Opinion
Spirituality
Guest Voices



(Dreamstime/Juan Moyano)



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For the last nine months, Greenwich Village's famous sing-along piano bar Marie's Crisis has been streaming five hours of live performance every night. Performers sing Broadway standards from their homes and rooftops while viewers send requests and hopefully tips.

I have been tuning in for a while now. There is nothing like a guy singing "Oklahoma" in his backyard while his nephew does cartwheels behind him to get your mind off the endless hellish weekend that has been 2020.

But I've found watching has offered me another kind of relief as well. For almost 30 years I've worked in the Catholic Church as a Jesuit seminarian and priest. It has been a tremendously rewarding life, filled with challenges to grow and inspiring people.

At the same time, being a gay man in an institution where the only real conversation around homosexuality frames it either as a sin to be faced or a secret that must be kept has had costs. Over time, you can begin to lose track of the fact that who you are is actually OK, or even that you exist. It's like you learn to hold your breath so well, you forget you still need to breathe.

Then you stumble onto a Facebook page where people are singing gender-swapped show tunes without shame. And suddenly you realize, *Wait, that's right. I'm here.*

I'm always surprised by the people who always knew they were going to be priests. I was much more of the "Spider-Man, but in outer space" school of childhood future career planning. When I arrived at Marquette University in the fall of 1987, I didn't even know what a Jesuit was.

Five years later, I was applying to become one. In part, I wanted to help people, like Jesuits I had met had helped me. I also longed for the kind of relationship with God that they seemed to have.

A third element in my choice, I see now, was some nascent sense of self, an awareness of being most myself in the company of other men.

As I was growing up in the 1980s in a sleepy suburb of Chicago, homosexuality was not something you really heard about. My teenage years were like the John Hughes movies of that era — lots of big hair, cliques and status anxiety, and the queer kids

never seen or mentioned.



(Dreamstime/Juan Moyano)

To the extent that being gay existed for me as a concept back then, it was in the gaps that I created for myself — the people that I avoided, the movies I didn't watch, the choices I made that I carefully ignored. Like a villain in a film noir, day by day I

retraced my steps, erasing any evidence of my own identity.

By the time I was applying to the Jesuits, I was more self-aware. Still, when the lead interviewer asked where I would put myself on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 is straight and 10 is gay, I didn't know the answer.

But in the years that followed, with good classmates and a novice director who kept quoting me the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, I slowly started to settle into myself. The early part of my formation was like a 1980s romcom, lots of me banging into doorframes and stumbling over words as I finally began to see and feel the things that had been buried for so long.

I was very lucky to go through all that in the Jesuits. My whole life in the order, in fact, I have been surrounded by friends and mentors of every orientation who have accepted me, laughed with (and occasionally at) me and shown me through their lives so much about being generous, human and happy. I have lived with hilarious gay men who delight in being themselves and being Jesuits, and others who have quietly endured great suffering because of who they are. When my 13-year-old sister died suddenly in a car accident shortly before I entered, Jesuits cared for me with a tenderness and vulnerability that remains a touchstone of what our life can be.

Early in my formation I remember a bunch of us, straight and gay, watching the Thanksgiving episode of "ER" where Legaspi tells Weaver she's a lesbian. We were sitting around sipping drinks and eating pie. When Legaspi came out, we spontaneously cheered.

Nobody tells you *Don't ever talk about being gay* when you're preparing to get ordained. You won't find it listed in any code of conduct or hear it mentioned at a ceremony. It's just understood, usually couched in benign-seeming virtues like "prudence," "discretion" and "not wearing red while in Pamplona."

I didn't have any problem with that expectation. I didn't see how presenting silence as discretion can make the normal desire to share your own experience seem self-indulgent, or how calling it prudence can make you feel like a vandal. I didn't notice the weight that hung quietly over the idea of being up front, the flashing ambers warning of the harm you might do not only to yourself but to the order that has cared for you and helped you.

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No, I was just glad after 11 years of formation to be able to preside at sacraments and be a friend to people as a priest. Also, I could easily preach from my own understanding of self-acceptance and God's wide-open love for us all without having to wear a rainbow stole. And if I was going to mention queer people in a homily or article, it probably wasn't a bad idea to think about including other marginalized or mistreated groups as well. After all, the priesthood is not meant to be the pulpit for any individual priest's agenda or needs.

Make the best of what's allowed, try to be a place of welcome for others who feel rejected or outside the church, and go home each night to a community where you are known and can feel safe: That was my hope for the priesthood, and mostly that has been my life.

Over time, I even came to think of myself as "out," because most of the people who mattered to me knew who I was. I think many gay priests feel similarly. We're seen and known to the people we care about. That's enough.

