

# Building a Bridge

*How the Catholic Church and the  
LGBT Community Can Enter  
into a Relationship of Respect,  
Compassion, and Sensitivity*

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## Introduction to the Revised and Expanded Edition

Since the first edition of *Building a Bridge* was published, I've been happy to have the opportunity to speak at many parishes, colleges, retreat houses, and conventions, as well as one-on-one with many LGBT people, their parents and grandparents, brothers and sisters, and friends and neighbors. Many of these encounters have been deeply moving, since so many people have shared their personal stories with me—stories about suffering and struggle, about perseverance and hope, and about doubt and faith.

With every encounter, I have learned something new. At the same time, I've also spoken with cardinals,

bishops, priests, and other church officials, including lay pastoral associates and parish workers, about their reactions to the book.

All these conversations, as well as reviews of the book, letters from readers, and messages received through social media, encouraged me to expand this book and incorporate the insights I've learned along the way.

Let me mention five specific insights that have proven helpful.

*First*, shortly after the book's publication, I realized something that may not be surprising for some readers: ministry to LGBT people is a ministry not simply to the relatively small percentage of Catholics who are LGBT but to a much larger group.

Initially, the book was intended for two distinct audiences: LGBT Catholics and church officials. But after almost every talk, lecture, or retreat, people would say something like "My daughter is lesbian and hasn't gone to church in years, and I'm looking forward to giving her your book." Parents, in particular, sought me out to tell me their stories, which were always edifying and educational. Beyond that, I've heard from grandparents, aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews, as

well as neighbors, friends, roommates, coworkers, and on and on.

Thus, far more people than I had anticipated are touched by this topic. And the number is only growing. As more Catholics feel comfortable sharing their sexuality and identity, more Catholic families are affected by LGBT issues. And as more families carry their hopes and desires into their parishes, more priests and pastoral workers are affected. In turn, more bishops and diocesan officials are affected. In such gradual ways, the entire church is affected.

The first realization, then, was that ministry to LGBT Catholics is ministry not just to LGBT people but, increasingly, to the entire church. Likewise, while this book is written primarily for Catholics, I hope it will prove helpful to all Christians who seek to welcome LGBT people in their churches.

*Second*, I realized that I needed to be clearer about one specific topic: where the onus for the bridge building lies. The first edition of this book expressed that obliquely but not directly, because I thought it was obvious.

So let me say it more clearly: the institutional church bears the main responsibility for the ministry of dialogue

and reconciliation, because it is the institutional church that has made LGBT Catholics feel marginalized, not the other way around. It is true that the public actions of a few LGBT groups have targeted the institutional church, and provoked strong reactions, but in terms of making people feel marginalized, it is the clergy and other church officials who bear responsibility.

*Third*, a few readers wondered why I seemed to have left out two things from the book: a discussion about the church's teachings on same-sex relations and same-sex marriage, and a discussion about the sexual abuse crisis in the church.

That last topic—sexual abuse—was covered only glancingly in the first edition. Some asked why I didn't discuss the topic in depth, since it was an important reason why many LGBT people have left the church, mainly because they felt some church leaders were hypocritical in criticizing their sexual activity while countenancing sexual abuse by the clergy. (In the first edition, as here, I quote a gay man who expresses that feeling.) That sentiment, of course, is shared by many straight people as well.

But I intentionally did not include a discussion of the

clergy abuse crisis and the crimes of sexual abuse not because I am afraid to tackle that topic (I've written about it elsewhere) but for another reason: that critical topic deserved a far more comprehensive treatment than was possible in a short book. I didn't want to address it because it warrants an exhaustive treatment beyond the scope of this book.

The omission of a long discussion on same-sex relations was also intentional, because the Catholic Church's stance on the matter is clear: sexual relations between people of the same sex are impermissible. At the same time, the LGBT Catholic community's stance on the matter is also clear: same-sex relations are part and parcel of their lives. (Here I am speaking about the majority of LGBT Catholics, not the relatively small portion of the group who think otherwise.) Theologically speaking, you could argue that this teaching has not been "received" by the LGBT Catholic community, to whom it was primarily directed.

So I intentionally decided not to discuss that question at any length, since it is an area on which the two sides are simply too far apart. The same holds true for same-sex marriage: it is an issue on which the institutional church and most of the LGBT community are too far apart. In this edition, I quote the *Catechism's* entire teaching on LGBT sexuality (more specifically, on homosexuality),

but again I don't enter into a lengthy discussion because I prefer to focus on areas of possible commonality.

