



FROM THE MARGINS TO THE CENTER

**A report on spiritual conversations
held for LGBTQ people & allies
as part of the Synod on Synodality**



New Ways Ministry

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MISSION

New Ways Ministry is a Catholic outreach that educates and advocates for equity, inclusion, and justice for LGBTQ+ persons, equipping leaders to build bridges of dialogue within the Church and civil society.

New Ways Ministry's core commitments include:

- Promoting dialogue and reconciliation grounded in the unity and diversity of the Body of Christ (I Cor 12:12)
- Becoming anti-racist in our programming, publications, and internal operations
- Supporting research and resources that empower pastoral ministers and educators to advance an intersectional understanding of gender identity and sexuality
- Fostering holiness and wholeness within the Catholic LGBTQ+ community and allies through spiritual programs and resources

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Spiritual Conversations:

An Overview

LGBTQ people have journeyed together as part of the people of God for as long as the Catholic Church has existed. And so it is proper that people of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, as well as their loved ones and allies, are joining the synodal journey now underway.

To better facilitate the participation of LGBTQ people, their families, and allies in the Synod, New Ways Ministry hosted three “Spiritual Conversations” sessions via Zoom in the past few months. Nearly 1,000 people participated from across 25 countries, though United States participants predominated.

While many people were lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and/or non-binary, the conversations also included parents and family members of LGBTQ people, pastoral workers and educators working with this community, and other Catholic allies concerned with inclusion. Participants were largely lay people who were or had been active in local parishes. A number of current or formerly vowed religious and clergy, including some who are themselves LGBTQ, also participated.

The sessions included “cradle Catholics,” converts (including someone just baptized this past

Easter), and people who are no longer practicing the faith, often due to mistreatment in the church. Several participants spoke of finding new communities in other Christian churches, but still identified as Catholic and longed to feel welcomed.

The Spiritual Conversations followed an Ignatian-inspired format aimed at discerning the will of the Holy Spirit in a community of faith. Participants encountered one another in small, intimate groups of six to eight people, accompanied by a facilitator and a note-taker. This experience of dialogue was grounded in prayer.

"LGBTQ Catholics expressed deep gladness that flows from their Catholic identity and sacramental participation."

Before the small groups began, participants were led through an examen developed especially for LGBTQ people to reflect on their experiences of church (see Appendix 1). At the conclusion of the small

Spiritual Conversations: An Overview, continued

group period, attendees re-gathered to “name the graces” and to conclude with a closing Marian prayer (see Appendix 2).

As preparation for the Spiritual Conversations, New Ways Ministry also hosted three webinars on the Synod. These covered topics related to what synodality is, how LGBTQ people might participate, how synods can be a spiritual practice, and why this synodal journey is an opportunity for reconciliation. Recordings of the webinars are available online (see Appendix 3).

"Many LGBTQ and ally Catholics who participated in these sessions stated that this was the first time anyone has invited reflection on their joys and obstacles in journeying together as a church."

Throughout these programs, New Ways Ministry has encouraged participants to engage actively with the synodal process in their local communities. We will continue to

provide ways for LGBTQ people and allies to stay involved in the process as the Synod moves into its next stages. Many LGBTQ and ally Catholics who participated in these sessions stated that this was the first time anyone had invited reflection on their joys and obstacles in journeying together as church. What emerged from their reflections was a portrait of a people in tension.

LGBTQ Catholics expressed deep gladness that flows from their Catholic identity and sacramental participation. Specifically, the Eucharist and the sacraments in which they are allowed to participate bring an enduring joy.

Simultaneously, and inextricably linked to their joy, is a deep pain—articulated as real hurt—that comes from negative experiences in the church based on their sexual and/or gender identities.

Despite this hurt, LGBTQ Catholics and their allies articulated a desire and a commitment to remain in the church and to ensure the church can better witness to Jesus Christ's inclusive ministry for generations to come. The reflections on the church recorded in this report flow from this tension—the experience of abiding joy accompanied by deep pain.



A Joyful Church

"There is joy to be found in Catholic identity," reported one small group. Participants in the Spiritual Conversations who found the greatest joy, or at least fewest obstacles, to practicing their Catholic faith, invariably identified their specific parish or faith community as "inclusive."

