

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING WHO WE ARE:

Finding Our Place as Catholic Lesbians

Karen A. Doherty

Meeting Other Catholic Lesbians

An unmet need for connection, support and affirmation was the spark behind the Conference for Catholic Lesbians (CCL) held at Kirkridge Retreat Center in November 1982. At that time, no Catholic women's or gay organization spoke sensitively to the needs of Catholic lesbians, or in many cases, even acknowledged our existence at all. Except for a small presence in Dignity, we were invisible and voiceless.

The goal of the first conference was to come together with others who identified as Catholic and as lesbian; but also to articulate how these two identifications were often at odds in our church, in the gay and lesbian community, and in us. To be one, we had to hide the other. This lack of authenticity and wholeness affected every part of our lives and spirituality.

The conference organizers asked the participants what they hoped to get out of the conference. Among the major themes were the following:

- A greater understanding of myself as a Catholic lesbian; establish friendships with other lesbian women who treasure and nurture their spiritual selves; support and direction.
- A renewal of my Catholic faith and a way to combine it with my lesbianism to a workable balance.
- Prayer & community in a supportive environment. For three years I experienced those elements as a Sister of Mercy. Though it's been five years since I left the community, the prayer, community and supportive atmosphere are still missed.
- Sharing ideas and experiences with other women of the same background and philosophy in an atmosphere of openness and acceptance. To be able to be proud of being a Catholic and a lesbian without punitive consequences.

- An answer to the question, “How can one be a sexually active lesbian and a Catholic?”
- Help toward resolving my indecision if a lesbian can be Christian, much less Catholic.
- To meet Catholic women, get a better view of women (gay) in the church and learn how to incorporate my Christian gayness in the straight world without becoming bitter.
- A sense of reassurance that Catholic lesbians have not abandoned the church; that God is an integral factor in other lesbians’ lives. An opportunity to discuss Catholicity with other lesbians.
- A greater appreciation of my place in the gay community as a deeply committed Christian woman.
- Meet new people, gain new insight, broaden my thinking and have fun.
- The opportunity to meet and talk with other Catholic lesbians. To share feelings/common problems. To be quite honest, just to be able to do something as a group of Catholic lesbians to come away with a feeling of belonging. That there really are more Catholic lesbians out there than the 1 or 2 we see at church occasionally.

What emerged from that weekend gathering was the realization that although there are many ways to identify as being Catholic or lesbian, we shared a bond to a faith with which we would always feel connected, even if we ceased to consider ourselves practicing church members.

What was special about Kirkridge and subsequent conferences was the opportunity to meet, hear and speak with other Catholic lesbians about shared gay experiences, especially the pain that often comes from a sense of rejection and exclusion. As one participant noted, “It is very rare to find lesbians who will own the fact that they have been/are part of the Catholic church. I hope to gain knowledge of other women’s experiences in order to share the past, and deal with the present with a new vision.”

Anger and Sadness

There is a lot of anger and sadness present in Catholic lesbians and gay men when it comes to our church. Our sexual orientation had to be kept bottled up and silent if we wanted to

continue to belong to our families and church. This inability to talk about our attractions and that part of us produced terrible conflict and pain. Our need to matter and our need to belong are as fundamental as our need to eat and drink. Ostracism—rejection, silence, exclusion—is one of the most powerful punishments that can be inflicted. Many of us left the church at that point, with a bitterness that came from feeling betrayed at our deepest core. When we needed kindness and understanding the most, our church utterly failed us.

There is some improvement in the atmosphere today, with dedicated parish ministries, people and clergy of good will who are warm and welcoming. Official church teaching now calls for tolerance and acceptance, but church practice frequently belies this. Countless stories continue to be recorded of lesbian and gay Catholics who are fired from parish or diocesan jobs simply for going public that they live in a same-sex relationship; couples who are booted out of pastoral ministries because they are married; and gay parents who have to constantly hear statements from church hierarchy that we are morally unfit to adopt or raise children. The church hierarchy continues to lead the charge that same-sex marriage will destroy the family, even civilization.

