



ELEPHANTS IN THE LIVING ROOM A PANEL DISCUSSION ON SEMINARY FORMATION OF HOMOSEXUAL CANDIDATES

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FRED DALEY TALK ON HOMOSEXUALITY

SS. SIMON & JUDE, WESTLAND

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INTRODUCTION

TONY KOSNIK

Found out a few minutes ago that our main speaker this afternoon is an acquaintance I met 20-30 years ago when I was still in the seminary at Orchard Lake. He was then vocation director for the Diocese of Syracuse where he comes and as a good vocation director came to visit his seminarians. So it is a real pleasure to introduce you to Fr. Fred Daley, a priest from the Syracuse Diocese who has a very impressive record of accomplishment. He has been director of vocations of the Diocese. He has been president of the Presbyteral Council. He's been the pastor for some 16 years of St. Francis de Sales, an inner city parish with a very interesting history of accomplishment on his part. Talk about transforming a parish. What he did is in his some 13 years there he took the convent and turned it into a house of refuge for immigrants. He took the rectory and made it a shelter for young girls from the street. He bought a crack house across the street from the rectory and turned that into a soup kitchen and he opened up affordable child care for people in the parish and a tremendous accomplishment for a pastor for which he was given an honor by the Cornhill neighborhood for his great work there. But you can see from the appointments in the Diocese and from his work. In addition to that he has done extensive overseas work with the Maryknoll missionaries in Mexico, with a number of organizations to get that world-wide experience that is part of his background. And so I know of no one who comes to us on this topic with the kind of personal experience and richness of background to address it. He came out 2 years ago acknowledging his gay identity and continues to serve in his parish. I don't know if 2 years after the announcement he's much more at peace. And then when I left the priesthood to become married, I consulted with my spiritual director, he said, you know it seems like you are crossing an ocean, but when you get on the other side you are going to find out it's a little stream. (Laughter) I hope Father Fred is comfortable, certainly in this group he will be, but we welcome him with open arms and deep gratitude for sharing his wealth of experience with us. Father Fred...(applause)

SHARING THE STORY OF HIS STRUGGLE WITH BEING HOMOSEXUAL IN THE

WORLD AND IN THE CHURCH

FR. FRED DALEY

Thanks Tony for your very kind words and certainly appreciate the hospitality and someone told me that it's sunny and beautiful like this in Detroit everyday. (Laughter) I certainly appreciate the privilege to share with you today and very impressed with this when Bishop Gumbleton invited me to the Elephants I thought, well this is something really new. But wow, what a great organization and what a sign of hope and fire in the midst of some pretty dark cold days, I think, in the church at large. So keep up the good work it's a great sign of hope.

I'd like to share my remarks this afternoon sort of by beginning if we look at many of the painful issues of our world we know some of the liberation theologians have sort of talked about the spiral of violence that begins with ignorance. And ignorance leads to fear. And fear leads to hatred. And very often then hatred leads to violence. And I think that cycle of violence that we see in many ways tearing apart our world is very true in this issue of sexual orientation. So many of the problems around this issue is based on ignorance. And I would say that in my own struggle, this has been a very difficult struggle in my life, primarily because of ignorance in my journey and in my life. And basically what I'm going to do this afternoon is share my story and to set the tone for that I just want to mention some very simple points that are really mainline in understanding this issue that probably need to be sort of proclaimed from the housetop so I'd like to begin by mentioning these.

The first one to be that a person's orientation is pretty well set by the time they are 3 or 4 years old, the behavioral scientists tell us.

Secondly, no one chooses their orientation. I don't think there is anybody in the room here who remember the day you decided to be straight or gay or bisexual or trans-gendered or whatever.

