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A CHALLENGE FOR IFI: GOOD THEOLOGY *is not enough* FOR QUEER PEOPLE

By Rev. Joseph San Jose, *Metropolitan Community Church*

METROPOLITAN Community Church (MCC), the denomination I am part of, has been an inclusive and LGBTQ+-affirming Church since its founding in October 1968 — when all other Churches were excluding and exterminating queer people. A Church founded by LGBTQ+ people for LGBTQ+ people. Perhaps there is some wisdom I can share to our siblings at Iglesia Filipina Independiente (IFI).

Many LGBTQ+ individuals in the country have been and will be born into religious families and raised in Church communities. Some 8 out of 10 LGBTQs will be born, baptized and raised in the Christian faith. Yet, the common story is that, at some point, the prevailing religious culture will be in direct collision with queer people's unfolding awareness of their sexuality, even in Churches that welcome and accept them. While on paper and in the national leadership, IFI has become affirming of LGBTQ+ persons, I suspect the religious understanding of many remains the same and, thereby, families and parishes continue to have some level of microaggression and hostility towards gender and sexual minorities. For centuries, the official moral doctrines and theologies of the Church and the way they have been proclaimed have taught LGBTQ+ individuals to hate a significant part of themselves. This is amplified by the overall negative attitude towards them by those who claim to preach love and practice compassion.

All of these give LGBTQ+ persons overwhelming feelings of being cut off from God; cut off from an authentic relationship with their families; cut off from free and true connections during their developmental years. Eventually, many of them will feel cut off from their inner selves.

IFI has grappled with the issue of sexuality and finally affirmed the sacred worth of LGBTQ+ individuals. Part of its struggle has been the development of theology and biblical studies, and seeking how these could inform the institutional Church on sexuality. The continuing scholarly study of Scripture and

progress in theological reflection are things that IFI and other Churches must do to contextualize Faith and Practice from age to age.

However, theology is not enough. We may think progressive theology will give all the answers the Church needs in accepting LGBTQ+ persons who had been harmed, wounded and cut off by fundamentalist theology. LGBTQ+ Aglipayans also may think that having the right theology would suffice for them to live and serve in the Church. There might be a false notion that a national statement with the right words would be enough to heal the divide between queer people and the Church. Yes, theology can give answers to a certain extent. It can give hope and relief to a point. But it is not enough.

I encourage reading and listening to the theological works of experts. I would even go as far as saying that it is both a spiritual exercise and a Christian duty to continue learning theology with and from professional theologians and biblical scholars. But, I want to remind all denominations, LGBTQ+ faithful and, most especially, LGBTQ+ clergy that theological knowledge is not enough because it is not theology that queer people lost. It is not our deepest longing. What we lost and desire is authentic connection — relational, spiritual and ecclesial.

What queer people truly desire behind and beyond theology are new ways to a free and authentic relationship with God through a

spiritual community that enables a reconnection with and rediscovery of the inner life. Theologies must translate to real programs that help bring about the authentic connection and integration of queer people. Statements without programming are tokens and platitudes that have little use in real life.

In Acts of the Apostles 2:42-47, we read that early Christians were devoted to the teachings of the apostles but, beyond that, also lived together as a community, having everything in common, sharing according to each one's need. They ate their food with glad and thankful hearts. They prayed together and for each other. God's love was expressed in their relationship with each other. Day by day, new people, especially the poor, joined because of this character.

The early Christians are in many ways similar to present marginalized and oppressed sectors, including queer people. Many were rejected by the official religion and by society. Like queer people, their deepest longings were to be heard, seen and included; to attain a life with others. Many ancient peoples desired acceptance — to love and be loved; to have purpose and meaning through authentic relationships — which was present in early Christian communities. In living this way, they theologized about God and Christ and, later, chronicled their ways as gospels and letters.

Good theologies emerge only from the lived experiences and struggles of people. Some theologies can be read in books, but they are realized in our renewed relationship with God and other people as our authentic selves. The countless works of progressive scholars and theologians can teach us about God but, if the Church wants to

