

Father Patrick J. Conroy Extended Interview OwningOurFaith

Introduction

My name is Father Patrick J. Conroy. Right now I am assigned as the 60th Chaplain of the United States House of Representatives. First I was assigned by my Jesuit Provincial to apply and so after I applied and was chosen – so I had the religious thing behind me – but I was chosen by John Boehner as the Speaker of the House and in cooperation with Nancy Pelosi as the Minority Leader because the Chaplain's position is a non-partisan or bi-partisan position. So they are the ones who hired me and I was first sworn in on May 25, 2011 by the Speaker of the House on the floor of the House.

Sexuality and Sin

The Catholic Church does not have a teaching on sinfulness about who a person is. It is not a sin to be gay, or lesbian, or to be straight. It is not a sin to be any race or any tribe. It is a sin to behave or to engage in action that is considered sinful. And the Catholic Church's teaching on sexuality is that any sexual activity and certainly any, what would be considered, sexual intercourse between human beings, is always sinful if not within the context of marriage. So this is an easy issue to talk about with high school students or most college students. It is sinful for gay people to engage in sex. Well guess what, it is sinful for heterosexuals to engage in sex too in this crowd if you're talking with high school or most college students. So that's not a different message. The problem is, the problem of course that's facing the world, that's facing most states, its facing the American people and, you know, I think facing the Catholic Church is, what then does that, what hope does that ever give for a gay and lesbian person who desires just as a heterosexual person desires, just as a heterosexual person desires, to commit their life to someone in whom as Catholics they have found, if you will, the presence of the love of Christ. The presence of the meaning of their life in that person and where to go with that is the dead end and I think that it calls for a theology in our church that I don't think we have.

We have a theology on all this stuff and the answer is gays can never engage in this and can never get married. But that's a theology that goes back centuries. And it goes back centuries before there was any understanding of human psychology, human individuality, human sexuality, and all-all those kinds of understandings of human psychoses and human person that weren't as complete prior to these kinds of advances in understanding. Human beings procreate male, female. But human sexuality isn't just about that. It's about so much more which is self-evident.

I think Pope Francis has given the church, has given all permission to take these questions seriously and not just answer them out of a categorical you know system that worked for centuries because we didn't have these kind of complications to deal with. Because we either weren't acknowledging them or aware of them even. So I think it is an exciting time to be a Catholic, it's not scary. I think the Holy Spirit is impelling us to ask and seek pastoral you know life giving answers to these kinds of questions.

“Who Am I To Judge?”

When I see a Catholic clergy disrespectful of gays and lesbians or somehow not being sensitive – I just remember my own failures. Maybe not so much with gays and lesbians because they came into my life for the most part in the 90’s and I was ordained in the early 80’s so I’ve been around the block a few times and in other issues I’ve been, you know, closed-minded or too strict, or addressed a pastoral a situation with a law and order mentality. And I am embarrassed by that myself. When I see others and especially younger priests making those kinds of what I would call pastoral mistakes or pastoral failures, I’m a little more patient, but it is bothersome that the Church, well it’s always bothersome to me that the Church suffers from the same weaknesses as everybody else. Which actually is comforting because we are the Church – in some senses, but people expect us to do better and it’s always disappointing when the Church doesn’t and so when there is a priest who doesn’t perform well pastorally, or you know it’s disappointing, I’d say disappointing. I don’t get angry any more or impatient like I said because I’ve made those mistakes.

How Are LGBT Gifts to the Church?

Could the Church not think of itself instead of a place of position and ownership – what if we imagined ourselves as a field hospital? If you spend your time with the poor, your life is going to be messy. If you spend your life with little children, your life is going to be messy; it’s not going to be nice and neat. And one of the things that gays and lesbians are bringing to our Church is messiness and what I mean is this. Nothing derogatory. It’s like our answers don’t work anymore. That messes us up. We’ve got to come up with different answers or new answers. We’ve got to start dealing not like we have all the answers, but we need to find the answers. We need to know how can in the end, how can gays and lesbians really feel welcome in the Catholic Church.

Why don’t we ask, what’s right here? How about going about it that way? How might God be present in the homosexual experience? How might God be present in homosexual relationships? How might the world be gifted by God, or gifted by the Holy Spirit with the presence of gays and lesbians in our midst?

What the heck are we doing with Catholic families throwing their children out because they are gay or lesbian? This is unacceptable and this is something that our Church I do believe needs to address period but certainly because of the great pastoral evil this is for those children – rejected children – just because of who they are. Our Church needs to come up with a way of addressing that so that it is absolutely clear that being gay or lesbian is no different in the eyes of God to being heterosexual and so far as it is being a member of our church

I think it’s just great that as a church for the first time we are being encouraged to just look pick up a different glass to look through – instead of what’s wrong with this picture, what’s great about this picture? This is about how people draw closer to God. That’s the question we need to be asking about, what is it about the lives of gays and lesbians who are Catholics in their same pursuit of the presence of Christ in their lives that makes their desire to have the Church recognize that.

I mean we say we welcome gays and lesbians, but how can we behave in such a way that gays and lesbians feel more welcome. I mean that's the issue. We can say anything we want, but if our behavior or actions don't leave anybody feeling welcome, we've got to pay attention. We do have that crisis – there are a lot of people that don't feel they are fully accepted.