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Coloring Outside the Lines:

Richard Rohr, Speaker at the New Ways Ministry Conference

The Albuquerque-based Center for Action and Contemplation, founded by the nationally known writer and lecturer, Fr. Richard Rohr, has begun an 8-week discussion series, "Exploring Developments in the Church's Tradition on Homosexuality." The series is offered by the "Bridge Building Community" at the Center, a group which began about a year ago under the inspiration of New Ways Ministry leaders, Jeannine Grammick and Robert Nugent. The Community comes together periodically "to discuss a variety of topics, from the Scripture and its reference to homosexuality, to practical aspects of living as gays and lesbians."

The Center for Action and Contemplation is housed on the property of Holy Family Parish, whose pastor is Fr. Jack Robinson. Fr. Robinson is scheduled to hold a retreat at the Center in late June (1997) which is titled "Coming Out, Coming Home: A Place in the Church for Lesbians and Gays." Clearly the CAC is reaching out to the homosexual community. The quality of that outreach - the depth of its compassion and Christian charity - must be measured against its fidelity to the truth. To that end, it is valuable to examine some of the teachings Fr. Rohr has given to men, many of them homosexual, in the past.

Fr. Rohr spoke at the March, 1997 New Ways Ministry Symposium in Pittsburgh [see *Wanderer* coverage of the Symposium, 3-20-97; 3-27-97], delivering a talk titled, "The Men's Movement: Homoeroticism and Homophobia." His tone was intimate, and at times almost tender, as he described his years of work in the "men's movement," providing retreats and spiritual direction.

Rohr began the talk by explaining his personal encounters with "Father Hunger" (a term coined by Robert Bly). In his interactions with men around the world, Rohr has observed an almost insatiable and an increasing yearning for "the Father," because so many children have no father. As a priest, he was amazed by both the overwhelming respect his position elicited from younger men, and in some cases, the irrational hatred.

Therefore, Rohr's retreats often start with asking men to describe their early experiences with their fathers, as those initial interactions he felt, became the template for later experiences. Rohr conducts all-male retreats because he feels men need the freedom to just be with other men, after they overcome their fear and competition with one another. In a group comprised only of men, Rohr finds that there is usually a tremendous readiness to be led, and that the men exhibit the least contentiousness of any other group. *"After Nazism we're so suspicious of males marching in lockstep, but there's something very beautiful, what Buddhist's call 'Beginners Mind.' 'Beginners Mind' is needed for an initiation into a space where someone is ready for guidance. You can't go someplace new unless you believe that there is something new on the other side..."*

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Rohr continued, *“Most men who come [to his retreats] are from the technocratic side of society - doctors, lawyers, professionals. The spiritual life has not been fed at all by their work... ..they want to be opened up... Along with that desire to be led is this, what we call in the title, a certain kind of - and I don't know what other word use - a certain kind of homoeroticism. I'll try to give a number of examples of that. Just a tremendous desire for intimacy, for closeness, for brotherhood, with other men, to an amazing degree. I would say most retreats tend to be 80% heterosexual, 20% at least designated, or owned, homosexual - probably more than the usual population. But what I see just as much, probably more among the heterosexual men is this desire for union, communion, connection with other men. And we realize, of course, that women have been given much greater freedom in this regard. To touch one another, to hold hands, to have friends, even after marriage and not to be considered, or judged to be, a lesbian. But for some reason, friendship is pretty much taboo, at least friendship on a one-on-one level, for a man, unless it's say sports, in a public place. But men don't go off and do things together alone or apart without some kind of suspicion emerging. So men seem to find themselves in a kind of trapped kind of place, in regard to on-going relationship, on-going friendship, or intimacy. So when it's offered, when the possibility is given - G-d! They run to it. And just seem to eat it up, can't get enough of it.”*

Rohr feels that his retreats afford men, both the heterosexual and the homosexual, a “safe” space where they are free to express their feelings. The heterosexual must be reassured that this emotional letting-loose is not homosexual, but when Rohr is able to convince them of the “healing” this experience will provide them, “then the gusto they go toward it with is really quite amazing.”

Rohr fills his 5-day retreats with rituals. *“Usually on the last night of the old retreats - the Quest retreats, and the Hero retreats - I would have about an hour talk on sexuality and touch and embodiment. Then we would have a healing ceremony - several of you in this room have done that. Of all the things that happen, it reveals to me the power of ritual, or the power of touch over the power of just concepts... when I can let go of those and hand it over to ritual, that's when the real transformation seems to happen.”*

The ability to invent rituals is powerful and attractive to Fr. Rohr. *“One of the best things happening in the men's movement - and also the feminist movement - is this wonderful freedom to create rituals, male rituals (and as the women are wisely doing, to create feminine rituals, because so often we've been the ritual makers for the women, which doesn't seem quite fair).”*

