



ELEPHANTS IN THE LIVING ROOM

Website: elephantsinthelivingroom.org



FR. JAMES MARTIN, S.J.
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Introduction (by Bishop Tom Gumbleton)

Good afternoon, and welcome to the Elephants in the Living Room. By way of video conferencing, we welcome our speaker, Fr. Jim Martin today. Jim comes from a suburban area around Philadelphia, which is sometimes called Plymouth Meeting, Pennsylvania.

He went to elementary and high school there and then he decided he wanted to have a career in business. So, he went to the University of Pennsylvania, to the Wharton School of Business, now made especially famous by our President (*many comments and laughter and applause*) who also went there. But after he graduated, he began to work in the corporate finance office for General Electric. He stayed there for six years.



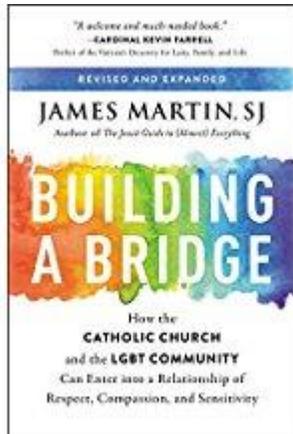
But then, during that time, and probably earlier than that, but at least during that time, he began to feel that he wanted something more than a life in corporate business. And it reminds me of a story in the gospel; you remember when the young man comes running up to Jesus and says, "What do I have to do to gain everlasting life?" Jesus said, "Keep the commandments." And the young man said, "I have done that since my youth. What more?" And Jesus said, "Go sell everything; give it all up, come follow Me." In the gospel the young man, Luke tells us, went away sad, because he had many possessions. On the other hand, Jim Martin followed Jesus.

He entered into the Jesuit Society Seminary in 1988 and then was ordained in 1999. After ordination, and before very long, he was assigned to be on the staff of America Magazine; and he continues working for the magazine now. But you will also see Jim very often on radio and television as a Catholic commentator.

He also, if you stay up late at night, you might see him on Stephen Colbert. (laughter) Stephen Colbert seems to think of Jim as his chaplain. He also—and I just saw this movie again for the third time—was a consultant on the movie *Silence*, which was written and developed over a period of about 20 or 30 years by Martin Scorsese. Jim spent quite a bit of time with the two actors who were the main Jesuit characters in that movie. He helped them to understand what it really means to be a Jesuit; and they come across as very well in the movie.

But most of all I am happy to introduce Jim, because he has been a friend of mine for over 20 years; and I have the greatest admiration and respect for all that he does in his professional work, but also for his very human work for being a brother to many, many people who are in trouble in various ways. Jim has been a good friend to me over the years; and I thank him for that. And I am also very honored to present him to you today to speak to us to building the bridge, within our Church, between the LGBT community and the rest of the Church. Thank you, Jim. (*Applause*)

Building a Bridge between LGBT People and the Church: Fr. James Martin, S.J.



Thank you so much. First of all, I am very happy to be here with you. Thank you for letting me come to you virtually and saving me a great deal of time and money. But I am very happy, especially being introduced by the great Bishop Tomas Gumbleton. Can we give him a round of applause, please? (*applause*) One of the great things about this life is that your heroes become your friends sometimes. And Tom Gumbleton is indeed one of the great Catholics in our Church; and it is such an honor for me to know him, let

alone be introduced by him. So, I want to thank him for the initial introduction and also thank his friend Jasmine Rivera, who is in the audience somewhere, for helping to set all this up. So, thanks to both of them. (*applause*)

So, today I would like to talk a little bit about the relationship between the LGBT Catholic community and the Catholic Church. And, you know, at times it has been contentious and combative, and at times warm and welcoming. I am glad we started with that beautiful hymn, *All Are Welcome*.

And, by the way, I was at a recent Mass where that was supposed to be sung; and the local archbishop declared that that could not be sung in his archdiocese. (*audience comments*) So, I proposed to the coordinators that we sing the song, *All Are Not Welcome* (laughter).

