

Background

My name is Mateo Williamson and I am 23 years old. I was born in Phoenix Arizona and that's where I grew up. I grew up in a family with 6 children and a single mom who took care of us all. My father died when I was 8 years old and so she worked hard, she worked a lot, but she was always there for us and our Catholic faith was so important to our family dynamic. My father was a physician actually and that's played a huge role on me. I'm studying to be a doctor, hopefully going to medical school next year. After my father died our Catholic faith plays such a huge role in the healing process for us and bringing us back together.

I am Catholic and I go to church every week and that's a big part of my life for me. I would say the sacraments have always been of great importance to me. The liturgy too, I've always seen great beauty in the liturgy. I became one of the youngest altar servers at my parish and the only female altar server at the time. I was an altar server for ten years and that was amazing for me to be able to be close to the altar, and to be close to what's going on right there on the altar. It was like magic to me as a child. And it still is. It's so amazing to be there, and to be close to God in that moment. One of my greatest memories growing up in the Catholic Church was Easter vigil mass and for me as a child to be in that space where you have one candle, one light, and everyone in the community comes together and that light just spreads throughout the whole church until the whole church is lit up. It's such a profound image for a child and still today to see that. It's an image of connection and of love, and it's, it's amazing for me.

Mateo's Transition

When I say that I'm transgender that means to me that I was born biologically female but identify on the inside as male and I've always been male since birth but it has taken me some time to realize that this is who I am on the inside.

There was always a desire in me, even from a very young age, to, I felt gravitated towards the men's section of the store. And I often felt uncomfortable with the clothes that I was wearing. And, but for so long, I just didn't know the term for who I was. And it was around the age of 12 though that I saw a documentary, it was on the TV, about a transgender man. And it was the first time that I had a word to put for, but at the same time I knew in my heart I felt that I would never have the courage to do that. To be myself and so it was overwhelmingly sad for me to see this freedom in front of me and to think that I will never be able to do that because of the cultural constraints. And the constraints of my religion. And so it took me many years later until I was able to come out at the age of 20.

My relationship with my mom has always been really strong. She's always been there for us no matter what. And I've always looked up to her so much because when you're a kid you don't really think about how someone takes care of a family and especially after losing someone in, in the family. And so even through the whole process of my transition and coming out telling her was the most nerve-racking part of the whole process I think, naturally, but she's always been there for me. And I realize that I had to have some patience, right, with my family because this is a change for them as much as it is a change for me. And so giving them the amount of time they

need that I've had all my life to process my gender identity that was important, I think, in the process of transition.

I saw psychologists who were often Christian and I think that really changed their perspective about how to treat me and how to approach a lot of the issues that I was dealing with in terms of my gender identity. And so it framed the way that they were giving me solutions to this issue, this conflict, that I was facing, so instead of telling me that they could embrace me for these thoughts, these masculine thoughts they would say how can we make you feel better about being female. And so that, I think that was, in some ways, destructive to my self-esteem, and perhaps they didn't quite know what they were doing at the time they thought that they were providing me with the best care that they could. But at the time we didn't understand a lot about gender identity.

Today I identify as a gay man and before that was difficult to understand because I thought that in order to be transgender, in order to be a transgender male that I had to be attracted to females but I never have throughout my entire life. I was always attracted to gay men and it makes a lot of sense now thinking back but it's natural to me, I think, because gender identity and sexual identity are two separate identities. A lot of people get confused about how those two connect. But really you can be any gender and be attracted to any gender as well.

I think growing up a lot of people probably thought that I was lesbian, in fact a lot of people told me that after I came out as transgender because I was very masculine growing up. But I think one thing that is important to realize is that sexuality and gender identity are two different concepts, or two different entities and they don't necessarily converge and for me as a gay transgender man a lot of people would say that's too confusing, I can't wrap my mind around that. But I think we need to understand that sexuality and gender identity and gender expression, even are all on different continuums and so we can have a lot of variety within humanity in general.