And thirdly, all the empirical scientists to this day simply don't have an answer to why one's orientation is what it is. But there is a very good understanding that if we had a spectrum between 1 and 10 and 10 being exclusively heterosexual that probably 90 percent plus of the population tends towards number 10. And 10% or under, tends towards number 1 which would be exclusively homosexual. And people are all along that spectrum from 1 to 10, the middle being bi-sexual. And the why we don't know but most of the myths that most of us were brought up with have been discounted. We used to hear a lot well a boy is gay because the father was very passive and the mother was very strong. Well I'm a twin (Laughter) and my twin brother is very heterosexual, married with 4 children. Or we hear myths, all kinds of myths around the why. But the best theory to date like on so many issues is tending towards the genetic. In the same way some people have blue eyes and some people have blond hair. Some people are gay and most people are straight and whatever. I'd also want to mention that in the area of scripture studies, most of the main line even conservative Catholic scripture scholars and the mainline Christian scripture scholars, Lutheran, Methodist, Episcopal or whatever have come to 2 very clear points that are so critical when we look at this issue. And one is that the 6 areas in the Hebrew scriptures and in the New Testament that mention homosexuality, none of them are speaking of sexual orientation as we know it today. And their second point, which is so crucial to this, none of those 6 areas in scripture can be used as a proof text to either point out the morality or immorality of homosexual orientation as we know it today. That's very, very important. That's not Fred Daley saying that but you couldn't find a mainline scripture scholar who would use the bible to sort of hit us over the head when it comes to this issue. So I just sort of share that as a little sort of setting the tone for what I want to share today.

From the time I was a little boy I somehow knew I was different. I didn't know why, I didn't have an understanding of it, but deep in my gut I knew I was different. As a got a little bit older when I heard the words faggot and fairy and queer. Didn't have a clue what they meant but somehow I felt deep within me that they were saying something about ME. And somehow I was getting the message that there was something wrong with me, that I was a mistake. And as I look back, even though again consciously not understanding homosexuality at all, I got the message that somehow being different, the culture was telling me I was a mistake, my church was telling me I was a mistake and even my family, unintentionally, was telling me I was a mistake. Because deep down there was a gut feeling that somehow I connected with those things.

And so, I can remember, at an early age, sort of coming to a conclusion that if I couldn't be accepted for who I am well then I certainly will make sure I'm accepted for what I do; and so, as a little kid I became the best little boy in the world. I was the class president and I was the kid who always helped people out around the neighborhood. I was going to make sure that people liked me for what I did. And all of this I am in touch with now as I reflect back. I remember when I grew into adolescence I began to have sexual thoughts and feelings. I didn't understand them but boy I knew that they were bad.

I remember when I was a freshman in high school in our parish, back then we would have parish missions for teenagers. And a guest priest would come in. And the church was a large suburban parish would be filled with high school kids. Hundreds of high school kids for this week retreat. And on the last night of the retreat, the topic of the retreat was sex. And they would invite in all the neighboring priests to come to make sure that all the kids went to confession after this talk on sex. (Laughter) So, I can remember waiting in the confession line and I was really, I was scared to death, I can remember my knees shaking you know. And I got in there and the screen opened up, and I happened to go to the retreat master. And I said "Bless me father for I have sinned" and then I mentioned my usual, fought with my brothers and sister, (Laughter) disobeyed my parents and then I whispered, I said, "I had impure thoughts and actions with myself". And he said "What". He said "Do you realize if you continue doing that you are going to go right to hell". And at that point I thought Hell was better than just being there in this situation (Laughter). So he said to me "Here's what I want you to do". He said "When you go home, every time you have one of those bad thoughts and feelings, I want you to take a pack of matches, and I want you to light a match and I want you to burn the tip of your finger (audience is alarmed) with that match so that you'll really understand what the fires of hell are like if you continue those thoughts, feeling and activities". So I always joke I wonder I have any fingers left. (Laughter) I always did what the priest told me to do you know. But all I can say about all that is I just somehow saw that the little I understood of my sexuality was bad, was awful was sinful and very negative.

I can remember in the middle of my high school years when I seriously started considering the priesthood. That I can remember the moment that it dawned on me well if I'm going to be a priest I can't have these sexual thoughts and feelings and sex just can't be part of my life. Now again, consciously, I wasn't understanding at all my orientation. You know I could not consciously even imagine that, although looking back the thoughts and feelings were very much that way. I can remember making a decision to just cut that area out of my life. It's actually possible to consciously repress areas of your life. And so in the middle of my high school years, I repressed my sexuality and literally became asexual for the last couple of my high school years through my 4 years of college seminary, my 4 years of theology and the first couple of years of priesthood.

I can remember when we were preparing for ordination to diaconate which is where we made the promise to celibacy I went into my spiritual director and he said "Fred, how's celibacy" you know, we never had any classes on celibacy or any talks on celibacy or anything you know. It was unspoken. And he said you know "How's celibacy, you think that is going to be a problem for you?" I said "Oh, no not at all". I might as well have promised going to the moon, you know, I had no clue of what that was all about.