Rohr is concerned that male ritual be fresh and virile. *“I think that for many men, the sacraments of the Church have been very feminized. There's a lot of lace and sweetness for the typical male. You see it when you go to so many parts of the world –*

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there's got to be some reason why the man is behind the altar and the church is filled with women and then men are out smoking behind the church. Why do so many men feel castrated by coming into Church? Is it because we [the priests], dressed in dresses behind the altar, have all the power? And the whole thing gets confusing for them? I think that might be part of it, but I think also the rituals themselves have become awfully church-y, maybe too pretty. The classic rites of initiation, rites of passage for young males are blood, semen, ashes, beatings, nakedness...they're real "down there." There's nothing pretty about it. I'm not saying it's naughty or bad, but the male psyche responds to this gutsy-ness, and you see it as soon as they [the men in Rohr's retreats] get out in the woods. They create it. They want it. They need it. They desire it."

Fr. Rohr's retreats often contain an element of nudity. *"The nakedness thing, I must comment on, is really uncanny to me. I could give a whole talk just on that. I never encourage nakedness, as such, but it always happens. I will normally have on the 4th day of a 5-day retreat, a day where I send them out into the canyons or into the desert alone. I've prepared them for that day. A lot of men, and women too, I sure have never spent a day alone, in solitude. And then that night we come back and process: what happened in the canyons alone?"*

"Well, there's always one who in that processing will raise his hand and, sort of with embarrassment, admit that when he got out there he took off all his clothes. And then there's chuckles all around the room - I can just predict it, it happens every time - there's chuckles all over the room. 'Oh! I did, too! I did, too! I did, too!' There's something about nakedness in the male psyche - and now I've studied initiation rites - it's universal. The boy always gets naked, as you see in the sweat lodges, too. And I think it's this desire to get rid of all this persona. All this stuff you have to live up to - you pay a big price for being a patriarch. And feminism has sometimes not been sympathetic enough with that. You pay a big price for having roles and titles and importance and power and significance and the male is just finding every way he can to take it off, to take it off. They always tell me they had to do it and it's amazing how often some wonderful things happen in this sitting there in the sunlight naked - exposed, as it were."

At times, nudity at the retreats is communal. *"We often have campfires, and I know some of you have been at these where it happens, so you know what I'm talking about. Always, always, there's some guys - I mean, is it in their hard wiring? - they'll strip and have to leap over that fire, burning their balls...I don't know what it is. They're the "real" men, who can leap over the fire, naked."*

According to Fr. Rohr, this nudity occurs spontaneously. *"This is not part of my agenda that they're supposed to ...it's just that we have a fire, and then predictably men start doing the same old damn things, all again and again and again. There's this deep desire to get naked, to somehow, even risk nakedness in front of one another. To expose the self. That's really pretty archetypal. It shouldn't really surprise us at all should it?"*

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I mean, that's really what all love-making is of course - could you love me when you see me in my nakedness? Could I still be beautiful, could I still be attractive to you in my nakedness? Can you see it all and still be desirous of me?"

Fr. Rohr understands that many of the retreat activities may appear peculiar to an outside observer. *"Certainly the outsider - and this happened one time - would think it's a homoerotic or homosexual group, and it's just not really the character of the group, as such, in a formal or holistic way."*

One of the rituals done at some of Father Rohr's retreats is a healing ritual. *"I give [the men] a talk on the body and I tell them to go alone and do a compassionate meditation on their body from head to foot. I give them all a foot and a half of red tape and wherever their body is holding a memory, a shame, a fear, a guilt, an anger - whatever - to wrap a little piece of that on their body. And then they come back and they sit in a big circle and I always say they look like a field of wounded soldiers. They're always very quiet when they come back. You can feel, like a self-massage almost. The pain came out when they touched each of those spots, I guess."*

"And then beginning with the elders I lead them through an extended meditation ... I invite them to lie down in what is, for the male, the most vulnerable position - on his back. Then the other men surround them and cradle their bodies and especially touch and lay hands on and pray over those places where the man holds wounds..."

Given the high percentage of homosexuals at his retreats, it is conceivable that a good number of the participants' "wounds" are of a sexual nature. The listener is intrigued to consider the ramifications of this ritual. *"[It] sounds like a rather simple, innocuous ritual - well, it blows them out of the water. It usually goes on the whole night. They don't want to stop. The man becomes their Father that they never had; their Father that they could never touch; their Grandfather who died when they were a boy; their Brother that they wanted to be friends with."*

"Then when the older men are doing it to the younger men, it all, of course, reverses. But the tears just astound me. This readiness to cry and the readiness and the tears seem not be evoked by my words but by the touch itself, by the laying on of hands, by the communion, the connection that seems to happen there. And again, without any unnecessary encouragement from me, many of the men will invariably take off their shirts to expose the red tape, maybe on their chests."

