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**People of God**  
**Who are Gay or Lesbian:**  
**A Catholic Pastoral Response**  
by Fr. Joseph Fortuna  
*(First in a series)*

Our popular American culture has very recently given renewed attention to the fact that some of us are gay or lesbian human beings. Some of this attention has attempted to be sensitive and honest. Some has been derisive and mean. Some has attempted to poke fun. Almost none of it has seriously engaged any faith concerns.

I do not ask you to accept at face value these assertions, but to think for a moment about what you have heard or seen in the past few months. Ellen has “come out” to the world, openly admitting that she is lesbian. Although doing so in the context of a sitcom, her gesture was serious and risky. Not long ago The Plain Dealer did a serious article on Robbie, the student at St. Ignatius High School who committed suicide at least partly because of his homosexual identity.

Jay Leno, whose humor and politics often seem to be “liberal” (whatever this may mean anymore), has often engaged in humor that can be described as “gay bashing.” Roseanne spoofed the Ellen sitcom in her last show of the season by having her whole family “come out” as if they were gay or lesbian.

A particularly disturbing development among our youth culture is that the word “gay” is now being used as a term of derision to signify something or someone who in a former jargon was “not cool,” “nerdy,” or otherwise stigmatized by the “in” group.

These are just a few examples of the preoccupation and talk about gay or lesbian members of our population. On the one hand, the fact that these expressions are happening at all can be an indication of healthy awareness. On the other, the manner in which these expressions occur can make one suspicious about the motives, awareness and attitudes of those who make them

These suspicions are reason enough to take another look at our approach to people who are gay or lesbian, but there are two other reasons as well. The first is that there is no reason to believe that the percentage of people who are gay or lesbian, is any different in the church than elsewhere in society. Research shows that the percentages of Catholics who divorce or who have abortions or use birth control is about the same percentage among those who are not Catholic. In other words, I think that with regard to homosexuality as well as other social issues, the Catholic population reflects the wider American population.

The second reason is that since some members of the People of God are gay or lesbian, then those who are not must regard them with the same mind and heart of Christ with which they would regard the heterosexual members. In addition, anyone who is a member of the Body of Christ brings to that Body both the need to be nurtured and supported by the Body and the right and responsibility to serve the mission of the Body.

Over the next few months I will be periodically reflecting on a Catholic and pastoral approach to gay and lesbian people. I propose five parts to this reflection: (1) The experience of being gay or lesbian in our culture and our church; (2) Some current scientific data on the origins and nature of homosexuality; (3) What the Church teaches about homosexuality; (4) What to do if you find out that you, a family member or someone you know is homosexual; and (5) The role of gay and lesbian people in the Body of Christ.

No doubt, there are those who will ask why I should devote so much attention to this topic. I have already given one reason: Since people are naming this issue and talking about it, it is important that accurate information and a faith perspective have a contribution to the conversation. Another reason is that the manner in which we treat other human beings is a central part of our faith. How to love gay brothers and lesbian sisters as we love ourselves is a particular instance of the second great commandment given by Jesus, namely, that we love our neighbor as we love ourselves. (And we should not forget that this is closely connected to the way in which we love God.)

A third and easily overlooked reason for treating this topic is that mainstream American culture pressures gay and lesbian people to remain silent and underground. Ridicule, discrimination and homophobia push them to be very careful about disclosing who they are. In other words, I'm treating this topic because even though it is important and legitimate, there are few places where it can be given the hearing it deserves in a faith context.

I have been stretched in my own reading, conversations and reflections on this topic. I suspect many others will be challenged as I have been. I am by no means an expert on this topic, but I invite you to consider it with me as members of the Body of Christ who seek to know and live and serve with our sisters and brothers more authentically and more faithfully.

**People of God who are  
Gay or Lesbian:  
A Catholic Pastoral Response**  
by Fr. Joseph Fortuna  
*(Second in a series)*

More than twenty years ago I sat in a seminary classroom in a course called, “Philosophical Anthropology.” During one class session the teacher was trying to get across a difficult concept which St. Thomas Aquinas had borrowed from the ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle. The technical term was “accident,” and the definition was that “an accident is something which inheres in something else, called a substance.”

