



Bearing witness to the
reality of LGBT+ Catholic
lives since 1973

Pastoral Support for LGBT+ Catholics

Synod Submission from Quest, a UK based charity representing LGBT+ Catholics

Note on use of the acronym LGBT+ throughout this document

LGBT+ refers to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans (gender/sexual) identities, with the '+' indicating other groups, such as asexual, intersex, queer, questioning, etc. Our choice of terminology recognises the contributions of the sciences to our understanding of the complex natures of sexual identity and sexual orientation.

Introduction

Quest is a volunteer led charity which has been in existence for almost half a century. Our 'birthday' is the 6th November, the anniversary of the first meeting of 9 respondents to an ad placed in 'Gay News' back in 1973. The impetus for the advert and the reason that we continue remain the same: to support LGBT+ Catholics to integrate their sexuality and orientation with their faith against a backdrop of a sometimes more / sometimes less sympathetic church.

Our Constitutional Purpose is "To proclaim the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ for the advancement of the Christian religion amongst LGBT+ Catholics."

Our story, our history, lies in the still not uncommon experience of our founder who approached his parish priest to ask whether it was possible to reconcile his faith with his sexuality. The answer was an unequivocal "no" and he experienced the rejection and the marginalisation experienced by too many LGBT+ Catholics over time. He asked the same question of the LGBT+ Catholic community as he sought fellowship and spiritual growth; the seed was planted, and our organisation grew.

Our ministry directly serves over 400 Catholics across the UK. Our social media presence and our outreach work extends the message of Christ's Gospel to untold numbers.

A recent Quest event, in which Fr James Martin SJ was in conversation with one of our Trustees exploring '**What does it mean to be an LGBT+ inclusive, Gospel led, Catholic school**' (and within the teaching of the Catholic Church), drew interest from over 500 Catholic Educators, with over 270 people attending the online event, mainly from the UK, but with representation from every continent on the globe.

Our membership represents the breadth of LGBT+ Catholics: those who still feel able to practise their faith, though with varying degrees of openness about their sexuality and identity as they balance their sense of personal safety with their need to be in direct Communion with the Church **and** those who have been disenfranchised through their experiences – often referred to as the 'marginalised' ie those who have been pushed to the margins.

'Who am I to judge' is probably the most widely publicised LGBT+ related comment made by Pope Francis. In recent years we have seen great shifts in the way in which the Roman Catholic Church in the UK is responding to the call and challenge of the Gospel to make church buildings welcoming and the ministry of the priests and bishops who serve the faithful, truly inclusive.

This changing landscape is welcomed and celebrated. Indeed we are an organisation hopeful by nature. We strive for a Gospel led church. We have been working in a synodal manner for our nearly 50 years, seeking opportunities to listen and be listened to, sharing our stories and our hope, finding commonality in ministering pastorally to those who seek the Christ of the Gospels.

But the fullness of the welcome to our LGBT+ siblings, a group within Christ's flock that the institutional part of our Church has often pushed to the margins, is sadly, still a work in progress; there is still much to do.

With an 'unequivocal no' still in evidence we maintain a respectful independence from the hierarchy. We continue to journey together with our brother priests and bishops when they are able, supporting their work of service.

Our response to the synodal call

In recognition that our membership represents both those pushed to the margins, and those who remain in parishes but may not have been able to openly represent themselves as LGBT+ Catholics for fear of negative consequences, Quest has held several events over the past two years which contribute to this submission:

1) A workshop event at our 2021 conference.

This event explored what an inclusive parish might look like/taste like/feel like/ smell like. This was the first event which in the longer term will lead to Quest developing guidance for parishes on being inclusive.

Participants were asked to "**Envisage your inclusive parish experience**" and to explore:

- a) What are your expectations from clergy, religious, lay people and other parishioners?
- b) What does an inclusive Church and Mass look and feel like? e.g. policies and practices, literature, teachings and values
- c) What does inclusive parish involvement look and feel like? e.g. parish groups, roles
- d) How are your friends, family and loved ones included?

