

# Building a Bridge

*How the Catholic Church and the  
LGBT Community Can Enter  
into a Relationship of Respect,  
Compassion, and Sensitivity*

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# A Two-Way Bridge

The relationship between LGBT Catholics and the Catholic Church has been at times contentious and combative and at times warm and welcoming. Much of the tension characterizing this complicated relationship results from a lack of communication and a good deal of mistrust between LGBT Catholics and the hierarchy. What is needed is a bridge between that community and the church.

So I would like to invite you to walk with me as I describe how we might build that bridge. To that end, I would like to reflect on both the church's outreach to the LGBT community and the LGBT community's outreach to the church, because good bridges take people in both directions.

As you probably know, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says that Catholics are called to treat homosexuals with “respect, compassion, and sensitivity” (No. 2358). What might that mean? Let's meditate on that question,

and on a second question as well: What might it mean for the LGBT community to treat the church with respect, compassion, and sensitivity?

To answer this, it may be helpful to define these two groups. Of course, LGBT people are part of the church, so in a sense those questions imply a false dichotomy. The church is the entire “People of God,” to use the language of the Second Vatican Council. So it may seem strange to discuss how the People of God can relate to a part of the People of God. In good Jesuit fashion, then, let me refine our terms.

When I refer to the church in this discussion, I mean the “institutional church”—that is, the Vatican and the church hierarchy (popes and cardinals, archbishops and bishops, priests and deacons) as well as anyone, including laymen and laywomen, who works in any sort of official capacity in the church. In essence, these are the decision-makers in our church. So for purposes of this discussion the “institutional church” includes not only the pope but also the laywoman who is the principal of a Catholic high school. Also, I will at times refer to both LGBT Catholics and the LGBT community. In fact, the church has relationships with both groups, because what it says about LGBT Catholics often reaches the ears of LGBT people who are not Catholic.

Let’s begin by taking a walk on the first lane of the bridge, the one leading from the institutional church to the LGBT community, and reflect on what it might mean for the church to treat LGBT people with respect, compassion, and sensitivity.

## Respect

First of all, *respect* means, at the very least, recognizing that the LGBT community *exists*, and extending to it the same recognition that any community desires and deserves because of its presence among us.

In the wake of the Orlando tragedy in 2016, some church leaders spoke of the event without ever mentioning the terms *LGBT* or *gay*. This revealed a certain failure to acknowledge the existence of this community. But this is not a Christian model, for Jesus recognizes all people, even those who seem invisible in the greater community. In fact, he reaches out specifically to people on the margins. Catholics, therefore, have a responsibility to make everyone feel visible and valuable.

Recognizing that LGBT Catholics exist has important pastoral implications. It means carrying out ministries to this community, which some dioceses, parishes, and

schools already do well. Examples include celebrating Masses with LGBT groups, sponsoring diocesan and parish outreach programs, and in general helping LGBT Catholics feel that they are part of the church, that they are welcomed and loved.

Some Catholics have objected to this approach, saying that any outreach implies a tacit agreement with everything anyone in the LGBT community says or does. But this is an unfair objection because it is raised with virtually no other group. If a diocese sponsors, for example, an outreach group for Catholic business leaders, it does not mean that the diocese agrees with every value of corporate America. Nor does it mean that the church has sanctified everything every businessman or businesswoman says or does. No one suggests that. Why not? Because people understand that the diocese is trying to help the members of that group feel more connected to their church, the church they belong to, by virtue of their baptism.

Let me pause here to underline the importance of baptism in light of this discussion. “Holy Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life,” says the *Catechism* in a marvelous phrase, “the gateway to life in the Spirit”

(No. 1213). Its importance cannot be overestimated. Baptism incorporates us into the church.

It is essential for all Christians, including LGBT Catholics, to grasp the significance of this sacrament in their lives and how it seals their place in the church.

Not long ago, at the start of a Sunday Mass at my local parish in New York City, the presider announced that there would be a baptism. The priest did a fine job of weaving the baptismal rite into the larger context of the Mass, and at the appointed moment, he pronounced the ancient formula, “I baptize you, Ellie, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” as he poured water over the child’s head. Then he held the child aloft and said, “Welcome to the Christian community!”

At that moment, the church organ boomed out the first few notes of the Easter hymn “The Strife is O’er,” which begins with a loud “Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!”

And I thought, *Yes! This is a life-changing moment, for the child, for the family, for the church, and for the entire universe. A new person has been welcomed into the church. The heavens are indeed shouting “Alleluia!”*

Immediately I thought of LGBT people and how often people tell them that they don’t belong in the church. But Christ himself called them into the church—forever. So when LGBT people report that someone has told them

they are not part of the church, I often say, “You were baptized. You have as much of a place in your church as the pope, your local bishop, or me.”

Part of respect is treating LGBT Catholics as full members of the church, by virtue of their baptism.

Second, *respect* means calling a group what it asks to be called. On a personal level, if someone says, “I prefer to be called Jim instead of James,” you would naturally listen and call him by the name he prefers. It’s common courtesy.

It’s the same on a group level. We don’t use the antiquated and even offensive term “Negroes” any longer. Why? Because that group feels more comfortable with other names, like “African Americans” or “blacks.” Recently, I was told that “disabled persons” is not as acceptable as “people with disabilities.” So now I use the latter term. Why? Because it is respectful to call people by the name they choose. Everyone has a right to the name they wish to be called by.

