

New Ways Ministry co-founder passes

Thomas C. Fox | Jan. 2, 2014 NCR Today

Salavadorian Father Robert Nugent, a compassionate priest whose pastoral work was ahead of his times and, as a result, was censured by the Vatican for his ministry to gays and lesbians, died Jan. 1.

Nugent will be remembered in Catholic history for his early efforts to minister to gays and lesbians at a time when few, in any, other clergy and religious would do so publicly.

In some ways, gay and lesbian ministries have made great strides since the Nugent first reached out to that marginalized segment of our church. In other ways, those ministerial efforts have made only small gains. Gay and lesbian ministries are still not the norm in Catholic parishes and New Ways Ministry is seldom welcomed into parishes.

Pope Francis, as if taking the lead from the now deceased Nugent, when asked how he views gay clergy, responded: "Whom am I to judge?"

That was precisely Nugent's attitude -- and he lived as Francis now preaches.

Nugent, who maintained an inclusive pastoral ministry throughout his life as a priest, had been suffering from lung cancer when he took his last breath Wednesday in Milwaukee at age 76.

New Ways Ministry announced Nugent's passing with these words:

With confidence in the promise of the Resurrection, but also with hearts heavy with sorrow, New Ways Ministry reports the passing into eternal life of our co-founder, Father Robert Nugent. Present at his side at the time of his death were New Ways Ministry's co-founder, Sister of Loretto Jeannine Gramick, and Brother John Hauenstein, a member of his religious congregation, the Salvatorians.

Francis DeBernardo, New Ways Ministry's Executive Director, reflected on the impact of Father Nugent's life in a statement on the New Ways [website](#). [1]

When few priests would do more than whisper about homosexuality, Father Nugent was meeting with lesbian and gay people and encouraging them to claim their rightful place in the Catholic Church. During a time of intense homophobia in both church and society, he exhibited uncommon courage and foresight in welcoming and affirming the goodness of God's lesbian and gay children.

But his ministry was more than a welcome. He had the wisdom to know that the real moral problem in the church was not the lives of lesbian and gay people, but the ignorance and fear out of which many church leaders and officials operated. An uncommon prophet, instead of railing against this ignorance and fear, he and Sister Jeannine set out to educate people about the reality and holiness of lesbian and gay lives. Instead of battling the institution, he attempted to build bridges of education and dialogue, helping to enlighten Catholic leaders who were sometimes reluctant to break free from their traditional ways. A loyal son of the Church, he attempted to

help the institution live up to its most cherished ideals of human dignity, equality, and respect.

In founding New Ways Ministry with Sister Jeannine, he helped establish an institutional resource for the Catholic Church on lesbian and gay issues. Their dream was for New Ways Ministry to be a resource and advocacy center to which pastoral leaders, lesbian and gay Catholics, and family members could turn. For decades the duo crisscrossed the nation providing support and guidance to those Catholics who were willing to open up to their more inclusive model of church. He bravely withstood the disapproval of many Church leaders, often experiencing the alienation and marginalization of the lesbian and gay people that he served.

It is impossible to overestimate the impact and value of Father Nugent's lesbian and gay ministry. He educated a generation of pastoral leaders who began to put into practice the inclusive ideals that he taught. A tireless researcher and writer, he produced a number of important works on pastoral care that helped to shape the movement in Catholicism of gay-friendly parishes. In the mid-1990s, he served as a consultant to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Marriage and Family Life as they produced their landmark pastoral document, *Always Our Children*. A sensitive counselor, he supported scores of gay priests and brothers as they worked at reconciling their spirituality with their sexuality.

When New Ways Ministry informed its supporters of Fr. Nugent's illness, hundreds of cards and notes expressing gratitude and encouragement flooded his hospice room. At the end, he knew he was loved and cared for by so, so many on his final journey.

While we at New Ways Ministry are sad that we will no longer experience his sharp mind, his warm heart, and his delightful wit, we are comforted by the fact that his impact will live on in the lives of those he touched and in the Catholic Church's continued renewal of its welcome and commitment to its lesbian and gay members—a renewal that he played such a large role in effecting. We now have another saint to whom we can pray for LGBT equality and justice.

Nugent and Gramick created the ministry in 1977 with a goal of reconciling gays and lesbians with the wider church community.

In 1999, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, then the Vatican's orthodoxy watchdog, said they had harmed the church by causing confusion about church teaching that same-sex relationships were sinful. Ratzinger, who went on to become Pope Benedict XVI, ordered the co-founders to permanently stop their outreach.

Nugent told the Associated Press in an interview that year he didn't dissent from the core teachings on homosexuality, but opposed the language the church used when discussing the issue.

"I spent 25 years telling homosexuals that the church cares for you, that it wants you to have a part in it," Nugent said. "How can I talk to them and convince them of that if I use language like evil, depravity and disorder?"

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[1] <http://newwaysministryblog.wordpress.com/2014/01/02/father-robert-nugent-new-ways-ministrys-co-founder-passes-into-eternal-life/>