

## **Our Lesbian Sisters: Mentors on the Journey to Wholeness**

Womanjourney Conference  
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By Mary Ann Zollmann, BVM

### ***An Invitation into Revelation***

Extending the invitation to speak at this gathering, Jeannine wrote: "We would like you to share what you have learned from our lesbian sisters. We would also like to hear what your community has done in moving that topic forward. Of course, you can speak about whatever you wish from your experience." I was immediately drawn to say yes as I could feel my soul stirring in the way it does when grace is yearning to do its work.

For me, writing is a revelatory experience. It begins with long spaces of contemplative listening, and then the slow emergence of words. As the words for today took shape, I felt like I was tracking the movement of God leading me and all of us women religious into seeing and being who we have been from the beginning: only and always beloved.

### ***Personal Primordial Certitude***

Invariably when I sink into God, I am drawn into a single touchstone event, an experience of personal primordial certitude that is at once clear and yet always has more to say. I was in my early 50's, beginning ministry as novice director. At that pivotal point in my life, the whole of my past flooded in. I kept thinking that, if my sisters knew who I really was, they would never entrust me with new members. Desiring to face the truth of who I am, I decided to make my first directed retreat.

I entered the retreat apprehensive about what I would uncover. For the first three days I tried to escape the anxiety by incessant walking. The fourth day, I was drawn to my rocking chair, no frantic walking, just quiet sitting. I sat there for seven hours conscious only of being held in the lap of my Mother God. At some point, I heard three words, "I love you." Afterwards, I did not know if I spoke the words to God or God spoke them to me, so in communion were the speaking and the hearing: "I love you."

Resting in a God who turns expectations into surprises, I came face to face with the amazing truth of my being: I am loved by God. Moreover, experiencing how complete and unconditional God's love is for me, I knew God had to love everyone and everything in that same way. It is out of that personal primordial certitude of being loved for love that I reach out without reserve to the marginalized, among them my lesbian and gay, bi-sexual, and transgendered sisters and brothers.

- I was invited by students at a Catholic college to speak on the topic of the Catholic Church and homosexuality. After the presentation a young man came running after me. In the midnight darkness, he poured out his heart. "I love the

Catholic Church. I learned to love it from my father who taught me everything I know about the church. When it became clear to me that I was gay, I told my father and my father rejected me. Because of the identification I had made between my father and my God, I thought it meant that God had rejected me, too. Until now no one officially connected with the Catholic Church has told me that I am loved by God. Tonight because I believe you, I am trusting in God's love."

- I was teaching a course in a lay ministry formation program. I chose a book containing a chapter on the human need for intimacy which included a reflection on the beauty of same-sex relationships. Walking into the class, I was challenged by piercing words: "Sister, I cannot listen to anything you say because you asked us to read a book that honors homosexuality." Into the stunned room, I verbally introduced the presence of a loving God, a welcoming Jesus. Good as those theological words may have been, I recognized even as I spoke how theoretical they sounded, paused, and offered an alternative: "I would imagine that some of you have sisters, brothers, sons or daughters whose sexual orientation is gay or lesbian." It grew very quiet. Then a man spoke: "I want to tell you about my son." A woman stood up, "I would like to tell you about my daughter." As stories tumbled out in a cascade of heart-filled narratives, long-held moral rigidity softened into an ethic of love.
- I was participating in a national meeting with religious and lay leaders of church-affiliated organizations. Our agenda included the topic of sanctioning those deemed outside the official teachings of the church with the refusal of Eucharistic communion. After several comments supporting the action, I spoke. Voicing my belief in Jesus who made room at the table for all, I highlighted inclusive table communion as the hallmark of his life. Within that gospel context, it is a scandal at the very heart of Christianity to use our liturgy of communion as exclusionary sanction for pro-choice politicians, gays and lesbians, creative theologians, advocates of women's ordination. When I concluded, the bishop chairing the meeting called for a break during which a few participants covertly expressed gratitude. The meeting continued without further word on the subject. A year later at the same meeting, in the midst of a similar conversation, the bishop chair asked me to speak my perspective.

### ***Stirrings in the BVM Communal Consciousness***

As the conviction of being loved unconditionally and the commitment to be love inclusively were informing my personal life, there were related stirrings in the communal consciousness of our BVM Community.

- Beginning in the late 90's in response to requests circulating among the membership, community gatherings in different parts of the country focused on sexual development and identity. With content catalyzed by the wisdom of

professional counselors and psychologists and the honest stories of lesbian women religious, we entered, tentatively and cautiously, into exploration of our sexuality. As a testament to the yearning for such processes, some of our sisters who could not participate in person engaged with hours of videotapes from these sessions without ever losing interest. Many commented afterwards, "I wish I had this opportunity years ago."

