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Juan Carlos Cruz, a member of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, speaks to the Outreach conference June 18 as Jesuit Fr. James Martin looks on. (Courtesy of America Media/Cristobal Spielmann)



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Hundreds of Catholics involved in LGBTQ ministry across the U.S. gathered at Fordham University June 16-18. Although the agenda included a range of controversial topics — from how the Bible speaks of homosexuality, to gay clergy, to the Catholic Church's ban on blessing same-sex relationships — the focus was primarily conversation and community-building.

Tania Tetlow, Fordham's president, set the tenor for the Outreach conference with a simple but meaningful opening line. "I am here to tell you that you are loved, bathed in the overwhelming love and acceptance of God," she said at the beginning of her June 16 keynote address.

Speaking to attendees, including many who identify as LGBTQ and shared throughout the conference their experiences of exclusion and disparagement from the church, Tetlow told them they are loved by Jesus, "who made it a central tenet of our faith to avoid the sin of marginalizing people, defining them as other, treating them as less worthy."



Tania Tetlow, president of Fordham University, delivered the June 16 keynote address at the Outreach conference. "I am here to tell you that you are loved, bathed in the overwhelming love and acceptance of God," she said. (Courtesy of America Media/Cristobal Spielmann)

"To marginalize is a sin," she said. "To love is our command. You are loved by the church made up of the People of God; the church we claim, the church we fight for, because we know it must constantly strive to better live up to the Gospels."

Outreach is [an online news and opinion site](#) dedicated to LGBTQ Catholics that is affiliated with the Jesuit-run America magazine. The June event was the group's second in-person conference, following a similar event at Fordham in 2022.

Although the effort to convene Catholics involved in LGBTQ ministry has attracted some pushback in more conservative circles — [an online petition](#), garnering some 93,000 signatures, demanded that Fordham cancel the conference, and small group of protesters stood outside the event on June 17 with derogatory signs — it has also attracted support from the highest quarters of the church. Pope Francis [sent a message of support](#), as did New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan.



A small group of protesters stood outside Fordham University's Lincoln Center campus on June 17 during the Outreach conference. (NCR photo/Joshua J. McElwee)

### Hope amid a powerful backlash

[Juan Carlos Cruz](#), a Chilean clergy abuse survivor who has become a personal friend of Francis, was also a keynote speaker. He told attendees June 18 he believes that his friendship with the pope, created as Francis [came to grips](#) with the shocking

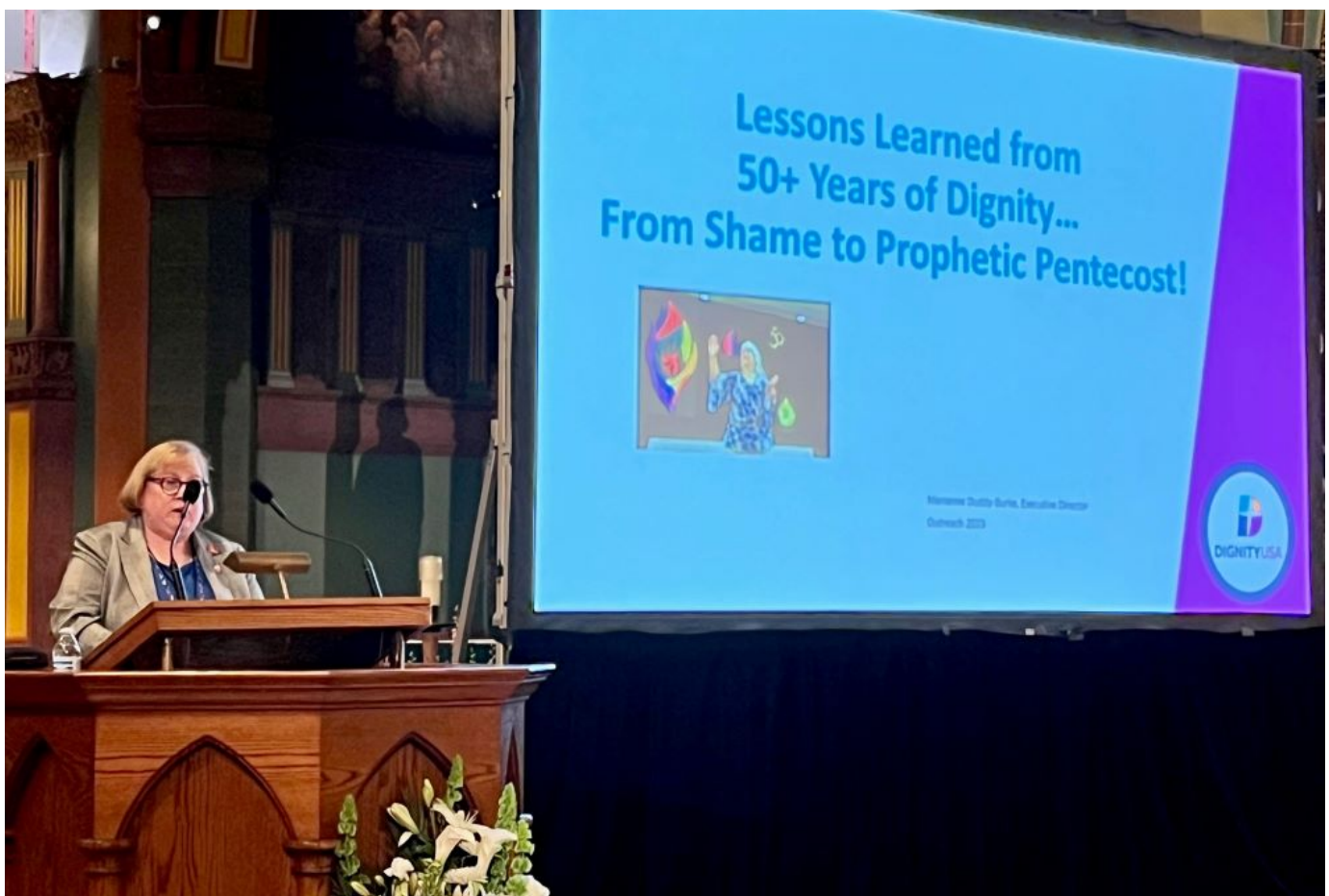
mishandling of abuse complaints in Chile, can be "a symbol of hope" for LGBTQ people.