What is most laughable about this farce is that these statements are coming from mouths that have yet to publicly chastise and remove a brother bishop for protecting predator colleagues or priests at the expense of vulnerable children and young people. Gay men in the church have to deal with homophobia but Catholic lesbians have a double whammy: the issue of homosexuality, and the complete marginalization of ourselves as women.

In her testimony at a public hearing sponsored by the Boston Women's Ordination Conference, in spring 1980, Dr. Lorna Hochstein addressed the topic, "Woman and Roman Catholic: Is it Possible?" What she said was:

“No: it’s not possible to be a woman and a Roman Catholic. And yet I am. Somehow I am. I am because I was born a Catholic, because I was raised a Catholic, because I think in Catholic categories and speak in Catholic vocabulary. I am a Catholic because I miss that church’s rituals when I’m without them, and because a cross hung with a body speaks infinitely more to me than one without the body. I am Catholic because my heart and soul want to be Catholic. I’m a Catholic one day at a time, one week at a time, and I’m a Catholic with varying degrees of intensity. Each time I go to a liturgy, I make a deliberate choice. Each time I say “Yes, I am a Catholic,” it is because on that day I can somehow believe that I am whole, valuable, and complete person who is also a woman; and on that day I am able to be such a woman in a church which denies me recognition of my full humanity by saying I am not able, that I am not adequate, to represent the humanity of Christ.”

“I am a human being, a female human being, before I am Catholic. I am a female human being called by God to minister to others as fully as I am able, and because of this, I live as a witness to the sinfulness of my church, the church that presumes to know what it is that God wants for me. More than that, it presumes to know what God wants and doesn’t want for every single Catholic woman in the world. Before I was born, my church knew that God would never call me or any other woman to be a priest, deacon or altar server. Before any woman is born, the hierarchy of my church knows that “God the Father” will be enough for each and every one of us. How can they presume so much?”

“Today I am a Catholic. Tonight as I speak, I am a Catholic. But I am a woman first, and as such, I live on the boundary of that institution, with one foot already outside. So I manage to keep my own self whole. I keep my sanity and live with this contradiction. Today I am a Catholic. But tomorrow I might leave.”

In the 35 years since those words were spoken one thing changed: we now have female altar servers in many parishes. An overwhelming majority of people who identify themselves as Catholic support women’s ordination. They also support same-sex marriage in a higher proportion than the U.S. population as a whole. Then why does the institutional church remain so resistant to even talking about change?”

Courage

Nothing changes without courage. Perhaps the most important contribution we can make to our own liberation as lesbian and gay people is to come out—to family, friends, colleagues at work, school, organizations where we volunteer, and yes, to people we go to church with every

week. It takes a lot of courage to do this. And we might lose, perhaps forever, some people we love and admire, and much more.

The progress made in the cause of marriage equality over the last ten years is widely attributed to the greatly increased visibility of gay people. When I was growing up, I didn't know anyone who lived openly as a homosexual, much less as a homosexual couple. Now, just about everyone knows a friend, family member or co-worker who is gay or lesbian. They know them, love them, and we are a part of each other's life. Getting to know who we are as people—and as part of a couple—has made all the difference to our safety, dignity and respect.

Imagine the immediate change in the Catholic church if every lay person, priest, sister, bishop, cardinal, teacher, student, university administrator, health professional, writer, theologian, social service worker, everyone who is gay and works or is active in a Catholic institution, put on a lavender star and announced they are gay or lesbian... Just imagine how much would change in that moment. It's great to dream about, but it is not going to happen, because of fear and the retaliation that would occur.

As theologian Dr. Mary E. Hunt pointed out in a May 2013 article in the National Catholic Reporter,

“Courage is an old-fashioned virtue that comes in many forms: physical, social and political. I have paid attention to it of late—both in its absence and presence—in the hope that highlighting courage will make it multiply. A dose of courage would go a long way toward solving many ecclesial and civil problems.”

“I ponder how or if one can compel another to act courageously. Do we have the right to expect mere human beings will surmount self-interest and act for the common good? I am not naïve about how complicated many decisions are –weighing competing goods, preventing bad outcomes, limiting damage, and all the other complexities that make up a moral calculus. But I do know that courage needs to come back into fashion in a big way.”

