

'Friendship' is, according to her, a more comprehensive, and from a theological point of view, more adequate model than 'marriage'.

- Elizabeth Stuart, *Just Good Friends. Towards a lesbian and gay theology of relationships*, Moybray, London 1995

In this book, the English theologian Elizabeth Stuart researches the meaning of friendship in the Christian tradition as well as in the life of homosexual men and lesbian women. From this she develops insights which are also relevant to heterosexuals, amongst others concerning marriage.

- Working Group of Catholic Gay Pastors, *Called to blessing. A Pastoral Letter on Faith and (Homo)sexuality*, 1989 (may be ordered at: WKHP, Postbus 59, 6850 AB Huissen, the Netherlands)

For reactions and information concerning this pastoral letter

one can contact the

Werkverband van Katholieke Homo-Pastores (WKHP),

Postbus 59, 6850 AB Huissen, the Netherlands.

Postbank-account 2419768, WKHP, Nijmegen NL (bank-account)

e-mail: wkhomopastores@hotmail.com

Working Group of Catholic Gay Pastors,
the Netherlands

Prepared to give blessing

Pastoral letter concerning
the celebration of friendship

April 2003

Contents

1. What is the reason for this letter?
 - 1.1. Called and prepared
 - 1.2. Recognition in society
 - 1.3. Pastoral opportunities
 - 1.4. Structure of this letter
2. Friendship is a holy matter
 - 2.1. Friendship, a word of faith
 - 2.2. Body and spirit as one
 - 2.3. Rituals mark life
 - 2.4. A sacramental reality
 - 2.5. The task to grow
3. All blessing comes from God
 - 3.1. Blessing as praise
 - 3.2. Blessing each other
 - 3.3. Word and act in one
 - 3.4. Public confirmation
 - 3.5. Blessing and union
4. Blessing on the parish agenda
 - 4.1. The earned blessing
 - 4.2. The necessity for discussion in faith
 - 4.3. The offer should come first
 - 4.4. Pastoral preparation
5. The celebration of friendship
 - 5.1. Three possibilities
 - 5.2. A friendship-service
 - 5.3. A friendship-meal

Conclusion

Appendices

1. Suggestions for discussion
2. Liturgical suggestions
3. Literature

- *Song of Solomon 5,10-16a: My beloved is....*
- *Wisdom of Jesus Sirach 6,5-17 or 22,19-25: friendship*
- *Matthew 12,46-50: real kin*
- *Luke 10,25-37: the good Samaritan*
- *John 4,7: Jesus and the woman from Samaria*
- *John 15,12-17: the first commandment*
- *1 Corinthians 13: the song of love*
- *1 John 3,16-24: united in God*

Appendix 3

The list below is in two parts. The first part is primarily practical: a selection from the available liturgical material in English. The second part consists of a choice of English secondary literature for those who wish to delve into the theological, pastoral and liturgical aspects of the celebration and blessing of homosexual and lesbian life-long relationships.

Liturgical material

- Elizabeth Stuart, *Daring to Speak Love's Name*. A gay and lesbian prayerbook, Hamish Hamilton, London 1992.

A collection of orders, prayers and texts for different moments in homosexual and lesbian life, making use of especially English and American sources. More than fifty pages of the book are concerned with the celebration of friendship.

Secondary literature

- John Boswell, *Samesex unions in premodern Europe*, Villard Books, New York 1994.

The value of this book lies in the presentation of previously unknown texts, especially from the early Church in the Near East, concerning unions between people of the same sex (usually men). Critics praise the author's sleuthing and erudition, but question his assertion that these unions were homosexual.

- Mary E. Hunt, *Fierce Tenderness*. A Feminist Theology of Friendship, Crossroad, New York.

The author asserts that in friendship between women, four components come together: love, power, physicality and spirituality.

both models

1. *Programme for a friendship-service*
 - *Opening song*
 - *Word of welcome*
 - *Song of praise (optional)*
 - *Prayer*
 - *One or more reading(s)*
 - *A psalm (sung) or song (as a possible intermezzo)*
 - *Sermon*
 - *Music*
 - *Exchange of vows*
 - *Symbolic rites*
 - *Prayer and blessing*
 - *Song*
 - *Intercessory prayers*
 - *Celebration of the Eucharist or Word and Communion service (optional)*
 - *Our Father*
 - *Sending and blessing*
 - *Concluding song*
2. *Programme for a friendship-meal*
 - *Reception and welcoming of guests*
 - *Lighting of candles*
 - *Song*
 - *Introduction concerning the character of the meeting*
 - *Prayer (possibly combined with a blessing of the home)*
 - *Entrée*
 - *Short Scripture-reading*
 - *Discussion concerning the reading*
 - *Blessing of friendship*
 - *Song*
 - *Blessing of the food and drink (bread and wine)*
 - *Toast to the couple*
 - *Meal*
 - *Intercessory prayers and/or wishes*
 - *Song*
 - *Informal continuation of the meal*
3. *Suggestions for readings*
 - *Ruth 1,7-18: the covenant between Ruth and Naomi*
 - *1 Samuel 20,12-23.35-42: the covenant between David and Jonathan*
 - *Ecclesiastes 4,7-12: better two than alone*
 - *Song of Solomon 4,1-7: How beautiful you are!*

1. What is the reason for this letter?

*Render blessing;
for to this end you have been called,
that you may inherit a blessing.
1 Peter 3,9*

*The experiences of homosexual men and lesbian women, often acquired in a difficult struggle to distinguish between good and evil and to determine what gives them peace, are hardly known to the community of the faithful. Like many gay believers, whose expertise simply consists in their well-contemplated personal experience, we too are convinced that homosexual people can give expression to their longings in ways that are good, ways that make them whole and which affirm them in their faith in God's love for them and for the world. We are also convinced that in the Church, homosexual friendships and relationships can be made publicly known and are deserving of all respect there.
From: Called to blessing, De Horstink, Amersfoort 1989, page 12.*

*It is not good for a Church that wants to help people enter the Kingdom of God, not to understand the real life of people or only to come up with superficial analyses of it, such as moral deterioration, self-indulgence, subjectivism or secularization. In such a case, no one will listen to the Church and then no one is really helped. We find that regrettable, and would therefore like to make a contribution to the community's understanding of the contemporary reality about sexuality and relationships. It will then become clear when and where moral boundaries are required, namely, every time respect for the other and the cause of justice are threatened.
From: Called to blessing, pages 17-18.*

The author of the first letter by Peter admonishes Christians to always confirm each other in their goodness and to wish each other well (1 Peter 3,9). All good amongst and between people, points to God, who is Himself the source of all good, the source of blessing.

1.1. Called and prepared

In 1989, as members of the Working Group of Catholic Gay Pastors (WKHP), we addressed you, our brothers and sisters in the Roman Catholic Church in the Netherlands, with a pastoral letter concerning faith and (homo)sexuality. We gave that document the title 'Called to blessing'. The letter ended with the blessing cited above. Now, eleven years on, we once again address you with a pastoral letter, this time with the title 'Prepared to give blessing'. This second letter should

not only be read as a follow-up to the first, but at the same time as focussing on certain aspects of it.

In our first letter we especially wished to declare that friendship, love and sexuality between people of the same sex can and may be experienced as a blessing. Building upon this conviction, we shall give in this second letter attention to a relatively new phenomenon: the liturgical celebration of homosexual and lesbian relationships, including the blessing of these within the community of the Church.

