



## Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry

### Articles

- GTU President James Donahue on McNeill's Empowerment of GLBT Students at Georgetown University
- Sr Jeannine Gramick: McNeill: A Prophet for Our Times
- Mary Elizabeth Hunt: *More Catholic Than Thou*: McNeill's Contribution to Theology and Ministry
- Rev. Jim Mitulski on McNeill as Pastor
- *My Life Has Been Very Joyous*: John McNeill 's Response

### BOOK REVIEW

- Jay Johnson reviews McNeill's *The Church and the Homosexual* and spiritual autobiography

The Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry

[www.clgs.org](http://www.clgs.org)



John McNeill and Charles Chiarelli

## CLGS Receives and Celebrates McNeill-Chiarelli Archives

On Friday, 8 February 2002 the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry at Pacific School of Religion formally received the John J. McNeill and Charles Chiarelli Gay and Lesbian Liberation Archives.

In attendance at this event were Graduate Theological Union President and moral

theologian James Donahue; Sister Jeannine Gramick; theologian Mary Elizabeth Hunt of WATER; and MCC minister the Rev. Jim Mitulski.

Over 200 people filled PSR's Chapel of the Great Commission to hear these speakers discuss the importance of the ministry

and scholarship of John McNeill and to thank John and his partner Charles Chiarelli for their gift of these archives to CLGS.

This issue of *CLGS Outlook* features the words of these speakers and celebrates the ongoing ministry and scholarship of John J. McNeill. ▼



## *More Catholic Than Thou: John J. McNeill's Contribution to Theology and Ministry*



**Mary Hunt**  
**Co-Director of WATER**  
 (Women's Alliance for  
 Theology, Ethics and  
 Ritual)

Good afternoon. I am honored to join my friend and colleague John McNeill on this historic occasion when the Pacific School of Religion and the Graduate Theological Union receive a spiritual and intellectual treasure more precious than gold. It is always a pleasure to be with John and his life partner, Charlie Chiarelli, because they embody the best of what John writes.

As a GTU alum, I am proud that our institution, which, thanks to the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry, with the creative leadership of Mary Ann Tolbert and Bernard Schlager, is in the forefront of a new theological sub-specialty. I congratulate you on this accomplishment and encourage you to continue ad multos annos, as John McNeill's beloved Jesuits would have it.

I am pleased to join Jeannine Gramick whose ministry has been effective enough to have her silenced, and Jim Mitulski whose ministry I have admired for many years. It is great to have "a good Irish Catholic boy" like Jim Donahue with us. Jim and I go back to our graduate school years here on Holy Hill. His presence as a representative of the wider theological community is proof of what I will outline, namely, that John McNeill has had an enormous impact on theology and ministry, indeed on GLBTQ theopolitics, within and beyond Catholicism.

I have entitled my remarks: "More Catholic Than Thou: John J. McNeill's Contribution to Theology and Ministry," because I think it is important to contextualize and claim John's work as part of the contemporary Catholic

scene. I do this both for purposes of scholarly rigor, because that is where John's work is rooted, and for purposes of redemption, that it might help to undo some of the virulent "homohatred" and duplicity for which the Catholic Church is responsible.

Today's event is a delicious irony in light of John's history with the institutional, or what Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has so helpfully called the "kyriarchal," Catholic Church. He was silenced by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith shortly after the publication of *The Church and the Homosexual* in the late 1970s, and forbidden from speaking in the public arena on these matters though he continued his private psychotherapy work.

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### *Coming Home: Celebrate In Worship!*

On **Friday, 26 April 2002** the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry will sponsor a worship service for African American Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender people of faith. The service will begin at 7:30pm and be

held in the PSR Chapel

Johari Jabir, coordinator of CLGS' African American Roundtable Project, will coordinate the service

**Everyone is invited** to come join in worship!



# John McNeill, Pastor

There are many things that we're proud of today — the Graduate Theological Union and the reception of the McNeill Archives by the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry. But, as a Pacific School of Religion graduate, I must take the opportunity to brag on my school: it was PSR that had the courage and the foresight to establish CLGS, the first center of its kind in any seminary in the world, and it was CLGS that has brought the McNeill archives here today. And let me acknowledge publicly Pacific School of Religion as the coolest seminary in the GTU.

It is a great honor to be here tonight as part of the celebration and I want to take a moment and just ask that if you're a Catholic here, by your own definition — that means perhaps you were baptized in the church, perhaps you were confirmed in the church, perhaps you no longer go — but you know what I mean when I say, "You're a Catholic." Would you, the Catholics here, stand for just a moment? Let's give ourselves a hand for being here, for being alive.

I say that because John McNeill means something to us who are Catholics that is even more profound than you who are Protestant will ever know. It's the part that makes me feel somewhat

emotional even as we gather here. There's something about being a Catholic: it's a contradiction you live with your whole life long, and it's also something that you'd love to be as proud of as you are proud of being GLBT.

I remember at the beginning of *Portrait of the Artist*, James Joyce's character says to a friend, "I've lost my faith," and his friend responds by saying, "Have you become a Protestant?" He says, "No! I said I had lost my faith, not my reason."

Catholic is who you are, not just what you believe. It's not just another denomination. And John, you are the pastor to the Catholics in the church, and the vast number of Catholics who for reasons of self-respect, dignity and a deep relationship with God have left the church. But you're our pastor, and that's what I want to lift up tonight.

I'm going to give a personal testimony about how important John's work has been to me and to my work as a pastor. *The Church and the Homosexual* came just at the right time for me in the mid-70s. My mother is a graduate of a Jesuit university, and when I was 18 and coming out to her, I was able to hand her this book written by a Jesuit — not a Benedictine or a Franciscan or a member of

one of those other orders. Hey, you know that I'm telling the truth — the Jesuits are the Cadillac of Catholic religious orders. Published by a Jesuit priest with an *imprimi potest*. OK, it's not an *imprimatur*, but it's almost as good.

There was nothing like it because she understood and the Catholic hierarchy understood (and every Catholic who picked up this book understood) that what it was saying, couched carefully but plainly, was this: it's OK to be gay. Now I gave this book to my mother back in 1976 when I came out to her, and I remember that when I came out to her the first words out of her mouth were, "Are you a homosexual?" And I said, "Yes." And she said, "Then remember that God made you and that God loves you unconditionally, and never let anyone tell you differently — not even the Church." She's the product of a Jesuit upbringing — what can I say?

And I remember that a few weeks later I was talking to her on the phone (I was then back in New York), and she was crying and saying that she was glad that we'd had this conversation, and she said, "You know, I'm glad we talked, but I just wish that you could change."

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**Rev. Jim Mitulski**



## John McNeill's Influence on Catholic Higher Education

First of all, I would like to welcome John McNeill here today to the Graduate Theological Union and to the Pacific School of Religion; welcome, too, to John's partner, Charlie.

This is a great moment for us: we celebrate your work, John, and we celebrate your wonderful contribution and gift of your archives to PSR and to the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry. We also celebrate your presence as an ongoing voice in a very, very contentious and confused theological world. You have always been a clear, and, I

think, resounding voice in the midst of that and so I thank you personally on behalf of the Graduate Theological Union for your gift of the archives, but also for your gift of presence and for your ongoing work.

I also want to thank Mary Ann Tolbert and Bernard Schlager of CLGS and Bill McKinney, the President of PSR, for the work of the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and the Ministry. This is indeed a powerful and compelling project and center, and I am very proud that it's part of the Graduate Theological

Union. You are to be commended on your work, and I'm just so devoted and in much gratitude to you for all that you have done.

I want to speak a bit today from my own experience, and I want to locate my remarks in a somewhat limited way. As Bernie mentioned in his introduction, I have spent the last 20 years of my life in Catholic higher education and I would like to speak about the influence of John McNeill on the life of Catholic higher education.

