

## **Remarks upon Receiving the Tom Dooley Award from the Gay and Lesbian Alumni of the University of Notre Dame and St. Mary's College**

*By Sister Jeannine Gramick*

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Who was Tom Dooley? During my high school days in the 50's, this doctor who devoted his life to helping the suffering people of South East Asia was acclaimed as a model of selflessness and devotion to humanity by the good sisters who taught me in the mainly Catholic town of Philadelphia. Of course, we didn't know that he was gay. The word gay or even homosexual was never heard in the hallowed halls of Catholic schools in Philadelphia!

As I was reflecting on this award and what it means to me to receive it, I found myself thinking, "How did Tom Dooley feel about being gay, at a time when there was no virtual support for lesbian or gay persons in mainstream society, let alone in a Catholic cultural ghetto? How afraid was he that the truth of his sexuality would become public? What must have been his self-image? Were his magnanimous deeds a form of compensation for feelings of unworthiness or inferiority?" We will probably never know the answers to these intimate, psychological questions.

For some, the revelation of his homosexuality may cause his public image to topple like the Berlin Wall so that he should no longer be considered an exemplary role model. For others, the revelation of his collaboration with the CIA as a conduit of military information against the Vietnamese people may prove he was no compassionate humanitarian worthy of esteem or admiration, but only a pawn or dupe of the US government.

But what Tom Dooley's life, whether private or public, whether intricate or apparent, says to me is that he was a normal human being. He had a shadow side as well as a radiant side. Some friends who knew him said that he wanted to be a saint. Well, isn't that what every Catholic wants? And he is a saint because sainthood or greatness lies in following the path God wants us to tread, despite what others may think of us. Tom Dooley is a superb role model for us because he lived his life as he thought it should be lived, despite his fears and anxieties, despite the judgments of others who may have branded him perverted, deceitful, or foolish. He lived his life, true to his own integrity, and he inspires us to do the same.

So it is with a deep sense of awe and gratitude that I receive this award, for to me it is a symbol of personal integrity. It is a reminder that each person is not all good or all evil. It is a sign that, even though we may be afraid at times, we can still walk down the road God asks us to travel.

There are two stories in my own life, which relate to the meaning of this award, that I wish to share with you tonight. In my more than 30 years of ministry on behalf of lesbian and gay people, I tried to walk a path that God asked me to travel, despite my fear and the negative judgments of others. This truth was brought home to me during one of the retreats I made at the Carmelite Monastery in Baltimore during the Vatican's investigation of my ministry. Should I follow the directives of church authorities to leave this ministry? This was the question of discernment during this retreat.

One morning during the retreat, I was jogging around the monastery grounds. (Perhaps "walking briskly" is a better description.) I looked down at my tennis shoes and they became a metaphor of life for me. I began to realize that I could walk comfortably around the monastery grounds because my shoes fit me just right. If I were jogging in sandals, I might trip. If I were jogging in high heels, my feet would ache. I saw that I needed shoes that fit just right.

I began to see my future in this image. I could walk in shoes that were too loose or too tight for a little while. But if I continued to wear clogs or toe-pinching heels, I'd fall or ruin my feet, my back, and ultimately, my good health. So too in life I needed to walk the path that was just right--the path that God, not others, however well intentioned, prescribed for me. In short, I had to be who God intended me to be. I

had to follow God's map for my life, no matter what others thought, or said, or did. I had to walk in God-shoes.

This is the truth that all of us must come to, just as Tom Dooley did. We must be true to the self that God intends us to be, to walk in the right shoes God has given us, no matter what others think or say or do. This is one of the greatest lessons I have learned from my ministry with lesbian and gay Catholics—to walk in God-shoes.

My second story takes place on an airplane from Rome to Munich. My provincial and I decided to make a pilgrimage to Munich to visit the grave of our foundress to pray for a miracle because my case with the Vatican was looking grim. As we boarded our plane in DaVinci airport in Rome, we saw an elderly, white haired man in a black suit, who looked familiar, but we were unsure of his identity. As he was seated by a window with two empty places beside him, I sat down next to him and began a conversation.

“Do you speak English?” I asked. “A little,” he replied. “Are you a priest?” “Yes,” came his answer.

