

TABLET



Pope Benedict XVI

Do not be afraid, he tells Rome and the world

Ratzinger and me

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THE TABLET INTERVIEW

Ratzinger and me

Sr Jeannine Gramick's ministry for gay people, highlighted in a new documentary, brought her into direct conflict with the Vatican. She tells Terry Philpot about dissent – and coming face to face with the new pope

SR JEANNINE GRAMICK is one of those people who can talk to anyone. Not because she is a gushing, voluble chatterer, but because she has a calm, even calming presence that encourages openness and confidence. There is also a fearlessness about her, honed after years of having to defend her work with gays and lesbians, work she believes in with a quiet passion.

So it was entirely natural for her to speak to the man sitting next to her on the plane from Rome to Munich. It was July 1998, and she thought she recognised him. She asked if he was a priest. He was, so she told him that she was a member of the School Sisters of Notre Dame. He had an aunt who was a member of the order, he told her. "Her name?" she asked. "Ratzinger," he replied.

Bizarrely, the very man sitting next to her – none other than Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger – was carrying out an investigation into Sr Jeannine and the New Ways Ministry, a Catholic project set up to work with gays and lesbians. Less than a year later Cardinal Ratzinger, then prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), issued a notification demanding that she and her collaborator Fr Robert Nugent cease all pastoral work with gays and lesbians, following their refusal to confirm through their ministry the Church's teaching on homosexuality.

Sitting in a hotel during a short visit to London for the Lesbian and Gay Film Festival premiere of *In Good Conscience*, a documentary about her work, she reflects: "Our meeting may not have affected the outcome but it affected the way that I think about the cardinal and it may have affected the way that he thinks about me. It allowed me to see a human face; I saw his demeanour, his manner; I was able to witness his prayerfulness (he was reading his breviary when I sat next to him) and to feel his sensitivity."

This disarming ability to cope with her staunchest opponents is reflected in a scene in *In Good Conscience*. Michael Brennan, a bullish, vocal demonstrator comes face to

face with Sr Jeannine outside the American bishops meeting in Dallas in 2002. She is lobbying the hierarchy to urge them not to attribute the sex abuse scandal on gay people and, without telling him her name, explains to Mr Brennan what she is doing there. He asks her if she works with Sr Jeannine Gramick. "I am Sr Jeannine Gramick," she replies. This momentarily silences him,



but he soon takes the opportunity to tell her of the threat that gays, and especially gay priests, pose to the Church. He wants to "get gays out of the seminaries". She remonstrates politely and then says that they have much in common. The two of them are working for the same end, she says, if in different ways.

But can it really be said that the newly installed Pope Benedict XVI, Michael Brennan and Sr Jeannine are working to the same end? "The difference is about the micro and the macro", Sr Jeannine explains. "We are on the same side in the large picture – we love the Church and want what is best for it. But the little picture is where we differ. We can't talk about the little picture until we see what we have in common in the big picture."

"Both [the new pope] and I are working in an institution that we believe in and where we have common goals, which is the spreading God's love. I think that we all have to give oth-

ers the benefit of the doubt, to be able to walk in their shoes. It's easy to demonise people."

Even the investigation offers opportunity for common ground. "It was painful but I have a great belief in what Paul said to the Romans that, 'to those who love God all things work unto good'. This means that some resurrection comes out of it; we have raised the issue of homosexuality on the Vatican's agenda. At least it's discussed."

The Church must, she feels, recast its whole understanding of sexuality – and with it homosexuality – in the light of modern scientific and sociological understanding. "Procreation in moral theology is important, but it is not the only thing because we are not just animals; what is really important is creativity."

"The obstacle to reformulating moral theology is the Church's world-view. This is based on natural law, which it sees as static and fixed: we know what it is and we have to maintain it. But the world-view of most people now is that nature is fluid and changes. What we believed about the human person in 500 AD is different from what we believe now because we are finding out more about ourselves that we did not know then. If we see that nature is in flux we can move forward and include gay and lesbian people."

