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A Good Measure Showing Welcome and Respect in our Parishes for LGBT People and Their Families

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One of the more recent challenges for Catholic parishes is how to welcome their LGBT parishioners, as well as families with LGBT members. But that challenge is also where grace abounds, because so many LGBT Catholics have felt excluded from their church for so long that any experience of welcome can be life-changing--a healing moment that can start them going to Mass again, return them to the faith and even help them to believe in God again.

In the past few years I've heard the most appalling stories from LGBT Catholics who have been made to feel unwelcome in parishes. A 30-year-old autistic gay man who came out to his family, and was not in any sort of relationship, told me that a pastoral associate said he could no longer receive Communion in church. Why? Because saying he was gay was a "scandal."

But cruelty doesn't end at the doors of the church. Last year a woman contacted me to ask if I knew a compassionate priest in her diocese. Why? She was working in a hospice where a Catholic patient was dying. But the local parish priest assigned to the hospice was refusing to anoint him--because he was gay.

Is it surprising that most LGBT Catholics feel like lepers in their own church? Even if LGBT people are living the Gospels and following church teachings, they may still be treated like dirt.

The same holds true for families. The mother of a gay teen told me her son had decided to come back to church after years of feeling that the church hated him. After much discussion, he decided to return on Easter Sunday. The mother was delighted. When Mass began she was so excited to have her son sitting beside her. But after the priest proclaimed the Gospel story of the Risen Christ appearing to Mary Magdalene, guess what he preached on? The evils of homosexuality. The son walked out of the church. And the mother sat in the pew and cried.

But there are also stories of grace in our church. Last year, a university student told me that the first person to whom he came out was a priest. The first thing the priest said was, "God loves you and the church accepts you." The young man told me, "That priest literally saved my life." Indeed, we should rejoice that many Catholic parishes are places where LGBT Catholics feel at home, thanks to both the parish staff and more formalized programs.

My Jesuit community in New York is next to a church called St. Paul the Apostle., which has one of the most active LGBT outreach programs in the world. The ministry is called "Out at St. Paul" and sponsors retreats, Bible study groups, speaking engagements and social events for the parish's large LGBT community. At every 5:15 PM Sunday Mass, when the time comes for parish announcements, an LGBT person gets up and say, "Hi! I'm Jason, or Xorje, or Marianne, and I'm a member at Out at St. Paul. If

you're lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender, we want you to feel welcome. Here are some events coming up this month..."



Sadly, too much the spiritual life of an LGBT Catholic or their families depends on where they happen to live. If you're a gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, trying to make sense of your relationship with God and the church, and you live in a big city with open-minded pastors, you're in luck. If you live in a less open-minded place, or your pastor is homophobic, either silently or overtly, you're out of luck. And the way that Catholics are welcomed, or not welcomed, in their parish heavily influences their outlook on not only the church but on their faith and on God.

That's a scandal. Why should your faith depend on where you live? Is that what God desires for the church? Did Jesus want people in Bethany to feel God's love less than people in Bethsaida? Did Jesus want a woman in Jericho to feel less loved than a woman in Jerusalem?

So what helps a parish to be welcoming and respectful? How can priests and deacons, sisters and brothers, directors of religious education, lay pastoral associates, and all parishioners, help their parish become a home for LGBT Catholics and their families?

The following observations are based on not only my conversations with LGBT people, but also the experience of LGBT ministries and outreach groups that I consulted for this talk. I asked them: What are the most important things for parishes to know and to do?

I'd like to talk about three areas. First, what are some fundamental insights for parishes? Second, what can a parish do to be more welcoming and respectful? Finally, what might the Gospels say to us about this ministry?

Let's begin with six fundamental insights.

1) They are Catholic. That sounds obvious, but parishes need to remember that LGBT people and their families are baptized Catholics. They are as much a part of our church as Pope Francis, the local bishop, the pastor or any other parishioner. It's not a question of making them Catholic or deciding if they're Catholic. They already *are*. So the most important thing we can do for LGBT Catholics may be to welcome them to what is already their church. And remember: just to remain in the church they've often endured years of rejection. Thus, our welcome should reflect that, and should be, to quote Luke's Gospel, "a good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over."

