Opinion
Guest Voices



Fr. Greg Greiten, pictured in May 2017 (Provided photo)



by Gregory Greiten

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For years now, I have been carrying a heavy burden, a secret cloaked in silence that the leaders of my church have not wanted me to share publicly. Each time I had a great desire to speak out I was challenged by other priests and leaders.

"Shhhh … be quiet."

"Keep it to yourself."

"Don't say a word to anyone."

"If you don't keep quiet, you will be thrown out of here."

"If you make it known publicly, it will hurt your ministry."

Then I recall the personal struggles of the prophet Jeremiah who desperately wanted to keep the Word of God to himself because it provoked such a negative response from those who heard his preaching. No matter how much he did not want to speak in the name of the Lord anymore, he could not hold it in. "There is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot" (Jeremiah 20:9). Jeremiah understands the anguish of preaching; however, keeping silent and not speaking the truth comes with an even greater cost. What a trap!

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Today, I break the silence and emerge free from the shackles of shame placed upon me at a young age. There is so much to speak about, to repair and to heal — much beyond the limits of these words in print.

I am gay.

Driven to silence, hiding, being straight

Since my days in high school seminary in the 1980s, I was taught that homosexuality was something disordered, unspeakable and something to be punished. Friends with "particular friendships" were immediately removed from the school due to "family problems." During my senior year, a friar led an inquisition seeking to identify and discipline sexually active students. After being questioned, I

was told directly that if I was caught talking about this with others, I would be dismissed immediately from the school. Because of the culture of shame and secrecy around issues of sexuality in the seminary environment, students lived in fear and felt threatened to remain silent. It was evident that the leadership wanted everything to be swept under the carpet and to ensure that nothing would ever be leaked out. It was in this secretive environment that I grew up.

Truth breaks through denial

The words of author Jack Morin, seem so prophetic to me, "If you go to war with your sexuality, you will lose, and end up in more trouble than before you started." Since my traumatic experiences in the high school seminary, I immersed myself into my college and graduate studies exploring my vocation to ministry within the church. In reflecting back on those years, I didn't realize how I was repressing my feelings in an attempt to live life as a straight man. This was until one day, at the age of 24, on a five-hour drive back to seminary, when the truth broke through the denial. I finally admitted to myself, "I AM GAY!" I was driving down a road trying to keep from veering out of my lane or off the road itself, repeating to myself again and again, "I am gay!" Years of built-up, toxic shame came pouring out of me as the tears were flowing down my cheeks.

It felt more like a life sentence than freely embracing my true sexual orientation.

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I went to the fifth floor of the seminary building, opened the window and climbed into it — with one leg inside the room and the other leg dangling outside. There I sat straddling the window for three hours contemplating whether I could face the truth of being gay or simply jump out of the window ending this once and for all.

I kept repeating and pondering my truth: "I am gay."

What was I going to do now? Where would I go from here? I remembered the words of the high school seminary rector, that if I were to say anything to anyone, then I would be thrown out. For years now, I had felt a calling to ministry in the church and have had a desire to serve people. I felt a shift taking place inside, a reassurance that I wanted to live; I didn't want to die. In a moment of lament and ultimate surrender, I remember crying out inside, "God, where are you right now? I need you.

Help me. I cannot do this or face this by myself." Wiping away my tears, I crawled out of the window and stood firmly on the floor inside the seminary.

My ministry, my joy

With support from the director of spiritual formation at the seminary as well as my own spiritual director, both of whom assured me everything was going to be OK, I moved forward with ordination to the priesthood and with my ministry in the church. This past May, I celebrated my 25th anniversary of ordination to the priesthood — for 25 years I have faithfully served as a priest. I minister alongside families celebrating joy through marriage, welcoming children, watching them grow. Throughout the years, I wondered whether they would think of me differently if they knew who I really was. Would they pull away? Who else could I serve if I accepted my true self? Am I limiting my ministry by hiding in shame and fear?

As I weighed whether or not to speak out at different moments in my life and publicly accept the person God created me to be, the words of a wise trauma therapist with whom I was conferring echoed: "Greg, it is like you are out on that window ledge once again, although this time as you are straddling it, you look down noticing that there is no floor on either side for you to safely step off onto. It appears as if you are having to make serious choices in your life."

In clearly identifying this dilemma in my life, he was helping me to realize the difficulty and severity of the choices that I was making. For the next several years, I pushed onward in my priesthood seeking to maintain the secrecy of my sexual orientation only to discover that the harder I tried to suppress it, the more and more it was pushing back in order for the truth to be set free. Over the past year, I came to the realization that I could no longer live the lie of masquerading as a straight man in the priesthood.

I'm one, but not alone

There is no question there are and always have been celibate, gay priests and chaste members of religious communities. According to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, in 2016, there were 37,192 diocesan and religious priests serving in the United States. While there are no exact statistics on the number of gay Catholic priests, Fr. Donald B. Cozzens suggested in his book, *The Changing Face of the Priesthood*, that an estimated 23 percent to 58 percent of priests were in fact gay. It would mean that there are anywhere from 8,554 (low) to

21,571 (high) gay Catholic priests in the United States today.

