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Kieran Fitzsimons

Welcoming our
LGBT+ Sisters
and Brothers

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The whole creation is on tiptoe to see the wonderful sight of the sons [and daughters] of God coming into their own.
[Romans 8:9]

In this article, I aspire to shed a little light on the background and position of LGBT+ people (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and other sexualities) in the Catholic Church. I write from the perspective of a gay man who is a Franciscan brother and priest. I share a story and give some context. In my article I will engage with *Dignity's* mission statement, the narrowing of our understanding of sexuality, the reality of oppression and the need for dialogue. Finally, I will look at normalisation and the *sensus fidei*, the need for a paradigm shift and future challenges. Overall, I hope to contribute positively to an ongoing dialogue.

A STORY

I knew a young devout Catholic man many years ago who came to London and shortly afterwards discovered that he was gay. This caused him great distress because he understood that sex was to be within heterosexual marriage and primarily for bringing up children. Previously he had pursued a vocation to be a priest, but reluctantly discerned after some time that this was not for him. Marriage also was out of the question. He had a brief holiday affair with a handsome young man visiting from abroad. That brief but powerful experience of relational sex and well-being, was the turning point in convincing him of his homosexuality. Despite Catholicism's negative judgement, he felt that there was something good, beautiful about it. However, that uplifting experience proved elusive, not to be encountered again for several years, despite the searching. At the age of 23 he felt that he faced the overwhelmingly bleak prospect of an enforced celibate, lonely life. He struggled

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with all this for about four more years, trying to be faithful to the Church's teaching. When the loneliness got unbearable, he had occasional one-night stands and affairs that lasted no more than a few weeks or months. A conflicted, painful inner life buried deep, sometimes not so deep, below an ordinary surface. A sequence of fairly regular guilt-filled confessions ensued. One well-meaning confessor encouraged him to find a good, Catholic woman. Then aged 27, after a period of searching, reading, meetings, praying, encountering compassionate priests, socialising with gay friends, a "miracle" occurred: the process of reconciling and integrating his homosexuality with his Catholic Christianity began. He met the love of his life not long afterwards.

This "miracle" happened over time. A "forbidden" prayer had been answered! During that period, the young man crucially, tentatively told God to go away. He'd grab happiness in this life, even if it cost an eternity of hell. A decision no human being should feel forced to make! Such indoctrination, spiritual abuse is horrendous, since it appears to penetrate the very soul, not just in this life, but for eternity. However, that "crisis" enabled God to communicate God's great loving, inclusive heart to him. It shattered false images of God, organised religion, and had a domino effect. One consequence was a critical reappraisal of the Church's other teachings. It was a growing-up experience. Something similar to the effect Pope Paul VI's *Humane Vitae* had on many people from 1968 onwards. The Church seems to dread unlocking sex from procreation, fearing that the whole pack of moral cards will collapse.

SOME CONTEXT

The Book of Genesis tells us that God made the world and human beings and we're *very* good! [Gen 1:31] That does not deny or diminish the great mystery of sin, evil and suffering in our lives and world. St Paul reminds us all that *God loved us with so much love ...* [Ephesians 2:4] St John the Evangelist says that *God loved the world so much ...* [1 John 4:11] We are loved with infinite divine love. In that love, each human being is precious, beautiful, simultaneously perfect right now, and in a process of greater perfection, of infinite divinisation.¹ That's good news for everyone. At heart, it's an all-inclusive web of magnificent relationships. A kin-dom launched by Jesus of Nazareth.²

1 *God hath deified our nature, though not by turning it into himself, but by making it his own inseparable habitation*, Quotation in the original English from the Folgar Library Edition of the Works of Richard Hooker, vol 2, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, ed W. Speed Hill (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Press, 1977), V. 54.5., cited in Gene Robinson, *In the Eye of the Storm* (Norwich, Canterbury Press, 2008), p. 43.

2 *Mark 1:15*. In the *People's Companion to the Breviary, Volumes 1 and 2* (The Carmelites of Indianapolis, USA, 1997) the word *kingdom* is translated as *kindom*, referring to relationships, which I understand to being a web of wonderful relationships e.g., Volume 1: p. 27 (*Colossians 1:13*); p. 50 (*Daniel 3:54*); p. 67 (*Rev 5:10*).

