



# **Invited to Courageous Love**

## **The Catholic Church and Homosexuality**

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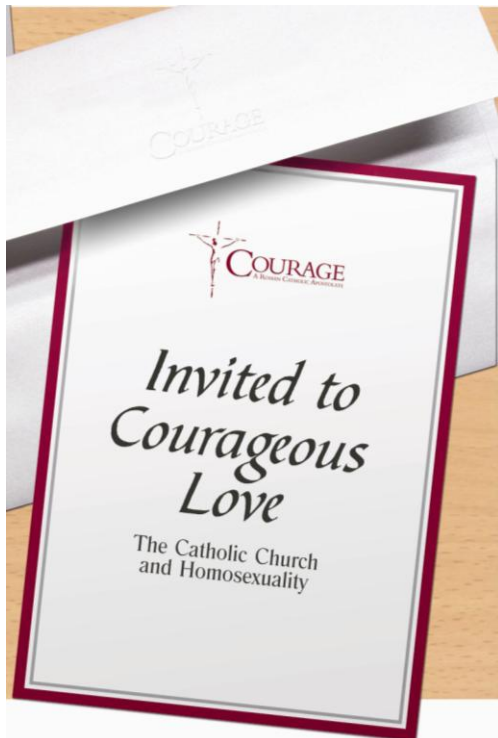
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## INTRODUCTION

# Invited to Courageous Love

## The Catholic Church and Homosexuality



Among the realities affecting human beings in every time and place, and particularly in our own day, sexuality and sexual identity are among the most meaningful as well as the most complex. Sacred Scripture reveals that sexuality is part of God's plan for the human person, and that He created it with a purpose and as part of a great ordered plan for human happiness.

The reality of sin, likewise central to the story of humanity in every age, continually threatens to obscure God's purpose for sex and for sexual intimacy. Distortions of ordered sexuality take various forms, few as difficult to understand as same-sex attractions. As always, the teachings of the Catholic Church, drawn from reason and

revelation, from Scripture and her living Tradition, shed light on the increasingly relevant issue of homosexuality and provide clear guidance for a life of holiness.

This five-part catechetical series examines the experience of Catholic men and women who experience same-sex attractions, of their parents and loved ones, and of the ministers of the Church who care for them, in order to bring out the beauty of God's plan for human relationships, and to highlight both the struggles of those striving to be faithful and the tools that the Church provides to assist them. Guidance will also come in the form of the consistent teaching of the Church and the insights of professionals in the medical and social sciences.

This study guide is intended for individual and group use, to highlight important aspects of the catechesis contained in the videos and to prompt personal reflection and communal discussion.

Program One

## The Good News About Chaste Love

*“Love one another as I love you.”* (John 15:12)



At the Last Supper, Jesus told his apostles, “I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). The Lord invites each person to walk the path that leads to Him, so that He can lead each person to the Father. He promises to welcome all those who seek Him: “All that the Father gives me will come to me,” He says, “and the one who comes to me I will not cast out.” (John 6:37).

Every person who comes to the Lord, however, does so from his or her own starting point, and experiences twists and turns, and sometimes obstacles, along the way that are very personal. Men and women who experience same-sex attractions walk a path that is not always easy, and that often involves suffering, doubt and loneliness. But many of these people relate that, by a long and sometimes winding road, they were able to find again the way that Jesus marked out for them, and in the process found freedom, joy and peace.

### Questions for Review

#### What are some common factors in the stories you heard?

Many people reported experiencing same-sex attractions from a young age. In childhood, some of them were victims of sexual abuse by family members or friends. Others mentioned feeling disconnected from parents or friends. Often this meant that they felt insecure or “less than” others, and found themselves looking for same-sex connections to soothe the pain of being isolated.

#### What lessons can be learned from the example of Jesus in his encounter with the Woman of Samaria?

Jesus knew very well the particular struggles and sins in the life of the woman, but this is not the first, nor the central issue that they discuss. Rather, He offers her an invitation to receive God’s grace, which has the power to transform her life, and to lead her to eternal life. Just so, Jesus approaches each person with an invitation to accept His friendship and the grace and mercy He is offering. In this context He can lead each person to a healing of wounds, conversion of heart, and a new way of life.

