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In Good Conscience: Sister Jeannine Gramick's Journey of Faith

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In Good Conscience: Sister Jeannine Gramick's Journey of Faith

Abstract

This is a review of *In Good Conscience: Sister Jeannine Gramick's Journey of Faith* (2004).

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This 82-minute film, directed by Barbara Rick, documents the career of Sr. Jeannine Gramick, who, since 1971, has advocated for and walked in solidarity with gay and lesbian Catholics. Her ministry began with a simple question from a young man who has since died of AIDS: "What is the Catholic church doing for my gay brothers and sisters?" Gramick, who has spent more than 40 of her 62 years in religious life, and over 40 of those years in gay ministry, has met that challenge with dedication, intelligence and grace ever since. It has also cost her dearly, both personally and professionally.

The film begins and ends with Gramick's visit to Rome, shortly before the death of John Paul II. Despite being forbidden by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) to continue her ministry, and ordered to silence by the General Superior of her order, the School Sisters of Notre Dame, Gramick is there to publicize the Italian translation of her book, co-authored with Fr. Bob Nugent, *Building Bridges: Gay and Lesbian Reality in the Catholic Church*. Rather than being repelled by the grandeur of Vatican City, she frequently visits St. Peter's to pray, seeing it as a monument to the faith of generations of Christians. Rather than being discouraged by the refusal of the Prefect of the CDF (Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI) to meet with her, she sends him a copy of the book, along with a personal note, hoping that he will read it with respect, if not agreement.

This incident is typical of Gramick's gentle but firm refusal to be bullied, suppressed or discouraged by the stalwart Vatican opposition to her mission. The film intersperses vignettes from Gramick's personal life--her childhood in Philadelphia, her youthful attraction to the religious life, her prosaic daily activities as an aging nun caring for an octogenarian father--with her career as an activist in a highly controversial cause. In her work with New Way Ministries, a gay-positive ministry for lesbian and gay Catholics, her discussions with curious journalists in Rome and the U.S., her conversations with sometimes hostile anti-gay activists, Gramick remains positive, polite, compassionate and reasonable. Sometimes dubbed a "rebel nun," Gramick sees herself rather as "following where I feel God wants me to go"--a bridge-builder between communities.

A question posed by Gramick at a lecture on a college campus resonates through the whole film: "What is the place of silencing in the social teaching of our church?" Rather than agreeing to be muzzled and thus complicit in the oppression of gay Catholics, she continued her work, and transferred to the Sisters of Loretto after a threat of dismissal by her old order ("Move on, where there's a need, you go," says an elderly Loretto of their mandate). Gramick appeals to the "best-kept secret" of Catholic teaching, the primacy of conscience, to justify her faithful dissent. The Vatican's 1975 *Declaration on Sexual Ethics* teaches that it is not morally wrong to be gay, but that to act on one's homosexuality is. This teaching,

she observes, begs the question of why God would create human beings with a same-sex orientation only to forbid its expression. With respect to doctrine, Gramick quotes an elderly nun she once knew: "there is only one absolute, and that is God; anything else can change."

The most striking feature of this film is that Gramick does not fit the stereotype of the radical. Rather than being aggressive or judgmental, she tries to meet opposition and weakness with compassion. She uses a parable of different kinds of cloth to illustrate the capacities of different kinds of people. Some, like herself, are linen, and able to take the heat. Others are more delicate, and don't have the ability to stand up to the Vatican like she does--they are "silk, beautiful silk." Nonetheless, the film is not a hagiography; Gramick admits to sometimes being "witchy," to the laughing agreement of some of her colleagues.

This film would be a good discussion-starter about core values, religious affiliation and assent to church teaching with respect to a controversial, sensitive and important issue of human and religious rights.