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Our Church seems to forget, occasionally, the radical, wondrous theology of the Incarnation: God-made-human-like-you-and-me, so that we might share God's very divinity. The motivation, attitude and action of a great lover are to share absolutely everything. Meister Eckhart, said, *You are God's seed. As the pear seed grows into the pear tree and the hazel seed becomes the hazel tree, so does God's seed in you become God.* Do we believe in the Incarnation, that each and every human being is loved into existence, made for love on earth and eternal relational love? Love is in our very DNA. We're infinitely loved and loveable. Our surfaces are sometimes damaged, maybe badly damaged, but our inner, deep core of goodness and beauty remains intact. No power, no thing and no one can damage, destroy or rob us of this God-given gift. Teilhard de Chardin said, *By virtue of Creation, and still more the Incarnation, nothing here below is profane for all those who know how to see.*³

From a basic *human rights*' perspective, each and every adult human being has the right to a mutually consenting, respectful, sexual relationship. Adult celibacy, or I should say, total sexual abstinence, may be the chosen lifestyle of a minority, maybe at times of a majority. But it is something to be freely, maturely chosen. It may be chosen temporarily, as in some faith systems. It should never be an external imposition.

That's basically our context. In that huge family of our Creator of wonderful diversity, we each have our honoured home, treasured place. So, when we speak of welcoming anyone, particularly minorities of people who are marginalised, devalued, oppressed, the need and justice of welcoming does indeed apply.⁴ But in another profound sense, conditional human welcoming definitely does not apply in God's kin-dom. *We LGBT+ people* always have

3 *The Divine Milieu* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2001), p. 30.

4 The issue on LGBT+ people and the Catholic Church has long been controversial. Debate specifically on that of welcoming them is historically relatively recent. Challenges have come from: developments in our understanding of humanity; civil society and within the Church. Fr James Martin SJ is a currently high profiler with his book, *Building a Bridge: How the Catholic Church and the LGBT Community Can Enter into a Relationship of Respect, Compassion, and Sensitivity* (New York: HarperOne, rev. ed., 2018). This book has been welcomed by some senior clerics including: Cardinal Farrell, Prefect of the Vatican's Dicastery for Laity, Family, and Life; U.S.A. Cardinals Cupich and Tobin. A critic is Cardinal Sarah. Other contributors to debate have included: John McNeill, theologian, priest, psychotherapist, *The Church and the Homosexual* (Kansas City: Sheed, Andrews and McMeel, 1976), and *Freedom, Glorious Freedom: The Spiritual Journey to the Fulness of Life for Gays, Lesbians and Everybody Else* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995); John Boswell, historian, professor at Yale University, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (The University of Chicago Press, 1980), described as a "ground breaking work"; Richard Woods OP, *Another Kind of Love: Homosexuality and Spirituality* (Fort Wayne, Indiana: Knoll Publishing Co, 1988); James Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2001); Gareth Moore OP, *A Question Of Truth: Christianity and Homosexuality* (London: Continuum, 2003).

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been, *are*, and always will be at home, *in our home* ... in God's kingdom. One tends to only welcome visitors and newcomers. We have never been away! But we may need reminding, to remind ourselves of this important truth, and others. God's kingdom is our birth-right!

STATEMENT

Dignity, a USA body, which organises to unite LGBT+ people, families, friends and loved ones in order to develop leadership, and be an instrument through which they may be heard and promote reform in the Church, states:

*We believe that LGBT+ Catholics in our diversity are members of Christ's mystical body ... We have an inherent dignity because God created us ... the Holy Spirit sanctified us in Baptism ... Because of this, it is our right, ... privilege, and ... duty to live the sacramental life of the Church, so that we might become more powerful instruments of God's love working among all people ... We believe that we can express our sexuality physically, in a unitive manner that is loving, life-giving, and life-affirming. We believe that all sexuality should be expressed in an ethically responsible and unselfish way.*⁵

THE NARROWING OF SEXUALITY

Teilhard de Chardin said: *All (human) love is sexual. But the genital is only one of many expressions of sexual love.* He proceeded to explain, for example, that Mary's love for Jesus, and vice versa was sexual love, but not expressed genitally. Sadly, too-often both secular society *and* our Church have impoverished the rich gift of sexuality. We have misidentified sexual love solely with genitality. This is one of many significant risks of a patriarchal Church, dominated by an unrepresentative, male, celibate clergy, some of whom tragically have under-developed emotional and sexual hinterlands. Apart from justice, it's yet another reason for the full participation of women in all areas and levels of our Church. Otherwise we continue to live with a debilitating deep wound, that saps our energy, creativity and equilibrium.