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**James Donahue,  
GTU President**

## John McNeill: A Prophet For Our Times

In the last few years, probably because of chilling events in the Roman Catholic Community, I reread, and then read once more, an insightful little book published years ago: Walter Brueggemann's *The Prophetic Imagination*. Brueggemann identifies four characteristics of the prophet: imagination, pathos, energizing, and amazement.

The prophet thinks freely about imagined alternative futures so that this poetic imagination critiques or challenges the dominant

reality. The prophet suffers and embraces pathos. He or she speaks neither in rage nor in cheap grace, but with a candor born of anguish and passion. Through the language of grief, the prophet brings people to their own experience of suffering, thus enabling them to feel and cut through the numbness. The prophet energizes the community to fresh forms of faithfulness, vitality, and hope in God because those who know death most painfully can speak hope most vigorously. The prophet can be described only with the

language of amazement. We read of Jesus: "They were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, 'What is this? A new teaching!'" (Mark 1:27). At another place in Scripture, we read: "And many who heard him were astonished, saying, 'Where did this man get all this? What is the wisdom given to him?'" (Mark 6:2).

It struck me how John McNeill's life matches the characteristics of a prophet that Brueggemann delineates.

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**The prophet energizes the community to fresh forms of faithfulness, vitality, and hope in God because those who know death most painfully can speak hope most vigorously.**



# Spring 2002 Lavender Lunch Series

- 18 April 2002  
*War and Justice: An LGBT Human Rights Issue?*  
Surina Khan, Executive Director,  
International Gay & Lesbian Human Rights Commission
- 25 April 2002  
*From Orientation to Orienteering: Two Bisexual Perspectives*  
Veneita Porter, Executive Director,  
BiNet USA; Ann Schranz, Starr King student
- 2 May 2002  
*Strangers No More: Rituals of Hope and Hospitality for Lesbians Alienated from Church*  
Sharon Casey, OP
- 7 May 2002  
*Readings from Pearl Cleage's Blues for an Alabama Sky: A Celebration of Friendship between an African American Woman and a Gay Man*  
Barbara Essex, PSR Community Life Minister; Johari Jabir, PSR Student
- 9 May 2002  
*Speaking with a Transgender Heart: Reflections on Ministry & Gender Identity*  
Rev. Erin Swenson, Th.M., Ph.D.
- 16 May 2002  
*The Soul Beneath the Skin: How the Unseen Hearts & Habits of Gay Men Reshape America's Ethical Life*  
David Nimmons, Founder & Director  
Manifest Love



## John McNeill, Pastor (continued from page 3)

**Most importantly, I think that John's work is important to GLBT Catholics because he is our pastor and he has made sure that even though the church abandoned us, we were not left alone.**

**John McNeill**

That was a little hurtful for a moment; I thought we'd had a little regression at that point. And she said, "No, I don't mean about being gay. I wish you could be Catholic." And that's really the core issue for many people — gay people and non-gay people: we have been told that we cannot be Catholic even though it was our birthright, even though it is the religion of our ancestors, even though it is who we are our whole lives long. And, John, with this book and your subsequent life and ministry you have restored something that cannot be taken from us: you have reminded us that we always have a place.

These archives are important and will prove to be important to religious scholarship because of what John has done, not only in terms of GLBT scholarship but there are other items that belong to the archives that scholars will find important. It's important also to GLBT scholarship because John says it first plainly and clearly like few others did and still do. It's important to GLBT religious scholarship, too, because eventually, when the history of this period is written, we will come to understand that it was religious people and the conflicts that took place in the church that often guided what happened around the issue of GLBT rights in secular society — it's not just a church issue, but it's

also about our place in society, and, as it goes in the church, so too it goes in society. And John, you have provided guidance not only in the church but in society for your work.

But, most importantly, I think that John's work is important to GLBT Catholics because he is our pastor and he has made sure that even though the church abandoned us, we were not left alone. John McNeill is a scholar, an activist, and a pastor to the church and the post-church.

I want to remind us of the church of the 1970s into which this book appeared. This is pre-John Paul II. It was during the ascendance of liberation theology; some parishes were being run by councils and pastoral teams composed equally of priests and nuns in many places. These were experiments that were so successful that they *had* to be killed. Everybody knew that married priests were just about to happen, and women priests were not far beyond that. Divorced people were hopeful that their new marriages would be recognized shortly, and in many parishes they received communion openly. Many priests openly counseled the use of birth control. Communion was given in the hand for the first time — communion in both kinds. There were female altar servers, or, as they called them in my parish, "girl altar

boys." No wonder we turned out the way we did! And Catholics were even singing like Protestants. That's the context. It was a time of great optimism that the church would be different, that it really would be what Vatican II had dreamed about. This is the context in which John made these three simple assertions to scholars and also to people outside the church.

One, is that homosexuality is not contrary to but is supportive of the will of God. Two, is that homosexuality is part of God's plan and that homosexuals, gay people — we didn't use the word "gay" that much then — have a unique role to play in God's creation. And his third thesis, which was perhaps the most exciting one, is that love and sexuality in the context of gay relationships can be a way of coming closer to God. These were the things that got John in trouble for when he said them.

And he made this important connection in *The Church and the Homosexual* that I also want to lift up to us because I think that it's become even clearer as the church has become more conservative again:

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## After Apologetics: A Review of *The Church and the Homosexual* (Fourth Edition, Beacon Press, 1993) and *Both Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1998) by John J. McNeill

The advances toward tolerance and acceptance that lesbian and gay Christians have made in the church over the last twenty-five years can easily eclipse the path-breaking work that made such progress possible. John J. McNeill certainly belongs among those early pioneers. Reading *The Church and the Homosexual* now, twenty-six years after it was first published (and in its fourth edition, with a helpful new preface and an appendix on the history of the book's publication), can make us shudder with the realization of what kind of battles we had to fight then. Perhaps we shudder more realizing the extent to which we must still fight the same battles and confront ecclesial positions which have become even more entrenched now than they were in the 1970s. When we must, we'd be hard-pressed to find a better blueprint for such confrontation than the one McNeill laid out for us in this book.

In Part One McNeill carefully outlines the traditional points of contention and systematically dismantles the moral and theological condemnation of homosexuality. With reference to Scripture he treats the usual suspects from Sodom to the Apostle Paul. With reference to philosophy he exposes the influence of Stoicism and natural law traditions on theology. And

with reference to developments in the human sciences he demonstrates how psychology, sociology and anthropology can inform our theological understanding of human sexuality and correct previous assumptions about homosexuality, which have contributed to its censure in traditional moral theologies.

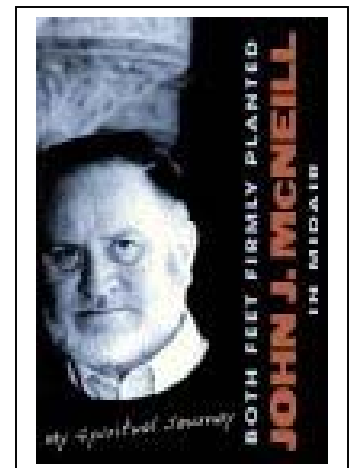
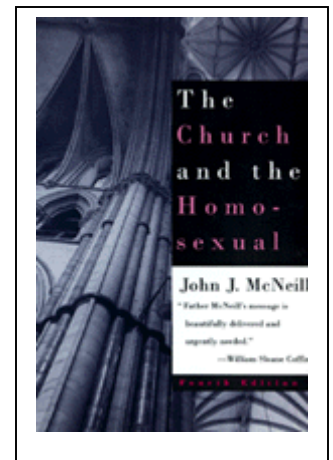
For those of us who continue to struggle with ecclesial homophobia, these are by no means antiquated points of contact with Christian traditions, nor are they a kind of historical marker of a battle we've already won. Just when we thought the Biblical debate had been put to rest, yet another essay or book appears reviving the supposed Scriptural injunctions against same-sex desire and love (see, for example, Robert Gagnon's recent book, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*). Just when we thought new progress has been made on the ordination front yet another setback dashes our hopes (witness the recent decision by local presbyteries to reject the recommendation of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church to permit the ordination of openly gay and lesbian ministers).