My favorite story of courage is about my friends, Leah Vader and Lynne Huskinson, a lesbian couple living in Wyoming. In 2006 they married in Canada, and sent a letter to their state legislator several months later decrying a state bill that would deny recognition of same-sex marriages. The lawmaker read their letter on the floor of the Legislature.

Soon after, a local newspaper interviewed the couple on Ash Wednesday, and ran a story and photo of them with ash on their foreheads, a mark of their faith. Not long after that the couple received a letter from their pastor, the Rev. Cliff Jacobson: “It is with a heavy heart, in obedience to the instruction of Bishop David Ricken, that I must inform you that, because of your union and your public advocacy of same-sex unions, that you are unable to receive Communion.” The letter shocked Leah, who received communion every week until forbidden by Rev, Jacobson’s letter. “This is all the food we need,” she said.

The bishop said the couple’s sex life constitutes a grave sin, “and the fact that it became so public, that was their choice.” “If all this stuff hadn’t hit the newspaper, it wouldn’t have been any different than before—nobody would have known about it,” said Fr. Jacobson. “The sin is one thing. It’s a very different thing to go public with that sin.” “We’re not the bedroom police,” he said. “That ultimately comes between the person and God, but it puts it in a much different light with a public nature.”

The couple never made any secret of their relationship. In front of their home were statuettes of two kissing Dutch girls. The couple posed for a family photo with Vader’s children from a previous marriage for the church directory and the church has sent mail to both of them at the same address for years.

Huskinson questioned why Catholics having premarital sex and using birth control are not barred from receiving communion, too. Fr. Jacobson said the difference was other Catholics

are “not going around broadcasting, ‘Hey I’m having sex outside of marriage” or “I’m using birth control.” But, they do. How many 8, 9, 10, 12 children families have you seen at church lately?

Courage comes in many forms and takes many faces. It took a great deal of courage for many women to write a letter to CCL’s post office box with their real name and address in hopes of making contact.

“I am a 50 year old woman, divorced, mother of two grown children (with whom I have close loving relationships), administrative officer in a human services agency, a lay pastoral minister for the — Diocese, and an Oblate of the ---. I feel I am a well balanced person who has a variety of interests, gets along well with people, and who is striving to live a peaceful and loving life. The glitch is that I am a “closet” Lesbian. I feel certain there are other people in the world, who are like me—who want to live wholesome, full lives, and are persons of faith. I would like to connect with a group or some individuals with whom I could share companionship, support, and be able to be open, authentic, and find acceptance.”

I don’t remember what happened to this particular woman, but I hope we were able to direct her to an area contact or group that would welcome her. It is very hard, impossible, I think, to be courageous alone. You need a group, or support network, or a lover to help inspire and give you strength.

There were other women who—for very good and prudent reasons—could not be public but sent expressions of support. I wrote to one woman about joining us at the gay pride day parade in New York City and received this reply:

“Right now I can’t afford any publicity even though I back the cause 100%,” the letter began. “I am a teacher in a Catholic elementary school in New Jersey. It is the only job I have now and cannot afford to put the job in jeopardy. I lived with someone for 7 ½ years who died about a year and a half ago. We were very much in love with each other and I am still grieving over her loss. Ethel was sick for many years before she died since she was a diabetic and has left many medical bills behind that I am still paying for. The pieces of my life have shattered since her death and I am still trying to put them back together. There is not much of a support system for a lesbian losing her lover. It has been a long hard road for me and sometimes I feel I can never recover, the pain can be so great. Because of my job and financial commitments I have to repay money for Ethel’s

care I cannot come “out of the closet.” However, if I could be of any service to CCL in a behind the scenes capacity I would be more than willing to do what I can. I hope you can understand my predicament. If there is any way I can be of service please don’t hesitate to let me know.”

When I put the letter down, paused and closed my eyes to think about her, a quote from Helen Keller came to mind: “I long to accomplish a great and noble task, but it is my chief duty to accomplish humble tasks as though they were great and noble. The world is moved along, not only by the mighty shoves of its heroes, but also by the aggregate of the tiny pushes of each honest worker.” This woman had performed a great and noble task by her loving care and responsibility for Ethel. I’d like to think that this devotion has been recognized by Ethel’s medical practitioners, neighbors, friends and families.

