News



Brother Christian Matson is a Catholic diocesan hermit in Kentucky. (Courtesy photo)

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Lexington, Kentucky — May 20, 2024
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Diocesan hermits by nature don’t get much attention. A small subset of religious persons, hermits mostly spend their lives engaged in quiet prayer.

Brother Christian Matson, a Catholic diocesan hermit in Kentucky, has spent years doing just that. His monk’s habit might catch his neighbor’s eye, but he is known in the town where he lives primarily through his work with the local theater.

But recently Matson decided that his faith compels him to make a little more noise than usual.

"This Sunday, Pentecost 2024, I’m planning to come out publicly as transgender," Matson told Religion News Service on Friday (May 17), saying he was speaking out with the permission of his bishop, John Stowe of the Diocese of Lexington in Kentucky.

Matson, who is also a Benedictine oblate, believes he is the first openly transgender person in his position in the Catholic Church. It is a difficult claim to confirm — even Stowe told RNS he did not know for sure if Matson is the first — but Matson’s status is at least highly unusual and comes at a time when church officials are grappling with how to address transgender Catholics.

According to Matson, 39, his "disclosing," as he describes it, is a moment years in the making. He offered his story as indicative of the often difficult path for trans Catholics, including those seeking life as a religious — a category that includes brothers and nuns.

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"I am currently based in the Appalachian mountains of eastern Kentucky," he wrote in an email to friends and supporters on Sunday. "I live in a hermitage at the top of a wooded hill, which I share with my German Shepherd rescue, Odie, and with the Blessed Sacrament, which was installed in my oratory shortly before Christmas."

Raised in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Matson converted to Catholicism in 2010 — four years, he noted, after transitioning in college, a step he refers to as a part of his "medical history" rather than a "central part of my personal identity." After his conversion, Matson felt called to minister to people working in the arts, but knew he would encounter "issues" because of a 2000 Vatican document that, according to a Catholic News Service report from the time, declared that anyone who had undergone "sex-change" was ineligible "to marry, be ordained to the priesthood or enter religious life."

Matson approached a canon lawyer to discuss his options and was told that only two aspects of Catholic life were categorically off the table: marriage and the priesthood. According to Matson, the canon lawyer recommended being upfront about his status as a transgender man in any vocational conversations with church leaders and mentioned the role of a diocesan hermit, which could prove less challenging than enlisting with an existing religious order.

The canon lawyer, Matson said, effectively conveyed that "there's no problem as long as there's a bishop who will accept you, because there's no distinction by sex and you're not in a community — you're by yourself."

What followed was roughly a decade of searching and no small amount of rejection. Living in the United Kingdom while pursuing a master's degree, and later a Ph.D. in theology, Matson entered a vocational discernment program and approached the Jesuit order to ask if he could join.

"They said, 'No, we just don't see how this would work for us,' which was crushing, because that's where I felt called," Matson said.

Other communities offered similar responses, when they responded at all. "People who knew me said, 'You clearly have a religious vocation,' and these were all people who knew my medical history," Matson said. "But when they would go to the people in the community in charge of making that decision, they … would often just refuse to even meet with me."

In one instance, Matson said, a religious leader declined to meet simply to hear his experience as a trans man, saying doing so would be "a waste of time."

But Matson's call to religious life wouldn't abate. While visiting a monastery during a retreat, he found himself unable to sleep, consumed with the idea of starting "a religious community of and for artists — artists who are living together, (operating)

in the church through their art, and ministering to the loneliness and sense of precarity many artists experience."

> "My willingness to be open to him is because it's a sincere person seeking a way to serve the church," Bishop John Stowe of Lexington said of Matson.
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In 2015, he returned to New York City, where he had attended college. Having already taken private vows of poverty, chastity and obedience — witnessed by his spiritual director — before he arrived, he co-created a nonprofit called the Catholic Artist Connection. The group hosted retreats and connected artists to resources such as the Archdiocese of New York's Sheen Center for Thought and Culture, where Matson began working as a programming associate.

Matson kept running into artists who wanted to pursue religious life, he said, and continued to feel the tug himself. But roadblocks kept appearing. "As I spoke to friends in the archdiocese, I knew somebody with a trans background was never going to be accepted into religious life in the Archdiocese of New York," Matson said.

He tried again after a move to Minnesota in 2018, but his entreaties to various religious communities and orders were also rejected.

"I thought, well, if I can't find a religious community to sponsor me, maybe what I need is a bishop," Matson said.

A priest friend recommended different bishops to contact, beginning with Stowe, who was emerging as a leading voice among Catholics calling for a more tolerant approach to LGBTQ+ people. In 2020, Matson sent Stowe a letter, conveying his status as a transgender man, his vision for an artists' community and his pull to religious life.

Stowe wrote back immediately, expressing his openness.

"It was an enormous relief," Matson said. "I was in tears. I felt my hope revive."



Bishop John Stowe. (Video screen grab)

Stowe confirmed Matson’s account, saying the then-aspiring brother was recommended to him by a number of people.