What is your role, and that of Quest, in realising the vision?

2) An online seminar in January 2022

with guest contributor Sr Gemma Simmonds CJ, giving a reflection on synodality from her experience and leading a discussion which explored '**What is Synodality and how might we as LGBT+ Catholics take part**'

3) **A follow-up online event in June 2022**

This event explored (a) what our experiences of Synod had been in our parishes and dioceses and (b) what we wanted to represent for those of our members who find church buildings to be unsafe spaces in which we feel we are at risk of harm.

4) **A final workshop discussion at our 2022 conference**

At this event we explored two key questions.

- a) What gifts / charisms and skills do LGBT+ Catholics bring to the local and broader Church?
- b) What change would LGBT+ Catholics like to experience in the local and broader Church after the synod?

The key findings from 1, 3 and 4 are presented from page 5. Please note that in this section the submission uses mostly the language of respondents – sometimes summarised and / or clarified.

This submission

Our submission is a synthesis which represents nearly 50 years of listening and journeying within our church whilst we have ministered to those in our community who find themselves at the margins. It also presents our most recent findings, those of the synodal journey we have been on with our members since July 2021.

This submission welcomes what we believe to be the movement of the Spirit represented in so many of the Diocesan syntheses which we have read in which our non-LGBT+ and LGBT+ siblings alike have called the Church to consider again whether the ministry of Christ is truly represented in the way LGBT+ people of faith are and have been treated and presented. We endorse those representations of our lives which recognise our God given completeness and which call on the faithful to recognise our fullest calling and our place at Christ's table.

However, some of those syntheses still represent us (for example) as 'broken heterosexuals' [by implication] or those 'troubled with same sex attraction' failing (we believe) to recognise the wholeness and diversity of God's creation.

The marginalised

Before continuing it is important that our submission explores the term '**marginalised**'. LGBT+ Catholics are too often to be found 'on the margins' in need of 'the field hospital' of which Pope Francis speaks. A significant part of our

ministry is to provide that field hospital to this vulnerable group of people, our LGBT+ siblings.

The LGBT+ community still face societal and faith-based rejection and demands for conformity which do not take account of the uniqueness of their part in God's creation and their particular calling.

Too often we still hear stories of parents rejecting their children; of parents struggling because they see their faith as a rigid set of rules that will result in their children not ticking enough boxes to get into the heaven of a vengeful god who keeps score.

We know that LGBT+ people across the age ranges from childhood through adulthood, experience higher rates of mental health issues, addiction, homelessness and suicide than their non-LGBT+ peers. We know that these rates are higher again for LGBT+ people of faith. As with other vulnerable, marginalised, disenfranchised groups, too often they are asked to carry the burden of 'blame' for the issues society and faith-based groups ask them to carry.

It is important to state that our lived experience is that we were born just as God intended us, manifesting a particular diversity in God's creation. As with other marginalised groups we were not born broken, but as with other groups who do not conform to rigidly held beliefs and norms we have been pushed to the margins, often out of fear, often accompanied by mythologies about who we are and what we are trying to achieve. We are not broken because we are LGBT+, but we have become broken because of the action or inaction of others.

The Baptismal place at Christ's table offered by Christ himself has too often been denied us by those who have seen themselves as gate keepers. The invitation is from Christ, yet it is denied by those called to serve his purpose and to serve all of God's children.

This is beautifully summarised in the European Forum's Roman Catholic Church Working Group Synodal Submission:

"In many places the pastoral and theological response to LGBTIQ+ Catholics is characterised by a perception that we are victims, carrying a cross of woundedness, for whom the Church's institutions can bring compassion and healing. As was noted by a number of bishops and others in the 2014 & 2015 Synods on Marriage & Family, such an attitude denies the gifts and strengths which we bring to the whole People of God as justice-seeking disciples. This attitude also does not take into consideration that the "cross

of woundedness” is in many cases being put on our shoulders by Church institutions and the language of doctrinal statements.”

