

Sept 18 meeting held with Courage team members from diocese of Calgary

By Kiply Lukan Yaworski

After a number of inquiries about Catholic ministry for persons who struggle with same-sex attraction, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Saskatoon invited the Courage team from the diocese of Calgary to facilitate a dialogue on pastoral care for the homosexual person.

Ministry leaders from parishes, Catholic schools and various ministries in the diocese gathered at St. Paul's Cathedral Sept 18 to hear from Michael Soentgerath and Norline Johnson, who direct the Courage Apostolate in the diocese of Calgary.

Courage and Encourage is a ministry of support for those struggling with same-sex attraction who are trying to live in accordance with the Catholic Church's teaching on homosexuality. The Encourage Apostolate offers support to parents, siblings, children and other relatives and friends of those struggling with same-sex attraction.

The Director of Pastoral Care / Chaplaincy Services for the diocese of Calgary, Michael Soentgerath approached Bishop Fred Henry in 2006 about providing pastoral care for homosexual persons in the diocese. Norline Johnson, who also coordinates Project Rachel for the Calgary diocese, joined Michael in providing the Courage and Encourage outreach.

Michael described it as a "ministry of presence" that affirms the goodness and lovability of the human person. The ministry focuses on helping individuals come to terms with the truth of who they are, loved by God, and like all of us, called to live the virtue of chastity.

Norline and Michael both expressed the need for dialogue in our communities, recognizing that we all are sinners in need of God's love and healing. "I definitely think there will only be fruit when we have the courage to invite the homosexual person to the table and when we come to listen to their story," said Michael. "As long as our mindset is about 'them' verses 'us' we are operating out of a paradigm of Church, which in the eyes of God, I don't think exists. There is no 'them' and 'us' – there is only us."

Compassionate listening, patience, and confidentiality are all vital in offering the ministry, said Norline. As with all pastoral ministry, outreach can be complicated when there are other issues involved, including addictions and a history of strained family relationships, she noted.

There is a great need to educate people to tackle the misunderstandings and myths about same-sex attraction, Norline added. "For a lot of people, when they hear that someone has a same-gender attraction, they treat them differently, they think differently of them, as if their whole persona changes. It's still the same person," she said.

“It’s really about treating people with dignity and respect; with compassion. These are children of God. They need to know that they are loved, and accepted, and cared for. And that doesn’t mean treating them differently than we treat everybody else,” Norline said.

Michael highlighted that the virtue of chastity is a challenge for all of us, not just the person struggling with same-sex attraction. Growth in this area affords much patience and perseverance for all, he said.

The group heard about ongoing efforts of Catholic school districts to be inclusive communities and to provide a safe place for every student. Michael said that parishes should also be embracing that challenge.

“I would hope and pray that every homosexual Catholic could see their parish as a safe place of refuge, an oasis,” he said. “Where they walk in the door, are affirmed and people offer their hand at the sign of peace; where they know they can stand in the pew and people know who they are, and communicate that they are loved members of the Mystical Body of Christ.”

During the discussion, those in attendance shared experiences, joys and challenges in providing pastoral care to those with same sex attraction.

Leah Perrault, Director of Pastoral Services for the diocese of Saskatoon, expressed appreciation for the dialogue, noting that while there are no current plans for the establishment of a formal ministry office, the conversation is another step in providing pastoral care across the diocese.

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