

# As Church Shifts, a Cardinal Welcomes Gays; They Embrace a ‘Miracle’

By [SHARON OTTERMAN](#) JUNE 13, 2017



*The Rev. Francis Gargani during a Mass last month that welcomed gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Catholics at the Cathedral Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Newark. Credit Bryan Anselm for The New York Times*

**NEWARK —** The word “pilgrimage” usually evokes visions of far-off, exotic places, but for some 100 gay and lesbian Catholics and their families, a pilgrimage to the Cathedral Basilica of the Sacred Heart here on a recent Sunday was more like a homecoming.

The doors to the cathedral were opened to them, and they were welcomed personally by the leader of the Archdiocese of Newark, [Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin](#). They were seated on folding chairs at the cathedral’s center, in front of the altar in the towering sanctuary, under the blue-tinted glow of stained glass.

“I am Joseph, your brother,” Cardinal Tobin told the group, which included lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Catholics from around New York and the five dioceses in New Jersey. “I am your brother, as a disciple of Jesus. I am your brother, as a sinner who finds mercy with the Lord.”

The welcoming of a group of openly gay people to Mass by a leader of Cardinal Tobin’s standing in the [Roman Catholic Church](#) in this country would have been unthinkable even five years ago. But Cardinal Tobin, whom Pope Francis appointed to Newark last year, is among a small but growing group of bishops changing how the American church relates to its gay members. They are seeking to be more inclusive and signaling to subordinate priests that they should do the same.

Inside the Newark cathedral. Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin's welcome to Mass was particularly powerful for those there from his own diocese, because his predecessor had emphasized the immorality of homosexuality during his tenure.



*Cardinal Tobin greeting parishioners before Mass. He is among a small but growing group of bishops changing how the American church relates to its gay members. Credit Bryan Anselm for The New York Times*

“The word I use is ‘welcome,’” Cardinal Tobin said in an interview just before the Mass last month. “These are people that have not felt welcome in other places. My prayer for them is that they do. Today in the Catholic Church, we read a passage that says you have to be able to give a reason for your hope. And I’m praying that this pilgrimage for them, and really for the whole church, is a reason for hope.”

Four years ago, Pope Francis set the Catholic world aflame with his comment about gay priests seeking the Lord: “[Who am I to judge?](#)” But it was unclear how his words would affect Catholics seeking acceptance in the pews.

After all, the church teaches in its catechism that homosexual acts are “[intrinsically disordered](#).” Men who “present deep-seated homosexual tendencies or support the so-called gay culture” are [not to become priests](#), according to Vatican instructions [renewed in 2016](#). Catholic bishops in America have strongly opposed [same-sex marriage](#). More than 100 employees of Catholic institutions across the nation have [lost their posts](#) in the past three years for being gay or for marrying a same-sex spouse, according to Marianne Duddy-Burke, executive director of [DignityUSA](#), an organization of Catholics that advocates equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

But gestures like Cardinal Tobin’s are evidence that Pope Francis’ words are having an impact. Bishops now have latitude to focus on the more inclusive parts of the church’s [catechism](#) on homosexuals, such as the call to accept them with “respect, compassion and sensitivity.” They can follow the principle of [accompaniment](#), meaning they can meet people where they are spiritually and build relationships that help them deepen their faith.

**“It’s the beginning of a dialogue,” said Francis DeBernardo, the executive director New Ways Ministry, a group that ministers to and is an advocate for gay Catholics. “The church leadership, for the past 40 years, has just been so silent, and unwilling to dialogue, and unwilling to pray with L.G.B.T. Catholics that, even though this isn’t the ultimate step, it’s a first step,” he said of Cardinal Tobin’s welcome.**

**Some church conservatives were wary, however. The problem, they said, was not the idea of welcoming — after all, Jesus welcomed all — but that the public embrace of such a group could be interpreted as the church’s acceptance of a homosexual lifestyle, which church teaching bans.**

**“Everyone is welcome in the church, but no one is accepted as they are,” said the Rev. Robert Gahl, a professor of ethics at Opus Dei’s Pontifical University of the Holy Cross in Rome. “While I am delighted that they went to Mass in the cathedral, I hope that Cardinal Tobin challenged them, as all good shepherds should, to live according to the teachings of Jesus.”**

**Cardinal Tobin, in response, said in an interview last week that to combine his welcome with a criticism would not have been a full welcome at all.**

**“That sounds a little backhanded to me,” he said. “It was appropriate to welcome people to come and pray and call them who they were. And later on, we can talk.”**

**Showing just how sensitive the simple act of welcome could be, he said that after the Mass he had received a fair amount of visceral hate mail from fellow Catholics. Someone was even organizing a letter-writing campaign to call on other bishops to correct him.**