Now, much of the tension in this very complicated relationship results from a very lack of communication and a good deal of mistrust between LGBT Catholics and the hierarchy. So, I would like to propose a bridge between those two groups. So, when you reflect on both the Church's outreach to the LGBT community, and the LGBT community's outreach to the Church, because good bridges take people in both directions. The Catechism invites us to treat LGBT people with respect, compassion and sensitivity. So, what might that mean? And what might it mean for the LGBT community to do the same thing? And, by the way, when I refer to the Church in this discussion - now we all know that the Church is the whole people of God—but I am referring to the institutional Church. So, that's people in the Vatican: hierarchy, bishops, priests, but also, Catholic lay leaders who are in the position of making decisions. So, for my purposes the institutional Church are the decision makers, right? So, therefore, a lay woman who is the principal of the Catholic high school, who can hire and fire people, right? This is part of the institutional Church.

So, if it's all right with you today, I would like to reflect on the first plane of that bridge: The one leading from the institutional Church to the LGBT community. And reflect on what it might mean for the Church to treat LGBT Catholics with respect, compassion and sensitivity.

RESPECT.

So, let's start with respect. What does respect mean? First of all, respect means at the very least recognizing that the LGBT community exists and extending to it the recognition that any community in it deserves, because of its presence among us. I remember in 2016, after the Pulse nightclub massacre, where 49 people were killed, there was very low response from the bishops. Most of them said nothing. And even fewer of them mentioned the words LGBT or gay. To me, after such a tragedy, that was the time, the largest massacre in U. S. history. In their failure to acknowledge the existence of the community. But that's not a Christian model. For Jesus recognizes all people, especially those who are on the margins. So, Catholics have a responsibility to make people feel visible and valuable. Recognizing that LGBT Catholics exist has important pastoral implications.

It means carrying outreach ministries in some diocese and parishes. It means LGBT Catholics celebrating Mass with LGBT groups; as people who are part of the Church, they are welcomed and loved.

Now some Catholics object to this, which is kind of an understatement – skull mines. They say that any outreach implies a tacit agreement with everything that anyone in the LGBT community says or does. But that is an unfair objection, because it is raised with no other group. You know, if your diocese sponsors an outreach group for Catholic business leaders, it does not mean they have sanctified everything that every businessman or business woman says or does. Most people wouldn't say, "Oh my God, they are living in America; and they are not looking at Catholic social teachings." No one says that. Why not? Because people understand that the diocese is trying to reach out to the group to feel more connected to their Church, the Church they belong to by virtue of their baptism.

Secondly, respect people for what they want to be called. You know, if you met me and you started to call me Jimmy, which is something only my family calls me, and I said, "No, called me Jim." If you persisted in doing that and there were people around you who heard that, they could say, "You know, that is kind of rude." You know, it's simple courtesy; you call people by the name they prefer. It's common courtesy. It's the same on a group level. We don't say Negroes any longer. Why not? Because that group feels comfortable with names like African American or Blacks. Recently, I was told that *disabled persons* is not as acceptable as *people with disabilities*. So, now I use that other term. Why? Because it's respectful to call people by the name they like.

This is not some minor concern. In Jewish and Christian churches, everyone's name is important. In Hebrew Scriptures a person's name stands for his identity. Knowing the person's name, you knew the person, had an intimacy with the person and had kind of power over the person. That sort of reason, when Moses asks what God's name is, what does God say, "I am who I am." In other words, none of your business. (laughter) That's really what that means. That's His holy name. Like in the New Testament, where Jesus renames Simon to Peter; the former persecutor, Saul, who is the Apostle Paul. The very first question a deacon or priest asks is, what? What is the first question they ask? "What name do you give this child." Because names are important. Church leaders need to be attentive to how they name the LGBT community.

So, let us lay to rest phrases like, “afflicted with same-sex attraction,” which no LGBT person I know uses; or even, “homosexual person,” which seems overly clinical to some people. So let us listen to what your gay brothers and lesbian sisters prefer to name themselves. I'm not saying what name they should be using or what name they should be called; but we should listen to them. And, finally, Pope Francis uses the word gay sometimes, so can everybody else.

