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COVER: DONATELLO AND MICHELOZZO, ADORING ANGEL. © VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM, LONDON

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The Church of England bishops have rejected same-sex marriage but backed blessings of civil same-sex marriage. A former monk who is now an Anglican priest argues that a decision that has been sharply criticised on all sides might be the best way forward / **By LUIGI GIOIA**

Pain and hope of compromise

WHEN I LEFT my monastery in June 2016, I had been a Benedictine monk for 29 years. When I joined, aged 18, I had known I was gay but I had total faith in the teaching of the Catholic Church on sexuality and I trusted that monastic discipline would help me to embrace chastity and sublimate my vital energies into spirituality.

In many ways this is what happened. Prayer became the heart of my life and I remained unreservedly committed to celibacy. And yet, from very early on, I was flabbergasted by the number of gay people who, like me, had chosen priesthood or monastic life but were rather casual with their vow of chastity. I preached retreats all over the world, heard the confessions of hundreds of priests and monks, and discovered that many of them had had or were in sexual relationships. The sexual relationships were usually with other men. While trying to be a minister of God's forgiveness and comfort, I faithfully taught that sex is reserved for marriage, and the path of Christian discipleship for homosexual people lay in chaste friendships and celibacy.

In 2011 I started to teach at the Pontifical University of Sant'Anselmo in Rome. One of my brightest students challenged me to revisit the Church's teaching with him in a series of tutorials on Scripture and ethics. I relished the challenge and trusted that deep down the student, also a monk, wanted to be convinced of the soundness of traditional teaching.

We looked into the Scriptural and doctrinal aspects of same-sex relationships conscientiously and critically, in the way I had learnt when I had specialised in the history of the development of dogma for my doctorate at Oxford. For the first time, and with deep inner reluctance, I had to acknowledge that the traditional interpretation of Scripture on homosexuality is deeply flawed.

It took me three more years of reading and questioning before my initial reluctant acknowledgment became a full-blown moral conviction. With this came a painful realisation that for three decades of my life I had been the captive of an erroneous interpretation of Scripture. I looked for advice and support in the Church, but I found only (sometimes indulgent) intransigence or, more often than not, sheer frivolity. The most baffling to me was the latter: as long as you are not found out, I was often told, do as you feel or please

Anglican priest Luigi Gioia lives in New York

or need. Relapses into guilt will become more and more rare, until you end up leading a double life without even realising how you got there in the first place.

Just at this time, the newly elected Abbot Primate of the Benedictine Order asked me whether I would consider being a candidate for the position of Rector of Sant'Anselmo. I told him I had decided instead to accept the offer of a visiting scholarship at Magdalene College, Cambridge. This was meant to be a year of discernment before coming out. Through my ministry of confession and spiritual counselling I had witnessed too much of the spiritual, emotional and psychological ravages that result from intransigence and frivolity. I knew that for me coming out had to be a spiritual journey, a quest for a way of loving God with all my heart, my sexual orientation included. It is not an accident, I believe, that the moment I took this decision, I finally found the inspiration to write something I had been postponing for almost 10 years, a book on prayer called *Say it to God: In Search of Prayer*, which to my astonishment and delight was chosen as the Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent Book for 2018.

Leaving the monastery and the priesthood was much more traumatic than I could have ever imagined. It meant three years of depression and paralysis, which I survived only thanks to an extraordinary Jungian therapist and the unfailing support of a few friends. Since my time in Oxford, in the late 1990s, I had developed what I considered a close friendship with charismatic evangelicals, especially from Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB). They invited me to give talks several times a year. In 2014 I was interviewed on the main stage of the annual HTB Leadership Conference in the Royal Albert Hall by Nicky Gumbel in front of an audience of more than 6,000 people.

When I returned to Cambridge, my evangelical friends were delighted by the prospect of a closer co-operation – until I told them that I was coming out. They immediately severed all relationships with me, with the exception of four lay people I had known since Oxford. I had transgressed their commitment to a strict "don't ask, don't tell" policy. The issue was too divisive, they explained to me. This time, I was exposed not to frivolity, nor even to intransigence, but to sheer, brutal denial.

I spent five years in Cambridge and initially I thought I would remain in academia. Within two years however, partly as a result of the unexpected impact of my book on prayer, I understood that the most important thing in my life was my vocation as a priest. I had been familiar with Anglicanism for more than 20 years, loved its liturgies and was fascinated by its Benedictine roots. I had been greatly endeared to the Church of England when they decided to ordain women. Because of my experience with Anglican evangelicals, I was aware that I could find denial there too, but I also knew that there are many flourishing parishes with a sufficient degree of autonomy to be safe spaces of inclusiveness and affirmation, something almost impossible in the Catholic Church.