This is not a minor concern. In the Jewish and Christian traditions, names are important. In the Old Testament, God gives Adam and Eve the authority to name the creatures (Gen. 2:18–23). God also renames Abram as

Abraham (Gen. 17:4–6). A name in the Hebrew Scriptures stands for a person's identity; knowing a person's name meant, in a sense, that you knew the person, that you had a certain intimacy with the person, even that you possessed a kind of power over the person. That is one reason why, when Moses asks to know God's name, God says, "I am who I am" (Exod. 3:14–15)—in other words, as my Old Testament professor explained to our class, "None of your business."

Later, in the New Testament, Jesus renames Simon as Peter (Matt. 16:18; Jn. 1:42). The persecutor Saul renames himself as Paul (Acts 13:9). Names are important in our church today as well. The first question a priest or deacon asks the parents at an infant's baptism in the Catholic Church is "What name do you give this child?"

Because names are important, church leaders are invited to be attentive to how they name the LGBT community. So let us lay to rest antiquated phrases like "afflicted with same-sex attraction," which no LGBT person I know uses, and even "homosexual person," which seems overly clinical to many. Besides, how will the LGBT community be able to listen if the church persists in using language offensive to their ears?

On this topic, as on all topics, we can look to Jesus for guidance.

Think about the ways in which Jesus spoke to the

people of his time. Especially as recorded in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), Jesus used language his followers could understand, words and phrases tailored to their own situations.

When he first meets the disciples who are fishing by the Sea of Galilee, for example, he doesn't speak to them as a carpenter would—by saying, "Let us construct the house of God" or "Let us lay the foundations of the reign of God."

Instead, Jesus the carpenter speaks to them in *their* language, the language of fishermen: "Follow me," he says, "and I will make you fish for people" (Mk. 1:16–20; Matt. 4:18–22).

Dialogue begins by recognizing how to speak with another person. We need to be especially attentive to this with the LGBT community. As the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops says in their pastoral letter *Always Our Children*, written in 1997 and addressed to the parents of LGBT Catholics, "Language should not be a barrier to building trust and honest communication."

There is also an overlooked irony here: the term "same-sex attraction" is the one currently favored by some traditionalist Catholics, who object to using "gay" or "LGBT" because those terms supposedly identify a person only by their sexual urges. But this is precisely what the term "same-sex attraction" does. And, for good

measure, “same-sex attraction” includes the word “sex.” By that yardstick, it is hardly an improvement. I have always wondered if the resistance to “gay” and “LGBT” stems from the fact that these terms are the ones preferred by LGBT people, and so using them is considered a form of “caving.”

I’m not the only one who supports calling people by the names they choose. In 2017, Cardinal Blase Cupich, the archbishop of Chicago, said, in response to a question at a public lecture:

We have always wanted to make sure that we start the conversation by saying that all people are of value and their lives should be respected and that we should respect them. That is why I think that the terms “gay” and “lesbian” and “LGBT,” all of those names that people appropriate to themselves, should be respected. People should be called the way that they want to be called rather than us coming up with terms that maybe we’re more comfortable with. So it begins with that.

Let us, then, lay to rest phrases that no one in the LGBT community uses. Instead let’s listen to what our gay brothers and lesbian sisters and transgender siblings prefer to name themselves. Instead of prescribing what

names to use, though “gay,” “lesbian,” “LGBT,” and “LGBTQ” are among the most common, I invite church leaders to recognize that people have a right to name themselves. Using those names is part of respect.

And if Pope Francis, and several of his cardinals and bishops, can use the word *gay*, as they have done several times during his papacy, so can the rest of the church.

*Respect* also means acknowledging that LGBT Catholics bring unique gifts to the church—both as individuals and as a community. These gifts build up the church in special ways, as Saint Paul wrote when he compared the People of God to a human body (1 Cor. 12:12–27). Each body part is important: the hand, the eye, the foot. In fact, as Paul said, it is the parts of the body that “we think less honorable” that deserve even greater respect.

Many LGBT people have indeed felt “less honorable” in the church. At a recent parish talk the moderator asked all the LGBT Catholics in the room to raise their hands. A forest of hands went up. Then he said, “How many of you have ever felt excluded in the church?” Not one hand was lowered.

Following Saint Paul, it is to these beloved members and to their great gifts that we should pay even *greater*

respect. “Those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor,” he wrote.

Consider the many gifts brought by LGBT Catholics who work in parishes, schools, chanceries, retreat centers, hospitals, and social service agencies. Let us “honor” them, as Saint Paul says. To take several examples, some of the most gifted music ministers I have known in my almost thirty years as a Jesuit have been gay men who have brought tremendous joy to their parishes, week in and week out, during every liturgical season. For several years, I worked with a lesbian woman in a Jesuit ministry who brought immense reserves of smarts, talent, and good humor to the job. One of my favorite spiritual directors—that is, people who help you notice the presence of God in your prayer and your daily life—was a gay man. Another was a lesbian. Their wise counsel and patient listening helped me more than I can express. Faithful, thoughtful, intelligent, committed, and loving LGBT people have enriched my spiritual life in countless ways.

The whole church is invited to meditate on how LGBT Catholics build up the church with their presence, in the same way that elderly people, teenagers, women, people with disabilities, various ethnic groups, or any other groups build up a parish or a diocese. And although it is usually wrong to generalize, we can still pose the question: What might those gifts be?