OPPRESSION

In our human situation, we note the reality of the oppression, criminalisation, imprisonment and execution of LGBT+ people right down through history. Only a few decades ago we witnessed the secular decriminalisation of people with LGBT+ sexualities and the removal of their labelling of mental illness from the psychiatric bibles in the USA and Europe, the withdrawal of practices such as shock aversion therapies and chemical castration. But contemporary Russia, its' client states, certain Middle Eastern and African nations, like Uganda, remain examples of a persistently cruel homophobia.

5 For *Dignity USA's* full Statement and Purpose, see www.dignityusa.org

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We remember Nazi concentrations camps, and our Church's poor pastoral response to gay men diagnosed with HIV and AIDS in the 1980s and 90s. Our post-Vatican II Church continues to use derogatory language such as "intrinsically disordered," requiring a chaste, celibate life, devaluing the rich gift of our sexuality in impersonal, clinical terminology. Were genitals part of the goodness of creation, or bad apples slipped into the human barrel, by a mischievous little minx, when God was distracted? Under Pope Francis, certain attitudinal changes may be occurring. But they are contradictory and ambivalent. A Vatican document in December 2016, reaffirmed a 2005 instruction banning gay men from entering the priesthood.⁶

DIALOGUE: RELATING AS EQUALS

There seems to be a tendency in parts of the hierarchical Church to be more comfortable with LGBT+ people who approach as self-denying, guilt-ridden, apologetic sinners. These are vulnerable women and men who are searching/confused, in denial/trying to escape their primary sexual orientation. Here we have an unequal power relationship. Where individual ambiguity, uncertainty tends to encounter a dogmatic, institutional certainty. This can morph into an unhealthy, suppressed, occasionally psychologically dangerous sub-culture, among laity *and* clergy. Alternatively, the Church seems to be uncomfortable with encountering, on an equal basis, happy, educated, articulate, responsible LGBT+ people, who have good self-esteem, who are devoted Christians. Jung comes to mind: *But what if I should discover that the very enemy himself is within me, that I myself am the enemy who must be loved – what then?*

NORMALISATION AND THE SENSUS FIDEI

The normalisation of a variety of sexualities and relationships is already happening in certain secular societies and even in Christian Churches. We witnessed this in Ireland in 2015, when 62% of the Irish Republic's majority Catholic electorate voted to legalise same-sex marriage. Parents and grandparents played

6 The Vatican Congregation for Clergy document, *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation*, (8 Dec, 2016) restated that men *with deeply rooted homosexual tendencies* should not be accepted into Catholic seminaries and consequently ordained priests (nos 199, p. 81). That stance is a restatement of the Congregation for Catholic Education's *Instruction Concerning the Criteria for the Discernment of Vocations with regard to Persons with Homosexual Tendencies in view of their Admission to the Seminary and to Holy Orders* (4 Nov, 2005). The section in the 2016 document concerning men who experience same-sex attraction (nos 199, p. 1) takes most of its content from the 2005 document (section 2, para 4: ... *it is necessary to state clearly that the Church, while profoundly respecting the persons in question, cannot admit to the seminary or to holy orders those who practice homosexuality, present deep-seated homosexual tendencies or support the so-called "gay culture"*; and section 3, para 5). I suggest that if this current policy were to be rigorously implemented, there might be a not insignificant loss of seminarians, priests and consecrated religious from the Church.

a crucial decisive role in this. Their basic motivation: we want our children to be happy! This decision went against the wishes of the Catholic Church. It seems to have involved an intellectual discernment, judgement and intuition. This is replicated in other Catholic countries.⁷ Blessed John Henry Newman wrote on the development of Christian doctrine that, if a great idea is duly to be understood ... it is elicited and expanded by trial, and battles into perfection and supremacy.⁸ Pope Francis has indicated that law should not become thorns that strangle the seed, as in the parable of the sower. In a 2017 study, Ben Clements (University of Leicester) found that ‘the attitudes of ordinary religious adherents in relation to LGBT+ rights have changed significantly in recent decades’.⁹ While ‘clear majorities of Anglicans, Catholics and other Christians disapproved in 1983 ... in 2013 opposition had fallen to a minority in each group’.¹⁰ Certain traditional understandings of the *sensus fidei* seem to have a strong circular undercurrent: if our consciences are informed, then we will arrive at the same conclusions as the magisterium. But Pope Francis seems to have opened up the soil here, when he says that God furnishes the totality of the faithful with an instinct of faith – “*sensus fidei*” – which helps them to discern what is truly of God.¹¹ Francis refers to Christians receiving from the Spirit *a certain connaturality with divine realities, and a wisdom which enables them to grasp those realities intuitively, even when they lack the wherewithal to give them precise expression*.¹²