Sr Jeannine, 62, was alerted to her ministry through a gay Episcopalian whom she met when a student at the University of Pennsylvania in 1971. He asked her what the Church was doing for gay people. She didn't know, but he told her that he had many gay Catholic friends who felt alienated. Six years later, she and Fr Nugent founded the New Way Ministry. They held Masses and retreats for gays and lesbians, gave training, and held conferences for parents of gays and lesbians.

Although her pastoral work was banned, she continues to speak and write. It was the severity of the notification that came as a surprise: Sr Jeannine had thought that she and Fr Nugent, who agreed to accept it, would be silenced for a year or so, as had been the case with others who had fallen foul of the CDF. In 2000, a year after the notification, her order, which had hitherto supported her, demanded obedience: she was never to write or speak about homosexuality; never to criticise the Vatican privately or publicly; and never to write or speak about the process that had led to her silencing. "I choose not to collaborate in my own oppression," she responded in a public statement.

It was those words, given in a *New York Times* news story, and the evident courage of her position that caused the film-maker Barbara Rick ("I'm a recovering Catholic")

JESUIT CHURCH FARM STREET, MAYFAIR

Sunday 24 April, 2005

Mass times:

Vigil: Saturday 6pm

Sunday: 8am, 9.30am (Family Mass),

11am (Sung Latin: Seiber, Halmos, Alain)

12.30pm, 4.15pm, 6.15pm

farmstreet.org.uk

to suggest a film. How has she reacted to four years of following Sr Jeannine through the United States and to Rome, as well as around the world to screenings and festivals?

"I'd say I am a very spiritual person, but I am not as able to love my enemies as is Sr Jeannine. She can see the good in people, when it is easy to demonise or minimise them. With her I see how far I have to go and also I can see how close."

Sr Jeannine is obviously anxious to avoid the mantle of saintliness. She quickly responds that it is easy for her to feel conciliatory to people like the new pope when he is so distant from her; her problems with charity are with people with whom she has regular, day-to-day contact.

She says that she might have found other forms of ministry but "that would be like wearing shoes that don't fit". After the demand from her order, she transferred to the Sisters of Loreto, founded in the United States in 1812. She could have continued her work as a layperson but, she says, "I always had this conviction that God wanted me in the religious life."

"I love God so much and I want to be a conduit for other people to God's love to other people, and being a Religious is a visible way of doing that. As a Religious you are publicly connected with God.

"IT IS part of my ministry to be a religious because of what it says to gay people, that there is someone in leadership of the Church – even though I am in a lowly role – who cares, who is an advocate for them. I think that if I did not have that status (I don't like that word) it would affect the quality of that relationship.

"The Vatican could even now silence me with the Loretos. There are non-canonical orders in the States and I suppose that I could join one of them, but I prefer to be connected and to be on the inside to change things. I believe in the mission of the Church and to be with people on the same journey.

"I don't think of myself as defiant – I am just following the call of God as I see it. If an incident comes up I don't ask what the religious authorities say. I pray, I use my conscience, I use the moment."

Doesn't she despair sometimes? "No, but I do get discouraged and angry at the intransigence of the leaders of institutions who are fearful of, or unwilling to, change. What keeps me going, I think, is that I have a fierce sense of justice and I knew that in fifth grade at school." While she sympathised with the coming of the women's movement in the Seventies and the anti-Vietnam war movement, she never protested publicly. "It was Vatican II", she says, "which made me question."

In *Good Conscience* has another scene with Michael Brennan, the opponent she met outside the bishops' conference meeting. At the end of their encounter, he patronisingly declares that he has never yet met a woman who didn't want to have the last word. She then suggests that they end by saying the Our Father and Hail Mary together. As they do so, it is she who moves to hold his hand.

* Information about *In Good Conscience* is available on www.ingoodconscience.com.

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