Respect means acknowledging that LGBT Catholics bring unique gifts to the Church, both as individuals and as community. (applause) These gifts build up the Church, as St. Paul wrote, when he said the people of God is compared to the human body, right? Every bodypart is important. Just for a moment, let's pause for a second, think of the LGBT Catholics you know, just pause and think of the gifts they bring to the Church; think of: music ministers, directors of religious education, pastoral associates, priests, bishops, sisters, lectors, all sorts of teachers. You know they are a gift to the Church. The Church is invited to meditate on how LGBT Catholics build up the Church, the same way that anyone else builds up the Church. And we might ask on a group level what might those gifts be? And I think it is wrong to generalize; but sometimes it is a positive thing to generalize with a group that hasn't been looked at positively. Many LGBT people have endured from a very early age: misunderstanding, prejudice, hatred, persecution and even violence. And, therefore, in my experience, people in my field often feel a natural compassion for the marginalized, right? Their compassion is a gift. They feel unwelcome in their parishes and churches; but they persevere.

I heard the most incredible story in the last 6 or 7 months, about people who persevere in their faith. I got a call from an autistic man, who just came out as gay; and he is not in a relationship. And his pastor told him he could no longer receive communion in the church; but that the pastor would give him communion in his office. (people made sounds of dismay) So this guy, his perseverance, like many LGBT Catholics, is a gift. They are also forging of clergy who treat them like dirt. Their forgiveness is a gift. Their compassion, perseverance, forgiveness are gifts to our Church. Seeing, naming and honoring all these gifts are components of in our LGFT brothers and sisters. Some of us are letting them know that publicly, they are welcome in church. The Church is called to welcome God's people, who are often made to feel, whether by their families or religious leaders, as though they were damaged goods, unworthy of ministry, or even subhuman.

But these are beloved children of God; and they should be treated like that.

Respect should also be extended to the workplace, especially if that workplace is a church or church related organization. To that end, I am really concerned, as are many, with the recent trend of the firing of LGBT men and women. Now Church employees have, according to the rights of employees, the power of organization. I mean, if I were working the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers and I borrowed a few chairs, they would say, "You can't borrow a few chairs." So, Church organizations have certain rules. The problem is the authority is applied in highly selective ways. Almost all of the focus is on LGBT people.

Specifically, the firings have usually related to employees who entered into same sex marriages, which is against Church teaching, and if one of the partners has a public role in the Church. But, if adherence to Church teaching is the concern, then dioceses and parishes are asked to be consistent. So, therefore, do we fire divorced and remarried people who do not have an annulment? Do we fire women who have children out of wedlock? Do we fire a man who lives with a woman before he is married? Do we fire people who practice birth control? I mean, all those actions are against Church teaching. And what about employees who are not Catholic? I'd like you to think about this for a minute. If the offense is, which it is, that these people are not following Church teaching, then we should fire every Protestant who works at a Catholic institution. But they do not believe in a lot of the things about Church teaching. Do we fire every agnostic? Or atheist? No, we don't. Why don't we? Because we are selective of which Church teachings matter. Here is another way of looking at this kind of selectivity and shows us why selectivity is problematic. Requiring that Church employees adhere to Church teachings means at a more fundamental level, requiring them to adhere to the Gospel. But to be consistent, we should fire them for not helping the poor, for not being forgiving, for not being loving, and for being cruel.

Now, I mentioned this before to a couple of people, including some bishops, is that the difference is that being cruel is not a public scandal, (laughter) as the entering of same sex marriage is according to the Church institution. And you have seen people who are cruel and evil. So the problem is: LGBT people in their sexual life. That is it. That's the culprit. The selecting on what to focus on, when it comes to firings is to use the words of the Catholic Catechism, "a sign of unjust discrimination; something we should avoid. So that's respect.

COMPASSION

What about compassion? What would it mean to the Church to treat LGBT people with compassion? Well, the word compassion is a beautiful word. It comes from the Greek word pathos, means to experience or suffer; and compassion means to experience with and suffer with. So, what would it mean for the Church to experience life and suffer with LGBT people? What would that mean? Well, the first and most important requirement is listening. Imagine if you came to me and said, "Oh Father, I have this problem. I hate to tell you, but..." "No, you don't need to tell me, I don't need to hear it. I'm just going to have compassion." That's what we do with LGBT, we are not listening.