Today, of course, most of us flinch at the idea of making yet one more apology to the institutional church for our existence. Parts of

McNeill's book seem to do precisely this and they're hard to read. He advises the clergy-counselor, for example, to discern whether a homosexual parishioner could make a "heterosexual adjustment" and thereby avoid the "difficulties of homosexual life" (p. 162-167). While we can rightly worry about how this can fuel the current movement toward "reparative therapies," we should remember that McNeill is actually carving out a *more compassionate* pastoral space in Catholic practice with this advice (which should give us an even better idea of the climate in which this book first appeared). Likewise his call for a reasonably chosen life of sexual abstinence, which remains a "good prudential choice for the homosexual in today's society" (p. 168), sounds like a troubling note of accommodation to a homophobic institution.

Thankfully, the first appendix in this new edition of the book revises many of these problematic passages and McNeill outlines how his mind has changed on these topics over the years. These welcome revisions to the text should not, however, overshadow the overall tenor of this book, much of which sounds years ahead of its time.

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**You taught us that we can serve God in the church or we can serve God outside the church.**

**You taught us not only how to be free, but how to free ourselves.**



## John McNeill, Pastor (continued from page 6)

“The church’s attitude toward homosexuals is another example of societal injustice equally based in questionable interpretation of scripture, prejudice and blind adherence to merely human traditions — traditions which have been falsely interpreted as the law of nature and of God. In fact, as we have seen, it is the same age-old tradition of male control, domination and oppression of women which underlies the oppression of the homosexual.”

This was a brilliant insight even before its time that has become even more true as we’ve seen how the church has revealed its truly patriarchal nature.

John, you taught us through your work and through your witness to think independently; you taught us to listen to our consciences and to believe independently. To keep changing and growing. Every year I always looked forward to what it was that you would talk about at Kirkridge [Retreat Center in Pennsylvania] because I knew that there was no issue you were afraid to grow toward or engage with. You’ve gone a lot of different places, and you’ve been very candid not only in the religious press but also in the secular gay press about

sexuality. What a great model for a priest and for a pastor!

You taught us that sometimes it’s OK to say “no,” and sometimes it’s OK to speak up. Sometimes we have to act up, act out, and not let anyone else define us. You taught us that we can serve God in the church or we can serve God outside the church. You taught us not only how to be free, but how to free ourselves because we were part of that Catholic self-reinforcing world. It’s almost like a cult — and I say that cautiously, but if you grew up in it you know what I’m talking about. The one thing you can’t ever do is challenge it. It teaches you from the earliest moment to be fearful of claiming your own authority. And, John, you taught us to claim our own authority as a spiritual act.

This is what it was like to hear John McNeill in the mid-1970s. I was there as a member of Dignity New York then, like a lot of good Catholic boys — that’s mostly who went there. We were the parochial school graduates, all moved to New York City, trying to figure out what it meant to be gay. We were obedient unto death, and we met, like Christians in the catacombs, on Saturday nights in

apartments all over the New York City for Dignity masses because no church would have us. You had to come one Saturday to find out where the next Saturday’s mass would be.

Now the people who cared for us, we who were Puerto Rican and Italian and Polish and Irish and German boys, were the Jesuits on 98th Street and a nun named Sister Mary Lou Steele. They were our pastors, and we met in these houses on Saturday nights, and they taught us to love ourselves and to free ourselves, and we couldn’t do it on our own. We needed priests and nuns to set us free, and they did — not to cultivate our dependence on them, but to learn to be strong, self-sufficient, spiritual and sexual people. Once a month we had a big gathering at Good Shepherd Faith Presbyterian Church on 66th Street (again, in a Presbyterian church because the Catholic Church wouldn’t have us). We would hear the Jesuits come and talk to us in a big group about the issues of homosexuality and spirituality.

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## *More Catholic Than Thou...* (continued from page 2)

In 1988, he was ordered by Cardinal Ratzinger to cease all ministry with the GLBTQ community, an order he chose not to obey. As a result, the Jesuits caved in to Vatican pressure to expel him from the Society of Jesus.

I predict that long after most of us are dead scholars will come to this archive to read John's side of the story. They will discover what we already know—that John is “more Catholic than thou”—and that he was correct when he claimed that being gay and Catholic were not mutually exclusive. They will rehabilitate his reputation and probably name a Jesuit university after him (perhaps University of San Francisco will become John McNeill University!). I see no reason to wait as the data are now or soon to be catalogued, accessible and on-line. Happily, we can begin the process today.

My theory is that the Jesuit order was so full of gay men that they realized John could not comply with the Vatican's directive to cease ministry with gays except by leaving the Society. Simply by celebrating mass with his brothers he would be in violation! But I will leave that speculation for another day and note simply, as John would, that the Holy Spirit always has the final word. In this case, indeed she did.

The Roman silencing of John McNeill by unlawful decree resulted in profound intellectual and spiritual sounds: the completion of John's trilogy (*Taking a Chance on God* and *Freedom, Glorious Freedom*); a fruitful ministry as a therapist that led many people from guilt and shame to ease and pride about their sexuality; hundreds of lectures and workshops around the world; more than two decades of retreats at Kirkridge, a conference center in Bangor, Pennsylvania, where every year a remarkable community gathers to be “Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Christian”; generous nurture of the Catholic lesbian and gay group Dignity after co-founding the New York City chapter; citation in virtually every subsequent book in the field as the Catholic pioneer; honors and awards from secular as well as religious groups; not to mention Grand Marshal of the New York City Gay Rights Parade (1987), all distilled with spiritual maturity in his autobiography, *With Both Feet Firmly Planted in Midair*. Because of John's work, many people began to realize that being Catholic and queer was not a contradiction in terms, but a joyous reality.

In light of John's remarkably productive life, I am tempted to ask Cardinal Ratzinger if

he might silence me just a little! But indeed, the irony gives way to deep regret when I imagine how much more of an impact John McNeill might have had if the Catholic Church had instead lifted up his brilliant intellectual and spiritual insights. Imagine if the Jesuits had been courageous enough to stand up to Rome and affirm John's prophetic claim that just as psychologists learned that homosexuality per se is not pathological, theologians have no choice in conscience but to reconceptualize our approaches as well. The work could have begun earlier and been woven into catechesis and documents as one day it will be when the Catholic Church admits its errors on homosexuality as with Galileo on science. Thanks to John, we began the work, and continue it through the steady theological production on these questions that this Center was founded to promote. How fortunate we are to have John's original materials at hand.

Happily at the Center we are engaged in inter-religious and international work. But let me highlight how John's work is Catholic as an example of how one's tradition shapes one's contribution to the whole.

**Because of John's work, many people began to realize that being Catholic and queer was not a contradiction in terms, but a joyous reality.**



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## John McNeill, Pastor (continued from page 8)

# I Am the Good Shepherd

There were people there in that room who have gone on to do things important to our movement — Joe Kramer, who founded the Body Electric School, and Andy Humm who became a great gay/lesbian rights activist. Many of John’s therapy clients were there, unnamed of course, but John, you know how many people you helped set free through your therapy practice. I was there.

We’ve all left the church and yet we’ve reinvented it in the best tradition of Vatican II, in the spirit of Jesuit scholarship, in the spirit of Martin Luther, in the spirit of Jesus —“You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.” You taught us to claim our own authority, you taught us that good science is good theology, and that God gives us intellect and spirit, and, because of the religious world view in which we had been raised, we needed someone to show us a different way. We needed a pastor. You were and are our pastor — the good pastor that the church didn’t provide for us.

There’s a passage of scripture in John 10 that reminds me of John McNeill. Just so you Protestants know, we Catholics *do* know the Bible; we don’t always choose to use it, but we do know it. Listen to these words from the Gospel of John and think about John McNeill’s life and ministry.

“I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because the hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me, just as God knows me and I know God. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold; I must bring them also and they will listen to my voice so there will be one flock, one shepherd.”

