

## Week 4

# “Let’s *Talk* About Homosexuality”

## Part 2: Putting a Human Face on Homosexuality

### *Segment 2: Gay and Lesbian Persons Talk of Their Experiences*

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*“I challenge us – individually and as a community – to listen to the stories of gay and lesbian...people. For, perhaps more than any topic I can think of, this is one area where those who don’t know, speak – and those who know, find themselves voiceless.”<sup>1</sup>*

*... Paul Giurlanda*

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In 1989, a group of Dutch Catholic clergy and lay ministers who are gay addressed a “Letter on Faith and Homosexuality” to their community of faith. “Homosexuality,” they wrote, “is all around us in real, living people, men and women with names and faces and personal stories of joy and sorrow.” So let us listen.

*William Glenn is a 1966 graduate of Creighton Prep in Omaha, NE. A former Jesuit, he works today as a licensed psychotherapist and a spiritual director, and convener of Spirit Group, an interdenominational prayer community in the San Francisco area. His story was printed in the May 21, 2001 issue of “America.”*

Several years ago, while I sat at my desk one morning at Continuum, an AIDS agency in San Francisco where I served as executive director, the phone rang. The caller identified herself as a secretary to the First Lady and asked if I would come to the White House for a community leaders’ forum later that month. After my initial startled reaction, I said, “Why, of course!” As you might guess, I was honored, felt privileged, saw this as an obligation and was very excited.

Fast forward to several weeks ago. My friend Robert Hotz, S.J., the [then] president of Creighton Prep, the Jesuit high school that I attended in Omaha, Neb., where my younger brother Greg teaches, called me one morning. Fr. Hotz asked if I would return to Prep and speak to the faculty about my experience of being a gay student and offer suggestions regarding what Prep might do to assist its gay students. Again I felt

privileged; I was honored; I understood this as an obligation. But this time I was not excited. The hand that held the phone was trembling!

I hadn't been back to Prep for 35 years. I had been in Prep's gym for midnight Mass and had visited the track to watch my brother John and my nephew Brian practice football, but I had never set foot in the school since graduation day in 1966. But several weeks later, there I was.

In thinking about what to say to the teachers, I realized that I wanted to say *one perfect thing* that would forever change the way all gay students are treated. But, of course, there is no *one perfect thing to say* and I am one imperfect human being. So instead I decided to tell them who I am, a bit of experience, some of what I have learned, and how I believe it is possible for them to serve all of their students better – particularly the gay students – at Prep. After graduating from Prep in 1966, I spent four years at its mother institution, Creighton University. In 1970 I joined the Society of Jesus and spent the next 10 years in a variety of ministries, most satisfyingly as a scholastic at another Jesuit prep school.

It was also as a Jesuit that I befriended alcohol. I got sober in 1978, and for a multitude of reasons – but not because I did not greatly value Ignatius' vision – I decided the following year to leave the Society. Subsequently, I served as principal at a black elementary school and vice principal of a large, multicultural Catholic girls' high school in San Francisco. For the past 17 years, I have been a psychotherapist, working in private practice, in hospital-based substance abuse treatment centers and, particularly, in the AIDS epidemic. From 1993 to 1999, I led an agency that cares for dual-diagnosed individuals with disabling H.I.V. disease in San Francisco's rough Tenderloin district.

Two years, ago, in response to a call I first felt before entering high school in 1962, I left my formal work in the epidemic and focused on my interior journey. Last year, I made a pilgrimage to Ireland, where, in a small cottage on an island off County Mayo, I spent 30 days in silence, praying the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, saying again yes to the One whose call is irresistible. Nowadays I spend my time in a ministry of presence with those discarded by the culture.

But back to Prep.

As I was preparing my remarks for that afternoon's talk, I realized that I was not the 52-year-old man that I appeared to be. Instead, I was once again the sophomore of 1963, a 16-year-old gay boy, thrown back in time. I re-experienced my old life, with feelings and memories that echo within and haunt me still.