Likewise, this book is not a treatise on moral theology, nor is it a reflection on the sexual morality of LGBT people. I am not a moral theologian. Moreover, not everything has to be about sex. This is a book primarily about dialogue and prayer.

*Fourth*, I would like to address the question of hate. While the vast majority of readers—particularly LGBT people and their families—expressed gratitude for the book, often with great emotion, the book unleashed in a few quarters of the church a virtual torrent of hate. Most of these expressions of intolerance appeared on social media, but in other venues as well I saw how the mere idea of welcoming LGBT people gave rise to the most homophobic and hateful comments you can imagine. Of course I expected some criticism of the book, and I invited discussion in the first edition, but the intensity of the hate took me by surprise.

For the most part, I could anticipate the more thoughtful critical reactions: some LGBT Catholics would say that I had not gone far enough; some bishops and church officials would say that I had gone too far. But critical reactions are to be expected. This is the nature of dialogue

and the nature of inviting people into a conversation—onto the bridge, if you will.

Much of the criticism and discussion has been helpful, constructive, and challenging in the best way. And I've learned a great deal from my critics. Many of their questions guided me in writing this new edition.

Some of the criticism, however, has been neither helpful nor constructive: some of it has been, as I said, hateful. It serves as a vivid reminder of how much homophobia still exists in society and in the church. And a reminder of how treacherous the waters are underneath the bridge. Sometimes it was hard to keep up with the attacks online, but the hateful comments and personal attacks were always put in perspective after just a few minutes with LGBT Catholics and their family members. Just a few tears from an LGBT Catholic more than made up for an ocean of hateful attacks.

Where does this anger come from? From several places, I would suggest:

- a) A fear of the LGBT person as the “other,” the person who is seen as different and whose differences are seen as a threat. This is true “homophobia,” that is, actual fear of the LGBT person.
- b) A hatred of the LGBT person as the “other.” This illustrates the more colloquial way of using the

term “homophobia,” meaning not fear but hatred. This hatred is sometimes transformed into scapegoating, where the LGBT person is viewed primarily, or only, through the lens of sin, when, in fact, we are all sinners.

- c) A disgust or revulsion over the idea of same-sex relations or of same-sex attraction. This sometimes leads to a hatred of the LGBT person.

These three preceding reasons (fear, hatred, and revulsion) often lead to not only anger, but a kind of schoolyard bullying—name-calling, personal vilification, and even threats of violence.

- d) A fear that any attempt to “build a bridge,” to listen to the experiences of people previously seen as “other,” or to encourage people to reflect on church practices in a new way is tantamount to advocating a complete change in church teaching. It is not, of course, but opposition to building bridges for that reason sometimes solidifies into general opposition and transforms into anger.

To that end, it’s important for Catholic readers to know that this book has the formal ecclesiastical approval of my Jesuit superior. That is, as required of all books published by Jesuits, the manuscript was vetted by my Jesuit province’s *Censor Librorum*

(the censor of books) and then received official approval for publication (the *Imprimi Potest* in the front of the book) from my Jesuit Provincial Superior. It has also been endorsed by several cardinals, archbishops, and bishops. So everything in this book begins with the Gospels, builds on the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and is well within church teaching.

- e) A fear that welcoming those people on the margins is what Jesus would want. Here the fear—usually from those who know the Gospels well—is not that offering welcome to those people seen as “other” is wrong but, rather, that it is precisely what Jesus did. While it is easy to oppose, say, same-sex marriage because it’s against a traditional view of marriage, it’s harder to argue that Jesus did not offer welcome to people on the margins. Frustration flows from the recognition that the inclusion of LGBT people is entirely consistent with Jesus’s practice of including the marginalized. This cognitive dissonance between opposing marginalized people and knowing that Jesus welcomed them can produce anger in some people, as they struggle with that fierce internal tension.

f) A discomfort with one's own sexuality. Since the book was first published, I have spoken to many friends who are practicing psychologists and psychiatrists, and they all point to this as one of the most important factors in explaining the intense anger. Human sexuality is complex, and all of us, say psychiatrists and psychologists, are on a kind of spectrum in terms of which gender we are attracted to. Some of us are uncomfortable with that, and so raising topics like homosexuality terrifies us because it forces us to confront those complicated feelings. This terror is more easily directed outward, and can take the form of anger.

For the most part, however, I've not been overly bothered by the anger, the invectives, or even the personal attacks, since the book was meant to start a conversation, not to serve as the final word on the topic. The attacks also served an important purpose: to remind me why this was an important topic to discuss and why it was important to advocate for LGBT Catholics who long to find a place in their church.