Summary Outcomes from our events

1 The workshop event at our 2021 conference

Key themes which arose from the discussion:

Leadership – the importance of pro-inclusive clergy, including training on this issue, and dissemination of this vision throughout Mass, parish life, and other activities, including the active welcoming of LGBT+ people, their family and friends, including non-Catholics.

Clarity – clergy being explicitly clear where they stand on LGBT+ issues and working towards inclusion.

Feeling able to be and express oneself as openly LGBT+ people as non-LGBT+ people can do.

Inclusivity as journey – a recognition that this is a journey not a tick box exercise, which can be messy and complex, and a recognition of inclusivity as normal and to be expected, inclusivity as practice, not just policy. A greater clarity at parish level of the clergy’s perspective and commitment to inclusivity.

Linguistic, liturgical, written inclusively – eg if we mean people why do we still say ‘man’ or ‘men’ it is no longer a collective noun that represents all

Using opportunities for dialogue which arise – at all levels of Church life.

Laity – an active and responsive laity and parish, which does not rely on the clergy for inclusivity.

Visibility – feeling able and being supported to be ones-open and authentic self within Mass and in a parish, greater visibility of LGBT+ lives and realities at parish level.

Welcome – feeling, and being, actively welcomed, through inclusion in parish life and Mass for example through the welcoming of family and other loved ones, being named and known.

The workshop revealed some comprehensive insights and though trans and non-binary people actively took part, the findings are lighter on gender than was expected, including discussion about the unequal roles and power of women within the Church. One thing that is clear is that people want clarity, action, equality, engagement and leadership. One suggestion is that a simple set of inclusive guidance for reflective parishes could be developed drawing on the

findings here, and those in the GNRC report [referenced at the end of this submission] as it has greater depth.

3 The follow up event

Whilst the use of 'they' in the outcomes of this event mostly refers to priests, bishops and cardinals and reflects the use of participants' language, it would be remiss to say that 'we' feel totally unheard or that we don't have many supportive brothers/allies amongst our clerical brothers. But where there is hurt our conversations still often include a sense of caution and a sense of having been othered/marginalised and consequential counter-othering is reflected in this use of 'they' and 'their'. Our members reflected:

- they need to listen to us and not talk at us.
- they need to hear our lived experience.
- saying 'you are welcome here' is one thing - but what does a real welcome look like? Who is offering the welcome? The welcome is Christ's already given, not theirs [as gatekeepers].
- We want to call very specifically for the whole area of the teaching on sexuality and sexual ethics to be looked at considering the advances and developed understanding
 - in the biological and social sciences
 - In theology and biblical scholarship. The academically and theologically substantive Wijngaards Institute report [referenced at the end of this submission] has shown that this whole area doesn't appear to be soundly based on scripture
- There ought to be a call for much stronger condemnation from bishops and cardinals on the treatment of LGBT+ people in various parts of the world – eg where the death penalty can still apply?
- There should be a focus on what skills, gifts and charisms we have to offer.
- We note the lack of younger people in many of our churches.
- We have been supporting those who voted with their feet for 50 years.
- [additional note: our work with Catholic Educators suggests that younger people often reject the hierarchical church based on the way in which their LGBT+ friends are described and treated in what is seen as a direct contradiction to preaching a loving Christ who embraces all. Young people find this conditional intolerance unacceptable and don't wish to be part of an institution which so openly fails the vulnerable and refuses to own its mistakes – whilst also preaching forgiveness and honesty].
- We have had to form Christian communities outside the current or parish structures. And so we have that gift of being able to establish small

Christian communities that are mutually supportive. The pandemic did not hit the LGBT+ worshipping community in the same way as those who have never been denied access to their places of worship.

- We have experience in ministering to the margins. The Synod has not heard the voices of the people that don't go to church. They don't even know about the synod. And even if they did, they don't know how their voices can be heard. Why did they leave? We have included LGBT+ voices from this large group of disenfranchised Catholics.
- We offer a different voice. We offer a questioning voice.
- We have had to inform our consciences in a way that conforming to norms doesn't demand.