Though I have since 'butched up' pretty well, I was a sissy, and Prep was no place for sissies. After a difficult freshman year, I begged my parents to transfer me to the local public school. That request was, for my father, tantamount to heresy. Little did he know how ashamed and deeply isolated I felt inside as a student in this revered high school. I lived in constant fear that I would be exposed and dread that I would be

discovered as a despised *thing*, whose name I did not know but whose negative effects I could see and feel all around me, mostly deep inside me.

All was not bad, of course. I had some wonderful teachers, Jesuits and laymen alike. (In my four years, there were no women on the faculty.) My senior English teacher, a coach, particularly impressed me; he taught us to write from our feelings and he showed each of us respect and dignity. And at Prep, my faith deepened; I encountered Jesus in a profound way and was introduced to rudimentary Ignatian wisdom, that incomparable combination of spiritually and psychologically grounded understanding and intuition. I had lovely friendships. And I made my first forays into critical thinking.

But Prep was a difficult place for a gay boy. At the time, Prep strongly supported the values of the dominant culture, values anathema to the development of persons, values particularly suited to molding boys into narrow and constricted young men.

Let two incidents suffice as examples. At the Prep homecoming football game in my freshmen year, I was sitting with a friend when two thugs from my homeroom approached. One said to the other, "This is the one," and grabbed my collar and stood me up in the bleachers. The other sucker-punched me in the gut, threw me back into my seat and walked away, laughing scornfully. They imparted the knowledge that I dreaded: "We're on to you." For four years I lived with that fear every day, always believing that somehow I deserved what I got for being the one, the one they were onto.

Though they were thugs, they were also the kind of minor celebrity that high schools produce. Both were touted athletes (the sucker-puncher became All-State Football in his senior year). But they were thugs nonetheless, thugs whom the dominant culture unconsciously encouraged. And still does.

In sophomore year, like nearly all high school boys, I fell in love, though in a different way from my friends. I did not fall in love with a girl from one of the local Catholic girls' schools. I fell in love instead with a boy who sat one row away from me. It felt overwhelming. I was alarmed, ashamed, guilty. There was no one with whom I could share these feelings, even to acknowledge that the feelings existed. I felt then the beginnings of what I would feel most profoundly for the next 15 years: I was alone. And I believed that I would always have to be alone, with no language, no community, no symbol nor myth, no conversation, no dialogue, no hope.

What I acquired at Prep were the messages proffered by the dominant culture. During puberty's final onslaught I came to believe that I was evil. And more: that I was sick, sinful and unacceptable in the eyes of the world. All our culture's words and notions and judgments came home to roost in me, a 16-year-old gay boy, whom the world, let alone his parents, could not know.

But finally, and primarily, I came to believe that I was unacceptable as a human being in the eyes of God.

The more I prayed to be changed, which was the concentrated content of my prayer (deeply aware that I had not chosen this but believing it was visited upon me because of my sinfulness), I regarded my *not changing* as God's judgment on me. My prayer and my life must be insincere, somehow beyond the pale. I had no access to the simple grace that everyone else seemed to merit.

The one I called God, and my companion Jesus, previously the source of such great comfort in my life, were taken away – or they had left. They had abandoned me to despair because the person I had become could effect no change, could not desist from either my feelings or my desires, no matter how hard I fought them or prayed to be delivered from them. In the end, I was utterly alone.

This is the terror for gay boys and girls: that they are alone. We suffer without the comfort and love of a mother or a father, of friends or even the odd solace of the cosmos. No one with whom to share this terrible fate: we believe all the culture's heinous images, holding our young selves responsible for this sick and perverted condition. There is no symbol to transform the experience, no story to provide context for it, no person to explain it or bear it away.

Somehow, I think: Who would wish this on any enemy? – let alone a child or a friend. But this is what happens to gay boys and girls in this culture.

On the inside, I experienced a circular existence of guilt, shame, expiation. On the outside, I "straightened" up as best I could, and forced myself into being the image of the "good boy," "one of you," as much as possible, knowing all the while I was not nor ever would be.

