

In Good Conscience

Sister Jeannine Gramick's Journey of Faith

A film by Babara Rick

Nun Stands By Her Ministry to Gays

South Bend Tribune

February 10, 2005

by ANDREW S. HUGHES

Sometimes, Barbara Rick feels sorry for the Vatican.

After four years of following Sister Jeannine Gramick with a camera for the documentary "In Good Conscience," Rick says she knows how "tough as nails" and how "sweet as can be" the Roman Catholic nun is.

Gramick's also indomitable in her dedication to her ministry to gays and lesbians, the subject of "In Good Conscience." The film will be shown at 3:30 p.m. Friday as part of the University of Notre Dame's second annual Queer Film Festival. Rick and Gramick will answer questions after the screening.

Where some people saw films such as Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ" and Michael Moore's "Fahrenheit 9/11" as radical, Rick says, it's Gramick who's the radical -- and one in the manner of Jesus Christ.

"She's really radical because unlike the messages of those films, she's not hitting anybody over the head," Rick says by telephone from her office in New York City. "She has no rancor, and that's her strength. That's what frightens the Vatican. People don't know how to stop her."

Not that the Vatican hasn't tried. In 1999, it issued a decree instructing Gramick's order, the School Sisters of Notre Dame, to end her ministry. A year later, the Vatican ordered the School Sisters of Notre Dame to order Gramick to stop speaking about the ministry and investigations into it.

Gramick refused and transferred in 2001 to the Order of Loretto, which voided the School Sisters of Notre Dame's jurisdiction over her.

"I still feel very much called to this ministry," she says by telephone from her home outside Washington, D.C., in Maryland. "I made a lot of retreats and gave a lot of prayers during the investigation, and I still felt God wants me to be an advocate for gay and lesbian people, and for the church. I try to give the church a good name."

Reconciliation, education
Gramick became a nun in 1960, with the School Sisters of Notre Dame, fulfilling a calling she had felt since childhood.

"I felt that was my vocation," she says of becoming a nun. "I felt God was drawing me to a religious life to draw people closer to God, and I still believe that. It's my mission in life."

In 1971, her life gained an additional mission, ministering to gays and lesbians who felt disenfranchised from and unwelcome in the Catholic Church. At the time, Gramick was a graduate student in Philadelphia, where she met a gay man and former Catholic, Dominic Bash, at a con-celebrated liturgy between the campus's Catholic and Episcopal churches.

"He had been raised Catholic and had been in a religious community for a short time, but had left the church because he felt the Catholic Church had only condemnations for gays," she says. "He told me he had many friends who had been raised Catholic and had left the church but still longed for it."

Gramick arranged for a Catholic priest to conduct Mass in Bash's apartment.

"It was very deeply affecting for me because of how welcome they felt (to be) back in the church," she says. "They had fond memories of the church, and they loved the church. ... It grew into a ministry of personal reconciliation for gays and lesbians and then a wider ministry of education for the heterosexual part of the church."

In 1979, however, a bishop filed a complaint with the School Sisters of Notre Dame, which refused his request to

remove her from her ministry to gays and lesbians. The bishop filed his complaint with the Vatican, which told Gramick's order to investigate her and recommend appropriate discipline.

"My community investigated me and recommended no disciplinary action because they felt what I was doing was true to the teachings of Christ," she says. "They did this three times. In the late '80s, the Vatican appointed its own commission to investigate me."

Gramick says her decision to defy the Vatican's order of silence was her first "major decision of conscience," something she wouldn't change but doesn't want to relive.

The emphasis of her current work, Gramick says, is on her educational workshops and writing on the subject of homosexuality.

The workshops, she says, "educate (heterosexuals) about the reality of what homosexuality is and isn't, to remove the stereotypes they have in their minds."

"Jesus' ministry was one of invitation, not coercion," she says. "When I look in the Scripture, Jesus had nothing to say about homosexuality. Jesus had very little to say about sexuality. Jesus did have a lot to say about the dignity of the individual and not being self-righteous or casting the first stone."

'This little nun'

A freelance writer for ABC News in New York who has won an Emmy Award and a Peabody Award, Rick runs Out of the Blue Films Inc., an independent documentary company that produces films dedicated to spiritual justice and that "explore, articulate and celebrate humanity."

In the spring of 2000, Rick read in The New York Times about "this little nun who was defying the Vatican to continue her ministry to homosexuals."

Gramick sounded like somebody who believed she was doing God's will, Rick says, not like somebody out to stir up anger or hatred. A nonpracticing Catholic, Rick says Gramick's "courage" and "humility" resonated with her.

Those qualities seem to resonate with filmgoers, too. Since the film's release in the summer of 2004, Rick says, people have "come up to (her) in tears" after screenings.

"They tell me they're going back to the church," she says. "That's why I find it so ironic that the archbishop of Detroit banned a small reception that was to be held after the film because he wanted to keep the faithful safe from having tea and cookies with Sister Jeannine Gramick."

Staff writer Andrew S. Hughes
ahughes@sbtinfo.com
(574) 235-6377

**Our Privacy Policy and Direct Notice To Parents
Contact the southbendtribune.com Web staff.
News coverage and editorial content provided by
the South Bend Tribune unless otherwise specified.
Copyright © 1994-2005 South Bend Tribune**