

From Pain to Peace- Bob and Sue Cavera

Devastated,

is perhaps the best word to describe our emotional and mental state upon learning that our youngest son struggled with same-sex attraction (SSA) and later embraced the gay lifestyle. We were grief-stricken, ashamed, and heartbroken. How could this have happened to him? To us? What did we do to cause this? How can we “fix” it? Where do we go for help? These feelings and questions became a part of our daily routine. Our deepest concern was for his spiritual, physical, and emotional well-being.

It remains so to this very day.

At first we didn't handle the news from our son very well. We objected. “God didn't make you this way”, is what we said. In retrospect, we should have said, “We love you; we will always love you”—and wrapped our arms around him. Absorbed with our own pain, we failed to recognize the pain our son was in and had been in through most of his life. Our son's revelation, that SSA was a factor in his life, shattered our peace about twenty-four years ago. It started us on a journey that led to Father John Harvey, the founder of Courage and EnCourage, and to the apostolate that he so lovingly shared with grieving parents. Meeting Father Harvey and attending our first Courage conference was the beginning of a journey that would move us from pain to peace.

This journey to peace is certainly not a straight line between two points nor one that is ever *finally* achieved. As we sought help, read books, attended conferences, enlisted prayer partners, and counseled with professionals, we discovered that, in moving from pain to peace, we frequently moved *back* to pain. Father Paul Check, director of Courage/ EnCourage International, often refers to EnCourage as a “Ministry of Tears”, because parents are grieving the loss of their children. It is a spiritual, relational, and moral loss that causes parents and loved ones to grieve. This grief, if the situation remains unresolved, can last for years. Mourning for someone who is still living is extremely painful.

We have heard from many parents who, like us, were devastated, heartbroken, and frightened about the future. One response common to many parents is the desire to immediately “fix” the problem. The son or daughter is “broken” and thus “fixable”. This “I can fix you” response often occurs early in the revelation, usually from the father (but not exclusively), and may last for a time. Parents reason that if we can locate the *source* of the problem or find the “right” counselor, we can resolve the issue satisfactorily and get on with our lives. *That approach usually doesn't work and can alienate the son or daughter.* The younger the son or daughter is when his or her “coming-out” occurs, the greater the potential for a positive outcome of any effort at intervention.

Our son was in his late teens when this first came to light, but he soon left home and was on his own. Because of the influence of popular culture, it is not uncommon for children even in middle school to make this declaration to Mom and Dad. Public schools have clubs and counselors who offer support and encouragement for teenagers who “come out”. We have heard from many parents who arrange for counseling for their teen only to find out that the counselor, sometimes from a Catholic agency, encourages same-sex relationships.

We recall an incident when the parents of an eighteen-year-old daughter sought counsel from a local Catholic college. They were told that homosexuality is like being born left-handed. It may be a little bit different, but a person is born that way, and to change it would cause irreparable damage. “Your daughter can’t help who she is”, they were told. A popular opinion often expressed by so-called Catholic scholars is that someday the Church will “change.” How tragic for the parents—and even more tragic for the daughter. Parents who themselves are committed to Catholic teaching, who seek counsel from a faithful Catholic or Christian therapist, and who diligently work together on their relationship with their child have the best opportunity for success. Sons or daughters out of college, living away from home and thus frequently beyond parental control, are a greater challenge. They may very well have expressed the view that “this is who I am and who I want to be, so — lay off.”

It is very important that parents attempt to maintain a relationship with their children. *Without a relationship, we will have little or no influence.* This doesn’t mean that we affirm this newly asserted identity. We clearly communicate the truth about SSA as outlined in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, (CCC 2357-2359), and then we work on maintaining a relationship with our children.

We don’t need to repeat Church teaching at every visit. Indeed, one statement of belief is enough, unless the son or daughter brings up the topic. It should be noted that the older the son or daughter is, the more dependent he or she is on the “gay” support system that offers comfort. To step away from this network is very difficult, for it means being rejected by the very people with whom one identifies. When a person intends to pursue chastity, it is not unusual for that “gay” support system to turn against him or her in a hurtful manner. When our son revealed his struggle, we went to see our pastor. Thankfully our pastor was a faithful priest who did not send us into that entangled swamp of false teaching and enabling behavior that surrounds this issue. We remember our pastor saying that he knew little about the subject but was willing to learn with us. (Remember—this was twenty-four years ago.) How grateful we were! We have heard from several parents that when they approached their parish priest they were told that they, the parents, were the ones with the problem and not their son or daughter. Their priest recommended PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) or Dignity, Fortunate Families, or New Ways Ministries.