4 The final workshop discussion at our 2022 conference

Question (1) What gifts and skills do LGBT+ Catholics bring to the local and broader Church?

We have the same gifts

LGBT+ Catholics have the same skills, gifts and charisms as everyone else. 'On one level charisms, skills etc are the same for everyone', however, failed understanding results in the denial/prevention of our exercise of the gifts we have, the gifts God gave us for the benefit of God's Church.

Engagement with and reflections on current Church ideas/categories

Responses described an active sense of ongoing reflection e.g. 'Honesty about our identity' ● Having a same sex partner ● being transgendered ● 'How do we contribute to the Church in the state of flux in its understanding of the human, body, sexuality?' ● 'Our path to family life and children is less "given" than for straight people?' ● in human, relationship and spiritual terms our existence 'pushes the boundaries of meaning: being human, trans, man/woman, family, parenthood' ● 'discernment - re-evaluation of faith, deliberate reconsideration of what it means'.

Gifts based on our experiences

This theme focused on what could be called the flip side, or an outcome of resilience to structural and systemic homophobic and biphobic discrimination linked to Vatican teaching on homosexuality; and more recent pronouncements on gender and the perceived role of men, women, and marriage. These have been directly quoted as they relay the variety of emotional and psychological work that participants have undertaken. The comments hint at the existence of a deeper, longer-term story.

Comments included:

- 'Experience of supporting each other through AIDS, which became re-activated during Covid'
- 'It requires a particular type of love to stick with a difficult experience'
- 'Capacity to deal with pain (resilience)'
- 'Ability to stay with doubt'
- 'Loyalty - sticking with the church and remain committed despite hurt; loyalty to each other'
- 'Patience - to remain with the church despite slow pace of change'
- 'Courage'
- 'Perseverance, eschatological hope/vision prophets e.g. loyalty to church/faith'
- 'Persistence'
- 'Hope (not giving up hope that things can change)'
- 'Compassion'
- 'A sense of compassion of tolerance that comes from the experience of being scapegoated and attacked'
- 'Tolerance of the organisation lack of acceptance and intolerance of the organisation lack of acceptance'
- 'Loving ways of disagreeing'. This comment is quite striking, though only it is quite pertinent to the synod's aim of walking together with those who would disagree.

Actively seeking and participating in inclusive ministries

These responses focused on an active desire to identify and access safe spaces, communities, scriptures and liturgies relevant to the LGBT+ Catholic community. Eg, 'create safe spaces, thinking outside the box away from biblical literalism', 'active participation in scriptures to find what is relevant to you', 'experience of feeling part of something', 'accessing a broader theology than local parish'.

Witness to diversity within Church and society

Responses highlighted that LGBT+ Catholics were being witness to the diverse relationship between the church and wider society. This took three forms, firstly both living and sharing the lived experiences of LGBT+ people as part of the church and society which could help to educate others 'Representing LGBT+ people both within and without the church - a witness - being present'. Secondly; providing the church with elements of societal diversity 'Awaken the current institutions to a wider society which includes LGBT people'. Finally, two responses noted LGBT+ Catholics as a marginalised group 'being an outsider, of wider society and that is under-represented in the church'.

Reflections on these themes from Question 1 responses

What comes across in the responses is a sense of agency, diversity and activity, and a desire to turn learning from negative encounters into positivity e.g. 'patience', 'persistence', 'loving ways of disagreeing'. There is also a strand of critical reflectivity running through the responses, with participants being unsatisfied with the negative, static aspects of the Catholic Church's attitudes, policies and practices towards LGBT+ Catholics, an unwillingness to accept us, and an active desire to identify and nurture more reflective, inclusive and creative ministries and communities, capable of being congruent with the embodied lives, truths and realities of lay Catholic LGBT+ people.

Question (2) What change would LGBT+ Catholics like to experience in the local and broader Church after the synod?