2) They do not choose their orientation. Sadly, there are many people who still believe people choose their orientation, despite the testimony of almost every psychiatrist, biologist and, more important, the lived experience of LGBT people. You don't choose your orientation any more than you choose to be lefthanded. It's not a choice. And it is not an addiction. Thus, it is not a sin simply to be LGBT. Far less, it is not something "blame" on someone, like parents.

3) They have often been treated like lepers by the church. Never underestimate the pain that LGBT people have faced. Not only at the hands of the church, but from society at large. A few statistics may help: In the United States, LGBT teens are *five times* as likely to have attempted suicide than their straight counterparts. *Forty percent* of transgender people in the US attempt suicide. Among young LGBT people in the US, *57% percent* feel unsafe because of their orientation. Also, one study shows that the



more religious the family they come from, the more likely they are to commit suicide. So parishes need to be aware of the real-life consequences of stigmatizing LGBT people.

Most LGBT Catholics have been deeply wounded by the church. They may have been mocked, insulted, excluded, condemned, singled out for critique, either privately or from the pulpit. They may never have heard the term “gay” or “lesbian” expressed in any positive way, or even a neutral way. Even if hateful comments did not come in the parish setting, they may have heard about other Catholic leaders who have made homophobic comments. They fear rejection, judgment and condemnation from the church. In fact, these may be the only things that they expect from the church. This often leads them to exclude themselves from the church.

Parents of LGBT children face similar pain. There is a saying, “When a child comes out of the closet, the parent goes into the closet.” It can be confusing, frightening and embarrassing for parents to accept the reality of their children’s orientation or gender identity. They may suffer shame in front of relatives and friends. Having a child come out, or say that they are transgender, can make the parent feel not only that they have somehow failed, but that they will be isolated, judged and excluded from the church. Parents often also worry about that their children will leave a church that is seen as rejecting them. As a result, pastors and pastoral associates must let parents and families know that they are still welcome, and that they have nothing to fear from the church, and the church is their home.

4) They bring gifts to the church. Like any group, LGBT people bring gifts to the church. Now, it’s usually wrong to generalize, but for a group that has been seen in the church almost exclusively in a negative light, it’s important to consider the gifts of the group. To begin with, because they have been so marginalized, many LGBT people often feel a natural compassion for those on the margins. Their compassion is a gift. They are often forgiving of pastors and priests who have treated them like dirt. Their forgiveness is a gift. They persevere as Catholics in the face of years of rejection. Their perseverance is a gift.

In fact, in the last few years some American parishes have fired LGBT people after they were caught getting married, which is against church teaching--and that’s an accurate term, since usually they are reported on. And something about these situations always mystified me. Every time I would hear these stories, it would always be about the “most beloved” teacher, parish associate or music minister. It made me wonder why they were always the “most beloved” or “most popular.” Then I realized why: LGBT people working for the church really have to *want* to be there, given the way they’re treated. They stick with their ministry *despite* the rejection that they experience. It’s the same with LGBT parishioners: they must make a conscious decision to stay with the church, to stick it out. So when you think about their gifts, you may find with the same reaction that Jesus had with the Roman centurion: amazement at their faith.

5) They long to know God. Many LGBT people struggle with aspects of the church’s teaching—for example, terms like “intrinsicly disordered.” At the same time, many aren’t as focused on those parts of our church’s tradition as people may think. Many want something simpler. They want to experience the Father’s love through the community. They want to meet Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. They want to experience the Holy Spirit through the sacraments. They want to hear good homilies, sing good music and be part of a faith community. Treat them like that--not as protestors but as parishioners. Help LGBT people and their families to fulfill their deepest desires: to know God.

6) **They are loved by God.** God loves them. So should we. And I don't mean with a stingy, grudging, half-hearted, judgmental, conditional love. I mean real love. And what does real love mean? The same thing it means for everyone: knowing them in the complexity of their lives, celebrating with them when life is sweet, suffering with them when life is bitter, as a friend would. But I say even more: love them like Jesus loved people on the margins: extravagantly.

With those insights in mind, how can a parish be more welcoming? How can we treat them with the virtues that Catechism recommends, "respect, compassion and sensitivity"? Let me suggest ten things. Now, all these suggestions need to be fitted to your own parish. No one size fits all. Each parish must develop its own model.