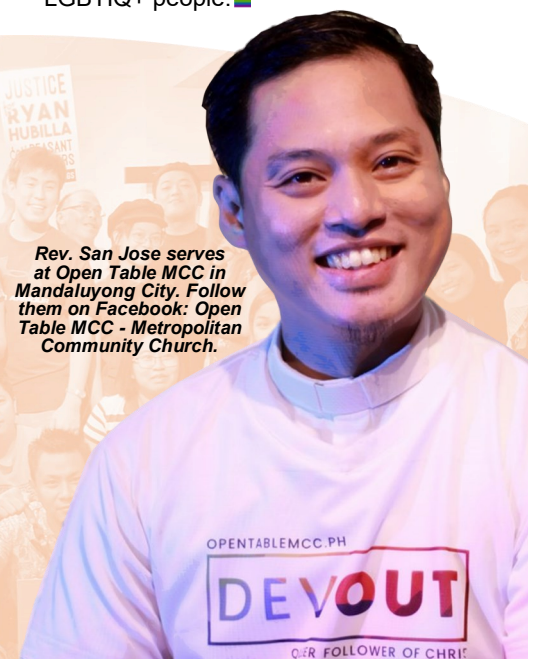
experience God's love, it must intentionally enact God's love in concrete ways, at all levels.

Is this the exclusive task of the institutional Church and the heterosexual allies of queer people occupying leadership positions? No. Queer IFI members must assert themselves, and demand their rights and recognition. LGBTQ+ clergy must step up and step out for themselves and their members. It is their spiritual duty as rainbow shepherds to represent and care for their rainbow flock in the totality of who they are. The national statement of IFI is not a blanket to comfort the Church and its LGBTQ+ members. It is the Spirit of the Pentecost's challenge for the Church to restore its communities as safe spaces for all people, where God's inclusive love can be experienced through authentic relationships.

Psalms 34:8 says: "Taste and see that the Lord is good." God is to be experienced and, in the Liturgy of the Church, God is to be partaken. In the statement of faith of MCC, we echo the words of the Psalmist — "Come, taste, and see. Jesus Christ, You invite all people to Your Open Table."

I hope and pray IFI will not be content in proclaiming good theology. It must, more importantly, practice God's love through a renewed community warmly embracing LGBTQ+ people.

Rev. San Jose serves at Open Table MCC in Mandaluyong City. Follow them on Facebook: Open Table MCC - Metropolitan Community Church.



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Transpinay on her way to priesthood

By Sister Wylard 'Wowa' Ledama

"Are you a boy or a girl?"

Early on, I knew the definite answer: "Girl." However, my parents introduced me to the world as their son. They did that because the doctor told them I was a boy based on my genitals.

I'd spend half of my childhood years with my ever-supportive late grandmother, who reinforced my girlhood. Most of the time, she would let me borrow my cousin's full balloon skirt, which I would joyfully wear while assisting her with chores at home. She'd even taught me traditional women's skills: cross-stitching, creating flowers from crepe paper and cutting out letters for decorations. All these childhood experiences made me very conscious that I was, indeed, a girl! I held firm to this awareness from high school until college.

After graduating from college with a nursing degree, I started taking hormones, publicly donning women's clothing and wearing makeup. I did clinical work as a nurse and, at the very same time, started actively participating



in the Iglesia Filipina Independiente (IFI) Cathedral in Pagadian City. I had no hint at all how the congregation would react to a transwoman faithful but, later on, I gained acceptance with minimal resistance from people who may have come from a conservative upbringing. They questioned my capabilities as an individual and doubted my intentions, but I pushed through and became a youth leader.

In February 2017, the IFI Supreme Council of Bishops released the statement, "Our Common Humanity, Our Shared Dignity," which recognized, affirmed and rejoiced the presence of the LGBTIQ+ community in the Church, and acknowledged that we have enriched the life, work and witness of IFI. It ignited my spirit; shifted my focus from the clinical to the pastoral track. It served as my motivation to undergo seminary formation. Going through the document, I thought the priesthood would be an effective way to deliver

the boundless and supreme love of God. Thus, at the risk of judgment and great difficulty, I chose to become a transwoman seminarian at the Aglipay Central Theological Seminary. Lo and behold, I would be the first transwoman seminarian in the notoriously conservative Philippines.

In my journey, I've met a lot of good people who helped me cope with my daily troubles. Those uplifting individuals make me believe that there is hope for us, the marginalized, whom others have called immoral sinners for centuries. I do wonder how, in the bigger picture, policymakers do not seem affected by the plight of LGBTIQ+ individuals or touched by the compassion and acceptance many have extended to us — even through all the mobilizations, consultations and lobbying efforts. They always respond, "The nation is not ready." It is an attitude that insults and dehumanizes LGBTIQ+ individuals.

Despite the stonewalling, I continue to dream of a community where no person feels insecure and unsafe in their identity; where pigeonholes and stereotypes are no more; where gender and sexual minorities do not need to fight for their existence and validation. I still yearn for a world where everyone can express their authentic self, and not be



trampled on because of it.