Being Transgender & Catholic

I left the Catholic Church out of high school and I actually started to come back to the church when I was coming out as transgender. I felt such a strong call to come back to the church. And, in fact, going to church and even going to confession for the first time in three years that was an amazing moment for me. Because that was, I think that's the moment when a lot of LGBT people come out, too, to their priests, or to the confessor. And, that's an important moment because the confessor holds a lot of power in that moment in terms of making someone feel welcomed as who they are or alienated from the church, potentially, and so the priest that I talked to he was just incredibly compassionate, and someone who, he, admitted, I, you know, I haven't dealt with this before, I've never met someone who's transgender. But I see you and I see you, and he called me a brother in Christ, and that was huge. That was the first time that someone acknowledged me for my gender, and to have that come from the Catholic Church. It just changed a lot. It let a lot of my anger and frustration with the church fall away and so it broke a lot of my own misconceptions about the church. And so to have someone acknowledge me for who I am and to say "I love you" all the same and I see who you are, it was life saving to me.

I get emails and calls every week from transgender people who are just coming out and they come from a Catholic background and they are looking for support and there's only so much support that I can give them as another transgender person, um but to be able to hear this compassion coming from a clergy member, that is life changing, and not only for them but for their families as well.

I think LGBT people are gifts to the Catholic Church because they enable us to see an immense diversity in God's creation and to affirm everyone no matter who you are and to bring everyone in to this family, this Catholic, this universal family. We need to be able to see God in every person and to look at other people and even if we don't understand why they are who they are, to say this is who you are and I'm going to love you all the same.

I feel at home in the Catholic Church, and I feel at home within parishes that I go to that are affirming and welcoming of who I am. But at the same time some of the things that I have heard coming from the Catholic hierarchy have made me feel unwelcome and unwanted and even like an outsider within my own community. I think one thing that the Catholic hierarchy, that the bishops, and, um, the Cardinals can do to make transgender people feel welcomed and affirmed as who they are, is to tell them that they are loved as a transgender person and not despite being transgender, but because of their entire identity as a child of God. It's difficult to disconnect who I am from being transgender. That's not the most important part of who I am but it is a part of who I am and it's a part of what makes me who I am and it's a part of what connects me to God.

I think one of the things Catholic leaders could do right now is to listen. And that's the most important thing that we can do at any time when we are confronted with suffering. And when we see someone suffering I think that should lead us to greater compassion because I think God sometimes wants us to feel uncomfortable and that's when God is leading us to something great. And perhaps we can lean into that discomfort, even if it is a challenge for us.

Working at LGBT Youth Shelter

I work at a Catholic youth shelter in Newark, NJ. Many of the youth that we see have been rejected by their families for being LGBT.

To see that rejection because this child is gay, it was just so painful for me. And it, it's difficult because we see these moments every day, multiple times a day, when someone comes to me and talks to me about what they are going through and especially what they are going through because they have been rejected by their family because their family has religious beliefs that conflict with who they are and oftentimes a lot of the young people we see are dealing with their own conflicts between their faith and their identity as a person.

In the past few years since I've come out I've met a lot of LGBT people and there was a time when within a span of five months I lost so many friends to suicide and it was a very dark time for me and it reminded me of a time when we were losing a lot of young LGBT people to suicide and we didn't really hear the church speak up about this problem, about this problem of rejection, of depression, of all of the difficult things that these children were facing. And that silence was the most tragic thing for me.

I had to realize that I'm not necessarily the scandal in the church. That's the greatest scandal is to see this rejection of youth and to see the suffering that the church really needs to take a strong and clear stance against.

For Parents Who's Child Comes Out as LGBT

I think for Catholic parents of LGBT children it can be difficult because they have an image of what their child is going to be in the future and every parent has that image of their child's future but oftentimes that's not going to be the reality. Your child has desires that you can't see and vocations that you don't know about that God has placed in their heart and so giving your child freedom to walk God's path for them is so important for them to be able to connect with God and to live their greatest truth.