

MARTIN, JAMES: *Building a Bridge: How the Catholic Church and the LGBT Community Can Enter into a Relationship of Respect, Compassion, and Sensitivity*, San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2017. – 150p.

In: *Marriage, Families & Spirituality* 25/2 (2019), p. 263-265

The Jesuit James Martin's intention in writing this essay with the eloquent title "Building a Bridge" is to make a contribution to overcoming the gulf between the institutional Catholic Church and the LGBT community. In view of the attack in Orlando, Florida, in which a man killed forty-nine persons and wounded fifty-three others in a night club that was well known to the LGBT community, and in view of experiences of discrimination or of disproportionately higher rates of suicide among young people, Martin asks what it ought to mean to treat persons from the LGBT community with "respect, compassion, and sensitivity." This is what nr. 2358 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church stipulates, but it is often not noticeable in the Church. Besides this, he wishes to employ meditations on biblical texts to encourage people to reflect on their own sexual identity and also to invite people to meditate and discover Christian spiritual resources for self-acceptance in the relationship to Christ. One central pastoral goal here is "letting them know that they are beloved children of God" (27). Martin's words draw on his many years of experience of pastoral work with the LGBT community. His essay is based on the hope that an encounter between the LGBT community and the institutional Church is possible – as are reconciliation and fellowship. He wants the work of building this bridge and setting out on it to be understood explicitly as a spiritual path: "we are accompanied by God, the reconciler of all men and women as well as the architect, the builder, and the foundation of that bridge" (76).

The essay has four parts. First of all ("Why I'm Writing", 1–13), Martin explains the motivation for his essay. He has in mind LGBT Catholics' varied experiences of discrimination, hurt, and exclusion in their own Church ("unwelcomed, excluded, and insulted", 4), or else the LGBT persons who themselves carry out a ministry in the Church, for example, as priests or religious. Martin focuses explicitly on the institutional Church with its language and praxis. His aim is to build a bridge between the LGBT community and the institutional Church, in order to make possible mutual understanding and respect. His book wishes to provide a starting point and an "occasion for reflection and conversation" (13) in this regard.

Martin discusses in the second part ("A Two-Way Bridge", 15–76) what mutual "respect, compassion, and sensitivity" can mean. He interprets the bridge metaphor as follows: both sides, the LGBT community and the institutional Church, are to be treated with respect, empathy, and tact. Looking at the LGBT community, Martin understands "respect" to mean that one acknowledges that the LGBT community exists as a matter of fact, and that people call themselves as they themselves wish. But respect also signifies appreciating them in their special abilities and gifts, both as individuals and as a community: here, Martin thinks especially of "compassion", patience or "perseverance", and "forgiveness" (26). He argues that it is precisely a lack of concrete encounters and experiences that prevent them from being genuinely met with respect, understanding, and empathy (31). Compassion implies sharing common experiences, showing empathy, and also sharing in suffering. It also means acting in solidarity and raising one's voice when discrimination, violence, and injustice take place – something that Martin often fails to see in the institutional Church. Compassion also includes an attentive and sympathetic listening that shares in solidarity both distresses and concerns, and joys, vitality, and creativity. In that case, empathy is an expression of an esteem that is due to every person as a human being and the image of God. Finally, Martin interprets tact in relation to LGBT persons to mean understanding the experience, the feelings, and the perspectives of other persons, and being aware of these (40). This happens only through encounter and accompaniment, when one does not regard people

as members of one particular societal group, but rather acknowledges and encounters the individual as a person in their own right. Martin writes that this dimension of fellowship, encounters, and friendship makes it possible for something of the Spirit of Jesus to be felt and experienced in the interpersonal meeting, as he emphasizes with a reference to Pope Francis (38).

Looking at the other side of the bridge, Martin asks what “respect, compassion, and sensitivity” can mean for LGBT Catholics in their dealings with the Catholic Church and its ministers. He is fully aware here that this perspective is highly demanding and can sometimes make excessive demands of those concerned. This is why he wants his reflections to be understood rather as an invitation and a meditation that is oriented to the ethos of Christian love: “LGBT Catholics are Christians, and those virtues express Christian love. Those virtues help to build up the entire community” (49). This can be seen when LGBT Catholics, in what they say and do, display a fundamental respect to the office bearers, both as a part of the Church with its long tradition and as human persons. By doing so, one interrupts the vicious circle of disesteem and disrespect (52). According to Martin, compassion is expressed when the office bearers are seen in their humanity, in the complexity of their life situations, and with the burden of their office (61). Sensitivity could then also mean being vigilant about who speaks, and how one speaks, but also paying heed to the teaching authority with which office bearers speak, and what status pronouncements of the magisterium have, so that one can make the appropriate theological and ecclesiological differentiations here (67f.). Martin also underlines the global dimension of Church teaching, when he points out that for many countries and cultures, Pope Francis’s affirmation in *Amoris laetitia* that all human beings – and naturally, also LGBT persons – are to be treated with respect is, even today, a prophetic statement (70–72).

In the third part (“Biblical Passages for Reflection and Meditation”, 79–139), Martin proposes suitable passages from scripture and explains how these can be reflected and meditated upon in a manner that follows the Ignatian way of reading the Bible, either alone or together with others. Every biblical text is preceded by a short introduction and followed by suggestions for reflection or a consolidation of what one has read. Martin closes with “A Prayer for When I Feel Rejected” (143–147) for persons in the LGBT community who feel hurt, excluded, disrespected, or discriminated.

Martin’s essay has attracted worldwide attention, and it is the object of controversial discussion within the Church. It is explosive in church-political terms, it is courageous in its solidarity, and it has solid spiritual foundations. Martin’s endeavor to construct the bridge from both sides, to make people’s experiences visible, and to put balanced words to these experiences without condemning or polarizing, and to plead for mutual respect, compassion, and sensitivity, can be liberating. It can also irritate or provoke contradiction, depending on one’s background. But precisely in this way, it can inspire an honest and intense reflection and meditation in the Church. Martin understands his reflections as a contribution to the discussion that has a spiritual foundation and is ethically sensitized and written in solidarity. It is meant as a pastoral encouragement in view of the experience of suffering and disesteem. His intention is not to present an academic theological monograph; instead, he asks for reflection on a coherent spirituality, preaching, and praxis in the Catholic Church. No one who wants to study the theme of LGBT persons and the Catholic Church with sensitivity both to problems and to experience can afford to pass by this book.

*Diese Buchbesprechung ist auch in deutscher Sprache auf unserer website [www.intams.org](http://www.intams.org) verfügbar.*

*Jochen Sautermeister, Bonn*