Many, if not most, LGBT people have endured from an early age, misunderstanding, prejudice, hatred, persecution, and even violence, and therefore often feel a natural compassion toward the marginalized. *Their compassion is a gift.* They have often been made to feel unwelcome in their parishes and in their church, but they persevere because of their vigorous faith. *Their perseverance is a gift.* They are often forgiving of clergy and other church employees who have treated them like damaged goods. *Their forgiveness is a gift.* Compassion, perseverance, and forgiveness are all gifts.

One could add gifts that are applicable to more specific ministries. Recently, a woman who works with people with physical disabilities told me that she believed LGBT people make some of the best outreach workers with that population. Why? As a social worker, she surmised this: “LGBT people have been judged for so long that they approach people in ministry free of any judgment.” In her experience, many people tend to judge those with physical disabilities. LGBT people, in her experience, seemed freer of a reflexive need to judge.

LGBT Catholics are also some of the most effective evangelists for Catholicism in their communities. At a parish talk, a lesbian woman who was asked to respond to my lecture drew appreciative laughs from the crowd when she said that the most difficult challenge

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was not coming out as a lesbian to her Catholic friends but “coming out as a Catholic to her lesbian friends.” She serves as a kind of ambassador for Catholicism to her LGBT friends, some of whom harbor suspicions about the church. For her, however, it is a home. At the same time, she helps the church reflect on the place of LGBT people in its midst. Another lesbian friend of mine called this process “double evangelization.”

Let me add another gift: that of celibate priests and brothers who are gay, as well as chaste members of men’s and women’s religious orders who are gay or lesbian.

Now, there are many reasons why almost no gay clergy, and almost no gay and lesbian members of religious orders, are public about their sexuality. Among these reasons are the following: they are private people; their bishops or religious superiors ask them not to speak about it publicly; they themselves are uncomfortable with their sexuality; or they fear reprisals from parishioners or those with whom they minister.

But there are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of holy and hardworking gay clergy, and gay and lesbian members of religious orders, who live out their promises of celibacy and vows of chastity and help to build up the church.

Sometimes my mentioning this surprises people. Or angers them. But I am not saying anything polemical; I am merely stating a fact: I know many celibate gay priests, chaste gay brothers, and chaste lesbian sisters. At times, they have been my spiritual directors, my confessors, even my religious superiors. Some of them are the holiest people I have ever met. Saying that I know them is like saying that I see the sun in the sky. It’s a simple fact.

These men and women freely give their whole selves to the church. They themselves are the gift.

Seeing, naming, and honoring all these gifts are components of respecting our LGBT brothers and sisters. So too is accepting them as beloved children of God and *letting them know* that they are beloved children of God. The church has a special call to proclaim God’s love for a people who are often made to feel—whether by their families, neighbors, or religious leaders—as though they were damaged goods, unworthy of ministry, and even subhuman. The church is invited to both proclaim and demonstrate that LGBT people are beloved children of God.

It is also important to remember that LGBT people are, like all of us, called to holiness. “Holiness” is a word that

is not used enough about LGBT people, but the Second Vatican Council spoke about the “universal call to holiness,” everyone’s call to sanctity (*Lumen Gentium*, 5). As Saint Teresa of Calcutta liked to say, holiness is everyone’s duty. And everyone’s joy, I would add.

LGBT people are called to be holy, as all of us are.

We need, therefore, also to consider the fact that some of the saints were probably gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Yes, I know those terms weren’t used until recently, and the modern concept of homosexuality is a relatively late cultural construct, but if a certain small percentage of human beings are gay, lesbian, or bisexual, then it stands to reason that a certain small percentage of the thousands of saints were as well—because they are, of course, human beings. And holiness makes it home in humanity.

In other words, among the saints were some men and women who were attracted to people of the same sex. That’s not to say that they acted on their sexual desires, but if you consider—to take just one example among the thousands of saints—the many priests, brothers, and sisters who have been canonized, it’s likely that some of them, even as they faithfully lived out their promises of celibacy and vows of chastity, experienced attractions to people of the same sex.

Which ones? It’s hard to say. Perhaps impossible to

say, given how little homosexuality would have been understood, admitted to, and discussed in the past. To my mind, though, there are some saints who, at least based on their writings and what we know about their lives, seem to have been what we would today call gay or lesbian. But again, it’s difficult to know for sure.

In our own time, we can look to several well-known holy persons who were also LGBT. As should be obvious by now, I’ve known many holy LGBT people in my life. In a more public vein, think of someone like Mychal Judge, OFM, the Franciscan fire chaplain and hero of the 9/11 attacks. Father Judge was the first official victim of the attacks in New York City, after he selflessly rushed into one of the Twin Towers at the World Trade Center to minister to the rescue workers, and was killed. He was also a celibate gay priest. How do I know he was gay? Not only based on biographies of the man (*Father Mychal Judge*, by Michael Ford and *The Book of Mychal*, by Michael Daly, among others) but also thanks to knowing several of his Franciscan brothers

Or think of Henri Nouwen, the Dutch priest and psychologist whose perceptive books on the spiritual life, like the now-classic *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, were of inestimable help to millions of his readers. Toward the end of his life, he fell in love quite suddenly, and turbulently, with another man. How do I know that Father

Nouwen was gay? Again, based on not only biographies and essays (*Wounded Prophet*, by Michael Ford and *The Essential Henri Nouwen*, edited by Robert A. Jonas) but also, in this case, knowing the man with whom he fell in love.