The Working Group of Catholic Gay Pastors marks its twentieth anniversary with this document. Membership of the WKHP is open to all those who have a relationship to the Roman Catholic Church, whether by vocation or professionally. The working group strives after a Church open to all who sincerely desire to follow in the steps of Jesus of Nazareth, irrespective of sexual preference, gender or personal life-style. As pastors who are homosexual or lesbian ourselves we feel a special duty, not only to stand up for ourselves, but also to do so for all the faithful who are as we are. We also wish to stand up for our parents, friends and for all those who are sympathetic to the emancipation of homosexual men and lesbian women in society and the Church.

As pastors we are searching, together with many others, for how the Gospel can become flesh and blood for the people of today. In this sense the letter you hold in your hands is a pastoral letter. With this letter we wish to speak words of hope and encouragement and to point towards a path into the future.

1.2. Recognition in society

The fact that this letter is appearing now must be seen in connection to developments within Dutch society. Marriage between men and women remains undiminishedly popular, but along side this, there is a growing acceptance and recognition of other relationships. According to the Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (Central Office for Statistics), 89.000 civil marriages were registered in 1999. Therefore, for the fourth consecutive year the number of marriages has risen. Eighty per cent of these marriages was registered by couples already living together. One in five of the individuals marrying had already been married at least once.

Since January 1st 1998, The Netherlands recognizes, apart from 'marriage', 'legally registered partnerships'. In 1998 and 1999 7.900 couples made use of this arrangement. In 4.800 cases, a relationship

Are there differences which can more or less be called essential? To which criteria, in your opinion, should a relationship conform in order to be acceptable for celebration and blessing in a church? (30 minutes)

4. Homosexual and lesbian believers

When a parish is prepared to give blessing, it will have to communicate this to homosexual men and lesbian women. It is important to acknowledge that homosexual and lesbian believers take part in parish life in various different ways. Some will be active or attend the services regularly. Others will be more distant and visit a church only incidentally. Some will probably also be estranged from the parish, because they are not able to experience the parish as a 'safe haven' where they can be themselves. Reaching all these different categories of homosexual and lesbian believers demands a differentiated approach.

Some suggestions

- Write an article in the parish-magazine about the contents of this pastoral letter and their importance for the parish. With it, publish a report on the discussions that have taken place concerning this letter and an overview of the policy that has been developed.
- This letter can be made available on the information-stand in the church. Make sure that there are enough, especially on Christmas Eve.
- Meetings can be organised for homosexual and lesbian believers to discuss this letter with each other.
- Finally: the best publicity is making every celebration of friendship as festive as possible. This will certainly encourage others to follow your good example.

Appendix 2

In chapter 5 we presented two 'models' for the liturgical celebration of friendship, which we have respectively called 'friendship-service' and 'friendship-meal'. Below, we offer by way of example, programmes for

your life were important for you from a religious point of view. Which moments were clearly connected to your faith?

- **Assignment in groups of four**

Tell each other about these moments. At which moments was there a liturgical celebration and at which moments was there not? And why not? Was that due to your own choice or was a celebration not possible due to another reason? Would you like that to be different in the future? (25 minutes)

- **Follow-up assignment**

Compile a list with three moments in life which demand a separate liturgical celebration according to your group. (5 minutes)

- **Group discussion**

Exchange the lists with the entire group. Do you discern possibilities to celebrate certain of these moments in your parish in the future? (30 minutes)

Work-form C: 'Life-partners'

This work-form is meant to give insight into the differences and similarities between various types of relationships and to arrive at pastoral criteria for the possible celebration and blessing of them. The following steps may be taken.

- **Discussion in silence**

Hang up two large sheets of paper. Write down on one the word 'marriage/partner-relationship' and on the other 'friendship'. Invite those present to write down words on these sheets showing which qualities conform to a good partner-relationship, and which conform to a good friendship. (10 minutes)

- **Dialogue**

Discuss in pairs the differences as well as the similarities between a partner-relationship and a friendship. (20 minutes)

- **Summary**

Write down the similarities on a sheet of paper which is placed between the two others. Write down the differences on two sheets which are hung up on either side of the other sheets.

- **Group discussion**

Do the qualities of a partner-relationship and a friendship overlap?

between two men or two women was concerned.

On September 12th 2000, the Tweede Kamer der Staten Generaal (the Second Chamber of the States-General) accepted a bill proposing the opening of marriage to persons of the same sex by 109 votes for and 33 against. When this bill becomes law – at the time of the writing of this letter the bill has not yet been discussed in the First Chamber – two people of the same sex will be able to enter into a civil marriage. The bill gives the partners concerned as many of the same rights as possible as when a marriage is entered into by a man and a woman.

Its proponents motivate the opening of civil marriage by pointing out the feeling in society that citizens, irrespective of their sexual preference, have the right to equal treatment. Their motive is supported by the anti-discrimination principle contained in article 1 of the Dutch Constitution. An extra motive held by some proponents of the new law is that the legal recognition of relationships does not only serve the personal interests of those concerned, but also a social interest. In their opinion, society's network is strengthened when citizens enter into lasting relationships with each other. In other words: for them, same-sex marriages also form one of the fundamentals of society.

Whatever one may think about this from a moral point of view, the fact is that the growing acceptance and recognition in society of relationships other than that of marriage between a man and a woman, has an influence on the faithful. Believers who live in different types of relationships also ask Churches and pastors to confirm their own relationship in some way before the eyes of God. A number of homosexual and lesbian believers ask the Church, either in conjunction with their civil marriage or not, to celebrate and bless their friendship. Here and there, a similar question is posed by men and women who share their lives outside of marriage and by individuals wanting to enter into a civil marriage again after having been divorced.

1.3. Pastoral opportunities

Up to the present, the Roman Catholic Church has always rejected the liturgical celebration or blessing of relationships other than heterosexual marriage. The most important reason for this is the fact that, in its own opinion, such relationships are incompatible with the natural order of creation of which marriage between man and woman is a part. 'The vocation to marriage is written in the very nature of man and woman as they come from the hand of the Creator,' as the Catechism of the Catholic Church (no. 1603) states. The Church therefore does not consider marriage

to be a 'purely human institution' (CCC no. 1603). In view of this, it opposes the introduction of same-sex marriage.

For the Church, sexual intercourse is not only an expression of love between partners in a marriage, but it is also connected to procreation. The Church rejects sexual intercourse between a man and a woman outside of marriage. On the basis of this assumption concerning the natural order of creation, it considers homosexual desire to be an objective disorder; the experience of this desire is in its view 'intrinsically disordered' (CCC no. 2357) and 'contrary to the natural law' (CCC no. 2357). Pope John Paul II quoted these words in a speech given during an international gay-demonstration held in the summer of 2000 in Rome.

It is also against this background, that the letter of June 19th 2000 written by the Dutch bishops concerning 'entering into a life-time relationship: liturgical celebration and pastoral care' must be viewed. In this letter, addressed to those working in the pastoral field, the bishops declare that 'marriage is made impossible by the fact of partners having the same sex.' Besides marriage between a man and a woman, ordination and the taking of community-vows, the Church does not have any other forms of liturgical celebration for life-long relationships between individuals ('such as friendships and relationships characterized by living together or taking special care of each other'). The bishops then conclude: 'This vision of marriage and of the liturgical celebration of a life-long relationship implies that the liturgical celebration of a life-long relationship between two individuals of the same sex is not possible in the Roman Catholic Church.'

The 'official teaching' of the Roman Catholic Church as described above, is followed by less and less faithful in our country. Despite the dismissive attitude by pope and bishops, there are Roman Catholic churches and chapels in this country where homosexual and lesbian friendships are blessed. The pastors concerned experience the growing social acceptance of homosexual and lesbian relationships as a 'sign of the times', in which the activity of the Spirit is to be discerned. Because of these reasons, they consider it to be legitimate from a Christian and pastoral point of view to thank God for these friendships within the community of believers and, for the friends concerned, to pray for God's blessing. Here the Working Group of Catholic Gay Pastors would like to thank all those pastors who in this way have shown their solidarity with homosexual and lesbian believers. We also consider ourselves as being called to this ministry.

into practice.