In order to get his point across, he asked us, “Have you ever seen ‘blue’ walking down the street? Or have you ever seen ‘tall’ shooting a basketball?” The answer was obviously, “No. Blue and tall don’t exist by themselves. There is always a ‘blue something’ or a ‘tall someone,’ not simply blue or tall.”

This class came to mind because often homosexuality is discussed as if it, too, could walk down the street by itself. Homosexuality doesn’t exist by itself. Rather than thinking about homosexuality, it is probably far better to think of “people who are homosexual.”

It is important to take, “people who are homosexual” as our starting point, rather than the abstract “homosexuality,” because it will keep us from falling into two powerful traps. The first is stereotyping. To stereotype means to take one attribute of one person who is homosexual, and to say that this is the “nature” of homosexuality. A typical stereotype of a gay man is someone with effeminate mannerisms. A typical stereotype of a lesbian woman is one who wears her hair cut short and seems “tough.” The problem with this stereotyping is that it reduces the whole reality of being a homosexual person to one attribute. Another is that some people who are not homosexual may have the same attributes.

The second trap is generalizing. To generalize is to say that what is true of one person who is gay or lesbian is true of all. But other than having a sexual orientation to people of the same sex, people who are gay or lesbian are as diverse as people who are heterosexual. Some people who are gay or lesbian do have some of the stereotypical attributes, but most do not. The fact of the matter is that unless an individual explicitly discloses his or her sexual orientation, we cannot be certain what it is.

It is very difficult to name the experience of gays or lesbians without considering individual gay or lesbian people. They are not all the same. They are diverse as all people are diverse. And just as our Catholic faith calls upon us to love and respect all people in all their diversity, so does it call us to love and respect people who are gay or lesbian.

The first faith response to a person who is gay or lesbian ought then to be respect and empathy. Respect allows the gay or lesbian person to be who God has created them to be without defense or apology. Empathy seeks to understand not so much homosexuality in the abstract but “this man” or “this woman.” Respect and empathy allow all human beings to be valued for their God-given dignity.

There are some things that seem to be common to the experience of gay or lesbian people, not because they are all the same, but because the dominant culture in which we live presumes that people are heterosexual.

This creates problems for homosexuals that others do not face.

For example, all human beings who grow to adulthood face a difficult period of discovering their sexual identity. They get in touch with their bodies, with feelings and needs that were not noticed or important before, with desires for the relationship and intimacy which are necessary for healthy human living.

Discovering one's sexual identity is difficult even when one is heterosexual. There is a certain amount of discomfort and embarrassment, a great deal of insecurity and sometimes awkwardness, along with anticipation and excitement. It is very important during this time to have healthy role models and conversation partners.

But difficult as this is for someone who is heterosexual, it is far more difficult for people who discover they are gay or lesbian. They begin to discover that their desires and attractions are not like those of most other people. Everything to which their culture says they should be attracted, every socially acceptable behavior and situation, the majority of celebrity role models, situation comedies, movies, and so forth—trumpet the norm of being heterosexual.

People discovering they are gay or lesbian can be horrified, frightened and confused. They can feel isolated and alone. Their fears and confusion can lead them to repress their true sexual identity or to act out in ways that are not healthy. They can feel marginalized and invisible in our culture because our culture has a decided preference that they be marginalized or invisible.

In addition, if their sexual orientation is known, they must face the uninformed and often insensitive and cruel behavior of those around them. Not infrequently even family and well-intended friends act toward them in ways that discourage disclosure of who they really are.

But think about how this can affect the homosexual. If human beings require intimacy and relationship in order to be healthy and to grow, and if such intimacy and relationship require deepening trust and honest self-disclosure, then the pressure upon gay and lesbian people to remain closeted is not just pressure, it is oppression. It is little wonder that so many are not honest (even with themselves) and choose to live as someone they are not, or choose to live in a gay or lesbian “subculture” in which they can find acceptance but at the price of increased marginalization from society.