"It shows that the divide between faith and sexuality can be bridged," Cruz said. "It shows that the highest levels of the Catholic Church are capable of love, understanding and acceptance. It is proof that we are moving forward."

Cruz, who also serves as a member of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, offered a respectful and oblique critique of "certain bishops who perpetuate harmful rhetoric and prejudiced doctrines." But he said their behavior "stands in stark contrast to Pope Francis' call for acceptance and love."

"It's crucial to remember that these discriminatory attitudes held by some bishops do not represent the entirety of the Catholic Church, but their impact on the LGBTQ+ community cannot be understated," he said.

Cruz told attendees that he had spoken with Francis on the phone that morning, and that the pope had passed along renewed greetings to conference participants.



Marianne Duddy-Burke, executive director of Catholic LGBTQ ministry Dignity USA, speaks to attendees of the Outreach conference at the Church of St. Paul in New York City on June 17. It was the first time Duddy-Burke had been invited to speak inside a Catholic Church since 1986. (NCR photo/Joshua J. McElwee)

[Marianne Duddy-Burke](#), the long-time executive director of the Catholic LGBTQ ministry DignityUSA, also spoke. She shared eight lessons drawn from what she called the "sacred wisdom" of Dignity's 54-year history.

Noting the recent ramp-up of controversy around LGBTQ issues, Duddy-Burke said the greater visibility and civil protections being guaranteed to members of the community "are being met with powerful backlash, both politically and by some in our church."

"This is no time for us to retreat to our safe, upper rooms," she said. "It's not a time to protect our privileges. It is not a time to lay low. We need to embrace and claim the wind and fire on Pentecost, not only on ourselves but for everyone."

'These discriminatory attitudes held by some bishops do not represent the entirety of the Catholic Church, but their impact on the LGBTQ+ community cannot be understated.'

—Juan Carlos Cruz

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Like all keynote speakers, Duddy-Burke spoke to attendees from the pulpit at the Church of St. Paul the Apostle, the mother church of the Paulist fathers. Given Dignity's sometimes-contentious relationship with church authorities, Jesuit Fr. James Martin, a conference organizer, told attendees it was the first time Duddy-Burke had been invited to speak inside a Catholic Church since 1986.

Like Duddy-Burke, Tetlow, the first lay president of Jesuit-run Fordham, encouraged attendees to continue working for better inclusion and respect in the church and

wider society.

"After a remarkable transformation in attitudes and understanding of LGBTQ issues and a new willingness to acknowledge and celebrate the complexity of gender and gender identity, we see a vicious opposition," she said.