1) **Examine your own attitudes towards LGBT people and their families.** Do you someone is sinful simply because she's lesbian, or more inclined to sin than a straight woman? Do you hold the parents "responsible" for a gay teen's orientation? Do you think a person is transgender person only because it's "fashionable"? Or here's a question: If none or only a few LGBT people have made themselves known to you, you might ask: Why might that be the case?

Likewise, are you discriminating against them in your heart? For example, do you hold the LGBT community to the same standards as the straight community? With LGBT people we tend to focus on whether they are fully conforming to the church's teachings on sexual morality. Are you doing the same with straight parishioners--with those who are living together before being married or practicing birth control? Be consistent about whose lives get scrutinized. Pastors are often more sympathetic to the irregular situations of straight people because they know them. For example, even though Jesus condemns divorce outright, we are fine with divorced people in our parishes. Do we treat LGBT people the same way?

What can you do about these attitudes? Be honest about them. But also get facts, not myths, about sexual orientation and gender identity from scientific and social scientific sources, not from rumors and misinformed and homophobic online sites. Then talk to God and your spiritual director about your feelings and be open to God's response. Invite your pastoral team to speak about their feelings and experiences. Then this leads to the next step.

2) **Listen to them.** Listen to the experiences and stories of LGBT Catholics, and their parents and families. If you don't know what to say, you might ask: "What was it like growing up as a gay boy in the church?" "What is it like being a lesbian Catholic? And an important question, "What is it like being a transgender person?" We know little about the transgender experience, so we must listen. Invite the parents of an LGBT child to speak with your pastoral council. And ask them: "What was it like to discover that your child was gay?" "How has the church helped you or hurt you?" "How has your understanding of God changed?"

Whether you're participating in a ministry like an LGBT outreach program, or are meeting with an LGBT person one-on-one, begin with their experiences. To that end, trust that the Holy Spirit will guide them in their formation as Christians. We don't treat other Catholics by simply repeating church teaching without considering their lived experience. So avoid doing that with LGBT people. Notice how Jesus treated people on the margins: for example, how he treated the Samaritan woman. Does he castigate her for being married several times and living with someone? Not at all. Instead, Jesus listens to her and treated them with respect. So be like Jesus. Listen, encounter, accompany. If the church listened to LGBT people, 90% of the homophobia and prejudice would disappear.

3) **Acknowledge them** in homilies or parish presentations as full members of the parish, without judgement and not as fallen-away Catholics. LGBT people should never be degraded or humiliated from the pulpit—nor should anyone. Just mentioning them can be a step forward. Sometimes in homilies I'll say, "God loves all of us all—whether we're old or young, rich or poor, straight or LGBT." Even something small like that can send a signal. It also sends a signal to their parents and grandparents, and brothers and sisters. You may not believe you have any LGBT people in your parish. Maybe not. But you certainly have parents of LGBT people. Remember that when you're speaking about LGBT people you're speaking about their children.

4) **Apologize to them.** If LGBT people have been harmed in the name of the church by homophobic comments and attitudes and decisions, apologize. And I'm speaking here to the church's ministers. They were harmed by the church, you're a minister of the church. You can apologize. It doesn't solve everything, but it's a start.

5) **Don't reduce gays and lesbians to the call to chastity we all share as Christians.** LGBT people are more than their sexual lives. But sometimes that's all they hear about. Remember not to focus solely on sexuality but on the many other joys and sorrows in their lives. They lead rich lives. Many are parents themselves or are caring for aging parents; many help the poor in their local community, many are involved in civic and charitable organizations. They're often deeply involved in the life of the parish. See them in their totality.

6) **Include them in ministries.** As I've mentioned, there is a tendency to focus on the sexual morality of LGBT parishioners, which is wrong, because first, you often have no idea what their sexual lives are like; and, second, even if they are falling short they are not the only ones. As a result, LGBT people may feel they have to be dishonest about who they are, and that they have no place in ministries. Like everyone else who does not live up to the Gospels--which is everyone--LGBT people should be invited into parish ministries: Eucharistic Ministers, Music Ministers, Lectors, Bereavement Ministry, and every ministry. By the way, by not welcoming them the church is missing out on their gifts. They will simply go to where they are welcomed, to where they can bring their whole selves. Also, asking someone who has felt left out his or her or their whole life can be a life-changing.

