

Towards global inclusion of LGBT people within Catholic communities: a new theological approach

*Presentation by James Alison for “The ways of Love”,
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Introduction

I'd like to ask you to join me as we imagine ourselves as participants in a familiar scene from Scripture. The scene is from Acts 10, but imagined from a small distance: looking back a week or so after the events that are described. We are in the house of the Roman Centurion Cornelius, in Caesarea. Maybe we are family members, maybe servants or slaves. Along with Cornelius, we have long been accustomed to being second-class citizens in the house of God. When we accompany our master to the Synagogue, we are called “God-fearers” and are allowed to attend and follow the worship from a carefully separated space. This is because while we know the one God of Israel to be true, and we follow with attention the preachers of Moses, we have not fully converted. So we have not been circumcised if we are male, nor have we taken on board the full yoke of Moses' law with its observances and commandments.

We attend, then, aware that we are considered impure, and not to be touched. We are often treated with courtesy, and even genuine friendliness by the insiders, though this is invariably tinged with a certain distance and condescension, as befits dealings with those who are not true insiders, and so can't really be full participants in what it's all about.

But last week something weird happened. Cornelius had sent three of us to Joppa to invite someone called Peter to visit us. Peter had accepted the invitation, and had actually come into our house, which was, in itself, an oddity, since he was religiously observant, and not a Gentile like us. It wasn't some mistake: he was quite strong-minded about it, telling us boldly that even though we knew it to be unlawful “for a Jew to associate with, or visit a Gentile” he had become

convinced that “God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean”.

When invited by Cornelius to speak, Peter began by telling us that he truly understood “that God shows no partiality, but in every people anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” Then he told us about a message of peace that had been sent to Israel, one about which we had, in fact, heard some sketchy accounts before. This message had been sent through someone called Jesus, the Anointed One. It turned out that Peter was a friend of this Jesus, from Nazareth, who had been a prophet full of works of power. This man had been put to death as a seditious blasphemer, as if under a curse from God. But God, by raising Jesus from the dead, had shown that the so-called curse, which we had all heard read from the Torah of Moses¹, had nothing to do with Him. And Jesus had been seen since then by many of the people who had accompanied him beforehand. Indeed had eaten and drunk with them. It had become clear that he had been the long-awaited fulfilment of a series of prophecies, even though he’d fulfilled them in a way no one could possibly have expected. Having been treated by the religiously observant as someone worthy of condemnation, in fact he had turned out to be acting entirely with God’s approval. In this way, by his vindication, he up-ended much of the received way of understanding God among the religiously observant of his people.

Well, it wasn’t clear that Peter had fully grasped the bit he mentioned about God showing no partiality, since he seemed to think, at least at the beginning, that he was telling us something about Israel. And certainly the guys he’d brought with him hadn’t grasped it at all. Yet, as Peter talked, we all found ourselves on the inside of a great movement of the Spirit, praising God and talking in strange languages. We were all astounded, especially the guys who’d come with Peter, since they had seen this before, but among the circumcised. They just couldn’t believe that this was also happening among us second-class citizens.

And yet, as the scene developed, it became clear that what Peter had said about God showing no partiality among peoples, and God telling him not to call anyone impure or profane, was actually true, far truer than Peter himself had seemed to

¹ cf Deuteronomy 21:23

understand at first. We were finding ourselves insiders in this movement of the Spirit just as he and they were, and on absolutely the same terms of equality, without any distinction. What was even more astounding to all of us was how this then led Peter to tell his colleagues to Baptize us.

We'd heard a bit about this sign: on being Baptized, some among the circumcised people had found themselves sharing in some sort of being involved in Jesus' life and death. They had discovered themselves emboldened to be sons and daughters of God, becoming part of a priestly people Jesus had inaugurated in his life and death: a priestly people that was in fact the fulfilment of what Israel had always been called to be. And Peter, there in our master's house, suddenly recognized that the substance of what Baptism was about had evidently manifested itself among us who were Gentiles. How, then, could he withhold the sign from us? So he told his companions to baptize us with water. And we were amazed to find ourselves insiders in the life of God, sharers in God's holiness, without any distinction based on any of Peter's, or our own, previous understanding of what was needed to be an insider in the life of God.