"My willingness to be open to him is because it’s a sincere person seeking a way to serve the church," Stowe said of Matson. "Hermits are a rarely used form of religious life … but they can be either male or female. Because there’s no pursuit of priesthood or engagement in sacramental ministry, and because the hermit is a relatively quiet and secluded type of vocation, I didn’t see any harm in letting him live this vocation."

He added that Matson’s spiritual journey was "consistent with the calling of that particular vocation."

Matson moved to Kentucky, having already made progress on Stowe’s suggestion that he link up with an additional community through which to experience religious life. Matson entered the novitiate at a Benedictine monastery in 2021, hoping the formation offered by that path would eventually help him form a new religious community for artists.

Finally, in August 2022, Matson took his first vows as a diocesan hermit — a yearlong commitment — under Stowe's direction.

For the next year, Matson "lived a life of basically spending half the day in prayer and half the day doing some form of work" that included producing and writing at a local theater.

Three years earlier, Matson read with frustration a document issued by the Vatican's Congregation for Catholic Education titled "Male and Female He Created Them: Toward a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education." The instructional letter rejected "calls for public recognition of the right to choose one's gender."

In 2021, the Diocese of Marquette, in Michigan, followed with its own instruction to priests to refuse transgender people asking to be baptized or confirmed until they have "repented."

"It was suddenly becoming a lot more difficult in the church to be trans," Matson said.

But tolerance seems to be growing in some quarters. While Pope Francis has opposed elements of gender theory and recently called its proposals "ugly," he has also met and dined with groups of transgender people.

In November 2023, the Vatican doctrine department ruled that transgender people may be baptized and serve as witnesses at Catholic weddings, so long as doing so "doesn't cause scandal among the faithful."



The Rev. Andrea Conocchia, center, introduces members of the Torvaianica transgender community to Pope Francis on Aug. 11, 2022, during the pope’s general audience at the Vatican. (Photo courtesy Andrea Conocchia)

In the United States in March, a coalition led by Catholic nuns released a letter voicing support for transgender, nonbinary and gender-expansive individuals, implicitly rebuking a statement put forward by a group of U.S. Catholic bishops discouraging Catholic health care groups from performing various gender-affirming medical procedures.

But overall, "Vatican-level documents that have come out on the subject have not engaged with the science at all," Matson said, adding that he believes many

diocesan-level statements are inconsistent in their attempts to categorize gender and cite scientific studies misleadingly. Matson has sent multiple private letters to Vatican offices, urging them to engage with transgender people and arguing that the church can embrace transgender people while maintaining orthodoxy.

As trans rights began to be debated in statehouses across the United States in recent months, conservative lawmakers have begun pushing bans on providing gender-affirming care for youth and, in some cases, adults.

Matson vented his frustrations to Stowe and his spiritual director, saying he wanted to speak out. But he said he was advised to first "build a foundation" in religious life for several years.

During that time, Matson had an experience that shook him. Attending a friend’s play in his religious habit, he was approached by a student who identified as trans and nonbinary. After asking if Matson was a monk, the student said they were raised Catholic, but that their parents had rejected their identity, and the student felt like they "don’t have a place in the church anymore."

Matson responded by saying there were people in the church who would support the student, and Matson prayed with them, asking God to show the student how they are "wonderful the way you’ve made them." The student, Matson said, grew emotional, thanking the hermit profusely and saying, "No one from the church has ever affirmed me for who I am."

Matson, who renewed his vows in 2023, eventually began mulling a date to go public with his status. "I have to say something," Matson told his spiritual director. He settled on Pentecost, which emphasizes preaching "the good news of God’s love to everyone," he said. It was also the day in the church calendar when he’d been baptized years before.

"I can’t stand by and let this false and, at times, culpably ignorant understanding of what it means to be transgender continue to hurt people," he said. "If I don’t say anything and allow the church to continue to make decisions based on incorrect information, then I’m not serving the church."

> "I don’t have a hidden agenda, I just want to serve the church. People can believe that or not."

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Both Matson and Stowe said they are bracing for blowback after Sunday's announcement. Matson said he is largely unconcerned with "online trolls" but is sensitive to people who are "legitimately concerned" that "accepting a trans person into religious life means Catholic anthropology gets thrown out the window."

For people with such concerns, he said, he looks forward to engaging in dialogue. "I don't have a hidden agenda, I just want to serve the church," he said. "People can believe that or not."

Both the hermit and his bishop are prepared for the possibility that church officials may push for Matson's removal. Stowe acknowledged that "if I'm told to by higher authorities, then I will have to deal with that at the time."

As for ever leaving Catholicism itself, Matson bristled at the idea, calling the church "my family." "I'm Catholic," he said. "I became Catholic after I transitioned because of the Catholic understanding — the sacramental understanding — of the body, of creation, of the desirability of the visible unity of the church and primarily because of the Eucharist."

At the very least, Matson said, he hopes going public will spark dialogue about his fellow transgender Catholics, a discussion he believes can enhance unity among the body of believers.

"You've got to deal with us, because God has called us into this church," he said. "It's not your church to kick us out of — this is God's church, and God has called us and engrafted us into it."

A version of this story appeared in the **June 7-20, 2024** print issue under the headline: Catholic diocesan hermit approved by Kentucky bishop comes out as transgender.