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Speaking about love with love

Fr. Peter Daly | Dec. 17, 2012 Parish Diary

I felt like I was in a spy novel. Or maybe like a Christian in ancient Rome, trying to make contact with the church of the catacombs. The email told me to stand in front of the student union building. Someone would meet me there and escort me to an undisclosed meeting room somewhere on campus. The location could not be announced ahead of time because the group itself did not even know where they would meet. They just had to find an empty room somewhere. As it turned out, the room we used was a lecture hall where I once taught a class on estates and trusts.

Despite the arrangements, this was not a spy rendezvous in a John le Carré novel. It was an ordinary meeting of CUAllies, the gay student group at The Catholic University of America.

I had been asked to speak to them because of an article I wrote for Catholic News Service recounting my experiences in dealing with gay young people who were suicidal. I concluded the article with the simple observation that no one should ever feel excluded from God's love and no one should be driven to despair. Evidently, they were surprised to hear that from a Catholic priest, so they asked me to speak to their group.

CUAllies is not an officially recognized student group at Catholic University, despite overwhelming support from the Student Association General Assembly, CUA's student government, which voted 20 to 3 last February in favor of recognition. Lack of university recognition means the group cannot reserve rooms, publicize their meetings, receive student funds or be listed in the student directory. They still manage to meet, however. Students use social media, like Twitter, to communicate, just like the pope.

The student body is much more accepting of gay people than the administration. In fact, the former director of CUAllies, Ryan Fecteau, is the current president of the Student Association.

CUAllies says its purpose is to provide a "safe, welcoming and affirming atmosphere" for gay students on the campus. Probably it is the "affirming" part that bothers the university administration.

Our meeting was innocuous enough. I had been invited to speak to them as a pastor and priest. I merely related five stories from my own experience of more than 25 years of ministry.

The first story was from 20 years ago, when I worked at CUA in campus ministry. Back then, AIDS was almost certainly fatal. In the popular mind, it was a "gay disease." I organized a group of Catholic University students to walk in the AIDS Walk in D.C. I walked along with them, dressed in my black suit and a clerical collar. A man who claimed to be a Catholic was outraged when he saw us with our CUA banner. He came up and screamed at us, especially at me. Before he walked away he spit on me, to show his to show his contempt at seeing a priest "walking with the fags," as he put it.

My second story was also from that era. About 20 years ago, I was asked to read the names of people who had died of AIDS as part of the NAMES Quilt [1] display on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. We were told just to read the names of the dead and not add anything. But at the end of my list of names I felt the need to

pray. So I added the standard Catholic prayer for the dead, "Eternal rest grant unto them O Lord," etc.

When I came down from the stage, an elderly couple approached me. They were crying. They told me that I had read their son's name and prayed just after it. They also told me that their own pastor, a monsignor in upstate New York, had refused to bury their son, who died of AIDS, because he was gay. I was, they said, the only priest who had prayed for their son.

The third story was about an elderly gay couple in my rural southern Maryland parish. I'll call them Robert and Harry. They had been together for more than 40 years, ever since Harry was an architecture student at CUA. When Harry's parents were sick with cancer, Robert retired from his job and took care of them until they died. Then when Harry got sick, Robert nursed him, too. I got to know them when Robert came to the rectory and asked me to come anoint his friend. After Harry's death, Robert showed up to plan the funeral. Harry's family would not come, but they did call and tell me that they did not want any mention that Harry was gay and they did not want Robert mentioned.

At the funeral, I started the homily by thanking Robert, who was the "most important relationship of love and friendship in Harry's life." I quoted the book of Sirach in the Bible: "A faithful friend is a sturdy shelter" (Sirach 6:14 [2]).

It would have been inhuman not to mention Harry's best friend and companion.

The fourth story was about a lesbian couple in our parish. Their friendship had saved them both from loneliness and poverty. I only knew one woman. Her partner had died more than a decade before I arrived. But the survivor kept the memory of her friend alive and maintained her friend's grave in the local Methodist cemetery. One evening, I went to anoint the survivor who was sick. Afterward, we spent some time looking at her photo album. She turned and asked me, "Father, do you think my friend is in heaven?"

I responded, "Why wouldn't she be in heaven?"

She said, "Well, Father, she was a Methodist."

I said, "Yes, I think even Methodists can go to heaven."

Finally, I told them about one of my best friends, a Presbyterian minister named Jack. He had been a pastor, a civil rights leader and a hospital chaplain. He lived almost 40 years with his Catholic partner, Paul. Each attended their own church faithfully. When Paul died suddenly in Florida, Jack flew down to claim the body. But at the morgue, he was not allowed to see his partner's body because he was not a blood relative. However, a nephew, who hardly knew his dead uncle, was allowed to claim the body. At the Catholic funeral, my minister friend was not invited to sit with the family or to say anything. He was not even invited to the meal afterward. How cruel.

Those were all true stories. Collectively, they paint a picture of authentic love. Those relationships do not seem "intrinsically disordered."

They also show how the church or the society was more concerned about rendering judgment than showing compassion. How can followers of Jesus be so cruel? Why does cruelty pass for orthodoxy? French essayist Anatole France said, "It is the certainty that they possess the truth that makes men cruel."

At the end of my talk, one of the students asked, "What does the Catholic church have to teach gay people?" I was touched that he would care what we have to say. I thought for a moment.

"The church can teach gay people the same thing we want to teach all people. Love is the measure of our lives. When we speak about love, we also want to speak about commitment, fidelity, respect and dignity in human relationships. Also, everyone is asked to carry a cross at times. Everyone is asked to be chaste at times in their life."

The students in CUAllies have more charity toward the church than the church, which once again this December, refused them recognition, has toward them.

[Fr. Peter Daly is a priest at the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C., and has been pastor of St. John Vianney parish in Prince Frederick, Md., since 1994.]

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