- End the meeting with a conclusion which is made known to others in the parish (via the parish-magazine for example)
- Finally, sing a song together, say a prayer or read a (scripture) text which has something to do with the subject of the meeting.

Work-form A: 'Life-line'

This work-form gives insight into the time-shifts involved in the way people shape relationships. The following steps can be taken.

• Individual assignment

Draw three horizontal lines on a sheet of paper - ages in tens - which depict the life of respectively one of your parents, yourself and of a child. The length of these lines corresponds to each individual's age. On the three lines you can show which mode of life these people had at different ages (for example: unmarried with a family, single, living together, married).

• Assignment in groups of three

Mark out ages in tens on a horizontal staff at the bottom of a piece of paper. Above that, give the life-lines in order of birth of those you have described. Below the oldest, at the top the youngest. (10 minutes)

• Follow-up assignment

Compile a list of the three things you think have changed most in the course of time. What do you notice? Which shifts have occurred in the course of time? What are relationships really about? (20 minutes)

• Group discussion

Exchange the lists with shifts with all those present. Discuss what these changes in life-style mean for the parish. (30 minutes)

Work-form B: 'Moments in life'

In chapter 2 we dealt with 'the need of the modern individual to mark the happy and sad moments of his or her personal and collective life with rituals'. The work-form described here is meant to give insight into some of these moments and their possible religious significance. The followings steps may be taken.

• Individual assignment

Look back on your life and write down which important moments in

number of suggestions for those who wish to work at towards 'inclusive community of faith'.

Like all 'renewals' in the life of the Church it is inevitable that sometimes there will be tensions and conflicts. In such cases pastors are often the first to be approached. In these cases it is important for a pastor to be sure of the support of the parish-council, but also of the support of the (closest) colleagues in the parish, region or deanery. Here especially lies a clear task for regional pastor-councils, the diocesan council of priests and those who are responsible for the permanent formation of pastors.

Pastors should at all times try and avoid the practice (as well as giving the impression) that the celebration of homosexual and lesbian unions is mainly a task for pastors who themselves are homosexual or lesbian. Every pastor should be qualified to minister to these couples, irrespective of his or her sexual preference.

3. The entire community of the faithful

Council and pastor operate within the local community of the faithful and not in a vacuum. They will have to create a basis within the parish for their policy and practice. A way of dealing with this basis is to invite the parish - or other groups - to enter into a discussion concerning the contents of this pastoral letter. In the case that the parish has a separate working group for sexuality and relationships or a working group for marriage preparation, it is evident that this working group should take the initiative.

The discussions may be limited to a single meeting, but they may also involve more meetings. This depends on the possibilities in the parish. The goal of these discussions certainly does not entail that everyone immediately agrees with each other as to this complicated and sensitive subject. However, such meetings can start a process of reflection, can enable opinions to be expressed and tested and possibilities and boundaries to be sounded.

Some may choose to invite a homosexual or lesbian pastor or parishioner to lead the discussion. This can be useful, although the possibility that the entire discussion could revolve around him or her should be avoided.

The agenda for a discussion for those interested could look like this.

- Start the evening with a short introduction in which the most important aspects of the pastoral letter are summarised.
- Choose one of the work-forms A, B or C described below and put it

We also feel supported by developments in other Christian Churches. Three smaller Protestant Churches - the Remonstrant Brotherhood, the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the General Baptist Association - no longer differentiate between hetero- and homosexual relationships when giving blessing to life-long relationships. The synod of the Old Catholic Church will in all probability soon decide to allow lesbian and homosexual relationships to receive a church-blessing.

The future Samen-op-Weg-Church of Reformed, Calvinists and Lutherans is developing in the same direction. In the concept-regulations of this merged Church of the future 'marriage services' are mentioned. Besides the institute of marriage, 'other life-long relationships' are also mentioned. This implies: 'The church-council can - after consulting the congregation - decide whether other relationships may be blessed as a covenant of love and faith before God within the community of believers.' Actually this is already the case in a large number of local Protestant and ecumenical congregations. The developments in the areas of society, the Church and ecumenism as described above, encourage us to once again plead with the bishops for a revision of their opinion concerning the celebration of relationships other than that of marriage between a man and a woman. We pray that a good ecumenical example will encourage others to follow. Here lie unique pastoral opportunities for the Roman Catholic Church, which should gladly embrace them in view of the Gospel with which it has been entrusted.

1.4. Structure of this letter

The structure of this letter is as follows. Chapter 2 offers a vision of faith concerning homosexual and lesbian friendship. We argue that these relationships are of a sacramental nature

The Catholic Church has a rich tradition of blessings. Chapter 3 explores this tradition and its roots and using these offers a way of viewing the concept 'blessing'.

Celebrations of friendship are not private occasions, but take place within the community of believers. This is the reason why in Chapter 4 pastoral aspects are dealt with: the role of the local congregation and ministers and the pastoral counselling of partners who have asked for a blessing. Lastly, the actual ritual is dealt with in Chapter 5. Here we give a number of suggestions for the celebration of homosexual and lesbian friendship within the liturgy of the Church.

In an appendix, a manual for those who wish to start a reflection on the

celebration of friendship within their own local congregation, suggestions for bible-readings, songs and prayers and a list of literature are given.

This letter was written on the basis of a profound exchange of ideas within the Working Group of Catholic Gay Pastors and was approved by its members. We have thankfully made use of the remarks by advisors who were presented with the text before publication: 'experience-experts' from the (Church) gay- and lesbian movement, pastoral experts and experts in theology, liturgy and other disciplines. The contents of this letter are completely the responsibility of the Working Group of Catholic Gay Pastors.

Appendix 1

Suggestions for discussion by Conny van Lier

In this pastoral letter we plead for the liturgical celebration of homosexual and lesbian life-long relationships and the blessing of these within the communion of the Church. To attain this, an open and inviting attitude by parishes and pastors towards those wishing such a celebration is desirable.

In this appendix we shall give a number of suggestions enabling the initiation of a discussion on this subject at the different levels of the local community. The goal of this discussion is that the community develops its own pastoral policy concerning the blessing of friendship.

1. Parish council

The various types of parish councils all bear responsibility for parish policy. The council endeavours to increase discussion and unity within the parish and watches over the impression the parish wishes to give to the outside world. A wise council will try to create clarity concerning what does and what does not belong to the policy and possibilities of the parish. The council will make certain that this clarity is not only evident to itself and to the pastors, but also to others responsible, to the working groups and to the community as a whole. This clarity demands that the council is open as well as prepared to defend and maintain, if necessary, the predetermined policy.

If policy is not properly formulated then there is the real danger that the parish will go from the one incident to the next, with all the damage done to those involved in such incidents.

2. Pastors

The role of the pastors is no less crucial than that of the council-members. Usually they will be the first in the parish to be confronted with the request for a blessing.

The pastors are therefore also required to have a clear policy. A pastor will have to earn the name for being prepared to confer a blessing. He or she will have to win the trust of homosexual and lesbian partners who wish to have their friendship celebrated. Pastors who regularly show a positive attitude towards homosexuality in their sermons, in pastoral situations or in the parish-magazine, will be requested more often than pastors who never associate openly with homosexual and lesbian people. In the pastoral letter 'Called to blessing' we made a

Conclusion

In our first pastoral letter, 'Called to blessing', we already stated that, in our opinion, homosexuality can and may be understood by Christians to be a blessing from God. In this second pastoral letter, 'Prepared to give blessing', we call upon the community of faithful to implement this conviction in practice and to start to celebrate and bless homosexual and lesbian relationships. And to do this for the salvation and healing of homosexual men and lesbian women, but also for the salvation and healing of the community of faith as a whole.

