships unfolded in the midst of fairly large communities. None of these women was a lesbian; I did not have genital experiences with any of them. Two of them are no longer in my congregation; two of them are still very close friends. Both at the time they occurred and now, I have seen these relationships as wonderfully positive, precious gifts that have been the source of rich blessings for me.

By the second experience, around 1970, when I was thirty-two, I began to wonder about my own sexual orientation. Notice the tentativeness, fear, and inability to name my feelings clearly in a journal entry of this time:

During these past few months I have become involved in what has proved to be a highly significant and frighteningly “feeling filled”

relationship with another sister. At first I was almost in a state of panic about this, fearful of the abnormality it seemed to indicate in me. Perhaps now, with even a little more insight into it, I can see that it isn't that abnormal . . . what is so frightening is facing all the feelings I have here directly rather than changing them into other things . . . as I've tended to do in the past.

It was only during the third experience that I could recognize and describe what I was experiencing as falling in love, as erotic feelings for another woman. By this time the specter of homosexuality (and it was a specter then) was looming larger. Such a deeply felt love, delightful as it was, raised questions and fears in me. I instinctively knew that this love was somehow different and tried at one point to articulate that still vague reality to the woman I loved: “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.” Following a conversation about homosexuality with several sisters, I wrote in my journal:

Last night's conversation left me feeling . . . unsettled. I guess this is because it touched on a vulnerable and, in some ways, still very uncertain spot in me. . . . 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?

At this time I began therapy to try to “integrate” into my life my relationship with the woman I loved. During the course of a year or so in therapy, I concluded that my orientation was homosexual. Another journal entry captures a kind of conviction, though still entirely intellectual, still mixed with fear and ambivalence:

I feel more clearly convinced of my own pretty definite and permanent homosexual orientation. It's funny how my understanding and acceptance of that fact comes, it seems, in such a

gradual way, or with ever new degrees of depth. Maybe that's part of God's goodness to me, a way of revealing about myself only as much as I am able to take at any given moment. A part of the difficulty in accepting this reality in myself is the fact that I believe the things that are said about homosexuality being in some way wrong, pathological, a sign of stunted growth. I believe these things superficially, but way down deep I sense that this is not true, that this has been my orientation all of my life as far as I can consciously remember, and that it is not the result of something wrong in my childhood or development.

November 1982 marks the beginning of the third period of my religious life, and this period extends to the present time. This is a time in which the fog finally clears and the dawn brightens into day for me. In 1981 I was elected to the leadership team of my congregation. By this time some of the intensity of the relationships I have referred to had in fact been integrated. Yes, in my mind I did think I was homosexual, but I felt no need to think or talk about this. It was a reality I had carefully noted in my journal, then tucked it neatly and ironically into the closet!

Then in November of 1982 a sister in our congregation came to talk to the council about her discovery and acceptance of her homosexual orientation. She wanted to attend a retreat sponsored by Dignity, the organization of gay and lesbian Catholics and their supporters, but wanted us to know what she was doing and why. That afternoon as she spoke to us, I felt a little like Saul being knocked off his horse. I knew with blinding clarity that I needed to take the next steps in dealing affectively, not just intellectually, with my own sexual identity.

The next several months were very painful and lonely ones. I realized how shallow my so-called "acceptance" of my homosexuality had been. I engaged in an intense "review of life." I reread journals and letters I had kept for more than twenty years, trying to piece things together, to see connections and patterns, to understand and accept what the words written in my journal really meant. I felt obsessed by sex, a very unsettling way to feel. I read furtively all kinds of materials about homosexuality from scholarly articles to explicit descriptions of lesbian lovemaking. 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 came close to knowing panic, experienced sleeplessness and physical as well as emotional pain, struggling to face the big decisions that arose as I began to consider the implications of anything more than a detached intellectual understanding of being lesbian.

At this time I again began a year of therapy, this time with a woman therapist. Before my first session, I noted in my journal the following as the issues I needed to address:

- To articulate my experience of myself as homosexual to someone who will understand and affirm that experience for me;
- To get some assistance in trusting my own experience to be true;
- To integrate the fact that I am homosexual into my understanding of my own sexuality, my relationship with others, with God;
- To explore with whom and how I share this;
- To learn how to deal with strong sexual feelings in the light of a more conscious acceptance of homosexual orientation;
- To decide how I will deal with the Church's position on homosexuality and other sexual issues;
- To in some sense choose again a celibate lifestyle in the light of this more complete and conscious understanding of my sexuality.

