

## *Introduction*

“So . . . I’m gay.”

The most important person in my life had called me the day before and told me that he wanted to drive up to Duluth, Minnesota, to talk. There we were, the next day, walking along the north shore of Lake Superior, and he was sharing one of the most personal details of his entire life with me.

What does a person say at a moment like that? What would you say or do if the person you loved most in the world bared his heart to you?

“Man . . . you know I love you.” I hugged him, and he hugged me back. I was the third person he had ever told, and my very first instinct was to let him know that this new piece of information had changed nothing. We kept on walking, and he began to share his experience with me. He had always felt different. He had always had these stirrings, but he just did his best to ignore them or avoid thinking about them. But twenty-seven years is a long time to carry a secret that weighs so much, and he needed to let it out.

“Do you, um . . . do you have any questions?”

I thought it was really thoughtful of him to ask. I only had one question: “What are you going to do now?”

“What do you mean? I’m gay . . . I didn’t choose to feel this way.”

“I know. I know you didn’t choose that...but what are you going to choose *now*?”

He wasn’t sure, and I still don’t know if he is sure, but this is “The Question” faced by every man or woman who experiences same-sex attractions.

I wrote this book for anyone who has been touched by the reality of same-sex attractions. If you have gone through life and have always felt different, if you are a parent of a child who has same-sex attractions, or if you love someone who experiences same-sex attractions, I wrote this book for you.

You do not have to be afraid of anything that you will find in this book, even if you have wrestled and struggled and fallen in the area of sexuality. The words of Jesus, spoken to a woman after she had been exposed for having fallen in the area of sexuality, are the underlying thread of this entire book. The scribes and Pharisees, wanting to entrap Jesus, asked if she should be stoned as commanded by the Law of Moses. Jesus replied, “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her” (Jn 8:7). After the scribes and Pharisees had left, Jesus looked at the woman and said, “*Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again*” (Jn 8:11; emphasis added). This encounter is great news for all of us. None of us is without sin, me definitely included. As John’s Gospel says a few chapters earlier, “God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him” (Jn 3:17). Jesus came not to condemn, but to save, to heal, to set right, to bring life. Even when he calls us to change, he does it so that we can be healed.

So you will find nothing in this book that is a personal condemnation. But that does not mean that this book will not be challenging. Following Christ is always challenging, but it is always possible and worth the effort. I have wrestled

with the topic of same-sex attractions and the effects of this struggle on people close to me for over twenty-five years. I was very young when I realized that the experience of being attracted to the members of one's own sex would be a reality for many people I love. I was a committed Catholic Christian, and I knew that the Catholic Church had what some people would find to be challenging teachings in the area of sexuality. But I also knew that I might be called upon, one day, to offer a message of hope in the middle of what could seem to be a forest of *no's* and *don'ts*. From my personal experience, I knew that there would be a need for Catholics to understand where people who experience same-sex attractions were coming from. I knew that there would be guilt and shame and suspicion around the topic and that the Church would need many people to speak with a voice of compassion. And that is what I want this book to be.

This book is meant to explain *what* the Church teaches about same-sex attractions. It is also meant to explain *why* the Church teaches it. This book is for people who are affected by the experience of same-sex attractions. Above all, I want all those who read this book to know that same-sex attracted people do not have to make a “fool's choice”—a choice between two options, when *both* of them mean losing.

The fool's choice would be this: either you follow your heart, or you will be miserable. Either you indulge in what you desire, or you will be lonely. Either you accept and embrace everything that someone else chooses to do, or you hate and fear him. These are false options. Isn't there another way? Aren't there other choices? Isn't it possible to live out the teachings of Christianity and still be happy? Isn't it possible to love your neighbor and not agree with everything

he chooses? I think there is a third choice. I think there is another way.

### *There Is a Third Way*

Let's start at the beginning: "*It is good that you exist.*" These need to be the first words that you hear. When God the Father sent Jesus to us, he was saying as loudly and clearly as he could to each one of us: It is good that you *are*. This world would be worse if you were not here.

I think of one of my best friends in college, Brian,<sup>1</sup> who was my little sister's Confirmation sponsor. Brian identifies as a gay man.<sup>2</sup> He is a nurse and has one of the most caring and compassionate hearts of anyone I have been privileged to know.