I told him I was a School Sister of Notre Dame from the US and asked him if he knew the School Sisters. “Yes,” he quickly said, “my aunt was a School Sister.” “And what was her name?” I inquired. “Ratzinger,” he replied. “Oh, and you're Cardinal Ratzinger?” I politely asked? He nodded. (Cardinal Ratzinger was in charge of my case at the Vatican.) When he learned my name, he said with a twinkle in his bright blue eyes, “I have known you for 20 years”! He asked about my life and how I got involved in lesbian and gay ministry.

I asked Ratzinger if he had ever met any gay people. “Yes,” he said. “When the pope and I were in Berlin, there was a demonstration of homosexuals.” I told him these were not Catholic homosexuals! I said that homosexual Catholics love their church. They are doubly persecuted because they are made to feel unwelcome in their own church and then ridiculed by lesbian and gay people who say, “How can you stay with a Church that oppresses you?” But because of their love for God and their great faith, they stay in their Church, I told him.

In our 15-20 minute conversation, we talked about homosexuality and the document, *Always Our Children*, which was addressed to parents of lesbian and gay children by a committee of the US bishops. We spoke of the schools in the US, vocations to religious life, and my reading of his first book when I was a young sister in the novitiate during the time of Vatican II. We chatted about his present vacation plans to visit his priest brother, and only living relative, in Regensburg. As the flight attendant announced landing instructions, Ratzinger said, “Pray for me and I will pray for you.” At least three times during this chance encounter, Ratzinger murmured, “This is providence.” My Superior General had asked him to meet with me during the investigative process. Ratzinger had declined, but God had decided otherwise.

I believe the meeting did not change the final decision in my case. But for me it put a human face on the institution of the Church. I found Cardinal Ratzinger to be warm, sincere, and gracious. I experienced the humanity of someone who had the power to disrupt my life. Even though I do not agree with Cardinal Ratzinger's ecclesiology or moral theology, I felt how wrong it is to demonize another. As the life of Tom Dooley shows us, no person is all good or all evil. Each of us is a combination of light and darkness. And what I judge as darkness in another, someone else may perceive as light.

In his discourse with his disciples at the Last Supper, Jesus told us that he is the vine and we are the branches. Cardinal Ratzinger and I are different branches, but we are both rooted in the same tree—the tree of Christ. In the final analysis, our political or theological differences are less significant than the resolve each of us has to fulfill God's call in our lives as best we can, despite disagreement or the opinion of others.

So, in conclusion, I want to thank the Gay and Lesbian Alumni of the University of Notre Dame and St. Mary's College for bestowing on me the Tom Dooley Award, an award I will cherish because it reminds

me of a great man who is a saint, who teaches us that sainthood lies in following God's call to live with personal integrity, despite contradictions or opposition from without, despite hesitation or trepidation from within. I receive the Tom Dooley Award with deep reverence in the name of all the lesbian and gay Catholics who have taught me how to walk in God-shoes.

*The Gay And Lesbian Alumni of The University of Notre Dame and St. Mary's College held a reception bestowing the 2003 THOMAS A. DOOLEY AWARD on SR. JEANNINE GRAMICK on November 22, 2003 at the L. A. Gay and Lesbian Center in Los Angeles, CA.*

*The Dooley Award honors individuals who, through their faith based background, have demonstrated personal courage, compassion and commitment to advance the human and civil rights of lesbian and gay Americans. It is named for the gay Notre Dame graduate who achieved world fame in the 1950s while helping the needy of Southeast Asia.*

*Sr. Jeannine Gramick is the co-founder of the Baltimore and Washington, DC chapters of DIGNITY, a national organization for Catholic lesbian and gay people. She also founded New Ways Ministry, a social justice center working for the reconciliation of lesbian/gay people and the Church. The Thomas A. Dooley Award will be accepted by Sr. Jeannine Gramick in a ceremony at the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center. The evening will feature excerpts from a new feature documentary, IN GOOD CONSCIENCE: SISTER JEANNINE GRAMICK'S JOURNEY OF FAITH, by Emmy Award-Winning Out Of The Blue films.*