**“And there’s a lot to correct in me, without a doubt,” Cardinal Tobin said. “But not for welcoming people. No.”**

**Individual parishes across the country have for decades had ministries to gay and lesbian Catholics. But more traditional forces prevailed among the church hierarchy, guided by a [1986 Vatican letter](#) written by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the future Pope Benedict, that warned against any acceptance of homosexuality.**

**Gay Catholics became among the most marginalized groups in the church. After the nightclub shooting in Orlando, Fla., last summer, for example, only a handful of American bishops made public statements of support for the gay and lesbian community that had been targeted.**

**The Rev. James Martin, a Jesuit priest and author, said he found the bishops’ silence revelatory. He has written a book calling for small steps forward that was to be released on Tuesday, “Building a Bridge: How the Catholic Church and the L.G.B.T. Community Can Enter Into a Relationship of Respect, Compassion and Sensitivity.”**



*Ed Poliandro, who attended the Mass, said: "It was a miracle to have church leaders say, 'You are welcome; you belong.' And I felt, after a lifetime of struggle, that we are home." Credit Bryan Anselm for The New York Times*

In it, he calls on church leaders to show respect by using terms like "gay" and "L.G.B.T.," instead of phrases like "afflicted with same-sex attraction." He also argues that to expect a sinless lifestyle from gay Catholics, but not from any other group, is a form of "unjust discrimination" and that gay people should not be fired for marrying a same-sex spouse.

"Pretty much everyone's lifestyle is sinful," Father Martin said. "Unless the Blessed Mother shows up in the communion line, there is no one sinless in our church."

Across the country, there have been recent glimmers of openness that would not have been possible under previous popes, Mr. DeBernardo said.

The diocese of Jefferson City, Mo., for example, last month said [it would permit](#) transgender students in its Catholic schools. In October, Bishop Robert McElroy of San Diego held a diocesan synod on the family that called for improved ministry toward gay and lesbian Catholics. At a New Ways Ministry national conference in April, Bishop John Stowe of Lexington, Ky., said he admired and respected lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people who remained steadfast to the church even though the church had not always been as welcoming.

Both Cardinal Tobin and Cardinal Kevin Farrell, the prefect of the Vatican's dicastery for laity, family and life who was appointed by Francis, wrote positive blurbs for Father Martin's book. Cardinal Farrell, who previously was the bishop of Dallas, wrote that he thought it would "help L.G.B.T. Catholics feel more at home in what is, after all, their church."

But Cardinal Tobin's welcome to Mass on May 21 has been the most significant of such recent gestures, because of the symbolism of a cardinal welcoming a group of gay Catholics, some of whom were married to same-sex spouses, to participate in the Sacrament of Holy Communion at the center of a cathedral, no questions asked.



The “[L.G.B.T. pilgrimage](#)” was organized by gay ministries within the [Church of the Sacred Heart](#) in South Plainfield, N.J., and the [Church of the Precious Blood](#) in Monmouth Beach, N.J. It stemmed from a conversation between David Harvie, of the South Plainfield parish group, and the Rev. Francis Gargani, a Brooklyn priest who, like Cardinal Tobin, belongs to the Redemptorist order, and took the idea to him.

Though Cardinal Tobin left soon after greeting the Mass attendees, citing a previous engagement, eight priests concelebrated it with Father Gargani. The group was also welcomed by the rector of the cathedral, Bishop Manuel Cruz, who told them that the cathedral doors were always open to them “because we are children of God and our identity is that we all belong to him.”

Many of those in attendance were moved to tears.

“It felt like a miracle,” Ed Poliandro, a member of St. Francis Xavier Parish in Manhattan and a clinical social worker. “It was a miracle to have church leaders say, ‘You are welcome; you belong.’ And I felt, after a lifetime of struggle, that we are home.”



*Some of the parishioners who attended the Mass gathered for dinner afterward. Credit Bryan Anselm for The New York Times*

Cardinal Tobin’s predecessor in Newark, [Archbishop John J. Myers](#), emphasized the immorality of homosexuality during his tenure, supporting, for example, the 2016 dismissal of a dean of a Catholic high school in Paramus, N.J., for marrying her lesbian partner. So Cardinal Tobin’s welcome to Mass was particularly powerful for those there from his own diocese.

“He brought Francis to us,” said Thomas M. Smith, 66, a deacon who serves the deaf community at the Newark cathedral. “I’ve been waiting 25 years for this. I’m a deacon in the church and I’ve had to be careful. And afraid.”

He teared up, remembering how his parents had died thinking he would go to hell if he found someone to love. “This is amazing to me,” he said.