A Catholic pastoral response to gay and lesbian people must consider carefully the manner in which Jesus sought and cared for those whom the dominant society marginalized and cast out. We must ponder that Jesus was never condescending, nor did he permit those who were outcast to turn away from the truth of their existence. In every instance he helped them to see and live their existence in light of the Reign of God. He challenged them to accept God's commands at the same time that he challenged those in the dominant society to confront their own prejudices and ungodly attitudes. He invited all, both the marginalized and the socially accepted, to find a way to live and love each other that is characteristic of the Reign of God.

**People of God**  
**Who are Gay or Lesbian**  
**A Catholic Pastoral Response**  
by Fr. Joseph Fortuna  
*(Third in a series)*

If we are to arrive at a Catholic pastoral response to People of God who are gay or lesbian, then we have a responsibility to be informed. This is one reason why in my previous article I attempted to describe what gays or lesbians experience as they live in a culture that is predominately heterosexual and considers heterosexuality to be normative. In this article, I'd like to carry the quest to be informed one step further: What does science have to say about homosexuality?

When the "scientific" approach to homosexuality is taken, three questions seem to command attention. (1) What is homosexuality? (2) What is the frequency of homosexuality in the general population? (3) What is the origin (or cause) of homosexuality?

The answers to these questions are not easy to determine. The manner in which the first question is answered will make a difference in the answer to the other two. But the answer to "What is homosexuality" can differ according to the one who is defining. The interconnection between definition and frequency of homosexuality is well demonstrated by Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, a professor of psychology at Easter College. She writes:

*In random sample surveys, such as the landmark Sex in America study, when homosexuality is narrowly defined—either by self-identity or by sexual contact exclusively with same-sex partners in the past year—then less than 3% of adult men and 2% of women are homosexual. When it is defined in terms of ever having had a same-sex contact the percentages go up to about 9% and 4% respectively. These figures are complicated, however, by the fact that for upwards of half the men who report having had any same-sex contact it occurred before age eighteen and never again thereafter, whereas women who report same-sex contact usually had it after age eighteen. If homosexuality is defined, even more widely, as ongoing attraction to same-sex persons or to same-sex erotic activities (regardless of one's feelings or behavior with the other sex), the figures for both men and women are in the 20% range." (p. 145) ["To Ask a Better Question: The Heterosexuality-Homosexuality Debate Revisited." Interpretation vol 5 ½ (April 1997): 143-158] Later in the same article, Van Leeuwen offers her personal opinion that "primary homosexuals," that is, "persons with a consistent and longstanding pattern of attraction directed exclusively to members of their own sex," do exist, although the percentage is small. (p. 156)*

Even when one has decided how to define homosexuality, its origin or cause is very difficult to determine. The evidence is piecemeal. We don't have all the pieces, and those we have don't always seem to fit together.

For example, there is some evidence from biology and neurology to suggest that certain brain structures in some homosexuals may be different from the same structures in heterosexuals. There is also evidence to suggest that there may be a genetic predisposition to homosexuality in some individuals. But in each of these instances, the methodology of the research leading to even these tentative conclusions does not permit one to make sure generalizations to the entire population. Often heterosexuals in the samples studied had some of the same characteristics as those identified as homosexuals.

Not only the “hard sciences,” but also the social sciences have studied the origins of homosexuality. Many of these point out the influence of family structures and social influences to conclude that homosexuality is “culturally constructed.” In other words, a person becomes homosexual (or heterosexual for that matter) as a result of the social and cultural influence upon him or her.

All of these sciences together try to answer the question that is often posed in this manner: Is a person born homosexual, or does a person learn to be homosexual? And a second question usually follows: Can a person who is homosexual learn or be trained not to be homosexual?