Were these men saints? That's hard to say, but I'd argue that they were certainly holy, and therefore they can show us how one can be an LGBT person and holy.

When I mention this, some people profess surprise. But why are they surprised? Because they think gay people can't be holy? Some are offended. But why are they offended? Being gay is not a sin, and, from all accounts, Father Judge kept his vow of chastity and Father Nouwen his promise of celibacy.

Those who are surprised may be surprised to be greeted in heaven by more than a few gay and lesbian saints. And those who are offended may have their own offenses forgiven by those same saints.

Let's return to the concept of respect.

Respect also should be extended to the workplace, especially if that workplace is a church or church-related organization. To that end, I'm disheartened by the recent trend, in a few places, of the firing of LGBT people. Ac-

ording to New Ways Ministry, since 2010 almost seventy people in Catholic institutions in the United States have been fired, been forced to resign, had job offers rescinded, or had their jobs threatened because of their orientation—often after years of service in these positions and being known as LGBT people. This figure, according to New Ways, includes only those people whose situations have become public; anecdotally, many other instances are known.

Of course, church organizations have the authority to require their employees to follow church teachings. The problem is that this authority is applied in a highly *selective* way. Almost all the firings in recent years have focused on LGBT matters. Specifically, the firings have usually related to those employees who have entered into same-sex marriages, which is against church teaching, when one or the other partner has a public role in the church.

But if adherence to church teachings is going to be a litmus test for employment in Catholic institutions, then dioceses and parishes need to be consistent. Do we fire a straight man or woman who gets divorced and then remarries without an annulment? Divorce and remarriage of that sort are against church teaching. In fact, divorce is something Jesus himself forbade (Matt. 19:8–9). Do we fire women who bear children, or men who father

children, out of wedlock? How about couples living together before being married? Do we give pink slips to people who practice birth control? All those actions are against church teaching too.

And what about church employees who are not Catholic? If we fire employees who do not agree with or adhere to church teaching, do we fire all Protestants who work in a Catholic institution because they do not believe in papal authority? That's an important church teaching. Do we fire Unitarians who do not believe in the Trinity? Do we fire all Jewish employees who do not believe in Jesus Christ, in the Incarnation or the Resurrection? Do we fire all agnostics and atheists who doubt or who do not believe in God?

Do we fire these people for such things? No, we do not. Why not? Because we are selective—perhaps unconsciously, perhaps consciously—about *which* church teachings matter.

Here is another way of looking at this kind of selectivity, one that shows us why it is especially problematic. Requiring church employees to adhere to church teachings means, at a more fundamental level, adhering to the Gospel. To be consistent, shouldn't we fire people for not helping the poor, for not being forgiving, or for not being loving? For being cruel?

That may sound odd, and it may even cause you to

roll your eyes, but why should it? These commands of Jesus are the most essential church teachings.

Some people have argued that those final categories are unenforceable because unlike entering into same-sex marriages, being cruel, for example, is not a “public sin,” nor does it cause “public scandal.” But anyone who has ever worked in any kind of professional setting—including a rectory, chancery, retreat house, hospital, or school—will tell you that being cruel is a very public act. And, to my mind, being a cruel person while working in a Catholic institution is indeed a “public scandal.”

It is rather that we do not choose to focus on those things.

The selectivity of focus on LGBT matters when it comes to firings is, to use the words of the Catholic *Catechism*, a “sign of unjust discrimination” (No. 2358), something we are to avoid. Indeed, in 2016, *America* magazine published an editorial that said, “The high public profile of these firings, when combined with a lack of due process and the absence of any comparable policing of marital status for heterosexual employees, constitute signs of ‘unjust discrimination’ and the church in the United States should do more to avoid them.”

One young gay man shared with me another perspective on this phenomenon. He wondered if the selectivity occurs not only because of homophobia but

because straight men and women are never forced to consider what would happen if they were gay. Thus it is easier for them to condemn homosexuality because they see themselves as now and forever straight. “You can never be a hypocrite preaching about the ‘sinful homosexual lifestyle,’” he wrote in an email, “because you will never find yourself where the temptation is present.”

That was one reason he believed there was so much focus on this issue rather than other issues related to sexual morality—like premarital sex and divorce. Straight men and women might indeed engage in premarital sex or seek a divorce. But they are safe in condemning homosexuality because it will never be an experience they face. It is an interesting argument to consider.

## Compassion

What would it mean for the institutional church to show compassion to LGBT men and women?

The word *compassion* (from the Greek *paschō*) means “to experience with” or “to suffer with.” So what would it mean for the institutional church not only to respect LGBT Catholics but also to be with them, to experience life with them, and even to suffer with them?

This question can be asked about the hierarchy as well as the entire church. It can be asked about bishops and priests as well as pastoral workers, directors of religious education, music ministers, teachers, administrators, and those who don’t work in any official capacity in the church but who participate in the life of the church as faithful parishioners: Catholic men and women of all sorts. How can all of us experience and suffer with our LGBT brothers and sisters?

The first and most essential requirement is listening. It is impossible to experience a person's life, or to be compassionate, if you do not listen to the person or if you do not ask questions.