Courageous acts of big shoves and little pushes help to change the church. We need to encourage them. I have fallen short on courage many times: the remarks and jokes I have let go by; the countless calculations of whom to trust, how much to disclose, what to risk, opinions suppressed, comments reined in; interests concealed. After each time I have kept silent or didn’t speak out, I pick myself up and resolve to do better. I also pray that if I am called to risk much by identifying clearly who I am, whom I love and what I believe, that I will conduct myself with the same grace and bravery, as Leah Vader, Lynne Huskinson and Dr. Mary Hunt.

Desire

Desire sharpens every cell of our awareness and makes us feel alive. This is especially true for lesbians, when we feel the first rush of arousal. Sometimes this first happens in dreams, sometimes just seeing a particular woman across a room or just being overwhelming aware of her presence if she is standing close by. I was first aware of my desire for a friend in high school, and the power of that first desire stayed with me until my first sexual experience with a woman 10 years later. I have been asked what sex between women is like. It is different than sex with

men. A simple answer is that it is more playful, and also more intense. Sexuality is about pleasure, but it is equally about connection and intimacy, emotions and states of being that are not limited to simply a union between a male and female for the purpose of procreation.

The sex drive is so strong in human beings, so important, lesbians will risk their reputation, family, friends, life—everything, to be with the woman they want and love. How more romantic can you get that? Many lesbians, myself included, felt a sense of confusion replaced with relief when we understood our desire was for women, not men. The duplicity, the pretending, the fear was replaced by a discovery of our authentic selves.

The church offers women two options for sex: sex with her husband for the purpose of becoming pregnant (to bring life into the world); or no sex at all by living a chaste life. The idea of getting pregnant by a man you love and are married to is a beautiful thing. I am happy for all the women and men who have desired that wonderful experience and have the gift of a child.

“Life-giving” intercourse is not limited to a man and woman; it can also be experienced by two women or two men in a passionate, giving and mutually-affirming sexual relationship. When you have sex with someone you love, whatever you do becomes another way of expressing your love and desire.

“How do I reconcile the Church’s reaction to the expression of love and the fact that I live in an openly lesbian relationship? Perhaps it is the wrong question,” said Maggie Redding, the founder of the Catholic Lesbian Sisterhood of Great Britain.

“Most of the Church’s teaching on sexuality is based on male sexuality. There is very little understanding of female sexuality. So I am firmly convinced the Church’s teaching embodies only half the truth.”

“Female sexuality is different from male sexuality. It is much less easy to define what is a sexual act, especially in the expression of love between women. It is my passionate belief that women, especially lesbian women, have much to offer in the understanding of and

solutions to questions about sexuality that are causing the Church great pain and conflict. Besides, we are the Church, too.”

Relationship with God

At the first conference at Kirkridge, one of the workshop speakers, Dr. Lorna Hochstein, talked about our relationship with God. She asked us to reflect on the ways in which our relationships with ourselves, with others and with God are affected by the degree to which we acknowledge to ourselves and others that God created us lesbian. Because of that fact we live, love and experience God and the world in a special, particular and complementary way.

Dr. Hochstein told participants that she was not proposing that they disclose their sexual orientation regardless of consequences. But she repeatedly pointed out that invisibility and silence in themselves have consequences: “There are consequences in our relationships with others and thus with God when we choose to keep silent—consequences which affect our understanding of ourselves and the world’s understanding of us. But more important, consequences which affect our understanding and the world’s understanding of God.”

My own relationship with God had been shriveled and bitter for many years. I blamed God for my alcoholism with its horrible pain and loneliness. I wouldn’t set foot in a church I was so angry at God. I was not alone in my feeling of anger: “For the past several months,” a woman wrote, “my personal life has been rather chaotic. And unfortunately, one of the results of that chaos is a great deal of anger directed at God. Despite having physically left the Church, several years ago, that is a new emotion for me. I think the only way I am going to get over that anger is to deal with it directly, a kind of one on one with God. I think all I’m capable of right now is going back to Mass and working through the anger.” We were both estranged from God. The writer’s goal was a one-on-one encounter, but mine was to walk away.