#### What was life like for those who pursued homosexual relationships?

The people interviewed in the video spoke very frankly about their experiences of homosexual desires and homosexual acts. They spoke of the same reality: on the one hand, feeling a sense of excitement or fulfillment in the moment, while on the other, knowing deep down that what they were seeking or doing was wrong. As they got deeper into relationships, and were surrounded by other people who were also homosexual, it became easier and seemed more natural to continue this way of living. However, they all eventually came to a point where how they were living felt empty and unfulfilling. But it was often difficult to break free and make a change.

### **What is chastity?**

Chastity is the virtue that puts sexual desires in their proper context, and makes decisions about thought and actions based on the plan of God for sexuality and sexual intimacy. Chastity is much more than *continence*, which avoids sexual acts that are sinful. Chastity involves a reordering of desires, thoughts and actions, so that a person can be in control of his or her sexual desires, rather than controlled by them.

### **What happened when the people interviewed in the video made a choice to pursue chastity?**

It was not an easy decision for many of them to make: sometimes it involved leaving relationships behind and staying away from people and places that were sources of temptation. But ultimately, each person interviewed reported feeling peace, joy and freedom, and a closer relationship to God and to other people. They spoke often of a freedom to love more authentically because they were being chaste.

### **What is the message of the Catholic Church to people who are experiencing same-sex attractions?**

Too often, people perceive the Church's teaching about chastity to be about saying "No!" to people who are just "doing what comes naturally." While it's true that the Church often has to say "No" to behaviors that are sinful and that therefore lead a person to be unhappy, the "No" of the Church is always leading to a deeper "Yes!"

The Church calls people who are experiencing same-sex attractions — and indeed every person — to embrace chastity as a way of saying "Yes" to God's plan for the human person and for human relationships. In this way, they can say "Yes" to an intimate friendship with God, to a deeper understanding and acceptance of their identity as His children, and to authentic relationships with others. They can say "Yes" to expressions of love that are based on the love God has shown us in Christ Jesus, who laid down his life for us and calls us his friends.

Ultimately, they can say "Yes" to the vocation God gives them to be part of the Church, to use their gifts and to lay down their lives in imitation of Christ. This is the way of joy, of freedom, and of eternal life.

### **For Personal Reflection**

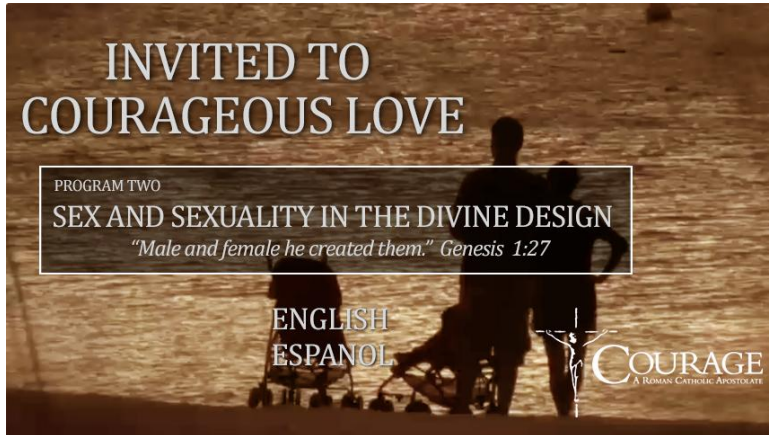
Can you see part of your own story, or the story of someone you love, reflected in the stories of the people who were interviewed for the video? How does hearing their stories affect the way you think about your own life?

Do you find it easy to believe that the people in the video found joy and peace by embracing chastity and leaving behind unchaste acts and relationships? If not, what makes it difficult to believe? What do their stories have to say to a world that often seems obsessed by sex? Are there parts of your life in which you have to say "No" to sinful thoughts and behaviors in order to say "Yes" to God and his plan?

Program Two

## Sex and Sexuality in the Divine Design

*“Male and female he created them.”* (Genesis 1:27)



The question of identity is fundamental to understanding ourselves and our lives in God’s plan. Before we can know how we are to live, we need to know who we are and what God’s plan is for us and for our relationships. As children of God, created in His image and likeness, and created as male or female, we are made to reveal the image of God in the world.

The purpose of sex (being male and female) and sexuality (expressing love in a physically intimate way) is intimately connected with this duty to make God visible in our words, our actions, and our relationships. The complementary sexual differences between man and woman allow them to achieve an intimate union of body, mind and heart. The permanent, faithful covenant of marriage provides the appropriate context for a sexual intimacy, which creates and strengthens a bond of self-giving love (union) which allows spouses to cooperate with God in giving the gift of new human life (procreation).

