

## Introduction

# HER MISTRESS'S HAND

“Oh, I wasn’t raised Catholic, so I don’t have all that baggage.”<sup>1</sup>

I used to say that a lot. I converted in 1998, at age nineteen, having come out as a lesbian when I was about thirteen. My parents and most of the people in my world were secular progressives. Even the people who brought me into the Church, who first taught me who Jesus is and what the love of God is like, didn’t make a big deal out of my sexual orientation. Maybe to some of them it made me a little bit exotic; maybe to some of them it made me a little bit of a mess. (I was *a lot* of a mess . . . though not because I was gay.) But all of them treated me like any other person they knew. They talked to me about the Incarnation and the Crucifixion, instead of thinking they needed to start off by making sure I knew what Jesus thought of my sex life.

The Catholic sexual ethic, in which (among other things) sex is restricted to marriage between a man and a woman, was probably the biggest obstacle for me when I was trying to figure out if I really needed to knuckle under and become Catholic. I sought various explanations of this teaching from friends—and from a well-meaning, unhelpful priest—but none of the explanations I received then persuaded me. They still don’t. I have a better sense now of how Catholic teaching fits into the patterns of scripture, which you’ll see a bit of in this book, but in reality the Church’s sexual ethic is still something I take on trust rather than because I’ve been convinced by some argument about it.

Still, I longed for the Eucharist, and I knew that if I was confirmed in the Church, I’d be asked to affirm that I believed all that the Catholic Church teaches to be true. My friends had presented

the Church to me as beauty and rescue, not a bunch of rules for good behavior. But I accepted the Church's own account of herself, in which the morality was not separable from the beauty and the rescue. I was being asked to trust the Catholic Church as both mother and teacher: a mother who would nourish me with Jesus' Body and Blood, and a teacher who would show me Jesus the Way—a way of life, which I was to follow even when I didn't understand.

Much to my surprise and dismay, I found that I *did* have that trust.<sup>2</sup>

This is an admittedly oversimplified account, but it should make clear how different my experience was from that of most gay people in our churches. I met gay people first as my parents' friends, then as my own community. They were never threats or even strangers. I didn't have to worry that the people who had taught me to know Jesus would reject me if I came out to them, because I was out already. I didn't have to suspect that Christian sexual morality was just an excuse for straight people to reject us and indulge their bigotry, because most of the straight Christians I knew were genuinely interested in listening to me and willing to correct any misunderstandings they had about gay people and communities.

I was still damaged by the silence and homophobia within our churches. When I became Catholic, I didn't know *of* anyone—let alone know someone personally—who was openly gay and accepted the Church's sexual ethic. I made a lot of mistakes, often sinful mistakes, due not only to my own weaknesses but to the bad guidance I received, as well as to my refusal to hear the witness of other gay people. Don't worry—I'll talk about all that stuff later in this book.

But I was able to escape a lot of the shame and fear that gay people who grew up Christian often experience. I never—seriously, not once—believed that God loved me less or cherished me less

because I'm gay. I'm not sure I've ever met a cradle Catholic who can say that.



One day I overheard myself saying that cute line about how little baggage I have as a convert. For the first time I realized what I was really saying, and it shocked me. I was saying that it's typically easier for a gay person who grows up outside the Church to know God's love than for a gay person who had a Catholic upbringing. The children of the Church, who should be the *most* confident in God's love, the ones who know best what God is like, are instead the ones who grow up uncertain of God's love and afraid that there's no place for them in the Church.

Gay people who seek to submit our lives to God's guidance through the Church are like the maidservant in Psalm 123:

Like the eyes of a maid  
on the hand of her mistress,  
So our eyes are on the LORD our God,  
till we are shown favor. (Ps 123:2)<sup>3</sup>

We look to the hand of our mistress, the Bride of Christ—the Church—to know what we are to do and where we are to go. We long to go where she points us. But what is the character of this mistress? What is our Mother and Teacher *like*?

Even (especially?) gay people who have always tried to do right and be good Christian kids often wake up one day in their twenties or thirties and realize that they have never really believed that God cherished them. They have always felt, on some level, that God was disgusted by them and did not delight in them the way he delighted in people with more conventional desires. They knew intellectually—they accepted, as a dogma of their faith—that God

loved them; but they pictured it as a dutiful love, colored by that familiar parental admixture of expectations and disappointment.