*Fifth*, and on a far more positive note, I underestimated the desire for conversation around LGBT Catholics within the church itself. One of the first talks I gave after the book's publication was at Saint Cecilia Church in Boston—a parish well known for its welcome of LGBT people—drawing over seven hundred people, who packed the church on a weekday night.

The size of the crowd shocked me. At the time, coming off a few months of writing the book, I was, unsurprisingly, so immersed in it that I considered the book rather mild. But seeing a packed church made me realize that for many people this was something new. For many Catholics, seeing and hearing a priest speak on these issues prompted deep emotional reactions. Young LGBT people hugged me, parents and grandparents of LGBT children wept, and people told me, in stronger terms than I could ever have anticipated, how grateful they were.

A gay friend echoed this, in an email sent to me after one of these events: "I suspect one of the reasons this is so powerful for many Catholics is because a priest is saying it. Most people aren't around priests that often, usually for just an hour or on Sundays. So when it comes to LGBT issues and the clergy, most Catholics only hear the negative voices that are loudest or highlighted by the

media. Seeing a priest say the things you say is a powerful counter-narrative. Having a member of the clergy say something positive about LGBT people is both novel and powerful.”

That’s likely true. But also likely is that these reactions were not simply about hearing a priest say these things, or about this book (for many of them had not yet read it), but about something even deeper: the simple desire for an open discussion of this topic, which had for so long only been whispered about. I was often reminded of Jesus’s words in the Gospel of Matthew: “What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops” (10:27).

This was confirmed time and again. A few weeks later, at the Church of Saint Paul the Apostle in New York City, I gave an evening talk. Not only had I spoken on the topic a few weeks prior at the church, but also the parish is well known for its vibrant LGBT outreach program. Consequently, I thought few would attend the talk. But again, it attracted a standing-room-only crowd, and the event went over the allotted time since there were so many questions to be fielded. Not long afterwards, I spoke at Villanova University in suburban Philadelphia. Again, I assumed that at a Catholic university in a well-heeled part of the country, the discussion would be superfluous. But again, we had over seven

hundred people—students, parents, people from around the area—in a packed church. After both events, attendees waited for up to two hours to share their stories with me, often with great emotion.

These were all reminders of the need for discussion—even in places where the topic seems “known.” One of the final questions at Saint Paul’s was “What can we do next?”

There is a deep and evident desire for bridges to be built in our church.

*Finally*, this book is not an argument, not a polemic, not a debate, but an invitation to conversation and prayer, and then to a ministry rooted in Jesus Christ. Every Christian ministry is rooted in Jesus, but to reach out to those who feel on the margins is to follow Jesus most closely. For this was one of his primary tasks, and so it should be for the church.

So I’m happy to continue this ministry with this revised and expanded edition. May it lead to a continuing of the conversation, a building of bridges, and a growing spirit of respect, compassion, and sensitivity.

## Why I'm Writing

In the summer of 2016, a gunman stormed into a nightclub popular among the gay community in Orlando, Florida, and killed forty-nine people. It was, at that time, the largest mass shooting in U.S. history.

In response, millions in this country, myself included, grieved and voiced their support for the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) community. But I was also concerned by what I did not hear. Although some church leaders expressed both sorrow and horror, only a handful of the more than two hundred fifty Catholic bishops used the terms *gay* or *LGBT*. Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago; Bishop Robert Lynch of Saint Petersburg, Florida; Bishop David Zubik of Pittsburgh; Bishop Robert McElroy of San Diego; and Bishop John Stowe of Lexington, Kentucky, all spoke out strongly in support of the LGBT community or against ho-

mophobia within days of the shooting. Many more, however, remained silent.

I found this revelatory. The fact that only a few Catholic bishops acknowledged the LGBT community or even used the word *gay* during such a critical time showed that the LGBT community is still invisible in many quarters of the church. Even in tragedy, its members are invisible.

This event helped me to recognize something in a new way: the work of the Gospel cannot be accomplished if one part of the church is essentially separated from any other part. Between the two groups—the LGBT community and the institutional church—a great chasm has formed, a separation for which a bridge needs to be built.

For many years, I've ministered to and worked with LGBT people, most of them Catholics. My ministry has not been primarily through classes or seminars but rather through more informal channels. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people as well as their parents and friends have come to me for advice, counsel, confession, and spiritual direction. After Masses, lectures, or retreats, they will ask advice on spiritual and religious matters, pose questions on church-related issues, or simply share their experiences.

During these times, I've listened to their joys and hopes, their griefs and anxieties, sometimes accompanied by tears, sometimes by laughter. In the process, I've become friends with many of them. A great many bishops, priests, deacons, sisters, brothers, and lay pastoral workers in the church could say the same thing.