In this unique position, I know I can contribute to realizing that dream shared by millions of LGBTIQ+ siblings. I am now an eye-opener. In my passage to priesthood, I am proving that the vocation is inclusive, welcoming anyone committed to work in the vineyard of God. In forging ahead, I am lucky I mustered up the gender-neutral values of conscience, persistence and honesty.

May the diversity that God provided to the world be appreciated by everyone, and the rainbow shine brighter. 🌈

RAINBOW VOICES

Does IFI have sexual diversity within? The Youth of Iglesia Filipina Independiente and Ramento Project for Rights Defenders looked for active LGBTIQ+ IFI members to ask them about their personal struggles and their dreams for their sector.



#Kabataang Aglipayano

RPRD ASKED

If you are comfortable, tell us a bit about how you discovered yourself to be LGBTIQ+.

What difficulties of the LGBTIQ+ community have you faced or witnessed?

How did you feel about the IFI statement affirming the LGBTIQ+ sector? Why?

What do you think is the best way for LGBTIQ+ individuals to be treated equally in the Philippines?

What is your dream for LGBTIQ+ IFI faithful?

What is your dream for LGBTIQ+ Filipinos?

LYKA MANUEL BORRAMEO

21, bisexual woman

Cathedral of St. William the Hermit / Diocese of Laoag

In 6th Grade, I found myself attached with a lesbian romantically. My belief was that if you were in a relationship with a lesbian, you were automatically a lesbian too. But, I was wrong. When I entered high school, through the influence and knowledge of my friends, some of whom were LGBTIQ+, I learned that was not the case. I forgot all about that question when I had a boyfriend. But, in July 2018, I once again met a lesbian I was attracted to. The question — "What am I?" — came back. I finally had an answer: I am bisexual! How good it is to be part of the LGBTIQ+ community. I am proud to say that the person I met last 2018 is now my partner for almost 2 years, and I am happily contented.

I respect other people's views and opinions, but I do not stand with people who bully or degrade us. Some LGBTIQ+ friends would be bullied and rejected by their families. One relative questioned me, and even posted discriminatory quotes right after commenting on a couple photo I had posted. I got offended many times, but these will not change the fact that I am happy with the acceptance and support of my parents and other relatives. Their love is enough!

I was so happy because my Church was truly a #SimbahangMalaya. I have been a youth leader, and witnessed the discrimination of LGBTIQ+ and even woman priests. The statement showed that IFI stood for what was right, and defended the rights of all. While reading the statement, I got emotional because I felt respect, support and love. I want to thank IFI and the Supreme Council of Bishops for the support to the LGBTIQ+ community.

We are still humans who have rights and dignity. The best way is to give us a chance to be accepted by the community. We are not criminals to be hated, degraded and left behind. Let us speak, let us shine, let us live the life that we want with respect and love. Stop discriminating us. Stop the violence against the LGBTIQ+ community!

Continue to serve God and our Church no matter what your SSOGIE is. Continue to love and respect each and every one. Continue to support human rights. Pro Deo et Patria!

Never stop reaching our goals for the whole LGBTIQ+ community. Keep supporting gender equality. 🌈

20, bisexual man

CHRISTOPHER SANIEL

Parish of St. Joseph, Sariaya, Quezon / Diocese of MaQueBaCa

Since I was kid, I felt something different about me. I'd been attracted to men and women, which was wrong for me, my family and community. I didn't know how to classify myself. In junior high school, I was really afraid to show the real me. Most of my friends were girls, and I didn't want to hang out with boys because most of my boy classmates had ridiculous behavior like cutting classes and smoking. I have ex-girlfriends; Grade 10 was the last time I had a girlfriend. When we broke up, I felt really upset. After a few months, I met a man who was also attracted to men. We talked via chats and calls. We became a couple, and that's when I really affirmed that I was attracted to both men and women.

When I was a kid, the neighbors would always tease that I was gay because, to them, I was soft. I think the lack of a father figure contributed to that. I am not a Daddy's boy. Actually, none of his children are close to him. Also one of the most challenging concerns for me was what my ex-girlfriends would say about me: whether they would be grossed out or continue to accept me.

Grateful. In this world full of hatred, there's a religious sector who will embrace the difference and the people like us. Imagine if I was born in some parts of Africa where being LGBTIQ+ is considered a sin and a mental illness. I wouldn't get through it.