### Questions for Review

#### How do we understand our identity as human beings?

We are created in the image and likeness of God<sup>1</sup>, who exists as a Trinity of persons. We are also created as male and female<sup>2</sup>, and this being created “for the other” — called *complementarity* — helps us to reveal the image of the Trinity.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Catechism of the Catholic Church, 356-57. <sup>2</sup>CCC 369-70. <sup>3</sup>CCC 371-73.

#### What place do sex and sexuality have in the design of God for us?

Sexuality affects all aspects of the human person. Men and women are designed for the union of persons that is found in marriage and family life.<sup>4</sup> We are “blessedly incomplete” in ourselves, because we are made for union with one another.

#### Is there a purpose for sexual intimacy?

Yes. The purpose of sexual intimacy is a real joining of persons<sup>5</sup> that allows a man and a woman to make a total gift of self to one another (union)<sup>6</sup> and to cooperate with God in giving the gift of new life (procreation).<sup>7</sup>

#### How is homosexuality related to God’s design for sex?

True love wants to make a gift of the self to the other. Sexual intimacy that is not open to union based on complementarity and to the possibility of procreation limits a person’s ability to give fully.<sup>8</sup> Like contraception, homosexual acts are disconnected from procreation, and sexual intimacy can be reduced to something pleasurable without requiring a true gift of self. Moreover, homosexual relations lack the complementarity of the sexes that is the context for a sexually intimate gift to another.<sup>9</sup>

### **What does the Church mean when it says that homosexual acts, or the homosexual inclination, are “objectively disordered?”<sup>10</sup>**

This does not mean that a person experiencing same-sex attractions is suffering from a mental disorder. It means that same-sex sexual actions, and the desires that lead to them, do not correspond to God’s design or “order” for human sexuality.

### **What distinctions does the Church make in its teachings about homosexuality?**

The Church starts by identifying the person as a child of God, whose identity cannot be reduced to his or her sexual attractions. Then the Church distinguishes between homosexual actions, which are gravely sinful, and the experience of same-sex attraction, which is not sinful in itself. <sup>4</sup>CCC 2331-32. <sup>5</sup>CCC 2360.-63 <sup>6</sup>CCC 2364-65. <sup>7</sup>CCC 2366-72. <sup>8</sup>CCC 2363. <sup>9</sup>CCC 2357. <sup>10</sup>CCC 2357.

### **What does the Church mean by the Natural Law and concupiscence?**

There is a moral understanding, built into human nature, which is accessible to all people by the light of natural reason.<sup>11</sup> Principles like “Do no harm,” “Treat equals equally,” and “Do good and avoid evil,” are self-evidently correct, and every rational person knows that he ought to follow them. Concupiscence, which is a tendency to sin, creates a tension in the human heart between knowing what is right, and having limits on our freedom to choose the good.

### **What is complementarity?**

Physical, emotional and spiritual differences exist between men and women by God’s design, which are ordered toward the gift of self in marriage.<sup>12</sup> Everyone is called to accept and respect his or her sexual identity as male or female as a gift from God. Sexual relations that are not based on this complementary difference lack the context in which they can be truly self-giving.

### **Doesn’t God want everyone to love and be loved?**

Yes. God wants to unite people in the truth and in the authentic love which reflects God’s image in us. But not all expressions of love and affection are the same, and sexual expressions of love ought to be reserved for marriage, which gives them their proper context.

### **For Personal Reflection**

Do you have relationships in which you authentically share yourself, where you can reveal yourself to another? What is it that you want someone to know about you? Is this the whole you? What difference does it make in your life to know who Jesus is? What difference does it make to know that Jesus knows who you are? Angelo S., Bob H., and Jonah B. spoke about the importance of realizing that they are not defined by their desires. What difference does it make in your life to know that temptations do not inevitably lead to actions? <sup>11</sup>CCC 1954-60, <sup>12</sup>CCC 369-73, 2331-36



## Program Three

# Insights from the Medical and Social Sciences

“Lord, you search me and you know me.” (Psalm 139:1)



We have already seen that people who experience same-sex attractions each have their own stories to tell, and their own paths to walk on the way to a deeper relationship with God. In many cases, they themselves are not sure how same-sex attractions became part of the story, and the Church acknowledges that the origins of these attractions are varied, complex and personal.

There are certain parts of the story, though, that seem to be common to many persons who experience same-sex attractions. The Church encourages people to use all the means at their disposal to understand the experiences and the challenges that face their minds and hearts, including the contributions of professionals in the psychological and social sciences. These professionals can offer insights into the origins of same-sex attractions and suggestions that will make it easier to embrace a chaste lifestyle.

