



ARTICLES OF FAITH BY REV. SARAH FLYNN

A Spiritual Place You Can Call Home

IT IS HARDLY A SECRET TO SAY THAT GAY and Catholic is a combination of words that spell trouble, regardless of your point of view. For gay Catholics it means years of recovery from spiritual toxicity. Some burrow deeper into suffocating closets. Others come out screaming. And some, after considerable struggle, learn to separate the main entree from the upsetting side dishes that come with the Roman Catholic menu. On top of all that, LGBT Catholics face the understandably hostile attitude of the larger queer community to Christianity in general and Roman Catholicism in particular. As a good friend of mine was fond of saying, 'I don't know which is harder, coming out as a gay man to my fellow priests, or coming out as a priest to other gay men.'

"The Old Catholic movement offers a much-needed spiritual community in which queer Catholics may grow in their faith and not leave behind the rich sacramental life which formed their spirituality."

Where can you find a place that you can call your spiritual home if you are Queer and Catholic? One thing is clear, and that is LGBT Catholics need a supportive community, one that both encourages their faith and affirms their wholeness and worth as God-given gender variant people. There are some Roman Catholic parishes which provide quiet support. Very few, however, that can openly affirm Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender or Gender Queer persons without risk of censure from the hierarchy for departing from the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church.

All this the readers know. However, what many do not know is that there actually is a Catholic alternative, one that began in Europe 100 years before Vatican II in the 1960's.

This earlier progressive movement to which I refer was known as the 'Old Catholic Church' which began first in Holland, then Germany, Switzerland and spread to other European countries. Eventually it arrived in England, and from there came to the United States brought by bishops who were consecrated in direct line by those original dissenting bishops who had been excom-

municated for not submitting to the new doctrine of Papal Infallibility. Incidentally, the name 'Old Catholic' is not a reference to some form of rigid orthodoxy and hierarchical control. Just the reverse is true. From the very beginning Old Catholic bishops included lay persons with equal voice and vote in their deliberations. The word 'Old' refers to the way things were in the earlier centuries when there was less centralization of authority in Rome and more diversity in belief, liturgy and practice than came to be the case as the popes centralized power in Rome and in the papal office.

So what does the Old Catholic movement have to offer modern day LGBT/Q Catholics? It offers a much-needed spiritual community in which queer Catholics may grow in their faith and not leave behind the rich sacramental life which formed their spirituality.

Which brings us to the point of this article: the Old Catholic movement is now in Vermont, being represented by the American Catholic Church of New England. The author of this article is a priest in this Church, a transsexual female, and an out and activist member of the Burlington Queer community. Living proof, I should say, that there is indeed an affirming Catholic alternative for queer people.

It is not the intent of the American Catholic Church to encourage LGBTQ Roman Catholics to abandon their parish churches. If they have found a way to live within their faith community we support their decision to do so. Our ministry is to the marginalized, as we tell people over and over. We reach out to those who do not have a place where they feel welcome and accepted for who they are, be they straight or gay. We invite all in need of the Eucharist to come share what God has provided and receive the life and power of Christ in the sacrament for their healing and strength. All means all. The American Catholic Church is composed of straight and gay people. There are heterosexual married priests, ordained women, divorced and remarried persons; in short, none of the usual barriers are put between those called of God to share the sacramental life and their access to these means of grace. We use inclusive language, make decisions by consensus or democratic voting. Bishops are elected, not appointed by a pope.

For Catholics looking for a place to go that feels like home, but does not spiritually abuse you when you go, the American Catholic Church provides what you are looking for. We are a small denomination with worker priests who receive no salary. We meet in homes, hospital chapels and rent space from other churches. We travel light. Our mission is to those on the edge with no place to go and no one to welcome them.

If you are one of those persons, or are just curious to see what progressive Roman Catholicism might look and feel like in a few more centuries, feel free to come and check us out. ▼

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➔ April 2nd at 7:00 p.m. will be the first celebration of Holy Eucharist by the American Catholic Church of New England. If you would like to come either call 802-660-7175 or email me at saraflynn@yahoo.com for directions. Rev. Sarah Flynn is a priest with the American Catholic Church of New England

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