

# The Silent Cruelty of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”

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In our time of deep divisions in American cultural life, and as the church attempts to make sense of dramatic social transformation in a fast-changing world, ecclesial leaders have often fallen back on statements reaffirming traditional teachings as a soft means of underscoring the enduring traits of church belief and common life. Nowhere is this phenomenon more pronounced and deeply felt today than in the statements made by synods of bishops focused on LGBT people and the nature of Christian marriage. Recently the Orthodox Church in America went so far as to impose a gag order, with threats of ecclesiastical punishment for “clergy, theologian, teacher or lay person who contravenes our directive.”<sup>1</sup> At the same time, a growing number of committed parishioners question these statements, for both their substance and their tone. Many are concerned family members or friends of those targeted. When “gay” isn’t “those people” but my child, my mom, my best friend, my boss, *myself*, many of us experience a paradigm shift.

In the churches, some priests and lay people simply don’t talk about these issues at all. The history of the Church’s approach to LGBT people strikes many of us as offensive and cruel, and we simply don’t want to make matters worse. Church communities often promulgate an unspoken

“don’t ask, don’t tell” policy that feels kinder and more humane. In these situations, synodal statements are generally ignored or quietly derided, and yet LGBT members of our communities are told in a hundred silent ways to keep their real lives private and hidden. In this essay, I hope to imagine the experience of being the target of general disapproval in the Church and to look at the existential legacy of “don’t ask, don’t tell” in Christian communities. I also hope to explore the experience of those of us who aren’t part of the LGBT community but who experience the disingenuous phenomenon of silent participation in “don’t ask, don’t tell” in our churches today.

Rewind roughly 25 years. In my college years, I was a young Evangelical Christian who hadn’t yet given much thought to the Orthodox Church. Though it had been my ambition to attend a Christian liberal arts college where faith and learning were integrated, I was finding my time in the heart of the Evangelical movement a bit disconcerting. As someone who never felt comfortable with exclusion along lines of orientation and identity, I often felt at odds with the spoken and unspoken discourse of this kind of community. I remember the cruel jokes, the prayer sessions convened to “pray the gay away,” and the broken relationships when prayers didn’t

<sup>1</sup> Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church in America, “Statement on Same-Sex Relationships and Sexual Identity” (2022), <https://www.oca.org/holy-synod/statements/holy-synod/holy-synod-issues-statement-on-same-sex-relationships-and-sexual-identity>.

Joseph Ducreux,  
*The Silence*, 1790.  
National Museum,  
Stockholm.



effect this change (which was every single time this method was attempted). I remember especially the charade of gay kids finding “nice Christian girls” to help them escape “same sex attraction.” But what I hold closest, most visceral in that experience was my dormmate’s attempted suicide. He was the nicest of devout Christian kids, attended chapel, remained active in his local parish, and dated a young woman with the same resumé. For Charles (I refer to him with a pseudonym), being a disciple meant doing all these things, and if he did them with “sincerity of heart,” God would take away his desire for men and he would be past the struggle, *finally* able to “love Jesus with all my heart.”

Then came the pills.

Charles’s attempted suicide struck me to the core. Why would he feel so hopeless when surrounded by thousands of people in our little four-year Eden who pointed to hope in Christ to overcome sin and death? And then it became clear as air to me. Christian community wasn’t a support network

for Charles. His friends didn’t know who he was. Christian community for Charles was a daily, hourly lie.

Harper Lee’s Atticus Finch offers what has become popular wisdom to his daughter Scout: “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view . . . until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it.”<sup>2</sup> Though this is a beautiful image, I believe Atticus is somewhat naïve here. I don’t think I have ever fully understood what Charles went through, that is, walked around in his skin. I do believe in the power of imagination, though, and I see it as one of the great spiritual disciplines. Imagining oneself in the circumstances of others is the first threshold to any kind of meaningful, active love for them. I hope we can imagine what it must have taken for this kind, magnanimous, God-adoring young person to want to end his life.