"I imagine that many of you here are exhausted and afraid," said the university president. "What I pray fervently is that it is the seismic force of the progress that creates the flailing, terrible backlash. And we cannot forget that progress."



Craig Ford, left, a theologian at St. Norbert College in De Pere, Wisconsin, and Fr. Bryan Massingale, a theologian at Fordham University, spoke on a panel June 17 about being "Black, Catholic and LGBTQ." At right is artwork from the "Wonderfully Made — LGBTQ+R(eligion)" project. (Courtesy of America Media/Cristobal Spielmann)

## **Personal testimonies of LGBTQ struggles, joys**

The Outreach conference included a June 18 closing Mass celebrated by Santa Fe, New Mexico, Archbishop John Wester.

In brief remarks at the opening of the liturgical celebration, Wester told participants he considered their voices "prophetic" in the church. "I believe that your coming together is a very important way to bring our church closer and closer, to be one," he said.

The conference also included 17 panel discussions over three days. The conversations included moving personal testimonies from LGBTQ Catholics about the difficulties and joys of their lives.

At one June 17 panel about clergy who identify as part of the LGBTQ community, two priests shared their "coming out" stories.

'The People of God don't have a problem with this. Other clergy have a problem. The bishops have a problem. The People of God, no.'

—Fr. Bryan Massingale

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Fr. Gregory Greiten, from the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, spoke about his decision to write [an NCR article in 2017](#) in which he shared publicly that he is gay. Greiten said he decided that if he had to continue to hide his identity to be a priest, "then the priesthood is a sham."

"I am not going to lie every day that I am a straight man in order to do the priesthood," Greiten said.

Fr. Bryan Massingale, a theologian at Fordham, spoke about some of the negative reaction and vitriol he suffered online after he gave [a speech in 2019](#) in which he identified himself as a "Black, gay priest." Massingale said he realized there is a distinction between priests who might come out privately as gay to their family and friends, and those who decide also to speak more publicly about their identities.



"You can be out, you can be known, you can even be flamboyant. But you can't be public," he said.

Massingale, who is also a Milwaukee archdiocesan priest, said that since 2019, he has been disinvited from speaking at some Catholic venues. He also shared some of the derogatory comments he has received online.

"Yes, there are times when the vitriol gets to me," he said. "But I wouldn't trade it for anything. Because I see how life-giving it has been for others."

"The People of God don't have a problem with this," Massingale said. "Other clergy have a problem. The bishops have a problem. The People of God, no."



A group photo of attendees of the June 16-18 Outreach conference, held at Fordham University. (NCR photo/Joshua J. McElwee)

### **Prayer and spiritual sustenance**

At an earlier June 17 panel, several LGBTQ people shared details about their prayer lives and how they seek to encounter God on a daily basis.

Sam Albano, the national secretary of Dignity USA, recalled an experience of prayer when he was wrestling with what it meant to be Catholic and gay. "Being a gay man and a Catholic felt very lonely, and very unfair," he said.

Albano recalled praying to God and complaining about experiences of exclusion he had felt from the church. "Dear Lord, how can you let this happen in your church?" he remembered asking. The response he heard was: "It is my church, and it's your church, too, Sam, and that means you have a responsibility in it."

Said Albano: "God listened to my cries, but God also reoriented my vision."

Megan Fox-Kelly, a chaplain at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts, who has ministered with LGBTQ Catholic students for nearly two decades, said she has "come to know a deeper sense of who God is" through that work. "When I sit with the LGBTQ community, I come to know a God of immense joy," she said.

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Martin, the Outreach organizer who is also a popular spiritual author and editor-at-large at America Media, spoke about the importance of Ignatian contemplation in his own prayer life and shared suggestions for some Gospel passages that may be helpful for LGBTQ persons.

One passage was the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Martin, who has a book reflecting on that story set to publish in the fall, mentioned Jesus' command to Lazarus to "come out" from his tomb. Referencing how that command might sound to LGBTQ people choosing to come out of the closet, Martin said: "This of course meant something different, but not really. Come out, come into the light."

Martin also reflected on Jesus' later command, after Lazarus' resurrection, for the people near Lazarus to remove the stone from his tomb and to help untie the once-dead-man's burial cloths.

"While the grace might be coming from God to come out, or to transition ... the taking away of the stone and the unbinding is something that the community and friends and family can help us with," said the priest.

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love.