"Where charity and love are, God is there." This is the text of a very well-known hymn, originally sung in the liturgy of Holy Thursday, during the commemoration of Jesus' friendship-meal with his disciples. In our times this hymn is often sung in the form of a canon. It is exactly as a canon that this hymn expresses a profound faith, which as it were, from within itself demands to be repeated again and again.

May friendship and love be endlessly sung of and celebrated amongst ourselves. May they be sung of in the universal language of the Church: *Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est*, just as in our own language: 'Where charity and love are, God is there.'

Working Group of Catholic Gay Pastors

2. Friendship is a holy matter

Perhaps gay men and lesbian women have the ability as well as the task to take up the theme of friendship with God once again, to deepen it and to enrich the spiritual life of the Church with it. More than others, they have distanced themselves from the marriage and parent-child models. The theme of friendship with God keeps people from despising themselves and helps us to befriend ourselves. In this way, homosexual people can help alleviate the religious impoverishment that is due largely to the poor imagery for communicating the secret of the Unspeakable. (...)

The model of God as friend is also a relative one, of course, but it can help people think of God as being a loving and loyal friend when they suffer or feel guilty or as a loyal comrade in the struggle for justice.
From: Called to blessing, pages 23-24.

'Such a boundless desire for friendship.' This sentence^[1] by the poet-author Jacob Israël de Haan, engraved in the pink marble of the Homo-monument in Amsterdam, does not only tersely describe the incentive of the homosexual and lesbian emancipation-movement, but also that which keeps homosexual men and lesbian women going in their personal lives: a desire for profound friendship with others, with a partner.

Following the example set by the ecumenical movement, we shall use the concept 'life-long relationship' to denote the lasting relationships based on the love that two people can have for other. The term 'life-long relationship' is an inclusive concept: the term concerns both the relationship between two men and two women as well as that between a man and a woman. People who have a life-long relationship are each other's partner: they share each other's life to the full. They love each other and express their love publicly: a life-long relationship is a public matter.

People who enter into a life-long relationship, but not into a marriage, refer to their partner using the modern colloquial mode of speech as: 'my friend', 'my girlfriend'. Whenever we refer to homosexual and

[1] The Dutch original is as follows: "Naar vriendschap zulk een mateloos verlangen." ("For friendship, such a matchless longing.") The word 'mateloos' (immeasurable) can also be read as mate-less.

lesbian life-long relationships in this letter as a type of 'friendship', we hold with the mode of speech and the reality of the men and women concerned.

2.1. Friendship, a word of faith

The word 'friendship' is a vital word for homosexual men and lesbian women. However there is another reason to give this very word a central place in this pastoral letter: friendship is also a 'word of faith'.

In the First or Old Testament, people with whom God has entered into a covenant – for example the patriarch Abraham – are referred to as 'friend of God'. In the same way, Jesus explicitly addresses his disciples as 'friends' during the Last Supper (John 15,15). This form of address has a very warm and intimate sound to it, which we would like to associate with our subject.

One of the most remarkable utterances ascribed to Jesus in the Gospel by 'the beloved disciple' is: 'This is the greatest love a man can show, that he should lay down his life for his friends.' (John 15,13). Jesus did exactly this: with his death on the cross, he gave his life for his friends, male and female. Jesus' life can be summed up in one word: friendship - a friendship unto the very end.

Friendship is more than a feeling; it demands deeds. This same opinion is to be found in the letter by the apostle Paul to the Philippians, which is sometimes called 'a letter of friendship'. The Philippians had sent Paul a gift of support, but Paul wanted to demonstrate to them that their mutual friendship was not to be based on this gift. That would be too shallow for him, too 'utilistic'. Their friendship was based on Christ; He is the basis for their friendship. And it is a consequence of this friendship that Paul is supported materially by the community in Philippi (Philippians 4).

The concept 'friendship' is to be found among a number of spiritual and mystical writers in the Christian tradition. The mediaeval Anselm of Canterbury thus wrote to two young men who wished to join his religious community: 'My eyes fiercely desire to see your countenances, beloved ones. My arms stretch themselves towards your embraces. My mouth desires your kisses.' Just as passionate are the words by an alas anonymous nun who misses her beloved sister: 'Every joy, every delight, without you they are worth nothing. I do not rejoice anymore; I only cry. I am continuously sad. When I remember your kisses, and how you caressed my breast with tender words, I would like to die, because I cannot see you.'

An agapè-celebration can take place in a church, depending on the local possibilities, but it is especially suited for being celebrated at home and can be combined with the blessing of the home if so desired.

In our opinion the house-liturgy in itself has great value which has often been lost sight of. However we do not suggest this form of celebration as an escape from a parish not willing to confer its blessing. The unity with the local community of faith can be made manifest in a celebration such as this by the presence of the pastor or other members of the community. The fact that the relationship of two people has been blessed in a smaller circle, can be made known in the parish-magazine either beforehand or afterwards. During the parish's regular weekend-liturgy, intercessory prayers can be said for the partners concerned.

The attractive thing about a friendship-meal is that in it all personal wishes can be fulfilled and that it leaves much room for creativity. In principle every Christian can be the minister in this type of celebration. If a pastor leads the service, he or she does that as the representative of the Church. The meal can also be combined with the eucharistic thanksgiving, but this part should be clearly separate from the meal itself.

There is a flair in discovering just what character the meeting should have. It should not be too formal, but it should also not take the form of gastronomic excess. It deserves being mentioned that the meal itself and the informal continuation of the party should be clearly separated, for example by singing a song.

In appendix 2 we have included – again, by way of example – a programme for a friendship-meal.

real community-meal, to which Jesus invited his friends. As we have seen in chapter 2, the evangelist John – the beloved disciple – greatly emphasises the love found in friendship, which exceeds all limits. In the Acts of the Apostles, we can read that it was quite usual in Jerusalem to break bread and celebrate with a meal at someone's home. This eating together signifies concrete fellowship and concern for each other. The following subjects of discussion are to be seen in the light of this. Paul also emphasises the meal as a growing in communion in his letter to the Corinthians.

Various Fathers of the Church speak about these meals, which had a social-charitable function, and in which the bread was always blessed as well. Lay-brothers and -sisters lead these meals without any problem whatsoever. The eucharistic celebration of remembrance of the first Christians was developed within the context of these meals. In the fourth century, Christian communities became larger. The Eucharist was from then on celebrated in church-buildings and slowly became a ritual meal in the stylised way we know it today.

Since the sixties of the previous century, the agapè-celebration has been put back into practice in smaller groups, either in combination with the Eucharist or not.

The agapè-celebration seems to us to be a good model for the blessing of a relationship. Humanity realizes its existence in eating and drinking. In eating and drinking, everyone personally satisfies his or her feelings of hunger and thirst. Eating and drinking are basic necessities required to remain alive. Seen from the point of view of the participants, the meal is an opportunity to meet people and to form a community. Eating together is, in our culture, the manner of expressing a mutual friendship and to strengthen the ties of love. To invite someone home for a meal means: permitting someone to enter into the own intimate way of life. This gesture bears witness to a way of being together characterized by trust and faithfulness.

A friendship-meal can be a lively occasion, during which the participants may discuss their ups and downs with one another. All this is given a more festive character if the participants are especially dressed for the occasion, the table has been set nicely and the candles have been lit.

