

CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH

NOTIFICATION
REGARDING SISTER JEANNINE GRAMICK, SSND,
AND FATHER ROBERT NUGENT, SDS*

Sister Jeannine Gramick, SSND, and Father Robert Nugent, SDS, have been engaged in pastoral activities directed toward homosexual persons for more than twenty years. In 1977, they founded the organisation *New Ways Ministry* within the territory of the Archdiocese of Washington in order to promote “justice and reconciliation between lesbian and gay Catholics and the wider Catholic community”.¹ They are the authors of the book *Building Bridges: Gay and Lesbian Reality and the Catholic Church* (Mystic: Twenty-Third Publications, 1992) and editors of the volume *Voices of Hope: A Collection of Positive Catholic Writings on Gay and Lesbian Issues* (New York: Center for Homophobia Education, 1995).

From the beginning, in presenting the Church's teaching on homosexuality, Father Nugent and Sister Gramick have continually called central elements of that teaching into question. For this reason, in 1984, James Cardinal Hickey, the Archbishop of Washington, following the failure of a number of attempts at clarification, informed them that they could no longer undertake their activities in that Archdiocese. At the same time, the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and for Societies of Apostolic Life ordered them to separate themselves totally and completely from *New Ways Ministry*, adding that they were not to exercise any apostolate without faithfully presenting the Church's teaching regarding the intrinsic evil of homosexual acts.

Despite this action by the Holy See, Father Nugent and Sister Gramick continued their involvement in activities organised by *New Ways Ministry*, though removing themselves from leadership positions. They also continued to maintain and promote ambiguous positions on homosexuality and explicitly criticised documents of the Church's Magisterium on this issue. Because of their statements and activities, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and for Societies of Apostolic Life received numerous complaints and urgent requests for clarification from Bishops and others in the United States of America. It was clear that the activities of Sister Gramick and Father Nugent were causing difficulties in not a few Dioceses and that they were continuing to present the teaching of the Church as one possible option among others and as open to fundamental change.

In 1988, the Holy See established a Commission under the Presidency of Adam Cardinal Maida to study and evaluate their public statements and activities and to determine whether these were faithful to Catholic teaching on homosexuality.

After the publication of *Building Bridges*, the investigation of the Commission focused primarily on this book, which summarised their activities and thinking. In 1994, the Commission issued its findings, which were communicated to the two authors. When their responses to these findings were received, the Commission formulated its final Recommendations and forwarded them to

the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and for Societies of Apostolic Life. While not overlooking the presence of some positive aspects in the apostolate of Father Nugent and Sister Gramick, the Commission found serious deficiencies in their writings and pastoral activities, which were incompatible with the fullness of Christian morality. The Commission, therefore, recommended disciplinary measures, including the publication of some form of *Notification*, in order to counteract and repair the harmful confusion caused by the errors and ambiguities in their publications and activities.

As the problems presented by the two authors were primarily of a doctrinal nature, in 1995, the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and for Societies of Apostolic Life transferred the entire case to the competence of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. At this point, with the hope that Father Nugent and Sister Gramick would be willing to express their assent to Catholic teaching on homosexuality and to correct the errors in their writings, the Congregation undertook another attempt at resolution by inviting them to respond unequivocally to certain questions regarding their position on the morality of homosexual acts and on the homosexual inclination.

Their responses, dated February 22, 1996, were not sufficiently clear to dispel the serious ambiguities of their position. In these, Sister Gramick and Father Nugent demonstrated a clear conceptual understanding of the Church's teaching on homosexuality, but refrained from professing any adherence to that teaching. Furthermore, the publication, in 1995, of their book *Voices of Hope: A Collection of Positive Catholic Writings on Gay and Lesbian Issues* had made it clear that there was no change in their opposition to fundamental elements of the Church's teaching.