Questions that Catholic leaders might ask their LGBT brothers, sisters, and siblings are:

*What was it like growing up as a gay boy, a lesbian girl, or a transgender person?*

*What is your life like now?*

*How have you suffered as a result of your orientation or gender identity?*

*Where do you experience joy in your life?*

*What is your experience of God?*

*What is your experience of Jesus?*

*What is your experience of the church?*

*What do you hope for, long for, pray for?*

They might also ask the parents of LGBT Catholics these kinds of questions:

*What is it like for you to have an LGBT child?*

*What was it like when your child shared his or her sexuality or identity with you?*

*What is your relationship with your child like now?*

*Do you yourself feel welcome in the church?*

*Do you ever fear that your child will leave the church? And if your child has left, how are you dealing with that?*

*How might the church be a more welcoming place for your child?*

*What is your own experience of God?*

*What do you hope for, long for, pray for—for both you and your child?*

For the church to exercise compassion, we need to listen. And when we listen, we will learn, we will be challenged, and we will be inspired.

Let me share six very brief stories that invite all of us to listen.

One of my oldest friends is a gay man named Mark, who was once a member of a Catholic religious order.

About twenty years ago, after Mark left the order, he came out as a gay man, and began living with his partner, to whom he is now legally married. His partner has a serious, long-term illness, and Mark has cared for him for many years, with great devotion and loving-kindness.

*What can we learn from Mark about love?*

An elderly man told me that his grandson recently came out to him as a gay man. I asked what he had said in response. He said that he had suspected for some time that his grandson was gay, and so when his grandson sat down to tell him, before a word was even on the young man's lips, the grandfather said, "I love you no matter what you're about to say."

*What can we learn from this grandfather about compassion?*

After a talk I gave at a Catholic college in Philadelphia, a young man told me that the first person to whom he came out as a gay man was a Catholic priest. During a high school retreat, he decided to publicly acknowledge his homosexuality, but he was so nervous that he was "literally shaking." The first thing the priest said to him was "Jesus loves you. And your church accepts you." The young man told me, "It saved my life."

*What can we learn from this priest about acceptance?*

A woman in her eighties, with snowy white hair and apple cheeks, came to my book-signing table after a talk I had given in Connecticut and said, "Father, I have something to tell you." The focus of the talk had been on Jesus, not on LGBT issues specifically. I thought she might share an insight about Jesus or tell me that she had been on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Instead she said, "Father, I have a grandchild who is transgender, and I love her so much. All I want is for her to feel welcome in the church."

*What can we learn from this grandmother about faith?*

At a parish in Boston, a gay man and a lesbian woman were invited to "respond" to my lecture on LGBT Catholics, in the spirit of fostering a real conversation. In her response, the lesbian woman, named Maggie, chose to discuss a reflection question that appears at the end of the book: "When you think about your sexual orientation or gender identity, what word do you use?" My intention was to invite readers to reflect on biblical passages about names and naming and encourage them to "name" their sexuality. So I had expected words like "gay," "lesbian," and "bisexual." But that night in the parish, Maggie said that when she read that question and thought of her sexuality, she thought of the word "joy." It was such a surprise!

*What can we learn from Maggie about sexuality?*

And perhaps the biggest surprise: On that same evening in Boston, a couple stayed afterward to have their book signed. One was a transgender woman—that is, a woman who had begun her life as a man. The other was a “cisgender woman”—that is, someone born a woman who is still a woman. (As I’ve noted previously, I have tried to be mindful of contemporary terminology, though I recognize that these terms get dated quickly.)

The cisgender woman told me that the two had been married for many years, which confused me, since same-sex marriage had not been legal for that long in Massachusetts. She sensed my confusion, smiled, and said, “I married her when she was still a man.”

I was reduced to stunned silence. Here was an apparently straight woman who had married a straight man who was now a woman. How had she done it? “Love is love,” she said.

Here is a marriage that almost every church official would probably consider “irregular,” to use the official ecclesiastical term. Yet it was a model of faithfulness. Even after one partner had “transitioned,” the marriage was still intact.

*What can we learn from them about fidelity?*

For any learning to happen, we need to listen.

When we listen carefully, we will also hear the calls for help and prayer, especially in times and places of persecution. And when our LGBT brothers and sisters and siblings are persecuted, church leaders are called to stand with them. In many parts of the world, LGBT persons are liable to experience appalling incidents of prejudice, violence, and even murder. “Roundups” of LGBT people happen regularly in countries like Indonesia, Egypt, Azerbaijan, and Chechnya. In some countries, a person can be jailed or even *executed* for being gay or having same-sex relations. As of this writing, engaging in same-sex relations is a crime in over seventy countries, and simply being gay or bisexual is punishable by death in thirteen countries.

In these countries, the institutional church has an absolute moral duty to stand up for our brothers and sisters, publicly. Sadly, this does not happen very often, and in fact, a few church leaders have supported some of these discriminatory laws. But embedded in Catholic teaching is a call to stand with our LGBT brothers and sisters. The *Catechism* says “every sign of unjust discrimination” must be avoided (No. 2358). More fundamentally, helping, defending, and caring for someone who is being beaten is surely part of compassion. It is part of being a disciple of Jesus Christ. If you doubt

that, consider the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-37).

Closer to home, what would it mean for the church in the United States to say, when needed, “It is wrong to treat the LGBT community like this”? Catholic leaders regularly publish statements—as they should—defending the unborn, refugees and migrants, the poor, the homeless, the aged. This is one way to stand with people: by putting yourself out there, even taking heat for them.