I've also worked with and come to know many cardinals, archbishops, bishops, and other church officials and leaders. After thirty years as a Jesuit and twenty years working for a Catholic media ministry, I've become friendly with members of the hierarchy through a variety of ways, from Masses to pilgrimages to speaking events to retreats to dinner-table conversations. These church leaders are my friends and I rely on their wise counsel and pastoral support.

Over the years, I've discovered a great divide. I lament that there isn't greater understanding and more conversation between LGBT Catholics and the institutional church. I would rather not refer to two "sides," since everyone is part of the church. But many LGBT Catholics have told me that they have felt hurt by the institutional church—unwelcomed, excluded, and insulted.

At the same time, many in the institutional church want to reach out to this community but often seem confused about how to do so. Yes, it seems that there are some who don't seem to want to reach out and some

who even seem hostile to LGBT people, but the bishops I know are sincere in their desire for pastoral outreach.

For the past three decades as a Jesuit, part of my ministry has been, informally, trying to build bridges between these groups: But after the shooting in Orlando, my desire to do so in a more formal way intensified.

So when New Ways Ministry, a group that ministers to and advocates for LGBT Catholics, asked a few weeks after the Orlando tragedy if I would accept their Bridge Building Award and give a talk at the award ceremony, I agreed. The name of the award inspired me to sketch out an idea for a "two-way bridge" that might help bring together the institutional church and the LGBT community.

The first half of this book is that talk, which has been expanded into a longer essay. The essay urges the church to treat the LGBT community with "respect, compassion, and sensitivity" (a phrase from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*) and the LGBT community to reciprocate, reflecting those virtues in its own relationship with the institutional church.

Let me say something important at the outset. I understand the difficulties that LGBT people have faced in the church. They have shared stories with me about being insulted, slandered, excluded, rejected, and even fired. I don't want to minimize that pain.

Recently, for example, I received a message from a woman in the United States, asking me if I knew a “compassionate priest” living anywhere near her. She was working in a hospice, and the local priest assigned to care for patients was refusing to anoint a man who was on the verge of death—because he was gay. So I hope I can begin to appreciate the tremendous pain LGBT people have felt at the hands of some of the church’s ministers.

Still, I believe it’s important for the LGBT community—for everyone, in fact—to treat others with respect, even when their own church at times feels like an enemy. That is part of being a Christian, hard as it is.

This does not mean that one cannot critique and challenge the church when it needs to be critiqued and challenged. But all of that can be done with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. In fact, respect, compassion, and sensitivity are undervalued gifts for dealing with conflict and disagreement in general, gifts that can be shared with the wider culture. These virtues can help not only Catholics and Christians but all people of goodwill who seek unity.

In recent years, the overall social and political climate in the United States has become more divisive and so-

cial discourse more contentious. Even abroad, various social, political, and ethnic groups find themselves pitted against one another with an intensity that seems not only new but frightening. Not too long ago, opposing factions would often interact with one another politely and work together for the common good. Certainly there were tensions, but a quiet courtesy and tacit respect prevailed. Now all one seems to find is contempt. As a result, many people feel powerless to prevent the continued fraying of the social fabric as well as the name-calling, personal attacks, and violence that such division gives rise to.

For me, the echo chambers created by social media in which one’s worldview is barely challenged, the news channels specializing in simplistic and sometimes false analyses of complicated political situations, and the civic leaders seemingly unconcerned about the division their words and actions might cause are all developments that contribute to this disunity, as well as to the feelings of hopelessness that arise in the face of this disunity.

In these times, the church should be a sign of unity. Frankly, in all times. Yet many people see the church as contributing to division, as some Christian leaders and their congregations mark off boundaries of “us” and “them.” But the church works best when it embodies the virtues of respect, compassion, and sensitivity.

So I hope this brief book might be a meditation for

the church at large, not simply for those people interested in LGBT issues.

A few notes.

First of all, not every church leader needs to be upbraided for not treating LGBT Catholics with care. Far from it. Besides the bishops I've already mentioned, there are dozens more who are warm and welcoming to the LGBT community, and there are plenty of parishes with vibrant outreach programs to this community. Many bishops and priests—to say nothing of deacons, sisters and brothers, and Catholic lay leaders—should be praised for their compassionate ministry to LGBT Catholics.

In fact, one of the most surprising aspects of the church for non-Catholics is how much ministry to the LGBT community goes on, in quiet and unheralded ways, in so many dioceses and parishes. Many LGBT Catholics love their parishes and feel very much at home there.