Given the fact that certain of the statements of Father Nugent and Sister Gramick were clearly incompatible with the teaching of the Church and that the wide dissemination of these errors through their publications and pastoral activities was becoming an increasing source of concern for Bishops in the United States of America, the Congregation decided that the case should be resolved according to the procedure outlined in its *Regulations for Doctrinal Examination* (chapter 4).²

In the Ordinary Session of October 8, 1997, the Cardinals and Bishops who make up the Congregation judged that the statements of Father Nugent and Sister Gramick, which had been identified through the above-mentioned procedure of the *Regulations for Doctrinal Examination*, were in fact erroneous and dangerous. After the Holy Father had approved the formal *contestatio* of the authors, the above-mentioned erroneous statements were presented to them through their respective Superiors General. Each was asked to respond to the *contestatio* personally and independently from the other, to allow them the greatest freedom in expressing their individual positions.

In February 1998, the two Superiors General forwarded the responses to the Congregation. In the Ordinary Sessions of May 6 and May 20, 1998, the Members of the Congregation carefully evaluated the responses, after having received the opinions of members of the Episcopate of the United States and of experts in the field of moral theology. The Members of the Congregation were unanimous in their decision that the responses of the two, while containing certain positive

elements, were unacceptable. In each case, Father Nugent and Sister Gramick had sought to justify the publication of their books and neither had expressed personal adherence to the Church's teaching on homosexuality in sufficiently unequivocal terms. Thus, it was decided that they should be asked to formulate a public declaration, which would be submitted to the judgement of the Congregation. In this declaration they were asked to express their interior assent to the teaching of the Catholic Church on homosexuality and to acknowledge that the two above-mentioned books contained errors.

The two declarations which arrived in August 1998 were examined by the Congregation in the Ordinary Session of October 21, 1998. Once again, they were not sufficient to resolve the problems associated with their writings and pastoral activities. Sister Gramick, while expressing her love for the Church, simply refused to express any assent whatsoever to the teaching of the Church on homosexuality. Father Nugent was more responsive, but not unequivocal in his statement of interior assent to the teaching of the Church. It was decided by the Members of the Congregation, therefore, that Father Nugent should be given yet another opportunity to express unequivocal assent. For this reason, the Congregation formulated a declaration of assent and, with its letter of December 15, 1998, forwarded it to Father Nugent, through his Superior General, for his acceptance. His response, dated January 25, 1999, showed that this attempt had not met with success. Father Nugent would not sign the declaration he had received and responded by formulating an alternative text which modified the Congregation's declaration on certain important points. In particular, he would not state that homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered and he added a section which calls into question the definitive and unchangeable nature of Catholic doctrine in this area.

Given the failure of the repeated attempts of the Church's legitimate authorities to resolve the problems presented by the writings and pastoral activities of the two authors, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is obliged to declare for the good of the Catholic faithful that the positions advanced by Sister Jeannine Gramick and Father Robert Nugent regarding the intrinsic evil of homosexual acts and the objective disorder of the homosexual inclination are doctrinally unacceptable because they do not faithfully convey the clear and constant teaching of the Catholic Church in this area.³ Father Nugent and Sister Gramick have often stated that they seek, in keeping with the Church's teaching, to treat homosexual persons "with respect, compassion and sensitivity".⁴ However, the promotion of errors and ambiguities is not consistent with a Christian attitude of true respect and compassion: persons who are struggling with homosexuality no less than any others have the right to receive the authentic teaching of the Church from those who minister to them. The ambiguities and errors of the approach of Father Nugent and Sister Gramick have caused confusion among the Catholic people and have harmed the community of the Church. For these reasons, Sister Jeannine Gramick, SSND, and Father Robert Nugent, SDS, are permanently prohibited from any pastoral work involving homosexual persons and are ineligible, for an undetermined period, for any office in their respective religious institutes.

The Sovereign Pontiff John Paul II, at the Audience of May 14, 1999, granted to the undersigned Secretary, approved the present Notification, adopted in the Ordinary Session of this Congregation, and ordered its publication.

Rome, from the Offices of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, May 31, 1999.

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger,
Prefect

Tarcisio Bertone, S.D.B.,
Archbishop emeritus of Vercelli,
Secretary