Participants found the most joy when expressing their Catholic faith, tradition, imagination, and sacramentality in a community that actively invites their full engagement. To many, that invitation came in the form of active LGBTQ ministries within their parishes. As one participant stated: "Being involved with LGBT ministry within the parish has led to a feeling of inclusion, belonging, and community."

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When participants were able to meet, pray, and grow together, they

identified an abiding joy in belonging: "For me, to keep it simple, my time in the Catholic Church manifests joy when there is 100% inclusion and equality."

A number of participants highlighted the individual welcome they received from a particular pastor or fellow parishioner that included the fullness of their sexual and/or gender identities as a "wellspring of joy," especially when invited to participate in ministries.

When asked about the most vibrant source of joy in the church, many participants expressed their love of and devotion to the Eucharist. Even those who have experienced homophobia, biphobia, or transphobia in the church feel as though "God has always been reaching through" the Eucharist. Some participants who once disaffiliated acknowledged that the Eucharist was what brought them back to the church. Participants noted that from the Eucharist, and the joy it brings, flow the rest of their Christian lives: "we hunger for the Eucharist and we hunger to care for one another."



A Hurtful Church

Almost all participants stated that they had been wounded by other Catholics because of sexual orientation and/or gender identity issues. One participant was “struck by the raw pain” that simply being affiliated with the church causes.

The harm identified by participants comes in different forms: the denial of sacraments, employment and vocational discrimination, being forced to hide one’s full self in church spaces, faith-based conversion therapy attempts, derogatory comments from some church leaders, and, in extreme cases, witnessing support for criminalizing homosexuality.

For many, many participants, the language used in church teaching about LGBTQ people being “objectively disordered” is felt to be condemnatory and is a source of great pain. Likewise, the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith’s 2021 statement that “God cannot bless sin” in relation to same-gender couples re-opened old wounds for many people.

Responses to these harms varied. Some participants echoed the words “the

hurt is too much” as an explanation of why they left the church (or, rather, as they perceive it, why the church left them). One participant said mistreatment by pastoral ministers had left them in “an ecclesiastical desert.” Several people mentioned that they had been pushed to suicidal thoughts because of LGBTQ-negative church teachings and language.

“One participant said mistreatment by pastoral ministers had left them in ‘an ecclesiastical desert.’”

Parents expressed pain at watching the church mistreat their LGBTQ children. One parent commented: “Catholicism is killing our kids and they’re leaving the church.”

A further sadness was that the church was missing out on the tremendous gifts that LGBTQ people and their families offer.



A Clerical Church

A key source of participants' joyful or harmful experiences in the church was ordained clergy.

Notably, the contributions of women religious towards LGBTQ inclusion were celebrated repeatedly.

The impact of a pastor's ability to decide whether or not to welcome LGBTQ people to a community was seen as oversized and arbitrary.

As one participant stated: "When the pastor changes, anything and everything can change."

Participants shared about "degrading" homilies, diocesan policies targeting transgender people, a moral superiority by clergy, church leaders more invested in political partisanship than the Gospel, a failure to communicate how and why ecclesial decisions are made, and problematic traditionalism in seminaries.

LGBTQ-negative actions and statements of some bishops also deeply troubled participants, though some recognized that a number of positive bishops exist in the U.S.

"When the pastor changes, anything and everything can change."

There was a clear desire for more diversity in church leadership, better and ongoing formation about LGBTQ issues, greater dialogue, and pastors who "smell like the sheep."



A Hopeful Church

Most participants expressed an abiding love for the Catholic Church in spite of their doubts and challenges: “We would not be here if we did not care about the church we know and love.” These positive feelings were felt especially now due to the synodal process and leadership of Pope Francis. There were frequent references to the Second Vatican Council as a source of hope and inspiration, too.

Such appreciation did not mitigate the very real concerns stated in earlier sections. Feelings of confusion, doubt, and challenge about the inconsistent ways LGBTQ people are treated were common. But many people said they were more hopeful because of their experiences in the Spiritual Conversations.

Most participants remain committed to reforming and renewing the church even while a tension exists. One participant expressed this tension as the church needing “to go where people are broken but to also stop breaking people.” Another said, “Catholics could help the world to love everyone.” The importance of community, belonging, and welcome at the local level to really live out what church can and should be was repeated constantly.

