

Tasting the Wine: The Nun, the Filmmaker, and the Risk of Freedom

By Michael Bernard Kelly

Wearing her sensible shoes and carrying her oversized handbag, Sister Jeannine Gramick walks along the grand colonnade that frames St. Peter's Square. Her dark skirt and checked jacket stand out against the pale old marble of the huge pillars. The viewer's eye is drawn to her, this small figure moving amid all the immense immobility.

*Editor's Note: A funny thing happened on the way to publication. A key presence in the award-winning documentary film discussed below, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, was elevated to pope on April 29, 2005. The film, *In Good Conscience*, is receiving standing ovations at festivals around the world, at a time of increasing religious and political fractiousness regarding the rights of lesbian and gay people in the church and society.*

Sister Jeannine stops to talk to a Swiss guard, then turns left and walks to the front door of the Holy Office, the headquarters of the Inquisition. She has come with a gift for the Grand Inquisitor. It is her little book, newly translated into Italian as *Anime Gay*.¹

Sister Jeannine's gift giving is daring and symbolic. For more than twenty years her ministry to lesbian and gay Catholics has been under investigation by officials from this office. She has been scrutinized, criticized, silenced, and condemned. She has borne it all with grace and gentle resolution, and quietly found ways to continue her work.

Finally, in May 2000, in an attempt to silence her permanently, she was banned from ever speaking about the procedures used in the Vatican investigation. Gramick responded in an unforgettable statement: "I choose not to collaborate in my own oppression."²

It was this statement that first drew the attention of New York journalist and filmmaker Barbara Rick. As part of her freelance work at ABC News, Rick was poring over the *New York Times* when she discovered this nun "standing alone, standing on principle, and standing up to the Vatican. I knew I had to make a film about this woman."³ Four years

later, in June 2004, Rick's film *In Good Conscience: Sister Jeannine Gramick's Journey of Faith* had its premiere at New York's Lincoln Center. Over the past two years it has been screening at film festivals from Milan to Toronto to Sydney, where it has received standing ovations.⁴

I met Barbara Rick and Jeannine Gramick in Manhattan on a windy afternoon. The warmth between them, the good humor, and the mutual respect were striking. The sixty-one year-old nun, with her smiling eyes and soft pastels, and the feisty forty-five year-old New York filmmaker in her basic black, seemed like sisters as they argued and chuckled about the Church and the world.

Barbara Rick's office is filled with awards. Three gleaming Emmys hold pride of place and the walls are covered with commendations from institutions across the United States, including the prestigious Peabody Award. There are also framed clippings and photographs from her years working with legendary television journalist Gabe Pressman, who spotted her talent while she was still in college and hired her as his assistant and later as his producer. Success came early to Rick. For more than a decade she threw herself into the world of television journalism and was rewarded with professional respect



and material prosperity. She tells me she enjoyed the gracious lakefront home, three boats, and light aircraft that she shared with her first husband.

As she shows me around her office it becomes clear that she takes pride in her achievements. I decide to probe a little. “Do awards matter to you?” “Yes, they do,” she says. “It’s great to have your work acknowledged. Of course, a BMW convertible and a house in the Hamptons would also be nice!” “Didn’t you already go on that trip?” I protest. She laughs and leaves me to take a phone call. I scan the panoply of awards and wonder how an ambitious, heterosexual Manhattan journalist came to make a film about a demure Catholic nun silenced for her ministry to gay people. Clearly, there was more to this woman than success and prosperity.

Barbara Rick grew up in New Jersey, the eldest of six children in a devout Catholic family. She imbibed three quintessential Catholic qualities: a sense of the spiritual, a concern for the oppressed, and a gnawing shame around sexuality. As we talk, she hunches her shoulders and lets her dark hair fall forward, mimicking her own adolescent attempt to hide her developing breasts, to cover the shame of being sexual, being female. There is still a quiet fury in her at the Church’s treatment of women and at the burden of embodied guilt that so many Catholics carry. She tells me she cannot endure the hypocrisy in the Church, the aggressive patriarchy, the abuse of power. “How can anyone remain in an institution that treats you as inferior and unworthy, that refuses to let you speak?”

