NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Conversation on sexuality begins

Alice Popovici | Sep. 27, 2011

Audience members talk during a break at the "Learning to Listen: Voices of Sexual Diversity and the Catholic Church" conference at Fordham University in New York Sept. 16. (Alice Popovici)

NEW YORK -- One night during Holy Week last year, Kate Henley Averett was too upset to sleep, so she sat at her computer and wrote what she calls her ?breakup letter with the Catholic church.? It began: ?My heart is so heavy right now I?d swear it was causing serious damage to my other internal organs. I feel like I can?t quite catch my breath. It?s not quite that I can?t breathe, but that I can?t seem to be able to breathe deeply enough -- like if I could just get one giant gulp of air in my body, it would feel better, normal, not so tight, not so heavy. Do Catholics who leave the church always feel like this??

She wrote about the teachings that inspired her and about the hierarchy?s cover-up of priests? abuses, and about feeling worn down. ?I no longer look to the church and see any of my values, my priorities, my convictions reflected back at me,? she wrote. ?This place has become too foreign to me, and I can no longer call it home.? Averett said she sent the letter off immediately that night, without editing a word, in an e-mail to a few people who were important to her.

On Sept. 16, she read it to a couple hundred people gathered at Fordham University?s Lincoln Center campus in New York for a conference titled ?Learning to Listen: Voices of Sexual Diversity and the Catholic Church.? It was the first of a four-part series of conferences meant to expand the conversation on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues within the Catholic church, to bring more voices out into the open so the conversation becomes, like the title of the series, ?More Than a Monologue? -- ?monologue? referring to the voice and perspective of the Catholic church. (More details are available at www.morethanamonologue.org.)

?I can?t pinpoint in my memory the specific first time I learned that being gay was not OK, or even when I learned what being gay was, but I can tell you thousands of stories about learning that heterosexuality was right. About all the emphasis on marriage,? said Averett, who is 29 and studying for her doctorate in sociology at the University of Texas in Austin. ?It wasn?t about being told, ?You?re wrong and you?re bad,? but about being told what is right and what is good, and not feeling like I fit into that.?

Hilary Howes, a 56-year-old event designer and transgender activist from Washington, D.C., who said she was born ?with male genitalia and a female brain,? talked about the unique position of transsexual people who are

Catholic. Howes ?transitioned to live as a woman? through a sex-change operation 16 years ago, and was baptized and confirmed as a Catholic eight years ago. ?[I] remain in my Catholic marriage of 33 years, to the most understanding woman in the world -- making ours one of the few same-sex marriages affirmed by the Roman Catholic church,? Howes continued, drawing laughs from the audience. (A 2003 Catholic News Service article, discussing a secret Vatican document on the matter, said that the church may continue to recognize a marriage even after one of the partners has a sex-change operation. To read the article, visit the *NCR* Web site: NCRonline.org/node/26662 [1].)

The stories came from other vantage points as well. Eve Tushnet, a D.C.-based writer who called herself ?openly gay and faithfully Catholic? talked about the decision she made in 1998 to lead a life of celibacy in keeping with the teachings of the Catholic church.

Deb Word of Memphis, Tenn., talked about her gay son, who ?is Catholic in a way that doesn?t let the church get in the way,? and about volunteering at a shelter for gay and lesbian teens, who wouldn?t be safe in city shelters.

Fr. John Duffell, of New York City?s Church of the Ascension, said he believes ?the church is perhaps the only way of affecting change in the world,? but he added: ?The church is not perfect.? To an audience member who asked, in writing, how he should deal with the feeling that he is ?broken? after being told he cannot enter the priesthood because he is gay, Duffell answered: ?You?re not broken, the system is broken, and therefore you deal with it as a broken system; you lie.?

A few audience members posted updates, questions and criticism on Twitter, under the hashtag #mtam2011. ?Interesting start. But where are the collars? Is a convo between the marginalized moving the ball forward?? asked LLebrija.

According to New Ways Ministry: ?Fr. Duffell: as a way of welcome, he frequently mentions sexual orientation in homilies. Response to him is positive.?

From Paul Snatchko: ?Spoke with a @Fordham senior during reception at #mtam2011. He made a good point: there are no undergraduate voices on any of the panels.?

Snatchko later tweeted: ?The evening panel at #mtam2011 also has no conservative voices. All speakers in agreement. What happened to having a conversation??

Joe Moreshead, a 20-year-old philosophy student at Fordham who is considering entering the priesthood, said he was surprised by the direction of the conversations. ?I expected it to be a discussion of church teaching, but instead it kind of assumed that church teaching was wrong -- and I wasn?t expecting that,? he said. ?I didn?t agree with a lot of their [panelists?] conclusions, but I was impressed with its thoughtfulness.?

Overall, audience members -- including theology students, retirees and others mingling at a reception before the evening panel -- praised the event.

?It?s very encouraging to me because it?s coming from an institution of higher learning,? said 82-year-old Erma Durkin of Maryland. ?The church better start catching up with them.?

Bill, a 77-year-old retired naval officer from New Jersey, said the event was ?a great eye-opener,? and added: ?I get a certain consolation from realizing that there were a lot of people growing up as I did, with the same problems, the same uncertainty, the same pain.? Bill, who attended with his partner, asked to be identified only by first name because some family members don?t know he is gay.

Fordham theology professor Christine Firer Hinze, a member of the faculty planning committee who organized the conference, estimated that about 400 people filtered in and out of the auditorium throughout the day, including a few Catholic priests. She said the panelists were not ?a perfect representation of everyone in the church,? but that ?our approach to this was that the Catholic church teaching is the context for this whole conversation.?

?What was very striking to me and moving,? Hinze said, ?was the love for the Catholic church that came through in all the voices.?

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Dialogue continues:

The remaining three sessions in ?More Than a Monologue? are:
Oct. 1
?Pro-Queer Life: Youth Suicide Crisis, Catholic Education, and the Souls of LGBTQ People,? Union Theological Seminary, New York
Oct. 22
?Same-Sex Marriage and the Catholic Church: Voices from Law, Religion, and the Pews,? Yale Divinity School, New Haven, Conn.
Oct. 29
?The Care of Souls: Sexual Diversity, Celibacy, and Ministry,? Fairfield University, Fairfield, Conn.

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Links:
[1] http://NCRonline.org/node/26662