John, you were not afraid to lay down your life, your career, your ministry, your credentials for the sheep — the people that you were called to pastor. And we heard your voice and we knew that it was true.

I remember the first time I heard John speak in the basement of that Presbyterian Church: it was packed, wall to wall. This is not usually how homosexuals spend their Saturday nights in New York City, and this was really true in New York in the 70s. Trust me — I was there. We gathered in that basement of that Presbyterian Church to hear you speak, and you talked about your devotion to the Virgin Mary, you talked

of our special gift to take care of our families. Sometimes when you talked we rebelled, we snickered. We didn’t want to hear about the Virgin Mary and how we were there to take care of our parents. We were drawn to it, and we were put off by it too. And yet WE HUNG ON EVERY WORD THAT YOU SAID. And this was one of the most dramatic moments I remember from your speaking in that basement of that Presbyterian church when you told the story that you recount in your autobiography (*Both Feet Planted Firmly in Midair*) of your conversion, of your decision to become a priest; when you were a prisoner of war in a concentration camp in Europe and starving, just starving, and you depicted for us in vivid terms what it felt like to be starving.

You said that a Polish peasant tossed you a crumb, or a crust of bread, or a potato — yes, it was a potato — he tossed you a potato at great personal risk to himself, knowing that if anyone saw him tossing you that food he could be shot and killed, and some were for doing that very thing. He tossed you a potato and wordlessly made the sign of the cross, and you said in that moment you knew that you were called to be a priest.

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## *My Life Has Been Very Joyous:*

### John McNeill's Response

This is a bit overwhelming. I just want to share in response to the panel a few things for which I am so deeply grateful.

Ignatius Loyola in *Introduction to the Spiritual Exercises* says God gave us all the good things of this world to be used and enjoyed with moderation, but that all the glory should go to God. And so I want to give glory to God, and the primary way I know of giving glory to God – *Ad Majorem Dei Gloria* (the slogan of the Society of Jesus) – is to give gratitude to God.

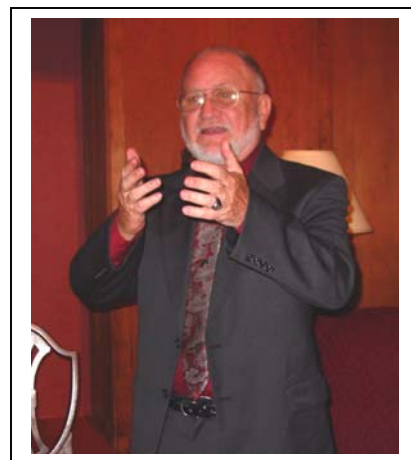
First of all, we've talked a lot here about suffering but I want to tell you that my life has been very joyous. Every minute of it, even at the worst moments, I have felt God's love deeply in my heart and that has given me great joy, so I wouldn't change anything because of the joyousness that God has given me as a gift.

The first "thank you" I want to give is to Maurice Blondell, the famous Catholic philosopher at the turn of the century, the author of *A Philosophy of Action*. I did my doctorate studies on him at Louvain University in Belgium, and he was the great philosopher of freedom. He taught me to respect human freedom. His great message was that God created us free and that he respects our freedom. Blondell came up with what he called "the principle of imminence;" nothing can impose itself on a free human being. God must speak to us from within ourselves and within our own experiences before we can give an authentic ascent to the will of God. When I first read that, cold chills ran

up and down my spine. Blondell's insights were so good and I think that one of the most important parts of my archives is all the studies and works that I'm contributing on the thought of Maurice Blondell. He was the primary philosopher behind Vatican II; he was mentioned on the floor over 60 times. And I wrote one of the only books ever written on Blondell, which is still published in the United States: *The Blondellian Synthesis*, (this was published as part of the *Studies in the History of Christian Thought* by Heiko Oberman of the Reformation Institut). It is important to note that there is a very catholic, that is to say universal, flavor to Blondell's thought

One line that I, as a young man, read in Blondell student was this: "Our God dwells within us, and the only way that we can become one with our God is to become one with our authentic self." Now that spoke so deeply to me as a gay man, that it was only by being an authentically gay person that I could have any hope of achieving union with the Divine. This insight underlay my whole ministry.

The other great insight that he had concerned the nature of truth. He said that objective realism always thinks of truth as the conformity of our minds with what lies outside it; but, no, he said, the deepest truth is in the dialectic of our will so that our will – what we choose about our freedom – conforms with the Divine Will, the Holy Spirit, if you will, dwelling within us, so that when we perform an action that's in conformity with the indwelling God,



**John McNeill Responding to Panel of Speakers**

the spirit of God, we know deep peace and joy, and this is our primary indication that what we are doing is true and good and holy. Therefore, the approach to truth is to constantly perform actions and then discern carefully, "Do they bring fulfillment? Do they bring peace and joy?" And if they do, then you have a direct indication through your experience from God him/herself that what you're doing is bringing you into deeper and deeper conformity with the Holy Spirit. This was my primary message to the gay and lesbian community – that you can discern carefully in your own experiences.

Let me move on to the next debt of gratitude and that was to my sister, Sister Sheila. My mother died when I was four; Sis was two years older and she mothered me, she took care of me all through my life.

--Continued on Page 14



# Celebrating the Ministry of John J. McNeill



From Left to Right: Jim Mitulski, Jeannine Gramick, Charles Chiarelli, John McNeill, Jim Donahue, and Mary Hunt



CLGS Executive Director Mary Ann Tolbert presents John McNeill with the CLGS *Leading Voice* Award



Sister Jeannine Gramick



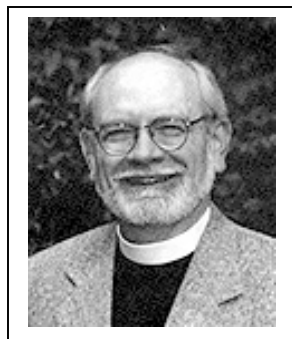
PSR Chapel of the Great Commission  
Setting of the McNeill Event



# CLGS Lecture Series Spring 2002

## Telling Sodom's Truths in the Churches

Mark Jordan  
Asa Griggs Candler Professor of Religion, Emory University  
Thursday, 21 February 2002 / 5:00pm / PSR Chapel

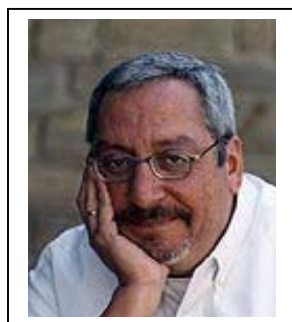


## Still a Source of Grace? Reading the Bible as a Gay Christian

L. William Countryman  
Sherman Johnson Professor in Biblical Studies, Church Divinity School of Pacific  
Thursday, 21 March 2002 / 5:00pm / PSR Chapel

## And Racism in Church Practice

Traci West  
Assistant Professor of Ethics and African-American Religion,  
Drew University Theological School



Michael Mendiola  
Associate Professor of Christian Ethics, Pacific School of Religion  
Tuesday, 7 May 2002 / 5:00pm / Badé Museum, PSR Campus



## *My Life Has Been Very Joyous (cont. from page 11)*

She entered the Franciscan Order in Buffalo, New York, as a young woman. She had serious bone diseases that left her an invalid for most of her life. And when she found out that I had begun a ministry to gay/lesbian people, she prayed to God to help her discern whether or not that was what God wanted of me. Soon after she had begun praying a nun in her order came from Africa who told her that she worked in a hospital where all the male help were gay; and she had been troubled by that until she saw my book and read it, and then she became totally accepting of the gayness of the people she was working with in this hospital. And so my sister said, "There it is! There's the sign from God that what my brother John is doing is right on." She then told me that whenever I spoke to a gay or lesbian group, that I should telephone and tell her the hours that I would be speaking; she would then gather from 30 to 90 nuns in the infirmary and they would kneel before the Blessed Sacrament and pray continuously while I was speaking so that the Holy Spirit would speak through me.