I think of the twenty-one year-old woman in those framed photographs, surrounded by political and media heavyweights—most of them male. She looks vulnerable and naïve. Yet her talent and passion drove her to succeed in one of the toughest professions of all. Was she proving something to herself, I wonder—or perhaps to the hierarchies of power that would have kept her in her place?

Either way, she chose a very particular proving ground. The documentaries that earned her so many awards focused on heavy issues that she produced: *Homelessness: The Shame of a City* (1981); *Asylum in the Streets* (1983); *The Politics of Cancer* (1985); *The Hungry* (1982); and *To Bear Witness* (1981) – which chronicled the first world meeting of Holocaust survivors. Rick likes to be on the cutting edge – but it seems to be the edge where the disenfranchised gather, simply not the edge where the glittering prizes are found. Her journalism in those years shows a person who, almost in spite of her drive for success, is passionate about the rights of the underdog.

In 1993, Rick left her job at WNBC-TV. She says it was because the network had been sold to corporate America and it no longer championed the serious journalism to which she was committed. However, I cannot but wonder whether, having moved beyond the need to prove herself, she was ready for a more radical life challenge. Around the same time she had also left her troubled first marriage and her luxurious but unhappy home. When she speaks of this period, Rick uses terms like “my life’s turning point” or “having my shackles removed.” She began to turn regularly to meditation, seeking guidance for her new and uncertain path. In time, inspiration came in the form of four short statements that Rick has embraced as her mantras for living: Be humble. Walk erect. Enjoy everything possible. Seek God always and in every situation.

In 1998, Rick founded her own independent film company and brought together into a new synthesis her skills, passion, and deepening spirituality. Her company, Out of the Blue Films, operates out of an office on East 11 Street. Its mission statement reads like the climax of Rick’s personal journey and a blueprint for her future: “to serenely, enthusiastically and profitably create critically and commercially successful documentary and feature films that explore, articulate and celebrate humanity.”⁵

On a steamy spring evening in Manhattan’s West Village, Barbara Rick is speaking at a seminar for up-and-coming documentary filmmakers. As usual, she is disarmingly frank, and it soon becomes clear just how deep her commitment goes. This woman who once shared ownership of an airplane now works a second job to keep her film company afloat. She has had to learn the ancient mendicant art of begging for funds. She has struggled to release her anxious grip and “trust the Spirit.” She speaks of her filmmaking as a “vocation—not in any messianic sense, but in the sense that this is what I deeply believe I am called to do in the world, and if I can make space for the Spirit then the vision and the means will be given.” In a brief exchange when strategies for fundraising are being earnestly debated, Rick says plainly, “the people I ask for money are not my true ‘source.’ They are simply a generous expression of it.”

Rick goes on to talk about the duty she feels to be “responsible, frugal, and practical” with the funds she is given. She speaks of “surrender and trust,” of “putting in the effort and leaving the outcomes to God,” of “following your call”—and suddenly I am struck by the similarity between her words and the admonitions given to spiritual seekers in any number of traditions. The conclusion becomes clear: for

Barbara Rick, filmmaking is not just grounded in a spiritual vision, it is itself a spiritual practice. For all the challenges and the uncertainty, she clearly feels a new sense of freedom and purpose that brings creativity and vision into her life.

The more I listen to Rick, the more I understand how she was drawn to the story of Jeannine Gramick. Sister Jeannine could easily have been one of Rick's convent school teachers. For many years she was, in her own words, "a good little nun," wearing the habit and following the rule. Then in 1971 a young man named Dominic told her he was gay. As a good nun she was accepting and compassionate. And then he challenged her: "What is the Catholic Church doing for my gay brothers and sisters? And what are you doing, Sister? You better do something!" Gramick says she looked at this whole class of people who were neglected, silenced, and oppressed in the name of Christ and knew her life was about to change. In Rick's film, Gramick says that today, after some thirty years of ministry to gay Catholics, she still feels Dominic at her side, supporting and encouraging her.

