

Local group reaches out to gay Christians

'Reencuentro' offers fellowship to those Church has rejected

By KARL ROSS
Of The STAR Staff

Every year during Easter week, churches everywhere go to great lengths to recreate the final agony of Jesus Christ. But gay and lesbian worshippers in Puerto Rico, like those elsewhere, don't need to shoulder a cross or don a crown of thorns to understand the awful angst of persecution.

Many of them have lived it, within their own churches and within their own beings. That much was clear after listening to members of "Reencuentro," a

multi-denominational gay and lesbian religious group that meets Tuesdays at the Episcopal Cathedral in Santurce.

Said Laura, a middle-school teacher and one of the group's founders:

"When I used to go to my church, the Catholic Church, I felt like a saint. I was director of the church choir. I took part in all the plays and activities. I helped clean and paint the building. But all the while I was terrified they might find out about me."

One of the ways "Reencuentro," the group's name, can be translated, is "to find once again." And as the name suggests, its members are looking to find God, once again, after a period of alienation and hurt.

Laura, who uses a pseudonym to protect her identity, said that most of the group's 35 to 40 members were steeped in

religious traditions during their childhood and that, despite their later disappointments, most remain deeply religious.

The question this leads us to ask, she said, is: "Is it God who has condemned me or is it society?"

The Bible, she pointed out, has been used in the past to "justify the unjustifiable," not just against homosexuals, but against blacks, women and other religious out-groups. One of the group's primary areas of interest, then, is to reread and reanalyze the Bible.

But the group strives to deliver its members beyond the church.

"We need to believe in our own experience, as opposed to what the church tells us," she said. "We have to learn to say — without intermediaries — 'This is my relationship with God.'"

The new approach to religion has helped members such as Francisco, a 25-

year-old student at the University of Puerto Rico.

"When I was a child, I thought God and the Catholic Church were synonymous, and that you could not reach God unless you went through what the church said you should do," he said. "But now I'm thinking for myself rather than letting the church think for me, and I've been developing my spirituality by myself and with others who accept me as a gay man."

Breaking away from the church has not been easy for many of those in attendance. One of the older members of the group said he had been subject to a fundamentalist upbringing in which all sexuality was taboo, not just homosexuality.

Other members of the group reiterated

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Psychologist ministers to his gay flock

By KARL ROSS
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Gays and lesbians can be found lining the pews of virtually every church on the island, assured the Rev. Manuel Olmo, pastor at the Santa Hilda Episcopal Church in Cupey. But what separates most other congregations from the one Olmo presides over is that they are invited to openly participate in the church, its ceremonies and activities.

Olmo, who holds a doctorate in psychology, began to promulgate this position at the request of a lesbian couple two years ago. The announcement rocked some members of the congregation — about 10 percent of whom swiftly departed — but Olmo has managed to keep his fold together and, as a result, is widely regarded as a champion of gay and lesbian rights.

"If you have a pastor who is interested in educating followers about the issue then you won't find many problems," said Olmo, who takes the time to explain the church's stance on homosexuality to all newcomers.

Unlike the stance of the dominant Roman Catholic Church, which accepts gays and lesbians as individuals but rejects their acts, Olmo says that a growing number of Episcopal churches, like his, have come to view the two as indivisible.

"People and their acts are the same thing, and to reject a person's acts is the same thing as rejecting the person," he said. "As a consequence, one sector of the Episcopal Church is prepared to accept homosexuals, including their acts, but we hold them up to the same standards of morality as with heterosexual couples."

There are an estimated 300,000 gays and lesbians in Puerto Rico.

The reverend decried the Catholic Church's tradition as antiquated and homophobic. The Catholic Church, he said, continues to make literalist, fundamentalist interpretations of the Bible, failing to take into account recent scientific evidence showing homosexual behavior, like heterosexual behavior, to be part of an innate, immutable biological



The Rev. Manuel Olmo, center altar, presides over a service at the Santa Hilda Episcopal Church in Cupey, which ministers to gay members.

STAR photo by Humberto Trias Jr.

condition.

To support his argument, Olmo cited the Book of Leviticus, which catalogs all known sins of the day. Homosexuality is included on that list, but so too are heterosexual relations during menstruation and the weaving of different types of fabric.

"But today, nobody is prohibited from having sexual relationships with a woman during her period of menstruation. And today, everybody uses polyester, which is a mix of two different types of fabrics, and it doesn't make anybody feel like a sinner."

"If people continue to think that homosexual relations are a sin while the rest aren't... then what you have is an interpretation that is not only fundamentalist but also homophobic because it leaves only homosexual acts in the cate-

gory of sin and eliminates the rest," Olmo said.

The main difference between the Episcopal and the Catholic churches, Olmo said, is that the Episcopal ministry emphasizes the life and teachings of Jesus while the Catholic ministry places more emphasis on dogma and ritual.

But despite the prejudices of influential Catholic scholars such as St. Thomas Aquinas, who coined the phrase "crime against nature" in reference to homosexual acts, modern biblical scholars have noted that Jesus Christ makes no pronouncement whatsoever regarding homosexuality.

As evidence of the traditional church's view toward homosexuality, the Catholic Church in England — which later became the Anglican Church — used to burn homosexuals in bonfires composed of

sticks. This practice begot the epithet "faggot," the literal meaning of which is a bundle of sticks.

Olmo pointed out that the Bible had been used in the past to justify similar atrocities, such as slavery, but said that nobody would dare defend such practices today. A fresh analysis of the Bible, he says, expunges it of the prejudices against homosexuality, as well.

Olmo said his crusade to bring gay and lesbian worshippers into the religious mainstream has wrought a considerable amount of misunderstanding. At least one fellow clergy has asked him derisively about his "obsession" with homosexuality.

In a March 1991 bulletin to his congregation, he answered his detractors by saying: "It takes a lot of work and effort

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