Questions that Catholic leaders might ask their LGBT brothers and sisters are: "What was it like growing up as a gay boy? What was it like growing up as a lesbian girl attracted to other girls?" And another very important question, "What was it like being transgender? What's your life like now? How do you suffer? Where do you experience joy? What's your experience of God? What's the Church been like for you? What's your prayer like?" They might also have parents who were LGBT.

There's another thing it took me a long time to realize that ministry to LGBT Catholics is ministry to their families as well. I was at a talk at Yale University and this woman came up to me and this was before the book came out and I was giving a talk on Jesus and it was on *Building a Bridge*, which makes it perfect for your family by the way; (*laughter*) and she said, "Fr. Jim, I hear you are writing a book about LGBT Catholics." She was probably in her eighties. And she said, "You know what I want first of all?" I said, "What's that?" She said, "I want my grandchild to feel welcomed in the Church". And I thought, because there are more and more people are out there and more and more parents and grandparents and family members are affected. And that means, we have to listen to these people to exercise compassion. And when we listen, we will hear their calls for help and prayers. When our LGBT brothers and sisters are persecuted, Church leaders are called to stand with them. In many parts in the world LGBT people are liable to experience appalling incidences of prejudice and even murder.

Do you know that in many countries you can be jailed and even executed for being gay, for gay sexual relations? Embedded in Catholic teaching, to use some Catholic terminology, is the call to stand with our brothers and sisters. Sadly, this has not happened very often. Catholic leaders regularly issue public statements, as they should, defending the unborn, the migrants, the homeless and aged with refugees and minors. That's one way of standing with people. It's putting yourself out there and taking some heat from that. But where are the statements in support of our LGFT brothers and sisters? I ask people, but they say you can't compare what refugees face with what LGBT people face. As someone who worked with refugees in East Africa for two years, I know it's often the case.

But it's important not to ignore the disproportionately high rates of suicide among LGBT youths and the fact that are more likely to attempt suicide than their straight counterparts. Bullying of LGBT kids in school is also an evil that should be squarely opposed. As I mentioned before, in the wake of the massacres at a gay nightclub in Orlando in 2016 when the LGBT community was grieving. I was at this parish a few months, I was discouraged that more bishops did not signal support. Some did. But imagine if the attacks were on, God forbid, a Methodist parish. Many bishops would have come out and said, "We stand with our Methodist brothers and sisters," right as they should. Where were the Catholic leaders who wanted to stand with our LGBT brothers and sisters? It was a real failure in a serious way. A failure of compassion, a failure to experience with, and a failure to suffer with. Orlando invites us all to reflect on this. We need to look for a model for this,

Jim Kean, a professor of moral theology at Boston College, said that in the New Testament, where Jesus said it is where the weak are struggling, the weak are trying. It's where people are strong and not bothering, right? it doesn't even bother them. The two people who passed by the beaten man on the road, the people who didn't bother healing on the Sabbath. Where Jesus said, according to Fr. Kean, "Sin is a failure to bother to love". And in Orlando we failed to bother to love.

God did this for all of us. The opening lines of the Gospel of John tell us, "The Word became flesh and lived among us." The original Greek is better translated as: "The Word became flesh and pitched its tent among us."

Using an earthlier translation, if Jesus pitched his tent among us, God entered our world to live among us. That is what Jesus did. Jesus lived among us, alongside us, took our side, even died for us. This is what the Church is called to do with all marginalized groups, as Pope Francis has reminded us, including LGBT Catholics, to experience their lives and suffer with them; and be joyful with them as well. You know, I gave this book to a friend of mine, who works outside the office of Aim; and he's a gay man; and he said, "It's all about suffering, so it must not all be true." (*laughter*) And so we celebrate and treasure them, experiencing life with them. So that's compassion.