Eventually, I discovered the immense relief alcohol brings, with which I was finally able to mask and relieve the constant pain. I drank for 12 years, culminating in a near-fatal auto accident in June of 1978. Even then I continued to drink.

But that same summer, on Labor Day, while riding my bike early in the morning on the shores of Lake Michigan, nursing a particularly brutal hangover, I heard the words: *You never have to drink again.*

I knew it was over.

A few weeks later, back in Berkeley studying theology as a Jesuit, I went to a rally to defeat Proposition 6 on the California ballot, not so unlike the recent initiatives against gay people disguised as being about something else (like the sacredness of marriage) that have been popping up everywhere. The initiative would have required firing any teacher in California discovered to be gay. That afternoon, I went to San Francisco in my Roman collar, not wanting anyone to think I was a gay man, though I had in truth never been anything else. Harvey Milk, the soon-to-be assassinated gay supervisor, gave what was his standard speech. He proclaimed that we didn't have to be

afraid anymore, for we were together, alive and free. He asserted we were there for the little boy in Fresno and the little girl in Sacramento who tonight believed they were alone.

I was deeply moved, really undone. Harvey Milk, in those few words, was telling my story. Tears streamed down my cheeks. I pulled the white tab out of my clerical collar and wept.

I went home on the subway that evening, entered my room in my Jesuit community, put a piece of paper in the Selectric and typed out the words: "I am a gay man." I was 30 years old.

That day, I vowed with the conviction only a reformed drunk can muster never to live in fear again and, at all costs, to be myself, no matter what or who would say no. For I knew the dominant culture says no every day. And everyday, I began to pray for the grace to say yes.

My story is a version of the "coming out" story of every gay boy or girl, and these stories will continue until the dominant culture, which suffers exquisitely from its own homophobia, withdraws its enormous and blinding sexual shadow.

Homophobia, the stepchild of misogyny, exists for a simple reason. Society projects the enormity of its unconscious sexual shadow – its desires and fears and taboos – onto gay persons. It stigmatizes, scapegoats, labels as degenerate, makes laws against, violates both the dignity and humanity of, and demands (as cultures do of their scapegoats) that gay people bear its oppressive burdens. If you wonder how this collective model works, look at the history of the Jews in the West since the time of Paul, or consider the way that patriarchy regards the humanity of women.

From seventh grade to the age of 30, nothing was worse than being gay. But as Providence would have it, I now understand this biological, psychological and spiritual dimension of myself, my *gayness*, as the source of enormous grace and wisdom for me. I am deeply grateful for the grace of my particular path and for the deep freedom that coming to terms with this gift has afforded me. And I have had returned to me my compelling and demanding companion, Jesus, who of course had never left me at all.

The overwhelming thrust of the Gospels, Jesus' ministering in the margins to the unrecognized, is no longer just a model for me but has become an outward sign or grace, a sacrament. So my story comes in ways, though skewed, full circle. I am even today that 14-year-old boy who came to Prep in 1962 to become a man.

I conclude my remarks at Prep by offering some suggestions to the faculty, premised on the following truth: that all gay kids and most gay adults believe they are damaged goods and, as a corollary, that all gay kids and many gay adults feel (and are) isolated and alone.

The head of the school asked me to say what I had needed to hear at Prep in 1963 and what gay Prepsters need to hear today. I believe they need to hear three things: First: You are created exactly as God intended you to be. Second: You are not damaged goods, neither sick, nor evil. Third: You and the love you provide are essential, mysterious graces in God's plan for the world.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, I asked them to accept my gratitude and admiration for the courageous way in which they received me so graciously that day, for inviting me to tell my story. They have perhaps unwittingly healed an old wound in me and I am in their debt. I asked that God bless the work they are doing in making the school a sacred place for every student who enters those doors each day, boys they have been given the charge of helping to become men for others.

