

St. Matthew broaches topic of 'coming out' for parents, gay Catholics

Editor's note: Christopher Gunty, associate publisher and editor for the Catholic Review, responds to concerns regarding the following article in this editorial.

By Maria Wiering

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"Coming out is a journey for the whole family," a Catholic mother of a gay son said Oct. 12.

She and her husband shared their family's story at St. Matthew Parish in Northwood as part of a nine-person panel discussion called "When a Family Member Comes Out."

Moderated by Father Joseph L. Muth Jr., pastor of St. Matthew and Blessed Sacrament in Baltimore, the panel included three gay Catholics, two sets of parents of gay adult children, and a pastoral counselor from Loyola University of Maryland. Each panelist shared his or her experience, including how coming out as gay affected their relationship with family members and the Catholic Church.

About 50 people attended the two-hour event, which included a question-and-answer session. Attendees asked for advice on personal situations, including navigating conversations with family members.

"People find themselves in a confusing place because they have a faith that allows them to be strong in the face of adversity, but they sometimes have a church that's been challenging them about how they should see their family members who are gay," said Father Muth in an interview after the event.

The panel discussion coincided with National Coming Out Day, Oct. 11. It was an extension of LEAD, St. Matthew's LGBT ministry. The 3-year-old organization hosts monthly meetings. Its members have marched twice in Baltimore's Pride Parade.

Relationships vary

Panelists candidly described realizing they or their children were gay and initially fearing the judgment of others, especially people at their churches. Some panelists maintained strong family relationships. Others, such as John, felt rejected and hurt. A gay Catholic and St. Matthew parishioner who asked his last name not be printed, John shared his experience of feeling shunned by his Catholic parents, who insisted on years of therapy. He spent time in seminary, and also participated in Courage, an

apostolate for gay Catholics that focuses on helping its members live celibately. Over the years, John's relationship with his parents has repeatedly frozen and thawed, he said. At times they refused to allow him to use "we" or "our" to refer to his then boyfriend, now legal husband; other times they met the two for dinner.

"To live with that tension, it's incredibly difficult," he said.

"No matter the amount of fuss you put up, it's not going to change that they're gay or lesbian," John added, speaking to parents of gay children. "There's a hyper-focus on (being) gay as the worst sin. That's hard to shake off. For me, it's been a process."

A welcoming approach?

The panel was held in the middle of the 11-day Synod of Bishops on the family in Rome, where topics included pastoral responses to gay relationships. Midterm and final reports suggested disagreement among bishops over the kind of welcome gay Catholics should receive in the church.

Despite the church's insistence that its marriage teaching will not change, several panelists stated support for church sanctioning of gay marriage. All three of the gay panelists were civilly married to same-sex partners. Several explicitly rejected Catholic teaching that marriage is reserved for a one-man-one-woman relationship, and that all non-married Catholics, including those who are gay, are "called" to celibacy.

Father Muth said that he's spoken with people who feel positive about the synod's potential outcomes on homosexuality.

"The church teaching may or may not change at some point down the road - that's not something I can do anything about - but the initial step to people who have felt rejected and put aside for many years is to create an atmosphere of welcome," he said.

That atmosphere also encourages gay Catholics to tell their stories, he said.

"I think through that storytelling, people begin to see how hurt people have been and how they've turned away from the church," he said. "With the church's whole emphasis on this new evangelization, this is a real opportunity to reverse the attitude - to have a more welcoming, compassionate, listening attitude, to tell people they can be included."

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