God and I are getting along better these days, although the relationship is not perfect. Over time, and with much searching and self-forgiveness, I have changed the way I see myself, and this has changed how I perceive God. The less harsh and more understanding we are with ourselves and others; the more God has become a close presence of awareness rather than a remote figure of judgment. I can feel God in the beauty of the sun on rippling water in a bay; or in the melody of a hymn everyone enjoys singing together.

One problem lesbian and gay Catholics face is that others attempt to stand between us and God. If we let this happen, we allow ourselves to be marginalized. This is the agenda of particularly conservative or traditionalist Catholics, who are happy to position God in judgment of others whose opinions, values and “lifestyles are those which traditionalists find distasteful. These conservative Catholics often point to laws in the Bible as justification for how they act and what they say. As for members of the church hierarchy condemning homosexuality, the institution has been discredited by its own hypocrisy on sexual standards and activity, particularly the sexual abuse of children and young people. Bishops as a group have been discredited not only by the behavior of those who protected predator priests, but by all the rest who said and did nothing. By remaining silent and doing nothing, they lost their moral authority.

It is ironic to contemplate that the success of Jesus’ ministry and sacrifice was built on St. Peter’s rejection of legalism. In a dream, God commanded Peter not to exclude others from receiving the “Good News.” “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile;” said St. Peter, “but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.” This change of heart by St. Peter changed the whole course of Christianity. In the 1992 book, *The Acts of the Apostles*,” theologians Luke Timothy Johnson and Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., write that this episode not only signifies a radical change in Peter’s identity as a

member of “God’s people,” but also “the implication is that all things God created are declared clean by him, and are not affected by human discriminations.”

Faith

Where does Faith begin? Mine began with a gift. May is typically the month for confirmations, and every May at Pentecost I remember my own, at St. Paul’s in Princeton, NJ. As we were getting ready for church, my sponsor came to the house. Unexpectedly, she brought another woman with her—a woman she introduced as her roommate. I hope I was friendly when we met, I was nervous and numb, and afraid Bishop Ahr would ask me a question I couldn’t answer. Too many times I went outside to play baseball or shoot hoops instead of sitting in the kitchen memorizing my confirmation questions.

My sponsor’s friend was named Joan. She said she wanted to come and meet me. She had heard a lot about me from my sponsor, and she wanted to give me a gift on the occasion of my confirmation. It was her own statue of the Blessed Mother, given to her many years before.

The note that accompanied her gift read:

To Karen on her confirmation, May 31, 1965

Most Holy Mary, my Lady, to your blessed trust and special custody, and into the bosom of your mercy, I this day, every day, and in the hour of my death, commend my soul and my body. To you I entrust all my worries and miseries, my life and the end of my life, that by your most holy intercession and by your merits all my actions may be directed and disposed according to your will and that of your Divine Son. Amen

The bottom of the note was signed, “Sincerely, Joan S-“

I never saw her again, or heard from her, or heard of her. I did not know who she was, or what her relationship was to my sponsor, although I suspect I do now. My sponsor, parents and I went off to St. Paul’s for the ceremony. At the altar rail, my sponsor gave my shoulder a reassuring squeeze as the bishop approached. I stopped being nervous. Like a ghostly visitation that replays itself every May anniversary, I see a tall woman with short brown hair smile warmly at a

shy and nervous 12-year-old in a white robe and red cap. She entrusts her with a precious gift, one she hopes will protect and comfort her always.

How is Faith lost? When trust is lost. In an article that I wrote for CCL's newsletter, "Images," I asked: "what can we do if we are not reaching you?" I was touched by several of the responses I received. One letter began:

"When you wrote, "If we are not reaching you . . .the memories of the great bond, the exhilarating feeling of the fall [conference] of '88, all make me want to reach out to you and the women who helped make it possible with an embrace. 'Cause you all filled a great void in me at that time.

But I have a personal problem to deal with now. To a question of faith, the need for it, the lack of it, the search for it. My faith has been going down steadily for a long time now, until I can come to the point of saying: I am not a Catholic anymore, I don't believe in the Catholic church, I don't care for what it represents, and I don't care to change it because it should be replaced. I even feel that the women who are trying to be part of it, of having a voice there, should reconsider being part of a religion in the name of which millions of human beings have lost their lives (remember the Inquisition, the Holocaust).

