

Being pastorally close to gay people

For a welcoming Church that excludes no one

For years, the Catholic faith community of our country has been working in all its sections, together with other social actors, to create a climate of respect, recognition and integration. Many of them, moreover, are committed in an ecclesiastical context or a Christian institution. The bishops encourage their collaborators to continue to follow this path. In doing so, they feel supported by the apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, which Pope Francis wrote after the 2015 Synod of Bishops. Distinguish, accompany and integrate: these remain the key words.

With these words, on 17 March 2021, we, the bishops of our country, published a communiqué on pastoral approach to homosexual persons and couples. In *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis explicitly states that every human being, regardless of their sexual orientation, should be respected in his dignity and treated with respect (AL 250). We want to continue on that path by giving this a more structural character.

Pastoral care and guidance

The pastoral attention of the church community concerns first and foremost the homosexual persons themselves. Along the sometimes complex path of acknowledging, accepting and positively living their orientation, we want to remain close to them. Some remain celibate. They deserve our appreciation and support. Others choose to live as a couple, in lasting and faithful union with a partner. They too deserve our appreciation and support. Because this relationship too, although not a church marriage, can be a source of peace and shared happiness for those involved.

Their family and relatives are equally deserving this pastoral attention and guidance. An attitude of understanding and appreciation is key. Pope Francis explicitly asks "these families to offer respectful pastoral guidance so that their members who experience a homosexual orientation can enjoy the necessary support to understand and fully fulfil the will of God in their lives" (AL 250).

Our focus should also be on the wider society and church community. Notwithstanding a growing social recognition of homosexual people fellow men, many continue to be left with questions. At the same time, homophobic violence can raise its head. A better understanding can foster better integration.

Structural anchoring

The Flemish bishops want to structurally anchor their pastoral commitment to homosexual persons and couples. The leadership team of the Interdiocesan Service for Family Pastoral Care (IDGP) will have an additional staff member to take this to heart. The bishops have appointed Mr Willy Bombeek for this purpose. In addition, each diocese will appoint someone to look after the same pastoral focus as part of the diocesan Family Pastoral Care. He or she will be the point of contact for that diocese. As interdiocesan coordinator, Mr

Willy Bombeek will work with them and provide them with the necessary training and guidance.

Pastoral of encounter

This pastoral focuses on encounter and dialogue. People of faith who live in a stable homosexual relationship also desire respect and appreciation within the community of faith. It hurts when they feel they do not belong or are left out. They want to be heard and recognised. That is what this pastoral approach is about: their story from uncertainty to growing clarity and acceptance; their questions about church views; their joy in knowing a permanent partner; their choice for an exclusive and lasting relationship; their determination to take responsibility for each other and their desire to be of service in church and society.

In this pastoral approach, there is room for spiritual discernment, for inner growth and for conscientious decisions. Pope Francis calls for people's conscientious judgment to be valued and supported, even in life situations that do not fully live up to the objective ideal of marriage: "Conscience can earnestly and honestly recognise this which is now the generous response one can give to God, and it can see with some certainty that this response is the self-giving that God asks for amid the complexity of concrete constraints, even when the full objective ideal is not achieved" (AL 303).

The encounter with a pastoral leader or counselor is an important link to integration into the community of faith for gay persons or couples. On that integration, Pope Francis writes: "The important thing is to integrate everyone, to help everyone find their own way of being part of the Church community, so that they might be personally touched by the 'undeserved, unconditional and gratuitous' mercy. No one should be condemned forever, because that is not the mindset of the Gospel! I address myself not only to divorced people and people in a new relationship, but to all, in whatever situation they find themselves" (AL 297).

Prayer for love and faithfulness

During pastoral encounters, people often ask for a moment of prayer to ask God that He may bless and perpetuate this commitment of love and fidelity. What content and form this prayer can concretely take is best discussed by those involved with a pastoral leader. Such a moment of prayer can take place in all simplicity. The difference should also remain clear from what the Church understands by a sacramental marriage.

For example, this moment of prayer can proceed as follows.

- Opening word
- Opening prayer
- Scripture reading

- Engagement of the two people involved. Together they express before God how they engage themselves towards each other.

For example:

*God of love and faithfulness,
today we stand before You
surrounded by family and friends.
We thank You that we could find each other.
We want to be there for each other
in all circumstances of life.
We confidently express here
that we want to work on each other's happiness
day by day.
We pray: give us strength
to be faithful to each other
and deepen our commitment.
In your nearness we trust,
from your Word we want to live,
given to each other for good.*

- Prayer of the community. The community prays that God's grace may be active in them to care for each other and for the wider community in which they live. For example:

*God and Father,
we surround N. and N. today with our prayer.
You know their hearts and the path they will take together from now on.
Make their commitment to each other strong and faithful.
Let their home be filled with understanding,
tolerance and care.
Let there be room for reconciliation and peace.
Let the love they share delight them
and make them of service in our community.
Give us the strength to walk with them,
together in the footsteps of your Son
and strengthened by your Spirit.*

- Intercessory prayer
- Our Father
- Final prayer
- Blessingwish

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The Flemish Bishops