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*This story about a Catholic lesbian is perhaps unique in the fact that Kathy Saunders "came out" publicly at Sunday Eucharist. Maybe the response of the congregation will surprise you. Maybe not. Either way, it says something for the people in the pews. Kathy's story is recounted by another parishioner, Steve Balog.*

November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2001, at the Sunday Eucharist, was another defining moment at St. Andrew in Portland, Oregon. Several weeks earlier, Kathy Saunders, who is on our "Welcoming the Whole Family Committee" at St. Andrew, asked Maria Fleming, Pastoral Associate at St. Andrew and then our Pastor Father Bob if she could tell her "coming out" story to the parish at the Sunday Eucharist. She thought National "Coming Out" day would be a good time to do that. Father Bob and Maria encouraged her to do so.

However, September 11<sup>th</sup> happened and the beginning of the war and the bombing. So, Kathy deferred her story to November 4. The framework was the theme of "All Saints" (God has called ALL of us to His love and to holiness) and the Gospel about Zacheus, the tax collector, whom people hated. Father Bob read the Gospel, gave a brief homily, then asked Kathy to tell her story. Kathy is in her 40's. She and her partner belong to St. Andrew and are very involved in the parish. She has been a member for about a year. Kathy said that she was very nervous; that she only told her story to people she loved and trusted. She said that she loved and trusted the people of God at St. Andrew.

Kathy is originally from the Midwest. She told of going to Catholic grade school, high school and college; of working for Catholic Charities; of being a member of Dignity; of the local chapter of Dignity being asked to sign a statement that they all believed in and accepted the teaching of the Church regarding homosexuality; how all 100+ members voted to refuse to do this; how she quit her job at Catholic Charities because of this.

She subsequently moved to Portland, heard of St. Andrew Parish, and joined the parish. She told of coming out to her sisters and mom. Her sister and nephew from Seattle drove to Portland to be with her as she gave her testimony at Mass. Kathy said that she told her mom on Mother's Day some years ago and said that this was her Mother's Day gift to her. As she started to tell mom, her mom interrupted and said: "Kathy, no matter what you tell me, I want you to know that I love you and will always love you." Kathy ended her remarks to the parish by saying that her mom modeled for her God's unconditional love for all of His creation.

When Kathy ended, there was a long, standing ovation. An elderly, 80+ year-old woman in the parish who is affectionately called "the godmother," stood up during the ovation, walked the length of the church, and gave Kathy a big hug! Kathy is about 6'1" and "the godmother" is about 5'. The parish is still talking about the courage and love that it took for Fr. Bob to encourage and support Kathy in giving this testimony and even more, the courage it took for Kathy to get up and give this testimony. Talk about being called by our baptism to partake in the "prophetic ministry"! I thought you would be happy to hear that the "silence" is being broken in this small part of the world!

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***Doris Cipolla and Charlene Tanner hid their commitment to each other from the outside world for 35 years – never coming out of the closet, even to their parents. When Charlene died in 2005, Doris revealed their partnership in a most unusual way: in Charlene's obituary. Doris told their story in the March 17, 2006 issue of National Catholic Reporter.***

*Charlene M. Tanner, age 70, died Monday, April 23, 2005, at home. Char was a graduate of St. Benedict Academy. After graduation she worked at St. Vincent Health Center as director of admissions for 43 years, until her retirement in 1995. She was an oblate and benefactor of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie and was extremely active in social justice issues. She volunteered at the Emmaus Soup Kitchen and for many years participated in vigils in remembrance of murder victims as well as monthly Holy Hours for Peace. In addition to her mother, Char is survived by her loving partner of 35 years, Doris Cipolla.*

With this obituary, we outed our 35 years of sharing and living together. During this time, we never knew what relatives, straight friends, neighbors and coworkers thought of us. Did they know we were gay?

...We had been living in our present home a good many years, never knowing what anyone thought. Then one spring, the young teenager next door, along with two friends, hissed, 'Lizzy, lizzy, lizzy' at us. Our hearts fell and we froze in the midst of our

yard work, gripped with fear as they continued to sneer and hiss their ‘lizzy, lizzy.’ Little did we know this would begin the most agonizing summer of our lives.