And yet last February, when I last got together with a CCL group I felt good. But it was the bonding with the women, not Christianity.

I have met a woman with whom I have been going for about 6 weeks now and she is a Buddhist. I am exploring her faith, her religion. I have to do now you may ask, Quo Vadis Anno? Ex-nun, ex-cab driver, ex-actress, now future monk? But it is not that bad. Don't be surprised to find a check in the mail one day. Not as a renewal, but as a sign of support. Because I care for the women of CCL.

How is faith renewed? By unexpected ways. Another woman responded in this way:

"I decided to write a note with my new membership check & tell you about me and why I joined you. I lost my life partner of 17 years, Laurie on April -, 198- to ovarian cancer. She and I had met as Little Falls Franciscans and lived together after we left the religious community. We remained closeted in our work places but built friendship (including many ex-nuns) & family support throughout those 17 years together.

When Laurie was dying, last Feb. she wrote her funeral liturgy & there was no doubt that it would be a Catholic/Franciscan ceremony. She incorporated religious songs she loved, wrote her petitions wherein I was proudly recognized as her life partner, had Offertory gifts brought up including our ring, symbolizing our life together & gave instructions on her homily, making sure that I was recognized and a part of it. The church held 400-500 of our families (hers & mine), friends & co-workers who flew in from 8 states. Laurie

used the Catholic ritual of the Mass to say farewell to us and give our lives together respect & honor.

I share this with you because if you had heard Laurie & me discuss the Catholic Church throughout the years you would have heard criticism, disgust, sarcasm & hurt over our unacceptance as lesbians & our second class status as women. We talked often of a church we wanted to support & grow in but for that growth we began to look elsewhere.

Now I am grateful to the Church for the gift it has given me through its ritual & music, which Laurie used to say good-bye & which she transformed for us as a final tribute to all that she loved. It – the Church – came through for us in the end. My best wishes to you as you continue to publish issues that need to be dealt with, as you encourage community & foster individual spiritual-human growth.”

For many decades my faith as flickered as a tiny candle in a dark cold night. I could never understand why it did not go out, but it never did. One time on retreat, the woman who was my spiritual director asked me how I could call myself “Catholic” when I never went to church or received communion. I can’t recall my answer, but it was probably something like I couldn’t stand the church, but I felt connected to experiences and values growing up and at school. But, her comment bothered me, because some part of it rang true.

Some years after that comment, acknowledging there was a place inside of me that was empty and lonesome, my life partner, Lori (now my wife) and I began attending our neighborhood church. We registered as a “Family.” As such, we received a box of weekly donation envelopes with both our names on it. Our good friend, Sr. Jeannine Gramick of New Ways Ministry, used our comment – “You know you’ve really made it when both names on are the envelope” in her film, “In Good Conscience.” We thought it was quite funny, but it was also quite an acknowledgement.

After some weeks of attending Mass regularly, we volunteered to help out on the social justice committee, and sold Fair Trade coffee after Mass. We made a lot of good friends, and got to know people and they got to know us. Participation in the weekly liturgy, the good

community, volunteering with others, the works of charity, and being reminded of other needs besides my own, helped me to return and belong more fully to my faith.

I still and will always have trouble with the sexist language and the way some bishops and church officials pound away over issues like gay marriage. But, in our church, we both have a place. Doubt and Discouragement are my ever-present companions in the pew every Saturday at 4 o'clock Mass, but they have to move over to make room for Hope and Faith.

Catholic and Lesbian

I went through the entire history of the Conference for Catholic Lesbians (1982-1996) in preparation for this article. In the many letters, notes, articles and comments I read, all the women, regardless of where they were on the spectrum of being Catholic and lesbian, said the same thing: it is very important for me to be who I am. I need to discover all of who I am and would like to do this within a community where I feel safe and understood. I want to be with others where I will feel supported and affirmed in my spiritual and sexual identity. And most of all, I would like to be heard and respected as I talk or pray from the reality of my life.