- Continuing to further the openness engendered by these meetings, leadership responded to an invitation to host a New Ways Ministry workshop in our Motherhouse. The workshop, attended by BVMs, sisters from other area communities, and pastoral service personnel, addressed the multiple factors that inhibit women religious from embracing our sexuality and consequently prevent us from experiencing healthy loving relationships. The workshop drew us into challenging and necessary topics: the inadequacy of a spirituality based the inferiority of body to spirit, the prevalence of a morality centered in disassociation from the body, ways that a life of celibacy can result in an asexual self-consciousness, the power of male-dominated social and ecclesial structures on women's sense of self, and the denigrating effects of an engrained tradition that equates divinity with maleness. Something broke free that day as we let ourselves feel the import of the repression and oppression in our lives as women.
- In the midst of these stirrings, those of us in leadership realized that we needed to learn more about sexual development in general and about the needs and hopes of lesbian sisters. As a leadership team we signed up for the 2009 Womanjourney conference.

### ***The Gift of a Defining Moment***

Then, in the way of the Mystery of Love at work in us we were given the gift of a defining moment. As leadership made public our plans to attend the 2009 Womanjourney conference, one of our members, knowing that she was going as a lesbian sister and that we would all be there together, contacted me; I was serving as President of our congregation at the time. In a profound experience of sisterhood, Diane shared her story from the realization of the truth of her sexual orientation early in life, through the pain of concealing who she is, to the processes that have led her to the discovery of herself as loved and loving. Even recalling that moment, now seven years later, I can feel the reverence that fell between us, two women honoring one another with mutual respect and trust all the way to the heart of our being. At the conclusion of our time together, Diane asked me to share our communication with the two Vice-Presidents. With Diane, the three of us in leadership were plunging into a place of vulnerability together and we knew it as we gathered for the 2009 conference here in Racine.

That conference was significant for us in leadership. We heard the stories of lesbian sisters, of your deep desire for relationships of integrity in the place that matters most:

your own religious community. We heard how liberating it is for you when you risk sharing your lesbian sexual identity and are accepted, even celebrated. And we heard of the deep pain when lesbian sisters, due to real or perceived attitudes, feel you cannot share yourselves not share honestly or have done so and were not understood.

We also realized how critical the role of leadership is in a community's openness to talking about sexuality and in a community's hospitality to lesbian sisters. Leaders, in your very persons—who you are, what you say, how you act—stand as symbols of the community you represent. At that conference the three of us experienced how much it meant for the lesbian sisters and for all gathered there that we had come as a leadership team. We knew it was incumbent upon us to facilitate an environment in our community conducive to discussing sexuality and encouraging our lesbian sisters to come out in community if that is what they chose to do.

We began by sharing our experience in our monthly *Council Notes* to the community. I quote extensively from that communication.

Recently, we experienced a door opening...when we participated in a workshop on "Lesbian Sisters: Understanding, Education and Action." When we stepped through this door, we entered a space of profound story-telling by lesbian sisters—their fears, struggles, joys—in accepting their sexual orientation. In presentations and probing conversations, we learned the importance of being able to share this core of identity with one's sisters, the pain of being unable to do so, and the pervasive silence and homophobia that exist in many communities. "How welcomed would I be?" Will I be accepted for who I am?" On the journey to wholeness, how can I continue to live with integrity while having to keep this hidden self?"

This workshop challenged us and raised significant questions. One of every 10 persons in society has a homosexual orientation, and the percentage is estimated to be higher in religious life. So, it is very likely that we have had and do have sisters who are lesbian.... These stirrings prompt us to invite personal and small group reflection during the coming Lenten season:

- How safe are we with one another to share who we are at a deep level?
- What am I doing to create a safe place for others to share who they are?
- Am I/are we homophobic?
- How can I expand my understanding of sexual identity/orientation?
- How inclusive are we as a community in accepting and welcoming diverse sexual orientation?
- What transformation is our all-inclusive, loving God calling us to in these signs of our times?

Reflecting on our own story, and listening to the sacred story of another, is a deeply transformative experience. Our caring presence to and support of one another is one of the richest gifts we offer one another as sisters in community, and to the wider church and world. This exploration challenges all of us. Let us

cross the threshold and take the first steps on the journey. We welcome your reflections.

Although leadership received no specific responses to our message, we trusted that members were engaging in personal reflection privately and/or in safe places with others.

The following year I was invited to speak at this Womanjourney conference. Entitling my presentation, *Living Naturally and Gracefully in the Image of God*, I traced memories of learning the unconditional nature of God's love around the table in my family of origin. I described how, through my life as teacher and in congregational leadership, I have lived out of the inclusive table communion that has shaped and formed who I am. And, at that same conference, Diane told her story. We stood side by side as we spoke, the words of one not possible without the words of the other.