I DECIDED then to start a two-year process of discernment which led me to "pursue my priestly ministry in the Church of England". I couch my motives in this way to emphasise the continuity in my journey and that this choice was not a disavowal of my Catholic roots nor was it based on an idealisation of the Anglican Communion. As the former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, at the time master of my college in Cambridge, told me: "It simply is a matter of finding your place in the Body of Christ." St Paul's Knightsbridge in London was that place. I found a warm welcome and unfailing support there, and for two years it was a place of deep pastoral and spiritual growth for me.

Up to that moment I had encountered intransigence and frivolity in the Catholic Church and denial in my experience with charismatic evangelicals. I was soon to discover that in the Church of England it was the beginning of the season of compromise. In the interviews that were part of the process of "transition" (as it is curiously called), I was told that, as a gay priest, I was allowed to be in a celibate civil partnership (some, I have to say,

did seem to be aware of the oxymoron), but also that "no archdeacon is likely to put a video surveillance in your bedroom". This was clearly part of an incremental process, similar to that which had successfully led to the ordination of women. By that time, I had come to the sad conclusion that as a gay priest I could only opt for the lesser evil, and swallowed the compromise. It seemed a small price to pay considering that for the first time in my life I did not have to hide my love for the person who has now become my husband, and I could start catering spiritually and pastorally for gay people in a way which, at least at St Paul's Knightsbridge, was unreservedly affirming.

UNDENIABLY, "compromise" is also the most accurate label for the proposals agreed by the bishops of the Church of England after a six-year period of discernment known as Living in Love and Faith, which will be reported to the Church of England's General Synod for discussion next month. Under the proposals, the offering of prayers in churches for God's blessing for same-sex couples to celebrate their civil marriage or partnership will be allowed, and the bishops will apologise to LGBTQI+ people for the "rejection, exclusion and hostility" they have faced in churches and the impact this has had on their lives; but the formal teaching of the Church of England that Holy Matrimony is between one man and one woman for life will not change.

I sympathise with everyone who is disappointed and hurt by this outcome. And yet, compared with the intransigence and frivolity I experienced in the Catholic Church, and the denial I experienced from some evangelicals, much can be commended and learnt from in the way this process is unfolding in the Church of England. Most striking to me is its willingness to discuss the issue in the open without being afraid of its explosiveness, showing a bravery lacking in most Roman Catholic and evangelical leaders.

The synodal process in the Catholic Church is not the same as the synodal structures of the Church of England, but Living in Love and Faith exemplifies some aspects of what Pope Francis is envisaging. Consider the suite of resources Living in Love and Faith published in November 2020: a balanced and impressive wealth of biblical, theological, historical and scientific thinking on human identity, sexuality and marriage went into the drafting of the main document and this was accompanied by films, podcasts, and course materials for study groups.

The bishops of the Church of England invited church communities from across the country to use the resources to learn together, to listen to one another and to God. Everyone who took part was encouraged to share their insights, stories and reflections in order to contribute to the bishops' discernment.

Living in Love and Faith has been a remarkable effort to examine the traditional teaching of the Christian Churches on same-sex relationships as fairly as possible while also taking into account human and social sciences and the real-life stories of people with diverse experiences and convictions. It is purely descriptive, does not make any final recommendation, and stems from the recognition that Christianity struggles to embody the good news in its relationships with LGBT people. Whichever doctrinal position Churches might hold, this pastoral emergency alone should be enough to bring Christians to pause and ask themselves serious questions.

Christianity struggles to embody the good news in its relationships with LGBT people

The Church of England does indeed compromise but as part of a process of listening and discernment. This remains painful, but gives me hope. In my view, allowing the blessing of same-sex civil marriages is not enough, yet in my experience nothing changes the perception of intractable issues (the ordination of women is another good example) more than incremental steps that take into account the diverse doctrinal sensitivities in the Church, assuage fears, and progressively help people to see things from a different viewpoint.

Some on the fringes of the Churches of course will always be afraid of listening and discerning. A schism might be inevitable in the end, as has happened at every critical doctrinal juncture in the history of the Church. We should trust process and time, as Pope Francis is fond of repeating. As we saw with the ordination of women, nothing softened irrational and ideological opposition and paved the way to women bishops more than interacting on a daily basis with women priests. I learnt this from my own personal journey: most people who distanced themselves from me when I came out, expressed outright disapproval, or simply did not know how to relate to a gay married priest, over time have realised that nothing has changed, that I am the same person I have always been.

Most of the rejection stems from the fear inspired by what we are not familiar with, what we were always told was wrong, what we have never bothered to look into consciously and critically. Sometimes, especially when agreeing on something seems impossible, the best way forward is keep walking together, for as long as possible. It does miracles.

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