So I was ordained a priest in May of 1974 and really loved what I was doing. I loved the priesthood. I was very effective in what I was doing. And I can remember probably a couple of years after being ordained, one morning I was coming down the stairs from the rectory to go over to St. Agnes Church for early morning mass. And as my feet touched the ground I became

aware of like an ache within me, a pain within me. That deep down within I just knew that something wasn't right. And I found that by working hard and things I could sort of get rid of that. But it sort of bubbled up from all this repression. And I learned rather quickly, coming from an Irish Catholic family that a couple of drinks would take care of that ache for a while. And one day, I was on vacation, out of town, I think I was out of state and almost impulsively I went to a gay bar. Now to this day I don't know how I ever found the gay bar. This was before I could even voice to myself that I was gay. I was still denying all of that. And I spent the evening at the gay bar. And I walked out of there getting back into my car and I can remember feeling terrible. And I was saying to myself "I no longer can deny the fact that I am the faggot, the queer, the sissy that I've always been afraid of". And I would rather have been dead when I came to that conclusion. And I remember the first thing I did was look for a Catholic rectory where I could find a priest to go to confession because somehow I felt like boy I had really gotten off of this good little boy track. And I found a priest. And I can remember hoping that he would be very stern with me and tell me how awful I was to even think of going to a place like that and that I had better get back on the straight and narrow. But that priest wasn't that way at all and he was very compassionate.

And it was the next week that I had scheduled to go on retreat. And I went to a Jesuit retreat center in Syracuse, was assigned a Jesuit Fr. Paul Curtain. And that was first person I then was able to open up and begin to share who I was. And again, it wasn't at all positive or pleasant. The goal of that retreat for me was hoping to be told that I needed to be on the straight and narrow and any of those thoughts and feelings and being gay was bad and evil and that was where I was at. And by the grace of God, Fr. Paul Curtain didn't give me that information. And for the next 10 years I was involved in spiritual direction with him. And he began to help me break through, not only the denial that was within me, but break through the terrible self image I had of who I was and help me to accept who I was as a person. And I was touched today in the prayer, Psalm 139 was the psalm that he gave me on retreat and has stayed with me. And it was like an experience of liberation to finally be able to believe that God has searched me and that God knows me and knows every part of my inward being and has created me that way.

But the journey to self acceptance didn't happen overnight. In fact the journey took me about 20 years. Discovered a lot of depression within me, discovered that being addicted to work alcohol became an abuse in my life. At one point the depression got so difficult that I asked the bishop if I could go to a treatment center to get some help and always been grateful that the diocese allowed me to do that - never shared with the bishop what was going on within me with all of this. But ultimately, through my spiritual journey, with a lot of help and support and counseling, I was able, not only to accept who I was, who God created me to be, but has been able to rejoice in who I am, that I am created in God's image and likeness out of love. And it's been a tremendous gift.

What has it done for my ministry? Henry Nouwen was always saying that we are compassionate to the extent we have experienced the passion in our own lives. And I must say through this journey, it's really helped me in my ministry to identify with others who are on the margins, others who are excluded, others who are going through terrible pain in their lives. At 12 step meetings they say religion is for people who are afraid of going to hell. And I was certainly in that category for many years. Spiritually is for people who've already been to hell (Laughter) and I sort of feel that in many ways, my journey has been that way.

I'm very grateful today that my journey of self acceptance, with all the pain and suffering that was part of it, has sort of – (???)if it would ever sort of clerical, patriarchal, on the pedestal type

of stuff that might have been within me boy, this struggle and journey has gotten rid of an awful lot of that.

I've come to discover that I'm a priest who's gay without apology. I've begin to discover that many of the gifts that I have for priesthood are because of my orientation. There's a lot of studies now pointing out that many men who are gay are in the human services fields, in the medical fields, social services and the like. We've been gifted through our struggle to be more in touch with the masculine and the feminine side of our personalities which bring out wonderful gifts. We know in other spiritual traditions, like the Native American traditions, very often gay and lesbian people are sort of the spiritual gurus of the community. The reason I think many gay men have been, and continue to be called to priesthood is because of who we are and how wonderful it is if we can celebrate that.

I choose celibacy today primarily because it's the discipline of the church today for those who are called to ministry. But certainly no statement that sexual expression is in any way evil or wrong. My spiritual journey now at 58 years old, is sort of to internalize that choice for celibacy. Many people in the midst of that struggling with the issues we all struggle with - the need for intimacy - the need to love and be loved. And can I do that in my life as a celibate without it doing violence to me is my question on a day to day basis.