This is the old nature versus nurture debate. Are people homosexual because of their genetic and biological make-up, or because of the environment in which they are raised? In my opinion, the best answer is that offered by Fr. Francis Mark Mondimore, a clinical psychiatrist on the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel. In his book, A Natural History of Homosexuality (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), Mondimore writes:

*“Human sexuality, like our capacity for language and the complex set of capacities we call ‘intelligence,’ can only be understood as arising from a complex interplay of nature and nurture, psychology and biology, genes and environment.” (P. 147)*

On the question of whether a person can learn to be something other than homosexual, Mondimore concludes the following:

*Evidence from the neurobiology of development and learning explains why sexual orientation does not appear to be subject to change. Some behaviors, even behaviors acquired exclusively through learning, such as language, become embedded in the structure of the nervous system as they develop. By puberty, the brain has lost most of its capacity to undergo fundamental change. If sexual orientation is also one of these embedded behavioral characteristics, it should be no more possible to change one’s sexual orientation than it would be to change one’s native language....” (p. 156)*

As I read the evidence, even though it is piecemeal and not all in yet, it seems to point to the conclusion that for the person who is homosexual, it seems to make no difference what precise network of causes or conditions are the root of one’s homosexuality. Taken together the evidence points to the conclusion that no one chooses his or her sexual orientation (be it homosexual or heterosexual). Rather, we grow into our orientation. As Robert Nugent has stated in his article, “Homosexual Rights and the Catholic Community,” (Doctrine and Life 44 (1994): 166) *“From contemporary research in the development of sexual identity, sexual orientation seems to be discovered rather than chosen,”*

What I conclude from all of this is that homosexuality, no matter how one defines it, does in fact exist. If one defines it as a sexual orientation for a person of the same sex, its incidence in the general population is small. No one thing causes homosexuality, but many things working together in ways that we don’t yet fully understand.

But for those who are sexually oriented to people of the same sex, their orientation is not something they have chosen nor something which they can change. This suggests immediately that a Catholic pastoral response that seeks to change someone who is homosexual into someone who is heterosexual is misguided, doomed to failure and not appropriately respectful of the dignity of that person. An appropriate Catholic pastoral response will have to take as a given that some people are and will continue to be homosexual. The manner in which we accept this fact and live it in context of the Catholic faith will be considered in the following articles of this series.

**People of God**  
**Who Are Gay or Lesbian:**  
**A Roman Catholic Pastoral Response**  
by Fr. Joseph Fortuna  
*(Fourth in a series)*

One of the surprising things I've learned in preparing these articles is that it wasn't until the last third of the nineteenth century that the word "homosexuality" was used to describe a person with a predominant attraction to the same sex. Prior to that time, people weren't considered "heterosexual" or "homosexual." Rather, they were simply people who performed sexual "acts" with others of either sex.

What we would today call "sexual orientation" had no part as such in the development of the Catholic moral tradition regarding sexual acts between people of the same sex. What was given pride of place were some biblical passages forbidding certain sexual acts between people of the same sex (Gen. 19:1-29; Romans 1:24-27; I Corinthians 6:10; and I Timothy 1:10) and the natural law theory.

The natural law theory isn't exactly what its name implies. It doesn't mean "doing what comes naturally." The natural law theory starts from the presupposition that everything is created with a specific purpose or end. Every act of that creature ought to help realize or at least be consistent with that end. To use the technical language, every act of that creature ought to be "ordered to" that end. If an act does not help promote or is not consistent with that end, then it is "disordered." So, according to natural law theory, such disordered activity is evil and is to be avoided.

At the risk of oversimplifying, Catholic moral teaching says that the purpose of human sexual activity is twofold: (1) deepening the union of a husband and wife in marriage and (2) the procreation of children in this marriage. Any sexual activity which does not promote or is not consistent with these purposes is disordered. Such activity is evil and should be avoided.

