Reaching Out to Affirm the Holiness in Each Person

Stanley Francis Zerkowski

The response was nearly immediate when the parish on the north side of Chicago included the LGBTQ+ community in a petition during the universal prayer. Grateful to be acknowledged, a parishioner voiced appreciation soon after the Mass during which the community prayed: “For those on the margins: may every person be affirmed in their dignity, especially immigrants, refugees, LGBTQ, non-traditional families, and those who feel alienated or removed from our community, we pray.”

In my position with the ministry Fortunate Families, I had worked with the pastoral staff of St. Benedict Parish for more than two years as they discerned their ministry to the LGBTQ+ community. My roles as both the director of LGBTQ ministry for the Diocese of Lexington and the executive director of Fortunate Families, a national Catholic ministry that supports LGBTQ+ siblings, brings me to work with parishes and dioceses. Through these positions, I facilitate respectful conversation with Church leadership, through sharing personal stories and by working to establish intentional Catholic LGBTQ+ ministry sites in dioceses, parishes, educational institutions, and communities. The work includes accompaniment and bridge-building as we seek to celebrate and safeguard the dignity of LGBTQ+ children of God.

CALL PEOPLE BY NAME

During my meetings with the staff at St. Benedict, we discerned intentional ways to connect with the LGBTQ+ community and their families and friends. How to best acknowledge they exist was discussed at length: call them by name. Especially in prayer. Such an acknowledgment in prayer often affects people in the assembly. At St. Benedict, the individual had told of tears streaming down his face when he heard the petition. In another parish, high school students contacted me with gratitude for my encouraging their parish to pray aloud for LGBTQ+ persons. They said they felt noticed for the first time at their parish. I had only begun a conversation and proposed options. The parish leadership and the Holy Spirit had done the rest.

If we as pastoral ministers consider LGBTQ+ Catholics members of our community, using the name they call themselves—LGBTQ: Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans, Queer—in our prayer is a good beginning. When we bring before God all our needs and dreams, we bring our entire human family, and we speak their sacred names on holy ground: immigrants, refugees, LGBTQ+.

How can a faith community expect people to feel part of the family if their existence is not acknowledged? Too often, the only acknowledgment LGBTQ+ persons receive is pejorative or accusatory. In my ministry, I hear stories about LGBTQ+ Catholics being invisible in their communities at best and being treated with contempt at worst. Why do we not affirm LGBTQ+ persons in our prayer and words at worship?

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2358, instructs that people who are lesbian and gay are to be treated with “respect, compassion and sensitivity.” The faithful do that when praying for the LGBTQ+ community at Eucharist and acknowledging their holiness, hurt, and hopes. After speaking their name at the source and summit of our lives, we go in peace, to establish a culture of respect, compassion, and sensitivity in our daily living beyond the doors of the building.

A SIGN OF WELCOME

Parishes can send a signal of affirmation before people even step inside their buildings. Historic St. Paul Church in Lexington, Kentucky, has received a positive response to the rainbow banner, stating, LGBTQ+ CATHOLICS, FAMILY & FRIENDS—ALL ARE WELCOME, that is placed in front of the church for Pride Month, Respect Life Month, and at other times of the year. The first to voice their appreciation were a fifth- and eighth-grader from the parish school. The students, along with their mothers, arrived in the office to say that they were deeply touched that the parish was prophetic enough and loving enough, to place that banner. The two youth identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community and said that they finally felt as though they mattered and that the Church cared that they existed. Acknowledging that someone exists in a way that celebrates their dignity is powerful. It is a holy thing.

Nick, a gay man in his late twenties who saw the banner while walking to another church, stopped in to worship with us.
instead. The intentional welcome the banner provided was the initial invitation for him to walk through the church doors. While he sat near the side wall in the rear of the church, a woman warmly welcomed him and at the end of the Mass said she hoped that he would return. Nick became involved in our LGBTQ+ ministry and was elected chair of the parish council as an openly gay man. He now serves on the Diocese of Lexington Peace and Justice Commission and the Diocese of Lexington LGBT Outreach Commission. Although the banner offered the initial invitation to Nick, a culture of intentional welcome that permeates the parish was necessary for him to stay.