Finally, I'd like to just share a little bit of well it's great it's wonderful that you came in touch with yourself, only took you 25 years. Great, but why did you have to tell the whole world. You know I sort of say I just sort of shared it with 100,000 of my closest friends. And I did it for a number of reasons and it didn't come without a lot of prayer and discernment.

The first thing was for my own personal integrity. I've been blessed in my ministry to minister with and enable and accompany a lot of people who are on the margins, the poor and the broken, the excluded. And I just felt more and more hypocritical, that the issue that is most personal to me through a lot of ministry with gay and lesbian people I couldn't share. And so it was an issue of integrity for me.

Secondly, I was in so many situations where I knew that by sharing this would help another person and yet I couldn't share it.

The timing of why did I do it 2 years ago. Two years ago in March was right in the heart of the clergy abuse scandal. And over and over again I saw where the official church, the Vatican and members of the American hierarchy were scape-goating gay priests as the sort of cause of this whole clergy abuse scandal. And at that point I just could no longer stay in the closet and be silent because there is no truth to that at all. And so that was what moved me to come out when I came out. I knew the spirit would let me know the moment to do it. And on March 25, 2005, the feast of the Annunciation, (Laughter) I said well - I was being interviewed. I was receiving an award on behalf of our parish, the *real hero award*, for our work in our parish and it was an award of the local United Way. And so a reporter was interviewing me, and she did her homework and checked my file and saw that I was outspoken on a number of different issues within the church and society so she wanted to talk about a lot of those things. So in my heart I said this might be the time. So she brought up this issue and I said "Well, you know as a gay priest I feel" (Laughter) so she fainted and after I picked her up we continued on with the interview. And probably the longest hours of my life was from the end of the interview to when the paper came out the next morning. The headlines on the front page of the paper was "Fr. Daley declares that he's gay". Then on the headlines of the local section "Fr. Daley receives the real hero award". (Laughter) Different articles.

But I must say in addition to a great deep peace within me for taking this step, I was just amazed and continue to be amazed by the wonderful support and affirmation from others. In my parish community, the paper came out on Friday morning and on that weekend I shared my story with the parish and had a standing ovation at each one of the liturgies. Received and continue to receive letters from all over. When this latest document came out concerning seminarians and gay orientation again I was sort of in the media front and 9 out of 10 of the responses I've received have been positive. The negative ones are mainly people who are afraid I am going to hell. And I can identify with that because most of my life I thought I was too. (Laughter) But they're coming sincerely.

So I must say it's just been a very positive, deep, healthy experience for me. And I am hoping that perhaps by myself taking this step; that it might just encourage some other priests to do the same. The reason priests aren't coming out, there's a significant number of gay priests that's no secret, and they're good priests. But there is just such a fear factor. Out of all of the groups of people that I've experienced since I've come out, the most uncomfortable are my fellow priests. Not my good friends who know me or whatever but priests in general. It's like they just can't even talk about that issue.

We conclude by just a couple points on the document concerning gay men being allowed into the priesthood. And I know our other speakers are going to focus on that a bit more. What we need to make clear with that document is – the document very clearly, if we take it at its word, says that gay men should not be accepted an ordained priest. The American bishops like they do, thank God with many Roman documents, most American bishops came out and said that it was a very nice document and then went on saying how they're not going to following it, including our own bishop. A letter went out to all the priests saying you may be concerned about this document and basically the letter said "It's always been our policy that homosexual and heterosexual men who are incapable of living a celibate life cannot be accepted into the formation program or seek ordination. Otherwise, we're following our policy which is to accept gay and straight people".

I'd like to just conclude with a little prayer that I think sort of summarizes, at least in my ministry and in my spiritual life, how I try to relate with others. And how it sort of reversed that cycle of violence in my own heart and would like to share it with you. In the East there's the saying ??????????, where when a person in the East greets another person, they bow to the other person and they say to you stay in that bow ?????????? which means "I honor the place in you which is of light, of truth, of peace and of love". When you are in that place in you and I am in that place in me, then we are one. So ?????????? and thank you for letting me share that. (Applause)

SUMMARY

BISHOP TOM GUMBLETON??

Thank you Fr. Daley for that very honest and courageous self revelation. I wish that every priest of our diocese, both heterosexual and homosexual were here to hear your story and be inspired by it. Thank you very much. I hope you continue a new assignment in the ministry to spread your experience and your good words to the rest of the church.