A significant number of participants referred to the church as family. One small group wrote a manifesto for “Our Dream” of the church: “a church where all TRULY are WELCOME,” “a church that celebrates and rejoices in differences,” “a church that reaches out to the margins until there are no more margins.”

“We would not be here if we did not care about the church we know and love.”

The role of LGBTQ people in this renewal was identified as key by many participants. In extreme terms, one participant said that “allowing ourselves to be sacrifices on the altar of transition will move the church forward.” Many participants were optimistic the church could and would come to be renewed, even if it took time.



An Equitable Church

A large number of participants expressed discomfort repeatedly about gendered exclusion in the church, which one participant called a “deep sin.”

Transgender and non-binary participants, as well as their allies, felt excluded by harmful rhetoric and disregard for their lived realities. Some participants felt trapped by the church’s understanding of gender. As one participant said, “Souls [were] being crushed to conform to outside gender expectations.”

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One parent saw the pain their transgender child was experiencing as “torment,” and, for their child’s protection, temporarily left the church. Participants noted feeling safer, more included, and closer to God.

when non-gendered language was used in the celebration of the Eucharist and during church functions.

Throughout the Spiritual Conversations, participants coupled the experience of LGBTQ Catholics with the situation of women in the church. A consistent obstacle to full inclusion in the church came in participants’ acknowledgment of the restriction from church leadership roles in the church of women and all Catholics not assigned male at birth.

One participant noted, “The exclusion of women from priesthood is an enormous obstacle to journeying together.” Another stated: “As a woman my voice is marginalized. We can do all the work and run around, but when it comes to making decisions the door is closed.”

Participants expressed hope that a more equitable church would allow for people of all genders to occupy positions of leadership—including ordination to the diaconate and priesthood, liturgical ministries, Vatican offices, and parish leadership.



A Just Church

In addition to the sacraments, and the Eucharist in particular, participants were most drawn to Catholicism for its focus and work toward social justice and liberation.

Beyond justice for the LGBTQ community specifically, participants expressed a desire for the church to work towards justice in its own structures, as well as in the wider world.

One participant said their justice-oriented parish showed “what the church can be, an institution that works for peace and justice.” Another participant shared that “the focus on justice nurtures my soul.”

Participants noted that the internal injustices in the U.S. church included abuse by pastoral ministers and the hierarchy’s mishandling of such cases; the church’s crimes against Indigenous

people; systemic racism that pervades the church; ableism in Catholic spaces; and the continued exclusion of divorced and remarried persons.

“The focus on justice nurtures my soul.”

Participants expressed the desire for a church more committed to external justice issues as well, including issues of immigration, income inequality, disability justice, healthcare, and ecological concerns—and a greater commitment to nonviolence in all its work.



A Listening Church

That the institutional church needs to listen more to LGBTQ Catholics, and indeed to the entire people of God, was generally acknowledged. Church officials' lack of understanding of the lived reality of LGBTQ people was seen as the major obstacle to full participation in the church.

Some participants who had spoken with bishops felt as though they were not heard, and that their experiences were dismissed. In such cases, participants saw a failure of the "hierarchy to hear and appreciate the deep goodness of every individual LGBTQ person."

Participants expressed hope that the church would truly listen to their stories. Many acknowledged the sacred, palpable presence of the Holy Spirit in these Spiritual Conversations, and desired to see church officials follow the same path on a regular basis. Repeatedly, participants

expressed the need for church leaders to truly listen "openly," "actively," and "empathetically." In that listening, the institutional church needs to be open to learn and to grow rather than insist on always speaking.

"[The hierarchy needs] to hear and appreciate the deep goodness of every individual LGBTQ person."

It is clear from participants' sharing that they already know what the Catechism says about LGBTQ people and do not need to be reminded of the teaching. Instead, church leaders need to hear LGBTQ people's stories, with their pains and their joys, if the church is to become one more authentically grounded in love and in justice.



Journeying Forward:

Recommendations & Further Questions

Participants expressed hope that the people of God, especially church leaders, would invest in building bridges between the LGBTQ community and the institution. The desire is not a shallow one. Participants expressed the fear of being ignored, rejected, or hurt again by this synodal process. They hope for real reconciliation with the LGBTQ community through the Synod. As a participant aptly noted, “Synodal listening is the way we can move forward.”

