News



(NCR digital illustration/Toni-Ann Ortiz)



by Aleja Hertzler-McCain

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

October 2, 2023

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

As the long anticipated Synod of Bishops is set to officially open on Oct. 4, LGBTQ+ Catholics are expressing gratitude that Pope Francis' revamped process for the synod has included some of their voices and concerns, and sharing cautious hope that the outcome will lead to even greater openness.

In the wake of the release of the synod's working document, LGBTQ+ Catholic advocacy groups celebrated the document's use of the "LGBTQ+" acronym as a significant step forward by the Vatican.

Brian Flanagan, a gay Catholic theologian and senior fellow at New Ways Ministry, called the terminology "an act of respect."



Brian Flanagan (Courtesy of Brian Flanagan)

"There's a way in which it de-pathologizes the discussion of queer people," he said.

While many LGBTQ+ Catholics praised the inclusion of Jesuit Fr. James Martin as a synod member, several expressed disappointment that no openly LGBTQ+ Catholics are among the members or participants.

"We are full members of the church, and if we're going to be talking about our faith and our lives and our spirituality and how we can function as members within the church, we need to be present at the table," said Sam Albano, a gay Catholic and national secretary of DignityUSA.

Yunuen Trujillo, a lay minister and author of *LGBTQ Catholics: A Guide to Inclusive Ministry*, emphasized the statistical likelihood that there are closeted LGBTQ people participating in the synod, saying that it can be hard to come out because the church "has historically been an emotionally toxic space" for LGBTQ Catholics.

"There's an LGBTQ presence in every single ecclesial space," she said. If there are delegates who are closeted, "it'd be lovely if they use this opportunity to share their story and their witness of faith," she said.

The working document for the synod's October meeting, which introduced a novel format with open-ended questions for the assembly to discuss, contains two questions in a paragraph that mentions LGBTQ+ people.

The document asks, "How can we create spaces where those who feel hurt by the Church and unwelcomed by the community feel recognised, received, free to ask questions and not judged?" And then in another follow-up question, it asks, "In the light of the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Amoris Laetitia, what concrete steps are needed to welcome those who feel excluded from the Church because of their status or sexuality (for example, remarried divorcees, people in polygamous marriages, LGBTQ+ people, etc.)?"

LGBTQ+ Catholics shared their own answers to the question with NCR.



To address the judgment that makes LGBTQ+ Catholics feel judged "you can't just create a program to make that go away," said Maxwell Kuzma, a transgender Catholic from Ohio. (Courtesy of Maxwell Kuzma)

"The way that question is worded shows you that what's really needed in a lot of ways is a big perspective shift," where church leaders model welcoming attitudes, said Maxwell Kuzma, a transgender Catholic from Ohio. To address the judgment that makes LGBTQ+ Catholics feel judged "you can't just create a program to make that go away," he said.

While Kuzma said changing doctrine would show "care and concern" for LGBTQ+ issues, he said the core issue is that, even with present doctrine, many Catholic leaders and employers appear to crack down more harshly on LGBTQ+ people in relationships than heterosexual people living in situations contrary to official church teaching, such as cohabiting together before marriage.

Kuzma said he hopes the synod will lead to "increased familiarity and comfort" with LGBTQ+ people that leads to more "unity." Kuzma would like to see people willing to engage in conversations about LGBTQ+ issues instead of being "outright disrespectful" or "dismissive."

Albano said he thinks that "if you're going to make people feel welcome," the church must increase the visibility of LGBTQ people in the church.



Yunuen Trujillo (Courtesy of Yunuen Trujillo)

Trujillo said that she hopes the synod can make a statement about the "God-given gifts of LGBTQ Catholics." She also hoped the synod could raise discussion about the difference between "LGBTQ" and "homosexuality," given that the latter term has historically included sexual behavior that was nonconsensual and abusive.

For Marianne, a queer Catholic teacher in the U.S. who asked not to be identified with her last name, if LGBTQ+ people are going to feel welcomed, "things that are hurtful and damaging within church teaching need to be removed, and I think everyone needs to be welcome at God's table."

"Regardless of status, everyone should be welcomed to receive all of the sacraments," including the Eucharist and holy orders, said Marianne. "Church teaching has changed before. It wouldn't be the first time," she said.

Marianne sees girls in her confirmation classes question why they don't see women in church leadership, explaining they feel the church doesn't see them as whole people.

And while she teaches that "God loves you for who you are," she said, "So many of them don't get confirmed."

"I don't see a very robust future for the Catholic Church in this country, and I think it's vital that we start adapting and changing," Marianne said.

However, Marianne recognizes that major change isn't likely. She said that "it's really hard to have hope" in the synod. "I love the church, but this church has been letting me down my whole life," she said.

Advertisement

"My expectations are on the ground, and if something good comes of it, then that's wonderful," she said.

Other LGBTQ+ people also expressed hopes for the synod that they acknowledged were less likely to happen.

While acknowledging it would be unlikely, Trujillo advocated for the synod to call for a commission to examine the use of "homosexuality" in Biblical translations.

Albano said he hoped the synod would recommend a change to the language in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which describes "homosexual tendencies" as "objectively disordered" and "homosexual acts" as "intrinsically disordered."



Sam Albano is a gay Catholic and national secretary of DignityUSA, and author of *God's Works Revealed: Spirituality, Theology, and Social Justice for Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Catholics*. (Courtesy of Sam Albano)

He said that LGBTQ+ people and their families frequently mentioned the negative impacts of that language in listening sessions.

"That would be a step that would open up more avenues for dialogue and that would place the church in a less offensive posture," Albano said, noting that there was recent precedent for changing the section, given that it was most recently updated in 1997.

Flanagan said that, as much as he might want immediate change on church teaching on issues like same-sex marriage, "I'm not the only Catholic in the world."

The central hope of this synod, he said, "is not fixing it all right away, but allowing us to even have the conversation. I don't think we could have had this conversation 30 years ago."

"Even 10 years ago, there would have been too much fear that even raising up the experiences of LGBTQ people in a church setting would mean you would never get promoted to be a bishop or you would never get a job again as a Catholic theologian," Flanagan said.

"The church is also at the beginning of what I expect to be a couple of centuries of conversation about the diversity of sexualities and the diversity of gender identities. I don't expect that they could figure it out in four weeks," he said.

Flanagan acknowledged that there was a "sacrificial element" for LGBTQ+ Catholics who remain in the conversation despite not being welcomed the way that they would like.

"For those of us like me" who have the patience and privilege "to stick it out, I think we are helping the church to grow into what will seem normal in a few hundred years," he said.

Trujillo said she would tell the synod participants, "For those that are allies to the LGBTQ community, I would say push the boundaries as much as you can," adding that she herself can be afraid to push boundaries.

"God is a lot more expansive than we can comprehend with the limited human mind," she said.

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. View the full series.

A version of this story appeared in the **Oct 13-26, 2023** print issue under the headline: LGBTQ+ Catholics express cautious hope for change as Synod of Bishops starts.