News

People attend a rally in support of transgender rights in Los Angeles Oct. 20, 2021. (CNS phot

People attend a rally in support of transgender rights in Los Angeles Oct. 20, 2021. (CNS photo/Mario Anzuoni, Reuters)

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February 28, 2022

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For transgender Catholics across the United States, retaining their faith can entail complex calculations. They face rebukes from some fellow Catholics, including many bishops, yet find full acceptance in some premises of the church.

A small but growing number of parishes have formed LGBTQ support groups and welcome transgender people on their own terms. Yet within the past two years, at least six Catholic dioceses have issued guidelines targeting trans people with restrictions and refusing to recognize their gender identity.

"Many of our bishops are anti-science. ... They are cold and cruel," said Sister Luisa Derouen, a retired nun who has ministered to trans people. "You can't respect people and deny their existence at the same time."

The latest policy targeting trans Catholics was issued by the Archdiocese of Milwaukee in January. It bars church personnel from using trans people's preferred pronouns that reflect their gender identity.

Objecting to trans-supportive "gender theory," the policy stipulates that "all interactions and policies, parishes, organizations, and institutions are to recognize only a person's biological sex."

Among other measures, it says parishes, schools and other Catholic organizations in the archdiocese must require people to use bathrooms associated with their birth gender and adhere to dress codes on the same basis.

A broader policy issued in July by the Diocese of Marquette, which encompasses Michigan's Upper Peninsula, said pastors should deny trans, gay and nonbinary Catholics the sacraments — such as baptism and Communion — "unless the person has repented." It was signed by Bishop John Doerfler.

But in some parishes around the country, a different, more welcoming face of the church is on display.

Just a few weeks before the Marquette policy emerged, the Church of Our Lady of Grace in Hoboken, New Jersey, celebrated its annual Pride Mass in support of the LGBTQ community. Delivering part of the homily at the invitation of the priest, Alexander Santora, was Christine Zuba, a transgender woman from New Jersey.

"We are not disordered, confused or a fad," Zuba said, sharing with other worshippers the decades-long journey that led her to come out six years earlier at age 58. "We are not trying to defy God, nor to play God."

"By staying visible, not only outside these walls but inside our churches, we change hearts and minds, one person at a time," she concluded. "Once in a while we may get thrown out, but if that happens, we're not going away. We're coming right back in."

Santora, a priest for 40 years, said the other worshippers rose and applauded.

"Our church was opened in 1878," Santora said. "I wanted Christine to be on that pulpit."

A lifelong Catholic, Zuba knew from age 4 that she was different. When she came out five decades later, she was grateful that a nearby parish, Saints Peter and Paul in Turnersville, New Jersey, welcomed her. She serves there as a eucharistic minister.

Yet she knows that much of the Catholic hierarchy, including the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, rejects the concept of gender transition.

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"These bishops and priests don't understand that when they turn someone away, they're losing parents, children, groups of friends who say this is not the church we want to belong to," Zuba said.

Lynn Discenza, a 64-year-old transgender woman, grew up in a churchgoing Italian American family in West Hartford, Connecticut, and gave seminary a try before pursuing a career in aerospace design.

She considers herself fortunate, after transitioning two years ago, to be part of a welcoming Catholic church in the area — Saint Patrick-Saint Anthony Church in Hartford. She is a co-leader of its LGBTQ ministry.

Particularly moving, Discenza said, was a Nov. 21 observance marking the annual Transgender Day of Remembrance, which commemorates people killed due to anti-trans violence. She thanked the other worshippers for their support, and they responded with applause.

The pastor, Timothy Shreenan, highlighted the commemoration in the church bulletin.

"We must always stand up against hatred in all its forms, and not allow others' fears (or phobias) to be a reason for hatred," he wrote. "Rather, we must continue to learn more about the experience of others and to become more tolerant and accepting of one another."

Discenza hopes that grassroots activism on behalf of greater inclusivity will accelerate as more parishes add LGBTQ ministries.

"The change is going to come from the ground up, and some of the old bishops will die away," she said.

For young transgender Catholics, the conflicting approaches of individual churches and clergy can pose challenges to both them and their parents.

Eli Musselman of Philadelphia, who turns 19 in March and came out as transgender almost four years ago, said he felt a strong connection with his faith as a boy and many of his friends supported him.

But the pastor of the family's longtime parish declined to refer to him with masculine pronouns and he had anxiety attacks in church due to some parishioners' "nasty looks," prompting the family to switch to a more welcoming parish.

"A place that had once been a safe haven for me had become a place of dangers," said Musselman, now a freshman at the Jesuit-run St. Josephs University, where students and most professors, with one hurtful exception, have been supportive.

"But since coming out," he added, "my spirituality has grown. ... I feel whole for the first time in my life."

"I lost some really good friends," said his mother, JoEllen Musselman. "I felt I was constantly making apologies to people, and I got tired of that."

After embracing the faith as a convert, she now has mixed feelings. Though determined to remain active in the church, she remains skeptical about the topmost Catholic leaders.

"They're flawed," she said. "If it wasn't for Christ, the church would collapse, because we humans screw everything up."

Luisa Derouen, the retired nun, who has ministered to more than 250 transgender people since she began in 1999, received permission from her superiors in 2014 to write about that work. But that was on condition she not identify herself or her congregation, the Dominican Sisters of Peace. She did so under a pseudonym, which she ultimately abandoned in 2018 to publicly speak out on behalf of trans people and "give witness to their dignity and worth as human beings."

In a recent interview, Derouen said friction over transgender inclusion is likely to intensify.

"There has never been a time in the American church when Catholic hierarchy has had less moral credibility," she said. "The people in the pews are taking responsibility for doing their own homework and recognizing that we are all God's people."