Opinion

News



An LGBT choir outside the gates of the World Meeting of Families, Thursday Aug. 23 in Dublin (NCR/Jamie L. Manson)



by Jamie Manson

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If the organizers of the World Meeting of Families had any hope of playing down LGBTQ issues in the church, those aspirations were quickly and ably dashed by LGBTQ Catholic activists and their allies in Dublin this week.

As Sarah Mac Donald reported in NCR, the campaigning began one day before the World Meeting of Families even kicked off with the launch of a new academic research project, sponsored by the Wijngaards Institute, on the theology of sexuality and gender. (Full disclosure, I spoke at the press event and a panel presentation that followed.)

Former President of Ireland Mary McAleese, who led the launch, spoke powerfully about the church's need to be accountable for the harm its teachings have inflicted on LGBT people, particularly youth. She referred to a 2016 LGBT Ireland Report that found that one-third of LGBT youth has attempted suicide.

The event also included a poignant testimony from Marianne Duddy-Burke, executive director of DignityUSA, who recounted the struggles that she and her wife, Becky, had trying to adopt their two children, Emily and Finn, from a Catholic agency.

One of the children was born addicted to heroin and the other was so badly abused that she was rendered mute for two years. The children suffered these abuses at the hands of heterosexual parents. And yet, Marianne and Becky were told that they, as a same-sex couple, they were unfit to be parents.

Duddy-Burke, Becky, Emily and Finn are the only openly rainbow family to be registered for this year's World Meeting of Families.

Plenty of room at the inn

As was widely reported, all pro-LGBT groups that applied for a booth in the World Meeting of Families' exhibit hall were rejected. Most were not even given the dignity of being told they were rejected. They simply did not get a response from the Congress' organizers.

When the Global Network of Rainbow Catholics, or GNRC, pushed for an answer from the World Meeting of Families, they were eventually told that they were denied a booth because of "uncertainties over the amount of space we will have available for exhibitions because of other logistical considerations."

In my own walks through the exhibition hall, I noted plenty quite a few empty stalls, as did New Ways Ministry's Frank DeBernardo, who posted photos of the vacant lots on Wednesday morning.

It should be also noted that organizations that had nothing to do with Catholic ministry were given ample space, including an entire hall that was dedicated to tech companies (some of whom never bothered to show up) as well as odd companies like Big Boy Bean Bag, which specializes in "luxury" beanbag chairs. Perfect for lounging around at your next parish council meeting?

Equal future

On Wednesday afternoon, as the World Meeting of Families' first sessions were wrapping up at the Royal Dublin Society (or, RDS, as it's known in Dublin), a new campaign called Equal Future 2018 hosted a press conference at a pub just across the street.

Calling itself "the largest ever global initiative of LGBT groups and faith groups," Equal Future 2018 is a movement to "raise awareness of the damage done to children when they grow up feeling that being LGBT is wrong."

The catalyst for this new project is the Catholic Church's upcoming Synod of Bishops on young people, the faith, and vocational discernment to be held in Rome the first week of October.

"The synod of young people is a once in a generation moment for us to shine a light on the role stigma against LGBT in its various forms affects the mental health of children and young people," said Tiernan Brady, spokesperson for the campaign.

"It is important for the church to look at this as part of their stated desire to consider situations where young people face exclusion for social or religious reasons," he added. "The synod will have a profound impact on young people all over the world for decades to come."



The press conference launching the Equal Future 2018 campaign, including, from left: Xorje Olivares, Emily Dever, Tiernan Brady, Carlos Velaquez and Ursula Halligan (NCR/Jamie L. Manson)

Equal Future has set up a website that will allow people to tell their stories directly to their region's slated delegate at the synod. They will be able to share letters as well as voice and video recordings.

Joining Brady at the press conference were three young adult members of the LGBT community, Xorje Olivares, who grew up along the Texas-Mexico border, Emily Dever, a recent graduate of Marquette University whose sister is transgender and whose father is a very supportive Catholic deacon, and Carlos Velaquez who grew up in Venezuela, but was forced to move to Ireland because of his LGBT identity.

An additional young adult from China, who used the pseudonym Eros Shaw, appeared via a voice recording for fear he might face severe legal repercussions in his homeland if he had filmed his statement.

Ursula Halligan, a former political editor of TV3, Ireland's main independent TV station, concluded the press conference by recounting her own coming out during the Irish referendum on marriage equality in 2015. She appealed to LGBT priests who are leading double lives to come out of the closet.

