

Misza Czerniak EN

My name is Misza Czerniak, I'm 38 years old. And more than one third of my life was stolen from me. No, I didn't spend 13 years in a cryochamber or in outer space with aliens. I spent it fighting myself. I was led to believe that God wanted me not just to take up my cross but actually to reject who I am. I grew up in Russia, so from my culture and from the narrative of my Orthodox Church, I only heard that homosexuality is a sin, a disease, an abomination, a barrier for me to enter the Kingdom of God. And I loved God, so I decided that I had to hate what I was.

At that point, there was nobody around to give me a different perspective, even a neutral one, no supportive priests, prayer groups, role models in the society, even psychologists. For 13 years, I prayed mostly begging God to take away my sexual desires and make me 'normal'. I was lucky to not end up in 'conversion practices' centres, but de facto I performed those practices on myself, which in a way is a next level of violence: twisting the conscience of a young person so much that they despise themselves. I joined an online community of 'Overcomers', read spiritual and ascetic literature, attended Bible study with likeminded persons. In a few years, I lied myself into believing I might have changed so much I could try going out with girls. One of such attempts led to marriage. At the very early age of 19. At the age of 21, I became a father. But the internal and interpersonal tensions only grew. I am not proud of how I behaved under duress – the more you squeeze a spring, the stronger it kicks back. In the end, our marriage collapsed. My then wife told me we should break up. I felt this was the end. I couldn't imagine myself going back into heterosexual marriage and I wasn't ready to allow myself to accept being gay.

But I had friends, who asked very interesting questions, like why do I believe so firmly that this is what God wants of me? Have I ever talked to Him about it? And it turned out that I had given up 13 years of my life to self-destruction of various degrees and destruction of people around me (my then wife, my daughter) on the premises of having a definite answer to a question that is not allowed to be asked. If only my church had allowed doubts, intellectually and spiritually honest searches, biblical studies, if it were in general ready to admit it had been wrong, all that harm wouldn't have happened to me and to countless other persons. The culture of shame that surrounded us was so strong, it took me quite some time to fight the internalized homophobia in me. But fortunately, I found the community of queer persons of faith – in Poland, in Eastern Europe and, finally, the European Forum of LGBT Christian Groups. It helped me to reconcile my sexuality and my faith: I could finally stop picking sides in my internal fight. I could learn to become whole. And start really helping others.

In 2016, I and a few other activists wrote an Open Letter to the pan-Orthodox Council that gathered on Crete. We shared the stories of the harm done by the Church to LGBTQ+ persons inside it and urged the bishops to stop that form of abuse of Christian faith and tradition. And while the Letter itself did not bring immediate effects, it still asked the important question for the first time so loudly that it can't and won't be ignored. And hopefully, fewer people will hate or be ashamed of themselves but can find the way to being whole.