News



Pope Francis, on stage, looks over the procession of flags from the all the countries represented by young people participating in World Youth Day during the event's welcome ceremony at Eduardo VII Park in Lisbon, Portugal, Aug. 3. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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Lisbon, Portugal — August 4, 2023
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The same day Pope Francis told half a million Catholics gathered in the Portuguese capital for a major youth festival that the church must be a home for everyone, ultra-traditionalist Catholics interrupted a Mass for LGBTQ pilgrims in protest of the organizer's efforts to put the pope's message into action.

When some two dozen Catholics gathered for Mass on Aug. 3 at the Church of Our Lady of the Incarnation here in Lisbon, a group of protesters began to chant "a reparatory prayer" in an effort to disrupt the gathering.

According to noted British theologian Fr. James Alison, an openly gay priest who was one of three concelebrants of the Mass, the group of a dozen protesters wore long mantillas and held crucifixes and increasingly raised their voices in an effort to drown out the priests and congregants during Mass.

Police who had already been notified of a potential disturbance were soon on the scene to escort the protesters out of the church, and the Mass continued without further incident. Alison told NCR that the interruption highlights the challenges that LGBTQ Catholics face in trying to practice their faith.

Those roadblocks began several days earlier, when the organizers of the Mass, the Global Network of Rainbow Catholics and a local Portuguese LGBTQ Catholic group, had to scramble to find a new location to hold the Mass after their original hosts grew anxious after calls for protests began to circulate online.

Much of the protesters' motivation, Alison said, was their mistaken belief that Jesuit Fr. James Martin would concelebrate the Mass. While Martin — a prominent LGBTQ Catholic advocate — had been in Portugal for Jesuit-related events ahead of World Youth Day, he had already left the country.

Despite the forced change of venue and the interruption, Alison said that he has no ill will toward the protesters.

"I was terribly sorry to see these people who have been led to this terrible ideology of hatred," he said. "They live in a weird, alienated world and did not look happy. We were principally sad for them."

"I don't blame them," Alison added. "I blame the intellectual authors who seem to bear the responsibility for this."

Alison said that the fact that the protest occurred on the same days that Francis — who arrived in Portugal Aug. 2 for a five-day visit for World Youth Day — used three speeches to repeatedly emphasize that everyone has a home in the Catholic Church, showed that the Mass for LGBTQ Catholics was "clearly in line with the Holy Father's message."

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Since the start of his pontificate in 2013, Francis has walked a tightrope on LGBTQ issues — continuing to uphold traditional church teaching, which prohibits gay relations, while repeatedly offering calls for everyone to be welcomed in the church and personally befriending a number of openly gay Catholics.

On Aug. 4, the Spanish Catholic news weekly, Vida Nueva, published an interview with Francis, in which the pope reflected on his meetings with transgender people.

"The first time a group of transsexuals came to the Vatican and they saw me, they came out crying, saying that I had given them a hand, a kiss … as if I had done something exceptional with them," he told the magazine. "But they are daughters of God!"

This story appears in the **World Youth Day 2023** feature series. View the full series
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