

Every week through Lent, a writer will reflect on how a time of challenge brought unexpected grace. Here, **James Martin SJ** describes how he found freedom from his need to be approved of

# Building bridges

**I** LOVE BEING a Jesuit. And I'm never sure where to start when I describe the reasons why. Certainly my life as a priest, my ministry as a writer and Jesuit spirituality are all things for which I will never be able to thank God adequately. But the most surprising blessings of Jesuit life have been my Jesuit brothers. The Society of Jesus can't promise this in its vocational literature, but I had no idea that religious life would mean knowing so many people I consider not only friends but as close to brothers as I can imagine.

Life in a religious order, however, is not perfect – and members of those orders will be the first to tell you that. Yet even that lack of perfection has turned out to be the source of grace for me.

Many years ago, I lived in a Jesuit community (which no longer exists) where someone disliked me. Of course people in religious orders are like everyone else: they like some people but not others. And I'm not perfect by a long shot, so I don't expect everyone to cotton to me. But this was on a different level. Perhaps a better way to put it would be to say that he despised me. For several years, he refused to speak to me, answering only when I directly put a question to him; he would sigh heavily and roll his eyes whenever I spoke in community; he would often leave the dining room table when I sat down to eat; and he occasionally muttered curses when passing me in the hall.



“I imagined speaking to Jesus and heard him say to me, ‘Must everyone like you?’”

I apologise if this is disheartening about religious life, but most people have had these experiences at least once in their life. Religious orders are not immune from human frailty and even sin, as we should know by now.

Through the years, I tried everything I could to rectify or even ameliorate the situation. I struggled to remember what I had done to anger him. (I couldn't recall anything.) I attempted to reconcile with him. (He threw me out of his room.) I spoke to my superiors, who were both sympathetic and solicitous. (They spoke to him, but nothing changed.) Eventually I learned to live with it, pray for him and, as one wise and elderly Jesuit counselled, simply be “cordial” to him. It was, however, a great penance.

A few years into this situation, I went on my annual eight-day retreat and confessed to my retreat director how difficult this was. In response, she suggested what I thought was an odd passage to pray with: the Rejection at Nazareth in the Gospel of Luke (4:14-30). In that passage, as I'm sure you

know, Jesus stands up in the synagogue in his home town and, in so many words, proclaims that he is the Messiah. Initially, the townspeople praise what he says, but then, after he suggests that they will probably demand a miracle, they turn on him. While some modern-day preachers soften what happens next, we should be clear: they try to kill Jesus. “They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.” But Jesus escapes, “passing through their midst”.

**WHEN PREACHERS** or commentators dilate on this passage, they often offer this insight: the townspeople couldn't see God, even when God was right in front of them. The spiritual takeaway is usually a question: where do we overlook God in our lives because God is too familiar? Or: what familiar person, place or thing is a carrier of God's grace that we might be ignoring? All good questions.

But in my prayer, something different happened, a shift in perspective. At the time I was writing a book on Jesus, and so I knew that Nazareth was a minuscule town of only 200 to 400 people. So when I imagined Jesus standing up in the modest synagogue (which, many scholars surmise, was not a building but an outdoor gathering place), I imagined him speaking to a small group of people who not only knew him, but whom he knew as well.

Suddenly it dawned on me: Jesus had to speak this truth before people he knew. Thus, he must have known, or have been able to intuit, what their reaction was going to be. It was a shock to have the story turned around that way: from the perspective of the crowd to the perspective of Jesus.

In my prayer, I imagined speaking to Jesus and asking: “How were you able to do this?”

And in my prayer, I heard him say to me: “Must everyone like you?”

It was a shock, not only in the clarity with which those words came to me (not aurally but felt) and their import. At the time, I felt like saying: “Yes, they do!” After a few more prayer periods, it dawned on me that Jesus was inviting me to be free of the need to be loved, liked or approved of.

That helped immeasurably in my relationship with this other Jesuit. And so, I thought, that insight was given in prayer for that reason. But God wasn't finished.

**FIVE YEARS** later, in 2017, I published a book called *Building a Bridge*, about the Church's relationship with LGBT Catholics. Though people laugh when I say this, I didn't expect the book would be a big deal. The first edition was physically very small, just 140 pages, and didn't challenge any Church teaching. Mainly, the book encouraged the institutional Church to treat LGBT Catholics with the “respect, compassion and sensitivity” called for by the Catechism and the love, mercy and compassion called for by Jesus.

Within a few weeks, it evoked astonishingly strong reactions. First came intensely

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## Getting threatened by the police is something quite new. But these aren't normal times

emotional responses in parish lectures, where I was stunned to witness standing ovations, receive tearful hugs and see long lines of people waiting to thank me. In time I realised that simply having the conversation made people grateful.

But then came the negative backlash, which I had anticipated, but not to this degree: endless personal attacks and hateful comments, including name-calling, from even supposedly reputable Catholic commentators, websites and magazines. It went beyond disagreement into hatred.