We can speak of an agapè if the participants experience God's presence in the meal. The food reminds us of the Creator's gifts and of Christian love. Tradition offers us prayers with which the food can be blessed. A classic is the prayer: 'Lord, bless us and these gifts, which we have received from your mild hand...' Here, the fruits of the earth are put into a symbolic perspective and in the ritual of the meal the divine becomes transparent.

In our own times, the theme of friendship also has a prominent position in the reflection on faith. This is to be found for example in the work of the much-read spiritual author Henri Nouwen. In feminist-theology, friendship is a major point of interest. Theologians such as Carter Heyward, Mary Hunt and Elizabeth Stuart recognise different dimensions in the one concept of friendship: the physical experience and nearness; the spiritual discovery and solidarity with each other; the desire to nurture righteousness within the relationship which may manifest itself publicly; unbounded love.

2.2. Body and spirit as one

A spark ignites between two people. No matter whether a woman and a man, two women or two men are concerned, the two wish to get to know each other. A process of discovery is initiated. Love, eros and sexuality play a major role in this; tenderness, the need to protect and to hold each other, being together often, all this is essential for mutual exploration and discovery.

People are equally body and spirit. In other words: Man is 'spiritual body', 'spirit become flesh'; therefore man has the need and necessity to express feelings in a physical way.

The fact that we are able to touch and embrace, that we can 'make love' to each other, is a great gift.

In the past, bodily lust was considered by some believers and theologians to be a result of original sin. We consider it to be more liberating to thank the Creator for the gift of profound feelings which can be experienced so intensely in a loving-relationship. Of course people will not always search for or experience this relational depth and intensity in the physical experience of sexual desire; this goes for all kinds of (hetero- and homo-) sexual relationships. However, not seldom will the intensity of the relationship become deeper through the joy of physical satisfaction. This is due to the fact that the partners approach each other in a most profound personal way in this gratification.

Because we do not wish to distinguish between loving with either body or spirit, eros and sexuality are also 'words of faith'. Believers will experience God in experiencing each other's closeness.

2.3. Rituals mark life

In recent years rituals have made a come-back in our society. The need of the modern individual to mark the happy and sad moments of his or her personal and collective life with rituals, we, exactly as pastors, consider to be a significant and joyful fact. In our opinion, the basis of

this need and practice is a deep, whether or not explicit, recognition of the fact that life is sacred and that it is important to accentuate existential experiences with a celebration or rite.

More so than some other traditions within Christianity, the Roman Catholic tradition has developed a profound sense and a rich practice of religious memorials and feast-days. The present-day 'explosion of rituals' fits nicely into the Catholic mentality.

Against this back-ground, it is good that the faithful also are able to celebrate friendship between individuals. In doing so, they demonstrate possessing a pure sense of the religious; and it is due to our religious intuition that we sense that friendship is a sacred matter: in it we recognise God's love for mankind. This love becomes flesh and blood in the presence of the loved one. Loved ones are a gift to one another. They desire to remain faithful to one another and they see this faithfulness as a mirror of God's faithfulness and reliability.

The friendship between individuals is sacred, a sign of God's presence. That is why it is important that friendship, as an essential and existential given in the life of every individual, whether hetero- or homosexual, is given the place it deserves in religion.

2.4. A sacramental reality

Life itself, in all its earthiness, speaks of God. The Christian tradition has recognised this from the very beginning. We are able to see how Christians already during the first centuries of Christianity gave all facets of their existence a religious significance. A so-called 'sacramental quality' was recognised in everything. Sacramentality was not restricted to ritual acts, but persons and places were also considered to be sacraments. Holy Scripture, as a book, was also seen in this way.

Reflection on sacramentality gradually received a more precise character: in the course of the Middle Ages a distinction was made between different 'sacraments'. During the councils of Lyon (1274), Florence (1439) and Trent (1545-1563), the teaching on sacramentality was worked out more precisely.

The most important aspect in this was that sacraments were seen to be sensorial forms of God's love and signs through which people profess their faith. To give an example: in the rite of baptism God receives the individual as a child through submersion in water; simultaneously, the

The blessing itself is conferred with a prayer of blessing.

*God, bless these people.
Make them fruitful.
Let their lives be like a tree
bearing good fruit
and offering shade when necessary.
Let their house be a good home,
a shelter on cold nights
and on warm days.
Let their lives be a course
over which refreshing water streams,
in which fatigue is eased
and well-being celebrated.
Let their work bear fruit,
let their silence speak
let their words spread goodness
and let their sleep be your grace.*

(Vincent Schoenmakers, in: Hein Vrijdag, Zonder beelden sprak Hij niet tot hen, Gooi en Sticht, Hilversum 1989).

After this, a blessing with the laying on of the hands by the minister may follow, with for example the following text:

*May the faithfulness of our good God confirm you in your friendship.
May the love of Jesus, our soul-mate, accompany you on
your life's journey.
May the fire of the Spirit increase your passion*

The blessing can be confirmed by the congregation by the singing of a song.

5.3. A friendship-meal

The celebration of a blessing of friendship can also take place within the context of a meal, especially if this is done in a smaller group. In this case we would like to discuss the model of the agapè, the friendship-meal which was practised in the early Church.

In the culture of those days, a meal at home with family and friends was commonplace. This can be seen with the Greeks and the Romans. Jews celebrate the Sabbath with a meal in the family circle. This is never just a profane occasion; every meal has a religious character.

This tradition is also to be found in the Second or New Testament. Luke especially incorporates various stories about meals into his Gospel, during which bread is shared and from which no one is excluded. Jesus' last meal cannot be seen apart from this tradition. It was a

*N., I love you
and wish to remain faithful to you
in happy as well as in difficult times,
in health and in sickness,
with much or with little.*

*I want to appreciate you
as you are,
all the days of our life together.*

*Together with you, I want to
build a home
for all those whom we love
and to work for a better world,
in which there is a place for everyone.*

*If we are granted children,
I want to care for them together with you.*

The partners' promise to each other can be supported by the blessing and exchanging of rings as a sign of permanency and unbreakable faithfulness. Other appropriate jewellery may be an armband, engraved with the partner's name, a necklace or an earring. However in the liturgy more things may be used symbolically. Symbols and symbolic acts can stimulate the senses and add a touching point of focus to the occasion. These may probably be objects that have a particularly special memory for the partners. If the symbol is connected to the theme of the Scripture-reading, the cohesiveness and depth of the service will be made even greater. Those assembled bear witness to the blessing and are also responsible for the welfare of the partners being blessed. If the group is not too large, a circle can be formed around the couple. The minister can ask those assembled to make a promise.

*Now that two people in our midst
are about to have their relationship blessed,
I would like you all to stand
and to answer the following.*

*Do you promise to accept N.'s and N.'s relationship,
to support them when necessary
and to be open
for whatever God will give us through them?*

The congregation answers with: Yes, we promise.

individual receiving this sacrament expresses his or her faith and trust in God.

Sacraments are always concerned with the sanctification of life and the individual and also with their continuous entrustment to God. This is why there were many different sacraments in the first period of Christianity. Later on a development got under way which eventually reserved the concept 'sacrament' for seven religious acts (baptism, confirmation, eucharist, penance and reconciliation, unction, ordination and matrimony).

At the same time many rites, prayers and blessings remained, which were called 'sacramentalia'. Home and harvest, people and animals, objects, important moments in life: there was little that remained unblessed! The intuition lying at the basis of this can also appeal to present-day people: the whole of existence, all aspects of life can receive meaning from God.

