

# From banishment to a blessing

Under a cloud of official disapproval for several decades, a pastoral support group for LGBT+ Catholics earned the support of the Pope on its fiftieth anniversary / **By MARK DOWD**

**1973: A YOUNG BANKER**, new to London from his native Cardiff, takes a deep breath. He puts pen to paper and drops a line to the personal ads columns of the recently founded *Gay News*: “Am I the only one? Or are there any other gay Catholics out there?”

Two weeks later, Ralph Long is forwarded 17 replies to his PO box number. He wants to arrange a gathering of kindred spirits, but his tiny bedsit is hardly a fitting venue. Thankfully, one of his correspondents offers a spacious two-bed apartment near Chapel Market in Islington. Nine of the 17 turn up for the inaugural meeting of an organisation that over the weekend of 21-22 July celebrated its fiftieth anniversary.

“At first we called ourselves the Gay Catholic Caucus, but then a few people said it sounded ‘too political,’” says Long. “Then one of the founding members, Alan Watson, mentioned the lyrics of a song.” The song was “The Impossible Dream” from the musical about Don Quixote, *Man of La Mancha*: “To dream the impossible dream, to fight the unbeatable foe/ To bear with unbearable sorrow/ To run where the brave dare not go/ This is my quest, to follow that star/ No matter how hopeless, no matter how far.”

So “Quest” it was. It was a smart move. In those early years, it was important not to frighten the horses and that meant deleting the “G” word when approaching sympathetic priests such as Fr Michael Hollings in Bayswater and Fr Ronald Salmon in Clapham. Quest ran a “tell a local priest” campaign in as many dioceses as possible. Local groups were formed up and down the UK, and a telephone helpline was established. The group slowly gained the sympathetic ear of Cardinal Basil Hume.

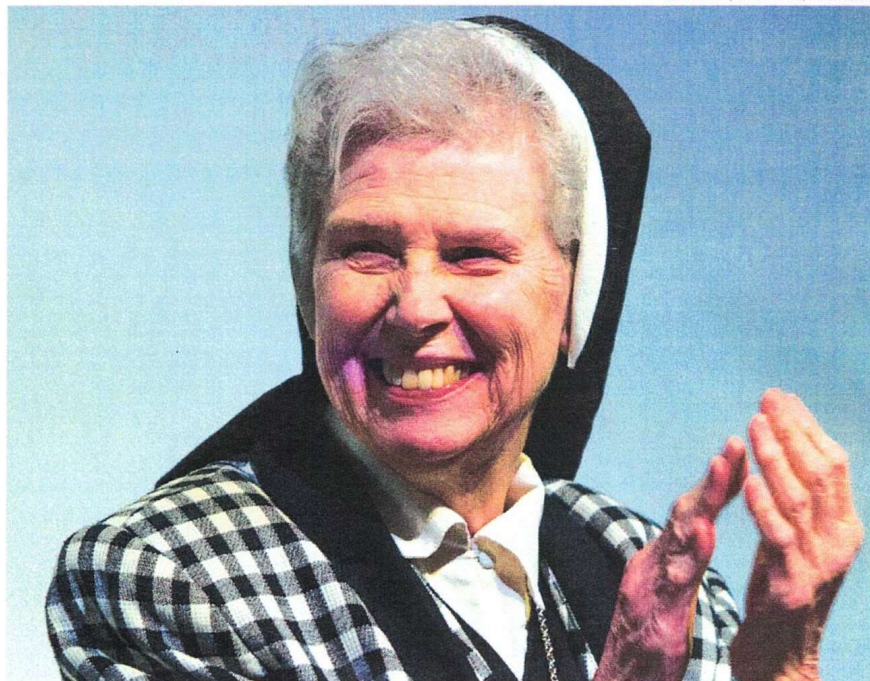


PHOTO: ALAMY/NURPHOTO SRL, MICHAL FLUDRA

In 1992, Hume thought it would be fitting to have Quest formally listed in the Catholic Directory as an “approved” body. Since the 1980s Aids had been ravaging the lives of many and Quest members were not spared.

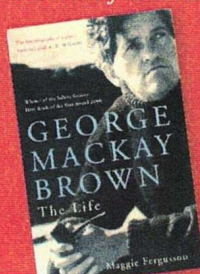
Quest leaders asked the Archbishop of Westminster why the Church’s leaders appeared to be so silent as women and men lay dying on hospital wards. Cardinal Hume later conceded that he and others should have taken a lead in combating the censorious and judgemental utterances that emanated from some Christians. As the 1990s progressed, Hume found himself caught between a rock

Sr Jeannine Gramick was the keynote speaker at this year’s Quest conference

and a hard place: between his desire for dialogue and openness with Quest, and an increasingly strident Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) in Rome led by Joseph Ratzinger.

A battle royal followed for more than four years over a handful of words in Quest’s constitution. Its founding document set as one of its goals for members, “the full expression of their homosexual natures in loving Christian relationships”. Perhaps with a flea

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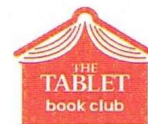
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or two in his ear from the CDF, Cardinal Hume said this phrase could be ambiguous. Did it leave the door open to sanctioning sexual acts outside marriage? Numerous letters were exchanged. The late Alan Bray, an openly gay historian and close associate of the cardinal, took on a role as mediator.