7 Countries with a majority of Catholic citizens (at least nominally) account for half the nations that have legalised same-sex marriage: Belgium, Canada, Spain, Argentina, Portugal, Brazil, France, Uruguay. www.out.come/news-opinion/2015/5/29

8 Newman (1801-1890), *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845), section I, para 7.

9 *Attitudes Towards Gay Rights*, (University of Lancaster: Jan 2017) introductory para 1. www.brin.ac.uk/figures/attitudes-towards-gay-rights

10 Ibid. On same-sex relations and equality, para 4: *While clear majorities disapproved in 1983 (highest at 75 per cent for Catholics and 80 per cent for other Christians; lowest at 58% for the non-affiliated), in 2013 opposition had fallen to a minority in each group: 33% of Anglicans and other Christians, 20% of Catholics, and just 13% of those with no religion.*

11 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, nos 119.

12 “The question is then not so much in what way the Church ... contributes to the formation of the believers’ moral discernment, but also how the moral sense of the faithful can feed into the moral insight of the Church ... (T)he moral sense of the faithful is not so much a cognitive capacity but a practical sense which intuitively realizes what is good or bad moral practice ... (T)he “*sensus fidei*” also refers to ... that innate inclination by which the human person is drawn to act in the way God wants him or her to act. We intuitively desire and commit to live this truth and make it our own, even before we understand it intellectually and understand what precise conduct it demands. But just as this sense of the faith is not only given to the believer individually, there is also something like a “collective conscience” of the entire Church which makes the entire body of the faithful inclined to, and hold fast to, good moral practice even before its concrete actions are to be validated against its explicit moral teaching.” Thomas Knieps-Port le Roi, *Church Teaching on Marriage and Family – A Matter of Sensus Fidelium*, in *The Sensus Fidelium and Moral Theology: Readings in Moral theology No 18*, ed. by Charles E. Curran & Lisa A. Fullam (New York: Paulist Press, 2017), p. 282, 283, 284.

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Our Western, heteropatriarchal culture has tended to elevate the intellectual over the intuitive and practical. Are significant changes occurring in the people's understanding of the *sensus fidei*?¹³ There is also a shift in the understanding of *obedience* from that resembling a military command to dialogue.¹⁴ We live in a fast-changing modern world where guidelines in morality seem to be ever trying to catch up with people's changing lived realities.¹⁵ Our more enlightened Church service-leaders are very aware of the increasing gap between people and clergy, between dry, dogmatic, life-denying teachings and the reality of peoples' lives.

A PARADIGM SHIFT

We need new understandings of humanity and new understandings of God. Richard Rohr refers to Thomas Kuhn who ... made clear that even in the scientific field, a paradigm shift is tantamount to what religion often calls "major conversion." And it is equally rare in both science and religion! Any genuine transformation of worldview asks for such a major switch from the track we're familiar with that often those who hold the old paradigm must actually die off before a new paradigm can gain traction and wide acceptance. Even more shocking is Kuhn's conclusion that a paradigm shift has little to do with logic or even evidence, and everything to do with cataclysmic insight and breakthrough.¹⁶

Kuhn said that paradigm shifts become necessary when the plausibility structure of the previous paradigm becomes so full of holes and patchwork "fixes" that a complete overhaul, which once looked utterly threatening, now appears as a lifeline. Rohr believes that we're at precisely such a moment when it comes to our images of God. Instead of the idea of the Trinity being an abstruse conundrum, it could well end up being the answer to the foundational problem of Western religion. Instead of God being the Eternal Threatener, we have God as the Ultimate Participant – in everything – both the good & the painful.¹⁷ This allows God to

13 "While remaining true to its mandate to preach the Gospel, the church assumes a servant role vis-à-vis the world. The relationship is reciprocal: the world helps the church in being true to itself – an unprecedented stance for an ecclesiastical document [*Gaudium et Spes*]", John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (London: The Belknap Press Of Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 234.

