

NOVATE
VOBIS
NOVALE

The FURROW

A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

Johanna Merry

LGBTQI+
and
Inclusiveness

November 2021

LGBTQI+ and Inclusiveness

Johanna Merry

Although general awareness of human sexuality has expanded in recent times, understandings continue to be in flux, new challenges continue to emerge. The predominant male/female binary view has given way to the realization that gender fluidity, the LGBTQI+¹ spectrum, is a ubiquitous part of every race, culture, class, faith traditions & c. This is so for the Church, as it is for any other human community. There are many Christian families today faced with a dilemma. Although accepting of an LGBTQI+ family member, parents and individuals are often left feeling unsupported in light of Church teachings and practice. Coupled to this fact, adolescents/young adults today are increasingly more aligned to their peers and societal role models rather than traditional values. Many find themselves adrift in a morally relative environment bereft of stable moral norms.

The trusted priest in the local parish may find himself sought after for appropriate pastoral support and guidance. The Church professes that every person is loved by God, without exception, while stressing that all human interactions should be informed by love. Pastoral ministers are aware that every person ought to be respected in his/her dignity, careful to avoid any sign of unjust discrimination. However, words of comfort to families and individuals faced with LGBTQI+ challenges may, despite best intentions, appear to be more aspirational and notional. At the October 2014 Synod on the family, and again in the 2015 Synod, Pope Francis expressed sympathetic concern for Catholic parents with lesbian and gay children, and for priests faced with unprecedented challenges in their pastoral role.

The pope recognises that gay persons are socially wounded as they feel that the Church not only condemns, but also excludes them. He muses, if God looks on a gay person does He endorse this

1 LGBTQI – An acronym for ‘lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex persons’ that is also used as shorthand for ‘persons of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expressions or sex characteristics’.

Johanna Merry is a Human Resource Consultant who works with religious congregations and dioceses. She can be contacted at johannamerry@gmail.com

THE FURROW

person's existence or reject or condemn the person? He invited faith communities to consider the mystery of the human person, noticing that God accepts and accompanies all persons with tenderness and mercy, starting from where they find themselves in the pilgrimage of life. In addressing how this question of belonging be further addressed, the pope noted that ordained ministers often lack the training needed to deal with the complex problems currently facing families. He cited that to be true shepherds in these circumstances, priests needed to be skilled in accompaniment and discernment.²

A cursory glance may reveal that some priests have publicly identified with an LGBTQI+ orientation, striving to be responsible for living wholesome sacramental lives consistent with their life choice. Others with veiled identities are making their own spirit-journey, earnestly toiling to resolve inner tensions towards reasonable self-acceptance and psycho-affective maturity. There is both gift and risk implied here – the gift of informed, wholesome role model – or risk of phobic rebuff? Further, there are others who are in hiding, covered over with sewn fig leaves, in the shade among the trees (Genesis 3:7-10).

As Christians we believe that all life is rooted in the unconditional *Love* that is God – *Rachamim*³. A God who speaks of *plans to prosper us not harm us and give us hope and a future* (Jeremiah 29:11). What can the Church offer to its members who need the protective and maternal Love of the Church at a bewildering time? How can priests be resourced as the outstretched hand of the Church offering the *good news* of hope and encouragement, fostering a culture of respectful acceptance? Veering away from the bounds of sexual ethics, the focus discussed here is limited to a pastoral approach. Hereon in, *gay* will be used to include homosexual, lesbian, and the wider LGBTQI+ spectrum.

CONTEXT

It seems appropriate to understand sexual orientation as a dimension of one's personality that persists as a stable structure in some persons, transient or fluid on a developmental trajectory in others. There is no conclusive understanding of sexual orientation in its genesis or morphosis. We are learning that aetiology may include an intermingling of genetic, hormonal, psychological, biological, etc. modalities. Experienced as something *given* rather than chosen, complex and often denying rational explanation. For

2 *Amoris Laetitia* (March 2016) – Chapter six: “Some pastoral perspectives” (199-258).

3 *Rachamim* comes from the Hebrew word *Rechem*, meaning womb. It is the boundaryless love of a mother for her child, a love that stems from the deep knowledge that the child is both of her and not of her.

some presentation is latent, ‘realised’ later. For others there is keen awareness from early life.

Each of the LGBTQI+ constituents on the spectrum has its unique identifying markers. For example, a trans-gender (gender dysphoria) describes a person with a gender identity that does not match the biological sex assigned at birth. A gay orientation produces a relatively stronger emotional and sexual attraction towards individuals of the same sex rather than towards those of the opposite sex, while not ruling out an interest and care for opposite sex. Same-sex attraction does not always lead to physical, homo-genital acts. In many instances the bond of emotional companionship suffices.

