

## **There is No Us and Them**

Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

US Congress, July 16, 2019.

“Responding to Hate: The Role of Religious Actors.”

### **Testimony: James Martin, SJ**

Thank you for inviting me to speak today. I regret that some medical treatments prevent me from joining you in person. But it’s a great honor to be with you.

On June 12, 2016, 49 people at Pulse, a nightclub that attracted a largely LGBT clientele in Orlando, Florida, were shot and killed in what was at the time the largest mass shooting in US history. In response, there was an outpouring of love and support for the LGBT community from almost every quarter in the country.

One notable exception was the Catholic Church, my own church. While the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a brief four-line statement, the words “gay” or “LGBT” were absent from it. As a thought experiment, imagine if 49 people from a particular ethnic group were massacred, and the name of that ethnic group was omitted from public statements. Moreover, in the wake of the U.S. Bishops’ statement, only a handful of individual Catholic bishops expressed any sympathy. The vast majority said absolutely nothing. Even in death the LGBT community remained invisible to much of the church.

The Catholic Church’s difficulty in ministering to, and even trying to understand, LGBT people has led to Catholic magazines and websites that vilify them, priests who single them out in homilies as the world’s worst sinners, and even statements from cardinals, archbishops and bishops overseas siding with repressive anti-gay laws that provide for the arrest and even execution of gay men and women.

Why bring this up? Because when it comes to the role that religious actors and organizations can play in combating hate crimes, the most effective thing they can do is to get their own houses of worship in order.

Racism, sexism and homophobia still exist in many Christian denominations, my own included. To turn to racism, we only need recall the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s trenchant comment that the most segregated hour of the week is 11 AM on a Sunday morning.

Last year, an African-American friend of mine, a national leader in the US Catholic community, told me a story. Recently, he was attending a conference at a town far from his home. When Sunday came, he searched for a Catholic church near his hotel so that he could attend Mass. Happily, he located one, drove there and entered the church. After my friend passed through the church doors, a priest, seeing a large, dark-skinned man, said to him, "I'm sorry. You do know that this a Catholic church, don't you?"

"Yes," said my friend. "Do *you* know that this is a Catholic church?"

The racism, sexism and homophobia still endemic in some Christian churches lead to casually racist, sexist and homophobic comments made from the pulpit, as well as overtly racist, sexist and homophobic comments made in private. Both give a silent blessing to more racism, sexism and homophobia among parishioners. Just this month an influential far-right Catholic website published an article that opposed even gay-straight alliances in schools, as part of what they called their "war" against "LGBT propaganda."

What does such tacit support for prejudice by church leaders end up doing? It excuses hate. It fosters hate. It blesses hate. And it unintentionally encourages the violence that this hate leads to. And make no mistake: Some Catholics who treat LGBT people with contempt think they are doing so with the church's blessing. Thus, these people think they are being prophetic. They don't see themselves as haters. They see themselves as prophets. Because they feel the support of their churches.

This is not to say that all or even most Christian churches are places of racism, sexism or homophobia. By no means. Often it is Christian groups that lead the fight against hatred. Witness, obviously, the example of Rev. King in the civil rights movement, a true prophet whose main impetus was an overtly Christian one. In our own day, I'm proud that the Catholic Church in this country has consistently stood up against the vilification of refugees and migrants, perhaps the newest victims of hatred.

But any actions or speech that mock, stigmatize, dehumanize or otherwise target specific persons or groups of people is completely opposed to the Christian worldview. Why? Because it legitimizes seeing a person who is different as the “other.” And this is completely antithetical to the actions of the Jesus whom we encounter in the Gospels. In fact, Jesus reached out first and foremost to those who were seen as “other”: women, tax collectors, prostitutes, Samaritans, Roman centurions, people who were sick, and on and on.

Jesus always brings those on the outside in. He brings the outsider into his circle of friendship. Because for Jesus there is no us and them. There is only us.

So the most important thing that religious actors and organizations can do to combat hate crimes is not only to fight hatred on the outside, but on the inside as well. How? First, by taking a clear look at how their organizations speak of, and minister to, members of marginalized groups. Second, by reaching out to these groups, specifically to make them feel welcomed into what are, after all, their churches too. Finally, by taking every opportunity to stand with them publicly, to advocate for them, to fight for them, even at the risk of losing some parishioners.

Overall, they must remind their own communities and the world that for Jesus and therefore for all Christians, there is no us and them. There is only us.

**The Rev. James Martin, SJ, is a Jesuit priest, editor at large of *America* magazine, consultant to the Vatican’s Dicastery for Communication and author of many books including, most recently, *Building a Bridge*, about how the Catholic Church can reach out to LGBT people.**