At times it was hard to keep up. I was called (you can look it up) “heretic”, “apostate”, “sodomite”, “homosexualist”, “false priest”, “wolf in sheep’s clothing”, as well as “pansy”, “fairy” and every homophobic slur you can imagine. The far-right website Church Militant directed their followers to “spam” my social media accounts, which led to thousands of hate-filled messages. Talks were cancelled after online campaigns. In my office at America Media, I received not only obscenity-laden phone calls but what I came to think of as Catholic death threats: none threatening outright murder but notes saying: “I hope you die soon.” Some attacks came even from a few clergy and members of the hierarchy, who often revealed their lack of knowledge of what I had written, preferring to get their intelligence from the web. One US bishop condemned the book in his weekly column but admitted halfway through his essay that he hadn’t actually read it.

**FORTUNATELY, I HAD** the support of my Jesuit superiors and, a few months later, came the pushback to the pushback, with invitations from cardinals and archbishops to speak in their dioceses, a surprise invitation to speak at the Vatican’s World Meeting of Families in Dublin in 2018 and, finally, a 30-minute audience with Pope Francis in the Apostolic Palace in September 2019, in which we discussed LGBT ministry in the Catholic Church, and after which I felt I was walking on air.

But in those intervening weeks, the personal attacks brought me back to the question that I heard in prayer: “Must everyone like you?” The answer is, “No”. Not everyone liked Jesus, so why should everyone like me? The freedom from the need to be loved, liked and approved of was a great gift, as Thomas Merton used to say, “in the order of grace”.

At this point, you might expect an “inclusio” of sorts, in which I tell you that in the end that Jesuit who detested me finally reconciled with me. That’s not what happened, however. Instead, he simply moved out of the community. But the grace that he left behind was the freedom to try to be like Jesus. To be free of the need for approval, to place myself on the side of those who find themselves on the margins, and, when attacked, to be able to say, with Jesus: “Who cares?”

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IT’S NOT that often that you can get cautioned by the police for saying the Rosary outside Saudi Arabia but these are exciting times. In Ireland, limited numbers of people are allowed in church for restricted periods for private prayer. But when does private prayer become communal worship, which is forbidden under the draconian Covid restrictions? Ah, there’s the rub. And so, when a group of people in my home town came to church during the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament and started saying the Rosary and even – another transgressive activity – singing hymns, there were complaints. The police were called and took the people’s names. They warned them that if there were a repeat of this sort of behaviour, they’d be fined. You know, I don’t think even in Penal times you could be fined for saying the Rosary.

I wasn’t there, of course; like everyone else I haven’t been able to travel for months. But I think I know who would have been there: they are getting on a bit in years and, in normal circumstances, the most law-abiding individuals you could meet. Getting threatened by the police is something quite new. But these aren’t normal times. For one thing, the parish priest, whom the police called before entering the church, was out of action. He had Covid.

Now at one level the restrictions are rational. Sitting or kneeling, spaced out in a big church, is fine. Even saying the Rosary, from behind a mask, should be perfectly safe. But hymn-singing is barred on the rational grounds that the breathing involved in singing may help disseminate this air-borne virus in the atmosphere. So, whoever it was who started singing “Sweet Sacrament Divine” or whatever may have tipped the balance towards the appearance of the police in a Catholic church, and not for devotional purposes.

But this uppity behaviour on the part of these respectable individuals has a context and it is that Ireland is practically alone in Europe in banning communal worship. In England, you can go to Mass perfectly safely: you’re stewarded, sanitised, spaced out, forbidden to sing, required to take communion on the hand, directed to walk in one direction. It makes churches significantly safer places than, say, supermarkets. And there is no real reason why the same worship under

similar restrictions should not be allowed in Ireland. Except for a secular government in an increasingly secular society, the impulse to worship together is not a need that is understood as it once would have been.

These are strange times.

VANESSA SPRINGORA’s devastating book *Consent* is an indictment of a French novelist, Gabriel Matzneff, who seduced her when she was 14 and he was 50. It is also an indictment of a society in which the absence of sexual restraint was a cultural norm, a society made by the ’68 generation. “Repressing juvenile sexuality was considered to be a form of social oppression and limiting sexual relations [to those of the same age] constituted a form of segregation”, she writes. Unfortunately, many older revolutionaries’ tastes ran to pubescent girls, and boys. Vanessa was one of them.

But there was a curious element of their relationship. She described how “every evening he made me read the New Testament, after which he would test me to see if I had understood the meaning of Christ’s message in each parable. He was astonished at the extent of my ignorance. I was an atheist. I was not baptised.” He also taught her the Hail Mary in French and Russian. Was he afraid, she asked, that the two of them were going to Hell? “Church is for sinners” was his response. In this respect G, as she called him, was unusual; the ’68 generation was blatant in its insistence on the primacy of its own needs and it acknowledged no higher authority, certainly not that of the Church. But G knew then that the Church is for sinners. He is now an outcast and an exile; his sins have found him out. And in his disgrace, perhaps he might look again at the gospels, and repent.

LAST WEEK, I went to the funeral at Westminster Cathedral for Mgr Mark Langham. There were only a few of us but it was lovely. Perhaps the best part was that Cardinal Vincent Nichols, Archbishop of Westminster, was there, a study in scarlet. In the dim cathedral, he shone like a flame. One of the nice things about being a Prince of the Church is that you can illumine the darkness.

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