14 "(D)ialogue is the preferred mode of operation of the church in relationship to the world, as Paul VI indicated in his encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*" John W. O'Malley, p. 233. However, dialogue seemed to quickly evaporate in the subsequent papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

15 "(A) shared belief over a long time, which is a proven criterion for the sense of the faithful in doctrinal and devotional matters, can hardly be invoked in the field of morality where constantly new questions and dilemmas emerge for which there is no precedent in earlier periods". Le Roi, *Opera Cit* p.285.

16 Richard Rohr, with Mike Morrell, *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation* (London: SPCK, 2016), p. 35.

17 *Ibid*, p. 36.

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be much larger ... and totally inclusive ...¹⁸ Rohr proceeds to say that the implications of this spiritual paradigm shift, this Trinitarian Revolution, are staggering: ... every bit of ambition for humanity and the earth, for wholeness and holiness, is the eternally flowing life of the Trinitarian God.¹⁹

Paradigm shifts in Western society concern sexuality and sexual morality. What was once deemed, for example, to be “living in sin,” socially taboo, a minority lifestyle, is now regarded by many as “cohabitation,” acceptable, a common lifestyle. Numbers of children in families have reduced. Artificial contraceptives, economic forces (e.g., the need for two-income households, high housing costs) and social aspects (e.g., education, increasing gender equality, careers/work outside home, developments in communication systems), all appear to be contributory factors to such paradigm shifts. The exercise of authority and demand for greater transparency and accountability in democratic societies exert influences and pressures on faith systems, including the Catholic Church. The scandal of the sexual abuse of children/young people and their cover up has hugely damaged the moral authority and credibility of the Catholic Church, other churches and secular institutions. A monarchical (tending to be absolutist, rather than constitutional) style of Church leadership is no longer accepted in democratic societies. Civil law has pressurized/curtailed canon law. Likewise, paradigm shifts are taking place politically and economically in different parts of the world (e.g., USA, China, India, Brazil, Greece) with certain international global companies emerging stronger than nation states, and growing technological developments in technology replacing human labour. While society and Church historically exercised influences on each other, today that power balance has significantly shifted back to society, at least in many parts of Western society. One notes that what has been deemed to constitute “good morality”, “the family”, has shifted considerably down through the ages and in different cultures – take a brief scan of the Bible.

Concluding Comments: Our Future

*(R)eligion's main job is to reconnect us (re-ligio) to the Whole, to ourselves, and to one another—and thus heal us. We have not been doing our job very well.*²⁰

An LGBT+ activist said that there is no such thing as a single

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 37.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 37-8.

²⁰ Richard Rohr, *Breathing under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Franciscan Media, 2011), p. 89.

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issue. All issues are related. I suggest alliances of movements and organisations, such as *ACTA*, *Quest*, *Dignity*, movements for the equality of women, for married clergy, the ordination of women, racial justice, justice for working class people, and many others are needed in the pursuit of Gospel justice, peace and integrity of creation.

Elizabeth Johnson refers to *women's* ownership of themselves as truly beloved of God. Elizabeth says that in a dramatic play about the dilemma of being black, being female, and being alive, Ntozake Shange captures the dynamism of this new religious experience. After roiling adventures of prejudice, hurt and survival, a tall black woman rises from despair to cry out, "*I found god in myself and I loved her fiercely.*"²¹ It is this fierce love, this fierce creative spirituality, which historically marginalised, oppressed and stigmatised groups, bring to and gift the People of God. When the Church is wise and discerning, it welcomes, harnesses and nurtures such gifts and giftedness, for the benefit of all. That, I suggest, is the yearning of our God, a God of rich and wonder-filled diversity.

21 *Quest For the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (London: Continuum, 2011), p. 97.

Hard choices. The Church is at a crossroads. It has a choice. It can turn this creeping existential threat into a disaster by ignoring it, or it can turn it into a spring tide by dealing with it. It cannot afford the luxury of presuming that because of its simple numerical strength, it has time on its side.

– MARY McALEESE et al, *Five Years to Save the Irish Church* (Dublin: Columba Press) p.93.