**Courage Ministry**

 **Article 118 July -December 2021**

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 **Plenary Council Submission in December 2021**

**Introduction**

The Plenary Council has asked the People of Australia**: What do you think God is asking of us in Australia at this time?** I offered two comments in December in response to the question in bold, and I thought it would be good for *Courage*  members and supporters to see what I proposed. I have deleted parts of the original documents, because of space.

**The first document:**

 The *Courage* Apostolate has been operating in four Archdioceses within Australia since the late 1980s. It has been a discreet, prudent, humble work receiving over two hundred same-sex attracted persons, their siblings and parents, seeking spiritual and at times emotional support for their choice of a life of holiness. In this time there have been quite a number of priest chaplains, in Melbourne, Canberra, Sydney and in Brisbane. (A part deleted).

**Why this note**

I write this note as the Director of the Brisbane *Courage* apostolate: an official ministry of the Catholic Archdiocese of Brisbane. I was, appointed by the International Director, the late Father John F. Harvey OSFSin 1997.

Recently the Catholic Religious Australia (CRA) held a webinar with the American Jesuit, Father James Martin, who in his address urged those listening to build bridges with LGBTQI persons. I know that Father Martin has been a voice for the LGBTQI and is encouraging a tangible support for them.

I am aware that hundreds of same-sex attracted persons, internationally have been supported and encouraged for at least forty years, by the *Courage* apostolate. I attended the International *Courage* Conference in Washington DC. in 2016 and heard the multiple stories and testimonies of men and women from USA and other countries. I participated in a number of workshops and one given by Janelle Hallman. A disciplined and discerning account of her ministry in love was truly inspirational. After conversing with her I bought her book. *The Heart of Female Same-Sex Attraction* is well worth the read.

I consider that Father Martin’s address had a serious lacuna in his depiction of the Church’s pastoral record, knowing that there are *Courage* Chapters in at least twenty countries. *Courage* work is very private and we in Australia have not publicized it openly.

**The Church is made up of a very diverse group with particular needs.** From what I can glean from reflections and commentary on the Plenary Council, it appears a small number want the Church to treat those with same-sex attracted as a specialised group within the Church. In my view that would be an unwholesome step, for it would create a group of “them” versus “us” within the whole Body of Christ. It could be a sort of tribalism, which according to Father Michael Casey in his book *Balaam’s Donkey* on p.421: “sets arbitrary boundaries that divide people from one another.” The bridge that Father Martin mentions is one that I see and witness in the Church. It is a very broad bridge that carries all of us, whether we are married, divorced, wheelchair bound, indigenous, mentally ill, physically ill, unmarried, diabetic, single parents, children, same-sex attracted, fragile aged and those who are paroled according to their criminal history. The bridge carries all united on a journey.

**Lumen Gentium Chapter Two - The People of God**

Paragraph 16 of Lumen Gentium proclaims:- “Therefore all the disciples of Christ, persevering in prayer and praising God (Acts 2:42-47), should present themselves as a sacrifice, living, holy and pleasing to God (Rom 12:1). They should everywhere on earth bear witness to Christ and give an answer to everyone who asks a reason for the hope of an eternal life which is theirs. (1Pet. 3:15).”(Austin Flannery edition, page 361.)

The shape and sense of the whole People of God is further demonstrated by a prominent Australian Christian author – Charles Ringma in his book, *Hear the Ancient Wisdom – A Meditational Reader for the Whole Year*. His insight confirms that: “We are made in the image and likeness of God and made for community…Neither Greek nor Jew, we are a Third Race. Not marked first and foremost by genetics, culture, and place, we are a people formed in Christ through the Spirit. And what is most significant about us is the way in which Christ has shaped our inner lives and our outward service.” (Page 358).

**A profound *Courage* perspective** Within the *Courage* Apostolate we state that we are the People of God and: “We believe that the dignity and identity of a person is not determined by their sexual orientation but by their relationship with God. We help people live this relationship by developing trust, compassion and friendship.”

I believe as emphasized in *Plenary Post Edition 41, November 25*, that *Courage* provides the balm of God, bandages wounds and heals broken hearts. The Sydney Chaplain has informed me that all the *Courage* members in his group are active within their Parishes or Apostolic groups.

**Relationships of Safety**

It is true that we need relationships of safety in the Church. In the past the perceived culture within the wider Church structure, sometimes made it unsafe to declare what was within us or share our innermost feelings. *Courage* allows a very safe place for sharing feelings, past issues of shame and is therefore a well-adapted bridge for those with same sex attraction. Within *Courage* we build on what Conrad Baars indicates in his *Feeling and Healing Your Emotions* 1979, p.65. He encourages all to be open and not afraid of our feelings and emotions and declares:- “that (a person’s) emotions have an innate need to be guided and directed by reason.”

In my work as the Brisbane *Courage* Director I have seen or helped over 80 people from the ages 16 – 70 who have voluntarily sought out *Courage* for help. During the ensuing discussion the wisdom of the Sacred Scriptures and the Church with the sincere acknowledgement of feelings occurs. If appropriate the person is offered more sessions where prayer and spiritual help is given. For some the person may join the regular *Courage* meetings.. Three of our former members have married and now have children.

At our November *Courage* meeting one of our long-term members articulated an insight about what we ought to strive for in the Church:

*We all have the need to have all of who we are, either hidden or not hidden, to be brought into the light. This bringing into the light can happen simply by another sensitive person’s attentiveness…we need to know ourselves, recognized and loved for all we are by God. That empowers us to live. And very importantly it also means that our hidden selves are not driven further underground by a perceived unlistening or excluding Church culture. Such an experience can fester and lead to a deep woundedness.*

**Australian Context of *Courage***

The apostolic ministry of *Courage* established in four Archdioceses with the support of the relevant Archbishops, has proved an experience of love and compassion in Australia for 30 plus years. It has done this in a reserved way by providing a place and haven for the person’s hidden self to come to light and to be held in respect.

**Conclusion**

**What do you think God is God asking of us in Australia at this time?**

The question I propose for the Council is based on my practical pastoral role in Brisbane, where the Courage apostolate is an official Archdiocesan ministry.

**What can the Church do to support this sensitive ministry**?

1. For the future involvement of Courage in most Dioceses, this apostolate ought to be included in the Australian Bishops Conference in a formal liaison, possibly in the Secretariat for Evangelisation, Laity and Ministry.

2. I recommend that an authorized member of the Courage and Encourage apostolate report annually to their Archdiocesan/Diocesan Ordinaries. It could be a priest or a layman recognized and acknowledged by the local ordinary.

3. A priest chaplain in each Archdiocese /Diocese ought to be appointed. There are quite a number of men and women active in Courage groups who practise their Catholic Faith and seek the Sacrament of Reconciliation when a chaplain is present at meetings. A priest confessor is an urgent pastoral requirement.

4. Over two hundred people have been supported and encouraged in a faith filled personal way for over twenty five years in the various Courage groups in Australia. Given this real awareness of the very sensitive, compassionate and sensitive fellowship of Courage it ought to be acknowledged as an authentic Catholic apostolate. An apostolate serving the whole People of God and in particular those seeking the virtue and habits of chastity.

5. In no way is Courage a lobby group. It is a very personal face to face gathering where brothers and sisters share their interior life freely for the witness and encouragement of one another. ( Inspired by Psalm 42:7).

For a view of Brisbane *Courage* apostolic work see my articles, numbers 92,93,98 and, especially, 109, a note to the Plenary Council in Feb 2019, at <http://courage.brisbanecatholic.org.au>

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