



In the past few days, there has been some confusion regarding a retreat that is taking place within our Archdiocese. With so many inquiring if this retreat is directly connected to the Archdiocese, which it is not, I felt obligated to clarify.

As the Church teaches, all individuals with same-sex attraction must be treated with understanding, compassion and support. A retreat for “gay priests, brothers and deacons” has been scheduled at the Siena Center in Racine, operated by the Racine Dominican Sisters, sponsored by New Ways Ministries and led by Fr. Bryan Massingale, a priest of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, who now teaches at Fordham University in New York. This event is not in line with Catholic Church teaching and is in no way connected to or endorsed by the archdiocese, and New Ways Ministry is not a Catholic organization.

In addition, no permission was requested for such a retreat to be held in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee (not that my permission is needed, nor would I have given it) and I was not contacted – even out of courtesy or respect – by the Dominican Sisters, the leadership of the Siena Center, or by Fr. Massingale.

That is disappointing, because it can be confusing for some people as to whether someone with same sex attraction can minister as a priest. As priests who have made a promise and commitment to celibacy, each are called to live holy, chaste lives.

Fr. Nathan Reesman, pastor of St. Frances Cabrini Parish and Saint Mary’s Immaculate Conception Parish in West Bend, has written a very good article about this topic, noting that, “The best pastoral experience of the Church, as well as our consistent teachings about who we are as persons, point to the reality that it is never healthy or holy to act out on same-sex desires, even in the realm of the merely emotional. Much healthier and holier is the attitude that our sexual desires are simply one facet of who we are as persons, rather than making them our dominant marker of identity with a term such as “gay.”

Fr. Reesman is the Chaplain for Courage and EnCourage for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. Courage is an apostolate of the Catholic Church that ministers to men and women who experience same sex attraction. His article is on the reverse of this letter.

A number of people have called and written to me asking me “to stop this retreat.” I cannot prevent the Sisters from running this retreat, nor Fr. Massingale from leading it. What I can do, to the best of my ability, is share the truth about the teachings of the Church with the Faithful People of God.

Most Reverend Jerome E. ListECKi
Archbishop of Milwaukee

The Mixed Message of a Retreat for Gay Priests in Milwaukee



Registrations are now being taken for the upcoming October retreat for “gay priests, brothers, and deacons,” that is sponsored by New Ways Ministry, which is to be held in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, and will be led by a brother Archdiocesan priest, Father Bryan Massingale.

I wish to briefly speak as a member of the Catholic clergy, and as someone with pastoral experience in helping men and women who experience same sex attraction, about the problematic nature of this upcoming retreat. I also wish to offer what I think are needed words of honest contrition to our lay faithful, as well as an invitation to my brother clergy in our era of ever-present scandal.

The Incoherence of the Term “Gay Priest”

It is of great importance for the Church to maintain our precise language of distinction between the experience by men and women of same-sex desires on the one hand, as opposed to the term “gay” on the other hand. More often than not, a man or woman who chooses to define himself or herself as “gay” is doing so because they believe their same-sex inclination is their defining attribute, and this belief allows them to live a lifestyle that normalizes same-sex relationships, either on a merely emotional level or also on the physical level. “Gay” generally means a mirroring of the behaviors, lifestyles, and patterns of heterosexual persons, only doing so with a person of the same sex.

The best pastoral experience of the Church, as well as our consistent teachings about who we are as persons, point to the reality that it is never healthy or holy to act out on same-sex desires, even in the realm of the merely emotional. Much healthier and holier is the attitude that our sexual desires are simply one facet of who we are as persons, rather than making them our dominant marker of identity with a term such as “gay.”

When it comes to ordained Catholic clergy, the same important distinction between “gay” and “experiencing same sex desires” becomes even more crucial because of the unique sacramental identity that is involved.

It is one thing for an ordained man to deal with same sex desires, doing so in a similar way that any man (ordained or not) has to learn to integrate his sexuality in a healthy and holy manner, consistent with the Gospel call to joyful respect of human dignity. It is a very different thing for a priest to identify himself as, and see himself chiefly through the lens of “gay,” because doing so means that this one facet of his personhood has the potential to become the dominant way that he, as a priest, will shape his behaviors and lifestyle, over and above his sacramental identity.

For the ordained Catholic priest, or for a man in vows, or also for a deacon, our most fundamental identity is our union with Christ’s own ministerial mission. Nothing else can get in the way of that core reality. “Gay priest” is a confusing and incoherent label that is heavily laden with potentially dangerous internal contradictions as well as external mixed messages for our Catholic faithful.

I do not know the nature of the content that is going to be offered during this upcoming retreat for “gay priests, brothers, and deacons.” However, I find it difficult to believe that any retreat that intentionally adopts such a misleading title, a title that is also in contradiction to our most effective pastoral practices, can bear positive fruit.

The healthiest sexually integrated persons that I know who experience same sex attraction, reject the title of “gay” because they believe it is a diminishment of their full personhood, and of their joyful freedom in the grace of Jesus Christ. Any cleric who experiences same sex attraction is wise to adopt the same reluctance about such an unhelpful, and limiting term. Any retreat that encourages the embrace of that term is in great danger of operating in opposition to the authentic message of the Gospel.

Very Poor Timing

The consistent message of the Scriptures and of the teachings of the Church has been a rejection of any attempts to normalize active same-sex behavior. This teaching of ours was as counter-cultural in the ancient world as it has again become today, and therefore we should not be surprised if we face opposition for it.

Nerves are understandably very raw at the moment on the part of the lay faithful about any behavior on the part of the clergy that even remotely hints of a normalization of what is immoral, protective, secretive, or abusive. Once more we are living through the horror of frequent headlines about the deviant behaviors by male clergy with younger men or boys, and we are coming to grips with the sad truth that for all of the house cleaning we were supposed to have been doing in the last two decades, there were some glaring and intentional omissions. At the moment, no one wants to hear about our clergy being anything other than eager to embrace the fullness of the Church’s teachings on sexuality and joyful celibacy.

In such a delicate climate, one wonders why any extra attention should be drawn to the reality of same sex attraction in the Catholic clergy under such an ambiguous title as this upcoming retreat for “gay” priests. To the laity in the pews who want iron-clad assurances that our priests will be faithful, and that their children will be protected, the idea of a retreat such as this is mortifying. The message it sends, quite frankly, is that the clergy are incapable of getting our act together.

An Apology and An Invitation

As an ordained priest I want to offer an apology for our ongoing inability, as the clergy, to fully grasp the reality of the scandal that not only our immoral behaviors, but also our incoherent teachings on these important topics has caused. I hope my brothers in the clergy will be open to considering the possibility of undertaking public and meaningful acts of penance and prayers of reparation in order to bring about the holy clerical witness that is so badly needed in our era. We would be wise if we ourselves embraced the same remedies for sinful behaviors that we prescribe to everyone else.

Fr. Nathan