Susanne S. wrote an op-ed piece for her local paper called, "At Peace with Faith, Sexuality," For those of us who identify as Catholic and lesbian, it elegantly, and very simply and clearly articulates how we have reconciled what appears on the surface to be a contradiction in terms.

"When I was growing up," she writes, "I had two passions: one was God, the second was women. Though I have gone through a lot of soul searching with both, neither of those things has changed. I always felt a deep reverence and comfort in the church, and most specifically the Catholic Church. Two years ago, I converted to the Catholic faith, something I had wanted to do all my life. Fortunately, I found a wonderful parish to do this in.

Two years ago, in June, I rediscovered my true sexuality. My sexuality has been a little less easily professed than my faith in God, since, of course, there are so many attitudes that work to repress it. However, through this blessing, I realize life is not worth living

unless I can include this part of myself, no more than it is worth living if I cannot profess my faith. All the wonderful feelings I had left behind, along with my ability to write poems, came back to me. I felt whole again. Even without a significant relationship on the horizon, my life has continued to become so much brighter.

To many people my being so intensely Catholic and lesbian at the same time may seem hypocritical. After all, doesn't the Catholic Church condemn lesbianism and homosexuality in general? And to many feminists and lesbians, Catholicism represents the height of the patriarchy.

Yet for me there is no conflict of interest. I recognize the church as an imperfect, human interpretation of Christ's perfect teachings. I do not believe every word in the Bible is true, or that our pope speaks for God. What I do believe is that God in His/Her infinite wisdom and compassion can bring forth inspiration in spite of prejudice.

The Catholic faith speaks to me, not because it is accurate in hierarchy or rule, but because it feels accurate to me in feeling and in spirit. I also know, unlike many women who are not lesbian and fear the idea of lesbianism, that love as a lesbian is as Godly as heterosexual love is. My feelings are an experience of joy that matches the joy I feel when I watch a priest consecrate the host or present us with a newly baptized child.

I am sorry that there is so much fear and cynicism in the world that some straight people look at my lesbianism as sad and misguided (or worse), and some lesbians look at my love for the Catholic Church as naïve or anti-woman. I hope one day there will be more people who can see the ability to marry their faith with their sexuality. I thank God for both of those parts of me."

"Ephphatha" – Be Opened

The need to speak, to be heard, to be brought out of silence and isolation into openness to God and others was one of Jesus' miracles, perhaps one of his most important works. In the Gospel of Mark (7:31-37) there is one small, but very important word - a word that in its deepest meaning sums up the whole ministry and message of Christ. This word, "Ephphatha," means "Be opened." The gospel reading says:

"Again Jesus left the district of Tyre
and went by way of Sidon to the Sea of Galilee,
into the district of the Decapolis.
And people brought to him a deaf man who had a speech impediment
and begged him to lay his hand on him.
He took him off by himself away from the crowd.
He put his finger into the man's ears

and, spitting, touched his tongue;
then he looked up to heaven and groaned, and said to him,
"Ephphatha!"-- that is, "Be opened!" --
And immediately the man's ears were opened,
his speech impediment was removed,
and he spoke plainly.
He ordered them not to tell anyone.
But the more he ordered them not to,
the more they proclaimed it.
They were exceedingly astonished and they said,
"He has done all things well.
He makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."

The historical and literal meaning of this passage is that, thanks to Jesus' intervention, a deaf mute's ability to hear and to speak were restored. Before he had been closed, isolated, and limited in his ability to communicate. His recovery brought him an "openness" to others and to the world, and through his new ability to communicate, he would relate to the world in a new way. On a spiritual level, this passage describes the closing of the deepest core of a person, what the Bible calls the "heart." It is the heart that Jesus came to liberate— to "open" —to enable us to fully live our relationship with God and with others. It is a gesture of healing we remember and honor every time the Gospel is read: Open my mind, my mouth, my heart, to receive your holy words.

This miracle stands in stark contrast to much of the hierarchy of the church, which does not want to hear what women, gay people and their advocates have to say, which wants to remain deaf, and which also wants these same groups to remain mute. Perhaps the openness that inspires Pope Francis to reach out to people on the margins, to hear the words of different kinds of people, to engage those of us that have been closed off is the miracle for which we have been waiting.