7) **Acknowledge their individual gifts.** Not only should we acknowledge the gifts that LGBT people play in the church as a group, but their *individual* gifts should be valued. For example, one of most talented cantors in our local Jesuit parish is gay. He is kind, thoughtful and an essential part of our worship. You probably have similar people in your parish. Remember how important it is to acknowledge them, to praise them, to raise them up. Don't hide their light under your bushel basket!

8) **Invite everyone on the parish staff to welcome them.** You may have a welcoming pastor, but what about everyone else? Does the person answering the phone know what to say to a lesbian couple who wants to have their child baptized? At funerals, are the gay adult children of the deceased treated with the same respect as other children? What about the teacher in a parish school who has two fathers coming to a parent-teacher conference? How does a deacon treat the father of a gay man who just died and who wants a funeral? Are gay and lesbian Catholics welcome in bereavement groups if their partner dies? Is your parish open to the children of all couples, not just straight couples? Are the children of lesbian and gay couples welcome in educational programs, parish schools, and all sacramental preparation programs? The voice of your parish, the voice of welcome, is not just your pastor's voice, but everyone's.



Also, think of it this way: by excluding LGBT Catholics, the church is falling short of its own call to be God's family. By excluding LGBT people, you are breaking up God's family.

9) **Sponsor special events or develop an outreach program.** Like everyone else, LGBT Catholics want to feel like they are part of the church. And, as for all its children, the onus is on the church to invite them to become part of the community. But for most LGBT people, the church has not been a place of welcome. So specific LGBT events and outreach programs are helpful to bridge the gap between your intentions and their suspicions.

As for events, there are many possibilities: you can offer a Mass of welcome, a weekend retreat, a day of recollection, a book club, or simply a speaker. And it doesn't have to be focused solely on LGBT issues. That is, sponsor a speaker to talk to LGBT parishioners about prayer. Or show a video about a topic that people need to be informed on, like the experience of transgender people. Again, that issue—transgender people—is one that the church needs to learn about because society at large is still learning about. Bishop Christopher Coyne of Burlington, Vermont said, "I see no reason why transgender people would not be welcome in church. There is more evidence...that a lot of this is biological; it's not just something a person just makes as a fashionable choice or cultural choice. This is who they are...everyone is God's creature, and I would invite anyone to come to the table."

There are many models for LGBT outreach ministries. They range from programs where LGBT people speak with one another privately; to ones where LGBT parishioners meet together with other parishioners; to education programs on church teaching; to more holistic approaches where the group does not focus on sexuality but on the many other questions that LGBT people face; to family groups for parents; to groups that do outreach to the LGBT community in the area, like working in shelters for LGBT youth; to what you might call "blending-in" programs where the parish makes a includes LGBT topics as one element among many in the parish: in adult education, social justice programs, and youth ministry. All of this depends on your parish.

As for parents, one mother said, when I asked what I should say to you: "The most important thing to give parents is a safe, welcoming space to share their stories with other Catholic parents. So many feel alone, and don't think anyone else is going through this. It's relief to know that there are others on the journey.... And they don't need to hear their children being compared to alcoholics. Hearing positive statements from the pulpit would also be nice, instead of acting as if their children don't exist."

Last year, the Jesuit parish where I celebrate Mass—called, not surprisingly, St. Ignatius Loyola--sponsored an evening of sharing stories. Five members of our parish came together—two gay men, the mother of a gay child, the father of a gay child, and his gay teen son—to talk about their lives. Their sharing of stories of joys and griefs were healing for them and for the whole parish. Why healing for them? Imagine being told that you are not a part of the church, and then being asked to speak about your experiences. And healing for the rest of the parish because it brought us all together in a way that we could scarcely have imagined.

10) **Advocate for them.** Be prophetic. There are many times when the church can provide a moral voice for this persecuted community. And I'm not talking about hot-button topics like same-sex marriage. I'm talking about incidents in countries where LGBT people are rounded up and thrown in jail for being gay. Or executed. In those countries these are life issues. In other countries, it may be responding to incidents of teen suicides, or hate crimes or bullying. There are many clear opportunities for parishes to stand with LGBT people who are being persecuted. The Catechism says, "Every sign of unjust

discrimination must be avoided” when it comes to LGBT people. Do we believe this part of the Catechism? The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith wrote in 1986, “It is deplorable that homosexual persons have been and are the object of violent speech and action. Such treatment deserves condemnation from the church’s pastors whenever it occurs.” Do we believe that statement from the CDF?

