Opinion
Guest Voices



On Oct. 23, 2024, Maxwell Kuzma meets Pope Francis after a general audience as part of a group of transgender Catholic men gathered through Outreach, a ministry to LGBTQ Catholics. (Courtesy of Outreach)



by Maxwell Kuzma

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One of my earliest memories regarding my gender is an experience I had at day care, where all the little girls were given pink blankets at nap time and all the little boys were given blue blankets. As a child in the early '90s, I didn't know anything about LGBTQ identities, but I knew that it didn't feel right when they handed me a pink blanket. Even then, I knew I belonged on "the blue side," and asking for a blue blanket was the only way I knew how to communicate that to the adults around me.

The search for a way to express my true self turned out to be a lifelong one; a search that, against all odds, would lead me to an introduction with the pope this week.

On Oct. 23, I met Pope Francis after a general audience as part of a group of transgender Catholic men gathered through Outreach. Fr. Andrea Conocchia, who ministers to the transgender people of his local Italian parish outside of Rome, organized our trip as he has done for others, including four American trans women in September of this year.

The other members of my group were British trans man and religious educator George White, transgender diocesan hermit Br. Christian Matson and electrical engineer and Fortunate Families contributor Scotty Pignatella, who has shared his story in talks with Sr. Luisa Derouen for many years.

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The morning of the audience, we rose early to join the other pilgrims in a line that wrapped around the block to St. Peter's Square. Presenting our yellow tickets to move past the crowd, we found our seats, a mere 50 feet from the pope, and listened to the announcements delivered in a variety of languages — a beautiful reminder of the diverse and universal nature of the church.

After the general audience concluded, Francis moved to his wheelchair and began to greet the crowd. When he entered our row, Scotty introduced himself and Christian asked for a blessing, which the pope gave. George had a copy of the book Trans Life and the Catholic Church Today, which he gave to the pope, who received it and said, "Thank you, God bless you," in English.

When Francis came to me, I grasped his hand and said in Spanish, "*Soy un hombre transgénero*" ("I am a transgender man"), adding that I, like himself, was a friend of Jesuit Fr. James Martin. Francis beamed.

After years of suppressing my identity, I am now free: free to be exactly who God made me.

> My transition to a male identity was a miracle in every sense of the word, an extraordinary spiritual metamorphosis that put me deeper in touch with my Catholic faith and closer to God than I'd ever felt.
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Growing up in a Catholic family and parish as a young transgender person without the language to describe my identity, I often felt as though I was suffocating. For many years, I buried the feelings of the little boy at day care who had asked for the blue blanket. Doing so protected me from the judgment, chastisement and rejection experienced by many LGBTQ people when we share our identities, but I was ultimately protecting a false identity — a mask that my true, God-given self was hidden behind.

I chose to transition as an adult when the loneliness and anxiety of keeping my true self buried became too much to bear. For years, much of my time and energy had been spent maintaining an inauthentic female persona that prevented me from truly expressing myself. My transition to a male identity was a miracle in every sense of the word, an extraordinary spiritual metamorphosis that put me deeper in touch with my Catholic faith and closer to God than I'd ever felt.

This profound journey led to my discovery of the rich history and theology of LGBTQ Catholics who have faithfully carried the torch of inclusion and representation for decades, alongside supportive allies. I am daily inspired by their strength, perseverance and steady faith in the face of astounding trials.



Maxwell Kuzma in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican (Courtesy of Maxwell Kuzma)

Being able to meet Francis as my true self, with no mask or false persona, was a privilege and a grace. I am proud of myself for telling him that I am transgender in his native language, and equally proud that the Catholic Church has a pope who responds so warmly and pastorally to the transgender members of his flock.

While in Rome, our group met with Bob Shine of New Ways Ministry, who shared with us how intently the pope listened and asked questions during a recent 80-minute meeting with New Ways and others from the LGBTQ community. This gave us hope, for not only does Francis benefit from learning more about LGBTQ Catholics, but the whole church benefits from the posture of welcome and listening that he demonstrates.

Meeting the pope was a full circle moment for me, an invitation to reflect on God's hand in my long and winding journey of identity. I felt the Holy Spirit moving in Rome, not just in the handhake of Francis but in the pilgrims filling the square and in

the hopeful smiles of my transgender travel companions.

"You are welcome here," the Spirit seemed to say. And I know that the little boy who asked for a blue blanket in day care would be proud.