The seven sacraments have their place and only receive their meaning within the broader scope of sacramentality as such. The Church was reminded of this fact of faith by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). In its constitution on the liturgy this council stated plainly 'that almost any honest use of material things is directed to this goal: the sanctification of man and the glorification of God' (Sacrosanctum Concilium no. 61)

Following the council, in 1987 a group of Dutch bishops and theologians expressed the rediscovery of the 'broad' sacramental approach as follows: 'Sacramental is every manifestation of salvation from God in the history of the individual and of society.' And while secularisation apparently is gaining ground, the faithful now plainly speak of 'the sacramentality of creation'. With this they mean that the world is for them a place where God's presence may be found.

We have already stated above: increasingly people are marking important moments in their life with a ritual, a celebration, a feast-day. Often they will barely or not be conscious of a 'religious' aspect in this ritual. Nevertheless, for those who are sensitive to it, this aspect will often be present. People often 'believe' much more than they themselves would think at first, more than others would discern at first glance.

The expansion of the concept of sacramentality, which appears to be a

(renewed) achievement of our time, we consider to be a good thing. It is important not only to reflect upon this theoretically, but also to give it a practical form.

2.5. The task to grow

Friendship cannot exist without the amazement as to the existence of the other; without respect for the tangible mystery of the other. The Greek word for sacrament is not *mysterion* without reason. This means: a hidden but tangible mystery that manifests itself in reality. In the sacrament, the mystery of life, which for the believer points to the mystery of God and to God's love for creation, is denoted by a sign.

In all this it is important to leave space for growth towards a greater perfection. In the celebration or blessing of a friendship, we presuppose that which is valid for the sacraments as well: the rite offers a start to a different life and also formulates an instruction or task to do so. Baptism, confirmation or marriage are not accomplished facts; whoever celebrates these sacraments is called and declares his or her intention to let the 'granted mercy' become reality in his or her personal life.

This is also true for friendship: the liturgical celebration gives a deeper basis to the mutual relationship and the relationship with God, but this does not mean that a totally new reality is suddenly made manifest. The faithful whose friendship is blessed, receive the possibility and the task to grow; to make the great gifts that they, as created beings have received from their Creator, blossom and bloom.

friendship, this will especially be done by expressing in words, songs and gestures the gratitude for the gift of friendship and love, especially between these two individuals. Lovers experience their relationship as grace, as a gift from God, who tenderly deals with people and as a favour done them by the community of their family and friends. This gratitude is heard in the service as a profession of and as a call for the confirmation of the relationship before the community, before the face of the Eternal God.

With this we have arrived at the second aspect of the blessing, the beseeching element, liturgically seen in the context of the intercessory prayers. Prosperity and happiness, the continuation of the relationship are requested before the assembled congregation and in the light of the Merciful God. Both aspects can be discerned in the following opening prayer and they are both worked out further in the prayer of blessing itself.

*Eternal God,
You have destined people for one another.
We therefore thank you
that N. and N. have found each other,
and wish to share their lives.
Merciful God, we ask you
to be with us here
now that we have come together
to request your blessing for your beloved people.
Amen.*

Preferably in their own words, the partners may express what their relationship and the blessing they have requested mean to them. They may state to each other what they experience in their love and friendship, what they hope of the future and what they are able to give to each other. This can adequately be done in the form of a promise of faithfulness to each other before God and the assembled community. During this, the partners may give each other their right hand or hold both each other's hands.

In the following example, the partners promise to remain faithful to each other in happy as well as difficult times. Respect is expressed for one's own personality as well as for the personal traits of the other. Both the circle of family and friends as well as the concern for society have been included in the following text. The promise can be extended to include the raising of children.

between a Catholic partner and a partner coming from a non-Christian religious tradition, or who has no religious background.

Having said this, three liturgical possibilities present themselves. Firstly, to opt for a public celebration in the context of the regular weekend-liturgy. The congregation is the place where love and sorrow are shared and this is a very good reason to opt for this first possibility. This choice does however mean that the parish has been prepared beforehand in the way we have discussed in the previous chapter. Usually the service during the weekend will be a celebration of the Eucharist or a Word- and Communion-service. The rite of the blessing will then take place just before the intercessory prayers. The pastor presents the partners to the congregation and in its name welcomes the couple as members of the congregation. Those present bear witness to this and guarantee the promises made.

The second possibility is in many cases much more obvious: a special service during the week is opted for. In a 'friendship-liturgy' with only family and/or friends, there is more room for personal attention for the partners. The partners' preference may be for a celebration of the Eucharist, but this does not have to be a matter of course. They may also chose a different type of service, such as a Word-service, perhaps with an added communion-rite. In the following chapter we shall go into this second possibility in more detail.

The third possibility is a blessing in a smaller circle. If so desired, this could take place together with the blessing of their home. This type of service gives more emphasis to the fact of living together. A service in a smaller circle can very well be held in the form of a friendship-meal as described in the third paragraph of this chapter.

5.2. A friendship-service

In appendix 2 we have given, as an example, the programme for a friendship-service including possible elements. Just as every service, this celebration will have one or more Scripture-readings, followed by a sermon. The friendship can be given a biblical basis in the covenant between God and humanity in Jesus of Nazareth, or in this covenant as a prefiguration of the coming Kingdom. Attention can also be given to themes such as life and faithfulness, care and responsibility, pleasure and tenderness, surrender and incarnation.

The different meanings of blessing, as discussed above in chapter 3, should have a place in the service. First and foremost, the blessing implies the praise of all things good in Creation. In the blessing of

3. All blessing comes from God

Believers experience God's salvation in their life-long relationship. Friends ask to be blessed as a way to grow in perfection and as a public confirmation of their relationship. In this chapter we will go into the different aspects of blessing to be found in biblical and Church tradition. On the basis of this we will then give a theological foundation for the blessing of friendship.

3.1. Blessing as praise

The concept 'blessing' is connected with prosperity. The Dutch language, for example, has various expressions which confirm this. The opposite of the blessing is the curse. We can wish someone good and bless them in difficult circumstances. However, although the faithful can bless, the blessing is not at their disposal. All blessing comes from God (conf. Genesis 49,25). God shows his unconditional and extreme love, which we may experience as mercy, in the blessing.

In the Book of Creation, God blesses Creation twice: the animals on the fifth day and on the sixth day humankind (Genesis 1,20-28). Blessing is seen to be a gift from God. In other words: good fortune comes to humankind through God's doing. In Scripture this good fortune is connected to the fertility of the earth, a large amount of live-stock, wealth and respect from others and of course many offspring. This is stated for example in the blessing of Noah (Genesis 9,17) and this blessing leads to the first covenant between God and humankind (Genesis 9,8-17). Humankind is able to share in God's creative power through this blessing. This entails responsibility and respect for life.

God blesses humankind and, in answer, humankind blesses God; this is a two-way process. God's merciful blessing invites humankind to bless in return. God's acts of salvation themselves invite humankind to sing their praise. The Jewish prayer-tradition recognises God's greatness and praises the Name in the blessing (beraka). In the prayer of praise 'Blessed are Thee, Eternal God, for the fruits of the earth...', the faithful recognise God as the source and owner of everything. The 'sanctification' of day-to-day life is concerned here. The Jewish individual recognises God, the world and his or her neighbour and the way they are related to one another.

The opening words 'Blessed is God...' are to be found more than once

in the Gospels (for example in Luke 2,68-79, the song of praise by Zachary) and in Paul's letters (for example Ephesians 1,3). The blessing reflects the true reality of the world, the condition under which the Kingdom of God can become manifest.

The notion of the biblical blessing is continued in the Christian tradition. The blessings over bread and cup during Jewish meals was adopted by the early Church in the eucharistic prayer. The Jewish blessing received a place in Christian liturgy in the form of the prayer as praise. The congregation glorifies God in admiration and gratitude as the source and principle of all things good in heaven and on earth.