Reconciliation, however, is the result of a process. Before the institutional church can be reconciled with the LGBTQ community, there needs to be an acknowledgment of the harm caused to LGBTQ people, an attempt to rectify the harm with those hurt, and a firm resolve with the help of God’s grace to not cause this harm again. To that end, the following

recommendations are offered from participants’ sharing.

- **Increase Dialogue:** The institutional church must engage in open, consistent, and respectful dialogue with LGBTQ people to grow in understanding of diverse experiences of sexuality and gender. In creating these opportunities for encounter, church leaders and pastoral ministers must be willing and ready to acknowledge the pain the church has caused in the lives of LGBTQ people and their families.
- **End Discrimination:** The institutional church must end its discrimination against LGBTQ people. In order to heal the relationship, church officials must stop firing LGBTQ people from Catholic institutions, stop excluding LGBTQ people from ministry, and

Journeying Forward: Recommendations and Further Questions, continued

stop denying the sacraments to LGBTQ people. Instead, the church must invite LGBTQ people into full participation in the life of the church.

- **Renew Teaching:** The current language and teachings on LGBTQ people were identified by numerous participants as needing development. The present teachings are, to quote one participant, “a doctrine of pain.” These “dangerous, erroneous, damaging” teachings have disrupted families, led to suicides, and separated people from God. A reconsideration of such teachings needs to be approached with “doctrinal humility” and in conversation with people’s lived realities and contemporary research. Doing so would take “courage to embrace a journey.” Participants were overwhelmingly clear that the church’s ills will not be purged until the hierarchy comes to terms with issues of sexuality and gender.
- **Practice Synodality:** The Synod “brings hope,” and participants were ready for more opportunities to dialogue and encounter. One participant said: “I hope the

bishops hear that we’re all here to be one.” Many people wondered how synodality will continue to infuse local churches with new life? What could the church be “if those excluded had a voice in decision making?” Where do the people of God go from here? Even with such questions, most participants committed to keep engaging with the church—and hope the church’s leaders and pastors will, too.

This process has not been easy. This process has not been easy. As evidenced in these Spiritual Conversations, deep pain surfaces when LGBTQ Catholics and their allies are asked to share about their experience with the church. But participants also grew in faith, hope, and love through opening themselves to one another and to the Spirit.

To paraphrase one small group’s report, LGBTQ Catholics are still here, are not going anywhere, and will continue to witness with fortitude, courage, and faith to who they are. Despite the long history of exclusion, discrimination, and alienation that LGBTQ Catholics have experienced, they remain cautiously *hope-filled* for *synodal, new ways* of being church.



"What could the church be 'if those excluded had a voice in decision making?' Where do the people of God go from here?"



Appendix 1. Examen for LGBTQ Spiritual Conversations for the Synod

Prepared by Ariell Simon, M.Div.

Leader 1: God, we ask that you enter into this important conversation with us tonight. Fill us with courage and compassion, to speak our experiences, to hold one another's stories, and to imagine together a new way of being as Church. Amen.

Leader 2: Tonight, we gather with intentionality to listen and share, to learn, and to reflect on how we are called to be and to build Church. We do so despite messages that have told us that we are not the Church because of LGBTQ+ identities. Our gathering is an act of faith, that our stories and experiences do not detract from the Church, but are crucial for re-building it in the image of our Loving God. So let us take a moment to just BE who we are before God...to slough off any shame or baggage that others have put on us in the name of the Church....and to feel welcomed into the presence of a God created, knows, and loves all of who we are... *(pause)*

Leader 1: To prepare for this examen, please find a comfortable and relaxed position, close your eyes, (feel free to turn off your screen if that will help you enter into a space or posture of prayer) ... and use these next few moments to focus on just your breathing... notice your heartbeat, any subtle movements in your body, and allow yourself to simply be in awe of the gift of Life...As thoughts, concerns, or distractions come up during this sacred time, gently acknowledge them, and let them pass. *(pause)*

Appendix 1.