Aside for a SOGIE law, I think we should respect each other; accept that we are all human and that there's a colorful flag existing and rising. LGBTIQ+ individuals are humans, too, and no one should be left behind.

To be an inspiration not just for the young believers and achievers of our Church, but also for the whole country and even the world. We will use our innovative minds and colorful eyes to see the truth, and we shall make a difference.

Most of us are breadwinners, and we can't deny that we have an amazing influence in our community. My dream is this: That we may achieve equality, respect and understanding. I hope someday the fear among people, even our own families, would stop. I believe that God did not create anything wrong. It's our minds that err, that's why they find it hard to accept people like LGBTIQ+ individuals. 🌈

JOY CHEL JAN D. INFANTE

24, transgender woman

Parish of the Hly Rosary, Iloilo City / Diocese of Iloilo

When I was in grade school, I already knew that I was different. The way I acted and considered things really differed from the body that I was in. I wore the boy's uniform but acted like a girl. All my playmates were girls. I was very uncomfortable to be surrounded by guys.

I've faced a lot of circumstances as an LGBTIQ+ member, especially in our community. When I was little, they would tease me for the way I acted, dressed and considered things in my own little way. As of now, I can say that I'm still experiencing discrimination, especially when people first see me and find out that I am a transgender woman.

Relief and, at the same time, joy. Not all LGBTIQ+ members have the chance to express themselves inside the Church. It's kind of heartwarming knowing that there is someone and there are some sectors that are fighting for our rights.

Accept us, consider us and appreciate us. If only people did these three things, members of the LGBTIQ+ community can have a better life.

To the LGBTIQ+ members of IFI, I hope and pray that God will bless you with good health and greater knowledge. May your faith and trust remain while serving the Church and God Almighty. Continue doing everything for the betterment of IFI.

To the LGBTIQ+ individuals all over the Philippines, always have the heart to understand; be patient and considerate. Even if they do not give us respect, we must still give it to them. Continue what you are doing when you know it is right. Always be proud of who you are, and always be proud to wave that rainbow flag. You are unique, you are different, and you deserve to live the life that you want. 🌈

26, homosexual man

RUDY LABITA

Pro-Cathedral of Bulua / Diocese of Cagayan de Oro

At 10, I started participating in Church activities. Since then, my routine was home, school and Church. I grew up meek, not talking unless it was my turn or something triggered me. People found me demure and would address me as *dai*. Those made me anxious so I distanced myself from Church. I had a childhood sweetheart, an official girlfriend, a trophy girlfriend and many flings. Late in 2012, a close relative underwent surgery, and we had to stay in the hospital for almost a month. There, I met doctors, nurses and other people. As days went by, I noticed that I'd wake up every morning to the voice and scent of our patient's surgeon who checked on us daily. That was my secret for weeks, until I found the courage to tell a cousin about my crush and my being gay. I remember the date: Nov. 1, 2012. My cousin nodded and told me that being gay was fine. Soon, I got interested in women's magazines and then had boyfriends.

It's a sad truth that my family invalidates my capability to love someone in the same sex with out-of-context verses and by saying that nothing will happen to me if this is how I'll settle. I experience invalidation from people around, too. With the things I do and create, some would appreciate me in a way that doesn't really uplift me: "*Maganda talaga kasi bakla ang gumawa niyan.*" That's really all they say sometimes.

That glimpse of the rainbow I saw in me became brighter. It could be a step for the faithful and for us to embrace together God's diversity. With it, we can thoroughly comprehend how liberating our God is within ourselves and towards the society we long to see.

I always say this: a protracted education that tackles the struggle of the sector and what we call for. Through this, everyone would understand our demands, and would be encouraged to join the call for equal rights and equal opportunities for all.

Christ has taught us to love one another. May IFI congregations not see us as different from those the Lord has commanded them to love. May the Church connect its history of being freed from colonization and oppression with the struggle of the LGBTIQ+ sector so that the Church would understand our holistic demand against unjust systems.

As we advance our people's struggle, may we not forget that our work should not stop in our own sector. In this bourgeois struggle, we all want freedom from tyranny and oppression. As we engage in our own fight, may we also be one with the peasants, the working class and the indigenous peoples. The world is so wide; let us all join the people's struggle and decorate society with our raised clenched fists! 🌈

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OUTRAGE



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The Ramento Project for Rights Defenders is a Church-based human rights program operated by the Iglesia Filipina Independiente for the cause of human rights, especially of human rights defenders. Its human rights commitments are based on Christian principles and on universal and national human rights instruments. RPRD observes the standards and processes of the rights-based approach.