SENSITIVITY

Finally, sensitivity. How could the institutional Church be sensitive to the LGBT people? My old Merriam Webster dictionary says, and it's a truly good definition, "an awareness or understanding of the feelings of other people." That is very much in line with Pope Francis' call to the Church today: to be one of encounter and accompaniment. First of all, it's impossible to know another person's feelings at a distance. You cannot be sensitive to the LGBT community if you just issue documents about them, or preach about them, or tweet about them, without knowing them. One reason that the institutional Church has struggled with sensitivity is that many Church leaders still do not know many gay and lesbian people. Now they may be closeted bishops and priests and sisters, but not people.

I'll share a story with you. I can share this with you; and some of it is ridiculous. So, my friend's name is Brian. So, he worked for several weeks for a huge bishop; (*laughter*) and this bishop hired my friend to be the social justice person. So, as you know each diocese has a person who is in charge of liturgy, or some other function. My friend's responsibility was social justice. So, he and the bishop would take trips to some parish or some diocesan meeting; and when they were in the car the bishop used all these terrible homophobic comments. And I said to Brian, "What happened?" And Brian said, "Are you kidding?" He is the last person in whom I would confide. So, this bishop who works with a gay man; and Brian completely shut down and, in fact, left because he couldn't stand it. So, the point is, that lack of caring makes it difficult to be sensitive. How could a bishop be sensitive to Brian? He didn't give Brian the chance to talk about who he was.

In 2015 Cardinal Christoph Schonborn, the Archbishop of Vienna, reminds us of this at the meeting of the Synod of Bishops on the Family. He was talking about a gay couple he knew, who had transformed his understanding of LGBT people. He even offered some qualified praise for same-sex unions. Now I am going to give you a quote, it might surprise you. This is Cardinal Schonborn on same sex marriage: "One shares one's life; one shares the joy and suffering; one helps one another. We must recognize that this person has made an important step for his own good and for the good of others.". The Cardinal Archbishop of Vienna. He also overruled a priest in his archdiocese who had prohibited a man in a same sex union from serving on a parish council. for same sex marriage. You get that.? (applause) Cardinal Schonborn said of the Church that "It must accompany people." In this as in all things, Jesus is our model. When Jesus encountered people on the margins, he saw not categories but individuals. To be clear, I am not saying LGBT people should or shouldn't feel marginalized; rather I'm saying that within the Church, many of the many of them do feel marginalized. They are seen as "other." But for Jesus there was no "other," just Jesus. There is just us.

Now, in conclusion, I would like to talk about two stories that I love in the Gospels that help look at the LGBT experience. And the first one is the Roman centurion. So, you all know the story. It was a couple weeks ago it came up in the lectionary before Christmas. So, Jesus is in the town of Capernaum, which is the seaside town of 1500 – 2000 people. And the Roman centurion approaches him. And he says, "My servant lies at home paralyzed and suffering dreadfully. And Jesus says, "Well, I will come to your house and cure him." And the Roman centurion says, "I am not worthy to have you enter under my roof. Only say the word and my servant will be healed." He says, "I too am a person subject to authority. I say to one 'Go;' and he goes. I say to another, 'Do this;' and he does it. You know you only have to say the word and my servant will be healed. And Jesus says, "Never have I seen such faith in Israel."

Here is the point. I want to underline this. The guy is a Roman centurion. He's a pagan. He's not Jewish. And did Jesus say, "Pagan?" (*laughter*) Look how he treats the margins of Jewish society. We are so used to that story we miss the point, I think. He encounters him, listens to him and then praises his faith. Now earlier the people see this guy, "He's a good guy; he built our synagogue." But notice how he treats people on the margins. That's our model.

And the second story I'd like to bring up is the story of Zacchaeus. Jesus is going to the town of Jericho, which is a large town; and this is toward the end of Jesus ministry. You can all the people that are there in Jericho. Zacchaeus, short in stature, climbs up a Sycamore tree. Funny story, I go on a tour of the Holy Land, and we go to Jericho; and I insist they stop at the town square; there is a Sycamore tree there and there is a big fence around; and they say, "Fr. Jim has that fit great (*laughter*). And I like to think of Zacchaeus as an emblem from the LGBT community. Now Zacchaeus is the chief tax collector in Jericho, At the time he would have been seen as a chief sinner. Now I am not saying the LGBT people are symbol for any of us, but Zacchaeus would have been on the margins. People would have been angry at him; and he would have been on the margins. And what did he do? The gospel says that he could not see Jesus because of the crowd. How often does the crowd get between LGBT people and contact with Christ?

