Opinion
News
Spirituality



Fr. Bryan Massingale, a theology professor at Fordham University in New York City, speaks during a Jan. 26, 2017, panel discussion in New York. (CNS photo/Fordham University/Bruce Gilbert)



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"I come to this conversation as a Black, gay priest and theologian."

That was the opening line of Fr. Bryan Massingale's July 4 talk at the 50th anniversary conference of DignityUSA, a group that self describes as "Celebrating the wholeness and holiness of LGBTQI Catholics." DignityUSA also hosted a four-day gathering of the Global Network of Rainbow Catholics prior to the conference.

As did others, I first perceived the talk as a public coming out. But as Massingale, a professor of theological and social ethics at Fordham University, explained in an email exchange and a phone conversation, it really wasn't.

"I didn't do this because I felt the need for some grand announcement," he wrote in an email. "As I said in my reflection, the headline is not 'Priest Comes Out.' … For many years I have been out and honest about my sexuality to those I love and who love me. Also, my orientation is not 'breaking news' to many others who know me more casually."

Whatever his intent, this distinguished scholar and author knew how to get our attention. His personal story of growing awareness and self-discovery is filled with the fury and anguish of someone answering a call to a vocation that, from the outset, simultaneously invites him to engage a deep yearning for God while setting him up for an inevitable rejection at the core of his humanity.

Massingale's headline for the talk was "The Challenge of Idolatry for LGBTQI Ministry," and that holds the key to the deepest part of his message. What's idolatry got to do with it? As much as God's got to do with it — and that's everything.

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It was during an Ignatian retreat in 1982, just before his ordination as deacon, as he meditated on the first creation story in Genesis, that he "noticed that when creation was finished, there wasn't a single Black person. Nor were there any gay people. As I looked at humanity, at all those created in the image of God, there were none that looked like me. Or loved like me. There was nothing in creation that mirrored me." Or at least not as years of Catholic education had informed his imagination and his understanding of himself and of God. "My own prayer betrayed that I didn't believe it. I didn't believe that God could be imaged as Black. Or as gay. And certainly not as both simultaneously."

The heart of his insight is worth quoting at length (italics are Massingale's):

> The major challenge we face as sexually minoritized persons is not a problem of sexual ethics. We tend to think, and we are told, that our problems in church and society stem from our nonconformity with the church's moral code.
>
> But the church has a solution for that issue. If you sin, you can go to confession. You receive forgiveness and absolution. ... Our deepest problem — the one that causes us the most pain, alienation, and self-estrangement — is that we've been told a false story about God and have been given false images of God. *That's* our problem.
>
> Underlying all of the struggles we endure around the world and the stories that we've heard throughout this assembly — stories of being kicked out of parishes, ostracized from our families, and in general being not welcome — underlying all of these experiences is a story that Catholicism tells about itself.
>
> At the heart of this story is that to be Catholic is to be straight. "Catholic" = "straight." Official Catholicism tells a story where *only* heterosexual persons, heterosexual love, heterosexual intimacy, heterosexual families — only these can unambiguously mirror the Divine. Only these are truly sacred. Genuinely holy. Only these are worthy of unreserved acceptance and respect. All other persons and expressions of love, family life, intimacy, and sexual identity are sacred (if at all) only by toleration or

exception.

> In effect, we are told that we are "afterthoughts" in the story of creation, not part of the original plan. In other words, we are "children of a lesser god." … Yes, we certainly need to rethink our church's official sexual ethics. *But even more, we have to rethink God.*

Imagine, those of us not burdened by such a limited God, what life would be like if our acceptance in the Catholic community were dependent on the tolerance of other human beings rather than on the assumption of God's unqualified love for us. Imagine if the image of God advanced by religious leaders excluded an element of your human identity that is intrinsic to who you are.

Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister, in speaking about the evolution of her thinking about God, says that what we believe about God — how we imagine God — "colors everything we do in the name of God. It forms everything we think about other people." Indeed, she notes, belief in God is really no big deal — it has happened endlessly throughout history. "It is the kind of God in which we choose to believe that in the end makes all the difference."

Women, understandably, provide some of the deepest new insights into reimagining the God of Catholic Christianity who emerged from centuries of formulation by a largely all-male, celibate, secretive culture.

In her book *Quest for the Living God*, St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson writes that struggles to understand God in new ways have emerged in recent decades because of a variety of events and forces — such as trying to understand the evil of the Holocaust, a range of social justice issues and "from Christianity's encounter with goodness and truth in the world's religious traditions." What once was settled territory, the monarch (always male) whose relationship with humans was a series of transactions and of totting up good and bad on a cosmic balance sheet, is being surveyed anew and rebuilt.

"By idolatry," said Massingale, "I mean the pervasive belief that only heterosexual persons, loves, and relationships are standard, normative, universal, and truly 'Catholic.' That only these can mediate the Divine and carry the holy. That God can be imaged only as straight."

This puts the conversation in new territory. Massingale turns the question from "To what ethics do you subscribe?" to "Who is the God you believe in?"

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