Gay people who grow up Christian so often learn the following lessons:

- their sexuality separates them from God;
- obedience is impossible for them unless they become straight;
- not solely their sexual desires but their longings for love and intimacy are fundamentally broken, intrinsically disordered;
- there is no history of gay followers of Jesus and therefore no guidance for their futures;
- gay communities must be avoided as petri dishes of sexual sin;
- gay people are uniquely difficult to love and even accepting us is a real struggle.

And this teaches gay Christians that God is not on our side. This teaches us that the Church is a mother who rejects us and abandons us when we need her most. We find ourselves obedient to a mistress who holds us in contempt and punishes us mercilessly, arbitrarily, and forbids us even to speak about what we've experienced at her hands.

So many of us have been taught a model of obedience that is really a form of self-harm.

This is not God, and this is not God's Church.

In this book I will explore gay Christians' need for the tenderness of God. I'll look at the many ways our churches have given us false images of God and the damage this has done to our faith. Because we are made in the image of God, a false image of God necessarily becomes a false image of oneself. A cruel God produces a degraded creature defined by its sins. Because God is Love, a false image of God necessarily becomes a false idea of love. The lines between love and harm, humility and self-hatred, become blurred and can even vanish.

But there is good news. By examining scripture, Christian history, and the everyday lives of gay people in the churches, we can

discover the true nature of the God who is Love. We can learn to see our neighbor and ourselves with his tender gaze. I will explore the ways God shows his tenderness to us, even when we least expect it: in our longings for same-sex intimacy and love, in our times of doubt or anger, even in our experiences of sin and shame. And I will suggest a few—only a few, since a comprehensive list would be impossible—practical ways by which individual gay believers have deepened our intimacy with Christ and experienced more fully his ardent love.

What if gay people were *safer* in our churches than in the secular world? What if we could find *more* ways to give and receive love within the Church than we do outside it? If this seems impossible, it only shows how far we have strayed from the path the Lord has called us to walk.



My hope is that this book will contribute to an ongoing transformation in gay Christians' lives and in our churches—a transformation in which we begin to see the mistakes we've made in the past, with which almost all of us have been in some way complicit, and rediscover the sweetness of God's love for his gay children. This transformation will mostly start with gay and same-sex attracted people ourselves and those who have sought to stand alongside us, but it will ripple out through the Body of Christ and renew our understandings of kinship, friendship, celibacy and unmarried life, ordered love, personal integrity, solidarity with the marginalized, obedience, surrender, sanctification, and hope. This transformation has already begun; I'm just trying to make it go faster. Already gay Christians, in our nascent communities, are working to revive gay people's trust in God—a trust our shepherds have too often damaged or even killed, but which our tender and good Shepherd can restore to life.

We can come to know Jesus as our greatest Lover and most intimate Friend, who will never leave our side or turn against us, no matter how far we try to go from him. We can come to know God the Father as one who loves us in a way even the best earthly parents can't, whose love for us flows from delight and not from duty—a Father who cherishes us most lovingly when our paths to holiness startle, confuse, and disappoint our own parents. And we can come to know the Church as a sweet mistress whose hand always points the way to greater love. We will still, always, be called to sacrifice: to lay down our lives, to give everything and hold back nothing for ourselves. But our sacrifices can be both fruit and seedbed of trusting love, not self-loathing shame.



The thesis of this book, which guides its structure, is that God offers himself and his ardent love to his gay children, and he offers us as gifts to our churches and loved ones—but Christians have made it unnecessarily hard for gay people to trust in God's tenderness. Thus even—especially—gay people who grew up loving God often need to rediscover him, uncovering his hidden, tender face.

I begin by looking at the experiences that have hidden God's sweetness from his gay children. This is a difficult topic to read about. I'm starting with it because this is where most actual gay Christians start out: in the gap between "God is Love" and "For the sake of the children, we're going to have to ask you to leave." Some people hear harsh words from the pulpit (in the school hallways, on the street, at the church coffee hour, in therapy, in a meeting with your supervisor or your pastor; at home). Others hear only a blank and deadly silence. Insults, well-intentioned falsehoods, and echoing absences all teach people what it is to be gay in the churches.

