

FAITH FAITH IN FOCUS

# Italian archbishop endorses a 'new pastoral attitude' for L.G.B.T Catholics

**Matteo Zuppi**

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*Un ponte da costruire*—that's the Italian translation of the work by James Martin, S.J., *Building a Bridge*. We can't help but pay attention to the two halves of the title. First of all, the word "bridge" (*ponte* in Italian), an expression beloved by Pope Francis, one that brings into respectful communication, potentially empathetic and full of sensitivity, two different groups present in our own church: pastors, and the entire community (both variegated and complex) of homosexual persons, which Father Martin—as he explains in the text—prefers to indicate with the acronym L.G.B.T. He uses the term without ideological intent, but instead with the desire to call these communities by the same name they have given themselves.

It's a necessary step for beginning a respectful conversation.

One cannot deny that homosexual persons express a variety of positions concerning their circumstances, and that many of these positions cannot be accepted by the church. Even greater is the complexity of their lived experience as it relates to faith in God, whether within the Christian community or outside of it. The church's teachings concerning the standing of homosexual persons are clearly and synthetically expressed in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*. They serve as the starting point for Father Martin, who doesn't wish to challenge them in any way.

***Archbishop Matteo Zuppi calls Father James Martin's 'Building a Bridge' 'useful for encouraging dialogue, as well as reciprocal knowledge and understanding.'***

These teachings have not been followed up with a commensurate pastoral program—one that doesn't simply restrict itself to the cold application of doctrinal guidelines, but instead transforms them into a journey of accompaniment. Until now, the approach has often been ad hoc, merely a quick response to the appeals (some appropriate, and others not) of homosexual persons and groups, and often with a view toward their restraint, especially for believers (instructive examples, albeit with differing perspectives, can be found in the experiences of Catholic homosexual groups, like Courage and other groups hosted in parishes and dioceses across Italy).

The words of Pope Francis in "Amoris Laetitia" urge us to adopt a wider perspective, one that translates the same timeless doctrine into new pastoral journeys. "Families should be given respectful pastoral guidance, so that those who manifest a homosexual orientation can receive the assistance they need to understand and fully carry out God's will in their lives" ("Amoris Laetitia," No. 250). As Pope Francis has reminded us many times, in pastoral settings we are not called to content ourselves with the simple application of moral norms. We must decide instead upon a true and patient *accompaniment* ("To accompany, To discern; To integrate..."), one that favors the comprehension and vital engagement of the Gospel message on the part of every person, but without reducing it.

To this end, we must use a wise pedagogy of gradualism that, while taking the particular circumstances of each person into account, does not take anything away from the integrity of faith and doctrine. This is the appropriate way to exercise the church's ministry as mother and teacher.

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The intent of the book is to help pastors develop an attitude of understanding, as well as a capacity for accompaniment, towards their homosexual brothers and sisters. And also vice versa, because there is also the mirror temptation to close oneself off or to assume ideological positions. The book aspires to support the Christian community's yearning for a Gospel-driven life, and to cultivate pastoral

relationships that yield fruit for the Kingdom. No authentic journey of spiritual growth can leave the truth of both the Gospel and church doctrine aside; but charity and the truth of the gospel demand both availability and the capacity for dialogue.

And so yes, there is indeed a bridge that needs continuous “building”—to come to the title’s other half—with this sizable segment of the people of God, L.G.B.T. persons, who express their belonging in the church in many different ways. Doing nothing, on the other hand, risks causing a great deal of suffering, makes people feel lonely, and often leads to the adoption of positions that are both contrasting and extreme. Such “building” is a difficult process, still unfolding, as we are clearly able to see from the Italian translation.

Pope Francis again reminds us of this reality in two passages from “*Evangelii Gaudium*,” both very profound: “Those wounded by historical divisions find it difficult to accept our invitation to forgiveness and reconciliation, since they think that we are ignoring their pain or are asking them to give up their memory and ideals. But if they see the witness of authentically fraternal and reconciled communities, they will find that witness luminous and attractive. [...] Let us ask the Lord to help us understand the law of love. How good it is to have this law! How much good it does us to love one another, in spite of everything. Yes, in spite of everything!” (“*Evangelii Gaudium*,” Nos. 100-101).

Father Martin’s book, one of the first attempts in this respect, is useful for encouraging dialogue, as well as reciprocal knowledge and understanding, in view of a new pastoral attitude that we must seek together with our L.G.B.T. brothers and sisters. Cardinal Farrell, prefect of the Holy See’s Dicastery for Laity, Family, and Life, has already said it well: this book is “much-needed” and “will help bishops, priests, pastoral associates, and all church leaders more compassionately minister to the L.G.B.T. community.” Furthermore, “it will also help L.G.B.T. Catholics feel more at home in what is, after all, their church.”

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