### ***Congregational Charism, Conduit of Grace***

Grace always afoot in the universe draws us into the fullness of our being in ways attuned to our uniqueness, individually and communally. For us BVMs our awakening to the interrelationship of sexuality, embodiment, and authentic love has unfolded through almost two centuries of living the affection of our foundress, Mary Frances Clarke. We have come to know her through her letters which, though brief, overflow with the liberating experience of God's love. She knows herself as a woman in a mutual real and practical love relationship with God as evidenced in her down to earth chats with God: "My dearest Lord, impressed and surrounded with difficulties, I do not know what to do unless you aid me." Stating unabashedly that "none but our dear Lord knows what or how my heart feels for you," she concludes most of her letters with the words: "Give my love to all the dear sisters, your affectionate Mary Frances Clarke." She delights in her sisters' love for one another: "I am glad to hear you say you love your sisters." She believes that others meet God's love through us, "When you see a very poor and neglected little one look on her with love...and the poor little one will love you, and when she learns to know God will love God for your sake."

In this certitude of God's love Mary Frances Clarke is freed to be who she is as a woman. Encouraging her sisters in their dignity as women she advises them not to keep the Lenten fast as they need to be fully present to their students; takes a stand when the local bishop attempts to divide the school into select students who can pay and the poor who cannot; refuses to let a cleric review her accounts; resists having the sisters staff tables at fairs; and advocates for their adequate living conditions and furnished classrooms. Her yearning for a love that is liberating extends beyond the Iowa prairie as reflected in this prayer of hers: "I implore you to bless and protect my dear Community and all the dear children under our charge. Bless and aid...all laboring for the salvation of souls in the whole world." Our BVM charism and mission, "women who are freed and help others enjoy freedom in God's steadfast love" (*BVM Constitutions*),

flow from her lived conviction: We are women; we are loved. We are women who embody God; in and through us, God's freeing love is accessible to others.

The yearning for full realization of womanhood is in our congregational genes. Over the years this passion has manifested itself in insistence on education for women nationally and internationally; persistence in seeking admission of BVMs into universities; preparation of BVMs for ordination; practice of gender inclusive language in liturgy; speaking out for equality for women in church leadership; advocacy for national budgets that take women's issues seriously; and relentless actions of solidarity against international realities of trafficking and abuse of women in all its forms.

As a community of educators, our commitment to women has been catalyzed and sustained by ongoing theological education. We keep learning the radical importance of re-visioning the relationship between women and the holy claiming our female body as image of God. A community named for Mary, we pursue understandings of Mary's life and by extension the lives of all women in scripture as consistent with the rightful retrieval of women's power and influence. We study the universe story, resonating with its primal truth: the sacred suffuses matter with original God-ness and goodness in an amazing diversity of embodied expression. More and more we grasp the explicit connection between the devaluation of women's bodies, the oppression of women in society and church, and the underlying cause of so much violence in our world.

Thirty-three years ago the centrality of women's issues in our congregation led us to form a Women's Network. Emerging from the membership, its purpose is to provide a way for BVMs, associates and friends to gather annually around topics of particular concern to women. The common focus and repeated attendance by many of the same individuals assure a safe place for reflection, conversation, and action around topics that could be difficult to explore in a larger congregational gathering. Sensing that we were on the edge of moving into deeper attention to sexuality and embodiment, Diane and I offered to plan the 2015 Women's Network meeting. Aware of the gifts of Maco Cassetta, CND, we invited her to open up the meaning of sexuality in a process she entitled, "Re-igniting the Energies of Love: Sexuality and the Cosmos."

In our hours together during that Network gathering we were drawn into the infinite inherent beauty of the universe, the holiness of our sexual energy as an embodiment of the relational power that permeates the universe, the goodness of our feelings of attraction and allurements. We reflected on questions we had not considered before in a BVM communal space: When I think of myself as a sexual person, I....; these days, my body...; for me, closeness with someone of the same sex is...; when I wonder whether others are attracted to me sexually, I.... We recalled significant life experiences which shaped our attitudes, positively and negatively, toward our bodies and affected our capacity to be comfortable with the sexual energies embodied in us. Sharing those experiences with a few others, we could see their formative influence on the women we have become and begin the process of integrating those experiences into the whole and holy women we are.

We were invited to enter a landscape perhaps not previously attended to with such specific personal focus and communal intensity: the terrain of sorting out our own sexual orientation, tapping into our potential homophobia, and honestly considering possible sexual motivators for choosing religious life. And, in the presence of all, Diane shared her story as a lesbian woman. Her witness was powerful; all could hear her freedom coming through as she came out to us her BVM sisters in the full truth of who she is. The room was enveloped in reverent silence and then spontaneously we all stood, broke into song, and grasped each other's hands in an unbreakable circle.