If you've experienced any of these harms, I hope this first chapter will make clear that you aren't alone. You weren't harmed in

Christian communities because you're unusually lacking in faith—or even just unusually unlucky. Your painful experiences are part of a shockingly common pattern. You don't have to wallow in them, but being able to see the pattern may relieve any self-blame you feel and help you articulate which aspects of your relationship with God need healing.

If your experience has been much gentler, you aren't alone either. My own experience in the Catholic Church has been *very* gentle. That gives me a lot of hope that none of these harms are necessary! But this first chapter is also for people like me, who have been spared many of these harms. I hope to give people a better sense of what others have been through, so that they can avoid some of the mistakes I made out of naivete. And it's possible that you will find, as I did, that you didn't escape quite as unscathed as you thought.

The rest of the book will offer an alternative curriculum—a way of unlearning all these hard, familiar lessons.

In the second section, I look at two experiences many of us were taught to view as isolating, loveless, or even sinful: same-sex love and celibacy. If you are afraid that your same-sex longings can only be loathed and fled, in the second chapter you may discover the ways in which God can use these longings to illuminate your path. If you are afraid that the only words scripture has to say about your longings are “abomination” and “against nature,” I hope I can suggest that same-sex love is woven into the history of our salvation. If you have ever prayed to become straight because it seemed like that was the only way you could be pleasing to God, this second chapter will suggest ways of bringing order to your desires while still remaining, you know, extra gay.

Most gay people who seek to follow the Catholic sexual ethic will live celibately. If you have considered a life without sexual relationships but feel despair when you think about a future of empty evenings, microwaveable meals-for-one, and Netflix alone, the third chapter will look at the vision and promise of Christian celibacy.

In the New Testament, celibacy is a way of life that offers unique freedom to love and unique forms of witness to God's faithfulness. This chapter will look at what it means to live a celibate life of beauty and self-giving love, even—especially!—when you didn't choose it and didn't feel "called" to it.

Same-sex love and celibacy are both so much better than you've probably been taught. But other experiences are about as bad as you think they are, maybe even worse, and the third section explores these genuinely awful experiences: spiritual abuse, familial abandonment, rage at the harm that Christian homophobia has done to you, sexual shame, ambivalence about your faith, and other forms of suffering. I hope these chapters will offer hope, grounded in scripture, Christian history, and experience. God is with you in these times, too, and still offers you shelter and support.

If you have experienced abandonment or abuse within Christian churches or Christian homes, chapter 4 will seek to walk with you as you examine the injustices you endured. Scripture reveals, again and again, that God is on your side. If you're afraid of the anger that wells up inside you when you start confronting what others have done to you, or if you're eaten up by guilt when you think about the rotten things you did in response to fear and shame, chapter 5 will show you how other gay Christians have felt the same things—and through them arrived at a deeper confidence in God's just and gentle love.

If you've felt intense shame over your sexuality, or over your sexual sins, the sixth chapter will shine the light of God's mercy in those places. This chapter will offer everything from ancient Christian theology to practical advice on habit formation. The intimacy you offer God during times of shame and sin is an especially profound intimacy, reflecting an especially deep trust. He will not reject it.

And if you've felt doubt and ambivalence about Christianity or the Christian sexual ethic, the seventh chapter will explore this extremely normal part of the life of faith. Ambivalence is part of



almost every story of change; you are very likely to encounter it as you grow and mature in your faith.

And in the last chapter of this section, I'll look briefly at suffering. (Woo-hoo!) Most of this book focuses on alleviating the suffering caused by injustice or silence and showing you the beauty of the life Christ offers you. Even this eighth chapter is mostly about the ways Christians misinterpret gay people's suffering. But it's also necessary to say a few words about the cross of each believer—and the forms of suffering that are more common for gay Christians, not all of which are solely the result of individual or structural sin.