JT watched the parish for about a year, checking to see if our actions matched our words and our message was credible. He had seen the parish’s banner and our presence at Pride festivals, where the parish LGBTQ+ ministry has a booth. Though impressed with the banner and our outreach at festivals, his experience of the Church as a teen made him wary. He explained that during confession he had been told that there was no place for him in the Church and that he should go elsewhere on Sunday morning. Taking to heart that directive, he stayed away from the Church until thirty years later, when he found an affirming community at St. Paul’s. A valuable member of our parish, JT has provided his skills as an architect to the parish, serving with the property stewardship ministry and leading the restoration of our parish hall. Not only has he shared his talent and gifts but his heart and story as a member of the LGBTQ+ ministry.

Daniel was attracted to the Catholic Church because of the outreach at St. Paul’s and the intentional welcome and embrace. He saw a Gospel-centered community that recognized the worth and dignity of LGBTQ+ persons, while also celebrating them. In the Church until thirty years later, when he found an affirming community at St. Paul’s. A valuable member of our parish, JT has provided his skills as an architect to the parish, serving with the property stewardship ministry and leading the restoration of our parish hall. Not only has he shared his talent and gifts but his heart and story as a member of the LGBTQ+ ministry.

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Listening to students allowed us to identify intentional steps to accompany LGBTQ+ students, including creating safe
environments for support, community building, and theological reflection. The listening sessions provided an opportunity for a student to give permission for her hurt to be shared with her pastor, who was mortified when he heard. A graced encounter was witnessed when reconciliation occurred after I invited the pastor to speak to one of our support groups. Subsequently, I invited other pastors, priests, deacons, religious women, alumni, and parents to share with the groups. After listening and responding to what was heard, opportunities for encounter and reconciliation were created. The students now know that they are indeed, “wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14) and that their local church loves and values them. This model is not only useful, but a source of unimaginable grace when used in a parish.

**REACHING OUT**

Though pastoral ministers might say that the parish is diverse and all are welcome, many people are not aware of that. The people we want to reach often have no idea that they would be welcomed, valued, and celebrated if they joined our faith community. So how do we communicate that LGBTQ+ persons are welcome and valued? By using every vehicle of communication to go to them. In our ministries, we need to follow Jesus’ example of meeting people where they are. LGBTQ+ persons are in families, communities, schools, and universities; they patronize restaurants, bars, and entertainment venues. Surely, spreading a word of welcome is challenging. From our experience at Historic St. Paul Church, we advise the following outreach:

- Print cards or flyers inviting the LGBTQ+ community to visit or join the parish and place the cards in gathering spots. Including pastoral ministers’ names and phone numbers, email addresses, the parish website, and social media information was key to success in our parish.

- Use your website to reach out. Our parish website states clearly, that the LGBTQ+ community is welcome and has a place in our ministry.

- Connect with social media. Through social media, the parish announces: “If you or someone you know is LGBTQ+, you have a home here at Historic St. Paul’s, where you will be valued, loved, respected and celebrated just as you are!”

- Stake out a corner of the bulletin. Bulletin announcements with a rainbow will catch the attention of family members and friends of LGBTQ+ persons. Such invitations in the bulletin have prompted many conversations with the parish and/or diocesan ministry team and often was the first step to accompanying people back to the Church.

   All of us are on a journey of conversion as we seek to convert our hearts to be more and more like Jesus’ heart. Ministering to LGBTQ+ persons begins with our personal conversion. After admitting our failure to minister meaningfully to this portion of God’s family, we must commit to listening and trying to understand the lived reality of LGBTQ+ persons before we can truly know why we pray for them, let alone accompany them or minister to and with them.

   Nick, JT, Daniel, and the two elementary school students and their mothers teach us about how we as a Church can engage in the challenging work of ministry to LGBTQ+ persons and their families and friends. Every LGBTQ+ person has family or friends who also are alienated from the Church. In reaching out to LGBTQ+ Catholics, we reach out to their families and friends. When we minister effectively, our witness will be seen as authentic and our faith may attract others. The catch will be large when we cast out our nets of love. Trusting it is Jesus who commands us to put out into the deep, we will constantly be amazed at the miraculous outcomes when we discern well our call to minister intentionally to the LGBTQ+ community.

   A one-line petition in the universal prayer can move a heart and bring a person to tears. It is ours to imagine the possibilities to rebuild the Church and accompany our LGBTQ+ siblings home with pride. ◆

**Note**


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At www.PastoralLiturgy.org

Find and share this article with parish staff and the liturgy committee at the following URL: http://www.pastoralliturgy.org/Reaching out.pdf.