

# Fr. James Alison

## Tells the Story Behind the Phone Call from the Pope

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the blog of the USA-based New Ways Ministry.

***Bondings 2.0* asked James Alison, a priest and theologian who is also an openly gay man, to share his personal reaction to the phone call he received a couple of years ago from Pope Francis confirming his priesthood, and which he put into the public domain<sup>1</sup> in October of this year.**

Regular readers of *Bondings 2.0* are strongly attuned to picking up signs that the Gospel is winning out. Of course, we are also used to countersigns of incomprehensible ecclesiastical scandal-creation. In this mixed context, I'm very happy to share my more personal reaction to the papal phone call with y'all.

First, I "sat" with the knowledge of the 'phone call for over two years. I shared knowledge of it, of course, with a small group of friends, asking them to keep it to themselves for the moment, and I am humbled to say that they did me that honour. Not only journalists of impeccable ethics, but even one or two noted motor- mouths among my friends. I had promised the Holy Father extreme discretion, and I did not want to expose him to any more hatred than he was already receiving. I also waited because his final words to me were that he would look up my dossier and be in touch. I was pretty sceptical that this would happen (and it hasn't), not because I doubted his word, but because I can't imagine why he would spend any more of his valuable time on such an unimportant case, when the ten minutes he already gave me have set me up for life and beyond.

Additionally, there was (as far as I know) no witness to the conversation. It's possible Francis' secretary was with him when he called, but nothing while we spoke suggested that. And, though I was, as you can imagine, initially moved and delighted by the call, and while it did give me a much-needed boost in my determination to carry on as a priest despite the Congregation for the Clergy's sentence, it is really only after it became public that I've felt it's effect.

So what changed to make me feel entitled to let the call be more widely known? The key factor was something my former novice-master, the bishop who had taken my letter to the Holy Father and pleaded with him to sort out my situation, told me in May 2019. He had been with the Holy Father for a private audience to discuss an entirely different matter earlier this year. The Holy Father told him he had called me, describing the conversation to him in the same words as I

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<sup>1</sup> Alison, J. 'This is Pope Francis calling...'. *The Tablet*, 28 September 2019, <http://jamesalison.co.uk/texts/this-is-pope-francis-calling/>

had reported. Francis had thus deliberately created a witness to what he had done. It took me a little time for the significance of that to sink in, but it was this development that finally overcame any scruples I had about making the matter public.

By that time it was also clear from Francis' reported reaction to Frederic Martel's book on gay priests in the Vatican (as reported in *Crux*<sup>2</sup>) and from the fact that the same book had taken a great deal of the wind out of the sails of the closeted homophobes who opposed him, that he needed no protection from worried little me! That, and the freedom with which he was organising the Amazon Synod convinced me that I would do him no harm.

And so I went public, offering the story to *The Tablet*, whose editor has been a friend for over thirty years, published my first book, and who I knew would push me to make sure that I wasn't being merely self-aggrandizing in what I wrote.

Only since going public have I become aware of a range of feelings and emotions associated with the call. The reaction of others has given me the beginnings of a narrative to work with those feelings. I should not have been surprised by that: *bonum diffusivum sui* ("that which is good tends by its nature to spread"). A sign is not a sign until it is a sign between people. The sign of priesthood is only a sign between and for people. And the knowledge of the Holy Father's confirmation, and making alive, of that sign, was not merely a comfort to me, but comforts me by making me the comfort to others for which I was ordained.

One of the reactions that I've been working through is: "Oh shit, now I get to see whether all along I was just engaged in some violent personal rivalry with Church teaching and doctrine. It was a rivalry where I both had to win before I could dare to become a human, and simultaneously needed to lose since the threat of having to become a human was so great that being locked in hateful fascination with my model, who was also my obstacle, seemed better than falling out of being". The great thinker René Girard calls this hateful fascination with a model "mimetic rivalry." So I've often wondered, over the years, whether that had been what was driving me all along. And now the Pope himself had called my bluff! By letting me "win", he'd suddenly removed my obstacle. Would I now discover that the whole thing had been a self-serving mirror-fight? And that once freed from the struggle by the papal unlocking, there was nothing left, and that I would have no desire any longer to be a priest, a preacher, a theologian; that all those things had depended on the duel for their fuel?