But where are statements specifically in support of our LGBT brothers, sisters, and siblings? When I ask this, some people say, “You can’t compare what refugees face with what LGBT people face.” As someone who worked with refugees in East Africa for two years, I know that’s often the case. But it is also important not to ignore the disproportionately high rates of suicide among LGBT youths and the fact that LGBT people are the victims of proportionally more hate crimes than any other minority group in this country.

Here are some statistics from The Trevor Project, an organization that helps prevent teen LGBT suicides, which remind us that these are “life issues.”

- Lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth are almost *five times* as likely to have attempted suicide compared to straight youth.

- Lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth seriously contemplate suicide at almost *three times* the rate of straight youth.
- Lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth who come from “highly rejecting” families are *8.4 times* as likely to have attempted suicide as LGBT peers who have reported no or low levels of family rejection.
- In a national study, *forty percent* of transgender adults reported having made a suicide attempt, and *ninety-two percent* of these individuals reported having attempted suicide before age twenty-five.
- Every instance of victimization of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth, such as physical harassment, or verbal harassment or abuse, increases the likelihood of self-harming behavior by *2.5 times* on the average.

The bullying of LGBT students in schools is also an evil that should be squarely opposed, particularly given the Catholic Church’s long history and extensive experience with running elementary, middle, and high schools.

GLSEN, a group that advocates for the protection of LGBT students in the United States, reports these sobering statistics about middle school and high school students who are LGBT:

- *Eighty-five percent* report being verbally harassed.
- *Sixty-three percent* report hearing homophobic remarks from teachers or the school staff.
- *Fifty-seven percent* feel unsafe because of their sexual orientations.
- *Fifty-seven percent* did not report experiences of bullying because they doubted that an intervention would occur.
- *Sixty-three percent* who did report bullying said that the school did nothing or told them to ignore it.

As I've mentioned before, in the wake of the massacre at a gay nightclub in Orlando in 2016, when the LGBT community across the country was grieving, I was discouraged that more bishops did not immediately signal their support. Some did. But imagine if the attacks had been on, God forbid, a Methodist church. Many bishops would have said, "We stand with our Methodist brothers and sisters." Why didn't more Catholic leaders name our LGBT brothers and sisters in Orlando? To me, it seemed a failure of compassion, a failure to experience with, and a failure to suffer with. Orlando invites us all to reflect on this.

Orlando also invites us to reflect on the implications of these failures. As James F. Keenan, SJ, professor of moral theology at Boston College, regularly pointed out to our class in graduate school, more often than not, Jesus did not critique people who were weak but trying. Rather, the gospels show that Jesus critiqued people who were strong but not bothering. For example, the rich man who doesn't bother to help the poor man by his door (Lk. 16:19–31), the religious leader who doesn't bother to consider that someone needs healing on a Sabbath (Lk. 13:10–16), and the Pharisee who doesn't bother to offer Jesus a welcome (Lk. 7:36–45).

For Jesus, sin was, as Father Keenan said, "a failure to bother to love." After Orlando, I think, many in the church failed to bother to love. How often do all of us fail to bother in this way?

We need not look far for a model for how to proceed. God did this for all of us—in Jesus. The opening lines of the Gospel of John tell us, "The Word became flesh and lived among us" (Jn. 1:14). A more accurate rendering of the Greek is: "The Word became flesh and pitched its tent among us" (*eskēnōsen en hēmin*). Isn't that a beautiful phrase? God pitched his tent with us. God entered our

world to live among us. This is what Jesus did. He lived alongside us, took our side, even died like us.

This is what the church is called to do with all marginalized groups, as Pope Francis has often reminded us, including LGBT Catholics: to experience their lives and suffer with them. “For Jesus,” said Francis in a homily in 2015 to a group of newly named cardinals, “what matters above all is reaching out to save those far off, healing the wounds of the sick, restoring everyone to God’s family! And this is scandalous to some people!”

So we need to experience life with LGBT people. To enter into their sufferings. And to enter into their joys as well! Because Jesus came to experience all parts of our lives, not just the sorrowful parts. LGBT people, though they may suffer persecution, share in the joys of the human condition.

Can you rejoice with our LGBT brothers and sisters? Can the entire church—from popes to bishops to priests to pastoral associates to parishioners—rejoice in the gifts and talents, the joys and hopes, the enthusiasm and energy, brought by LGBT Catholics?

Especially among younger LGBT people, I find a tremendous zest for the faith. Perhaps this is because, unlike their older brothers and sisters, they have grown up in a society where they feel more comfortable about their sexuality, and so they may feel less burdened by their

sexual identity. (This is just my own supposition.) Overall, younger LGBT people who are active in the church bring a great many gifts, which we can celebrate and treasure.

We can celebrate and treasure more than simply the gifts of LGBT Catholics. We can celebrate and treasure *them*. This is a kind of compassion too—to share in their whole lives and to experience the Christian joy that LGBT men and women, young and old, bring to the church.

## Sensitivity

How can the institutional church be *sensitive* toward LGBT people? That's a beautiful word used by the *Catechism*.

My old *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary* defines *sensitivity* as an "awareness or understanding of the feelings of other people." That's related to Pope Francis's call for the church to be a church of "encounter" and "accompaniment."

To begin with, it is nearly impossible to know another person's feelings at a distance. You cannot understand the feelings of a community if you don't *know* the community. You can't be sensitive to the LGBT community if you only issue documents about them, preach about them, or tweet about them, without knowing them.

