



IMMACULATE HEART^{OF}MARY CATHOLIC CHURCH

A LETTER FROM THE PASTOR SEPTEMBER 30, 2018

Dear friends in the Lord,

Monsignor Henry Gracz was my pastor in Athens, Georgia, when I was a young teen. He was an inspirational figure to me then, and he remains so today at age 79. Henry's generosity of spirit has enabled him, through 53 years of priesthood, to build bridges across divisions of race, creed and gender that would require a book to describe adequately. The parish he now pastors, the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in downtown Atlanta, itself has a long history of ministering to marginalized and at-risk communities, and it continues that tradition today in its welcome of gay and lesbian Catholics.

James Martin, S.J. is a distinguished author who has also spent his priesthood building bridges. He has dedicated himself especially to bringing the Gospel message to millennials, and he has done so with great heart and skill and devotion. Last year, Father Martin wrote a book, *Building a Bridge: How the Catholic Church and the LGBT Community Can Enter into a Relationship of Respect, Compassion and Sensitivity*. Using a methodology that is fully consonant with Catholic teaching, employing Scripture and the rich pastoral heritage of the Church, Father Martin tried to demonstrate that Jesus Christ seeks to embrace our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters, and that his Church must do the same. I am delighted that James will visit Atlanta next month to continue that conversation.

Recently, campaigns have arisen on social media to vilify both Father Martin and Monsignor Gracz—to distort their work and to assassinate their characters. These campaigns must be challenged and exposed for what they are—a cancer of calumny that is spreading more and more aggressively in the Catholic Church.

The attacks on Father Martin and Monsignor Gracz in particular tap into a long-standing intolerance within the Church toward our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters, based in part on an incomplete understanding of Catholic moral teaching, but in greater part, I think, on an inchoate, but powerful, fear. The understandable rage in response to the sexual abuse of children by priests across the decades has led some to scapegoat all gay people or all gay priests, which is lamentable and demonstrably wrong. But the result is that the complex issues of sexual orientation and its discernment in the life of the individual are being dismissed and ridiculed, and pejorative language and insults are taking their place.

These attacks are disappointing when they happen in the world at large. But when words of judgment and intolerance arise within the Church—from disciples of the Messiah who was demonized, and ultimately crucified, for his friendship with sinners and the marginalized—it is shameful.

Please join me in praying that Monsignor Gracz, Father Martin and all who engage in this important dialogue in the Church will be blessed abundantly for their loving labors.

Your brother in Christ's word and work,