Well, each one of us was as shocked as the person next to them: the first-class citizens finding themselves on the same level as us, with all their purity and sense of separateness deflated, and having to overcome a certain repugnance about dealing with people like us; and the second class citizens having to get used to taking ourselves seriously and behave as sons and daughters, rather than dirty servant children who had a sort of built in excuse for impurity.

As you can imagine, word of this got out pretty quickly. Some of Peter's more scrupulous friends and colleagues were quite upset, and thought that Peter, who had a reputation for being impetuous, had been in some sense frivolous or cheap in having acted as he did. So Peter had to explain himself to them in Jerusalem. Luckily, he didn't buckle. Even though there was a great pressure on him to backpedal and to apologize for what he had done (thus saving the face of those who really need there to be people like us, so that they can feel special). In fact he told them all quite clearly: "The Spirit told me to go with them and not make a distinction between them and us". He also described how the Holy Spirit had fallen on us all while he talked, and how he had realized that "If then God gave

them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” That gave the scrupulous cause to ponder, and little by little they began to realize that even we could be included inside the same gift of forgiveness as they, with the life that flows from it²

Well, that was a few days ago... we're still waiting to see what the consequences are, what it's going to look like for us all to be co-insiders in the House of God, sons and daughters with equal dignity, all sharing in a priesthood whose single purity requirement is of the heart. It'll be interesting to see: will they drop their ritual food law for us? Will they treat our family structures as equal to theirs in terms of what counts as proper marriage? What will they make of us not having to be circumcised, not having to keep all the commandments that make up their purity code? And what will we make of the freedom of finding ourselves first class citizens, insiders, daughters and sons, not servants or outsiders in the life of God, but starting just as we are. What will be the shape of the holiness that is coming upon us?

I think this account gives a sense of where we find ourselves as LGBT Catholics at this moment, and I would like to develop with you four points that flow from it.

1. A matter of basic Christianity

First, owing to what we have been through over the last years as LGBT Catholics, it has become clearer and clearer to us what the shockwaves emanating from Jesus' death and resurrection were really about. Jesus in his teaching and by his powerful signs had borne witness to God who had nothing to do with a purity code, no tolerance for any religious exercises, such as sacrifices, that replaced or got in the way of the reconciliation between human beings that he longed to bring about. He did, however, have a very great deal of interest in those considered unacceptable by the society of his day. Eventually he was considered blasphemous and seditious by a confluence of the religious and the civil

² cf Acts 10-11

authorities, and he was murdered. His murder was carried out in such a way as for him to fall under the officially designated curse of God.

The fact of his resurrection was much more than the demonstration of the existence of an afterlife, something many of his contemporaries believed in any case. It was the vindication from On High that the whole of the religious and political structure that had put him to death was under judgment from God. In other words, that he, Jesus, who had looked, to all extents and purposes, like a blasphemous and seditious transgressor, had been *telling the truth* about who God is in his teaching. This means that anyone at all, from any nation under the sun, who can perceive that he or she has been in some way involved in the sort of false and violent construction of goodness or badness which Jesus up-ended, can be forgiven for this, and so can enter into participating in the life of the Living God without any special external markings.

It is because of this that there is, formally speaking, no Christian religious law from outside us. The Image of Himself that God gave us in Jesus was not that of a Lawmaker, but that of the self-giving Victim of the conspiring together of both civil and religious lawmakers. Given this self-definition of God, no definition of people derived from the outside of who they are, and which might make them pure or impure, sacred or profane, could stand. Instead there is only the understanding that starting exactly from *where* we are, exactly *as* we are, we are invited to become daughters and sons of God, insiders in God's house. What God calls *good* is not some external definition, pleasing some lawgiver, but what is good *for us*. That which is human is loved, and is stretched through love into sharing in the life of God. It is not in our lopping off bits of ourselves, psychologically or physically, that we are saved: in spite of ourselves, by agreeing to jump through certain hoops, as it were. Rather, it is in our discovering and becoming who we were really meant to be all along, that we come to reflect the glory of our Creator. This, instead of the much-diminished version of ourselves that we had somehow got caught up in, and from which Jesus' death and resurrection shocks us into freedom.