Overview

An end to discrimination, a desire to experience acceptance and affirmation

Responses under this theme were a key finding. There was a desire to not be discriminated against, to feel accepted, to have one's identity recognised, and to be welcomed and affirmed. Though not always stated there was a strong sense that these are based at parish level. Here are some example quotes:

- 'Being open as an LGBT person in the church and getting a [positive] response from the priest'
- 'Feeling safer within the parish to be LGBT+ and not feel in constant jeopardy: a change in the priest/approach and no longer being welcome'
- 'Not feeling on your guard like your identity is going to be attacked (challenge to help spiritual growth is ok but not attacks on identity)'.

Official recognition of relationships

Some wanted to see the sacrament of marriage being extended to same sex couples in Catholic churches e.g. 'Gay marriage in church'.

Those in religious life

Comments on religious life mostly expressed a desire for change. Participants wanted to see priests and those in power in the church to be able to come out as gay, bi or trans without fear of discrimination 'ordination regardless of gender and sexuality'.

Some comments focused on changes they wanted to see to the priesthood, this included the removal of the ban on gay seminarians and the rule of celibacy, the right to marry a partner regardless of gender or sexuality, and the option of

ordination for women. These comments fed into two related areas, firstly; a desire for LGBT+ priests, but not those hiding from their sexuality 'LGBT+ are welcome to priesthood, but not as an escape from their own sexuality' and LGBT+ priests with lived experience to avoid othering, and being potentially 'misunderstood'.

'We want priests who are sharing the lived experience of the community they are serving to be educated about LGBT+ people and stopping seeing us as the 'others' (married priests' optional celibacy)'.

Some commented on their wish to remove anti-LGBT+ clergy, and/or to sanction those who discriminate e.g. 'challenging bishops preaching against LGBT+ children of God' or 'priests/bishops who are proactively anti-LGBT+'.

Church teaching

Comments under this theme were varied. Some wanted to see revisions and structural changes, others sought clarifications.

There was a desire to experience inclusivity, through ministries, liturgies, visibility and the removal of documents expressing anti-LGBT+, and particularly anti-trans sentiments for example.

Church governance/operationalisation

Two broad sub-themes – inclusion and visibility at Vatican level e.g. 'appointments of LGBT+ people in the Vatican' and 'Visible and public inclusion, including a stand against conversion therapy'; and the desire to experience a more reflective, inclusive church at parish level. For example, 'Parishes embed synodality into decision making. Governance of the Church is not tied to ordination (Francis)', and 'a church where you can authentically work out these issues without being undermined', 'Congregations should have a bigger say'.

Beyond the Church

Some comments reflected on experiences they wished to have in wider society. These fell into two areas, the end of discriminatory policies and practices in Catholic Schools and the promotion of inclusion and removal of the limitations on positions in schools that LGBT+ people can fill . There was also a wish for the church advocate against criminalisation/discrimination in countries where this exists and the end of discrimination towards LGBT+ families.

Reflections on the themes in Question 2

The responses expressed a desire to witness an end to LGBT+ discrimination via Vatican policies and teachings, both within the church and in wider society e.g. Catholic schools. Many looked forward to feeling safe, to being honest about oneself and not fearing any reprisal, from closeted or homophobic clergy in a

parish setting. Several looked forward to the arrival of same sex weddings in catholic churches, and no bar on the ability to become a priest by gender, or by sexuality, with an option to marry. The responses expressed a strong desire for an inclusive church both at parish and Vatican level. Several of the themes revealed a desire for visibility ie openness about self and about feeling safe to be themselves, and as looking for church recognition and condemnation in matters of discrimination e.g. audibly condemning conversion therapy, stopping LGBT discrimination from within the catholic church.

Reflections following analysis of both questions

Though a largely lay, predominantly Catholic audience, the comments are not focused directly on the plight of lay LGBT+ Catholics, they include ideas about the clergy and church teaching, and LGBT+ people in wider society. The dataset reveals a body of people thinking, critically reflecting in some depth about varied matters of church life, the skills they bring and searching for inclusive, rich theologies. This is not a group of people sitting about with a passive, unquestioning faith, waiting for change to occur. The comments illustrate a willingness to engage with a church in a state of flux, and convey a sense of looking forward inclusion, by a group of people with a huge investment in the church who have collectively experienced structural, and possibly individual hurt and discrimination.