Hell, in many places, it's all that's possible. Even though our actual lives as gay priests are not terribly unusual, let alone controversial, the rhetoric that can get stirred up about homosexuality can be intense and frightening. If you're a 60-something gay man who loves God and has spent his whole life working for the church, you don't exactly have job prospects, should you be thrown out.

Even as I felt happy in my life as a Jesuit, at some point I started to notice changes in my behavior. I worried about liking too many posts from openly queer people; could that get me in trouble? At home, I found myself open with fewer guys, and when interacting with other queer people, I'd quickly excuse myself.

It wasn't that I was afraid of being associated with them, I realized. I was afraid of being *seen*.

I've witnessed the same in other priests at times, a cautiousness that seems to deepen as we get older. Some of that is not a function of sexuality per se, but aging and the church's more general struggles with affectivity. Many of us have been taught to treat our feelings like the high school baseball trophies you store in the attic — fine to dust them off and take a look at home from time to time, but otherwise it's probably best to keep them out of sight.

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But affections kept secret are like the hidden planets that fascinated me as a kid; even when you can't see them, they warp the space around them. And so we clergy can become caustic where we're meant to be caring. We build walls when we're supposed to be vulnerable. We live in hiding, while we preach, "Be not afraid."

As I've gotten older, I've also found myself confronted with the possible consequences of my choices upon others. I have seven nephews and nieces, a godson, goddaughter and lots of friends with kids. Being the visiting priest when your friends' children are young is like getting to visit the Muppets. It's chaos and hilarity and you stumble home wondering how they manage to put on that show every day.

But then those kids get older and you watch them start to open up to the world around them and ask big questions about life. And I wondered, could the fact that they have a priest for an uncle or a family friend encourage them to take more seriously not just the idea that there is a God who loves them, or that they have gifts meant for others, but that women are somehow less capable of leadership than men? If they're queer would they be more likely to think something's wrong with them?

I read somewhere that Flannery O'Connor once mused about the fact that someone could convert to Christianity and yet become a worse person. My concern became similar: Could having me as an uncle, godparent or family friend encourage the young people I knew to distrust or despise themselves or others? Had it already had

that effect on the high school students I had taught?

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As a gay priest, you tend to think of your silence as a required act of self-sacrifice. But in fact, our self-erasure also contributes to other people believing there is no place for them in the church or the world, just as we struggle at times to believe there is truly a place for us.

Our reticence to share our stories within the church or to speak out when queer people are fired or mistreated likewise cedes the church's narrative around homosexuality mostly to those who misunderstand or demonize us.

We dream of a church that will accept us. But realistically will our institution grow in its understanding of sexuality if we who have experience as both gay men and clergy won't stand with other queer people and other Christian churches and share what God has shown us, that while we would love to not be afraid or ashamed anymore, to not feel in danger or like a burden, we would never choose to not be who we are? That we experience our lives and sexualities as a tremendous gift?

What's to say that's not why God called gay men to the priesthood in the first place? Certainly he's called enough of us.



(Dreamstime/Verastuchelova)

My image of God used to be Jesus the carpenter's shaggy son who wanders around in what look like uncomfortably heavy garments — *What is that, burlap?* — offering a word of hope and welcome and staying faithful to his love for us even though it costs him everything.

But these days, I find myself thinking of God more as mystery. It's the experience of looking up into a night sky filled with stars and being overwhelmed by its infinite vastness. The first instinct is to run and hide from the awareness of how ridiculously

small we are. But on the other side of that moment, there's such relief. We spend so much of our lives thinking everything revolves around us. To realize that's not the case is to be released from a terrible burden.

When it comes to sexuality, I think that some in our church and other churches get stuck in that initial moment of terror. Overwhelmed by the boundless wilderness that is the human heart, they grasp at ways to feel in control. And so they insist on definitions that don't match lived experience, scientific study or the example of Jesus. They silence, they scapegoat, they condemn.

These are not the acts of individuals trying to embody the endlessly welcoming love of God, or even just trying to be a source of goodness in the world. They're the choices of people who find themselves out of their depth, angry and afraid.

I understand that sense of being overwhelmed and scared. Many queer people do.

But the church doesn't have to stay in that place of fear, as Pope Francis himself has recently demonstrated with his comments in support of civil unions.

For those willing to pause and sit a moment before the wondrous, silly, painful, spiritual mystery that is being human, I can tell you, there's a guy online in the Village who has a song for you. It's only a show tune, I know. But you'd be surprised how much just that can help you start to breathe.

A version of this story appeared in the **March 5-18, 2021** print issue under the headline: A place for us: on being gay in the priesthood.