

### **Background**

I'm Eve Tushnet. I'm 36. I'm from and live in Washington, DC. I'm a freelance writer. I do mostly arts and book reviews. So, I was raised in a basically secular household. I did have some Jewish religious education. And, came out I think to myself and then rapidly to my parents and people around me when I was about 13.

### **Becoming Catholic**

I had not at that point really met Christians of any stripe who were really interested in kind of sharing their faith with me. Certainly not in a way that I could understand. When I went to college I met those people for the first time and was really startled by how many misconceptions I had about Christianity. And also how interesting I found the things that they were saying. So, I was meeting Catholics for the first time who were telling me you know I had this image of the church as a sort of institution that's purely repressive toward the body, that despises the body and the physical world. And they said, well that would be really weird considering that we think God created it. So they really emphasized for me the beauty of creation and the meaning and depth of it as something that was something very important to the Catholic faith. They introduced me to a lot of sort of central concepts like the Eucharist, like the incarnation, crucifixion that I really never, sort of, grappled with before so I sort of found myself distressingly attracted to the Catholic Church and started to read more about it. Took a class on Christian doctrine and you know, read a lot of Chesterton as people apparently do. And found myself more and more drawn to the church in a way that was kind of like falling in love. That there was a sense of sort of I have to be as close to this thing as possible and that sort of, reached its fullness. And you know in my sophomore year when I did do RCIA and come into the church.

### **Understanding of Sexuality & Faith**

The church's teaching specifically on homosexuality, but also on other areas of sexual ethics was probably my biggest stumbling block in becoming Catholic. It was something that I was pretty concerned over and one thing I'm really grateful for is the people, the Catholics that I was talking to didn't think it was their job to tell me what to care about. They didn't bring up the church's teaching on homosexuality to me even though they knew I was a gay activist and this was something I really cared about. And that actually made it much easier when I started to be asking questions and wanted to hear from them what they thought. What they did was just sort of to share what was most important to them in the faith, instead of assuming they knew what would be most important to me.

So much to my surprise I found that I did trust the church to teach me in all areas of my life, including that one, and that was sort of the mentality with which I entered the church. You know one way I sometimes think of it is, and this is more of a metaphor than anything else, but if you picture the bride of Christ as someone you can have a relationship with, in any relationship there are going to be some areas where the other person is going to ask of you that you don't necessarily understand why it has to be that

way. But you know that you need to be with them. And, you know, you love them and want to sort of do what's being asked of you. Because of the relationship not because you understand why this area is so important to them. So that was kind of the mentality that I came in with. But to this day it's something that I do really struggle to understand. I occasionally dip back into the theology and sometimes I feel I understand it better than other times.

I don't know that I made a decision to be celibate. When I converted I was very young and had absolutely no concept of the future as a thing that's real. So I just sort of like, plunged ahead. The Church has these various rules that I didn't understand super well but I was like, "I'm gonna do it." It took me a really long time to learn how you can shape a fruitful life that isn't just sort of the purely negative thing of "not" dating or "not" having sex. How to transform that into a life that's actually life giving and in relationship with others, but that's more how I've thought about the question of it hasn't really been deciding to be celibate. It's been accepting the Church's teaching and learning to live a life of giving and receiving love within that.

Partly I've reconciled myself to the Church's teachings being what they are. Partly I think I've learned more about it. And seeing how the church's approach fits in with scripture. One thing that's been helpful for me is seeing that scripture uses both opposite-sex and same-sex love as models and mirrors of the love of God and the human soul, but doesn't make those equivalent. The opposite sex love when it's being used this way is in marriage. This is throughout both the Old and New Testament. And the same-sex love is in friendship or chosen family. So, Ruth and Naomi, right, would be one example. Jonathon and David are the classic Old Testament example, which are brought up as a way of teaching us what it is to love and therefore what it is to love God. And then similarly Jesus and John, and Jesus and all the disciples, are offered as models for us of love between the human soul and God that are same-sex love. The fact that those are not sexual, that those are not marriage models is kind of important to me in reconciling myself to the Catholic teaching. That they're not just saying that you can't love or that your love isn't real. They're saying this is how it should be structured. And then I guess the third thing is that I am pretty comfortable, well comfortable is the wrong word...I am ok with living in some degree of tension and kind of accepting that I probably will not ever understand this fully. Again even though it's really relevant to my life.

For other people it's that I'm celibate and there's a sort of stereotype that the only reason you would do that is that you hate yourself or you hate being gay and wish you were straight, which has never been something I experienced. You know, there are elements of my life that I'm not proud of, but my sexual orientation has never been one of those. So, I see where people are coming from because there is so much self-hatred and shame out there, often imposed by Christian communities. So, I can understand how people would assume that's where I'm coming from. But, it really isn't. And, it doesn't need to be a huge part of the project that I and friends and colleagues of mine are working on. It is precisely creating a way of life for gay Christians who accept the traditional sexual ethic that isn't based on shame or self-rejection.

From what I can tell, the teachings on sexual ethics are pretty deeply woven into the fabric of other elements of the faith. Like the meaning of our bodies, the meaning of sexual difference, the way that we interpret scripture, the way that relate to the Christian past. The way that the witness of the past kind of structures our own understanding of what it is to be Catholic. I don't think that the teaching on homosexuality is like a splinter that can be drawn out of the flesh without leaving anything behind. I think it does sort of flow through a lot of other parts of the Catholic faith in a way that makes it very difficult to me to see how it could be extracted without at least severely changing big other parts of the faith.