These two parts of the Catholic moral tradition on homosexuality, i.e., scriptural prohibition of sexual acts between people of the same sex and natural law, are clearly evident in the summary of the Church's position which is offered in the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

*Homosexuality refers to relations between men or between women who experience an exclusive or predominant sexual attraction toward persons of the same sex. It has taken a great variety of forms through the centuries and in different cultures. Its psychological genesis remains largely unexplained. Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity, tradition has always declared that "homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered." They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved. (#2357)*

A clear signal that this paragraph of the catechism is a modern interpretation of Catholic moral teaching is its distinction between "a predominant sexual attraction to a person of the same sex" and sexual activity between people of the same sex. This is most often referred to as the distinction between "orientation" and "activity." It is this recognition of a particular sexual orientation that is relatively new to our tradition.

In 1986 Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger wrote a letter entitled, "On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons." In this letter he, too, recognizes the distinction between orientation and activity, but adds the following with respect to orientation: "The particular inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin."

Perhaps the most important reason why the Church does not consider the inclination itself sinful is that it recognizes that someone who genuinely has a homosexual orientation has not chosen that orientation. Sin implies freedom and choice. If the orientation is not chosen, it cannot be sinful.

Although the inclination or orientation is not chosen, sexual acts between people of the same sex are a result of choice. If someone can choose to commit a sexual act with a person of the same sex, that person can also choose not to commit such an act. The ability of a person to freely choose or not choose such an act is what underlies the Church's teaching that homosexual acts can and ought to be avoided.

It is for this reason that the Church does not approve homosexual activity, while at the same time accepts the God-given dignity of persons with a homosexual orientation. The Catechism puts it this way:

*Homosexual persons are called to chastity. By virtues of self-mastery that teach them inner freedom, at times by the support of disinterested friendship, by prayer and sacramental grace, they can and should gradually and resolutely approach Christian perfection. (#2359)*

Obviously, this creates a difficulty for the gay or lesbian person. On the one hand the Church accepts them as people with God-given dignity. On the other hand, it teaches that they may not act on an inclination which comes naturally to them. The Catechism recognizes this difficulty and calls on all people of faith to do the same:

*The number of men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies is not negligible. They do not choose their homosexual condition; for most of them it is a trial. They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. These persons are called to fulfill God's will in their lives and, if they are Christian, to unite to the sacrifice of the Lord's Cross the difficulties they may encounter from their condition. (#2358)*

It is not surprising that even though the Church's teaching calls for respect, compassion and sensitivity, many Catholics who are homosexual object to it. Again at the risk of oversimplifying, they claim that such respect, compassion and sensitivity are hollow. What good are these if their unchosen orientation means now that they must choose a life of celibate chastity?

In addition, many take issue with the phrase "unjust discrimination" in article #2358 quoted above. It seems to imply that there would be such a thing as "just discrimination" in their regard.

In fact, in June of 1992, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued a statement in which it stated that in certain situations discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation may be justified. The document entitled, "Some Considerations Concerning the Catholic Response to Legislative Proposal on the Non-Discrimination of Homosexual Persons," named these as such possible situations: The adoption of children; the hiring and firing of teachers; the housing needs of genuine families; landlords' legitimate concerns in screening potential tenants; and military recruitment.

"Free" choice of a lifetime of celibate chastity and the possibility of facing "just" discrimination have led many in the homosexual community to leave Roman Catholicism or to no longer consider its teaching credible.

As homosexuality becomes better understood, it is possible that Church teaching in this matter may develop and take on new nuances. But in the meantime the challenge to the entire Catholic community is to create a climate of welcome and respect. We must find ways to be with people of God who are gay or lesbian even as they struggle with what the Church teaches.

**People of God**  
**Who Are Gay or Lesbian:**  
**A Roman Catholic Pastoral Response**  
by Fr. Joseph Fortuna  
*(Fifth in a series)*

In the first several articles of this series I have discussed the need to address this topic. I have shared information on the meaning, experience, origins, and frequency of homosexuality. I have outlined the Roman Catholic Church's official teaching on homosexuality. But now it is time to switch gears a bit and move from information sharing to something more personal for all of us. The question to be considered is this: How do we respond to the people in our lives who are gay or lesbian?