This is my joy of being Catholic. This is my deepest identification with the Catholic faith – that there is a community of saints that is there supporting you, who are helping you to discern. This isn't found through listening to the Vatican but through discerning what the

Holy Spirit is saying to one directly through one's own experiences, and that's very much part of the reality of the Catholic Church.

My sister died a few years back of throat cancer. I miss her very much, but I know that she's here today and definitely a part of this. We had a collaborative ministry together for over 30 years and I think that you have to thank her as much as you have been thanking me today for the success of this ministry.

And now for a final debt of gratitude: when I was aware of my gayness I became aware that I had internalized the homophobia of the church and was filled with guilt and shame about my gay feelings, and I didn't know what to do with that. At one point I began to act out compulsively my homosexual feelings and when I was a student in Europe I came very close to suicide. And at another point I had a very strong impression that God was saying to me, "Be patient. You have to go through all of this in order to do the work that I want you to do." So, I didn't understand it at the time, but I agreed to be patient.

Thirty-six years ago I went to a gay bar in Toronto, called the St. Charles Bar, and I met Charles. I could not have done this ministry except for the fact that I was in a deep loving relationship with a gay lover. So I didn't

speak theoretically about "gay love could be holy and good." I spoke out of a deep personal experience of that love. It was through Charlie's love for me that I began to understand what it meant when I said that God loved me. Until then I dealt with a God of fear. I used to say in the Act of Contrition, "Oh, my God, I'm heartily sorry for having offended Thee because I dread the loss of Heaven and the pains of Hell." The prayer went on, but I didn't; I had no idea about God's love. But it was through the human love of Charlie that I began to understand what it meant to be loved, and what a gift it is, and how transforming it is.

And, therefore, I'm going to surprise my hosts at this request – but I think the archives are misnamed. They should not be just the John McNeill Archives; they should be the John McNeill and Charles Chiarelli Archives of Gay and Lesbian Liberation.

So, let me assure you, when God starts out doing something, God gets it done. I found myself cut off from most of the media recently through conservative politics. Like when the local public radio station cancelled an interview I was supposed to have while I was here this weekend, and other radio stations have done that several times in the past, and with no good reason. And so, at one point I went into prayer and I said, "God, I need a good PR agent, and I'm going to ask you to be

that PR agent. If you want my message to get out to the public, you're going to have to see to it." And then the thought occurred to me, "Call Jim Mitulski and tell him, 'Jim, I'm moving out of my house up north, moving to Florida, and I have all these papers, and what can I do with them?'" And Jim said, "Oh, I've got just the place: Pacific School of Religion!" He then contacted Mary Tolbert, who contacted me, and that's why we're here today. And I think all of us were instruments again of the Holy Spirit in making sure the message gets out and that it will always be available to other people. I want to thank you all for coming, for helping me to celebrate this moment. I will continue to work in gay and lesbian ministry to the best of my ability. I'm now 76 years old and I don't know how much time or energy I have left. But it's all there, and it's joyously there to reach out and help reverberate among gay and lesbian people everywhere so that they can totally integrate their human love and their reality with the spirit of God and the transformation of the world.

Thank you. –

– John J. McNeill



## John McNeill, Pastor (continued from page 10)

This is an image I have of John McNeill. Now I don't want to trivialize or demean or in any way misrepresent by falsely comparing the plight of gay people to the plight of people in prisoner-of-war camps, but there *was* a definite emotional and spiritual connection we made as you described what it meant to have your face pressed against a fence, and then having someone at great personal risk toss you a potato to nourish you and make the sign of the cross.

That's what you did for us, John, and that's what you taught us to do for others. To risk our lives even, and our careers and our ministries, in order to bring sustenance and nourishment to those who are desperate for it and who could only do it because people took risks.

Many times when I was a

pastor during the AIDS years, Catholic parents especially would have the worst time because they would be there with their children, with their sons, who were dying, and they would say to me through their tears, "Why does the church make me choose between me and my son? Why does the church tell me I shouldn't be here when my son is dying?" And I thought of what I learned from you, John, and I realized that I only had one task in that situation — to help set these Catholics free, to respect where they were but to go right to where they were in their situations and help set them free.

This is why you were our pastor, John, because you were not afraid to do what needed to be done because you taught us to set ourselves free.

Some day, when seekers and scholars want to examine how the church changed from what it is right now to what I know it will become as a result of your work, they will come here to the GTU to study at the McNeill archives. And they're going to have an experience reading through your work, reading through all the correspondence around it, and the testimonies that result, and seeing what came as a result of it. They're going to be proud to be gay, and they're going to be proud to be Catholic. And their minds will be opened, and they will dedicate themselves also to the work that you stand for — setting yourself and others free.

Thank you, John. -

— Rev. Jim Mitulski

**That's what you did for us, John, and that's what you taught us to do for others.**

**To risk our lives even, and our careers and our ministries, in order to bring sustenance and nourishment to those who are desperate for it and who could only do it because people took risks.**

## After Apologetics (continued from page 7)

He refuses, for example, to lump together gay male and lesbian experience into the same category and highlights one of the differences between the two with reference to male power and the tradition of patriarchal domination in the church (pp. 84-88).

More than that, in Part Two of this book he moves beyond apologetics and toward a positive, God-given role for lesbian and gay people in the church (rather

than trying to buttress a begrudging tolerance for an unfortunate condition). He extends this argument beyond the walls of institutional Christianity by suggesting that homosexuals are endowed with "special gifts and a divinely appointed task in the construction of a truly human society" (p. 197).

McNeill accomplishes these prophetic moments by adroitly shifting the focus

away from the causes of a gay orientation, those now dreary and tedious arguments over etiology, as if we're struggling to find the source of a disease. Instead, he moves the discussion toward the "why" of such orientation, or what he calls the "teleological perspective" in moral theology.

Rather than causes, in other words, McNeill wonders about *purposes*, and whether

we can discern a providential vocation for lesbian and gay people, both in the church and in human society generally.

In doing so he begins to map out a frontier we have only begun to explore: After apologetics, what kind of positive contribution can lesbian and gay people make to Christian theology?

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## McNeill and Catholic Higher Education

(continued from page 4)

**I think that what John McNeill has done in his work is to create what I would call “ecclesial space” for gays and lesbians in the Roman Catholic community.**



And, as Bernie also mentioned, for seven years prior to coming to the GTU I held the position of Dean of Students and Vice President for Student Affairs at Georgetown University. (My responsibilities in that context were fundamentally to oversee everything that was happening at the university as it relates to anything that’s interesting in the lives of the university and in the lives of the students in particular.) So you can imagine that issues of sexuality, homosexuality, gay/lesbian issues, and the culture wars all came my way. And so, I speak from that experience and will talk about the impact and influence that John McNeill has had on the conversation, and particularly the lives, of gay and lesbian students at Catholic colleges and universities.

I want to begin by advancing two claims about John’s work. First is that I think that what John has done in his work is to create what I would call “ecclesial space” for gays and lesbians in the Roman Catholic community. I’ll also mention a bit about what the nature of that space is, but let me say, John, that you have done an enormous amount in creating such a space and I think that that space is ever-expanding and becoming ever more

inclusive and ever more — I would hope — safe and supportive.

The second claim that I want to advance is that John has always insisted in his work on an integrative understanding of faith, of experience, of spirituality, and of sexuality. Now I can imagine that you are an incredible psychotherapist, John, because the kind of integrative perspective that your work has presented is one that, indeed, resonates deeply in the hearts, minds, souls and bodies of all of us.

Let me say something more specific now about what I believe John has done in his work with regard to this ecclesial space, that is, what such a space looks like from the perspective of gay and lesbian students at Georgetown University. Of course, I use Georgetown as an example because it’s the one that I know the best; however, I also know from my own research that it is typical in many ways of most Catholic universities, at least most Jesuit universities.