Each of these chapters will offer multiple ways of understanding your hard experiences. But I am not trying to exhaust all the possibilities! There are as many ways to come to know God's tenderness as there are people he created. Within the Catholic Church alone, there are more spiritual paths to God than I can count: Some people live a more Carmelite spirituality, while others love the Franciscan or the Jesuit or the Dominican way. Some will look to the traditions of the Eastern Christian churches, or the Catholic churches rooted in black American experience. My own spirituality is pretty much, "What if you love the 12 Steps, but refuse to go to meetings?" Whether your spirituality is more Gregorian chant or "Ride On, King Jesus" or Johnny Cash growling "Hurt," there is a way for you to come to Christ's embrace. I explore some of them here, on the theory that this will help you with your own exploration.

The final section of the book provides specific practices or ways of thinking that you can adopt in order to know God's tenderness for you as a gay believer. It's a little of everything, based on what my friends and I have found helpful. Nobody needs to do all of them, but most of us could probably stand to do some of them. Some of these practices will make you more obviously gay. Some of them will make you more flamboyantly Christian. All of them are intended to help you know God as he truly is and to rejoice that he knows you as you truly are.

You may notice that some of these chapters are super long (“Order in Same-Sex Love” could’ve been twice the length, I have *so much* to say about this!) and others quite short (“Ambivalence”). I’ve tried not to waste your time: I say what I think needs to be said, especially the things I haven’t seen in books before, and then I stop talking. Bear with me through the inevitable structural inelegance.



A few notes about terminology. I mostly say *gay* here to describe myself and the people for whom this book is especially intended. I’ll also say *lesbian* for the ladies. There are issues specific to bisexual Christians’ experiences which I don’t address, but I think much of what *is* here will be relevant to bi readers. Some of you all may prefer the term *same-sex attracted*; I think you’ll find this book relevant to your experience as well. I’ll sometimes say “gay or same-sex attracted,” just to remind us that we’re all in this together, but the places where I use that term aren’t the only places where our needs and experiences are shared. And although I don’t use it much because this book doesn’t attempt to address questions specific to gender identity, I use *LGBT* here and there, when talking about communities where many members would use that term.

I definitely mess around with the word *celibacy*. Often, especially in Catholic circles, this word implies that someone has taken a vow renouncing marriage, consecrating themselves to God in the unmarried state. I’m using it more loosely, for people who are unmarried *and intending to remain unmarried*, whether or not they’ve made any vow. This isn’t *singleness*. Nobody is single (God is our Lover! Sorry, I know this is a hobbyhorse of mine). Plenty of unmarried people want to marry and are either pursuing marriage or eager to accept a spouse if one appears; these people aren’t “celibate” in the sense I’m using the word here. I’m also not using “celibacy” to mean *chastity*, which is simply the integrity—the harmony

between flesh and spirit—we receive when, by God's grace, we obey Christian sexual discipline. You can be married and chaste, and you can be celibate and unchaste (ask me how I know . . .). Chapter 3 looks at celibacy, while chapter 6 looks at chastity.

I am still seeking an elegant phrase for “the Christian teaching that sex is restricted to marriage between a man and a woman.” In this book I've used a lot of not-quite-right phrases to approximate this long, clunky phrase: “the Christian sexual ethic” or “the Catholic sexual ethic” or “Christian sexual discipline” (even though all of those phrases encompass *a lot* more than just restricting sex to opposite-sex marriage!). I don't mean to imply that all Christian churches, or all individual believers, accept this sexual ethic; I know many sincere followers of Jesus have rejected it. I've sometimes resorted to “traditional,” even though the important thing about this belief is not that it's old but that it's a part of our faith, given to us not by our ancestors but by God.

And finally, I say *the Church* when I mean the Catholic Church—and especially her mystical aspect, the Church as the Bride of Christ and our Mother and Teacher. When I mean the often unmystical, all-too-often un-Christlike experiences Christians in every church inflict on one another, I'll say “the churches.”



My hope is that twenty or thirty years down the line, I will be listening to some young whippersnapper who will say, with no idea that she's saying anything unusual, “Oh, I was raised Christian—so of course I've never doubted that God loved gay people.”

*Of course.* Why should it ever have been different?

Now let's begin the long journey from this hard present to that future. Come and see how the Lord delights in his gay children.