The comments and themes arising are reflective of the three key themes of the synod, communion, participation, mission. As such the aims and activities of Quest are in congruence with the aims of the synod.

Active discernment has been evidenced by previous and current Quest committees, members and those attending the annual conferences as we search for a relevant, bespoke and inclusive theologies of bodies, gender and sexuality.

It could be argued that Quest and its members have been on their own synodal journey for nearly 50 years. The question is: can the church listen, learn, change and join in?

Looking to the future

“The Church has always had the duty of scrutinising the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel ... Today, the human race is involved in a new stage of history. Profound and rapid changes are spreading by degrees around the whole world.”

This quotation from Vatican II's 'Gaudium et Spes', partly repeated in some of the Synod documentation, is of huge relevance to the LGBT+ community. The Church has always faced a huge existential and theological dilemma. How to be

IN the world (a world basically created “good”, not only evidenced in Genesis but a direct conclusion from an incarnated God who takes on human form and redeems the world by entering into it in full communion) yet not **CAPTURED** and **COMPROMISED** by it. Its mission is to be counter-cultural, yet at the same time, able to discern what is essentially good and intrinsically blessed and holy in a historical setting in which the Holy Spirit is endlessly renewing and creating all things anew.

Implicit in this vision of Vatican II is the concession that the Magisterium, the teaching corpus of the Church, must occasionally look outside the ecclesiastical framework to discern where God’s spirit may be at work. This may be in other faiths, but also in explicitly secular domains such as science, philosophical enquiry and the social sciences such as psychology. In essence, the Church does not have within its own members and structures the monopoly of revelation. God’s Spirit blows where it will and the challenge facing the teaching authority is to discern which of these unfolding disclosures are of worth and merit.

Compared with the 1960s when the council documents were conceived and written, sixty years on, the world of LGBT+ people has moved on beyond all recognition in many countries of the world. Same sex marriage, adoption rights, gender reassignment and support for transitioning; all these and many more changes present our church with an urgent need to re-evaluate its stance on these matters. Sixty years ago, with little in the public domain about the lives of LGBT+ people, most of the language on ethics and doctrine had to be a priori based on principles established down the centuries. However, with so much now on the record about the real lives of LGBT+ people: their histories as parents and adopters, as forces for stability in local communities, their roles as parish organisers, musicians, liturgists etc, there is a new demand for a fresh outlook which is a posteriori in its approach. The offensive and deeply misguided language of “objective disorder” is ripe for jettisoning in favour of a new hermeneutic which reflects the evolving new reality of the central place of such individuals and couples (and their children) in a newer setting.

This will be a painful and difficult process for many in the church and will threaten to override long established views. But the church needs to embrace the social sciences in accepting that sexual orientation and gender identity issues are naturally occurring minority variants in the human condition which are GIVEN not CHOSEN. Part of God’s infinitely diverse and wonderful world.

We call on OUR Church to evolve in the way we believe the Spirit to be calling.

In addition we recommend

We recommend as additional evidence which will support understanding of LGBT+ issues in our church and progress dialogue last

- 1) The Wijngaards Institute - a statement and research by the Wijngaards Institute – A Catholic Think tank – on the question of “**Christian Objections to Same Sex Relationships**” See the website <https://www.wijngaardsinstitute.com/> and from the menu: see the section /Research/Current Research/
- 2) the Global Network of Rainbow Catholics (GNRC), representing Catholic LGBTIQ+ organisations from more than thirty nations around the world, released the final report of research project. “**Lay Catholic LGB Discrimination in the 21st Century**”. The press release can be found here: <https://rainbowcatholics.org/gnrc-press-release-n14-there-are-still-multiple-forms-of-church-influenced-discrimination-in-the-21st-century/>. The final report can be downloaded here: https://rainbowcatholics.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/GNRC_Lay_Catholic_LGB_Discrimination_Report_21_Century.pdf.