The next day we awakened to wheel ruts in our front yard. The following week while taking our usual two-mile hike, we were confronted with shrieks of ‘lesbian, lesbian.’ We never walked again that summer, and fearing that our home might be vandalized, we had a security system installed.

How many of our neighbors had heard the name-calling? What could be done to ward off further negativity? I confronted the parents with an indignant statement that we were good Christians, that we were not pedophiles and that we did not appreciate being called names. What that meant, I don’t know. It’s kind of sadly laughable.

Then I came up with the non-bright idea of telling the neighbors that we had been accused of being lesbians and that these young teenagers were making unjust accusations simply because we were two women living together. After all, many people of the same sex live together, but that does not make them lesbians or gay. I cringe at having done that. Char had said to do nothing, let people think what they want because nothing was going to change their thinking anyway. She was right and I was wrong, particularly since I had perpetrated a lie out of cowardice for the purpose of what I thought would be damage control.

Char’s death has certainly liberated me of any such needs. I couldn’t care less what anyone thinks of me. And, yes, I am a lesbian because I loved and still love the kindest, gentlest soul one could ever know.

Char and I cowered in a quiet, sometimes apprehensive, and always compartmentalized way of living. For example, only our gay and lesbian friends ever heard about the incidents of that horrible summer. In fact, we invited no straight friends to our home that entire season, and when our families came to share our usual Sunday dinners, sitting on the deck was excruciating lest the shouts of ‘lizzy’ or ‘lesbian’ be heard. Thank goodness nothing ensued and the taunting teenagers faded away.

We made sure that our friends and coworkers had only edited versions of what we did and with whom. When we were in their presence, we were most careful never to slip into the use of endearing terms or affectionate gestures. We feared jeopardizing our jobs. Char worked at a Catholic hospital and I was a secondary teacher in a public school system. Could we have been dismissed if we ‘came out’? Lesbian and gay persons have been dismissed from their jobs because of their sexual orientation.

Char was shy and reticent and treaded softly. On the other hand, I would rant and rave about social injustices. I found it ironic that our political and religious leaders decried Taliban practices while here in Pennsylvania there were many of us who experienced devastating discrimination and were denied legal rights that are granted to

spouses. We are fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan for freedom for those people, and we are losing the battle in our own back yard....

In retrospect, it is all rather mind-boggling. We never even came out to our parents lest they, knowing who we really were, would have to face the struggle of discrimination. Char's parents never questioned our relationship, nor did my mother. If they knew, they never said anything....

After the doctor told us that the return of Char's cancer had spread to a Stage 4, any need to remain silent seemed inane. Since Char's death, life has been difficult; time only affirms how much I miss her. I have found solace knowing Char has been spared the burden I bear. There is an old saying: 'May you live a thousand years, and I a thousand years less one day, so that I will never know that you have gone away.' One of us had to live that 'one day.'

There are times I experienced a satisfying consolation, realizing our coming out did not change most people's feeling toward us. During Char's wake all our neighbors came – friends, relatives, past coworkers. More than 300 people signed the register, the majority of them straight. The chapel was full and after the last song was sung and the Mass had ended, everyone spontaneously stood up and burst into applause.

There was also a grand attendance at the funeral luncheon. It was an extraordinary sendoff and a real tribute to Char. At times this evokes a warm, memorable experience, a phenomenal celebration, but ever a reminder that we could have a funeral but we could not have a wedding.

