

What World Meeting of Families 2018 Reveals the LGBTQI Catholic Movement

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Background

Our family recently traveled to Dublin, Ireland for the 2018 World Meeting of Families (WMF). As far as we know, my wife, our two adopted teenage children and I were the only openly LGBTQI family registered for this Vatican event. We were anxious about attending, because it was clear that LGBTQI families' role in the Church would be a hot button issue in Dublin; our unease was heightened when we realized we'd be each other's only support.

A series of controversies had marked the months leading up to the event. Despite at least two Irish bishops expressing hope that the WMF2018 would be welcoming for same-sex couples, LGBTQI-inclusive images and comments were deleted after appearing in early versions of WMF2018 promotional materials. The Global Network of Rainbow Catholics and We Are Church Ireland were denied a booth in the WMF Exhibit Hall. James Martin, SJ's invitation to talk on how parishes could be more LGBTQI inclusive was intensely protested and a petition calling for its cancellation was circulated widely.



The WMF Experience

As the WMF began, we noticed that the tone at various workshops, plenaries, and prayer sessions of WMF2018 was different than from that used three years earlier at the WMF in Philadelphia. In Philadelphia, language such as "same-sex attraction disorder," "unnatural relationships" or "so-called same-sex marriage" was used; the message at this year's WMF was more subtle: the permanent, exclusive marriage of one man and one woman and the children who were the fruits of their self-giving love was *the way* God's plan for humanity was fulfilled. The oft-repeated assertion that God's plan for marriage involved one man, one woman, and children was a hallmark of this year's programming.

There was a sometimes explicit, often unspoken, corollary to the insistence on the exclusive sanctity of heterosexual, permanent, monogamous marriage used during 2018's WMF: any family who differs from the church's standard is deficient in wholeness and holiness. While the central tenets of the theology of the family remained the same when compared to 2015's WMF, they were presented in more measured and positive language. Language about adoption, for example--which in 2015 was denigrated as state-sponsored theft of children from legitimate parents--was more moderate in this year's conference, but Francis' admonishment that "it is the natural right of all children to have a mother and a father" was part of every comment about adoption.

Other noticeable differences between 2015 WMF in Philadelphia, and this year's WMF—some of which may have resulted from challenges posed by Equally Blessed pilgrims at 2015's WMF-- included:

- The opportunity to address questions or comments to speakers or to audience members. This was eliminated in Dublin. There were no audience microphones, and following the formal presentation, if there were questions, they were asked of the speaker or panelists by the session moderator. It was clear that every talk was completely scripted, and that even the follow up questions (and often the responses) had been planned and vetted.
- The lack of a centralized gathering place. In Philadelphia, WMF attendees could opt to purchase a group lunch package and eat in a common space where they were able to communicate and building bonds with other attendees from all over the world. In Dublin, it was much more difficult to have meaningful conversation with other attendees.
- Media interest in LGBTQI issues was not as intense as in 2015. The focus was on the impact of growing revelations of clergy sexual abuse and cover-up, as it should be.

In sum, the atmosphere and structure of WMF2018 reflected a church hierarchy clinging tightly to the little control it still has, terrified of challenge or even engagement, and interested only in top-down communication. It was truly an event where the people had no voice.

LGBTQI-Specific Programming Surrounding WMF

There wasn't a whole lot on the official WMF agenda about LGBTQI people, but there were many events happening in the time and space surrounding the "official" meeting. Highlights include:



- The Wijngaards Institute, an international Catholic think tank based in London, announcing the launch of a major study that will combine academic analysis and personal testimonials of LGBTQI people in examining the theological claim that being LGBTQI is "objectively disordered." Former Irish President and canon lawyer Mary McAleese led the news conference and focused on the tremendous harm done to children and youth, who are among those most vulnerable to the impact of such teachings. I was asked to talk about what it meant to have Catholic Charities reject Becky and me as foster or adoptive parents without ever having met us, as well as why we were attending WMF.
- A panel event attended by over one hundred people (so large an overflow room carried the Facebook Live broadcast of the panel), that was held immediately following the Wijngaards press conference. The session was entitled "Voices Pope Francis Will Not Hear," and included

testimonies on marginalization of women; the abuse scandal; the vilification of LGBT Catholics; the ongoing silencing of priests; the harm caused by the papal ban on contraception and the aftermath of the 8th amendment abortion debate in Ireland.