It is also important to acknowledge the medical risks associated with homosexual acts, especially between men. At a time when secular society promotes homosexual relationships as equivalent to marriage, it is irresponsible not to point out the risks that same-sex behavior poses to bodily and emotional health.

### Questions for Review

#### Is a person born with same-sex attractions?

Researchers point out that many people report experiencing same-sex attractions for as long as they can remember. But this is not the same as saying that these attractions are inborn or genetic. For one thing, as Dr Jones states, childhood memories are often unreliable can be shaped and even distorted by what happens in later life. While some biological or genetic *predisposition* toward experiencing same-sex attraction may be present in certain people, it is not possible to say that it is completely *predetermined* by genetics or biology. The best studies of identical twins — who share the same genetic code — have only shown a weak correlation (less than 12% of cases) of two twins both experiencing same-sex attractions.

#### Then what explains the origins of same-sex attractions?

Same-sex attraction is a very complex experience, and many factors may be involved in a particular person’s story, but researchers have identified socio-cultural variables that are often present in each case. For example, people who experience same-sex attractions as adults are more likely to have grown up in single-parent homes, or to have had fathers who were absent or distant (physically or emotionally). When they were young they often went through a period of “gender nonconforming” behaviors (this is especially true of young women) and felt that they did not fit in with their same-sex peers.

### **Do men and women experience same-sex attractions in the same way?**

Although there are some factors common to men and women, there are also differences. Women tend to be attracted to other women because of an emotional connection — they are often looking for a deep friendship, which later becomes a physical relationship. Men more often are attracted to the physical qualities, the outward appearance, of other men. The connection sometimes begins as a sexual encounter, which is often temporary and even anonymous.

### **Is same-sex attraction unchangeable?**

More and more research describes a fluidity to sexual attraction and identity, especially during adolescence and young adulthood. It is important not to encourage a young person to take on a “label” based on sexual attractions that may change over time. The Church always refuses to define a person as “a homosexual” or “a heterosexual,” and instead looks at the identity of the whole person as a child of God.

### **Are people who experience same-sex attractions at a greater risk for emotional and mental health problems?**

Numerous studies show that people who experience same-sex attractions are at elevated risk for anxiety and mood disorders, substance abuse, and suicidal thoughts and plans. The numbers do not change when the studies are conducted in countries (like The Netherlands, for example) where homosexuality is widely accepted. The increased risk cannot be attributed solely to social stigmatization.

### **How can mental health professionals be of help to people who are experiencing same-sex attractions?**

An authentic therapeutic approach is not centered on “fixing” or “solving” a person’s same-sex attractions or “making” the person heterosexual. Rather, the therapist can help the client understand the emotional and relational factors that may underlie his or her same-sex attractions and that make it difficult to break away from unchaste behaviors. With deeper insight into the workings of his or her mind and heart, the client is freer to embrace chastity and a new way of life.

### **Do people who engage in same-sex actions face particular medical issues?**

Unchaste behavior always puts a person at greater risk for sexually transmitted diseases, but men who have sex with men are at particular risk. Rates of HIV/AIDS, syphilis, HPV, gonorrhea, chlamydia and hepatitis increase dramatically for such men compared to their heterosexual peers. Homosexual men and women are also more likely to be smokers, to abuse drugs and alcohol, and to be victims of intimate partner violence.

### **For Personal Reflection**

Have you heard the explanations that the psychologists in the video give for the origins of same-sex attractions before? How does their explanation compare to what you have heard from the media, from school, or from other sources? Do you think it is important to speak with people about the mental and physical health risks associated with homosexual relations? How could you have such a conversation with a relative or friend? With someone that you don’t know well?



## Program Four

# Homosexuality and the Family

*“Can a mother forget her child?”* (Isaiah 49:15)



Same-sex attractions have a deep impact on the life of the person who experiences them, but they also affect the lives of his or her parents and other loved ones. It can be difficult for a parent to hear that their child is experiencing same-sex attractions, and especially painful when their son or daughter is engaging in homosexual acts and relationships. Parents often experience a great tension between their desire to hold fast

to the Faith and their concern to maintain strong relationships with their children. This becomes particularly difficult when the son or daughter has rejected the teaching of the Church and has stopped practicing the Faith.