3.2. Blessing each other

In biblical stories, people often bless other individuals, just as Isaac blessed his son Joseph twice. In the following chapter we will return to this story-cycle (Genesis 25,19 – 33,20). Moses received the instruction from the Eternal God to bless the Israelites (Numbers 6,22-27). In the Jewish home-liturgy, the mother blesses the light of the Sabbath-lamp and the father blesses the family members.

The giving of a blessing became an official act in the Christian Church. This does not however mean that giving a blessing is exclusively reserved to ordained ministers. In the renewed Roman Ritual, the giving of a blessing is also entrusted to lay-persons, men and women. In Catholic families parents sometimes give their child the sign of the cross on their forehead at bedtime. The giving of a blessing, often accompanied by a physical gesture - a caress, laying on of the hands, the sign of the cross, a kiss -, is a sign of unconditional love for the other in God's name. Grace is given to us through the unearned blessing by the other. I am only able to bless by the grace of the fact that I have first been blessed by another. In the Christian tradition, the blessing received a decisive significance in the relationship to God, who is faithful, merciful and full of love. Whoever blesses, calls on God's loving grace and also entrusts the person being blessed to this grace in order that he or she may feel embraced by God. This reciprocity is to be found in the classical liturgy in the greeting by the minister: 'The Lord be with you.', and in the answer by the faithful: 'And with you.'

In the course of time, the Church has emphasised the asking and beseeching character of the blessing. Blessings came into use which stood close to the concrete facts of daily life. In this light, the blessing of friendship is not a new phenomenon. In old manuscripts indications are to be found that in the past the Church blessed the friendship

5. The celebration of friendship

*Where charity and love are, God is there.
Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est.
early-Christian hymn*

*This is my commandment: That you love one another just as I have loved you. There is no greater love than this, that a man lay down his life for the sake of his friends. You are my friends if you do everything that I command you. Henceforth I will not call you servants, because a servant does not know what his master does; but I have always called you my friends, because everything that I heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you, and I have appointed you, that you also should go and produce fruit and that your fruit might remain, so that whatever you ask my Father in my name, he will give it to you. I command these things to you so that you may love one another.
John 15,12-17*

A parish willing to confer its blessing, as well as two friends who have prepared themselves for this – the celebration can begin!

In the previous chapters we saw that the Church has a valuable tradition as to the blessing of people and things. The liturgy for the blessing of friendship demands a creative way of dealing with this tradition. In this chapter we will present a number of possible 'models' for the celebration of friendship. And we will give some liturgical building-blocks as well.

5.1. Three possibilities

When two partners come to a pastor with the request for a Church celebration, different possibilities present themselves. Of course this demands that the pastor or the person responsible in the parish can empathise with those concerned in order to help them in their choice of a liturgy that does justice to the situation as well as to their wishes and to those of the congregation.

In the case of a relationship between two partners with a different religious background, attention will have to be given to this fact in the preparation of the liturgy. This will probably have consequences for the character and form of the liturgy. The same goes for a relationship

In our opinion, a discussion on these themes offers a good point of departure to deal in a responsible way with the request by two people to bless their relationship. The discussion will also surely yield ideas for the liturgical character of the celebration of their friendship.

between two men.

The two expressed their wish to share their possessions and their life as brothers out of love for each other for better and for worse. It must be said that it is disputed whether these relationships had a sexual character. However it is true that this liturgy does show remarkable similarities to the marriage-liturgy of the time. The texts contain the same formulations and there are also the same ritual acts, especially the most essential part: the placing of the right hand into the right hand of the other.

3.3. Word and act in one

In the study-edition of *Zegeningen uit het Romeins Ritueel* (Blessings from the Roman Ritual) by the Nationale Raad voor Liturgie (National Council for Liturgy) (1986), which is based on the renewed Roman Ritual, many of the above-mentioned blessings are to be found. It must be mentioned that the introduction does say that these blessings primarily glorify God, 'whose greatness and goodness are illuminated', but that the emphasis has come to lie on the sanctification of the individual. 'They clarify God's care for people in many situations in life.' People in different circumstances are concerned here: families and family members, husband and wife, children and engaged couples, women before and after childbirth, the elderly confined to home, the sick, missionaries, catechists, aid-organisations, pilgrims and travellers. Blessings are especially recommended during critical moments in life.

Although the original Jewish prayer of praise is referred to here, the prayers in their formulations are often beseeching prayers taken from a mediaeval context. The prayers are for protection and healing. Characteristic to these prayers is that they are not restricted to the utterance of words, but are connected to gestures such as the sign of the cross and the laying on of the hands. Word and act form a united pair here and express that in the blessing something really happens with people: salvation by God.

3.4. Public confirmation

'The feeling of falling in love, of love, of friendship, of faithfulness; the feeling that someone loves you for reasons you cannot understand; the feeling that someone, to your own surprise, finds you attractive; the feeling that someone wishes to share life with you despite your weaknesses – these are moments when we discover that we do not have the first or final say in matters.' Thus stated the Dutch bishops in their pastoral letter on marriage (*In God verbonden* (United in God), 1994).

The feeling, which our bishops describe so well, is experienced by both heterosexual as well as homosexual and lesbian men and women. Homosexual and lesbian partners can experience the fact that they have been given to each other in true friendship, tenderness and love which are expressed in intimacy and passion. Such a relationship is based on the mutual feeling that the other brings you to your deepest self.

It is on the basis of these fundamental experiences that homosexual and lesbian partners ask the Church to confirm their friendship in a celebration. Whenever they do so, this has been preceded by a long process of faith. In the mundane aspects of daily life and in the physicality of their relationship, they feel the presence of Someone who cares for them. In their tenderness and love they experience the ever-present and faithful Other. In their intimacy, the divine becomes transparent. The definitive loving humanity and friendship of Jesus Messiah is expressed in their attitude towards life. Faith such as this is a genuine reason to ask to be blessed.

Two people wish to be united permanently. The public proclamation of this desire and resolution is not done just like that. Courage is needed to ask God, the congregation and one another for blessing. This is even more so in the case of two men or two women. They are called to account from all sides. The partners promise their mutual faithfulness to each other before those who are dear to them. Those present are asked to assent to their choice. In this way they wish to confirm their relationship before the community of believers. The celebration is a moment on their path of life. They gratefully recall their first acquaintance, their falling in love, the significance of their being meant for one another. They look back upon their path through life, and discover that they have remained faithful to each other for better and for worse. They feel strengthened by this. The partners and the assembled congregation see the blessing of this friendship as God's creative power, as a source of grace. They do this in and on the basis of their faith that it is the Living God who will perpetuate this choice and will accompany them on their way. In this, a sacramental dimension becomes apparent because the blessing is a sign and medium of God's love for humanity and of our love for God. In this they also realize that the blessing of their friendship is not a concluding point, but exactly the opening of new space. They trustingly promise each other to remain faithful. This promise of faithfulness and reliability is mirrored in the covenant between God and humanity.

its understanding of sacramentality and blessing, this will also have an effect on the celebration of non-homosexual relationships. During the process of reflection and decision-making, new light will be thrown on the significance of the sacrament of marriage and of the celebration of the non-marital relationship between a man and a woman. In this way the blessing of the one becomes the blessing of the other.

4.4. Pastoral preparation

How does a parish react when a homosexual or lesbian friendship is asked to be blessed? In this chapter we have up until now mainly discussed the willingness of the congregation to decide to confer its blessing on homosexual and lesbian relationships. This willingness however does not mean that people can 'just' demand the right to be blessed by the Church or by its ministers. And it cannot be expected that they will simply confer a blessing on those who request it without further discussion on the matter. Conferring a blessing cannot be a matter without further engagement for a parish. And receiving a blessing cannot be an automatic fact for the partners concerned. If two individuals ask the Church to confer a blessing on their relationship, the pastor, as the representative of the Church, should in principle react positively to this request. At the same time, he or she should invite the partners to prepare themselves for this step in their lives. God blesses people with all things good. Before the actual celebration of their friendship, partners should realize this. At the same time it is true that relationships are quite often not 'perfect'. Partners must realize that the blessing will contribute to growth and a deeper development. They may therefore be led by God's infinite love, which will complete what they miss.