I think of a girl who sat across the center aisle of the church I attended while growing up. We rode the bus together all through elementary school. She identifies as a lesbian, and she advocates for those who have been made to feel out of place because of their sexual orientation.

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<sup>1</sup> Names have been changed throughout this book to protect the privacy of those mentioned.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this book, readers will encounter the terms "gay" and "lesbian." Catholics sometimes disagree about the appropriateness of these terms. Some object that the terms are widely used in a way that implies that a person is reducible to his sexual orientation or that this aspect of the person is the most significant one. Others object that the terms have connotations that fail to distinguish between mere same-sex attractions, on the one hand, and same-sex genital activity, on the other. Others insist that these terms ought to be used because many people choose to use them to describe themselves and that how people refer to themselves should be the determining factor in how other people speak of them. Here I use "gay" and "lesbian" when referring to how people describe themselves, without my use indicating endorsement or agreement with other people's intended use of the term. A number of people who identify as "gay" and "lesbian" have told me that their homosexual friends would take greater offense if I altogether refrained from these terms. On the other hand, some people will be offended or confused by their use, even in the limited form found herein.

I think of my former girlfriend, Melissa, who works with countless young men who have been cast out of their homes and now live on the streets, simply because they told their families that they were same-sex attracted.

I think of all of the young people I have worked with over the years. So many of them loved Jesus and loved the Church—but felt like they had no place in the Catholic Church because they identified as gay or lesbian.

I think of so many people who have reached out to me through the Internet, who are striving to live faithful, chaste lives but are afraid to reveal to their fellow Catholics that they are same-sex attracted.

I think of my best friend in the world, someone who calls himself a gay man, whom I have let drift away because I too often don't know what to say. My awkwardness is another indication that I sometimes see the "gay" and not the "man."

This is not to say that this is a book written out of guilt. It is written out of love. I do not want to reduce "love," as some Christians do, to mean: "I love you, so I need to tell you where you are wrong." I write this book because I know (*I know!*) that many people have experienced little love in the Catholic Church, especially when it comes to talking about same-sex attractions. People have often felt rejected, condemned, and unwanted.

In fact, it seems the more I talk with people, the clearer it becomes that many people in the Church could do a better job of communicating her teachings with love. I don't mean to say that the Church's teachings are not based in love. It is my strong conviction that all the directives Christ gives us lead to freedom and love. But there is a lot of confusion about what the Church teaches when it comes to sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular. Sometimes the love behind Church teaching is hard for people to see.

My goal is to provide some context to what the Church teaches regarding sexuality. But keep this in mind: This is the *beginning* of the discussion, not the end. I want to bring these issues up and do my best to explain the *what* and the *why* so that we all can have a starting point to begin speaking with each other. *With* each other, not *about* each other. There is a difference.

Too often, people like me in the Church will talk about *other people's* experiences with limited knowledge. I know *my* experience. And I know what people have shared with me. But I do not know *your* experience. And I realize that your experience might not be positive.

Still, in the course of this book, I don't always use examples from the lives of people who identify as gay or lesbian. The reason is because we all struggle with something. And we can approach the issues surrounding same-sex attractions in much the same way that we approach nearly all divisive issues. Focusing only on examples from people with same-sex attractions risks encouraging an "us versus them" outlook with some people. We can follow the path of dividing humanity into *us* and *them*. Or we can recognize that there is no *us* and *them*—there is only *us*. All of us are in the same situation.

To underscore the point, I want to say it again: It is good that you exist. You are one of "us."

A few people might find the very existence of this book offensive. I can understand that. I do not want to put into your hands just another "here is where you are wrong" kind of book. Consequently, I will do my best to be positive and affirmative. In fact, I want to affirm everything that I can affirm. Those who identify as gay have dignity. Those who experience same-sex attractions are worthwhile. Those who are grappling with their

sexuality are part of the family, that is, part of the human family; and, if they are Christian, they are part of the family of God.

In short, if you are a same-sex attracted person, I want you to understand that when it comes to the Church, you belong here. There is more to say on how that should happen, but the affirmation that you should belong is something to be said before, during, and after everything else.