Experiences like that generate an unstoppable energy. Several among us present for that event yearned to explore our own sexual development more deeply and fully. This past September 20 BVMs gathered for a retreat weekend facilitated by Maco, around the theme, "Transforming Sexuality: Discovering the Swan Within." As we gathered the feel of risk and promise was palpable in the room.

Maco's competent sensitive presence and the vulnerable openness of all the women present created a safe and sacred space. Slowly and reflectively we pulled out from our life stories events and experiences that shaped our sexual selves as women and women who are women religious. What we recalled in silence found expression in our honest speaking and was received in attentive listening. We brought to word our early ingrained fears of particular friendships, our confusion as we enjoyed the pleasure of our own bodies, entered into sexual relationships with women and men, and struggled with guilt, shame, and feelings of sinfulness engendered by our Catholic morality.

We gave voice to the pain of having no one to talk with about these experiences, especially no one in our own BVM community, with the added suffering of feeling we were leading lives of duplicity and infidelity. We lifted up traumatic experiences of sexual abuse, lovingly tended to the effects of abuse in our capacity for relationship. We engaged the continuum of sexual identity, addressed fears of self-identifying as lesbian, and moved a little more into the place of claiming and celebrating ourselves for who we are as we are in our sexual being. Seen, heard, understood and loved, we saw our whole story, with every event, as part of our unique journey to wholeness—all normal, all good, all full of grace.

For me personally the experience was immensely powerful, not just because it happened, but because it happened in community. Just under the surface of my life I have been yearning to share with my sisters more of the fullness of who I am, experiences that I have hidden for fear of what those I love most would think. That weekend those experiences arose, were disclosed, and in the process integrated into who I am as a BVM. I felt the liberation that comes from being known and loved by God alive in my sisters and the freedom to enjoy loving that comes with it. Often, just before I fall asleep at night, our foundress Mary Frances Clarke comes close. The night our retreat ended the woman whose charismatic hallmark is affection drew near and smiled.

## ***Joy in God's Love***

Coming now to the conclusion of what I can say at this point in an ongoing life-long journey, I experience only joy in how the events narrated here have plummeted me, and I dare say, so many of us women religious, more fully into God's love. Even before I began to put this experience into words, I titled this presentation, "Our Lesbian Sisters: Mentors on the Journey to Wholeness."

As evidenced in the story told here, you, our lesbian sisters, are bearers of prophetic wholeness. You are prophetesses who speak the truth of God's word, God's total unconditional love, with courage. You take us women religious to the edge of how we have previously experienced the meaning of God's love and walk with us into new and uncharted places. Through you we are drawn back into that place of original desire, where divine energy takes up residence in all matter of creation. In a magnetic attraction between the holy energies embodied in us and the holy energy embodied in all that is, God allures us to God's self. What we feel in our embodied mind, heart, and spirit is sensual, sexual; it is of God; it is good.

Through you, we have been carried to that core place where God's love flares forth in amazing diversity. Each of us, originating in God and released by God, enhances universal beauty in a dazzling array of embodied epiphany. Because of your courage, we are inspired to unlock and unfold our own sexual history, to see our sexual orientation as the wondrous expression of divine energy in us. In your company, we are more able to integrate the whole of our lives into our self-understanding as women who are beautiful, good, and loved.

Thanks to you, we live our sisterhood in community more deeply and truly. Our bond of union in community is our love for one another and for others. You have modeled for us what it means to trust your sisters, to risk sharing the most intimate part of yourselves, the way your life intersects with God's love. Inspired by you, more of us are engaging in that kind of communication with one another. Communing in this way, we love one another more authentically. And the love that breaks through among us breaks out beyond us in our individual and communal love for all people and creation.

I end this presentation where I began: back in that rocking chair on my first directed retreat. Twenty years ago I knew irrevocably the truth of God's unconditional love. I also knew that the revelation, clear as it was, had yet more to say. This reflection tells the story of the "more." It is my story of what Derek Walcott describes in his poem as "Love after Love."

The time will come  
when, with elation,  
you will greet yourself arriving  
At your own door, in your own mirror,  
and each will smile at the other's welcome,



and say, sit here. Eat.  
You will love again the stranger who was your self.  
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart  
to itself, to the stranger who has loved you  
all your life, whom you ignored  
for another, who knows you by heart.  
Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,  
the photographs, the desperate notes,  
peel your own image from the mirror.  
Sit. Feast on your life.

Mentored into greater wholeness in companionship with my lesbian sisters, I am  
savoring the feast with joy!