



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

Website: elephantsinthelivingroom.com



MARY BLACK TALK ON HOMOSEXUALITY

SS. SIMON & JUDE, WESTLAND

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INTRODUCTION

Tony Kosnik

Our next speaker, Mary Black, is not at all a typical Catholic. (Laughter) Oh, she was born Catholic. She's a cradle Catholic who lived in Detroit all her life, has a grade school and high school Catholic education, and the university education and Catholic background from the University of Detroit, currently a member of St. Leo's. But she is one of those very rare, informed, committed and courageous Catholics. She belongs to most of the subversive groups in the diocese. (Laughter) – Dignity, of course, FLAG, Pax Christi, the Elephants. She's on the board of Peace and National Priorities of Oakland County. And just this year received an award from the Birmingham/Bloomfield task force on diversity as the diversity champion of the year 2006. (Applause) Finally, she is a three-year cancer survivor, and, I'm sorry I forgot, the mother of three children, one of whom is lesbian, and the grandmother of five. Mary, we invite you to share your richness with us. (Applause).

A PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE ON THE CHURCH'S TREATMENT OF HOMOSEXUALS

Mary Black

First of all I want to thank my husband, Jerry and Ray Kell for giving up their golf game today (Laughter) to come here and once again listen to me talk, and the rest of the gang over there in the corner.

I wrote a letter in early December to the hierarchy of the Catholic Church in response to the publication of the Vatican instruction for gays in the seminary. And in it I reflected on the hurt and harm that I felt this document has done. I spent a good deal of time and money searching for addresses, the proper etiquette in addressing bishops, cardinals and the pope and then mailing my letter. Out of hundreds I had 2 responses - one from Bishop Thomas Gumbleton (Laughter) and one from Cardinal Maida. I believe that my letter is the reason that I was asked to speak today even though I have a lesbian daughter and not a gay son. Her admission to the seminary would be an impossible dream. (much Laughter and Clapping)

There is a story tucked away at the end of the 2nd Book of Samuel about a woman named Rizpah. The story begins with a great famine and King David's attempt to end it by offering retribution to the Gibeonites for the massacre of their people by Saul. King David turns over 7 descendents of Saul to the Gibeonites to be slaughtered. It is a typical Old Testament tale of blood and guts, revenge and carnage.

Rizpah was a concubine of Saul and two of her sons are among those that are killed by the Gibeonites and left on the mountain top. Refusal of burial rites was part of the retribution.

Rizpah went to the mountain and stayed there day and night for almost 6 months keeping the birds of prey and the wild animals away from the bodies of her sons. When David heard of her vigil, he allowed the bodies to be gathered and buried. It was then that the famine ended...it did not end when Saul's descendents were slaughtered.

There are times when I feel a kinship with Rizpah. And one of those times occurred when the Vatican issued the document on gays in the seminary. To me it was yet another attack on my child and my friends ...an attack from those who speak of love and acceptance one day and then swoop in with condemnation and censure the next. The birds of prey have been very active lately assigning blame, making judgments, ostracizing the "unworthy" and saving marriage. (Laughter)

There are many mothers, and fathers too, who are following Rizpah's example of trying to protect their children. We hope to offer them the ministry that is lacking in our churches. We pray with them and we pray for them. We form groups, we attend meetings, we pray again, we write letters, we tell our stories to all those who will listen and then we pray some more.

One of the groups that my husband and I belong to was created by Linda Karle, who led the prayers today. And it's called "*Putting a Human Face on Homosexuality*". Now Linda intended that it would be a learning program for the parishes. But what we soon found it to be, was a series of gatherings where gay and lesbian Catholics and their parents could come and feel welcome and loved, and where they could share their stories of their struggles with their sexuality within their faith. Occasionally parishioners do show up, like a good number of them did at Nativity in March, and the Holy Spirit is felt in the room.

We have done presentations at over 40 parishes and now some of you have not been to them but today I'd like to share my story with you so you'll understand how we parents feel that this document needs to be challenged.

My daughter Meg struggled for years to discover her true identity just as Fr. Daley did. And it took many more years to come out to family and friends and to adjust to her new life. We have a quote from Anais Nin hanging in our bedroom.

The quote says...And the day came
When the risk to remain tight in a bud
Was more painful
Than the risk to bloom

A few weeks ago Meg turned 40, a milestone for many women. But I remembered back on the morning she was born and seeing our Magnolia tree in full bloom and thinking what a beautiful day it was to be born and what a wonderful life she would have. We named her for her grandmothers, Margaret and Frances. She grew up like any young girl in America. She loved to go to her grandparent's house, eat cookies, read and play "make believe". She was a sensitive child who seemed to worry about things that other children her age didn't even think about. When she was around 7 years old she began to tell us that she didn't want to grow up because life was too hard for grownups. Her father and I became concerned when we heard this several times so we took her to see the school counselor. And after several months, the counselor called us in and said Meg was fine. She was a very well adjusted little girl but she was just sensitive and not to worry about her.

