



ARE ALL WELCOME ?

BEYOND THE STRAIGHT & NARROW !

A presentation on the pastoral experience of LGBT Catholics in Westminster Diocese, London, UK - Martin Pendergast
*Ways of Love - Snapshots of Catholic Encounter with LGBT People and their Families International Conference
Rome - 3 October 2015*



Let us build a house where hands will reach
beyond the wood and stone
to heal and strengthen, serve and teach,
and live the Word they've known.
Here the outcast and the stranger
bear the image of God's face;
let us bring an end to fear and danger.
All are welcome, all are welcome,
all are welcome in this place.

Let us build a house where all are named,
their songs and visions heard
and loved and treasured, taught and claimed
as words within the Word.

Built of tears and cries and laughter,
prayers of faith and songs of grace,
let this house proclaim from floor to rafter.
All are welcome, all are welcome,
all are welcome in this place.

Text: Marty Haugen, b. 1950 © 1994 GIA Publications, Inc.

The Bishops' Conference of England & Wales 1979 "Introduction to the Pastoral Care of Homosexual People" stated: "*As a group that has suffered more than its share of oppression and contempt, the homosexual community has particular claim upon the concern of the Church. Homosexuals have a right to enlightened and effective pastoral care with pastoral ministers who are properly trained to meet their pastoral needs.*" The Guidelines affirmed that, "*homosexuals have the same need for the Sacraments as the heterosexual. They also have the same right to receive the Sacraments.*"

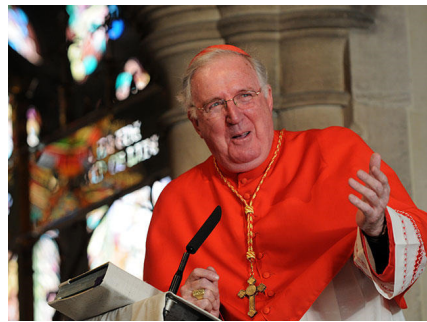


Where was this taking place, though? To create such a space, a monthly Mass, 'welcoming LGBT Catholics, parents, families, and friends' began in May 1999. The first celebration took place two days after a fascist bomber killed 3 people and an unborn child on Friday, 30 April 1999, at the Admiral Duncan pub in Soho's Old Compton Street. One of our future celebrants was a short distance away and rushed along to give absolution. The safe space offered by a Catholic convent enabled LGBT Catholics to provide a sacramental homecoming for many and faith-nurturing for others.

At the convent's 2001 closure, LGBT Catholics found hospitality at Soho's St. Anne's Anglican Church. The Sunday Masses soon became twice-monthly, served by Catholic priests from different dioceses and religious communities. The aims of the 1979 Guidelines were finally fulfilled, the LGBT Catholic community grew to a point, so that in 2006 it was almost outgrowing the space, and the first members of the then Soho Masses Pastoral Council were commissioned.



Previously hoping that we would just die away, and ignoring complaints from conservative Catholics, Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor proposed in 2006 that such pastoral provision should be embedded within a parish and a Diocesan framework.



A Consultation Process began, involving LGBT Pastoral Council members and Diocesan officials. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) observed from a Roman distance the Consultation's progress. This led to an agreement that from March 2007, Masses 'welcoming LGBT Catholics, parents and families' would be celebrated as part of the Sunday schedule on 1st & 3rd Sundays at the Church of the Assumption, Warwick Street, Soho. The CDF saw this as a potential pastoral model for other dioceses, even then.



Integrity, honesty, mutual respect, tried and tested principles of dialogue such as those used in ecumenical conversations, employing language used by communities about themselves, were key to the Consultation. In spite of being labelled "Gay Masses" by secular and religious media, and by our detractors, this worshipping community was never exclusive to a specific sexual orientation, but an inclusive expression of what a welcoming Catholic community could look like. Being proudly lesbian, gay, bisexual, or trans, and proudly Catholic was at the heart of this community of faith. However, direct protest action by conservative Catholics created toxicity around these gatherings.



