News



Matthew LaBanca, left, performs "Communion" at The Cell theater in New York. On March 26, his film of the same name had its world premiere at the Church of St. Ignatius Loyola in New York. (Courtesy of Matthew LaBanca)

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In October 2021, two months after Matthew LaBanca married his husband, he was fired from his job at a Queens Catholic elementary school, St. Joseph Catholic Academy.

He was also fired from his role directing music at Corpus Christi Church in Queens, and Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn officials said he violated a "morality clause." Offered a severance package equal to three months' salary, LaBanca may have received more had he signed a nondisclosure agreement preventing him from speaking publicly about his firing.

But he didn't sign an NDA, and on March 26, his film, "Communion," based on the experience, had its world premiere. It was held at another New York City Catholic church, the Church of St. Ignatius Loyola.

"This piece is not about pointing fingers," LaBanca said in an interview with RNS before the screening. "It's about sharing the emotional struggle that somebody goes through, and the freedom that I have to share it because I didn't sign anything."

The hourlong feature, directed by Bill McGarvey, tells the story of LaBanca, its writer, star and producer, who reenacts conversations with community members, priests and students. It highlights his passion as a teacher and musician, and both the gradual and sudden nature of his fallout after he married his husband, Rowan.

He said he lost not only his jobs and health insurance, but also a community central to his life, despite never being made aware of concerns about his job performance. In the film, he said the final decision to terminate his employment was made by then Brooklyn Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio.

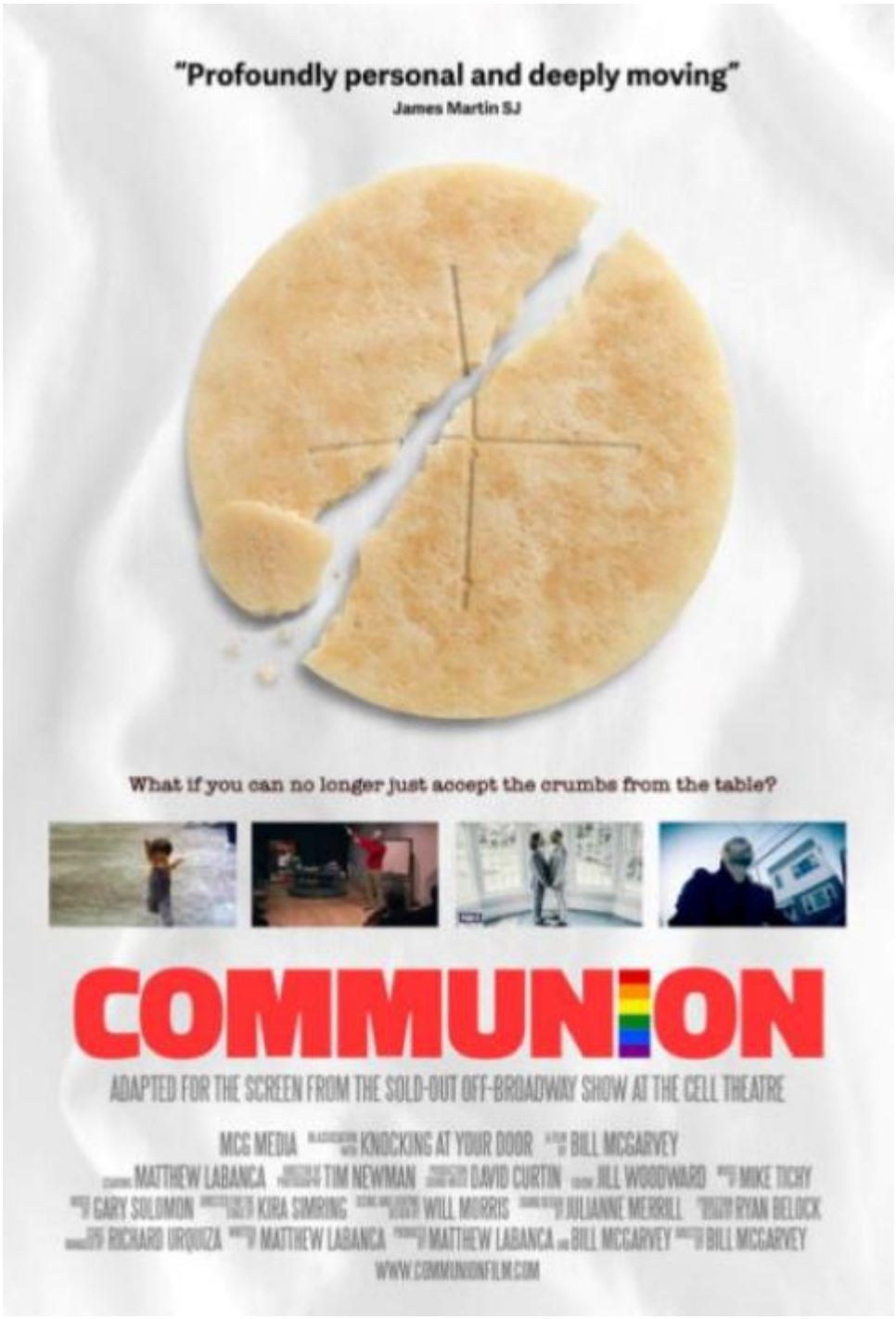
"You signed a contract to abide by church teachings," a recording of LaBanca impersonating church officials plays during the scene in which he is terminated. "Did this wedding happen?"