Between 1976 and 1978 gay and lesbian students of Georgetown decided that they deserved a place at the table. They, like any other student group, believed that they ought to be recognized, ought to be affirmed, ought to have the same kind of access to benefits that any

other type of student organization ought to have. Well, the university and its leadership was not particularly inclined to think that this was a good idea for a Catholic institution, and, while I was not at Georgetown in those days, the history is one of fairly high contention and not a terribly enlightened conversation about what role and what place gay students should have at Georgetown. So the students, being as smart as they always are, took their case to court, which is exactly that they should have done – if they couldn’t get the satisfaction institutionally, then they indeed should have tried other avenues to gain both support and recognition.

Well, that lawsuit took ten years to be decided, and, fundamentally, it was decided in favor of the gay student organization in that the court ruled that the request was a civil rights issue, a legal issue, a fairness issue, and a justice issue. In short, it was decided that the gay students ought to be given the same recognition that other students ought to be given.

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## McNeill and Catholic Higher Education

(continued from page 16)

At that point the university administration asked itself, “What does this mean for us? We have to comply with the law, certainly, but are there ways that we can do this so that we can delicately say ‘yes’ but not be too embracing and not too affirming of these students?”

Such is the very intricate, delicate and complex world of Catholic higher education. However, what began to happen—and this is where your work, John, I think, is pivotal—is that space began to be created for students to have a voice. Because I believe (and this is based, in part, on my conversations with those who were involved with this in the early stages at Georgetown) that it was your work that gave the Georgetown students the confidence to say that they deserved to be recognized, to be affirmed, and that it was the institution’s responsibility to do this. And so, it was that initial confidence, that affirmation that you gave to gay students at the university which began to create a space within the institution—within the church even—for gay and lesbian students to have a greater voice.

Now I’m not going to pretend that that voice is as strong as it should be or that it is as sound as it should be. This has been a hard-won achievement for gays and lesbians in the Catholic Church and in its various institutions. But the space is there and I’m happy to say that in the year 2000 when I left Georgetown that space was even larger than it ever had been and part of my work was to find interesting and creative theological ways to make that space even larger.

John and I had never met actually before today. When John came to

Georgetown in the spring of 2000 at the invitation of gay and lesbian students, the cardinal of Washington was not too happy with this invitation. However, it is important to note that the invitation was issued by students who invited John as a representative of New Ways Ministry and this invitation created a very different kind of dynamic for the institution. At this point I, as Dean of Students, had to decide whether John’s talk was a “go” or a “no-go.”

For me this was a “no-brainer.” Of course, it was a “go.” Unfortunately, however, John and I never met because, while Jeannine Gramick and John were speaking, I was out having to defend my decision to the press, to the Catholic right, and to other groups—such as the alumni—as to why this was an important, necessary, positive and constructive thing for this university to be doing. And, I believe, that the case was made.

I also believe at this point in time that you, John, helped to create the space for discussion at Georgetown and let me repeat my belief and hope that such a space is growing ever larger. I also believe that this space is becoming more inclusive, more affirming, more supportive, and, I hope, safer. Your work, John, has been an outstanding contribution to the work of Catholic higher education.

Let me also mention another example from Catholic education, one that I am not personally quite as familiar with as the Georgetown example I’ve been discussing, but one that shows us that a very interesting conversation is taking place in the press having to do with the issue of gay and lesbian teachers in Catholic institutions of

learning who decide to “come out” on the job.

Father Jerry Coleman from St. Patrick’s wrote an interesting article in *America* magazine back in March 2001 in which he cautioned gay and lesbian teachers in Catholic higher education against making information about their homosexuality available to students. Coleman, in his own words cautions against “making [such information] openly available in the Catholic school setting.”

The article refers back to a well-known article by James and Evelyn Whitehead in which the authors describe passages of maturity which include the necessary development of the homosexual’s own understanding of personal sexual identity. In short, the Whiteheads argue that, in the initial stages, an individual needs to make an “interior passage” in which one realizes and accepts the self-knowledge of one’s homosexuality; in the second stage there is a “passage of intimacy” in which one shares knowledge of that homosexual orientation with a trusted other or others; in the third stage, which they call a “public passage,” the individual takes the further step to be publicly known as a homosexual.

As you can see, Coleman’s point of view is rather damning of a Catholic school teacher who tries to live in an integrative and holistic way with her/his sexuality in the context of her/his work. In fact, Coleman write the following words:

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## *More Catholic Than Thou...* (continued from page 9)

**“Catholic” takes on new meaning in light of John McNeill’s work.**

**It is not simply the axiomatic “small c” equals “universal” approach. Rather, catholic, thanks to John McNeill, now means concerned with the whole truth, with the whole world, with the full meaning.**



**PSR President Bill McKinney and Mary Hunt**

The Catholic community claims to be unique in that it is “one, holy, catholic and apostolic.” These attributes have led to ecumenical stalemates, but I think in the case of John McNeill they form the most appropriate framework for assessing his work because they encompass the fullness of his project.

Dr. McNeill’s approach is “one” insofar as he intends and achieves, in my judgment, an intellectual and spiritual integrity. John’s life was not a straight line to sainthood; indeed, some would say there was little straight about it! Rather, his good Upstate New York Irish values (which I share) and his experience as a prisoner of war resulted in a Jesuit who strove for honesty and who knew suffering up close.

Mark Jordan, in his marvelous book, *The Silence of Sodom*, describes Catholic ecclesial culture as so fraught with lies and deceptions that I can see how John McNeill must have been very confused by what he saw up close and personal as a priest. I understand why he ultimately chose to reject membership that conferred clerical privilege in favor of a deeper “oneness.” His own integrity and that of the Gospel on which the whole religion was allegedly based trumped his desire to belong

to the Society of Jesus. Sad. Nonetheless, the Jesuits’ loss was the whole church’s gain as he extended his ministry to the Metropolitan Community Church, and indeed to all who seek him.

On to holiness. Frankly, I have always felt slightly uncomfortable around people who are said to be holy, because the word is so vexed and the reality so powerful. But there is a “holiness” to John McNeill that I trust. Throughout John’s writing, and more so in his being, I always sense a deep connection with something most of us only hope to glimpse. I admire his reliance on the Eucharist and prayer, habits he shared with his sister, a nun, who prayed daily for GLBTQ people in her cloister until her death several years ago. For me, the most telling mark of holiness is John’s amazing love for the Church despite unjust treatment by its officials. Likewise, his enduring love for the Jesuits despite their collective inability to be brothers is transparent. This kind of holiness impresses me.

“Catholic” takes on new meaning in light of John McNeill’s work. It is not simply the axiomatic “small c” equals “universal” approach. Rather, catholic, thanks to John McNeill, now means concerned with the whole truth, with the whole

world, with the full meaning. Contrast this with the myopic world of imprimaturs, *nihil obstat* and pedophilia cover-ups. This is why John McNeill is respected in the wider gay community as a gay Catholic priest because he is, despite it all. I take John’s approach and consider myself Catholic, thanks, and urge others to do the same. Another small irony—rather than being judged as heretics, I predict the many GLBTQ Catholics who seek to change the kyriarchal profile on this matter will one day be seen as apologists.

The “apostolic” nature of his work is his firm conviction that theology is done in service of people, not people in service of theology as those who traffic in mandatum would have it. Rather, John’s writing, from his study of Maurice Blondell to his most popular articles, is always geared to the needs of people who struggle to be faithful.

And his pastoral ministry, much of it private and unsung, is that of a steady Irish priest who knows human failings and rejoices in human diversity. His writings provide other pastoral ministers with the tools to do the same. This is no small contribution.

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## *More Catholic Than Thou...* (continued from page 18)

These four dimensions of John McNeill's work – one, holy, catholic and apostolic – leave the Catholic Church as a whole in his debt. They also account for his enormous popularity, I might say iconic status, among GLBTQ Catholics and our friends. But his impact goes well beyond his roots to persons of diverse faith perspectives who seek to hold together their sexuality with their faith. If a Roman Catholic priest can do it and be open and proud about it, why not a devout Muslim, a Southern Presbyterian or an Orthodox Jew? As our collective movement matures, his example becomes more obvious.