There is a growing call for the Church to reset its emphasis (and language) more towards the dignity of the person/gay orientation, rather than bounded by labels like ‘intrinsic disorder/disordered person’. Taking the view that a person is more than their sexual orientation and contingent behaviours, that before all else comes the individual person in his/her wholeness and dignity, Pope Francis’s welcoming tone regarding gay issues intimates that a person’s evidenced good will and sincerity in searching for God is primary.

Sexual beings that we are, there is no escape from the natural erotic drive. Nonetheless, in appealing to personal maturity and responsibility, the Church emphasises that unconsidered behaviours can erode and are corrosive of one’s dignity. Be it for a time, many of us, heterosexual or otherwise, could identify with living recklessly in the shadows as we try to reconcile the strain of competing desires. St Augustine’s *felix culpa* comes to mind. Yet, we all also experience a measure of the constant impulse to keep striving towards something more wholesome, greater than ourselves. Divine revelation helps us to make our human reality knowable, to discover adequate answers to our longings. Emphasis on this striving seems more relevant than passing judgements, implied or otherwise, on the life of any person – gay or otherwise.

Awareness raising regarding discriminatory attitudes, language, actions that offend and humiliate, are being voiced by LGBTQI+ persons in all walks of public life – sports, medicine, politics, hospitality etc. – all role models opening a portal for others. Likewise, there is an emerging stream of un-muted theological voices, challenging the legitimacy of Church practices of exclusion. We all know estranged members of the LGBTQI+ community who ardently desire to be part of the wider Church and within reach of the free gift of grace promised by Christ (Ephesians 2:8). A constellation of signs within Church and society in recent times has displayed a sensitivity towards gay rights, particularly in face of

THE FURROW

injustice, oppression and social exclusion. Pope Francis's ongoing engagement with LGBTQI+ persons, his seemingly strategic changes in Church personnel to include strong voices on equality issues e.g., appointments of Bishop Robert McElroy of San Diego and Bishop John Stowe of Lexington), and his recent June 2021 sentiments of support for the work of Fr. James Martin S.J.⁴ with LGBTQI+ people are noteworthy seminal efforts.

PASTORAL CULTURE

Heterosexual or otherwise, affective maturity indicates that a level of developmental advancement is required to relate appropriately to persons of every orientation in the course of pastoral ministry/Church mission. Mature judgement helps to assure that behavioural practices do not contribute to self-diminishment or scandal in public office. So, is it a question of *psycho-affective maturity* – less so of sexual orientation, that is central to ministerial priesthood? If priests are to take up their pastoral role as the outstretched hand of the Church, key aspects of a formative culture seem relevant.

Identity-Consonance garners confidence, respect, and trust among parishioners and wider. This means patient, faithful attentiveness to one's call to ministerial priesthood to live a life befitting of the call (Ephesians 1:4); that one seeks to integrate aspects of self that are exiled or split-off, in order to live a more authentic and wholesome life in accordance with one's sexual identity. Spiritual accompaniment, ministry mentoring, dedicated personal reflection, prayer, retreat days, etc. all reflect the cultivation of a healthy interior life. Continual 'reality checks' help each of us regarding our lives and relationships – with self, others, Other and creation.

Accompaniment with a compassionate gaze that heals and liberates arises from a pastoral disposition born of a healthy interior life. More often than not, a pedagogical didactic tone tends to smudge pastoral interactions and dialogue. The 'art' of accompaniment involves removing our sandals before the sacred ground of the other (Exodus 3:5) and entering a bond of closeness that reflects 'God's style' of compassion and tenderness. Pastoral accompaniment is both listening in silence, walking alongside, stepping back at times, pointing a way forward, supporting and encouraging, etc.

Discernment may be understood as the attentive listening to the voice of the Spirit and responding, as mirrored in the mentoring

4 Pope Francis's recent handwritten letter to Fr. James Martin, S.J. The occasion for the letter was "Outreach 2021: LGBTQ Catholic Ministry Webinar," a virtual conference sponsored by Fordham University.

interaction between Eli and the boy Samuel (1 Samuel:3). Personal discernment facilitates growth in inner freedom to being open and *present* to the complexity of various pastoral situations. It is here that the culture of accompanying comes to the fore so that each person, without prejudice, might find a home in the faith community, and experience being touched by an unmerited, unconditional and gratuitous mercy that is God⁵. Naturally, one may be flooded by a surge of waxing and waning emotions, particularly where the beauty, promise and mystery of human sexuality is overshadowed by paradox and confusion.

PASTORAL OUTREACH

Families and individuals need a safe space to unburden their feelings, laments and ruminations, so these can be received and acknowledged. They may have a perceived sense of being objects of mingled pity or aversion. Also, both a parent and LGBTQI+ offspring may be caught in a vise of shared failure - each struggling to love themselves and each other unconditionally.