It is this profound sense of the dignity of each person that has compelled Gramick to persevere in her ministry. Where others see issues, she sees persons, and so she will face (has faced?) down the Vatican's condemnations by begging Cardinal Ratzinger, for example, to "meet the wonderful lesbian and gay Catholics I have known," and she will refuse to condemn those who condemn her, encouraging gay Catholics to have compassion for Church leaders since "we always have to meet each person where they are." A moment in Rick's film captures this perfectly. As Gramick walks through St. Peter's Square, bringing her troublesome little book as a gift for the man who silenced her, she says, "We have to forge ahead. We have to keep taking steps that are liberating for others."⁶ This is true whether those "others" are gay Catholics or red-robed cardinals.

In May 1999, when Jeannine Gramick was ordered to remain silent about her own experience of the Vatican investigation, she reached a turning point. "Here I was being told I couldn't speak about my own life, about what I had gone through. That's not right. You can't deny a person the right to speak about her own life." It was at this point that she took her faith and her future in her hands and said, "I choose not to collaborate in my own oppression."

This simple statement echoed around the Catholic world. I remember reading it in Australia, where I live, and cheering for this nun. As a gay man and a Catholic, I sensed that this woman, after years of

ministry to others, had finally been brought face to face with the deepest oppression of all: the oppression that we ourselves collaborate with, the oppression that has taken root in our own hearts. Gay people call this "internalized homophobia," but it is common to all people who have endured entrenched, sanctified abuse, denigration, and hatred. At some point we learn to take the oppression into our own hearts and to act out of it, accepting it as the truth about ourselves and as the voice of God. There is nothing worse that can be done to a person's spirit, and nothing harder to undo. It is soul murder, and it bears deadly fruit.

This fruit can be as varied as the anguish of a young man who believes his only options are suicide or celibacy since he thinks he may be gay, or a young woman who hunches forward to hide her developing breasts. This poisonous fruit ripens at the point when we no longer need any religious authority to condemn us as "unworthy," and we start doing it ourselves. At so many levels, and with so many rationalizations, we learn to collaborate in our own oppression.

On this foundation rest all the protocols of duplicity, the abuses of power, the structures of patronage and hypocrisy that so disease the Church. People who believe, at the deepest levels, that they are "unworthy" are easily intimidated by those wielding "sacred power," and they readily learn how to survive in a system that rewards silence and pious complicity. How else can we explain the fact that in an age when there are more educated, articulate Catholics than ever before, it is still so rare to hear any priest, theologian, bishop, or lay person say the words Sister Jeannine said in 2000?

Barbara Rick says these words struck her to the core when she read them in the *New York Times*, and she knew immediately that this woman's courageous stance had to be put before the world. Four years of intense involvement with her subject have only deepened her respect. In Sister Jeannine she sees a woman who shows every woman, and every Catholic, that you can, and sometimes you must, stand up to abusive systems and refuse to collaborate. As we talk, Rick is anxious to ensure that I realize that the Vatican office to which Gramick delivered her book was the headquarters of the Inquisition. Its name has changed through the centuries, but here was housed the system that oversaw the torture of heretics, the condemnation of Galileo, and the burning of countless women who had been condemned as witches.



In Good Conscience

2004 82 Mins.

Sister Jeannine Gramick's Journey of Faith

"Excellent.. absorbing.. enormous charm" —*Variety*

"This gripping documentary is a must-see" —*TimeOut NY*

"A masterpiece" —*Barbara Kopple, Academy Award winner*

To arrange a public screening of Barbara Rick's acclaimed documentary, to buy the DVD, or to make a tax-deductible donation to support distribution and outreach of this film around the world, go to www.ingoodconscience.com

ALSO AVAILABLE :

SOUNDS SACRED

2001 53 mins.