- A kick-off for an initiative called [Equal Future](#), supported by DignityUSA, which is urging LGBT youth from around the globe to tell their stories in advance of this October's Vatican Synod on Youth.
- A surprise addition to the WMF program: a presentation titled "Farm Street Parish, Westminster LGBT Pastoral Initiative." At the very last minute, apparently in response to widespread criticism that there were no openly LGBTQI voices on the agenda, members of a London parish were told they could present a session IF they could get themselves to Dublin (self-funded) and develop an acceptable presentation. The session did not appear in the program book handed out to participants and was listed only on the WMF website. There were no announcements made to inform people of this additional session. And just prior to the start time, the session's room was switched. Consequently, only about two dozen people attended the presentation.
- James Martin, SJ speaking to over a thousand attendees, with more turned away at the door, in a workshop titled "[Showing Respect and Welcome in our Parishes for 'LGBT' People and their Families.](#)" The workshop gave solid, practical advice for those in leadership in a parish setting in terms of good steps they could take to improve pastoral care. There were problems with Martin's presentation, however, including: (1) LGBT people being othered by being consistently referred to as "they;" (2) Martin's claim that the spiritual life of LGBT Catholics and families is dependent on the quality of the local welcome (since we know the harm official teachings of the universal church causes, as well as the harmful rhetoric and leadership that play a tremendous role in suppressing our human rights of LGBTQI people around the world); and (3) Martin's failure to address the inequity caused by same-sex couples' inability to access the sacrament of marriage in their parish, or transgender peoples' longing to be baptized with names that reflect their identities, or of LGBTQI advocates being refused the Eucharist.
- Members of Dublin's two [LGBTQI choirs coming together for a brief performance](#) just outside the gates of the WMF venue. They wore shirts that proclaimed, "Hear Our Voices" under a rainbow. The group's powerful renditions of "Something Inside so Strong" and "We are Family" were at times nearly drowned out by the click of media photographers and supportive honks from passing drivers.





- A colorful witness on the historic Ha’Penny Bridge organized by supporters of clergy sexual abuse survivors, women’s ordination, and LGBTQI equality. Demonstration participants wore blue ribbons signifying calls for justice for abuse victims and accountability for those who covered up the abuse were tied onto the bridge’s columns. Others carried purple and rainbow umbrellas, which alternated along the length of the bridge. The witness was covered in the media and received gratitude from members of the public passing by.

- LGBTQI visibility represented by rainbow and transgender flags flying from many storefronts and private homes in Dublin. Dublin’s Wax Museum made a point of showing its support for the LGBTQI community by driving a large vehicle adorned with a wax model of the Pope, who was surrounded by rainbow flags, featuring a sign that read “The Pope Mobile becomes the Hope Mobile.”

Implications for DignityUSA’s Work

DignityUSA knows we need to continue to press for LGBTQI Catholics and our families to have visibility and voice within the official church. We need to do this in coalition and solidarity with our kin from other nations; this is crucial in ensuring that LGBTQI equality is seen as a global issue for a global church. The issues of pastoral care, sacramental equity, gender justice, and human rights—including health care, education, employment, civil rights, and freedom from violence and criminal prosecution—must be addressed in both the ecclesial and civil realms.



We must also continue to remember and highlight the distinction between church leadership and Catholics in general. Even in what was seen by many to be a conservative crowd, our presence and messages were overwhelmingly embraced and affirmed. This is a success to be celebrated, and a

hopeful indicator. Furthermore, the level of interest from media, advocacy groups, politicians, and the public in LGBTQI faith issues remains very strong.

DignityUSA recognizes that many who have public platforms do not yet understand the gulf between the church and its leadership on LGBTQI issues. The long effort by DignityUSA and others to explain and highlight this gulf was an important factor in helping to achieve marriage equality as well as other civil rights protections in the United States. It is a strategy that we will need to continue to call upon at home to preserve and expand those rights, and one with great potential in other nations.

Links to media coverage of DignityUSA's presence at WMF:

- NET TV (Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn)
<https://netny.tv/episodes/currents/lgbt-family-shares-hopes-for-world-meeting-of-families/>
- Religion News Service (RNS)
<https://religionnews.com/2018/08/24/at-world-meeting-of-families-catholic-leaders-address-sex-abuse-scandal-lgbt-inclusion/>
- National Catholic Reporter
<https://www.ncronline.org/news/world/ahead-world-meeting-families-event-amplifies-excluded-voices>
<https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/grace-margins/chasing-rainbows-world-meeting-families>
- Irish Times
<https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/mcaleese-backs-study-that-confronts-vaticans-treatment-of-gay-catholics-37229641.html>