But this has been exactly our experience as LGBT Catholics over the last thirty or so years. It has become clearer and clearer, until it is now overwhelmingly clear,

that what used to seem like a self-evident description of us was in fact mistaken. We were characterised as somehow defective, pathological, or vitiated straight people; intrinsically heterosexual people who were suffering from a bizarre and extreme form of heterosexual concupiscence called “Same-Sex Attraction”. That description, which turned us, in practice, into second-class citizens in God’s house, is quite simply false. It turns out that we are blessed to be bearers of a not particularly remarkable non-pathological minority variant in the human condition. And that our Daughterhood and Sonship of God comes upon us starting as we are, with this variant being a minor but significant stable characteristic of who we are. One, furthermore, which gives gracious shape to who we are to be. Of course, that Daughterhood, that Sonship, turns the characteristic into something more as we overcome the concupiscence that is proper to us all as humans, developing and humanising our capacity to love so that we become ever fuller sharers in the life of God.

And this means something quite significant: the only way a teaching can genuinely be Catholic is if it is bringing to mind something that *really is the case* about the human beings in question. Thus, the moment it becomes clear that what used to seem like an accurate description of who we are, a description which imagined that it sought our good, is not in fact accurate, but quite simply mistaken, then *at that very moment* it ceases to be possible to maintain that the teaching that flows from that description is Catholic. For the Catholic teaching follows the discovery of what the Creator shows us *really is*.

In other words, as in the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit does not wait for Peter’s permission before starting to produce sons and daughters of God. Quite the reverse. In fact Peter finds himself learning that what he had thought to be something true about God’s holiness and the necessity of abiding by the Book of Leviticus in order to enter into that holiness, *was not the case*. As he undergoes this learning, so the purity code becomes relativized, coming to be received as a non-binding series of taboos: ways of defining people from the outside rather than saying anything about who they are starting from themselves.

And this is exactly where we find ourselves: without it being the case that there is *anything at all that Peter and his companions can do to stop it*. As the Creator

has made abundantly clear to us what really is the case, through the normal, Spirit-inspired human process of learning about Creation by which we enter as insiders into God's Wisdom, so the teaching concerning us being bearers of an objective disorder inclining us to intrinsically evil acts has revealed itself to be a taboo, thus not from God, and so not a proper part of Catholic teaching.

2. Catholicity, rather than inclusion

My second point is to try and draw out some consequences of this. You asked me to speak to the title "Towards Global Inclusion of LGBT people within Catholic communities", and yet the theological approach which I offer you is not really about inclusion of LGBT people within Catholic communities, any more than Acts 10 was about the inclusion of Gentiles within Jewish communities: a cap-in-hand exercise in which second-class citizens request, and are given humble places at a first class table. No; What we have instead is the somewhat amazing realisation that, exactly in the degree to which it has become clear that we are simply the bearers of a not particularly remarkable non-pathological minority variant in the human condition, in that moment, as we find ourselves seeking the Lord, *we are found to be bearers of Catholicity* on terms of equality with everyone else. Catholicity gets to be redefined, through no merits of our own, by the objective element of humanity that we bring to the table simply being present as such.

Why is this important? Because it means that it is not we who find ourselves adapting to someone else's house-rules. All those in the house find ourselves adapting to the fact that, together with Peter, we are all learning something new about being human. And that all our understanding of good and bad, insider and outsider is going to change because of this. The process is obviously much more painful and difficult, at least initially, for those who had a strong stake in promoting a form of public goodness in which we were bit-players, as necessary examples of what was wrong. And much more joyful for those of us who are finding that after all *we have been telling the truth*. It is not the case, as we were so often told, that we are simply being particularly self-indulgent, or that our love is harmful to others, or that we are crazy to think that we are normal, or that we

have been misled by hedonism and relativism into purely subjective, unrealistic desires that are part of some dehumanising trap.

Please notice what happens as this work of the Spirit becomes evident, as our participation as joint bearers of Catholic truth-telling becomes apparent. First of all, there is rage and hatred from those who had a strong investment in what had seemed to be from God, but turned out to be just another idolatrous taboo demanding sacrifice. These people need help and mercy, our magnanimity rather than our resentment. Above all, we should not seek to provoke them or scandalize them, tempting though it be. Next there is something rather subtler, which I think we should look at carefully. This comes from those who are not full of rage, but who have a love for the old wineskins. These people wish to say something like “Well yes, we see that there has been a problem with how the Church has handled gay people in the past. And none of us want to continue with that. However the Church has a right, in tolerant, multicultural societies not to allow itself to be defined by what is in fact true about human beings. Instead we insist on the right to be able to keep alive our own, pious ways of doing things without interference.”