I place the question in this way on purpose. I am presuming that the vast majority of us do have people in our lives who are gay or lesbian. We may not be aware of who they are, but I'm quite certain that most of us have friends, co-workers, acquaintances or even family members who are homosexual.

The fact that there may be people in our lives whose homosexuality is unknown to us is itself worth pondering. Certainly everyone, regardless of our sexual orientation, is entitled to privacy. And none of us shares certain aspects of our lives with anyone other than our close friends. But the fact that many gay or lesbian people in our lives do not let us know about their sexual orientation is an indicator of just how difficult it is for them to do so.

Part of the difficulty comes from the fact that there are people in our society who are bigots. "Gay-bashing" is not just a metaphor for verbal abuse. The incidences of known homosexuals who are beaten up and even killed simply because they are gay are many. In addition to overt physical harm, homosexual people suffer many forms of discrimination. Many lose "friends" once their orientation becomes known to them.

Another part of the difficulty homosexuals face in revealing their orientation comes from the fact that they are themselves often in the process of self-discovery. They only gradually may be discovering who they are, or only slowly admitting to themselves that this is in fact their reality. And it is important to recall that self-discovery and admission can be terrifying in a culture where stereotypes and prejudices diminish homosexual people.

When we consider all this, as well as the data I presented in an earlier article which indicated that there is no scientific reason to think that the sexual orientation of a person can be changed, it is apparent that any attempt to "cure" or "change" someone who is homosexual is misguided and inappropriate. Our deliberations lead instead in a different direction. An appropriate response to a person whom we have discovered is homosexual is to treat that person in a way that is non-judgmental and respectful.

Indeed, if we consider all that is at stake, if someone "comes out" to us the appropriate response might very well be to be grateful. Gratitude is an appropriate response anytime someone trusts us with something so important or anytime someone makes themselves so vulnerable. And because the person has made himself or herself so vulnerable to us, it also would be appropriate to be gentle and empathic. A self-disclosure as personal and risky as this presents an opportunity for increased understanding as well as for healing hurts and tempering fears.

Another very important part of our response to someone who is gay or lesbian is to monitor and be

honest about our own feelings. It is not uncommon for someone to feel strong unpleasant emotion upon learning that a friend or family member is homosexual. These feelings can arise spontaneously and can be destructive of us and the other if they are not recognized and dealt with.

For example, parents may feel guilty or somehow responsible for the sexual orientation of their child. They may be angry at themselves or their child. They may punish themselves for doing something wrong (even though they have no clue what this was!) A friend may be angry or upset because a gay or lesbian friend was not honest about who they were.

One of the more common reactions to someone coming out is fear. People may fear that a disclosure of a same-sex friend's homosexuality is an indication that they themselves might be homosexual. Often one's own lack of comfort with one's sexuality, no matter what the orientation, is increased when someone "comes out" to us. Even when a person is comfortable with their own sexuality, the disclosure of something as significant as a friend or family member's homosexual orientation will raise questions about what happens to the relationship now.

In my judgment, one of the most important things to remember when someone discloses their homosexuality to us is that this person is first of all a human person and our friend, son, daughter, etc. Every human person needs real friendship and healthy intimacy. (Note that real friendship and healthy intimacy are not to be confused with or reduced to genital sexual expression.) These require honesty and the risk of self-disclosure.

Relationships of all kinds and friendships in particular are often "messy." In any relationship our encounter with someone who is different than us, an "other," both challenges us and reveals something to us about ourselves. These challenges and revelations are places where God's grace can work in our lives, transforming fears, hate, bigotry and uncertainty into the justice and peace and love that is characteristic of the reign of God.

As Catholic Christians it is important for us to remember that the church does not consider a homosexual orientation to be a sin. I hope that all of us can be the kind of people with whom gay and lesbian can be free to be the people whom God has created them to be. I hope that God's loving presence may be more clearly manifested and not more obscured by what gay and lesbian people find in our response.