Here we will give some themes which may be discussed in the pastoral discussions prior to the celebration:

- how much the partners really know about each other and about one another's life-history;
- their resolution to remain united to one another permanently and to be responsible for each other in good times and bad times;
- the significance of faithfulness, reliability, openness, honesty and jealousy;
- roles and differences in authority, acceptance and the experience of one's (homo)sexuality;
- the fruitfulness of their relationship for others, their engagement with fellow men and women and with society as a whole;
- the experience in faith of their friendship;
- their affiliation to the (local) community of believers.

However, what is not yet the case, can always become so. We feel that in the previous chapters we have given building-blocks which can bring about a deeper and renewed understanding of sacramentality and blessing in which there is room for homosexual and lesbian friendship. At the same time we emphasize the necessity within parishes and other congregations to get to know each other as hetero- and homosexual Christians, in order to discover the good in one another's relationships. Our first pastoral letter 'Called to blessing' was completely devoted to this discussion. In it, we gave suggestions concerning the forms this discussion could take. In this letter we shall also conclude with suggestions for those who wish to start a discussion within the parish (see appendix 1)

4.3. The offer should come first

'Prepared to give blessing' – this is what we have called the pastoral letter which lies before you. This title is clearly meant to be programmatic: in our opinion, it would be a good thing for parishes to show their willingness to confer their blessing on homosexual and lesbian relationships. The pastor who (or the parish which) patiently waits to see whether this will ever be asked for, will probably never be confronted with the question! Due to the Church's anti-gay past, homosexuals and lesbians find the road to the Church a difficult one. An uninviting pastor or parish makes the threshold for those concerned simply too great. Above all, most concerned will not relish the idea of their becoming an issue warranting discussion when asking for the possibility to celebrate their friendship in the Church. Therefore this is the state of matters: the demand doesn't create the 'supply', but the 'supply' will create the demand.

It is a good thing when a parish understands the signs of the times and actively takes them into account. This is why we urgently recommend placing this issue on the agenda, whether someone has asked for a blessing or not.

When a parish has finally decided to bless life-long relationships, it can show its willingness to do so in various ways. It can set up a special working group to work the idea out in more detail. Its positive attitude can also be shown in the sermon, in the liturgy, in catechism, in parish-relief activities and in announcements or articles in the parish-magazine or parish-guide. We would be very happy if parishes who are prepared to bless friendships, were to radiate this willingness as much as possible to the world outside.

Finally, in the context of the reflection on this by the local congregation, we would like to point out a possible side-effect: if a parish deepens

3.5. Blessing and union

The mutual profession of friendship is a variation on the meaning of the tetragrammaton, God's name: 'I will be there for you.' Just as two people promise one another to be faithful, for better or for worse, so does God promise to remain faithful to his people in his covenant. Just as two people live together with much stumbling and getting up again, with annoyances as well as with affection, so the covenant between God and people is always imperfect but full of opportunities.

The desire for blessing is based on the need to thank God in praise for his initiative concerning this covenant. At the same time, the blessing is the desire for happiness in unity. It is a genuinely religious and legitimate motive that lovers should ask the Merciful One for protection so that no evil or accident befall them. The blessing is a confirmation of the love and faithfulness of two people before God. Christian partners consider it to be a matter of course that God should be a witness to this. When they proclaim their love for each other before the congregation, it may be taken as a public profession of faith. In the promise of sharing life together, lies also the charge made by the Gospels that friendship may be seen in the light of the building up of the Kingdom of God.

Who would want to miss such a profession of faith?

4. Blessing on the parish agenda

Having faith (...) presumes the courage to face reality as it really is and not as we would like it to be. This courage is more and more present at the grassroots level of the Church, and that is reason for rejoicing.

*Facing the facts means that we as homosexual and heterosexual people must be ready to look each other in the eye. Homosexuality must not be a 'phenomenon' in the Church, just another of the many subjects for discussion and concern. Homosexuality is all around us in real living people, men and women with names and faces and personal stories of joy and sorrow. The Church usually speaks about homosexuality as if it were something alien to us; this approach must be replaced by a discussion with gay and lesbian people in the Church.
From: Called to blessing, page 25.*

Blessing is something that never should be taken for granted or be seen as a possession. Blessing is a gift given by God, and given by people to one another. However sometimes people have to struggle for one another's blessing. The local community of believers and pastoral care are central in this chapter. Our spiritual point of departure is to be found in Scripture.

4.1. The earned blessing

The biblical story-cycle concerning the patriarch Jacob, written down in the book Genesis (25,19 – 33,20) may be read as a story about blessing and being blessed. In the context of this pastoral letter, we shall not give a complete exegesis of this story, but shall illuminate some aspects of it which can give us insight into the sometimes difficult process which is gone through by homosexual men and lesbian women in order to ask for the blessing of their relationship.

Within the religious and social context in which Jacob grew up, he was not entitled to a birthright and the blessing connected to it. This was only destined for the first-born, in this case his brother Esau. Jacob did not accept this natural course of affairs. In the same manner, homosexual and lesbian Christians do not accept the fact that for them there is 'of course' no blessing to be received.

Esau sold his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of lentils and with a trick, Jacob filched his father's blessing, originally intended for Esau. A shocking story? Certainly, but also a story of faith: the covenant with the connected blessing is always there for God's first-born, Israel, howe-

ver within Israel the first-born is not always the oldest. Within Israel, within the Church, the natural order of things does not rule, but rather the order of salvation: the last become the first. People who were never thought of as being called to be receivers of the first blessing, come first thanks to God's grace.

This is not always understood, much less appreciated. Jacob is thus forced to flee his brother's anger and ends up in the desert. Likewise, a homosexual man or lesbian woman who asks to receive a blessing by the Church, must sometimes expect the desert. But humanity attains maturity in the desert. After two times seven years, Jacob returns to the world of people, matured and ripened, himself deceived and blessed. The blessing which had first been obtained by trickery, from then on is seen as an earned blessing.

At some stage, rich in possessions, Jacob stands before the river Jabbok, the division between the desert and the promised land. 'And a man wrestled with him there until daybreak.' It is now or never! Now the meaning of blessing is clarified most profoundly. After the struggle with the anonymous opponent – a struggle with God, the angel, tradition, the past, himself? – Jacob utters those important words: 'I will not let you go unless you bless me.' And he receives a new name and the blessing he so much longed for when the man says to him: 'Your name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have struggled with God, and with people, and have prevailed over them.' 'I will not let you go unless you bless me.' These words convey a certain attitude characterized by determination and generosity. Whenever this attitude, this mentality and spirituality is present, the possibility exists that homosexual and lesbian Christians on the one hand and the local congregation on the other, become a mutual blessing. However, this does not come about of its own accord.

4.2. The necessity for discussion in faith

'All blessing comes from God' was the title of the previous chapter. However the Eternal God is powerless if people do not co-operate with divine grace. God's blessing is rooted in a community of people who are willing and who dare to be a blessing for each other.

The process will often begin on the threshold of the parish-house. Two friends ring the doorbell and ask for the liturgical celebration and blessing of their relationship. How does the pastor react? And what about the local congregation? Are they open towards homosexual and lesbian relationships? How great is their willingness to give these their blessing? The answer to these questions is not always affirmative.