News



Jesuit Fr. James Martin delivers the homily during the closing Mass for the Outreach LGBTQ Catholic Ministry Conference at the Church of St. Paul the Apostle in New York City, on June 18, 2023. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)



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When the synod on synodality first began three years ago, expectations were high and hopeful comparisons to Vatican II were drawn. Now, some Catholics feel let down; there is even talk that this synod has been a bust. So before this year's session resumed,* we decided to get the thoughts of someone who is in the room where it is all happening.

Jesuit Fr. James Martin was invited by Pope Francis to participate in the synod on synodality, which met last October and this October in Rome. Martin is the founder of Outreach and editor at large at America magazine. Since 2017, he has served as a consultor to the Vatican's Dicastery for Communication.

Martin implicitly acknowledged the dour outlook for some about the outcome of the synod when he cited Fr. Timothy Radcliffe's retreat meditation: "Since the last Assembly, so many people, including participants in this Synod, have expressed their doubts as to whether anything is going to be achieved."

That led to our first inquiry in an email of questions and answers, conducted on Oct. 1, before the synod opened. Oct. 2.

***NCR*: Will anything be achieved by this synod and what progress was made?**

Martin: I'm sure something will be achieved, but what that is only the Holy Spirit knows! The progress from last year was, at the very least, a deepening of the friendships that started last October. Now, as Fr. Radcliffe said last year, people might say, "What a waste! To come all that way just to make friends!" But this is an essential step in the process. As St. John Paul II said, "Affective collegiality precedes effective collegiality." In other words, friendship precedes dialogue. You can't really can't talk about tough stuff unless you know the other person as a friend.



Jesuit Fr. James Martin, author and editor at large at America Media, chats with a woman after celebrating a Mass at St. Paul the Apostle Church in New York City June 25, 2022, for participants of the Outreach LGBTQ Catholic Ministry Conference. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

***NCR*: What is the mood inside the room, and is there a difference from last year's start?**

Martin: Frankly, it's like night and day. Last year, other than for those who worked at the Vatican, most of the delegates didn't know one another. So there wasn't exactly suspicion but I would say caution. This year the mood is more festive, with people greeting not strangers but friends. That should make it easier, as I said, to build bridges and tackle any tough issues that may arise.

***NCR*: Why do you think Pope Francis asked you to participate, and do you think your ministry for LGBTQ+ made progress through participation in this synod?**

Martin: I haven't asked the Holy Father, but I assume that my ministry with LGBTQ+ Catholics was the reason I was invited. But I'm here not to simply represent that community but, more broadly, to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit on all the issues that arise. As for the ministry progressing, perhaps the pope's appointment brought the ministry in front of more people, but really it's the Spirit that causes any progress.

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> —Fr. James Martin
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***NCR*: You recalled at your Outreach conference an anecdote about your seatmate at one of the sessions who apparently did not like his table companion. Tell us what happened next, and whether you ever spoke with him.**

Martin: I'd rather keep it simple and not elaborate too much. Basically what happened last year was that one delegate saw that he was seated next to me, expressed his displeasure to those around him and then left the hall and left the synod for some time. I've not spoken to him since then but very much hope to greet him this year.

***NCR*: You said that you learned a lot from conversations with African Catholics at the synod who shed some light on why some resist LGBTQ+ outreach. Tell us about that.**

Martin: As I wrote in my article on Outreach, I made it a point last year at the synod, and in the intervening 12 months, to seek out delegates who had opposed LGBTQ+ issues, broadly speaking. I wanted to understand them better and build some bridges. This, by the way, was something my friend and fellow delegate Austen Ivereigh suggested.

The opposition in Africa and elsewhere comes down to five schools of thought:

1. LGBTQ+ issues are an "ideology."
2. LGBTQ+ issues are a function of a kind of "neo-colonialism."
3. LGBTQ+ issues are a "Western preoccupation."

4. Outreach to LGBTQ+ people means you are against church teaching. And, perhaps most sadly of all,
5. LGBTQ+ Catholics hate the church. I really tried to listen to where they were coming from, and in the process came to understand the roots of their opposition, even though I don't agree with it. It's a reminder that we can dialogue with people who disagree with us, even strongly.



Pope Francis greets Jesuit Fr. James Martin, author and editor at large of America magazine, during a private meeting at the Vatican in this Oct. 1, 2019, file photo. Martin, a consultor to the Vatican Dicastery for Communication, ministers extensively to LGBTQ persons. (CNS/Vatican Media)

***NCR*: Do you think the pope's decision to sign off on *Fiducia Supplicans* — allowing priests to bless individuals in same-sex relationships — was actually an outcome of the synod considering how little consultation there was on it?**

Martin: That's a good question and I'm not sure whether that came from the synod. My sense is that after the statement from the Vatican that "God does not bless sin," there were a lot of responses and questions that probably came to the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith. So I'm supposing that they thought some clarity and direction was needed.

***NCR*: Now that the pope has effectively removed LGBTQ+ issues from the agenda, do you think they will still be discussed at the synod? Is the issue dead for now?**

Martin: That's another good question. Certainly they are not on any agenda. But my sense is that as we discuss synodality, which includes listening carefully to the Holy Spirit active and alive in the People of God, we will naturally have to consider how those who feel that they are on the "peripheries" are heard. In other words, I would imagine that they, and other groups who feel marginalized, will be very much on the minds of many delegates. But as of now, I'm not sure how the conversations will be structured, so who knows?

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***NCR*: Pope Francis struggles with his own views on controversial issues. With LGBTQ+, he is more engaged and open than previous popes, but stops short of changing the church's teaching. With women, he is in constant flux — working to empower them, but also shutting off roles such as deacons. What is going on?**

Martin: I can't pretend to speak for the pope! Perhaps what we are seeing is the pope himself coming to new understandings of those issues, as he listens, prays, weighs, discerns what he sees, reads and hears. We also have to remember that he is balancing the desires of various groups in the church, various dioceses, various cultures and so on. So what might seem tepid in the West is white hot in other parts of the world. But on LGBTQ+ issues, I think that he has definitely made great advances.

***NCR*: Why do you minister to the Catholics you interact with? Are their hopes heightened only to be let down? Or do they feel Francis is doing the best he can?**

Martin: I minister to LGBTQ+ Catholics because I'm a Jesuit priest. We are meant, as the Society of Jesus says, to "walk with the excluded." And who feels more excluded than they do from the church? More basically, I minister to them because Jesus always reached out to those who felt on the margins. And I definitely think that Pope Francis, who has to balance prophecy with unity, is surely doing the best he can. I know that LGBTQ+ people have a friend in Francis.

**This story has been updated to clarify the interview's timing.*

Related: Q&A with Fr. James Martin: Tombs, deaths and why his new book wasn't titled 'Come Out!'

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