With the encouragement of the therapist, I was able to trust and accept my own experience as true, perhaps the hardest hurdle of all for women who have been taught for so long to distrust themselves and to look to others, usually men, for the validation of their experiences. For the past several years I have continued to explore these issues and have taken steps in a number of directions, learning more by my experience than anything else.

Because I was and still am a member of our congregation's leadership team, some of the first people I came out to were our major superior and the other members of the council. I have found from them personal affirmation, interest, and a willingness to allow me to become gradually more involved with gay and lesbian activities and groups. In addition, coming out to a number of other sisters in my congregation has been a source of affirmation and support for me and a natural opportunity for education about gay and lesbian issues and people. It has been important for me to

come out to people close to me. My reasons touch back to the story of the lost coin. I am happy to have found and embraced this "lost" part of myself, and the natural impulse for me has been to share the good news with people I know and love.

Beyond the circle of close friends, I have also come out to others when the situation seemed right to do so. Having such a broad base of support and understanding enables me to be open and honest about my activities with a wider group of people. This openness is a far healthier situation for them and for me. For the most part, my disclosure has met with acceptance and understanding and not with the backing off or distancing I feared might occur. Coming out, though, is always a risk and the decision to do so requires prudence and good judgment. I know I am not personally ready yet to deal with widespread negative, hostile, or rejecting attitudes, and so I need to continue to be cautious about whom I tell and how.

On the other hand, as I grow more comfortable with who I am, I find myself more willing to take risks and to be involved with people and groups with whom I can both give and receive support, encouragement, and challenge. For more than two years I have belonged to a small support group of six or eight religious, currently five women and three men. We meet approximately every six or eight weeks to share prayer and life experiences and to socialize. Occasionally we help one another discern decisions that concern our gay or lesbian identity.

Sometimes my friends ask me why I need such a group, why I need to talk about myself as a lesbian. I think if we lived in an ideal world where sexuality was well understood and gay people perfectly integrated in church and society, we would not need separate groups. But as good as I might feel personally to have achieved some insight and integration regarding my sexuality, I cannot ignore the fact that I am part of a marginal and misunderstood group and as such I have some special need for association, support, and bonding with other gay and lesbian people. In addition, as I find myself growing more confident of my own identity, and as I listen to the stories of gay and lesbian men and women in and out of religious life, I feel the need to continue to explore how God is leading me to be involved in ministry in this area.

I have gone regularly to Dignity liturgies in my area. Here I feel I have something to give as well as to receive. Since there are very few women in this group, my presence is a support to the other women, as well as a needed feminine presence in the group as a whole. On many occasions I have brought sisters in my community to mass with the Dignity community. For those who are put off by media stereotypes of gay people, this image of a group of worshipping Christians concerned about community, faithfulness, and service can do much to change one-sided attitudes.

I would like to mention some of the things in my experience in a religious community that have been stressful or difficult for me as a lesbian, as well as some things I have found helpful and supportive. Perhaps most difficult or stressful for me is the great silence on the whole topic of homosexuality and more specifically the silence in the face of the reality of a lesbian religious. Throughout my religious life the presumption has been that everyone is heterosexual. This is evidenced in conversation and behavior, in the lessons of formation, in most of the reading materials to which I was exposed. It creates a situation in which there are no models to look to, no acceptable vocabulary with which to talk about one's experience, few quality written materials to refer to, no forum where it can be discussed except in therapy or the confessional. All this effectively leads a religious to conclude that she is either sick, sinful, or very unusual if she even thinks she might be gay. Perhaps we need to take to heart the subtitle of the book *Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence* (Curb and Manahan 1985) and examine whether our silence in this area is unwittingly denying others the right to be freely who they are.