Second, not every LGBT person struggles with self-acceptance; these days the process of coming to understand one's identity as an LGBT person is easier than it was just a few decades ago.

For example, one of the most moving parts of the

gathering at New Ways Ministry in Baltimore was being accompanied by two friends: one, a young man, age sixteen, who had just revealed to classmates at his Catholic high school that he was gay; and the other, his father, in his late forties, who had, along with the rest of his family, accepted his son with open arms and an open heart. And the very next weekend, on a trip to Philadelphia for a parish talk, I was given a ride from the train station by two brothers, both in their twenties. One of them, a college student, spontaneously told me that he was gay, and his relaxed manner quickly telegraphed his complete comfort with his sexuality.

So I don't wish to imply by my comments, or by the biblical passages appearing in this book, that an LGBT person *should* feel excluded. Some LGBT people simply presume, as they should, their place in the church and aren't bothered by the stray negative comments they hear. For most LGBT people, however, the process of understanding that they are loved by God as they are, and the process of finding their place in the church, remain difficult.

Third, though the book invites both groups—the institutional church and LGBT Catholics—to approach each other with respect, compassion, and sensitivity, the onus for this process lies on the institutional church. The main burden for this bridge building falls on bishops,

priests, and other church officials, who are invited to take the first steps and work harder at reconciliation. Why? Because, as I've mentioned, even though a few LGBT groups have publicly targeted the church, it is the institutional church that has made LGBT Catholics feel marginalized, not the other way around.

By the way, my use of *LGBT* as an adjective is not meant to exclude anyone; this is the most common nomenclature at the time that I'm writing. One could also use *LGBTQ* (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning or queer) or *LGBTQA* (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning or queer, and asexual) or *LGBT+*. Perhaps someday we will settle on a shorter acronym or an all-inclusive name, but my goal is to include all people who feel that their spiritual journey and their welcome in the church have been made more difficult by their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Overall, I'd like to offer a bridge for all of us, and then offer further support for that bridge with the second half of the book: a series of biblical passages that have proven helpful for LGBT Catholics, as well as brief reflections on those passages. Some of these are mentioned in the first half of the book—like the stories of Jesus's healing

of the Roman centurion's servant and Jesus's encounter with Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector in Jericho. At first blush, you might wonder what these familiar passages could possibly say to LGBT people, but when you see the story through new eyes, I hope it will become clearer.

I have also included other biblical passages that, based on my experience, have proven the most helpful in the spiritual journeys of LGBT Catholics. These too will be accompanied by brief reflections and questions as an aid to praying with those passages.

These select biblical passages and my own reflections are also meant for LGBT parents, friends, allies, and the entire church—including parishes and dioceses, priests and bishops. The Bible, after all, is for everyone. I hope these reflections might be of help on both the personal level and the communal level, to invite parishes and dioceses into communal prayer, conversation, discernment, and action. And conversion.

The term *conversion* in this context deserves some attention. In fact, I use the term so often in my Jesuit life that I sometimes forget the word may carry a different meaning for LGBT people and their friends and families. What I mean by *conversion* is the conversion that *all of us* are called to by God and the conversion of minds and hearts that Jesus called for.

In the Gospel of Mark, one of the first things Jesus does is call for *metanoia*, which is often translated as “repentance” but is probably more accurately translated as “conversion” (Mk. 1:15). Remember that while Jesus would have preached mostly in Aramaic, his native tongue, the Gospels were written in Greek. *Meta* is the Greek for “after” or “beyond” and *nous* is “mind.” In Jesus’s time, a *metanoia* meant a transformative change in one’s mind and heart.

Thus, I do not mean that the only people called to conversion are LGBT people, or that they are called to “conversion therapy,” a debunked set of methodologies that tries to “change” LGBT people into straight people. Conversion—*metanoia*—is for everyone.

Finally, I know this subject—the treatment of LGBT people in the church and the church’s outreach to them—is a highly sensitive one for many people. Because I have met and ministered to LGBT people, I know each situation is unique and these situations can be imbued with great anguish.

So I apologize if anyone feels I am minimizing their pain, misunderstanding their situation, needlessly scolding them, or leaving out something important. My experience with LGBT people is lengthy, but it is certainly not as extensive as that of others who work in this ministry directly.

This essay, then, is not a complete blueprint for the bridge, with detailed instructions for its building, or a bolt-by-bolt survey of the final construction. Rather, it is a preliminary sketch, a starting point, an occasion for conversation and reflection. Feel free to disagree—as people have already. And please reflect on what you find helpful in this book and leave the rest behind.

So, my friends, I invite you to join me on a bridge.