A soulful and unique exploration of how human beings connect with the spiritual through distinct practices of voice, rhythm, and ritual. Featuring: Deepak Chopra, The Glide Memorial Choir, and many others.



"Joyful noise.. the film traces the organic, transformative nature of sound" —*San Francisco Chronicle*

SHE SAYS/Women In News

2001 56 mins.

This Emmy Award-winning and duPont Columbia-cited PBS film looks at how ten influential female journalists have changed the industry and the culture. Featuring: Anna Quindlen, Judy Woodruff, Geneva Overholser, Helen Thomas, and others.



"Honors growing influence of female journalists" —*TV Guide*

The primary purpose of Out of The Blue Films, Inc. is to serenely, enthusiastically, and profitably create compelling and substantive films that explore, articulate, and celebrate humanity.

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As she filmed Sister Jeannine walking up to that Vatican door, I wonder, did Rick see this nun as standing up for her, facing down the religious system that so repressed her as a young woman and that still treats her as inferior? When I put this to her, Rick responds with a passionate "Yes!" She goes on to express her outrage at Archbishop Sean O'Malley of Boston, who refused to wash the feet of women at the Church's traditional Holy Thursday liturgy. As an artist Rick understands the power of symbol, and as a woman she feels the pain of such toxic discrimination.

So this film, while it continues Rick's practice of exploring issues of justice, also emerges from that personal place where she has known the pain of oppression and had to find the path to freedom. There is something potentially transformative, I believe, about touching this place in oneself. It can move us from "doing good for others" to realizing that we are also the abused "other," that we too have a right to liberation and that only when we claim our dignity can we truly stand in solidarity with other oppressed people. This is the moment when the political becomes personal. If we can integrate this experience we are freed to risk in surprising and radical ways.

I see this happening in Sister Jeannine herself. Throughout this film we see three deepening levels of liberation within her. First, she says she is "building bridges" between gay and lesbian Catholics and the Church hierarchy. Her role is to bring the two sides together in dialogue, without judging either side or declaring her own position. Admirable as this is, it remains a ministry to "others." Second, we see her talking with groups of gay Catholics. Here it is clear that she is taking sides, she is passionately involved, she is committed to empowering gay Catholics to listen to their consciences in ways that liberate them.

It is this level of Gramick's ministry that most disturbed the Vatican. Unable to prove, however, that she had ever actually contradicted Catholic teaching, Church officials demanded that she reveal her innermost, private thoughts about gay love. She refused, and this was used to bolster the accusation that her ministry was "ambiguous," "confusing," and "harmful" to the "faithful."⁷ On this basis she was permanently banned from all pastoral ministry to gay people. Significantly, she accepted this ban but continued to talk critically about her own experience of the Vatican investigation and to discuss issues related to homosexuality.

The third level of liberation comes when Sister Jeannine is ordered, under her vow of obedience, to remain permanently silent about the investigation itself, about “my own life, about what I had been through,” as she puts it. Here, the oppression that she had always opposed in the lives of others touched her in her own deepest place. Risking expulsion from her religious order, she responded by doing what she had encouraged others to do—she refused to collaborate in her own oppression. The political had become deeply, painfully personal.

My belief is that this moment will prove transformative for Sister Jeannine. For the time being she has side-stepped the looming crisis by transferring to another order of nuns, the Loretto Sisters, whose superiors are willing to support her in standing up to the Vatican. However, with the current controversy over same-sex marriage stirring Catholic bishops into something rather like a frenzy, it is hard to believe Church authorities will leave her alone for long. They will not have missed the fact she has begun speaking again—both in the United States and in Italy, where the new translation of her book is drawing widespread support. This speaking could look either courageous or foolhardy, but I suspect there is a growing freedom within Sister Jeannine that no Vatican edict will stop.

