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'Rebel nun' with a gay and lesbian cause

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This is the story of a 61-year-old nun with inclinations toward Birkenstocks and Jane Fonda exercise videos, and a knack for incurring the concentrated fury of the Catholic hierarchy in Rome.

In 1977, Sister Jeannine Gramick — dubbed "the rebel nun" these days in the mainstream press — heeded a call from God and her conscience by co-founding a groundbreaking ministry for gay and lesbian Catholics outside Washington, D.C.

"You can't go against the cardinal," she recalls her elderly father telling her, when he learned what she had done.

"I was breaking the cardinal rule," she acknowledged to friends, with a resigned humor.

For more than two decades, from her base in Maryland, Gramick worked to heal Catholics who felt excluded from their spiritual heritage and were struggling to discern what sexual behavior was permissible in the eyes of God.

Disobeying the pope

Her efforts were stunningly challenged in 1999, when a powerful cardinal and Pope John Paul II himself demanded that she halt all pastoral work involving gays.

Gramick turned her back on those "obediences," and her unorthodox tale is being brought to national attention in a new

documentary, "In Good Conscience," debuting tonight at Lincoln Center.

Gramick was raised in a Roman Catholic family in Philadelphia. In 1971, while in graduate school, she became friendly with a gay man who had forsaken Catholicism for the Episcopal church. His homosexuality, he had come to believe, excluded him from his spiritual heritage.

The friendship proved a watershed moment for Gramick. With a Jesuit priest named Robert Nugent, she went on to co-found the New Ways Ministry, a "compassionate ministry" for gays and lesbians. The two worked to forge a place within the faith, through workshops, conferences and pilgrimages to Rome, for a group historically relegated to the fringes.

As part of her work, Gramick in 1992 published "Building Bridges: Gay and Lesbian Reality and the Catholic Church." The book brought her to the attention of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith — formerly, she notes with irony, "the Office of the Inquisition" — and spurred a Vatican investigation.

The Congregation, finding



Showing tonight and tomorrow in Manhattan, Sister Jeannine Gramick in the documentary "In Good Conscience"

that Gramick's ministry was orthodox but failed to emphasize the church teaching that denounces gayness as "intrinsically evil," demanded that she publicly condemn homosexuality.

"Sister Gramick has caused confusion among the Catholic people and has harmed the community of the church," read a May 31, 1999, telegram she received from Cardinal John Ratzinger and approved by the pope. "For these reasons, she is permanently prohibited from any pastoral work involving homosexual persons."

A similar letter from her

order of nearly 40 years, the School Sisters of Notre Dame, followed suit in 2000.

Her response to Ratzinger — "I choose not to collaborate in my own oppression by restricting a basic human right" — resulted in Gramick's being abandoned by the Sisters of Notre Dame and forbidden by the congregation from giving workshops for gays and lesbians.

"To me," she rejoined, "this is a matter of conscience."

News reports of the Vatican's efforts to thwart Gramick caught the attention of Emmy-winning journalist Barbara

Rick. She reached out to Tom Fontana, the influential creator of HBO's prison series "Oz." Respectively, the pair directed and executive-produced "In Good Conscience."

"One of my brothers is gay," Fontana said in an e-mail explaining his motivation for joining the project. "He was a devout Catholic, until the hierarchy made him feel like a stranger in the House of God. I find the church's attitude very un-Christ-like."

The 80-minute film follows Gramick to Rome, where she futilely attempts to deliver a copy of her book to Cardinal Ratzinger; to the 2002 U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Dallas; and to the outskirts of Louisville, Ky., where she begins the process of joining a new order, the Sisters of Loreto.

A Maysles documentary

The film's director of photography is Al Maysles, who created "Gimme Shelter," the Rolling Stones' famed Altamont documentary. Financial backing came from sources including Ellen DeGeneres, Susan Sarandon and Trudie Styler.

Today, Gramick continues to speak out about the discrimination faced by the gay community. Forbidden to hold workshops, she instead tours the country, holding question-and-answer sessions at coffee-

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shops and bookstores.

"You find creative ways to go about things," says Gramick, who deflects inquiries about her own sexual orientation. "The directive did not say I couldn't speak or write about homosexuality."

Gramick's drive, and in fact her moral "permission" to pursue her work, comes from "the church's best kept secret," primacy of conscience, the vaunted tenet that holds Catholics will be judged by how true they are to their beliefs and *not* how precisely they follow canonical rules.

"Any time we make conscious decisions, we hope they will be in tune with church doctrine," she says. "But if what I've come to believe is not the same as what my church leaders say, I have an obligation to follow my conscience."

"In Good Conscience: Sister

Jeannine Gramick's *Journey of Faith* screens at 6:30 p.m. tonight at the Walter Reade Theater. Tickets can be purchased online at www.filmlinc.com/wrt/wrt.htm. The film also screens at 6 p.m. tomorrow at the Loews 34th Street Theatre as part of the 2004 NewFest. Call 917-328-3914.