One reason the institutional church has struggled with sensitivity is that, based on my observations, many church leaders still do not know many gay and lesbian

people. The temptation is to smile and say that church leaders do know people who are gay: priests and members of religious orders who are not public about their sexual orientation. But my point is a larger one. Many church leaders do not know, on a personal level, LGBT people who are public about their sexuality and identity. That lack of familiarity and friendship means it is more difficult to be sensitive. How can you be sensitive to people's situations if you don't know them? One invitation for the hierarchy, then, is to come to know LGBT Catholics as friends.

Some of the reasons behind this lack of familiarity and friendship are easy to understand. A friend of mine, a gay man named Brian, once worked on the staff of a U.S. bishop. Often they would share car rides together—traveling to a diocesan meeting or visiting a parish. While driving, the bishop would often make homophobic comments that deeply offended my friend, who was working hard in the bishop's office, specifically on issues of social justice. In fact, the bishop often praised him on his work ethic. (Later, Brian would work in a similar capacity in the office of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.)

So, I once asked Brian why he didn't come out to his boss. "Are you kidding?" he said. "He's the last person I would come out to. He's very homophobic, and I'm

worried I could lose my job.” So the bishop was working with a person he admired and relied upon and who, unbeknownst to him, was also gay. His homophobia had made it more difficult for LGBT people to feel comfortable around him, and perhaps as a result, his homophobia continued unabated.

In 2015, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, the archbishop of Vienna, reminded the church of the importance of familiarity and friendship at the meeting of the Synod of Bishops on the Family, the gathering of Catholic bishops who assembled at the invitation of Pope Francis to discuss a wide variety of issues related to the family, and as it turned out, human sexuality. Cardinal Schönborn spoke of a gay couple he knew who had transformed his understanding of LGBT people. He even offered some qualified praise for his friend’s same-sex union. The cardinal said:

One shares one’s life, one shares the joys and sufferings, one helps one another. We must recognize that this person has made an important step for his own good and for the good of others, even though, of course, this is not a situation that the church can consider regular.

He also overruled a priest in his archdiocese who had prohibited a man in a same-sex union from serving on a

parish council. That is, Cardinal Schönborn stood with his LGBT brother. Two years later, while speaking about the church’s support of family life in general, he said, “Favoring the family does not mean disfavoring other forms of life—even those living in a same-sex partnership need their families.” Much of his sensitivity came from his experience of, knowledge of, and friendship with LGBT people.

Cardinal Schönborn said of the church, “It must accompany people.”

In this, as in all things, Jesus is our model. When Jesus encountered people on the margins, he saw not categories but individuals. To be clear, I am not saying that LGBT people should be, or should feel, marginalized. Rather, I am saying that within the church many of them do find themselves marginalized. They are seen as “other.”

But for Jesus there was no “other.” Jesus saw beyond categories; he met people where they were and accompanied them.

The Gospel of Matthew, for example, tells the story of Jesus meeting a Roman centurion in Capernaum, a fishing town on the Sea of Galilee (Matt. 8:5–13). The cen-

turion approaches Jesus to ask for healing for his servant. When Jesus offers to come to the centurion's house, the man says, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof." The centurion tells Jesus that he knows something about authority, as he too has men under his command. All Jesus needs to do, he says, is to give the word. Jesus professes amazement at the centurion's faith and heals his servant.

In other words, although the centurion was not Jewish and therefore lived on the margins of that social milieu, Jesus saw someone in need, listened to his story, and responded to his need.

In another story, in Luke's Gospel, Jesus is passing through Jericho with his disciples when he encounters a man named Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector in this large town (Lk. 19:1-10). In that story, Zacchaeus, who is described as "short in stature," climbs a sycamore tree because "he was trying to see who Jesus was." He is prevented from seeing Jesus "on account of the crowd."

When Jesus sees Zacchaeus perched in the tree, he sees a person seeking to encounter him. Here it's important to note that Zacchaeus was the chief tax collector in the region, and therefore would also have been considered the "chief sinner" in that society. Again, he is someone on the margins. Nonetheless, Jesus calls to Zacchaeus in the tree and invites himself to the man's house.

Jesus was willing to be with, stand with, and befriend all these people who would have felt themselves as either on the margins or outside the margins of first-century Jewish society in Galilee and Judea.

In his ministry to those on the margins, the movement for Jesus was always from the outside in. He brought those on the outside in. At the same time, he brought his disciples, and those who were on the inside, out. He moved them out toward the margins.

Jesus's message was one of inclusion, communicated through speaking to people, healing them, or offering them what biblical scholars call "table fellowship"—that is, dining with them, a sign of welcome and acceptance in first-century Palestine. He did this again and again, with not only the Roman centurion and Zacchaeus but other tax collectors, as well as prostitutes, a Samaritan woman, and many of the sick, who also would have been viewed as outcasts.

My point is not that LGBT people should be treated as sinners, as many of these people were considered in those days—for *we are all sinners*. Rather, it is that Jesus continually reached out to all those who felt marginalized in any way.

In fact, Jesus was often criticized for this practice. But Jesus's movement was about inclusion. He was creating a sense of "us."

For with Jesus, there is no us and them. There is only us.