Examen for LGBTQ Spiritual Conversations for the Synod, continued

Leader 2: I invite you to tap into your memory and imagination...When you hear the word “Church”, what comes to mind? What is the earliest memory you associate with “Church”? How does that differ from what you associate with “Church” now? What is the truest image, memory, or feeling that you have that defines what Church means to you? *(pause)*

Is there a time when you have felt a sense of belonging to your Church community? If so, where did that sense of belonging come from? Did you experience that belonging as coming with constraints or conditions?
(pause)

Call to mind the first time you felt excluded or damaged by Church...what happened? What emotions come with that memory – perhaps hurt, disappointment, heartbreak, anger, grief, confusion, or some other feeling? If you can, I invite you to sit with those feelings in the presence of God. *(pause)*

Leader 1: Now, think of your current experience of Church. What does Church look like for you? How do you interact with Church? How do you choose NOT to interact with the Church? What keeps you connected to Church through difficult times? *(pause)*

How does Church connect you with God? How does it get in the way?
(pause)

How does Church connect you with your sense of self? How does it get in the way? *(pause)*

How does Church connect you with community? How does it get in the way? *(pause)*

Leader 2: Thinking back over the experiences you’ve had of Church, where do you see hope? Perhaps it is a person, a movement, or an experience. Perhaps it’s something that inspires you. *(pause)*

Appendix 1.

Examen for LGBTQ Spiritual Conversations for the Synod, continued

Allow these memories to fade away gently. Check in with yourself – how are you feeling? Do you feel more gratitude or resistance? Eagerness or anxiety? Whatever it is – offer those feelings up to God (*pause*)

Leader 1: I now invite you to enter into an honest dialogue with God.... speak to God about the challenges we face, individually and collectively, in building God's beloved community. (*pause*)

Imagine a Church that welcomes, empowers, and accompanies all God's people: (*short pause*) What comes to mind? (*pause*) What would be your role, in that church that you imagine? (*pause*) What would be necessary to head in that direction? Where could that change begin? (*pause*)

Leader 2: What do you bring to this conversation today? What are you open to receive from others? (*pause*) What grace might you need to share and listen with your whole heart?

Leader 1: We now close our Examen with a prayer...
God, who created each of us in our infinite and exquisite diversity, we offer to you all of these memories, thoughts, and experiences, asking that you would make from them a prophetic witness that spurs the Church forward. We ask for the courage and the wisdom to speak the truth, and to do so in love. Tonight, may we be the Church we imagine for one another.

Amen.



Appendix 2. Prayers for LGBTQ Spiritual Conversations for the Synod

Prepared by Dwayne Fernandes
Director of Spirituality, New Ways Ministry

Opening Prayer

Gracious God, in the Book of Proverbs it is written, “many are the plans in the mind of the human person, but ultimately it is your purpose that will prevail.” As we gather in preparation for the Synod, shine your light and wisdom upon your church. Sanctify your people and the leaders of the church, along with Pope Francis, in truth, and confirm us in faith and love so that your will be done. Animate us with the fire of your Holy Spirit to be radical just like your Gospel inspires us to be. Dare us to bring new life into places and people that have been abandoned or forgotten so that all may raise a joyful song to you, our God. **Amen.**

Closing Prayer

Mary, our mother, we invite you to sit with us during this Synod just as you seated yourself with the first Apostles in the Upper Room. Facilitate our conversations so that we can all share our experiences of church, listen to one another, and be open to the power of the Holy Spirit guiding this process. Clear a path for us to witness your love as a mother, God’s mercy to all, and Jesus’s abundant life to every continent and island, to every Christian and to every home. **Amen.**

Appendix 3. New Ways Ministry's Webinars for the Synod on Synodality

Synodality as a Path to Reconciliation with Sister Nathalie Becquart, XMCJ

This webinar by the undersecretary of the Synod of Bishops at the Vatican considered how synodality can be put into practice as the Catholic Church becomes a listening and inclusive church. [A recording of the 75-minute presentation and discussion is available here.](#)

LGBTQ Catholics & Synodality with Dr. Robert Choiniere

This webinar explored how all Catholics, especially LGBTQ people and allies, can help make sure that every voice is heard and recorded. [A recording of the 75-minute presentation and discussion is available here.](#)

Celebrating Synodality: Synods as a Spiritual Practice with Dr. Brian Flanagan

This webinar examined the spiritual foundations of synodality, as well as how all Catholics, especially LGBTQ Catholics and their supporters, can prepare for and prayerfully engage in the synod. [A recording of the 75-minute presentation and discussion is available here.](#)

For New Ways Ministry's full programming related to the Synod on Synodality, visit newwaysministry.org/synod.