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*Our final story reflects a small bit of the experience of Andrew Sullivan, Catholic and gay. Sullivan is English by birth, studied at Oxford University, received his Ph.D. from Harvard and has written as journalist and author on a number of themes, including Catholic thought and gay life. He was also editor of "The New Republic." His comments are part of an interview printed in the May 8, 1993 "America" magazine. We are quoting his remarks, however, in the context of an article written by Bishop Thomas Gumbleton, now retired Auxiliary Bishop of the Detroit Archdiocese.<sup>2</sup>*

*Bishop Gumbleton:* In order to deepen our understanding of homosexual love, we must listen to the experience of homosexual people as they struggle to become fully the person each is called to be. Just as moral theologians began to use the insights of married in developing guidance for the living out of married love, so must moral theologians begin to draw from the experience of those who are called to integrate their homosexuality into their lives in a fully life-giving way. Once again I turn to Andrew

Sullivan, who is Roman Catholic and gay. His own experience is very enlightening and serves as a concrete example of what I am suggesting.

*Being gay is not about sex as such. Fundamentally, it's about one's core emotional identity. Fundamentally, it's about how one loves ultimately and how that can make one whole as a human being.*

*The moral consequences, in my own life, of the refusal to allow myself to love another human being, were disastrous. They made me permanently frustrated and angry and bitter. It spilled into other areas of my life. Once that emotional blockage is removed, one's whole moral equilibrium can improve, just as a single person's moral equilibrium in a whole range of areas can improve with marriage, in many ways, because there is a kind of stability and security and rock upon which to build one's moral and emotional life. To deny this to gay people is not only incoherent and wrong from the Christian point of view. It is incredibly destructive of the moral quality of their lives in general.*

So we ask, does this make sense? Does it make sense to teach people to avoid loving, intimate relationships when the result is permanent frustration? Anger? Bitterness? That was his result. It affected his whole life including his relationship within his family, with his friends and so forth. That was his experience in trying to live the way the Church had taught him to live. It was not healthy, it was not life giving. He was asked about the contradiction between trying to be Catholic and trying to be homosexual and active:

*There is a basic contradiction. I completely concede that, at one level. At another level – and I confronted this, actually, with my first boyfriend, who was also Roman Catholic. When we had a fight one day, he said: “Do you really believe that what we are doing is wrong? Because if you do, I can't go on with this. And yet you don't want to challenge the Church's teaching on this, or leave the Church.” And of course I was forced to say I don't believe, at some level, I really do not believe that the love of one person for another and the commitment of one person to another, in the emotional construct which homosexuality dictates to us – I know in my heart of hearts that cannot be wrong. I know that there are many things within homosexual life that can be wrong – just as in heterosexual life they can be wrong. There are many things in my sexual and emotional life that I do not believe are spiritually pure, in any way. It is fraught with moral danger, but at its deepest level it struck me as completely inconceivable – from my own moral experience, from a real honest attempt to understand that experience – that it was wrong.*

*I experienced coming out in exactly the way you would think. I didn't really express any homosexual emotions or commitments or relationships until I was in my early 20's, partly because of the strict religious upbringing I had, and my commitment to my faith. It was not something I blew off casually, I struggled enormously with it. But as soon as I*

*actually explored the possibility of human contact within my emotional and sexual make-up, in other words, as soon as I allowed myself to love someone – all the constructs the Church had taught me about the inherent disorder seemed just so self-evidently wrong that I could no longer find it that problematic. Because my own moral sense was overwhelming, because I felt, through the experience of loving someone or being allowed to love someone, an enormous sense of the presence of God – for the first time in my life.*

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**In Part 3 of “Let’s *Talk* About Homosexuality,” we will review the Church’s official and normative teaching on homosexuality (including Vatican writings) and the application of this teaching on the pastoral level. We will also look at the role of conscience in moral decision-making – as well as some other perspectives on homosexuality being raised by religious and lay theologians and scholars.**

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*Part 2(cont.): Putting a Human Face on Homosexuality*

<sup>1</sup> Paul Giurlanda, *America*, May 8, 1993. 12-14. Giurlanda is an associate professor of religious studies at St. Mary’s College of California.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas J. Gumbleton, *A Call to Listen: The Church’s Pastoral and Theological Response to Gays and Lesbians*. From “Sexual Diversity and Catholicism: Toward the Development of Moral Theology,” Patricia Beattie Jung, with Joseph Andrew Coray, Editors, (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN. 2001.)