"Not only will you set yourselves free, you will empower gay people to live freely, too," she said.



A throng of press surround the LGBT choir singing just outside the gates of the World Meeting of Families on Thursday, Aug. 23. (NCR/Jamie L. Manson)

We are family

Halligan continued her campaign on Thursday by organizing an LGBT choir to sing just outside the gates of the World Meeting of Families. The group, who donned T-

shirts that read "Hear Our Voices," performed two songs, "Something So Strong Inside," an anti-apartheid anthem, and Sister Sledge's "We Are Family." Participants raised gay pride and trans pride flags along the gates of the RDS, which flew just below the official flags of the World Meeting of Families.

The chorus was nearly outnumbered by a large contingent of mainstream religious and secular press, who blocked a lane of traffic in their eager push to capture the scene.

Before the chorus arrived, a wild wind and rainstorm blew through for a few minutes. I found shelter inside the RDS and watched activists brave the elements and set up their flags. A short-haired, young woman from Eastern Europe stood next to me taking in the scene. She was one of a number of young people I noticed that day who had decided to wrap themselves in large Vatican City flags, wearing them like a sort of cape.

She turned to her friends, who were significantly older than her, and said that she wanted the activists to know they were welcome.

"I'm going to stand with them," she said. Though her group supported her, she stepped outside alone. She remained inside the RDS gates watching the pride flags waving in the wind as the skies began to clear. She paused for at least a minute, looking through the tall iron fencing as the media and the choir gathered, the Vatican flag now wrapped around waist. Without a word she slowly retreated back inside the WMOF hall. I didn't see her again.



A woman wrapped in a Vatican City flag looks out on the LGBT choir protest from inside the gates of the World Meeting of Families, Thursday Aug. 23. (NCR/Jamie L. Manson)

Somewhere over the rainbow

Now, not all LGBT-themed events were held outside of the walls of the World Meeting of Families.

On Wednesday evening, about fifty World Meeting of Families attendees turned out for Jesuit Fr. Dominic Robinson's presentation on the Westminster LGBT Pastoral Initiative at the Farm Street Parish in the Mayfair section of London.

The event might have had a better turnout if it had not been mysteriously missing from the official World Meeting of Families program, or if its location had not been moved at the last minute, switching venues with a session on the plight of Catholic families in Russia.

The program also featured testimony from two gay men (Nick O'Shea, who appeared in person, and a second parishioner who appeared via video) who are members of the community. They described how they were welcomed to the Jesuit parish in 2013 and the ways in which they have integrated into the liturgical, spiritual and pastoral life of the church. It was likely the first time in WMOF history that an openly gay man (O'Shea) spoke without declaring himself an avowed celibate.



Jesuit Fr. James Martin speaks Thursday morning, Aug. 23, at the World Meeting of Families in Dublin. (NCR/Jamie L. Manson)

One event that could not escape attention was Jesuit Fr. James Martin's Thursday morning presentation "Showing Welcome and Respect in our Parishes for 'LGBT' People and their Families." (Those quotes around LGBT were a last minute editorial additional, Frank DeBernardo told me. His extensive coverage of Martin's talk can be found here.)

As was widely reported in Ireland and the United Kingdom, Martin's presentation garnered backlash from a group called the American Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family and Property. The organization — which apparently suddenly spawned an Irish chapter last month — claims to have collected over 16,000 signatures opposing the presentation by Martin, though this reporter still cannot find any record of the names of the signatories of this online petition.

The event was held at the farthest most point in the RDS complex, nearly a 15-minute walk from the entry doors. In the end, over 1,000 people made the trek to hear Martin walk a fine line of explaining how to welcome and do no harm to LGBT people, without actually criticizing the church teaching that is the source of all of this damage.



Over 1,000 people attend Jesuit Fr. James Martin's Thursday presentation. (NCR/Jamie L. Manson)

If there were any protestors at the Martin event, none made themselves known. The only complaints I heard came from a queue of priests who were refused entry due to fire code restrictions. My media pass allowed me to cut the line of clerics and get waved in with a smile from the female gatekeepers who were blocking the churchmen's entry. The first priest in line huffed indignantly. For once in my life I experienced a privilege denied to a man in clerical garb. I'm not ashamed to say I relished the moment.

[Jamie Manson is an NCR columnist and books editor.]

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