John McNeill has had the good sense not to presume to speak for women. I would not want to overstate the case and call him a feminist. But his experiences of being

treated as a second class citizen in his own church dovetail with those of his feminist sisters who seek equality and dignity in the same circles. Among us he is loved as an ally and welcomed as a brother. Surely his notion that one could be gay and Catholic spilled over to those of us who are lesbian and Catholic. We remain in his debt as we work out the implications for ourselves, delighted to have his accompaniment though our paths may sometimes go in slightly different directions. We know that he is listening to women, like his dear sister, and praying for change.

John and I disagreed once quite publicly at a Kirkridge conference on the matter of death. I had delivered myself of a long-winded oration stressing a feminist approach

to death, suggesting that it was not so much an individual matter but a common one. Following Rosemary Ruether, I affirmed that we will all be part of the great matrix, the compost if you will, from which new life will spring. John was my respondent. He fairly bounded to the podium to protest in a classically Catholic priestly manner, stressing individual immortality. He assured the audience that when he dies he is confident he will run into the arms of his loving father who will call him Little Jackie McNeill for all eternity. As you can imagine, the contrast between our views was vivid! Happily, neither of us knows yet who was right, and I pray we won't find out for many years to come. Moreover, I suspect in hindsight that we both may be surprised. That

is the fun of theology done with trusted colleagues.

That John and I, two Irish Catholics from Upstate New York, can share so unselfconsciously the insights of our theological imaginations, disagree at points, and still welcome one another at the table of blessing is what matters. This is what it means to be "more Catholic than thou." Thanks to John McNeill, it is possible and I am grateful. I only hope the model spreads to the world's billion Catholics that we in turn might learn to live peacefully with far more profound differences among our neighbors. ▼

– **Mary Elizabeth Hunt**

## *McNeill and Catholic Higher Education* (cont. from page 20)

Such a way of being is, to my mind, the only healthy-minded way of living truly and authentically in this world and your vision, John, and your integrative holistic unity of sexuality and faith and spirit is at the core, I think, of any intelligent answers to the kinds of vexing problems that face us today in the realm of sexuality and faith.

In closing, let me thank you, John, in the name of many, many people, and, if I may be so bold, to thank you in the name of the many gay and lesbian students whom I've worked with over the years. Thank you for helping to create space for them and thank you for presenting a vision of what it means to believe in God, to

be sexual, and to be healthy in a powerful and compelling way.

We are very honored to be in your presence today and, again, I say "thank you." –

– **James A. Donahue**



## McNeill and Catholic Higher Education

(continued from page 17)

**John McNeill has advanced an understanding of what it means to have faith, to have sexuality, and to have an integrated sense of who one is.**



“A teacher who feels the need to make public his or her homosexual orientation in a school setting is probably (a) trying to complete the first two passages by jumping into the third level; and (b) failing to recognize the inappropriateness of seeking support from students who probably do not understand the teacher’s struggles or have the tools to offer necessary support. This does not mean that young people are not capable of being caring and loving toward homosexuals, but that they should not be put in the position of having a dual relationship with their teacher, i.e. as teacher and as homosexual. I would suggest [and these are still Coleman’s words] that a homosexual teacher who has a personal or psychological need to announce his or her sexual orientation to students should for this very reason not be teaching in a Catholic school at all. The assertion does not pertain, however, to the case of a mature, stable homosexual who publicly accepts and practices the church’s teaching and who does not feel the need to announce his or her homosexuality.”

This, to say the least, was intended to be a very provocative article and I’m

very proud to say that the initiating circumstance for this issue is the journey of a very close friend of mine who is a teacher at Catholic High School here on the West Coast.

Coleman’s articles prompted two interesting responses in subsequent issues of *America*: the first comes from the Whiteheads:

“[A]s a generalized prescription against identifying oneself publicly in Catholic social settings, Father Coleman’s counsel of silence resonates unfortunately with the failed U.S. military policy of ‘don’t ask, don’t tell.’ It seems, at least to us, that it reinforces a strategy of self-protective privacy that is proved to be psychologically and spiritually injurious to many people. And it seems to deprive Catholic school students and the public of examples of adults who are gay and lesbian and function as respected members of this faith community. Surely the apparent absence of gays and lesbians among the Catholic leadership — be they lay teachers or principals or priests or religious — plays some part in the continuing prejudice against homosexual persons that the U.S. bishops abhor.”

Bishop Gumbleton offers the

second response in *America*:

“Contrary to what Fr. Coleman seems to be suggesting, the mature stable homosexual person would not want to be known as such because he or she is seeking support inappropriately from students or simply trying to satisfy others’ curiosity. Rather, he or she simply wants to deal honestly and with integrity and self-assurance concerning a reality of his or her life. It is a desire to live without the fear and secrecy that acknowledging one’s orientation involves. If we really mean it when we say God does not love someone any less simply because he or she is homosexual, I believe our community would be enriched by the acknowledged presence of homosexual teachers in our schools.”

John McNeill’s imprint, I think, is central in this discussion. You’ll recall that my second assertion was that what John McNeill has done is to advance an understanding of what it means to have faith, to have sexuality, and to have an integrated sense of who one is.

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## After Apologetics (continued from page 15)

This is, of course, a moot question for more than a few who have felt compelled to leave the institutional church and for many others who have abandoned Christian traditions altogether as hopelessly homophobic and sexist. McNeill's unblinking gaze at those traditions can give us ample reason to question any facile reconciliation between historical theology and queer experience. He reminds us, for example, that Tertullian considered same-sex sexual behavior as "not sins so much as monstrosities" (p. 89) and that John Chrysostom denounced "the delights of sodomy" as "an unpardonable insult to nature and doubly destructive" (p. 90). Is this *really* a tradition on which we want to spend our time and energy?

Indeed, many believe it is high time to shake the ecclesial dust from our sandals and move on. We may need to admit, in other words – and as McNeill's own life clearly demonstrates – that the apologetic task might never prompt institutional conversion, or least not in our lifetimes. So when it comes to recalcitrant institutional structures perhaps the time has come, to evoke Matthew's Jesus, to let the dead bury their own dead and get on with the business of life-giving, liberating Gospel practice. This is precisely what we see

in McNeill's life as he continues to practice what he preaches, a more detailed account of which appears in his recent autobiographical reflections, aptly titled, *Both Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air*.

In contrast to the academic rigor of his other work, this is a more informal account and it even sounds rather chatty. In it we can catch a glimpse of the kind of life that produced the work on which so many have relied in their institutional and theological struggles. The irony here, in many ways tragic, is how far McNeill's influence has extended beyond the confines of his own Roman Catholic tradition, which he had devoted so much time and energy to change. With the exception of Dignity, the organization of lesbian and gay Catholics founded on his principles, McNeill's work has served as a catalyst and even foundation for liberating practice in a host of Protestant denominations and for new appropriations of Christian traditions (as in the Metropolitan Community Church).

These autobiographical reflections can also help us understand better his devotion to Christian traditions – how it emerged in his life and why it continues to fuel his spiritual journey. Most of us, of course, will want to read this

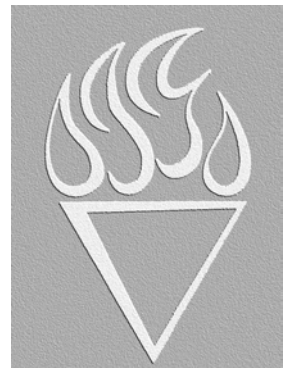
book for its intersections of spirituality and sexuality. Yet there is more to be had here, including the hair-raising account of his experiences as a soldier in World War II and the kind of resources his religious faith offered during his time spent as a prisoner of war.

Throughout these experiences, including the more familiar (and still painful to read) confrontations with the church hierarchy, he refused to abandon the tradition he loved until the ecclesial authorities of that tradition literally forced him to. Even then he continued the ministry to which he knew God had called him.

This in turn can help those of us who continue to work within institutional structures understand our own stubborn refusal to let go of our Christian heritage.