But here’s the trouble: the moment people head down that path *they are refusing Catholicity and creating a Church in their own image*. Because they are turning the Catholic Church into a group defined by certain house rules, which are independent of reality. In other words, they are recreating a form of holiness that is over against others considered to be impure or profane. This is a regression to Second-Temple Judaism. At the very moment people do this, they automatically exclude *themselves* from the Catholicity of the Church, for they are seeking to turn it not into God’s sign of God’s longing for all humans to be reconciled with God through Jesus, but instead into their own sign of their own longing for a particular group with a strong group identity and carefully defined boundaries concerning who is in and who is out.

So please, I beg you, don’t, out of some misguided courtesy, think that such people define what Catholicity is. Catholicity is defined by God alone, as God shocks us by breaking down all our socially and culturally constructed barriers, by leading us into truth about our being Jesus’ brothers and sisters, creating

equal-heartedly a way of being human together that doesn't call for any form of comparison, one that flows from the Crucified One who forgives us.

Another slight variant on this theme comes from those who say: "Yes, there is something wrong with the way the Church has handled LGBT people, but you shouldn't be in a hurry to change anything. Let the hierarchy organize, in a proper and peaceful manner, any change that must be made." That is to say, those who can't even bring themselves to recognise publicly that we have been telling the truth, and they have been binding our consciences based on a taboo, are insisting on managing a change towards truthfulness on their own schedule. They should be so lucky! This is not how the Spirit of God works, as the account from Acts makes clear. The Spirit leads us into all truth, kicking, protesting, shocked and dishevelled, by insisting on producing boldness of speech in season and out, when it is convenient and when it is not. And those who are most shocked and come running along last are those who think that any change should be managed by them on their terms, preferably without their losing face by having to admit that they too need forgiveness.

No, truthfulness does not wait for the convenience of those wedded to untruth before peeking out. It *breaks* out, as if from captivity, bearing witness to the One who sent it to run wild among us, and takes us on a giddy, and ultimately joyful ride. The Spirit *does* bring the peace that comes with truth, but not by following the schedule of those whose fear would hold it back. Peter was truly Petrine in listening to the Spirit and recognising he had been wrong about what makes for holiness. It was in doing so that he became a precarious-seeming centre of unity who was in fact a Rock, while all the forces of reaction sought to buffet him about. Neither he, nor his colleagues, set the agenda or the timetable.

3. Preparation for Evangelisation

My third point is: what does this say about our life in different cultures? One of the things people say is: "All this about LGBT people is a decadent Western value and we should defend ourselves against it." But the people they are defending themselves against are not decadent westerners, but their own brothers

and sisters, Ugandans, Nigerians, Iranians, Russians, Saudis, Jamaicans. These are our sisters and brothers who have discovered something true about themselves, and about their capacity for love, and know that what is true makes sense to them. And here is what is remarkable: this discovering of something that is true *is working in exactly the way that the Gospel said it would*, and following just the dynamic of the Spirit that flows upon us from Jesus. And yet bizarrely, Christian leaders of all denominations are joining together with leaders of other religious organisations, ones that not only do not know of the Holy Spirit, but are in some cases adamantly opposed to the existence and enlivening effect of any such thing. Such leaders would rather fence themselves round with all the trappings of “religion” than spread the Good News of the One who has relativized all religious formalities in order to bring us into a new humanity starting from the rejected and precarious.

But this means that we LGBT Catholics can step into the forefront of the Evangelisation that Pope Francis has asked us to, and we can do so as delighted and joyful recipients of this new humanity. We, as well as anyone, know how the Spirit of God humanises us, not destroying culture, but defanging it from all that is violent and destructive of who humans are called to be. We know that thanks to Jesus there is no such thing as religiously pure or impure food, there are no such things as religiously mandated forms of mutilation, genital or otherwise. We know that only culture, and never God, has demanded the veiling and covering of the glory of the head and hair of women. We know that the same Spirit that taught us these things, making available to us what is genuinely true, has enabled us to discover the graced banality of our minority variant condition, allowing it to be the shape of our love that turns us into witnesses of God’s goodness as we are stretched out towards those who are genuinely suffering from terrible injustice and deprivation.