Father's assertion that he does not encourage nudity seemed belied in the following anecdote: *"The only place I was not able to do this exercise - and this will come as no surprise to many of you - was in Ireland. And believe me, the Irish men were with me. This was just last May in Dublin. With me! I mean, G-d! They had their*

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drums - they were better drummers than we are - you know those Irish drums? And singing and together and drinking, of course!

“ I sensed that this was going to be a little hard. So I got together the leaders of the team and I said, now here’s what I normally do on the last night. Even as I was describing it, I could see their faces whiten - I’m not exaggerating. ‘Oh, no, Richard...I don’t think so! Don’t do it. They’ll walk out of the room. They cannot do that.’ And again, it’s not that they were resisting the retreat. They really were with me. But the internalized homophobia - and it’s not just homophobia. It’s [that] the body is this place of defilement...I don’t know how the Irish absorb that.”

Another anecdote also seems to reveal how Fr. Rohr gives shape to his retreats: *“But in fairness I should say, I had to talk another group into it and it was the black men of the Bahamas. They went along and they were blown away. But I had to explain it to them about three times.*

‘Now, do you think you can trust me on this?’

‘Well, OK, but we’re not sure that we really want to do it.’

Father Rohr then went on to discuss personality archetypes. Rohr has been one of the leading proponents of the Enneagram, a system of character assessment, and the following section of his talk revealed another system of personality typing which Rohr and his audience clearly found fascinating. The typologies have become an occult language in which hidden, secret ideas may nonetheless find expression: *“As you know, ... we’ve been given, by Robert Moore and others, [archetypes] for the male, and they still seem good to me, as much as I’ve worked with them: King, Lover, Warrior, Magician. [These archetypes] are now being worked with by gay men to see what exactly might be the shape of those same archetypes [for the homosexual]. Are they different archetypes, or do they simply have a different character? This is merely in the early stages. I just came from the Franciscan House in Chicago, where our young friars are studying, and one of them there is doing research on this. I asked if I could share some of what he’s come to, because it does almost perfectly match my own experience.*

“What was first said was that gay men were almost always Lover archetypes, or maybe Magician archetypes. What they [the homosexual men] had done, was almost entirely rejected the King archetype and the Warrior archetype. I don’t think it’s true - and believe me, all this is still open to discussion. I’m still working with it and I don’t have any final answers on it. But let me just throw out a few possibilities and maybe just get your psyches and souls working on this.”

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The homosexual finds himself to be an embodiment of paradox, says Fr. Rohr. Clearly, too, the homosexual yearns to be “included.” *“I think the King archetype can*

be, an often is - I wish I could give some public names, but I'm not free to, of people who I know are King archetypes. Can actually be accessed earlier by some gay men because of their need to deal with the paradox that they are; that struggling with the paradox that they are, you understand, and to find balance. And if you know the archetype of the King, that's what he is. He's one who can say, "This is true and this is also true." He holds the whole realm together. He says that everything belongs. Everything is included."

Rohr seeks to find the "gift" that he believes there must be to homosexuality. "So I see this - and this applies to the lesbian woman, too - this whole recognition in the homosexual person that 'I am a Man/Woman; I am a Male/Female; I am the inclusion; I am both.' I have no doubt that eventually that will be seen, even in western culture, as a tremendous gift."

The homosexual, using the occult language of archetype, talks about his anguish over boundaries: "The Warrior, I think, it takes the form...in what I call the Hunter or the Scout, who's going out to the edge to explore and pioneer new territory, do you see? It really is a form of the Warrior. It's not so much the defending of the existing boundaries, do you understand, which is the normal homosexual warrior. The homosexual, while honoring the boundaries, has had to learn, if he's at all healthy, how to move through them and beyond them, while knowing that they're there, do you understand?"

"That for me would be the Hunter and the Scout who says, "There's got to be more, because the homosexual person is a living icon of, 'It isn't what you think...' It isn't what everybody thinks. What everybody thinks is the truth is not the truth. What everybody thinks it is, is not the way it is. Again, that's where the homosexual person has a great symbolic head start, in knowing how to color outside the lines, while knowing there are lines, OK?"

"So the Warrior is the one aware of lines, aware of boundaries; the normal Warrior protects the boundary...And I'm sure that we could unpackage this too, from the other side, the learning how to protect and defend, "coming out" - the boundaries of [the homosexual's] own gay-ness. Maybe not the need to overdo it, the need to be in your face, which is the young Warrior. But to calmly, serenely, lovingly own it would be the healthy Warrior; that there are boundaries of who I am, and of who you are and I'm going to name both of them and honor both of them. That's for me a healthy, and a great Warrior."