This increased to such a pitch, with continued, slanderous allegations to Vatican dicasteries, that Cardinal Vincent Nichols, in spite of his own strong support for our ministry, was compelled to ask us to move, in 2013, from Soho to a Jesuit Parish in the neighbouring Mayfair district of Central London. Certainly a turn-around from the CDF who preferred to believe protesters' fictions rather than a Cardinal Archbishop!



The 2007 and 2013 transitions were not closures nor beginnings, but continuing steps in the journey of God's rainbow people. Some LGBT Catholics and parents have been seriously harmed by the Church's failure to recognise its pastoral responsibility towards those who have this 'particular claim on the Church's concern.' Many still carry these wounds of internalised homophobia, desiring the warmth of a closed-in ghetto, and so find change painful. The negative reactions, when moving from St. Anne's to the Church of the Assumption, predated those similarly heard when we moved to Farm Street Jesuit Church.

LGBT Catholics at Farm Street have perhaps better embodied the principles of the 2007 Consultation, expressing the community's ecclesial communion with the local Church. Here we are embedded within a welcoming, vibrant, well-resourced Catholic parish, with clear relational structures through which we can articulate our pastoral needs and concerns to our pastors, at parish and Diocesan levels. Not having to organise liturgy details frees us to engage with the wider parish community, to contribute our gifts of music, reading, Eucharistic ministry, alongside other parishioners who gather for Farm Street's Sunday evening Masses.



With such freedom, we are better able to develop systems of pastoral support with a vibrant Younger Adults Group, providing contact for trans Catholics, and meeting spaces for women's and men's groups as needed. We are committed to supporting refugees and asylum seekers, with two Ugandan gay men on our Council, one of whom has just been given permission to remain in the United Kingdom. We also engage with local Anglican and Baptist LGBT-friendly churches in some joint projects.

We offer our sense of community to the wider parish, with opportunities to engage together at after-Mass gatherings, as well as in other parish fund-raising and social events. This is 'embedding' in practice.



Meanwhile, regular Pastoral Reflection Days offer the possibility of LGBT focussed discussions and liturgies, using the expertise of priests who served on our previous Presiding Rota. This year we held our first pilgrimage to Rome. All this is coordinated by the elected LGBT Catholics Westminster Pastoral Council. A priest appointed by Cardinal Vincent as liaison with him attends our meetings, alongside Farm Street Church's Jesuit Parish Priest, and the Chairperson of its Parish Council.



So what to make of suggestions that the Farm Street model is up for export? There is no doubt that other parts of the Catholic world have been intensely interested in what we are doing in Westminster, especially since 2013. On describing our pastoral provision to Warsaw Diocese representatives earlier this year, their response was: "You have opened new perspectives for us."

Yes, it can be a model for other dioceses, but this will fail if such a pastoral provision is imposed from above. The strength of our Westminster experience is that it has grown from grassroots pastoral praxis, discerned and reflected upon by Bishops and people together, and seen to embody principles of welcome, value, respect, integrity, honesty, and a strong commitment to be at one with the Church - *Sentire cum Ecclesia*, as Blessed Oscar Romero's motto would have it - in ecclesial communion. Through such dialogue and trust we have been able to encourage our Bishops to recognise the social value of civil partnerships, even if they are not yet ready to offer blessings or accept same-sex marriage.



Ideally, no specialist ministries catering to particular needs should be required anywhere. All parishes should welcome everyone regardless of gender, race, sexuality, ability, or age, but reality often trumps ideals. People need staging-posts in their different journeys and LGBT people and their families are no exception. The Synod could begin this task by recommending a listening-process at global, national, and diocesan levels, in which the pastoral needs of LGBT Catholics and parents can receive not a one-size-fits-all pastoral model, but a response which goes beyond the straight and narrow, even leading to grace.



LGBT Catholics Westminster Pastoral Council

www.lgbtcatholicswestminster.org
lgbtcatholicswestminster@gmail.com

Younger Adults Group

www.lgbtcatholicasyag.org.uk
lgbtcatholicasyag@gmail.com

Westminster Diocese

<http://rcdow.org.uk/diocese/lgbt-chaplaincy/>

Global Network of Rainbow Catholics

www.rainbowcatholics.org
rainbowcatholicassembly@gmail.com