

Thank you to Father Andrew Young for inviting me to gather and pray this evening with the members of Embracing All God's Children. And thank you to the priests who are concelebrating with me this evening. I am very grateful to be with you. I want to begin by acknowledging that there are people here in this church tonight who come from different perspectives and have different expectations.

You know that the Church calls us all to chastity – refraining from sex outside Sacramental marriage between a man and a woman. Some who are here might be hoping for some change in that fundamental teaching. You can imagine that I – who willingly embrace celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of God and find freedom in that life – I am not among those advocating for change. I embrace the Church's teaching and encourage others to engage in prayer and study with openness to the wisdom of the Church's Tradition. Life is a journey into the heart of Christ who comes among us as one who is poor, chaste, and always loving. Let us seek the heart of Christ together.

Some are here because you know firsthand that life is complex. People are complex. We can feel attachments that seem contradictory. We have loyalties that sometimes are difficult to resolve. We love one another fiercely and annoy the snot out of one another at the same time. We are brothers and sisters and, just like in the families we are born into, we sometimes feel like we don't quite fit in. It is possible, in fact likely, that we

love Christ, need Christ, value the life of grace in the Church, and yet don't always feel like we entirely belong.

Some of you – our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters, their family members and friends – may experience real rejection, discrimination, and hurtfulness from members of the Church and even clergy (even perhaps from a clumsy but well-meaning bishop). There are some of us Catholics (and some part of many of us) who are not yet fully converted to the call of the Church to be welcoming to you and to affirm your fundamental dignity that has its origin in God. We are tempted to give into the fear that the happy duty to love and respect you will undermine the truth that the Church teaches.

Pope Francis often reminds us that the decision to choose artificial abortion often arises from a failure to recognize the life growing in the womb as a person with a person's value and fullness. Instead, we are tempted to see that nascent human life only as a problem to be eliminated. Similarly, because of fear, we Christians can sometimes fail to recognize that we respond to LGBT persons in the Church as problems to be solved (or ignored) rather than real, complex, valuable persons who Christ loves and desires to unite with his own Sacred Heart.

You complex, sometimes conflicted folks, I've come here to meet you and to insist that Christ loves you and the Church considers you her own. I do so for love of you, but also for the sake of my own deepening in the way of Christian love and greater unity with all members of this local

church. Please, journey with us. Perhaps we can help one another love Christ more completely.

Some are here because you are curious or want to be supportive to your neighbor. Beautiful. Thank you.

If emails I receive are to be trusted, some are here tonight recording my every word with your phones. You intend to hold me accountable to the only authority that modern people still seem to trust and respect – websites and social media threads. I love you all too. Christ loves you and calls all of us to continuing conversion and deeper communion.

Actually, the scrutiny that I have experienced since the announcement of this Mass with members of Embracing All God's Children has helped me recognize and appreciate what it might feel like to gay and lesbian members of the Church. To always feel scrutinized, questioned, distrusted, second-guessed, assumed to be in sin, put under a microscope, misunderstood and accused . . . well, it is exhausting. I thank our LGBT Catholics for your efforts to hang in there with us.

It's said that the most effective kind of preaching in our age is personal witness. That's why I so often begin a homily with an anecdote from my life that helped me come to know something of the Lord and the way His Spirit works in life. Today is no exception.

Although I have always loved Christ and the Church, there was a moment when I was young in which I began down the path of doubt and cynicism. I was working my way through college as a Resident Assistant in the dorms. (At the time, we weren't allowed to call them "dorms." The "Residence Hall" euphemism was strictly enforced.) My boss was a gay man and an active Catholic. He was the strongest voice in the Saturday evening schola and a sponsor for a young woman in RCIA.

At a staff meeting one day, I made a childish crack critical of the Catholic Church and her attitude toward gay people. I think I was hoping for the Hall Director's attention and approval. Well, I got his attention. He shot me a look that could only be interpreted as "Shut up, you jerk!" and went on with the meeting. At the end of the meeting, he asked me to stay behind.

As usual, he was kind but strong. He said, "John, you know that I'm gay and you know me from Church. I'm Catholic. You can imagine that sometimes that's a struggle. Sometimes people don't know what to make of me." I nodded along. "But John," he said, "I hope it is clear to you that I love Christ with my whole heart, and I love our Church." I nodded slowly, thinking this wasn't going where I thought it would. "Here's the thing, John" he said. "You don't get to use me and my struggles as a reason to badmouth the Church that I love. It's just not fair. It's not respectful."

The conversation was like a glass of cold water thrown in my face. It was powerful and I come back to it again and again. Over time, it was

lifechanging for me. As I was beginning to experiment with pulling away from the Church, his gentle but firm faith – a faith for which he suffered – planted the seeds of two truths in my mind. First, life in Christ is everything. My life, the Church, all the grace God pours upon us, it is all for the purpose of helping us remain in Christ and Christ in us. Second, the Church is the Pilgrim People of God, always on a journey through the complexities of this time and place striving for greater perfection in holiness. We are a people who God is forming and accompanying.

My boss – a gay man and a committed Catholic – witnessed significant truth to me. His witness eventually helped restore and strengthen my faith. Every faithful disciple in this church tonight retains the same power to witness to Christ's love and his desire to hold us close. That's what I most want you to know. I am here tonight, in part, because of the loving, faithful witness of that amazing and courageous LGBT Catholic. Each person here can offer that same gift to another – or to many others.

Matthew's Gospel teaches us. We are all brothers and sisters. We are children of one Father in heaven. When we humble ourselves, we are exalted and drawn more deeply into the life and mystery of Christ. He is the ultimate answer to our every desire.

¹Today we remember St. Augustine. Augustine was a man who burned with desire. He spent his life seeking after something that would fulfill and correspond to his desirous heart. This seeking led him in many different directions, some good and some not so good. We remember him because he never settled for what failed to satisfy.

What does Augustine's desirous search ultimately reveal to him and to us? As we desire God, God desires us. Christ alone corresponds to and fills our desires. At the center of every heart is the desire for union with God, to be known perfectly and loved completely.

It is my firm hope that the accompaniment, Christian charity, and respect that our LGBT neighbors, their families and supporters receive from one another, from this local Church, and from me, will help you to know more fully your desire for God and the fathomless depth of God's desire to be close to you.

Let's end with St. Augustine's own prayer from *The Confessions*, the world's first spiritual autobiography.

Late have I loved you, Beauty so ancient and so new, late have I loved you!

Lo, you were within,

But I outside, seeking there for you,

and upon the shapely things you have made I rushed headlong – I, misshapen.

You were with me, but I was not with you.

They held me back from you,

those things which would have no being, were they not in you.

*You called, shouted, broke through my defenses;
you flared, blazed, banished my blindness;
you lavished your fragrance, I gasped;
and now I pant for you;
I tasted you, and now I hunger and thirst;
you touched me, and I burned for your peace.*

May our common Father pour out on all his children the blessing of the Holy Spirit, and in Christ, grant us his peace. Amen.

¹ This final section borrows directly and substantially from the work of The Most Rev. William E. Lori, Archbishop of Baltimore in his statement “Like Every Disciple...LGBT Pastoral Accompaniment”. The archbishop’s full statement is available at <https://www.archbalt.org/lgbt-pastoral-accompaniment/#:~:text=Introduction%20%7C%20Like%20Every%20Disciple%E2%80%A6,we%20choose%20but%20God's%20call.>