This does not merely mean that we are able to pass on a piece of information to others. It means that we are bearers of Catholicity in our flesh. We have found ourselves prepared to be bearers of the Gospel precisely because of this most Catholic of things: we have been intimately part of the process of self-critical correction of culture which is how the Spirit keeps the Church faithful and alive. So in each culture in which we live we are thus in a great position to help our

sisters and brothers undo the quite local and particular taboos, violence, and structures which masquerade as being of God, but are in fact the work of idols. Who would have thought that it would be LGBT Catholics who could bear witness to the freshness of the Gospel, the way it brings Creation alive, even the value of Natural Law, not as a trap but as an adventure? Talk about the stone that the builders rejected!

4. Holiness, speech and witness

My final point. What is the shape of the holiness that is coming upon us? The most debilitating effect of the taboo under which we have laboured is not that it prohibited certain sexual acts. That has never held many of us back. Not even, as has become abundantly clear, many of those who took on the burden of some sort of formal commitment to avoid such acts. No, the debilitating effect of the taboo, as of any infection by idolatry, is that it damages the imagination, *making it impossible to imagine the good*. When our concupiscence was falsely defined as an objectively disordered form of heterosexual desire, then of course all of our acts were as bad as each other, and we had no incentive to humanise them. “No snacking between meals” might be a useful instruction if it teaches people to prepare for enjoying the next meal better. But “no snacking between meals, and in your case, no meal either” is a sure recipe for binge- snacking.

But now, thank heavens, we are beginning to discover what might be the shape of the meal, or meals, towards which it might be worth ordering our appetites. So please, as part of our discovering the shape of the holiness that is coming upon us, now that we are no longer second class citizens with a resentful victimary excuse for our lack of dignity, let us allow our imaginations to be enlivened by the Spirit. We are already discovering some of the ways in which we can share in Christ’s self-giving towards others – civil marriage, adoption of children, and in some cases freely chosen singleness of life. (This latter was, of course, impossible under the teaching of the taboo – we used to be taught that we had no option but to be celibate, and thus the option was not really free, since it was not leaving a good for a good, but avoiding an evil which it was our solemn duty to

avoid anyhow). In what other ways are we going to discover what we are called to become as a blessing for others?

Here is a hint: let us not allow this holy work of the enlivened imagination to be overshadowed by those who would rather have the discussion without addressing the question of whether we are in fact objectively disordered or not. In the New Testament, no one who insisted that the Gentiles needed to be circumcised in order to be saved had anything genuine to offer in the discussion concerning appropriate shapes of holiness among the baptised Gentiles. Just so, no one who is unable to concede the legitimacy, the potential for purity, of our loving flowing from who we are, is able to offer genuine help in our working out of what sort of marriage or adoption laws are appropriate for us, let alone what the appropriate forms of liturgy might be.

Many religious authorities in different countries try to hide behind the claim that in “defending Marriage” they are not doing or saying anything about or against gay and lesbian people. If they are honest in this, then let them show that their own conscience is not bound by taboo. Let them clearly renounce the notion that gay people in partnership, about whom they claim they are not talking, are *ipso facto* indulging an objective disorder, are impenitent practitioners of grave sin, and thus would be seeking to sanctify something that can never be approved. Once these authorities have shown that their conscience is free, and thus that there is, in their understanding, no rivalry between the form of flourishing proper to heterosexuals in marriage, and what might turn out to be the appropriate forms of flourishing for us, then, by all means, they may have something genuinely helpful to offer us all. Because they will legitimately be able to contemplate something of how, in our case, as in theirs, grace perfects nature. Something, that is, which flows from who we are, rather than in spite of what we are. However, for as long as their allegiance is to the taboo, they can be no judges of our flourishing.

No, the truthfulness and peace, the zest for the real, that come with the consciousness of being a daughter or a son: only these dare birth the imagination of the arduous good that is coming upon us. An arduous good to which we may justly aspire, and in the working out of which we hope to be found. The boldness

that flows from being able to speak truthfully out of an unbound conscience is not an extrinsic add-on to being Christian. It is intrinsic to what being Christian is all about. It leads to being able to bear witness, without which there is no Christianity. For us linguistic animals, being able to talk cleanly and openly is essential to being able to live cleanly and openly. It is as we talk and share with each other the experiences of love and of becoming that we will discover in our relationships who we are called to be.

Here we are, gathered in the city of Peter. Let us ask for the prayers of Paul the Apostle of the Gentiles, who was not afraid to call Peter out for backsliding, and who taught us: “*Omnia munda mundis*” – all things are pure for those who are pure. St Paul the Apostle, pray for us.

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