Throughout her life Gramick has steadfastly maintained two protocols. First, she has never revealed her own sexual orientation, arguing that this silence keeps the focus on her ministry of “bridge-building.” Several times in this film, however, she talks openly of her deepening unease about keeping her orientation private, especially since she has been so forthright in calling others to “come out” and claim their right to live with dignity. Listening to her, it is hard to resist the feeling that she is approaching a new edge of openness.

The second protocol is, perhaps, even more crucial since it concerns official Church teaching: Gramick has never openly stated what she personally believes about sexual expression in gay relationships. However, with the issue of same-sex marriage heating up, it is inevitable that she will be challenged on this. Over dinner I put this to her and she replied, “I support the statement made by the National Coalition of American Nuns in 1996, that ‘if heterosexual unions are recognized by the state, a lack of similar recognition of same-sex unions is an unambiguous discrimination based on sexual orientation. Such discrimination is politically and morally wrong.’”¹³

Struck by this, I say to her, “Does this mean you believe sexual expression in gay relationships can be good and even holy?” She replies, “As I say, I support the 1996 statement by the National Coalition of American Nuns.” Not to be outdone, I repeat, “Yes, but do you believe sex within loving gay relationships can be good and holy?” She pauses then says, “Yes.” A little stunned, I continue, “You do realize what you are saying?” She smiles and says, “Yes.” I sit back in my chair, take a breath, and look across the table at Barbara Rick, who is also quietly smiling.

In this brief moment, in a noisy Manhattan restaurant, the liberation in love promised by Christ suddenly seems palpable. I look at these two very different women who have been brought together by their love of justice and their journeys of integration, and who even now are taking new risks as they embrace freedom for themselves and for others.

Is there a deeper purpose moving within humanity, I wonder, that inspires our small actions for justice, our brief moments of courage, our fragile hopes of freedom, and that gently, almost unobtrusively, sweeps them up into a greater, grander story of liberation? Do we begin by caring for the oppressed other, only to discover that there is no “other,” and that liberation must take root in our own lives if we are ever to truly stand for justice? What is the hidden energy that draws us into freedom, leading us through the gateway of our own hearts, and releasing us to risk everything for a vision of life that only love can give?

I look at Sister Jeannine, this woman who has spent her life challenging sanctified oppression on behalf of others. I think of how she is claiming her own freedom and saying “Yes” at deeper levels. I raise my glass to her, and wonder who it is that works within us, often in spite of us, to draw us into a new life we hardly dared imagine. I take a sip from my glass and wonder if, even now, I am tasting the new wine of the Kingdom of God.

Notes

- 1 Gramick, J. and Nugent, R. “Building Bridges: Gay and Lesbian Reality and the Catholic Church,” Mystic Rivr, Conn.: Twenty-third Publications, 1992). Translated into Italian as *Anime Gay* by Editori Riuniti in 2004.
- 2 Quoted in the film *In Good Conscience: Sister Jeannine Gramick's Journey of Faith*, Out of the Blue Films, 2004.

3 This and all other unreferenced quotes are from personal conversations the author of this essay held with Barbara Rick and Jeannine Gramick in New York City in May 2004.

4 From the film *In Good Conscience*.

5 Quoted on the company's Web site: www.outofthebluefilms.com.

6 Quoted in the film *In Good Conscience*.

7 Ibid. The reference is to the "Notification" concerning the ministry of Sister Jeannine Gramick and Father Robert Nugent, issued by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in May 1999, authored by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger.

8 "Statement on Same-Sex Marriage," issued by the National Coalition of American Nuns, 1996.

Michael Kelly is a writer, educator, and spiritual activist who is known internationally for his work in gay spirituality. His background includes 17 years as a teacher and lay chaplain in Catholic schools and universities in Australia and the USA, and he holds degrees in theology, education and spirituality. Recently, he served as scholar in residence at Easton Mountain retreat center.