Hearing about Charles’s experience solidified an instinct I’d felt for a long time. I decided I would never teach or preach against my gay brothers and sisters, never sign statements or “re-affirmations of traditional marriage,” never use LGBT people as a litmus test underscoring my own orthodoxy. At the time it felt clear to me that these actions were kicking someone already down, rubbing proverbial salt in the wound. These conservative responses also hurt real people by making them minority scapegoats for the majority’s sense of self-righteousness. Wasn’t it enough that the Bible said what it said about “homosexuality,” that the church has remained broadly consistent in its disapproval over two thousand years? No one needed my voice added to that indomitable choir.

And then it happened again. It was fifteen years later when I enthusiastically

<sup>2</sup> Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960; London: Folio Society, 1996), 41.

recommended one of my dearest students for admission at my alma mater. He too was a devout eighteen-year-old kid who “loved the Lord” and wanted to experience education in a community of faith. In less than a year, he too made an attempt on his life. Same dorms, same classrooms, same chapel services—and yet my experience of college bore no likeness at all to my dormmate’s or my student’s. Charles and Evan (again, a pseudonym) were gay men living in what purported to be a homogenous belief community where “everyone” knew that love was always and only blessed between a man and a woman.

I have no idea what actual abuse Charles and Evan may have endured, what cruel things people said, the variety of ways they were excluded. But for the purposes of this essay, let us predicate that everyone was on their best behavior and talked about “homosexuality” with compassion and what passed for love in a culture that embraced the “don’t ask, don’t tell” approach to religious community life. Only a few students really wanted to expel gay peers when I was an undergraduate. Others strove in prayer to deliver their friends from “impure attractions,” choosing to “love the sinner while hating the sin.” Those praying such prayers thought it was an act of love. Let’s imagine how it felt for those on the receiving end. Barring successful “conversion therapy,” many straight students in that space wanted LGBT people simply to efface their identities for the comfort of the community. Gay kids were “inconvenient.”

One felt horrible rejecting fellow students on the basis of orientation. It felt unkind, and no one likes to be unkind. But there it was: You couldn’t be Christian and gay, and that meant

gay kids had to lie, or at least live two lives. By the time Evan tried to take his life, the effects of this cultural regime of “don’t ask, don’t tell” was much clearer to me. It wasn’t just the ugly things preachers said on TV and from pulpits. It wasn’t simply the political bigotry and cowardice in our public square. Even when we were pastoral and kind and empathetic, when we asked people to efface their identity, we created a dehumanizing dynamic, the nature of which we may not even be aware or understand.

“Don’t ask, don’t tell” (DADT) is far from a balanced, moderate, and gracious way to avoid hurting others in our churches. From a philosophical and ethical perspective, we create a living, breathing lie. We perform a fiction of homogeneity of belief, lifestyle, identity. This phenomenon is the visceral experience of so many who approach the altar table. Jesus said so simply, “The truth will make you free” (John 8:32). The Christian vision knows a good deal about freedom. The great acts of deliverance from Pharaoh in the Exodus and liberation from sin, death, and the devil in the Paschal mystery are celebrated every year during Holy Week. “How great a God is our God? You are the God who work wonders!” Those wonders are the divine acts of deliverance and liberation. The truth will set us free. Yet if we choose a community discourse of “don’t ask, don’t tell,” if we baptize an outward performance of fantasy, we are not free. When I think of Charles and Evan, I am reminded that some are less free than others.

It is my belief that this is the current situation in many Orthodox parishes across the US. Innumerable conversations have brought this reality to light over two decades of parish, diocesan, and national church life. Though some

communities work actively to make LGBT people uncomfortable enough to leave, most simply ask them to eclipse their identities. We won't ask and you won't tell. This compromise makes clergy feel that they are practicing "grace," doing far better than other eras, and preventing schism. I can only imagine what people like Charles and Evan still in the Church must feel.

Imagine what it might be like to have two mutually exclusive experiences of church.

On the one hand, the Kingdom of God is for everyone, and all are welcome. From those who started work in the morning to those who came at the eleventh hour, everyone has a place (Matt. 20:1–16). The Church claims to be a hospital for souls. The Church is said to be the house of the family of God. People like Charles and Evan have told me that they experience this reality palpably, drawing strength from the sacramental and communal life of the worshipping community.