If saints sometimes offer a model of sanctity at odds with the institutional church, McNeill's life and work certainly reflect beatitude. While he would undoubtedly blush at such a statement, he freely admits (and documents in this book) the wide-ranging impact his career has had on the overall shape and content of the conversation about lesbian and gay Christians in the church.

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## John McNeill: A Prophet For Our Times (continued from page 4)

### Imagination

John McNeill shows us how the prophet can challenge the dominant reality. In 1970, at a time when the Catholic Church had added nothing to its body of teaching and writing on homosexuality beyond what it stated in the Middle Ages, John McNeill, with meticulous scholarship and bold imagination, began to challenge the dominant reality in Christian morality regarding homosexuality. In three successive issues of the *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, John's articles, entitled "The Christian Male Homosexual," questioned a moral system that condemned all homosexual activity as objective evil. These articles grew into John's classic moral work, *The Church and the Homosexual*, published in 1977. Even today, 25 years later, this work stands as a benchmark for all subsequent moral reevaluation of homosexual relations.

*The Church and the Homosexual* examined the traditional arguments for condemning same-sex behavior in scripture, tradition, and philosophy and refuted those arguments. John was the first Catholic theologian to challenge the traditional Christian position that God intends all humans to be heterosexual. Lesbian and gay persons are part of God's creative plan, he boldly stated. He challenged cultural expectations when he asserted that lesbian and gay people have special gifts and qualities that contribute to the development of society. He disputed the dominant Christian teaching that every homosexual act was sinful and claimed that homosexual love can be just as holy and sacred as heterosexual love.

### Embrace of Pathos

The prophet embraces suffering without anger or rage, but with anguish. John has known the wounds of suffering himself. For about five years, he suffered the lengthy, and seemingly endless, reviews of his book, *The Church and the Homosexual*. A commission composed of Jesuits, as well as outside biblical scholars and moral theologians, both in the US and in Rome, carefully studied the manuscript.

Dan Berrigan described it this way:

"In those months and years, I saw a new side of McNeill: the strength of absolutely marmoreal patience. To this day, I am trying to absorb and understand it. He waited, he questioned, he was rebuffed, he waited, once more he was told to wait, he was counseled to be patient by millennial-minded authorities. His manuscript was scrutinized by enough experts to sanitize the Aegean stables. Their fine tooth comb declared him again and again tick-free, lice-free, dandruff-free; gnat or camel, they could find nothing to stick at. Through it all he was unflinching, exasperatingly courteous, a gentleman *ad unguem*. ... I suspect his sense of history is sound, and this is not merely a tactic. I think he is unafraid of the cross."

John wrote and revised, taking into consideration the suggestions of all the reviewers until permission was finally granted in January 1976 to publish his book. More than a year after the book's publication, the CDF sent a letter to the Jesuit Superior General to silence John on speaking or writing about homosexuality and

sexual ethics in the public arena. His ordinary rights were denied. He received no warning before the censure, there was no judicial procedure, he was not told who his accusers were, and received no proper defense.

John heroically and patiently endured this silence until Nov. 2, 1986, when his conscience compelled him to speak out in the face of harm of the 1986 Letter on Homosexuality from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The dismissal process was initiated and culminated in the final decree of dismissal by the Congregation for Religious on April 13, 1987. To suffer and be rejected by one's faith community, like Jesus, Jeremiah, and other Hebrew prophets, has been John's lot.

John has brought people to their own experience of suffering. His silence for 9 years symbolizes the defenseless silence of lesbian and gay persons throughout the centuries, who remain fearfully in the closet or who suffer untold hardships when they reveal who they are.

John has enabled people to feel. As a therapist and spiritual director, he has been able to free thousands of lesbian and gay persons from suffering and guilt so that they live fuller and healthier psychic lives.

As a founder of the New York chapter of Dignity, the organization for lesbian and gay Catholics, John has smoothed the way for Dignity members to maintain respect for the institutional Church while at the same time confronting its inadequacies.

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## John McNeill: A Prophet For Our Times (continued from page 22)

### Energizing

The prophet energizes the community to fresh forms of faithfulness, vitality, and hope in God. John's 1988 book, *Taking a Chance on God*, called lesbian and gay Christians to replace a God-relationship based on fear with one based on love. John's lifelong struggle to accept his own gayness as a gift of God encouraged his readers to overcome interiorized homophobia, shame, guilt, and fear engendered by religious and societal prejudice. His works have enabled thousands to grow into a spirituality based on love and giftedness

His 1995 book, *Freedom*,

*Glorious Freedom*, rejuvenated lesbian and gay Christians. It encouraged them to follow their conscience and thus to reconcile their faith and trust in God's love and mercy with their own self-acceptance. It helped those who have known the secrecy and fear of the closet to experience the liberation of the Holy Spirit.

John has energized lesbian and gay Christians to give personal witness to the Church about the holiness of their lives and their love by means of his own personal witness of fidelity and love with Charlie, his lifetime partner. John has enabled them to grow into a deep and

joyous relationship with God through the retreats he conducted for more than 20 years at Kirkridge, an ecumenical retreat center in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania. He continues to facilitate retreats called "Intimacy with God for Gay Men."

### Amazement

The prophet can be described only with the language of amazement. And this is the language we use when we speak of John McNeill.

We are truly amazed by John McNeill, priest, therapist, theologian, teacher, author, advocate for gay and lesbian liberation, and man of prayer.

We are amazed by his uncommon courage to walk down the lonely road of ecclesiastical censure so that others may amble down the freedom trail of self-acceptance and a legitimate following of one's conscience.

We are amazed by his willingness to assume the daring task of questioning the sexual ethic defended by an authoritarian institution at the risk of professional sacrifice, personal security, assaults on his good name, and dismissal from his Jesuit community.

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(back page)

## After Apologetics (continued from page 21)

Those of us who wish to take the next, and even more constructive steps in that conversation (without reinventing the wheel) would do well to pay attention to the building blocks McNeill offers for the task.

As with the best of hagiography, this autobiographical account does not keep us focused only on the life of one person. Through the courageous twists and turns of his life we can see in microcosm the dynamic, evolving shape of the gay liberation movement, both

inside and outside the church.

It does not, moreover, keep us focused solely on the past but on the prospects for the future, on how we can move beyond mere apologetics (lesbian and gay people really can be Christian too) and make creative contributions – to the church, to theology, to spirituality and to society generally.

In the preface to this book we learn where the title came from. Just prior to his graduation from seminary, one of his professors

commented that McNeill was the only Jesuit he knew with both feet firmly planted in mid-air. "Wherever he goes," this professor went on to note, "whatever he does, there will be trouble, trouble, trouble!" By the end of this book we discover how this "air" McNeill has breathed into the church actually offers a firm place to stand. It's now up to us, to those of us who have found our balance regained by reading John McNeill's work, to decide what we'll do next. ▼

– Reviewed by Jay E.  
Johnson

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## Methodist Scholar Traci West to Speak at CLGS

Traci West, author of *Wounds of the Spirit: Black Women, Violence and Resistance Ethics*, will speak at 5:00pm on 25 April 2002 in PSR's Chapel of the Great Commission.

West, Associate Professor of Ethics and African American Studies at Drew University Theological School, will talk on "The Moral Status of Heterosexism & Racism in Church Practice."

This lecture is the third in CLGS Lecture Series 2002 and is free and open to the public. (See p. 13)



### McNeill: Prophet For Our Times (continued from page 19)

We are amazed by his lifetime of dedication and service to the spiritual and moral development of gay and lesbian Christians in the face of stigma and rejection.

We are amazed by this instrument of God's compassion who has helped millions of lesbian and gay men to see themselves as expressions of God's deep and generous love.

John, we salute you as a prophet for our times and acknowledge our debt of gratitude for the witness of your life. ▼

—Sister Jeannine  
Gramick

## About CLGS ...

The mission of the PSR Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry is to advance the well-being of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people and to transform faith communities and the wider society by taking a leading role in shaping a new public discourse on religion and sexuality through education, research, community building, and advocacy.

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