Yea, I think there are going to be times in any person's life where you're going to have to sacrifice your sexual desire and the way that I picture this typically is sort of pouring it out as a gift. Often I'll think of it as sort of pouring it out over the feet of the crucified. So in that way it becomes something that you don't have to be...it's not something terrible that you have to be ashamed of. It's something that you offer to God. And that's something certainly married people will tell you that they have to do. Single straight people will tell you. People who've taken religious vows. It's a part of every person's life. For gay people it can be kind of harder to get it away from that context of shame that we've been told we should put it in. But it's not something that makes us...it's not something for which there are no precedents in other people's lives.

### **The Church's Ministry to LGBT People**

I think you know the Church has a long way to go before it even lives up to the bare minimum of the catechism of avoiding unjust discrimination. That's something that many institutions in the Christian world, including the Catholic world, have a very hard time doing. There is a lot of straight up unjust discrimination out there.

Beyond that I think there's a call to go be as with chastity itself, there's a call to go beyond the negative prohibition of, "don't unjustly discriminate," and actually live out a positive call to support vocations of gay people; to support the different ways that we are called to give and receive love. For if you accept the historical Christian sexual ethic, that won't be in same-sex marriage. And for many people, it won't be in religious vows because not everybody is called to that. So you have to find ways of positively supporting and encouraging other forms of love, whether it be friendship, chosen family, intentional communities, celibate partnerships. There are a wide array of artistry, devotional prayer. There's a wide range of different ways of giving and receiving love that are kind of lost and invisible in the contemporary, even Catholic, parishes, that if we truly want to support gay people's vocations and not just lack discrimination, but actually welcome people we have to be supporting those vocations as well.

### **Catholic Parishes Today**

I think there's a wide range of ways that the church could be better supporting vocations outside of marriage and religious vows. Some of them are really simple. You know we have a blessing for mothers at my church on Mother's days, we have a blessing of throats on St. Blaise's Day, so why not have a blessing for friends? Why not say, "next Sunday after the 5:30 mass, I will be blessing friends, so bring a friend and we'll say a blessing

over your friendship.” Certainly speak about gay issues with an attitude of welcome knowing that gay people are in the pews. This is one thing that I thought was so great about Pope Francis's comment, that got sort of distilled down to "who am I to judge?", but where that was actually coming from was him recognizing that gay people are ordinary Christians in the pews on a spiritual journey of seeking to love God. So just knowing that that's true and that when you speak to your church you're speaking to gay people. You can incorporate that very directly, very concretely into your homilies, into what's in the bulletin.

And then on the high side, on the liturgical side or the sort of more spiritual side, there have been historically lots of ways in which people could incorporate their friendships and their shared family lives into the church. So, for example, heads of households or single people would make vows of friendship. These vows were sometimes taking place on the church steps and then the friends would go into the church, share the kiss of peace, and receive the Eucharist together. That to me is startlingly beautiful, a way of honoring same-sex love, and a way of showing that there is such a thing as a chosen family. There is a way to make friendship a form of kinship. To do that within the Church, sends a you know Jesus and the disciples themselves formed a kind of chosen family. And from the cross Jesus entrusts Mary to John the Beloved disciple showing again that his understanding of family was much broader than the kind of contemporary, the only way to get kin is to marry or have a child. That is not what we see in the Gospels.

So, my own parish is really pretty extraordinary. It's I think a genuinely welcoming non-judgmental community that really strives to meet people wherever they are. I receive terrific spiritual direction through that parish. We have a gay and lesbian ministry there that I'm on the steering committee of, that again really strives to welcome everyone across the whole spectrum of belief. Including people who aren't Catholic, right, but who for whatever reason need a space where they can talk through issues of faith and sexuality. So, and the Church has really fought for that, and fought to make it a safe place that we can continue to have. So I'm really spoiled. That's the kind of community that I think very few gay Christians are able to experience. A place where you're not treated with suspicion, where you can be like a butch lady or a more effeminate dude and nobody thinks it's weird. It's just a part of the ordinary diversity of the parish. It's a complicated parish to be in because people do have real disagreements, but it's one that genuinely strives to kind of keep walking with people. And, not to say, you can't come here until you kind of sign the following kind of conduct code, which find really heartening and closer to how Jesus operated.

### **Conclusion**

I don't really think I feel at home anywhere. I don't feel at home in the Catholic Church. And, that's even though, as I said, my own parish is pretty amazing, but there is still you know, you're still kind of an outsider. You're still trying to live and discover for yourself these vocations that no one will really tell you about. Or there's very little guidance. Even in the best of all possible parishes, which is pretty close to the one that I'm going to in contemporary America it will be pretty hard for you to understand what you should do with your life if you're not married or pursuing religious vows. I think it's much harder

for most people, but there is I think a sense of building the plane while you're flying it, which could be a little disconcerting. You make a lot of mistakes and waste a lot of time.

I've always, I think in part because the Eucharist was a big part of what drew me to Christianity in the first place, because of that I've never thought that I could really just go. There could be times when all you can do is Eucharistic adoration or going to mass and kind of just listening and not feeling great about yourself. But, I've always I think am pretty convinced that that is where Jesus is. The Eucharist is kind of the beating heart of love that I've needed to be somehow in relationship with.