This is part of what it means to be a Christian: standing up for the marginalized, the persecuted the beaten down. It’s shocking how little the Catholic church has done this. Let your LGBT parishioners know you stand with them, mention their persecution in a homily when appropriate, or in the prayers of the faithful. The 1980 “Letter to Bishops on the Care of Homosexual Persons” from the CDF says, “It is deplorable that homosexual persons have been and are the object of violent malice in speech and action. Such treatment deserves condemnation from the church’s pastors whenever it occurs.” Be prophetic. Be courageous. Be like Jesus.

Because if we’re not trying to be like Jesus, what’s the point? And remember that in his public ministry Jesus continually reached out to those people who felt like they were on the margins. The movement for Jesus was from the outside-in. He was bringing people who felt on the outside into the community. Because there is no us and them for Jesus. There is only us.

To that end, I’d like to close with a story from the Gospels that might help us understand our ministry to LGBT people.

The Gospel of Luke tells us the beautiful story of Jesus’s encounter with Zacchaeus. Jesus is travelling through Jericho, a huge city. He’s on his way to Jerusalem, towards the end of his ministry, so he would have been well known. As a result, he probably had a large crowd following him. In Jericho, there is a man named Zacchaeus. He was the chief tax collector in the region, and so would have also been seen by the Jewish people as the “chief sinner.” Why? Because he would have been seen as colluding with the Roman authorities. So Zacchaeus was someone who was probably on the outs with everyone.

Here I’d like you to invite you to think of Zacchaeus as a symbol for the LGBT person. Not because the LGBT people are more sinful than the rest of us—because we’re all sinners. But because they feel so marginalized.

Luke’s Gospel describes Zacchaeus as “short in stature.” How little “stature” LGBT people feel that they have in the church today. Luke also says that Zacchaeus could not see Jesus “on account of the crowd.” That was probably because of his size, but how often does the “crowd” get in the way of the LGBT person encountering Jesus? When are we in the parish part of the “crowd” that doesn’t let LGBT people come close to God?

So Zacchaeus climbs a tree, because, as Luke tells us, he wanted to see “who Jesus was.” And this is what the LGBT person wants: to see “who Jesus is.” But the crowd gets in the way.

Now here comes Jesus making his way through Jericho, probably with hundreds of people clamoring for his attention. And whom does he point to? One of the religious authorities? One of his disciples? No, to Zacchaeus! And what does he say to Zacchaeus? Does he shout, “Sinner!” Does he shout, “You terrible tax collector”? No! He says, “Hurry down for I must stay at your house today!” It’s a public sign of welcome to someone on the margins.



Then comes my favorite line in the story, “All who saw it began to grumble!” Which is exactly what is happening today towards LGBT people! People grumble. Go online and you’ll see all the grumbling. An offer of mercy to someone on the margins always makes people angry.

But Zacchaeus climbs down from the tree and, as the Gospels say, he “stood there.” The original Greek is much stronger, *statheis*: He stood his ground. How often do LGBT people have to stand their ground in the face of opposition and prejudice in the church?

Then Zacchaeus says that he will give half of his possessions to the poor and repay anyone he has defrauded, four times over. An encounter with Jesus leads to a conversion, as it does for everyone. And what do I mean by conversion? Not “conversion therapy.” No, the conversion that happens to Zacchaeus is the conversion we’re all called to. In the Gospels, Jesus calls it *metanoia*, a conversion of minds and hearts. For Zacchaeus his conversion meant giving to the poor. All this comes from an encounter with Jesus. Because Jesus’s approach was, more often than not, community first, conversion second. For John the Baptist the model was to convert first and then be welcomed into the community. For Jesus, it’s community first, conversion second. Welcome and respect come first.

This is how Jesus treats people who feel on the margins. He seeks them out before anyone else; he encounters them, and he treats them with respect, sensitivity and compassion.

So when it comes to LGBT people and their families in our parishes, it seems that there are two places to stand. You can stand with the crowd, who grumble, and who oppose mercy for those on the margins. Or you can stand with Zacchaeus, and, more importantly, with Jesus.