

'Here I Am, Lord'

Ministry with Lesbian and Gay Catholics celebrates 15 years of service with Mass at St. Dominic Parish in Los Angeles, CA

"Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord? I have heard you calling in the night. I will go Lord if you lead me. I will hold your people in my heart."

The refrain of Dan Schutte's familiar opening refrain that filled St. Dominic Church in Eagle Rock February 4 set the tone for the warm, almost-summer evening, where more than 400 people gathered to celebrate 15 years of the Ministry with Lesbian and Gay Catholics (MLGC).

"Here I am, Lord" is, in ways, an unofficial motto for the ministry that had grown and found its place within not only the Los Angeles Archdiocese but also the cities and parishes where it has taken root. The MLGC encourages gay and lesbian Catholics to remain (or return to) their parishes to fully participate in the service and life of the church.

For all those involved in the MLGC—including supportive

pastors, religious, lay members, and leaders—the evening was indeed a celebration of endurance, strength, and commitment. At the end of the Mass, the ministry's director, Carmelite Father Peter Liuzzi, thundered to the crowds, "We have passed through the door. This is our jubilee year!"

San Pedro Regional Auxiliary Bishop Joseph Sartoris presided at the Mass where more than 30 priests concelebrated. "It is fitting that we begin this celebration of this ministry with the presentation of the baptismal candle," Bishop Sartoris noted. "This ministry is here for those to reclaim their baptismal rights as full members of the church."

St. Dominic's pastor, Dominican Father Anthony Patalano, welcomed people who came as far away as Santa Monica, Claremont, and Long Beach. "May God bless your commitment to the whole Catholic community," he said.

In a passionate homily, Fr. Liuzzi compared the ministry—as well as the experience of being gay in the church—to the Gospel story of Jesus calling Peter the fisherman to be his disciple. Peter, who had worked all day, was doubtful when Jesus told him to cast his net one more time, only to find the catch was big enough to sink two boats.

"That day a new partnership, a new life started," Fr. Liuzzi said. "It's that new life that we continue to celebrate tonight in grand style."

Citing the vision of Cardinal Roger Mahony as the originator of the ministry 15 years ago, Fr. Liuzzi described those involved in the MLGC as people "working against all odds. You and I lower our nets for a catch at the Lord's command. You are the ones who say, 'Here I am, Lord. Send me.' You have built up parish life all over the archdiocese. In this day and age of the laity in the church, you are a wonderful example of lay leadership."

The evening honored individuals who have been serving the ministry in their parishes. Eight received the Lumen Christi awards for 2001. Certificates of support were also handed out to those who offer support and recognize the ministry in special ways. Others received tokens of appreciation.

Earlier in the week, Fr. Liuzzi was presented with an official resolution from the Los Angeles City Council, commending the MLGC for its far-reaching work,

educational programs and outreach to parents of gay children. "I had no idea we were receiving such a recognition," Fr. Liuzzi told *The Tidings*. "It took all of us by surprise."

The resolution is important, said Fr. Liuzzi, because now the ministry is known as a force within the community. "We now have a level of credibility within the city. It really feels like we have come of age," he said.

In the next 15 years, Fr. Liuzzi said he hoped the ministry would find more welcoming parishes. "What I have noticed, is that where the ministry exists, the pastors are delighted," he said. "Gay people are supportive and creative in their parishes as they assume leadership roles."

In the past five years, the language of the ministry has evolved to be a declaration. "I am simply here to lay claim to all that I have been promised by my baptism," explained Fr. Liuzzi who added that the ministry has established parent support groups, the country's first Hispanic gay and lesbian group, and finally, Sophia's Circle, a newly formed lesbian group.

"Gay people," he summarized, "are those 'ordinary Catholics' who simply want to participate in Christ's body here on earth."

**By Brenda Rees
Los Angeles, CA**

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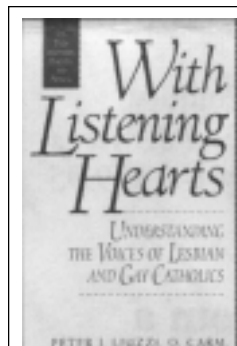
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