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'Gays and grays' -- so happy together

Vital San Francisco parish bridges the gaps of age and lifestyle

By CHUCK COLBERT

Boston

At a time when gay and lesbian Catholics are finding an increasingly chilly reception in some churches, a parish in San Francisco is defying all the trends and conventional wisdom by revitalizing its congregation with the unlikely combination of elderly Catholics, including many widows, and homosexual men who have settled into a common place of worship.

Jesuit Fr. Donal Godfrey, a gay author, tells the story of Most Holy Redeemer through research and a dissertation he wrote for a doctoral degree. The dissertation has been published as a book, *Gays and Grays* (Lexington Books).

Most Holy Redeemer is located in the city's Castro district, arguably America's most visible and iconic gay enclave.

These days, gays and grays are a comfortable fit. But it was not always so. When the 1967 summer of love blossomed in Haight-Asbury and gay liberation began to find expression in Eureka Valley, Most Holy Redeemer, then a predominately Irish Catholic parish, stood initially as bulwark against the burgeoning movement.

"As the gay community moved in, the parish was the center of hostility," Godfrey explained over lunch, during a recent visit to Boston.

"It was an old Irish neighborhood and the pastors didn't have a clue. The parish started to die. Nobody came to Mass. Nobody rang the doorbell," he said.

Godfrey, an English-born Irish Jesuit, was on the East Coast recently to speak at Boston College. **Sponsoring organizations at the Chestnut Hill campus included the school's theology department, Jesuit Institute, St. Ignatius Parish, and the Lesbian and Gay Faculty, Staff and Administrators Association (www.bc.edu/offices/lgfsaa). Godfrey addressed a student forum that was open to the public. Currently, Godfrey is the executive director of university ministry at the University of San Francisco.**

In his book, Godfrey devotes a chapter to each of two priests, Frs. Anthony McGuire and Zachary Shore, who played important roles in Most Holy Redeemer's transformation. "McGuire was the right person, at the right place at the right time, the catalyst in creating a new kind of community" where "unusual friendships developed," Godfrey explained.

Over the years, old-timers befriended the newcomers, encouraged by a pastoral sensitivity that bridged cultural and generational gaps. Together, parishioners discovered a need for each other, especially during the 1980s, peak years of the AIDS epidemic, which shook San Francisco like an earthquake.

Paradoxically, their mutual dependence was good for the parish. "Suddenly, Most Holy Redeemer had the most fabulous crèche you could imagine," said Godfrey. "The old people loved it."

McGuire became pastor in 1982, the same year the deadly disease, caused by the HIV virus, was given the name acquired immune deficiency syndrome.

By 1990, when Shore began his pastorate, Most Holy Redeemer was "most definitely the Roman

Catholic Church with the largest percentage of 'out' gay parishioners in the world," Godfrey explained.

Accordingly, Shore continued McGuire's integration of the gay community into church life. A parish contingent marched openly in the city's Gay Pride parade. Anniversaries of same-sex couples were acknowledged from the pulpit during Mass.

Members of Most Holy Redeemer, writes Godfrey, who spent time at the parish during his research, "see ourselves reflected again and again in the life of Jesus, but rather more rarely in the life of the institutional church. The paradox remains that it is the institutional church that introduced us to the liberating person of Jesus. The irony is that it is only when gay Catholics are given the chance to be part of the community that we can truly be the moral agents Jesus so wants us to be."

Tensions surfaced and tempers flared over a statewide anti-gay marriage ballot initiative that voters passed in 2000. California's bishops approved financial and political support for it, a decision "deeply resented" at Most Holy Redeemer. It was revealed that the San Francisco archdiocese contributed \$31,724 to the cause. Altogether, through the California Catholic Conference, the church's lobbying arm, the state's 12 dioceses threw more than \$310,000 behind the ballot initiative.

Neither Shore nor parishioners bore their resentments in silence. Shore's soul-searching took form in a letter that he wrote to then-Archbishop William Levada, now head of the Vatican's top doctrinal enforcement arm, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

The letter reads in part: "Is there a right that bishops have to use money that has been given to a diocese for the purpose of programs for the people of God, to be used for state politics? I cannot remember whenever it was done before or whether parishioners were aware of it, if it was."

Shore continued: "Frustrated parishioners are leaving the church or are no longer going to support church or archdiocesan ministries. What they thought was a home, a place of acceptance and love and not bigotry, is nothing more than a place of tolerance and lip service."

When Shore read the letter at Mass on a Sunday, members of the parish, many with tears in their eyes, rose to their feet.

Godfrey said he believes that on-the-ground practice will eventually change the church's outlook, and he takes hope from the fact that a 2006 document from the U.S. bishops on homosexuality did not use the phrase "intrinsic evil" that had been used in previous Vatican documents describing homosexuality.

"Gay Catholics are becoming an open and accepted part of parish life in a greater number of parishes," he writes. "I believe that this movement will grow as gays are more accepted in society. I don't see how it can be stopped."

The example set at Most Holy Redeemer gives voice to hope for a new church "revolution through evolution," as Godfrey called it, in a worshiping community where, he said, murmurs and whispers no longer cloak gay people in darkness and shame.

Chuck Colbert is a longtime contributor to NCR from the Boston area.