The ignorance and prejudices of people in my community or with whom I associate still have the power to hurt or anger me. This includes people who are repulsed by the very idea of homosexuality, people who will not even use the word *lesbian*, people who even today know nothing but the stereotypes of gay and lesbian people, people who equate the word *gay* with genital activity, people who focus only on the moral issues of being gay, people who make jokes and sarcastic remarks about gay people. I realize that our lack of good education about sexuality, affectivity, and intimacy probably lies at the root of these negative attitudes and fears of gay and lesbian people as well as our fears of our own

natural homosexual feelings. Nevertheless, I often find it difficult to know how to respond to such attitudes. It is still a challenge for me to separate myself from people's questions, comments, and issues regarding homosexuality.

An area of stress for me is in having to lead a "double life," that is, in having to move back and forth between groups who know I am lesbian and those who do not. This is especially the case within my congregation, where I am unable to share some very significant faith and ministry experiences because others do not know I am lesbian. When this happens I feel pained and less free, yet at the same time I know I am not ready for unqualified openness and all that might come with it.

Finally, I think our tendency to be more black and white on issues of sexuality than on most other issues we deal with in religious life causes a tension and unease in me. I realize that sexuality is indeed a delicate issue, but it is one for which centuries of poor formation need to be gently reversed and all of us probably need to learn and grow and to be pastoral in our approach to our own and others' search for greater wholeness and truth. In mentioning all of these things I do not mean to be unduly critical of my own congregation. I believe these difficulties and stresses are experienced to a greater or lesser degree in most congregations today. Actually I think the kind of support and affirmation I have received in my congregation is outstanding. I really do not have personal horror stories to tell. I do, however, think we are at a point in our history when the time is right to begin to change some of the misconceptions we have held for so long.

More positively, what has helped me along this sometimes perilous journey? A significant support was a major superior who, although she may have been initially surprised by my trembling announcement that I was lesbian, was willing to trust and respect me, to allow me to get the help I needed, to continue to support and dialog with me about my coming out and my growing involvement in gay and lesbian activities. Another wonderful support is the fact that I am able to be open with my living community about my gay and lesbian activities and connections, that I am not forced to sneak or lie, that I am free to talk about this part of my life with them. The wide acceptance I have found in my

congregation (more than fifty members know I am lesbian) is a wonderful gift to me and a tribute to the openness of these women.

I have found my congregation willing to take some risks with me, in having gay and lesbian retreats or workshops at our motherhouse, or willing to let me take risks after mutual dialog and discernment about a particular event or situation. I have never felt that those who know about me have "hushed me up" or have been embarrassed by who I am. Indeed it was affirming to be reelected to another term of office by a group of chapter delegates, many of whom knew I was lesbian. In turn, I have felt a great responsibility to continue to move where the Spirit seems to be leading me but to do so within the context of who I am personally and who and where my congregation is.

In this whole process of coming to understand and accept myself as a lesbian religious, I believe I have been powerfully touched by grace. Like the woman who found her lost coin, I am eager to celebrate, not once but many times over, the recovery of the immensely valued lost coin and the action and presence of God in my life. Each new step of my journey is in fact somehow a sacramental reality, a sign that marks and celebrates again the life and wholeness Jesus came to reveal.

There is an incident that reveals concretely the grace of this journey. One Saturday morning in December 1982, at the most painful part of my struggle, I asked God to give me a sign, something the skeptic in me never did and tended to disdain in others. I asked for a clear sign that would not be too subtle for me to recognize. I even suggested to God what the sign might be! I had been reading a part of John Fortunato's book *Embracing the Exile* (1982), in which he speaks about being gay as a gift. "So, God," I suggested, "when I open today's Scriptures, let it be that quote about sharing the gift you've received. Then I will really know that I'm on the right track with all I'm dealing with right now." I really did not know where that quote was in the Gospels, nor had I been looking ahead at the readings for that week. The reading for that day was from chapter 10 of Matthew's Gospel. And there before me was the very sign I had asked for in the words: "The gift you have been given, give as a gift" (Matt. 10:8). How could I doubt

any longer the gift of God given in those words but even more in the depths of my being!

References

Curb, R., and Manahan, N., eds. 1985. *Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence*. Tallahassee: Naiad Press.

Fortunato, J. 1982. *Embracing the Exile: Healing Journeys of Gay Christians*. New York: Seabury Press.