These pseudo-Catholic organizations believe it is possible to be loving without honoring truth, and thus deceive parents.

With the grace of God, along with a faithful pastor and a supportive bishop, we were permitted to introduce Courage and EnCourage into our diocese. We had always intended from the beginning to be under the authority of the Church, and this was, indeed, an answer to prayer. Our own experience of starting our EnCourage group was, however, a bit rocky at first. We set the meeting times, sent out notices to the bulletin editors in the diocesan parishes, brought treats and resources, and waited for the deluge of parents and loved ones to come to the EnCourage meeting. No one came. We did this for three months. We dragged our books and resources back and forth, minus the treats (we ate those). We went to our pastor and suggested that we meet quarterly. It would save us a hassle and keep us from eating too much unhealthy food. “No,” he said, “I want you to meet every month regardless of attendance or lack thereof and use this time for prayer.” Attending a meeting and having to admit that there is a problem is difficult for many. They haven’t told anyone; they feel embarrassed, ashamed, grieved, and discouraged.

Do the same parents or siblings come week after week? No. Some participants of our diocesan EnCourage group come regularly, some come for a while and then stop coming, and others come occasionally, often in response to a crisis. We do mail a monthly letter, either electronically or via regular mail, and we always include an informational or spiritual article. Many who don't attend or can't attend rely on our mailing for maintaining a connection. The feeling of being connected to the truth is important to many parents. Knowing the truth is there and that it can be accessed at any time gives comfort. Parents and family members often come because this issue is so divisive. Our experience is that this divisiveness frequently depends on how the parents respond to their loved one. If every encounter with the son or daughter results in an argument, the relationship will suffer.

Father Harvey would always remind us, "If you don't have a relationship, then you don't have any influence." Maintain the relationship, if at all possible, but not at all costs. Stop arguing and start loving, but not at all costs. Stop arguing and start loving, but not at the expense of truth.

Yet, our communication must not be exclusively about same-sex attraction; in fact, that should be a topic seldom mentioned. Our loved ones know or should know what we believe regarding SSA, so we don't need to bring it up again and again. What is important is that we hug them, love them, listen to them, and, if possible, spend time with them. We persevere in patient hope, waiting for the opportunity to share God's healing truth in love, with encouragement. It is not only the relationship with one's child that can suffer.

Sadly, we have witnessed couples divorce over this issue and siblings and other family members who stop communicating.

We have heard stories of family reunions that exclude those faithful to Church teaching and holidays that become tense and hostile instead of welcoming and joyful.

With gay "marriage" prominently in the news, many families struggle with how to respond to same-sex situations such as wedding invitations or social events. One parent was asked to help a "lesbian" daughter pick out a wedding dress; many are asked to participate as witnesses, and some are asked to pay for the event. Whether the ceremony is religious or civil, we do not recommend that parents attend it, nor should they attend the reception. The parents' presence at either event is an implicit witness to others, especially to younger siblings, and should be avoided. Unfortunately, the cost to parents for not cooperating is frequently separation and isolation.

If there are younger siblings in the family, the parents need to be concerned about the relationship of the younger sibling to the brother or sister who has made public his or her SSA. For example, a fourteen-year-old brother may try to explain to his friends and classmates that the brother he loves and idolizes is "marrying" his same-sex "partner". This can be very difficult. One couple shared how they called a family meeting to discuss how best to love a son with SSA without compromising the truth and, at the same time, allowing his nieces and nephews to maintain a relationship with their uncle. This works well if there is agreement, but often there is not. Another situation that frequently presents itself to parents and siblings is the son coming home for an overnight visit and bringing his "partner".

Parents should feel comfortable in setting house rules just as if a son were bringing his girlfriend home for an overnight visit. Be aware that parents who establish such boundaries may be accused of narrow-mindedness. Some years ago, as we encountered so many parents trying to understand and relate to their same-sex-attracted loved ones, we discerned four principles that have helped us and others move from pain to peace.

- **Pray:** Seek to deepen your relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ and his Blessed Mother. Surrender your loved one to the Lord, by placing him at the foot of the cross. Attend daily Mass if possible; pray the Rosary, the Divine Mercy Chaplet, or the Chaplet of the Precious Blood.