The experience of faithful parents reveals how these difficult moments in the life of a family can actually become moments of growth and conversion, leading them to a greater ability to love sincerely, to live faithfully, and to trust in God and his Providence.

### Questions for Review

#### **How can a parent begin a conversation with a son or daughter who experiences same-sex attractions?**

The key is to assure a son or daughter who is experiencing same-sex attractions that he or she is loved unconditionally. Any future conversations have to be built on this foundation of love.

#### **Are there common topics among these conversations between parents and children?**

Often, sons or daughters experiencing same-sex attractions are worried about being rejected by their parents, especially if the parents are active in the practice of their faith. Sometimes the children insist that their parents and family accept and approve of their homosexual relationships, or lose a relationship with them.

#### **Are these conversations always easy?**

No. Many parents, like Bob C., wish that they had responded differently to the initial “coming out” conversation they had with their children. It can take a long time for family relationships to recover from the hurt feelings and angry words that are sometimes a part of these first conversations.

#### **What are some experiences that parents may have?**

Looking back, parents sometimes recognize that their children needed attention that they were not able to give, or that their children were distant or pulling away from them. This realization can cause deep pain for the parents, and feelings of guilt, regret and shame. Parents can feel like it was “their fault” that their child is experiencing same-sex attractions. As parents come to realize that their child’s reality will not reflect the parents’ expectations, new tensions are created which can lead to feelings of confusion, doubt and fear, as well as anger at God or at themselves.

### **How can accepting the situation of their children be a moment of conversion for parents?**

Acceptance of a son or daughter with same-sex attractions (which does not mean acceptance of sinful choices) means trusting that God continues to have a loving plan for that child. It can be difficult to acknowledge that one's own child is struggling with such issues, but accepting the reality of the situation can eventually free a parent from any shame, narcissism or embarrassment. It can open up a parent's eyes to the suffering that the son or daughter is experiencing, and bring forth a response of real love and compassion.

### **What is the virtue of hope, and what role does it play in coming to understand the situation of a child with same-sex attraction?**

Hope does not mean "God does what I want," nor that I can make deals with God. Rather, the virtue of hope is real trust that allows God to be in charge of things. Hope leads to perseverance, to trusting in God's willingness and ability to act despite the obstacles that one might perceive or the personal weakness or helplessness that one might feel. Hope allows one's prayer to be real intercession, focused on the good of the other rather than on one's own suffering, doubts or needs.

### **What can a parent do when faced with the suffering and struggles they perceive in a son or daughter with same-sex attraction?**

It is natural for parents to try to "fix" the situation, as they would when dealing with a physical illness or injury. But this response is not usually helpful. Instead, parents need to try to patiently draw their children to a deeper understanding of the truth of the Faith. This includes not treating same-sex partners as a "couple" and setting appropriate boundaries during visits to the parents' home. It also means avoiding scandal, which leads someone to believe that sinful behavior is good. This is especially important when there are young children in the family.

Parents ultimately need to focus on developing and strengthening their own life of faith. A joyful example will inspire children and other family members and friends to seek a closer relationship with Christ and His Church, whatever their individual struggles, weaknesses and temptations may be.

### **What is EnCourage?**

The EnCourage apostolate was founded in 1992 to provide care and support for Catholic parents and spouses of people who are experiencing same-sex attractions.

### **How is EnCourage different from other support groups for parents of homosexual children?**

Too often, parents' groups pass over the question of whether their children's actions and desires are ordered or disordered, and instead accept their various living situations out of what might be called "misplaced compassion." EnCourage insists that the best way to love someone is to speak the truth with patience and compassion. EnCourage members accept their loved ones while not accepting or approving the disordered choices they are making.

### **For Personal Reflection**

What do you suppose your reaction would be if a loved one told you he or she experiences same-sex attraction? Has the discussion in this video changed the way you would hope to handle such a conversation?

If you are a person who experiences same-sex attraction, does the video give you insight into the reaction of your own parents and loved ones? Can this lead to a new kind of conversation with them?

Program Five

## Providing Authentic Pastoral Care

*“I will give you shepherds after my own heart.”* (Jeremiah 3:15)



Each person who experiences same-sex attractions has been created by God and called by name to a deeper relationship with Him. But no one is called in isolation. Every person finds his or her authentic relationship with Jesus Christ as a member of His Body, which is the Church. Through all of her members — the people in the pew, and especially bishops and priests — the Church reaches out to her children with same-sex attractions to offer them a warm welcome, the

consolation and grace of the sacraments, and clear teaching about the Faith and the moral life.