On the other hand, with DADT, the Church asks Charles and Evan to pretend. Some of our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters have chosen to enter heterosexual marriages, hoping to will themselves into conformity with the Church's teaching. I have seen some of these cases from close proximity, and they ended in broken marriages, broken families, and deep, deep suffering. Some attempt a celibate life. But at what cost? A person's deep need for partnership, intimacy, and a shared life is denied and effaced in the name of holiness and fidelity to certain passages in Scripture. A monastic life is a calling. The idea that "homosexuality" always overlaps with a monastic call to celibacy seems at once incredibly arbitrary and

strikingly convenient for those who would impose this vision or its ideological cousin, "don't ask, don't tell."

Others—most—live two lives. Imagine not being able to be your "at-home" self in your church family, always careful with whom you speak about your partner, your children, and your day-to-day life right down the street. Imagine wondering whether you will be denied communion, asked to leave, or embarrassed publicly because of who you are. Imagine reading the perennial statements from conclaves of bishops "reaffirming" the Church's faith in a way that is totally at odds with your own lived experience, statements that invalidate your most intimate relationship, your children, and your own sense of reality and identity. One of the healing ministries of the Church is to facilitate and encourage the integration of persons, bridging internal divisions of the self and living into a whole and centered unity. It is hard to imagine a church experience less integrated and whole than the one produced by "don't ask, don't tell."

Again, I'm imagining. That's all I can do.

What I *can* speak to is how *I* feel, how so many of my straight friends, lay and clergy, feel. We are not the direct targets of the "don't ask, don't tell" regime in the contemporary Church. We are, however, the ones who believe our family members, friends, and acquaintances when they share their lived experience with us. We see that we too are conforming to "don't ask" in our own subtle ways. To me this is uncomfortable and painful. "Don't ask, don't tell" requires me to put beliefs that matter to me, and a commitment to equity and justice, on the shelf in order to participate in the beauty

and the glory of the Church's community and liturgical riches. It asks me to be someone I am not to "keep the peace." DADT also whispers in my ear that if I give voice to what I believe is true, *it* (everything we love about the Church?) will all come crashing down. This is, after all, the argument so often presented by those who ardently maintain the status quo. If we start chipping away, we will lose the core teachings of the faith. It may be that this happens for some, that the psychological and emotional dynamic is such that one leads to the other. *For me, however, maximalist adherence seems to require one to embrace a lie, choosing to believe or pretending to believe something known to be false.* Such a choice springs from fear. And yet, we are told that love casts out all fear.

Being obliged to believe and propagate teachings that don't comport with our lived experience feels like the ultimate betrayal. For many of us, this crisis leads to what some in the Church fear the most. We begin to "pick and choose" what to believe. We stop assessing important matters solely through a hermeneutic of biblical literalism or blind adherence to "what has gone before." Instead, we make room for *lived experience*, especially when it varies from certain teachings of the Church—especially when the latter come into a collision course with certain "hot button" issues of the day. With a little study, we further recognize that many other "absolutes" of biblical or ecclesiological teachings of the past (bans on long

hair for men, defenses of slavery, sanctioned genocide, and so forth) have gone by the wayside. There is a way out of the trap of believing everything one is told in Church in order to retain "good standing" in the community; we are free to refuse feigned belief and active support for things that aren't true.

There is another reason, already explored above, why many of us are unwilling to conform to "don't ask, don't tell" at this stage in our lives and this stage in history. We now know without hesitation or ambivalence the harms inherent in DADT's regime for the people we love. How many who bear the *imago dei* must suffer the fate of my dormmate Charles and my student Evan? How many who wish to continue in communion with the church must be forced to live a lie at the Liturgy and in the fellowship hall? At the end of the day, if the Church is the "hospital of souls," we must ask ourselves whether "don't ask, don't tell" produces integrated, whole persons. I think the answer is obvious.

I maintain that our current practice of even well-intentioned "don't ask, don't tell" produces much more harm than good. We are told we will know a thing by its fruit, and that the truth will set us free. The orchard of half-truths, omissions, and fantasy produces bitter, half-formed people and bitter, half-formed relationships. Our church communities become mine fields. For some, navigation is precarious; for others, results are deadly. ✱



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