Matthew LaBanca, left, and husband Rowan greet attendees for a screening of the film "Communion" March 26 at St. Ignatius Loyola on Park Avenue on Manhattan's Upper East Side. (RNS/Fiona Murphy)

Since the legalization of same-sex marriage nationwide in 2015 following the *Obergefell* v. *Hodges* Supreme Court ruling, dozens of Catholic school teachers and church employees across the United States have reportedly lost their jobs or been forced to resign after entering same-sex marriages or relationships.

New Ways Ministry, a Catholic LGBTQ+ advocacy group that tracks these cases, reported at least 80 employment disputes since 2007 tied to LGBTQ+ issues within Catholic institutions. The film aims to capture their experience through the intimacy and close connection LaBanca had with the school and the community where he worked. He said he lived three blocks from St. Joseph's and seven from Corpus Christi.



Matthew LaBanca is writer, star and producer of the film "Communion," directed by Bill McGarvey. (Courtesy image)

At the end of the film, he recalls, on a walk with his husband, seeing a sign outside the church that read, "Everyone is welcome," and says it made him feel sick. They kept walking for several blocks until he unexpectedly ran into an older priest and a longtime friend who had heard the news of his termination.

"I'm sorry," the priest said. "God is not the church," a sentiment LaBanca said he now carries with him.

As the film's credits began to roll, the names of 127 people who have allegedly been fired from U.S. Christian institutions, presumably related to such issues, were listed, along with the state and year of each case.

Although the production has run as a successful off-Broadway play for the past three years, LaBanca said the screening at St. Ignatius Loyola, a Jesuit church on Park Avenue with a strong LGBTQ+ community, carries new meaning and marks something five years in the making.

"I found the film painful," said Fr. Dennis Yesalonia, the pastor of St. Ignatius Loyola, after the screening. "I think it puts a spotlight on what we need to address as a church, as a community."

LaBanca said debuting the film there, in the same city that fired him, felt especially significant.

"To be welcomed by a New York City Catholic church after being let go by another is a profound moment," he said. "It reflects goodwill and a desire to foster communion within the church, while building a bridge between LGBTQ+ individuals and the Catholic Church."



Jesuit Fr. Dennis Yesalonia, left, and director Bill McGarvey speak to attendees at a screening of the film "Communion" March 26 at St. Ignatius Loyola on Park Avenue on Manhattan's Upper East Side. Yesalonia is pastor at the church. (RNS/Fiona Murphy)

An audience of about 150 people gathered, singing along at times, shedding tears and sharing in the music teacher's pain. Roccio Arrigo, a Catholic gay man and New York resident, attended the film after seeing the off-Broadway performance at The Cell theater, where LaBanca and McGarvey filmed most of the feature.

"As someone who is a very proud gay Catholic, to experience this type of story and to see the heartache and the heartbreak that happens at the hands of a church that I love and that I hold dear is really important for me to witness," Arrigo said.

McGarvey said he joined the project as LaBanca's off-Broadway production began development and worked closely with him, using a hybrid style that blends elements of documentary, theater and traditional narrative filmmaking, along with archival footage from LaBanca's family life. He said he was drawn to the project because of

its potential impact.

"Matthew's script wasn't a polemic, it wasn't an argument; it was a story," McGarvey said. "And I think stories are what change people."

McGarvey said St. Ignatius Loyola Catholic Church was very open to having the film screened there, an attitude he said he has experienced across the board with trying to get the film screened.

"I think we're feeling a certain level of people being willing to move to talk," McGarvey said.

LaBanca and McGarvey said they wanted to make the performance into a film so that as many people could see it as possible.

"The arts have always made that difference in opening eyes and shifting hearts and minds," LaBanca said. "And to me, our film, our project, 'Communion,' is a way to pursue that eye-opening."

Despite the success of his creative work, LaBanca said what happened five years ago has changed his relationship with faith. He no longer feels comfortable listening to a Catholic homily, and his parents, who were also both teachers, no longer go to a Catholic church.

His goal with the film, he said, is not necessarily to prompt sweeping change within church leadership. Instead, he hopes the story resonates on a personal level, particularly with those who may feel isolated.

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"I'm hoping that this is something of a springboard for this story, which is so many other people's stories," LaBanca said. "I'm hoping that it opens the doors to more organizations who want to hear it and see it … parishes, young queer communities, universities, anyone who cares about turning the tides on religious discrimination."

Several additional screenings and events are in development, including at parishes in Los Angeles. LaBanca said he also plans to stage live performances in Provincetown, Massachusetts; Sayville, New York; and Portland, Oregon, in the coming months.

LaBanca now works at a secular middle school in his Queens neighborhood. He said he can still see the bells at St. Joseph from his new classroom.

"It started as a healing process for me, and it's become what I love and I call my theatrical ministry," LaBanca said. "We can hold the mirror (to) the institution to reflect back to them the pain that's inflicted in the hands of religious discrimination."