Rohr discussed that in certain [pagan] cultures the homosexual was seen as possessing a special, spiritual position. "Again, this is where I think the gay person has
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potentially great, great power....the homosexual person was very often the person who could be the spiritual Shaman or the spiritually enlightened person..."

Rohr believes that it is due to the particular suffering of the homosexual - his sense of victimization and of being outcast - that his special gifts and sensitivities can blossom, in *“the folly of the cross; letting go. So initiation tries to teach the boy that ahead of time - how to be wounded and not to turn bitter.”*

Many of Fr. Rohr’s retreats contain “initiation” rituals. *“There’s not an initiation rite that I’ve found where the boy does not have to symbolically die. ...The false self dies so the new self can live. You’ve gotta let go of something. All great spiritualities are about letting go, and especially about letting go of this thing we call “ourself,” so we can find the true self in God. Letting go of the imperial self, so you can find the “god-self”, letting go of the autonomous private-eye, ego-centric, tiny self so you can live the larger self which is the Christ.”*

Rohr told about the secret initiation rites of the New Mexican Acoma Native Americans. *“The boys were all whipped. That’s rather universal. So we[the Catholics] should go, WHAM! Not just [pat], “You’re a soldier of Christ!” You don’t really get the message: life’s gonna be hard, son.*

“In fact, if I can go a little further with that, cause I think you’ll find it interesting...the kiva is the ceremonial space for the Pueblo Indians and you enter it through the roof. It’s normally a male space. By the way, it’s a matriarchal culture. The men had to find some way to be important, so they created their own little space. Which is probably the same thing that happened to the Church, if we’d really unravel it...The one time they let the girls in is at this point in the initiation ceremony. The young boys are stripped naked and huddled together in the middle of the initiation room and the elders begin to whip them. The teenage girls are brought down - it’s very somber and serious; there’s no giggling - and circle the room and they watch the boys being beat. Then the girls go out.

“I guess you can see the psycho-drama going on here. Once the girls have seen the boys in the one-down position, naked underneath their clothes like everybody else, whimpering, perhaps and crying, they’re never going to assume they’re better than girls. It was their way of achieving an equality between the sexes.”

So, for Father Rohr, too, his creation of initiation ceremonies and rituals is to teach men not to abuse their strength. *“[M]ost cultures... seem to assume that unless the boy is taught the down-ward journey, into the dark night of the soul, into the ashes...he will always misuse power.He will always spend his whole life seeking power, position, privilege, perk, and possessions. And isn’t that the story of western humanity? Isn’t that the great anger at the male and the patriarchy? Because we’ve seen, even in the Church,*

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the male with his scarlet fever, wanting to rise up, careerism in the Church ...Come on, come on! You dare not come up until you have first gone down...or you’ll always abuse

it. You'll always aggrandize yourself for your own empowerment, not for the generative building up of the People of God.

"...[E]very initiation rite involves some ritual wounding, scarring. Two-thirds of the world, independently of one another, came up with some scarring of the penis, in the place where a man is most symbolically himself, most empowered, most potent, erect and ejaculated, there's all of his energy - it's there you must bleed..."

Father's retreats have not been without opposition. Originally they were held at a Baptist retreat center outside of Santa Fe. Father had created 6 large panels of archetypal pictures of the male. *"One is all King, archetypal pictures the positive and negative sides of that...one Lover, one Warrior, and one Magician. And I created one Male/Female and one Father/Son. I asked the men during the retreat to use the silent times to simply come and stand in front of these images...Again and again I'll come in and the men will be standing in front of what I think are really awesome pictures, and they can spend hours looking at them. I say to them, when one grabs you or threatens you or irritates you or attracts you, just stand there and ask, why does that picture fascinate me? Why does it turn me off or turn me on? Where does the fascination or resentment come from?"*

The Baptists were unimpressed by the therapeutic nature of the pictures. *"I don't think these are pornographic pictures, but I'm certainly not afraid of nakedness, and there are naked forms in them - very artistic and beautiful forms in all the pictures...it was too much for them. And of course, we weren't allowed to have beer or drink or anything....But they came in one day and they saw the pictures. And [what followed was] a very stern letter - "You may never come back here!"*

Fr. Rohr's talk concluded with a question and answer period, during which he said, *"[T]here has to be an outer "Holy Marriage" for there to be an inner Holy Marriage.....God has already given it the freedom to happen on the level of soul, so there's God's blessing of it [homosexuality] already. Clearly the gay man or woman is going to come to the Holy through the numinous, on the face of a same-sex person. That will be the otherness that will lead them to "ecstasy," out of self. It's obvious. It's obvious."*

If the talk given at the New Ways Ministry Symposium by Fr. Rohr is at all indicative, it is clear that New Mexican participants at the Center for Action and Contemplation discussion series, "Exploring Developments in the Church's Tradition on Homosexuality" will be taught to test the boundaries of their souls. They will be learning how to color outside of the lines.

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