And Meg's grade school years at St. Mary's of Redford were not happy times for her. She wore braces on her teeth, she had acne, she was tall and thin and awkward. She was teased and shunned by many of her classmates and withdrew from socializing at school. She would spend endless hours writing stories and plays. She found comfort in the world of "pretend". Meg also developed a sharp sense of humor, which helped her deal with her feelings of inadequacy. She particularly enjoyed telling gory and outlandish stories that would cause her sister to scream and cover her ears. I guess she was sort of an Old Testament kind of gal. (Laughter)

One Lent I decided to try and curb these dinner time horror stories so I told Meg that she would have to put a quarter in the rice bowl for every time she made her sister shriek. As it turned out, the poor received \$27.50 from Meg at Easter because I happened to pick the semester her biology class dissected a pig. (Laughter) To this day her sister will not eat bacon or ham.

When it came time for High School we decided that change was in order and we enrolled Meg in Bishop Borgess which at that time was 5 or 6 times larger than St. Mary's. When school started in the fall the braces had come off her teeth, her acne had cleared up and she had stopped growing at 5' 7". She was a lovely young girl with a great sense of humor. And Meg blossomed at Borgess. She won many awards including the State Championship in Forensics and a full scholarship to the Goodman School of Drama at Depaul University in Chicago. She dated a little bit and had many friends of both sexes; she had a wonderful future and we sent her off to college with only the normal fears of parents in the 1980's.

But soon after she started school in Chicago we saw changes in her personality. She became withdrawn, she lost weight and her appearance changed dramatically. At first we thought she was just having trouble dealing with being away from home and family and trying to find her way in a new place. Her visits home were few and far between and it became troubling times for the whole family. Something was wrong—but what? "I'm okay" was always her answer. "I'm okay Mom". Her grades began to slip and she lost part of her scholarship. She got a job waiting tables at a popular Chicago restaurant and along with our support she completed her degree.

After graduation she backpacked through Europe with her sister and then returned to Chicago in the fall to try out for local theater and to continue her studies. But again she seemed to slide into depression and lacked confidence. And after a year of no success she moved home to earn money to move to Los Angeles.

During the year and a half that she lived at home, she seemed to be happy and well adjusted but there was an edge of sadness that I could see that troubled me. We had many long conversations and she would always reassure me that she was fine. She would find success and happiness. Always ..."I'm okay Mom".

She left for California at the age of 25 full of hope and promise. But almost immediately, we could detect the familiar depression in her voice and she was evasive when we asked how her career plans were going. She took odd jobs, moved often and kept to herself. She said she was too busy to come home for a visit and she made excuses when we said we would come there. We knew she was struggling with something but she would not tell us what was wrong and I noticed she no longer said "I'm okay Mom." I prayed for her constantly, saying novenas to St. Anthony, the patron saint of things that are lost.

Then in the spring of 1994 our daughter Jennifer announced her plans to marry at Thanksgiving and Meg would be the Maid of Honor. When we all gathered in Ohio for the wedding Meg seemed to be struggling to keep her spirits up. The day after the wedding we drove her to the

airport and she gave us big bear hugs and then ran to the plane, the tears streaming down her face. We thought she was just reacting to the stress of the weekend and that she was tired. What we didn't know was that she had just mailed each member of the family a letter telling us she was lesbian and that she could no longer hide her true identity from those she loved.

My world changed forever when I read that letter. All of my hopes and dreams vanished in an instant and for a while I could only think about ME. What had I done wrong that made her reject my lifestyle and me? The silence and condemnation that surrounds homosexuality in our society meant I had no role model of how to react to this news or how to even be a good mother to a lesbian. I cried myself to sleep night after night and I withdrew from family and friends. I began a long period of intense praying; begging God every day to please change things.

And in addition to praying, I read everything I could find on the subject and I joined PFLAG. And it was there that I began to learn what my daughter had gone through on her own, with no one to support or comfort her.

I found out what it was like to be in a room and hear cruel and degrading jokes, words of hate and condemnation about my child. I have struggled with a Church that calls my daughter intrinsically disordered and tells me that I must not vote for any politician who would support domestic partners - a Church that spends our money to put an end to any possibility for gay marriage and now actively opposes the admission of gay men into the seminaries. However, within that same church, I have met many priests and nuns, and many of you are here today, who inspire me with your message of love and acceptance. The readings on Sunday [May 21] included a passage from the gospel of John with the final message of Jesus to his followers "Love one another as I have loved you." What a radical concept. An ultimate final commandment that encompasses all the others: Love One Another. I wonder when we'll start.

On Meg's birthday a few years ago I was looking at our beautiful Magnolia tree and I realized that God had indeed changed things – only in a way I had never expected. I now experience joy in being the mother of a lesbian. As for Meg she returned to school and earned a teaching degree and now teaches the 4th grade in an inner city school in Los Angeles. She found a partner, Theresa, who has become part of our family. My prayers now are that they will be safe and that they will find peace in this world and in the next. Meg is coming home tomorrow, but since she couldn't be here today and we call our program *Putting a Human Face*, this is the face of Margaret Frances Nicole Black, a lesbian. She's a Christian, a teacher, a poet, a writer, a sister, an aunt, a niece, a partner and a much loved daughter who is at long last a whole and happy person. Thank you. (Applause)

SUMMARY

Tony Kosnik

Thank you Mary for sharing a mother's story. How clear it's becoming for us that documents like this one have devastating effects far beyond those who are gay or lesbian - affecting families, community's, countries, religions. Think about the struggle that's going on in most of the major Christian churches. I think it makes it clear the ?????? call to do something about these documents and stop them.