

Christine: My story

Pronouns: she/her/hers

I have been very blessed and fortunate.

For as long as I could remember, since about the age of 3 or 4, I felt different. As a child, I would go to bed every night praying I would wake up a girl (a story commonly echoed by many transgender people). Growing up in the 60s and 70s meant the technology to easily “connect” to others had not yet been invented. I felt alone.

I enjoyed both boy and girl games and toys. Through my adolescent and teen years, I played sports, and privately wore mom’s clothes when alone. As a teen, my only exposure to the transgender world was hearing about tennis player Rene Richard’s sex change. I could only dream.

My college and early professional life mixed in dating, trying to fit into the traditional male role, trying to convince myself that my female longings did not really exist. Eventually I fell in love and married. Our marriage lasted 29 years. We have two beautiful children, a girl and boy.

My wife knew I cross-dressed for the last 15-20 years of our marriage. I’m in sales and travel often across the US, and while she was “okay with it,” it was something we stopped discussing over time as our relationship spiraled downward. Our marriage dissolved, I feel, not for trans reasons, but for the same reasons many other couples end. Ours was broken. Certainly, my frequent travel did not help.

Once we separated I needed to figure out where “I” was going. I attended a number of regional transgender conferences, and support groups both near me and across the US.

After two years of research, I still didn’t know where I was going, but knew I needed professional help to get there. In my mind it was “I can’t. I would lose my family, my friends, and my job.” After a year of therapy, it became, “I can’t not do this.”

I was also concerned about my faith. As Polish Catholics in Northeastern PA, my parents were very faithful to the Church. We attended Sunday and Holy Day masses, and other church activities as a family, and I often accompanied my father to special evening services. My wife, children, and I followed a similar path.

One late Saturday afternoon, I felt it was time to speak to a priest, at confession. I obviously knew what our Church taught with respect to being gay. At that point however, the Church was still silent regarding transgender folk. The Church was still figuring us out. I also knew that only my “outside” was changing. Everything else, my heart, my mind, my soul, and my faith remained unchanged.

I first said my confession to our associate pastor, then said, “Father, now I have something a little more challenging to discuss.” The conversation immediately reverted to sex. I said, “Excuse me, Father, this has nothing at all to do with sex, this has to do with who I am. You can throw me out if you want,” I said, “but if you do, I’m coming back. This Is My Church.” “No, no,” Father said, “we’re not going to do that.” After a little more discussion, he said, “Let’s together say a prayer to our Blessed Mother to help guide you on your journey.” I was crying as I left confession.

About a month later, I returned to confession again, this time to our Monsignor, whose first words were “God loves everyone.” I cried again.

It took my children, then 26 and 14, about a year to accept. Telling Mom however, was the most difficult. At 88, she did not understand what being transgender meant. One of her first questions to me was, “Did you talk to the priest?”

My employer and my customers have been wonderful and accepting. In 2016, I had gender confirming surgery. My children understood. Life began anew.

Even though I had attended the same church with my family for about 24 of our 29 years of marriage, we were a somewhat non-descript family, attending mass, educating our children, but not actively involved in Church community life. A couple of things changed that.

First, an email to the diocese began an 18-month conversation about where the diocese stood on LGBT issues. Monsignor and I also had numerous discussions about starting an LGBT Prayer Group/Ministry in our parish. After a few more months of diocesan uncertainty, Monsignor said, “Let’s just do it.” It’s been almost two years now. Our group, although small, continues to meet monthly in our Parish Center. Our Bishop is very aware of our group.

Second, about a year later, Monsignor pulled me aside after mass and asked me to become a Eucharistic Minister. More tears.

Through my involvement in our parish Ministry, I’ve become associated with other ministries and groups in Philadelphia, throughout New Jersey, Pennsylvania and New York City. I have received calls, emails, and social media messages from other

transgender Catholics, most of whom struggle with Church acceptance, some who wrestle with Church teaching, some who have left the Church, and one who unfortunately had been physically removed from her church.

I have been blessed to have met with Father Jim Martin numerous times, and was invited (along with 17 gay and lesbian Catholics, supportive clergy, and parents) to dinner with Cardinal Joseph Tobin at his residence in Newark. It was an amazing evening.

Again, I have been truly blessed and have so much to be thankful for. There is much more work to do.