By choosing to enforce silence, the institutional church pretends that gay priests and religious do not really exist. Because of this, there are no authentic role models of healthy, well-balanced, gay, celibate priests to be an example for those, young and old, who are struggling to come to terms with their sexual orientation. This only perpetuates the toxic shaming and systemic secrecy.

> I can only imagine that day in our church when we are accepted for who God created us to be and no longer fearing that we might be dismissed from active ministry.

However, a few Roman Catholic priests around the world have mustered up the courage to break through the wall of silence and speak the truth about their sexual identity. Today, I stand with these few courageous priests who have taken the risk to come out of the shadows and have chosen to live in truth and authenticity. What if every priest and religious were given the opportunity to live their life in truth and freedom without worrying about some form of reprisal from someone in authority over them? How different, affirming and welcoming would our Catholic Church truly become by simply acknowledging, accepting and supporting each and every gay priest and religious in their midst?

While gay priests and religious remain committed and faithful to their ministries, I know many who are deeply disturbed and angered by some of the official statements and disparaging remarks continually made about us. From my own personal experience, I attest to how exhausting it is trying to remain hidden in the closest pretending to be something other than what we truly are. All of this psychological, emotional and spiritual energy could be redirected into building up our communities of faith. I can only imagine that day in our church when we are accepted for who God created us to be and no longer fearing that we might be dismissed from active ministry.

To those the church has hurt

On the return papal flight from Armenia to Rome on June 26, 2016, Pope Francis urged the Catholic Church and other Christian communities to apologize to the LGBT community and others groups that they have offended throughout history. "I believe that the church not only must say it's sorry. . .to this person that is gay that it has

offended. … But it must say it's sorry to the poor, also, to mistreated women, to children forced to work." Francis further clarified, "When I say the church: Christians. The church is holy. We are the sinners."



Fr. Gregory Greiten distributes Communion at his 25th anniversary celebration May 20, 2017. (Provided photo)

As a priest of the Roman Catholic Church currently serving in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, I would like to apologize personally to my LGBT brothers and sisters for my part in remaining silent in the face of the actions and inactions taken by my faith community towards the Catholic LGBT community as well as the larger LGBT community. I pledge to you that I will no longer live my life in the shadows of secrecy. I promise to be my authentically gay self. I will embrace the person that God created me to be. In my priestly life and ministry, I, too, will help you, whether you are gay or straight, bisexual or transgendered, to be your authentic self — to be fully alive living in your image and likeness of God. In reflecting our God-images out into the world, our world will be a brighter, more

tolerant place.

In a message to young people in New Orleans on Sept., 2, 1987, Pope John Paul II stated:

> It is with the truth of Jesus, dear young people, that you must face the great questions in your lives, as well as the practical problems. The world will try to deceive you about many things that matter: about your faith, about pleasure and material things, about the dangers of drugs. And at one stage or another the false voices of the world will try to exploit your human weakness by telling you that life has no meaning at all for you. The supreme theft in your lives would be if they succeeded in robbing you of hope. They will try, but not succeed if you hold fast to Jesus and his truth.

He remarked that the supreme theft in our lives would be if the false voices of the world succeeded in robbing you of hope. I would like to edit his quotation a bit to read: "The real supreme theft in your lives would be *if the church itself* succeeded in robbing you of hope."

While I do sincerely believe, along with St. John Paul II, that the false voices of the world do at times succeed in robbing our young people of hope, I believe it is even more devastating and an even greater theft in their lives when the church itself robs them of hope by rejecting them, by not listening to their stories, by scorning them for who they are and who they were created to be, by telling them they are not invited or welcome at the table of the Lord, and by the failure of its leadership who either looked the other way or somehow failed to do everything in their power to end the discriminatory practices taking place.

Reclaiming my voice, reclaiming myself

I am breaking through the silence and reclaiming my voice — silent words to prophetic words, despairing words to hopeful words, angry words to forgiving words, and sad words to joy-filled words, with the passion of the words attributed to a great woman saint and doctor of the church, St. Catherine of Siena, "Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire."

This fire burning deep inside my heart, I will no longer contain. I will not be silent any longer; the price to pay is way too great. I must speak my truth. I have lived far too

many years chained up and imprisoned in the closet behind walls of shame, trauma and abuse because of the homophobia and discrimination so prevalent in my church and the world. But rather, today, I chart a new course in freedom and in integrity knowing that there is nothing that anyone can do to hurt or destroy my spirit any longer. First steps in accepting and loving the person God created me to be.

"I am Greg. I am a Roman Catholic priest. And, yes, I am gay!"

[Fr. Gregory Greiten is a priest of the Milwaukee Archdiocese, ordained in 1992 and currently serving as pastor of St. Bernadette Parish in Milwaukee.]

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