One common objection here is to say, “No, Jesus always told them, first of all, not to sin!” We cannot meet LGBT people because they are sinning, goes the argument, and when we do meet them, the first thing we must say is “Stop sinning!”

But more often than not, this is not Jesus’s way.

In the story of the Roman centurion, for example, Jesus encounters not only someone who is not Jewish but a man who likely believes in multiple gods. But Jesus doesn’t shout “Pagan!” or scold him for not being Jewish. Instead, he professes astonishment at the man’s faith, which he declares greater than he has found anywhere in Israel, and then he heals his servant.

Indeed, Luke’s Gospel tells us explicitly that Jesus was “amazed” by the centurion’s faith. In other words, Jesus was open to being surprised by something about a person on the margins.

Likewise, in the story of Zacchaeus, after spying the tax collector perched in the tree, a man who simply wants to see “who Jesus was,” he doesn’t point to him and shout “Sinner!” Instead Jesus says that he will go to Zacchaeus’s house, a public sign of welcome, before Zacchaeus has said or done anything. Only *after* Jesus offers him welcome is Zacchaeus moved to conversion, promising to pay back anyone he might have defrauded.

Even in Jesus’s time this provoked opposition. The crowd, says Luke’s Gospel, “began to grumble” at Jesus’s offer of welcome to Zacchaeus. As the crowd often does today!

But for Jesus it is most often *community first*—meeting, encountering, including—and *conversion second*.

Here again I am talking about the conversion that all of us need, not simply LGBT people. We are all called to *metanoia*, a conversion of hearts and minds.

In fact, in a fascinating reflection on Jesus’s interactions with tax collectors in the Gospel of Mark—in the *Sacra Pagina* series of bible commentaries—two distinguished New Testament scholars, Daniel J. Harrington, SJ, and John R. Donahue, SJ, underline an important aspect of such stories. Except for Matthew (or Levi), the tax collector who leaves his job to follow Jesus, “there is no indication that the toll collectors abandoned their profession after contact with Jesus.”

The same holds true for Zacchaeus in Luke’s Gospel: the man has undergone a *metanoia*, but there is no indication that he ceased being a tax collector. And, of course, Jesus continued to meet and dine with this group of marginal people, which caused intense controversy (Mk 2: 13-17).

In that case, that is, what is Jesus’s point?

According to Fathers Harrington and Donahue, “it

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amounted to a simple message that God loved these people and that they would be part of the kingdom being inaugurated by Jesus.”

They conclude their analysis with this observation:

The practice of Jesus depicted here manifests a preference for the marginal. . . . Churches today are challenged to expend their energy and resources not only on the “well” and the strong but also (and especially) on those who need healing and a sense of divine acceptance.

Pope Francis echoed this approach during an in-flight press conference in 2016, on his return to Rome from the countries of Georgia and Azerbaijan. “People must be accompanied, as Jesus accompanied them,” he said. “When a person who has this situation comes before Jesus, Jesus will surely not say: ‘Go away because you are homosexual.’”

Sensitivity is based on encounter, accompaniment, and friendship.

Where does this lead? To the second meaning of *sensitivity*, which is, in common parlance, a heightened aware-

ness of what might hurt or offend someone. When we are sensitive to people’s situations, we are sensitive to anything that might needlessly offend.

One way to be sensitive is to consider the language we use. Some bishops have recently called for the church to revisit the phrase “objectively disordered” when it comes to describing the homosexual inclination (as it is in the *Catechism*, No. 2358). The phrase relates to the orientation, not the person, but it is still, as countless LGBT people have told me, needlessly hurtful to them.

To understand more of the context of that phrase, here is the *Catechism*’s entire teaching on the matter, and on homosexuality in general:

**2357** Homosexuality refers to relations between men or between women who experience an exclusive or predominant sexual attraction toward persons of the same sex. It has taken a great variety of forms through the centuries and in different cultures. Its psychological genesis remains largely unexplained. Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity, tradition has always declared that “homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered.” They are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual

complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved.

2358 The number of men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies is not negligible. This inclination, which is objectively disordered, constitutes for most of them a trial. They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. These persons are called to fulfill God's will in their lives and, if they are Christians, to unite to the sacrifice of the Lord's Cross the difficulties they may encounter from their condition.

2359 Homosexual persons are called to chastity. By the virtues of self-mastery that teach them inner freedom, at times by the support of disinterested friendship, by prayer and sacramental grace, they can and should gradually and resolutely approach Christian perfection.

Our sexuality, in a sense, touches everything we do, including the way we love, even when the sexual expression of that love is neither involved nor even contemplated. So to call a person's sexuality "objectively disordered" is to tell a person that all of his or her love, even the most chaste, is disordered. For many LGBT Catholics, that seems unnecessarily cruel.

Revising, updating, or even setting aside such language was discussed at the Synod on the Family, according to several news outlets. Later, in 2016, an Australian bishop, Vincent Long Van Nguyen, said in a lecture:

We cannot talk about the integrity of creation, the universal and inclusive love of God, while at the same time colluding with the forces of oppression in the ill-treatment of racial minorities, women, and homosexual persons. . . . It won't wash with young people, especially when we purport to treat gay people with love and compassion and yet define their sexuality as "intrinsically disordered."

After a parish talk, the mother of a gay son asked me, "Do people understand what it could mean for a fourteen-year-old gay boy to read language like that? It could *destroy* him."

Part of sensitivity is understanding this. Part of sensitivity is listening to this mother.