**People of God**  
**Who Are Gay or Lesbian:**  
**A Catholic Pastoral Response**  
by Fr. Joseph Fortuna  
(Last in a series)

This past Wednesday ABC TV reran the episode of “Ellen” in which she announced to her family and friends (and the world) that she is lesbian. Although I did not plan to frame this series of articles with this television episode, that this did in fact occur is a happy coincidence.

It is a happy coincidence because it allows me to state again one of the primary reasons for addressing this topic at all: Gay and lesbian people are in the public eye with increased frequency. But even though this is the case, misinformation and prejudice regarding homosexuals continues to be a problem. What seemed true at the start of this series seems true at the end: There is a need for us as Catholics to deliberately and sensitively form a just and pastoral response to people who are gay or lesbian.

My sense is that most parishioners acknowledge the importance and legitimacy of this effort. But some also have asked, “Why so much attention to this issue? Is something going on here?” These are very fair questions that deserve an honest response. The reason so much ink has been poured out is that an adequate treatment of the subject required it. Much of the misinformation and prejudice surrounding homosexuals comes from stereotypes, half-truths, scientifically questionable and insignificantly nuanced presentations of them. Prejudice also comes from a failure to understand the experience of being gay or lesbian. Misinformation comes from a lack of awareness of the church’s teaching. In other words, a Catholic pastoral response to gay and lesbian people of God requires compassion, sophistication and intellectual effort. Even the six articles in this series just scratch the surface.

But the other half of the question posed by parishioners must also be addressed, “Is something going on here?” From one point of view the answer is, “No.” This series did not originate as a response to difficulties, irregularities or injustices that are peculiar to Ascension Parish. It did not stem from complaints from or about people who are gay or lesbian.

From another point of view, however, the answer is, “Yes, there is something going on here.” First, what is going on is an attempt to increase awareness and understanding of homosexual people. Second, what is going on is the unseen and often silent struggle of people in our parish and neighborhood who are gay or lesbian to deal with their homosexuality. Third, what is going on are the parallel attempts of family and friends to love and support them in their struggle. These last two struggles have been going on in our midst for years. What is different now is that these struggles can be shared because we have a more compassionate understanding of what they involve.

A final and very important question must be addressed before this series concludes, namely, the role of gay and lesbian people of God in the Roman Catholic Church. The most obvious answer is suggested by a book title addressing this issue, “We Were Baptized, Too!” In other words, those baptized members of the church who are gay or lesbian have the same rights and responsibilities in our church as any other members of our church.

This means, for example, that gay and lesbian people can exercise the full range of liturgical ministries. They can be lectors, eucharistic ministers, ushers servers, cantors, choir members, preachers. It also means

they can and ought to be involved in the church's mission to care for the poor, for victims of injustice, for the sick, for those in any need. It means they can and ought to be consistently involved in evangelization, adult education, faith sharing and ongoing formation of conscience.

As for any member of the church, the right and responsibility of homosexual people to participate in the Church's mission is not without conditions. It presumes adequate training and formation, appropriate accountability to legitimate church authority, and adherence to Church teaching. Because these conditions are accepted and met, many homosexuals become priests or religious.

But gay and lesbian people are not just any members of our Church. Very often the effectiveness of a person's involvement in the faith community depends upon an ability to be open, honest and trusted. Faith sharing is stilted and artificial if the most important dimensions of who we aren't permitted to be disclosed.

All this implies that if gay and lesbian people are to assume their rightful roles in our church, then other church members must be willing to recognize and accept their gifts and participation in the Church's mission. What for the heterosexual majority of the baptized may be taken for granted or easily accepted may for the homosexual minority be not easily attained. If gay and lesbian people are to assume their rightful roles in our church, not only must they accept them, but so also must the rest of the people of God.

To conclude this series I offer a word of thanks to all who have read the articles with interest and respect. I thank those who have offered positive and constructive feedback. It is the mark of a maturing and healthy faith community that a topic as sensitive as this was received so responsibly. I am grateful to part of such a community.