Participate in eucharistic adoration. Saturate yourself in God's Word; pray the Liturgy of the Hours and other spiritual readings such as the Magnificat. Have a Mass said for the intention of your loved one on special days such as a birthday or saint's day. Add a sixth decade to your daily Rosary dedicated to the Immaculate Conception for her intercession for the gift of chastity. Divide the week into daily prayer intentions. For example, on Thursdays we pray for Courage and EnCourage and our SSA loved ones. If at all possible, pray daily with a supportive person, such as your spouse, a dear friend, or a trusted family member. Pray for a "hedge of protection" around all your children and grandchildren, that they will embrace the Church's teaching on chastity. Pray in reparation for the sins of same-sex behavior in the tradition of Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque. Seek the intercession of patron saints or special saints such as Saint Monica, Saint Joseph, or Saint Charles L'Wanga.

- **Prepare** (Study): Educate yourselves on this issue. Read Father John Harvey's books: *The Truth about Homosexuality* and *Homosexuality and the Catholic Church*. Acquire and share the DVD *Desire of the Everlasting Hills*. Numerous resources are available through *Courage and EnCourage*. You need to learn to answer such questions as the following: Aren't people born that way? Will counseling cause mental and emotional damage? Isn't *Courage* all about change? Aren't *Courage* and *EnCourage* hateful and mean-spirited? The answer to all these questions is no, but you need to learn not only that the answer is no but why it is.
- **Persevere** in Prayer: Persevere in the face of disappointments and obstacles. Connect with friends and family members who are prayer warriors and who will maintain confidentiality. Do not isolate yourselves! Resist discouragement and embrace the fellowship that participating in an *EnCourage* group affords you. Remember, what you have no control over, you have no responsibility for.
- **Proclaim**: Don't just sit by; become proactive! Go to your pastor and share *Courage* and *EnCourage* with him. Chances are he doesn't know much about *Courage* or about current resources. Seek to become a resource. It is very important that you discern how to share (or not share) with other family members. It is not unusual to find that we are at odds with other family members regarding this issue. We can encounter the "throw-the-bum-out" attitude, and that would be unfortunate, but more likely we will encounter family members who approve same-sex behavior and will seek to enable the behavior. These family members and friends may challenge our views and seek to promote total acceptance of the behavior. Our responsibility is to be prepared to proclaim the truth in love.

Please remember: to share the truth without love is hurtful; to share love and compassion without the truth is deceitful.

When we introduced our pastor to the five goals of *Courage* — (1) chastity, (2) the pursuit of holiness through daily Mass and frequent reception of the Eucharist, (3) regular use of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, (4) the formation of chaste friendships, and (5) being a good example to others—he said: "This is the way we all should lead our lives, not just persons with same-sex attraction."

We recommend that pastors pray for *Courage* and for all persons with same-sex attraction to lead chaste and holy lives, as well as pray for their families and friends. We urge priests and deacons to speak the truth in a homily about the issue of same-sex "marriage" and other disordered behaviors. They should be able to recommend therapists who are faithful to Catholic teaching — men to counsel with men and women with women. They should publish the availability of the *Courage/EnCourage* meetings in the bulletin and include a parish or diocesan phone number and e-mail address. To ensure confidentiality, meeting locations should not be published.

Brochures, DVDs, and books about same-sex issues should contain appropriate contact information. And finally, they should invite speakers to help parishioners understand the Church's teaching on same-sex issues and learn how to be loving to those who experience SSA. Parents' interaction with loved ones can be very stressful to their relationship. This issue should not be the only focus of parents' lives; it will drain their energy. Encourage parents to look for opportunities to deepen their relationship with one another. Plan fun times together.

Parents should also be made aware that viewing, reading, and listening to same-sex attraction materials can be emotionally upsetting, especially the "gay rights" materials. Archbishop Charles Chaput observed, Léon Bloy, the French Catholic writer and convert from Judaism, once said, "Man has places in his heart which do not yet exist, and into them enters suffering, in order that they may have existence." Just about all of Christian scholarship on the nature of suffering can be reduced to these few simple words. Suffering can bend and break us. But it can also break us open to become the persons God intended us to be. It depends on what we do with the pain. If we offer it back to God, He will use it to do great things in us and through us, because suffering is fertile. It can grow new life." (from Archbishop Charles Chaput introduction to *Beyond Gay*, by David Morrison 1999)

It is not easy to be a parent to a loved one who embraces homosexuality and the homosexual lifestyle.

The cross is never easy. Embraced rightly, it will be the source of great graces to you and others.