

Courage

To make a long story short: a priest of 11 years, I returned to my native Archdiocese of New York in 1976 with a doctorate in moral theology, all the while expecting I would be assigned to the faculty of our Archdiocesan Seminary of St. Joseph, Dunwoodie, in Yonkers. Such was not to be.

In one of those surprises we all are used to experiencing in our Church, Cardinal Cooke appointed me instead to Headquarters: the Chancery Office, newly renamed the Pastoral Office – and the renaming was relevant to my appointment.

The Cardinal, a pastor from head to toe, was well aware of our culture's changing mores and saw it necessary that the Church offer spiritual support to groups within the Church in life situations that called for a pastor's special concern. He delegated me to organize such groups as needed.

Two, for example.

Divorced Catholics were rising in number and amid confusion. Many wrongly presumed that being civilly divorced placed them outside the worthy reception of the Eucharist. The Church's teaching on marriage and divorce – then as now – needed clearer explanation. Individuals reeling from the trauma of divorce had to be assured of the Church's presence in their lives, and the process of Church annulment had to be presented to them. So called "internal-forum" solutions, whereby a priest in confession would presume, virtually, to declare an annulment, had to be exposed as spurious and illegitimate. So began, then, a very successful pastoral initiative to separated and divorced Catholics – one that will hopefully find traction here in our own Archdiocese in the months ahead.

Another pastoral need, evident to me as I would hear confessions every weekday at St. Patrick's Cathedral where I was assigned, was to assist individuals with homosexual orientation seeking to live in keeping with the teaching of the Church. That teaching, solidly founded in Scripture and the constant magisterium of the Church, holds that homosexual actions are against the Sixth Commandment and always seriously wrong.

Then, as now, in the face of significant opposition, this teaching needed explanation and a pastoral outreach.

With Father John Harvey, O.S.F.S., and Benedict Groeschel, C.F.R., I was involved in the founding of Courage, a support group for Catholics with same-sex attractions who seek to live chaste lives. Off to a small start in 1980, Courage now has branches in 95 U.S. dioceses as well as in 12 other countries. The strength it continues to lend individuals and their families is a sure sign of God's grace at work.

At present, we have EnCourage, a group that meets regularly in our Archdiocese. I wrote about it in this column in March after celebrating Mass for its members. EnCourage supports relatives and loved ones of individuals who are involved in same-sex relationships. These EnCourage members are often parents who have homosexually active children and see the sad gap between them and our Church's stand. They have been univocal in expressing the need for Courage in our Archdiocese.

Now it is my hope to accede to their request and to other similar requests to promote and support our Church's teaching with the formation of a Courage group. This I have begun and I will share details of our plans in a future column.