

Testimony for Synodal Study Group 9 on Homosexuality (USA)

- **Which aspects of your personal experience do you consider most important to highlight regarding the issue we are discussing (in this case: homosexuality)?**

My sexuality isn't a perversion, disorder, or cross; it's a gift from God. I have a happy, healthy marriage and am flourishing as an openly gay Catholic. It's taken years of prayer, therapy, and affirming community to get here, but I thank God for my sexuality and station in life. If I could choose to be gay, I would, because it's a powerful and beautiful way of reflecting God's image in the world. Being a gay man makes me more empathetic, caring, passionate about justice, and creative. Of course, I have my faults, insecurities, and sin, too, but these are unrelated to my sexual orientation.

I entered my first same-sex relationship when I was 28 years old. The relationship was rocky at times, but I grew. I learned to be less selfish and give up control and realized that I am more the person God is calling me to be inside of a relationship than I am outside of a relationship.

Today I thank God for my husband, whom I met five years ago. He's been the greatest source of learning and grace in my life. He is an immigrant, suffers racism as a black man, and has been sober for seven years. Our life together feels like a miracle. Though he has a hard time with institutional religion, he often challenges me to grow in my relationship with God. We like to joke that he is "spiritual but not religious," while I can be "religious but not spiritual." We complement each other, and faith is a lively part of our marriage. While I tend to be skeptical and pragmatic, he radiates hope and vision. I wouldn't be who I am as a person, or as a disciple of Christ, without him. We're proud to build our family together.

- **Have you been practically involved in any groups or movements that focus on this issue, and what reflections or insights have you gained from that experience?**

My first exposure to groups in the church that deal with homosexuality began when I was a closeted master's student at the University of Notre Dame. To others I was a recently converted, fundamentalist Catholic who was dating women, but I was wracked with guilt over my same-sex attraction. I joined Courage, an apostolate that works with those who "suffer from same-sex attraction." The group came at the suggestion of a conversion therapist I met to deal with my "condition."

Attending Courage meetings did little to help my spiritual and psychosexual development. The gathering was secretive and hidden. The people I met were lonely, hopeless, and often depressed. My life, too, was disintegrating as I resisted reconciling my faith and sexuality. I tried in vain to date a Catholic woman, but our relationship failed when my family faced a crisis. The time had come to be honest with myself, God, and others.

At the age of 27 I began my PhD in theology at Fordham University. What a breath of fresh air! Faculty, friends, and colleagues were overwhelmingly supportive of LGBTQ people, and the department itself was around 1/3 LGBTQ. I learned new forms of theology that helped me accept myself as a gay man created in God's image. Reading the Bible in context made me realize that traditionalist interpretations have little to say about contemporary, life-giving same-sex

relationships. I began to take my experience, and the experiences of other LGBTQ people, seriously as the sight of God's unfolding work. At Fordham I came out and began the hard work of spiritual healing and integration.

Around that time I also began worshipping with Catholic parishes that had LGBTQ ministries – first, a Franciscan parish, and later, a Paulist parish. In these parishes, LGBTQ people were welcomed as full members of the church, able to share their talents singing in the choir, as eucharistic ministers, and teaching catechism classes. LGBTQ Catholics want to be part of the Church like everyone else. Priests encouraged me to follow the Spirit's lead in my life as I discerned God's call to partnership. Trusting my conscience was key and I came to see my sexuality as a blessing, not a burden.

When LGBTQ Catholics gather our spiritual charisms are on full display: hospitality, humor, compassion, evangelism! My friends are eager to invite their friends to church, and the community grows. We see wonders in countless stories of reconciliation with God. Many straight people with families come to our parish because of our witness. They want to raise their children in a faith environment that is loving and affirming, not fearful and exclusive.

I got involved in with LGBTQ ministry and leadership, first in my parish and later with America Media's Outreach and Fortunate Families, a group based in Lexington, Kentucky. With the help of people capable of offering non-judgmental welcome, I felt heard by the church and that my presence mattered. Priests and even a bishop encouraged me to continue my work. I started writing for national media, became a public advocate for LGBTQ Catholics, and worked with Catholic communities around the world. My first book, *LGBTQ Catholic Ministry, Past and Present*, traced the movement for LGBTQ Catholic pastoral care in the United States. LGBTQ people are part of the Church and have a rich history of struggle. Despite obstacles, we deeply care about the Church and are helping to find a way forward. The Church needs us just as much as we need the Church. The Body of Christ is incomplete without its LGBTQ members.

- **What is your relationship with Christian communities and with the reality of the Church, and in what ways do you find support or encounter difficulties?**

I currently attend both a local Episcopal church and a Catholic parish. My husband is Afro-Caribbean, grew up evangelical Protestant, and loves going to the Episcopal Church, which is openly LGBTQ-affirming and far more interracial than surrounding Catholic parishes. It's a gift to attend church with him and watch his own healing from the spiritual abuse he suffered as a gay teen. As a Catholic I value community and worship with the Episcopal Church and see that God is present there.

I also attend Catholic Mass and LGBTQ ministry events. My local parish accepts me as I am. When my husband attends, we sit together as husband and husband and feel right at home. I have been involved in parish leadership, and the priests and other parishioners respect me. It's a gift to know that I belong. There are many parishes, even in New York City, where I would not be welcome.

Whenever I am discouraged by homophobia or transphobia in the church (for example, Pope Francis' use of the word *frociaggine* and the Vatican's dehumanizing reduction of transgender people and their experiences to an "ideology"), I return to my local parish. It's easy to be angry at

an institutional church that doesn't seem to know me. It's much harder to be angry at the fellow Catholics I love and who love me.

At Mass we take a while to exchange the sign of peace and stay to chat after the liturgy concludes. Frequently the church's security must ask us to leave because the building is closing for the night! We often go out for dinner and continue fellowship over a meal.

As a community we care for the ill, elderly, lonely, and depressed among us. We strive to welcome newcomers and make everyone feel included. LGBTQ ministries frequently become family to those who have been rejected from their biological families because they are LGBTQ. In my experience, this is what the church should be.

The Catholicism that keeps me Catholic welcomes me as I am. I know of many priests who have been attacked because of their support for LGBTQ folks. I imagine them like Mary, protecting LGBTQ Catholics with her mantle, as they get hit by the hateful arrows of homophobia. I can't emphasize enough how much a difference LGBTQ-affirming, and sometimes openly gay, church leaders make. They have saved my spiritual life and the spiritual lives of hundreds of other LGBTQ Catholics I know.

I value our priests but also recognize that patriarchy is a problem for my lesbian Catholic sisters. While gay men may feel at home in my parish, lesbian Catholics are often ignored. Few gay women attend because they see no one in leadership who can relate to their experiences. The Body of Christ is hurting because these women are overlooked.

Finally, I teach at a university that was founded by the Sisters of St. Joseph Brentwood. They have been wonderful examples of Christ's love to me. My university supports my research and ministry, and I regularly consult with our campus minister and the sisters' community as they seek to become more welcoming and affirming themselves. Located in the center of Long Island, New York, they are an oasis for LGBTQ Catholics who receive no support from the local diocese.

Being an LGBTQ Catholic is not easy, and many days I grieve the harm the church has caused. But I also have hope. I have witnessed conversion during Pope Francis' papacy at the local and universal levels of the church, and I look forward to helping build up the body of Christ that reflects Jesus' ministry of healing and inclusion.