Each person is also called to contribute to the life of the Church, by generously living chastity, by sharing his or her journey and experiences with others in similar situations, and by taking on roles of service to others. The Courage apostolate builds on this framework to support Catholics with same-sex attractions and help them to fulfill their vocation as children of God and members of the Church.

### Questions for Review

#### **What framework does the Catholic Church propose for the lives of people who experience same-sex attractions?**

The Church teaches that “everyone should have a high esteem for the virtue of chastity [which] increases the human person’s dignity and enables him to love truly, disinterestedly, unselfishly and with respect for others.”<sup>1</sup> She also insists that a person’s first and most important identity is as a beloved child of God, and not simply as “a homosexual” or “a heterosexual.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics*, 1975. <sup>2</sup>CDF, *Letter to Bishops on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, 1986.

#### **Why don’t some priests teach as the Church does about the disordered nature of homosexual acts and attraction?**

Sometimes priests or other members of the Church may be motivated by “misplaced compassion” — that is, in an effort not to offend a person who is experiencing same-sex attraction, they may downplay what the Church teaches or even ignore it completely. Rather than helping a person, however, such an approach can leave him or her in greater doubt and confusion about the truth. Many of those who were interviewed for the video said how helpful it was when a priest spoke the truth to them with compassion, and helped them to turn away from sinful behavior and embrace chastity.

#### **Why does the Church make distinctions between the person, his desires, and actions?**

As we have seen, the Church teaches that homosexual acts are always gravely disordered and seriously sinful. It also says that a same-sex attraction is disordered, although simply experiencing it is not itself a sin. But the Church does not reject the person experiencing the same-sex attraction as someone who is intrinsically or irreparably damaged or evil. Rather, the Church accepts each person and accompanies him or her in the life-long process of understanding their desires, controlling their actions, and growing in holiness. The Gospel reveals that no one is ever outside the reach of God’s grace.

### **What is the role of the Catholic community toward people who experience same-sex attractions?**

It is important for bishops and priests to speak clearly about the truth of the Gospel call to chastity, but it is essential that the lay faithful also speak the truth in love. This begins with recognizing the identity of a person with same-sex attractions as a fellow Christian, a fellow member of Christ's Body. It also means seeing the person *as a person*, as an individual with his or her own life story. No one can answer every question or solve every problem, but the gifts of authentic compassion, understanding and solidarity can greatly help a person to grow in his or her relationship with God and the Church.

### **How can the Gospel be extended to a culture that does not want to hear it?**

This process too must begin with authentic compassion, because many people who are outside or separated from the Church assume that they are judged and hated by the Church and by Christians. This assumption can only be overcome by a constant, consistent message of love, balanced with an honest critique of the way a person is living.

### **What is the Courage apostolate?**

Courage was founded in 1980 by Father John Harvey, OSFS, at the invitation of Cardinal Terence Cooke, then Archbishop of New York. From the beginning, Courage has existed to provide spiritual support, fellowship and pastoral care for people experiencing same-sex attractions who have made a free choice to live chastely and seek the help and support of the Church in doing so.

### **What are the goals of the Courage apostolate?**

The first Courage members identified five goals that they would pursue together, which form a spiritual plan for an interior life with Christ. The five goals are (1) true **chastity** in mind, soul and body; (2) **prayer and dedication**, especially to the Sacraments; (3) mutual **support** in the struggles and challenges associated with homosexuality; (4) real **fellowship** with one another; and (5) a life of service that serves as a **good example** to others.

### **How does a Courage meeting work?**

A Courage group meets weekly or several times a month in a location that provides privacy and anonymity for the members. A priest chaplain typically leads the meeting, which includes time for prayer and, in many cases, opportunities for individual confession. Members "check in" by saying briefly where they have had success or struggles since their last meeting, and the chaplain and fellow members offer support and suggestions for one another. Often a Courage meeting is extended by opportunities for social fellowship, which builds strong friendships and a sense of community among the members.

### **For Personal Reflection**

Have you found yourself remaining silent about Church teachings on the issue of homosexuality because of misplaced compassion? Has this series changed how you will talk about it in the future? Would you consider attending a Courage meeting, or recommending it to a loved one who experiences same-sex attractions? What might make you hesitant to do so? From the experience of those interviewed for the video, do you think it would be worth trying?

## **For Further Reading**

*Church documents, books and articles on what the Catholic Church teaches about homosexuality and pastoral care for persons experiencing same-sex attractions.*

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