How many times does the crowd see the LGBT person as a sacrament? How often does the crown see the LGBT person as a flourish of life? So, he climbs a tree to see who Jesus was. That's all he wants. He literally goes out on a limb for them, like our LGBT brothers and sisters. How does he do it? So, he goes out on a limb to see Jesus. Jesus has entered the town. He has a lot of people around him: there's the twelve, there's the disciples, maybe 72, and then there's the followers. And there is a huge number of people in Jericho 'cause it's a big town, right? Who did Jesus pick? "You! You up in the tree. Come down from the tree, Zacchaeus." Jesus is calling that person— and this is my favorite part— and the crowd began to grumble. (*laughter*) "Get in line!" That is what is happening today. An extension and an expression of mercy from the margins always makes people angry. So, the crowd yells, but Zacchaeus stood his ground. That's what it says, "Zacchaeus stood his ground." And he says, "If I cheated anyone I will repay it myself." And Jesus said, "Today salvation has come to this house." It's a beautiful story.

Now here's the point. What does Jesus say when he sees Zacchaeus? Does he say, "Sinner?" No, he says, "I want to come to your house today." So, when so many people talk to LGBT people, or anyone on the margin, the first thing that they say is: "Sinful!" That's not what Jesus does — I'm sorry. So, what does Jesus do? It came to conversion. It's the metanoia, or the conversion we are called to, the conversion of our minds and hearts. Remember, Jesus is community first and convert second—community first and convert second. So, it's stated often. This is Jesus' way. But where does that lead?

That leads to the awareness of sensitivity, to a heightened awareness of what might affect others. While more sensitive people look for a solution we are sensitive to other people on the planet. Some bishops have already called for the Church to set aside the phrase “objectively disordered,” when it comes to describing homosexual inclination; you know, even if it is expressed accurately, the phrase relates to the orientation, not the person. Part of sensitivity is understanding all this.

You know, a few weeks ago, I was at a parish; and a woman came up, who was the mother of a gay son; and she said—something I will never forget—she said, "Do people understand what that kind of language can do to a 10-year-old child?" She said, "You destroy them". The concept of sensitivity is listening to that mother, listening to what she has to say.

Now in my book, *Building Bridges*, I call for the LGBT community to treat the institutional church with respect, compassion and sensitivity. Why? Because not only is it a two-way bridge, but these are Christian virtues. But the onus is on the church, because the LGBT community has been mistreated by the Church. It's about respect and treating with respect. Overall, the invitation is for both the institutional Church and the LGBT community to step onto a bridge of mutual respect, compassion and sensitivity. Some of this may be hard for the LGBT community to hear; and some of this may be challenging for bishops to hear, because neither lane on that bridge is smooth. On that bridge are tolls; It costs when you live a life of respect, compassion and sensitivity. But to trust in that bridge is to trust that eventually people will be able to cross back and forth easily; and that the hierarchy and the LGBT community will be able to encounter one another, accompany one another, and love one another. It is to trust that God desires unity

CONCLUSION

And in conclusion, I would like to say something to the LGBT community. In difficult times, you might ask: “What keeps the bridge standing? What keeps it from collapsing onto the sharp rocks? What keeps it from plunging into the dangerous waters below?” The Holy Spirit! The Holy Spirit is supporting the Church and is supporting you. For you are beloved children of God, who, by virtue of your baptism, have as much a place in this Church as the pope, your local bishop, or me.

Of course, that bridge has some loose stones, big bumps, and deep potholes, because the people in our Church are not perfect. We never have been—just ask St. Peter. And we never will be. We are all imperfect people, struggling to do our best in light of our individual vocations. We are all pilgrims on the way, loved sinners following the call of our baptism; and that we continue to hear every day of our lives. In short, you are not alone. Millions of your Catholic brothers and sisters accompany you, as do your bishops, as we journey imperfectly together on this bridge. More important, we are accompanied by God, the reconciler of all men and women of good will, as well as the architect, the builder and the foundation of that bridge. Thank you.

Transcribed by

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