I was immensely relieved to discover that whatever elements of mimetic rivalry may have driven me over the last twenty-five years or more, I am in fact held up by a genuine and wholesome desire

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<sup>2</sup> Giangravè, C. Advocate says pope read, liked new book on gays in the Vatican. *Crux*, 10 May 2019, <https://cruxnow.com/church-in-europe/2019/05/advocate-says-pope-read-liked-new-book-on-gays-in-the-vatican/>

to live and act as a priest who is at the same time a sinful gay man, one who is trying to give voice to the Gospel in the first person, and from that desire I am being born. Or in other words, that it was not merely pride, or obstinacy that has driven me on, but that it was a vocation that had been birthing me.

Then something slightly more shocking happened. As people reacted to the news, I became aware of something for which I was not prepared: people taking me seriously. I hadn't realised how much of me had accepted the 25 years-worth of being a canonical non-person as evidence that I was some sort of unwanted volunteer circus barker playing a limited melody outside the gates of the circus, wearing a sandwich board proclaiming that gay people are human too. And that people walked by me, in some cases with polite greetings, on their way to see the real show inside.

Suddenly I became aware of people treating me as though I was part of the real show inside, and with that I realised I am, for a small circle, something of a reference point as to what the Christian thing is all about: a public witness in fact, which is I guess what a priest should ordinarily be. But I had always assumed that the real witnesses were elsewhere. One reason I flaunt my ridiculous penchant for tall leather boots is so no one who actually knows me should take me seriously! And now the responsibility not to scandalize becomes greater. Thankfully, so does my realisation that it is as a gay man who no longer needs to pretend, and a sinner who is no longer scandalised by himself that I am receiving grace, and ministering it in hope to others.

A final consideration: I was taken entirely by surprise when two long standing friends and a close relative quite separately wrote me very moving notes saying that they had had no idea what I had been through over these years, and asking my forgiveness for not having "been there" for me during those times. Which was baffling to me, since it hadn't occurred to me to share the stuff I was going through in other than glib, throw-away lines, with anyone other than the shrinks who've helped me. So how could they have "been there"? Certainly nothing needed forgiving.

I began to realise that from 1995 I had been slowly and deliberately facing down the entire canonical system for the clergy by attempting to speak truthfully as a gay man; and I had lost at every step of the way. Any sane non-Catholic friends and relatives who understood what I was doing would have regarded it as a preposterous exercise in hitting my head against a brick wall and strongly urged me to get out of such a toxic system. And with Catholic friends I ran the risk that they would want to help me by publicizing my plight, awarding me "heroic victim" status against the "wicked" curial apparatus. And that would have been the death-knell for what I was trying to do, which was to help make possible an honest discussion about what is true within the Church, by putting myself on the line, but not making it all about "me".

And of course I failed at that too. And had it not been for what I consider the miraculous intervention of the Holy Father, I would have simply been another failed priestly statistic, chewed

over by a no-longer serviceable canonical system.

So what was there to share during those long years that would have been comprehensible? I was faced with a similar question more recently, when friends asked me: “How did you do it? How did you survive 25 years of wilderness?” My main answer: it was probably the (in)famous Old Etonian arrogance, or more accurately sense of entitlement, that carried me through: the sense that *of course* you stand up for what is right, and *of course* you’ll win in the end. A sense of entitlement which is ludicrously out of proportion to the competence actually needed to see anything serious through. For I am the product of a school that has produced bevy of British Prime Ministers (including, Lord have mercy, the current one), Generals, actors, and so on. A world where someone being dismissed in disgrace with the line “...My language fails! Go out and govern New South Wales!”<sup>3</sup> is less comic verse and more cultural memory. So standing up to the Catholic clerical system with a mixture of stiff upper lip and humorous self-deprecation is pretty much par for the course.

However, the friends who heard my answer upbraided me, quite rightly, for that and told me that no, however much my education in the courts of the Pharaoh may have given me a head-start (and made it impossible for me to judge those of my fellow priests unable to be as foolhardy as I in putting livelihood and life at risk), actually what I had been given over those years was the gift of faith. And it is they who are right. Indeed I was being stretched by the tiniest glimpse of something true received, already, in my early adolescence: that ultimately the Catholic faith would embrace and include the gay heart; that the two held together give glory to God; and that it is better to die than to let go of that.

James Alison Madrid, December 2019

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<sup>3</sup> Belloc, H. *Lord Lundy*, [https://monologues.co.uk/Childrens\\_Favourites/Lord\\_Lundy.htm](https://monologues.co.uk/Childrens_Favourites/Lord_Lundy.htm)