Some prompts are suggested:

- Communication fosters a bond of closeness that can inspire persons to live a full, *best* life possible within the limits of their human condition. By and large, offering guidance when asked, rather than imposing, with an approach that is measured and gradual. May not always be a confirmation of their own ideas or desires, but hopefully such encounters can help them better understand their situation and discover a dynamic path to personal growth and fulfilment.
- Attentiveness to moments of self-discovery, self-affirmation, self-rejection - if the person is self-isolated, be on the lookout for ways to widen the circle of people with whom they can be open about aspects of their identity.
- Some sense of humour around sexuality is not inappropriate (since we all fumble a bit in this territory!). Make room for God's magnanimous love in pastoral and sacramental encounters, restoring and strengthening the impulse towards (the always) more wholesome, elegant choices.
- It may not be unusual for a pastoral minister to feel out of depth in the course of such encounters. Having a list of appropriate helping agencies at hand demonstrates a genuine interest and care. Practical actions like putting in place a dedicated parish

5 Amoris Laetitia (2016) – Chapter eight: “Guiding, discerning and integrating weakness” (291-312).

THE FURROW

LGBTQI+ support group of pilgrims on the same journey can provide a safe forum and enlightening collective experience.

FAITH CHALLENGE

Many LGBTQI+ families/individuals speak of the tension of loving themselves as God's precious creation – called by name and precious in His eyes (Isaiah 42:2; 4; Wisdom 11:24-27), but grapple with ambivalences. It can be a struggle from a vantage point of faith to see a purpose in God's designs. Are such uncomfortable gaps of irresolution the space where God rushes in to meet us, and accompany us in *becoming*? Paul's struggle with his vulnerability, referenced as 'this thing', might offer a glimmer of hope. He recounts that he pleaded with the Lord without success to take this thing away. Eventually, he found a sub-version to make peace with his reality, conceding to a realisation that God's grace was enough for him; *my power is at its best in weakness* (2 Corinthians 12:8–9).

In a similar way, persons of faith are writing their own subtexts which enable them to hold their given vulnerability with less resistance, bear up its challenges with deeper grace. The tender image of a God who finds us with our vulnerability exposed, spreads part of his cloak to cover us and takes us as his very own – *you became mine* (Ezekiel 16:8-9), accepting in us what we cannot even acknowledge, naming in us what we cannot bear to speak of, evokes encouragement and hope.

CONCLUSION

Being open to engage with LGBTQI+ persons and wider demonstrates the will to continue to enlarge our thinking and reshape meaning in these challenging, unprecedented times. Pastoral mentoring can assist ministers in reflecting and revising aspects of their pastoral practices that are relevant to LGBTQI+ issues. For example, being attentive that the use of language re gay/ LGBTQI+ is accurate in homilies or other conduits, attitudes are respectful, and ambiance within the faith community is welcoming. In addition, keeping in step with church teachings and wider theological debates, biomedical and psycho-social developments & c. can help to avert attitudes of ignorance or fundamentalism in making mature judgements. Essentially, what might help people to deepen Love for themselves, others, and the one community of life?

According to Thomas Merton: *there is only one thing necessary: to fulfil our own destiny, according to God's will, to be what God wants us to be* [within the limits and possibilities of our human

ingredients]. How can the outstretched hands of priests offer emboldened opportunities for LGBTQI+ to *sense* the limitlessness of the Love of God that bears with our *becoming*? How can we as Church, in the spirit of *Amoris Laetitia* (2016), keep walking together in a way that ensures we never lose heart because of our limitations, or never stop seeking that fullness of love and communion which God holds out before us?

The Giver of Life. God is not only the ground of life in creation, but its goal in sanctification. Throughout the centuries theologians have tried to tease out this relationship between God and humanity, with the Latin Church thinking in terms of ‘grace’ and ‘nature’, and the Eastern Church talking of *theosis*, the totality of deification. The danger in the Latin line of inquiry lies in reification – thinking of the life of God as a thing in itself, an abstraction that has the effect of alienating the association it is meant to articulate in the first place. This priority of analysis over attachment carries the added risk of putting morality before grace and setting a standard that is moralistic in tone and unrealistic in terms of attainment. This puts the proverbial cart before the horse, presenting Jesus as the Word to be heeded rather than the Word to be heard. John’s narrative approach offers a different avenue to understanding and accepting the life that God offers in and through the Word made flesh, one that is not reduced to a formula.

- Kevin O’Gorman, SMA, *Divine Diamond: Facets of the Fourth Gospel*. 2021. (Dublin: Messenger Publications) p. 17.