Opinion
Guest Voices



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Have we reached a moment when it's time for the many LGBTQ bishops, priests, deacons, brothers and sisters of the Catholic Church to come out?

The question comes after news that Pope Francis warned Italian bishops to "keep your eyes open" when considering candidates to their seminaries, and to reject anyone that might be gay. He also used an Italian term that roughly translates to "faggoty" as a way of describing clique-y, gossipy behavior — something for which he has apologized.

Since this was a private meeting, we don't know exactly what Francis did say. Did he really instruct Italian bishops not to accept anyone who they believed was gay, for instance, or was it to reject anyone who seemed likely to bring a negative or divisive spirit to a seminary community?

Given his long-standing support for queer people and celibate gay clergy, it's hard to believe this pope would secretly be telling bishops to avoid gay seminarians. But then again, I think most people would have found it hard to believe that this pope uses that kind of language either, and yet apparently it is a thing that he does.

But to me all of this also begs that larger question of whether it is the time, finally, for LGBTQ religious to publicly come out and help the broader church understand the extent to which it is supported, maintained and nourished by good and faithful queer people.

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For as much as some in the church may denounce us as a blight upon the purity of the church, in fact Catholicism depends in part on us, and has done so for a very long time. Gay and bisexual priests and deacons preside at the sacraments not just in big cities or here and there, but in significant numbers throughout the Catholic

Church. LGBTQ religious teach, do research and write the papers that both leaders and the faithful depend on. We work for justice and serve the neediest and most forgotten. LGBTQ Catholic clergy and religious run institutions such as colleges and soup kitchens, refugee centers and the church's own dioceses.

We are progressive, conservative and middle of the road. And in what remains, despite Francis' best efforts, as a pretty bleak time in the church, we help keep the faith alive, even as some of our fellow clergy and religious demean us or label us predators.

And the thing is, those who condemn us know all this. This is the game at the heart of it all: Our opponents demonize us, because it serves other agendas, like their need for a scapegoat for the sexual abuse crisis, or gender theory. But only those most fervently in denial don't know that they need LGBTQ ministers just as much as they need the many faithful and talented straight ministers who serve in the church.



(Unsplash/Metin Ozer)

What allows these leaders to sustain prejudice, suspicion and uncertainty toward LGBTQ people is the fact that too many of us keep silent. It's easy to demonize people who never get to speak for themselves.

To be clear, there are a lot of reasons why priests, deacons and religious don't come out, most of which involve one form or other of duress. First and foremost, it's an unspoken rule. As a public person in the church, you are not to talk about your sexuality, no matter what it is.

And, particularly for LGBTQ religious, that rule comes with an implicit layer of threat: If you do this, there will be consequences.

In some religious orders, one might find a community of support for one's sexuality, a place where you can safely share that part of yourself with your peers and fellow community members. In my formation as a Jesuit, the men I lived with, straight and gay, played a huge part in helping me to figure out my sexual identity, and enabled me to embrace it as I did.

But in many other situations that is not the case. Though they live their vows faithfully and serve the church well, many LGBTQ religious find themselves in a situation which is not only "Don't ask, Don't tell," but "Hide every trace of the truth, even amongst yourselves," because — in too many cases — if your bishop or superior finds out, they will try to get rid of you. Diocesan priests don't take vows of poverty and therefore must earn an income and build a pension in order to care for themselves. The possibility that a bishop could throw them out at age 50 or 60 without any legal recourse or means of supporting themselves simply because they are queer is no small issue. And while they rarely get reported, these kinds of expulsions do happen.

I think it's also true that over time some of us develop a deep, maybe crippling sense of shame about the fact that we haven't come out. Early on, we each made a deal with the church: Live the life we felt called to, try to follow Jesus and help people, in exchange for our silence on this issue. At the time it seemed like the bargain involved only a personal sacrifice, and maybe a very small one. Personally, I thought, yes, I won't be able to talk about this publicly, but as a gay man I will be able to help LGBTQ people in so many other ways.

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But as we've watched the LGBTQ people who work in our parishes, schools and offices get fired simply for being who they are or heard some of our leaders say astonishing things, we've discovered that our deal affects a lot of other people, too. Where we could be sharing the truth of our own experiences, truth which could provide support for young or struggling people and might help make the world and the church safer for LGBTQ people, might even convert some hostile hearts, we feel pressured instead to keep our comments general, if we speak about these matters at all.

It's a very good thing for a priest, deacon or religious to be able to say *God loves gay people*, an important thing. But to be able to share as a nun or priest that *I am gay, and I, too, have struggled with the question of whether God loves me* is to offer a whole other kind and level of support and friendship.

There are many more LGBTQ clergy and religious than any of us even in the priesthood or religious life know, precisely because we're not allowed to reveal it publicly. And there are others who don't know exactly their own identities, or have never felt safe to talk about such matters to anyone. How can any of that be of God?

In 1973, the American Psychiatric Society made the momentous decision to no longer define homosexuality as a mental illness. As This American Life reported in its tremendous episode "81 Words," the spark that enabled that dramatic change to occur was LGBTQ psychologists deciding to come out of the closet and talk about their own experiences.

Coming out is a very personal choice, and can be scary in a lot of ways. No matter how comfortable you are with yourself, you just can't be sure what your life might look like on the other side of acknowledging your identity in a public way — not only how your superiors, peers or others will treat you, but what it might open up inside yourself.



(Unsplash/Daniel McCullough)

No one can guarantee that LGBTQ clergy and religious coming out will actually have the kind of effect on the church that psychiatrists did on the American Psychiatric Society, either. But it's hard to believe it won't have some kind of positive impact. There are so many generous and incredibly loving LGBTQ people working in the church.

And the situation we're in is clearly not working, either for us personally oftentimes or for other LGBTQ people, among them our friends, our family members, and those we became priests and sisters and deacons and brothers to help. Meanwhile, the very few who do speak out in any way get attacked relentlessly. And who knows what is happening behind closed doors? Whatever Pope Francis might have meant or not meant, it's still a wake-up call.

The question that I often have is this: Why has God called so many LGBTQ people to ministry? If I believe that the Holy Spirit is at work, our sexuality must somehow be part of the gift God intends us to bring. And if that's the case, are we getting in the

way of grace when we hide that?

We've been told for so long that being LGBTQ is an impediment to ministry, that it's very hard on some deep-down level not to believe that it is indeed a flaw, a secret that must be hidden. But it seems pretty clear that this is not how God sees things. In fact, that's kind of Jesus' defining characteristic, isn't it? He sees things differently. He calls those who others scapegoat or ignore.

And if that's the case, to quote a much better moment in the papacy of Pope Francis, who are we to judge?

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