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BOOK REVIEW

Building a Bridge: How the Catholic Church and the LGBT Community Can Enter into a Relationship of Respect, Compassion, and Sensitivity

James Martin, S.J.

New York: HarperONE (2018)

208 pages; \$14.99 USD (paperback)

ISBN 978-0062837530

<https://www.harpercollins.com/9780062837530/building-a-bridge/>

Reviewed by Lalo Moreno

The book *Building A Bridge*, by Father James Martin, S.J. is a journey of discernment and healing, necessary for communities to become whole again. There have been many harms between the Catholic Church and the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) community. Harms, that without reflection, meditation, introspection, and humility, will not truly be healed. This book aims to provide a guide to facilitating healing and accountability between the church and the LGBT community. Throughout the book, readers are called to engage the content with an open mind. Through this work, we can all step a bit closer to walking in the path of Christ, as we seek to approach our communities on the margins, with love, respect, sensitivity, and compassion. *Building a Bridge* calls us all to think about how we can share in the beautiful work of increasing understanding between LGBT individuals and the Catholic faith.

The book begins by addressing the church as an institution and encourages communities to find ways of building together, starting with an awareness of how we have harmed one another. Father Martin writes with critical awareness, resulting in very thoughtful word choices throughout the book. This level of attention and sensitivity not only serves as a model for those who read, but as a reflection of what Father Martin has learned throughout his time in ministry to the LGBT community.

Throughout his experiences he has spoken with, listened to, and shared stories with many members of the LGBT community, particularly those who identify as Catholic. Regardless of the backlash he has received from some communities, Father Martin persists in his work of normalizing and including the narratives and lived experiences of LGBT Catholics in his speaking and written work. Direct stories and personal narratives are included throughout the book and relate back to scriptural passages, which serve as a form of connection and understanding. Father Martin conveys the stories of LGBT individuals and their families, further engaging in a process that does not impose narratives but allows LGBT community members to speak for themselves. Thus, the book hosts a platform of narratives, which are often left unheard or even silenced otherwise.

An initial impression of the book is that it is an interactive addressment of faith intersecting with sexual orientation and gender identity in a holistic approach. Father Martin does not attempt to impose beliefs or change minds; he simply reiterates that in order to build a fundamental bridge of understanding between two communities we must begin with open hearts, minds, and commonalities. In the book, he focuses on ways in which we can build together, opting to move backward from a divided space. He challenges the reader to move away from their current positionality, and does so in a way that is a gentle invitation to think about how we, as individuals, can better support one another in this journey. The book in its entirety serves as a workbook, one in which the reader can actively participate in the process of reflection and healing.

Building a Bridge was written in a formulaic way in order to begin the reflection process. Many pertinent topics and points of awareness are reiterated throughout the book, which truly allows the reader to engage with the words on the page and understand how they are impacted by them. The book also focuses on the historical, biblical, and global contexts of the relationship between these two communities. These sections of the book teach readers about the positionality of the church as an institution, thus providing readers a greater understanding of the inner workings of the church.

Father Martin also does a great job of outlining common language. There is an awareness that certain language can be viewed as harmful, depending on one's lived experience. For example, the word 'conversion' is given a thorough definition. Had it been left unexplained, this word could be a breaking point for a reader, particularly if viewed it in the context of the harmful therapeutic practice of 'conversion therapy.' However, due to Father Martin's awareness of

the potential impact, he brought up the definition and context in which he was utilizing the word. His use of the word is given in the context of *metanoia*, meaning transforming one's heart and mind. This is a pertinent distinction in the book that conversion—*metanoia*—asks everyone to work to transform their mind and heart. The use of contextualization serves as a model for how we can be more sensitive to one another, mindful of how our words may impact people adversely. This book is written in such a thoughtful way that it serves as a lesson itself about how to engage in the conversation.

A particularly moving section of the book was the discussion of various gifts each individual LGBT person could bring to the church. Father Martin calls upon the reader to consider the ways in which the lives and experiences of LGBT people translate to gifts, worthy of the church's respect. In fact, his impactful and clear argument places the onus of healing on the church. That although this is a two-way bridge, the responsibility to begin repairing harm is placed upon the institution, which has made some LGBT community members feel marginalized, and not the other way around. The church, as an institution, is gently called to practice humility in the face of harms done to the LGBT community. In a similar way, the book also addresses the need for the LGBT community to be more accountable to the reception of that humility and attempt to grow as well. Father Martin outlines this perfectly in the latter half of the book, as he holds a space for both communities to be accountable to treating each other with respect, sensitivity, and compassion.

One area the book could have been more mindfully conveyed, would be the utilization of gender inclusive pronouns. There are many attempts in the book to be inclusive of all genders; however, the consistency leaves a bit to be desired. In regards to sexual orientation, in some components of the book, individuals who identify as bisexual were left out of the questions or reflection prompts unless associated with the larger LGBT umbrella. Furthermore, the book could have extended more awareness to the transgender community. It is imperative to include these communities as visibility is already an issue, thus more specific inclusion would be helpful. There was a missed opportunity on how the section on "calling a group what it asks to be called" did not explicitly extend to the use of pronouns. Nor did this section include the awareness of transgender individuals' utilization of gender markers or selected names, which felt like a missed opportunity to address the need for people to address each other respectfully. Additionally, some components of how the LGBT community can be more respectful, sensitive, and compassionate to the church were difficult to hear and process. Although it was challenging

to address, there are many facets of those pages that can be useful reminders that the LGBT community members must also engage in this process for any bridge to be built.

Overall, the book itself is beautifully written and every word reads off the page with intentionality and humility. Refreshingly, Father James Martin addresses the ways in which he is unaware of certain components of the LGBT community. This book is one of the best faith-based works that truly attempts to respect the LGBT community. *Building a Bridge* aptly names the community for who we are and provides gentle reminders of how we can work together to build a holistic community. The writing pattern is meditative, a process of becoming, wherein at the end of reading it, the reader can discover the parts of the self which need more awareness, education, or reflection. I highly recommend this book to anyone of faith who is seeking to better understand how to bridge the divide. Likewise, this book is excellent for those who are not of faith, but would like to engage in the self-discovery process, and for my fellow spiritual vagabonds, who are seeking a work of light, love, and healing as we process our journey of faith.

Lalo Moreno began their role as Director of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Student Services office and Intercultural Initiatives in July of 2018. Lalo has worked extensively within the LGBT community ever since graduating with their BA in Philosophy and double minor degrees in Pre-Law & Sociology at Mount St. Mary's University and completing their Masters of Educational Studies at Loyola Marymount University. They have been training and engaging LGBT youth populations in the Los Angeles area in storytelling, resonance building, leadership development, and educational attainment for the past 7 years.