In 1998, things came to a head. Hume sent Bray to the annual Quest conference at Strawberry Hill in west London with a proposal that it amend its constitution to include an approving mention of “the need to live chaste lives” and an endorsement of church teaching on homosexuality. Given that the CDF in its infamous 1986 pastoral letter had described homosexuality as “intrinsically disordered”, many Quest members were determined to resist this demand. Delegates asked why, for example, groups for married Catholics such as the Union of Catholic Mothers, weren’t being asked to rubber stamp church teaching forbidding the use of contraception. Why were gay Catholics being singled out? A debate raged for more than six hours. The two proposed changes were rejected by 70 per cent of members.

**THE CARDINAL WAS** not impressed. He was not used to being snubbed. He decreed that Quest be removed from the Catholic Directory. What followed was, in effect, a “cold war”.

As well as providing pastoral support to LGBT+ Catholics through fellowship, retreats, pilgrimages to Walsingham, and worship opportunities in its local groups, Quest had been organising an annual conference every year since 1982, and several high-profile theologians, poets, MPs and civil rights campaigners had accepted invitations to speak. Now bishops often declined permission for their diocesan priests to attend the gatherings as chaplains. Some were even hostile to the group meeting on Catholic premises. It was 2017 before Cardinal Vincent Nichols was to encourage priests to make use of the Quest network as a resource in their ministry.

Such difficulties would not have been unfamiliar to Sister Jeannine Gramick. She had co-founded the New Ways Ministry in the United States in 1977 with Fr Robert Nugent. They had often questioned whether some statements made by the CDF on matters of sexual orientation were based on sound ethical and theological reasoning. In 1999 Gramick received a notification from the CDF that she was “permanently prohibited from any pastoral work involving homosexual persons”. After a year of prayer and discernment, she responded, “I choose not to collaborate in my own oppression by restricting a basic human right. To me this is a matter of conscience.”

Gramick transferred from the School Sisters of Notre Dame to the Sisters of Loretto. Her new congregation supported her LGBT+ ministry, despite a series of threatening letters from the Vatican. Then in December 2021, on the fiftieth anniversary of her ministry to LGBT+ Catholics, she received a handwritten note from the Pope. “You have not been afraid of ‘closeness,’” Francis wrote, “and in getting close you did it ‘feeling the pain’ and without

condemning anyone, but with the ‘tenderness’ of a sister and a mother.”

How fitting then, that the 81-year-old sister should be the keynote speaker at Quest’s historic conference this year, held at Luther King House in Manchester. “Doctrine cannot be preserved without allowing it to develop,” Gramick told the delegates, “nor can it be tied to an interpretation that is rigid and inflexible without denying the work of the Holy Spirit.” She was quoting Pope Francis’ remarks on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. For the full hour of her address, you could have heard a pin drop. But her final PowerPoint slide contained her very own “wedding feast at Cana” moment. “Pope Francis and I have exchanged a number of messages in recent years,” she said. “The latest to me said: ‘I wish you a good trip to England. I beg you to extend my greetings and my blessing to the Quest group. Tell them that I pray for them and ask them to pray for me also.’” From banishment to a papal blessing.

Quest’s founders could never have foreseen the scourge of HIV/Aids, and now the challenges surrounding gender identity, trans issues and the desperate plight of LGBT+ asylum seekers to these shores. The Church may never win back those who feel rejected by the language of “disorder”. Such language continues to alienate young Catholics who

see it as a slight on their friends and family members.

But Quest’s persistence and fidelity is a triumph of the witness of grass-roots storytelling over top-down “unchanging truths” foisted on unwilling subjects. There are now same-sex couples in every parish. Their love and publicly attested commitment is increasingly witnessed and celebrated. This is the world God has made and its flourishing demands a rethink of what we see and cherish as good in God’s incarnated world.

At the conference the Bishop of Salford, John Arnold, thanked Quest members for their work over the years and the work that lay ahead, “and for helping to try and heal the deep wound which has been there for so long in our Church”. It was apt that as he presided at the Eucharist in Manchester the Gospel of the day spoke of mustard seeds and yeast. With its 200 or so members, Quest is hardly a massive numerical force. But it has made a huge difference to thousands of people. And in what its founders would have considered an “impossible dream”, it can even say its work is blessed by the occupier of the throne of St Peter.

**Mark Dowd** was chair of Quest 2004-2009. His books include *Queer and Catholic* (Darton Longman & Todd, 2017).

## The Tablet poem

### The Door

By Kathryn Simmonds

At the knock I nearly fake it and  
pretend  
there’s no one home, but what if  
they’ve already  
caught a turn of shoulder, a  
reflection,  
then I’d be the sort of neighbour no  
one likes,  
and so I quickly shift a clod of socks  
and T-shirts  
to the washing basket balanced  
on the bottom stair, and prepare my  
face for greeting –  
please, not number 3, polished  
skirting boards,  
military tulips every spring.  
But it isn’t them.  
He stands in robes so white it almost  
hurts to look,  
his face relaxed, as if he’d just arisen  
from a beach.  
He asks, Can I come in?

At once the inside of my house falls  
through me,  
layer upon layer, room by room,  
unsorted laundry,

sloppy piles of this and that, pizza  
leaflets  
stuffed in drawers, plastic  
toys in piles of primary colour,  
and driven in the crowded sink, a  
frying pan  
its handle sticking up,  
dishwater spotted white with fat.

All the speckled surfaces, all the  
dust, and worse  
that blackish mould furring the  
bathroom pipes,  
the stuff we’ve given up on, left to  
spread.  
I glance towards his feet.  
His bare toes brush the ruin  
of camellia petals scattered on the  
mat,  
their fresh pink centres frilled with  
brown,  
fallen from the bush we never think  
to prune.

**Kathryn Simmonds’** latest poetry  
collection is *Scenes from Life on Earth*  
(Salt, 2022)