

**John 23 Belfast**

I am Catholic, I'm ashamed to say. I grew up in a predominantly Catholic neighbourhood in West Belfast. I went to Mass regularly with my parents. I volunteered around the Church, helping the sacristan prepare the various things for each mass. I coordinated the altar servers; made sure they were ready and knew what they were doing. Through the local school, I helped kids prepare for Confirmation by helping the teachers with the stuff they needed. The parish priest vouched for me to do this. I qualified as a youth worker, completing my placements in the local youth clubs. The parish was my life. One night, when I was online I got chatting with a guy I grew to like. I knew I was gay for a long time. The guy, Mark, lived local to me, and we met up for coffee. He knew me through one of the kids at the youth club who was his younger brother. I didn't mind, he promised he'd keep it a secret from my parents. He said his brother knew about me, but was okay about it, and could be trusted. His brother is a trouble-maker at the club, and has been barred a few times, by me.

That weekend, after Mass, the parish priest called me into the sacristy for a private word. He said some things had come to light; he had concerns about them and thought it best I take a break for a while from helping out. He wouldn't say what his concerns were, but he had already got someone to replace me. I went to the youth club the next day, to be told I wasn't needed there any more. Again they didn't say why. I got home, and my parents sat me down and told me the parish priest had been to visit them, and asked them to keep me away from the church for a while, and to encourage me not to go back. They were angry at him.

I challenged him about this that afternoon to be told there was no room for people like me in the church, we did not belong and he would do what he had to ensure that was kept the same. He told me not to bother asking the youth club manager for a reference, I wouldn't get it and he would see to it. But if I changed myself, and turned away from the sinful lifestyle I had lead, then he would welcome me back. To my knowledge, I hadn't committed a sin. But the only sin I did probably commit was to put my trust in the church. I'm still with Mark, almost 6 years now. I never found out how the priest knew about me. But I don't care any more. I'm happy as I am.

**Jennifer 19 Belfast**

In school I had been getting bullied for a while by the other girls for liking girls. I didn't even know if I did or not, I wasn't sure. They used to call me all sorts of names, write things on my books, spit at me, and sneer every time I passed. The PE teacher thought it was best I didn't get changed with the other girls in the locker-rooms. I came home from the library one evening after going there from school and my mum was crying. She shouted and screamed at me, saying things like 'how could you?' and 'what did I do to deserve a daughter like you!' I asked her what she meant, I was scared. I hadn't done anything wrong. She had been to bible study class. My religion teacher leads that class. They are good friends, and she had overheard some of the girls say things about me in the corridor at school after PE. Apparently she saw fit to discuss this with the headmistress who advised her to sort it out, discreetly. So she did. I was 18 already, almost near my A-levels. I didn't complete them. I took an overdose that night was rushed into hospital. The school wouldn't let me resit my exams there, and they didn't arrange any extra tutoring for the time I'd missed off. I didn't go back to them, I didn't resit Upper 6<sup>th</sup>. I moved out of the house, my mum doesn't talk to me now. I live in SHACK Buildings, am on anti-depressants. I passed my religion teacher in the city centre the other day. She politely smiled at me, and walked the other way. I'm trying to get myself sorted to go back to college to get my a-levels. God only knows where I would've been today had I been able to finish school properly.

### Kelly 15 Antrim

We had a nurse in with us yesterday talking about sexual health and contraception's and stuff like that. The class were being their usual selves. Then someone asked about the pill, and asked if lesbians needed to go on the pill, and told the nurse 'Kelly won't need it cos she's a lesbian'. The nurse was embarrassed, I was angry. Afterwards, she approached me privately and gave some leaflets on safer sex etc, along with some groups for girls like me, in Belfast. She was very kind. That same day, in class some of the girls were making jokes about the nurse, I defended her and was laughed at, with things like 'Kelly fancies the nurse!' The teacher didn't do anything to stop this; she just sat there pretending not to hear. One of the girls pulled at my bag and the leaflets fell out along with the piece of paper with the group details on it. The girl ran up to the teacher and gave it to her, saying it was lesbian groups to the whole class. The teacher tore up the paper and threw it in the bin, and made everyone get on with their work. After class I asked her for the paper and was told to go on to next class, and forget about it. She said I was too young to know anything about myself, and to wait til I'm 17 and meet a boy and he will help me to see that. When tears started in me, she just waved her hand at me, and told me to go; she didn't have time for teenage tantrums and would tell my parents if I kept it up.

### John 16 Ballymena

When I was 15, I told my mum I was gay. She didn't like it very much. She went and spoke to her local Baptist minister. My dad's Catholic, and he was fine with it, and so was the priest in the parish that my mum spoke to. I am Catholic, not Baptist. The minister however decided that he needed to talk to me, to pray with me. I knew why he wanted to do that, but I wasn't Baptist and told him I would talk to my priest if I needed help praying. He insisted, so I was made to sit with him and my mum. My dad argued all day with her about it and ended up leaving the house to go for a walk, he wanted to take me with him but mum wouldn't let him. The minister started by saying that there was still hope for me, that I hadn't went down 'that path yet', and he could help me but I had to really want his help. I didn't and told him I didn't need any help as I was happy the way I was. Mum cried, and he looked like someone had hit him. He prayed very hard that night, even told me he knew of a good psychiatrist I could talk to, one who could give me some treatments to cure me. He had already got the forms from him for my mum to sign them. The minister told my mum to trust him; he wouldn't let the devil take my soul, and recommended taking me straight away to the psychiatrist. I objected and told him I didn't want that, and pleaded with my mum about it. He put his hand over my mouth and started praying, saying that the devil had possessed me and should get out of me. I bit his hand and ran out of the house. Apparently he started screaming cos I drew blood. Dad said later that the minister thought that I had infected him with something and left the house very pale just as he had returned. Dad tore up the forms, he and mum argued for days afterwards. That was a year ago. She has come round a bit, even reads about stuff on the internet now, and gives me links to gay youth stuff. She isn't a Baptist any more by the way. She said she preferred the Catholic way of things more. I told her not to be so sure on that one, from some of the stuff I was reading about things in Belfast.

### Andrea 20 Derry

The other day I went into a Spar shop and asked the lady behind the counter if she had any Diva or if she could order them in. She looked horrified and told me she didn't sell magazines like that and asked me to leave. I went up the magazine shelf and took down a copy of Belle and FHM and some car magazine with a naked woman on the front cover. I asked her why she sold magazines like that, and she said that people bought them, so she would sell them. I told her I wanted to buy Diva, and asked her if she could order it in for me. She refused to do it. I live about ten miles outside Derry city, and this is the only shop in my area. She'll sell porn magazines for guys, but won't sell one single copy of Diva for me? Isn't my money good enough for her?

Mike 19 Enniskillen

On Sunday I asked my parish priest if I was allowed to use the parish hall for a youth prayer group I had been involved in. We had no money, and couldn't hire anywhere else out. He said certainly and made arrangements for me to get keys for it. We ran the group for a few weeks, and one Friday evening he turned up asking us to leave. I asked him why, and he showed me an advert in a local youth magazine, with my picture in it. I had been to Belfast Pride the week before, and some friends took a picture of me for a different group I had been a member of for a while. He didn't know if I was gay or not, but said he couldn't have me running some gay group in his parish hall, and I had to leave before the parishioners found out about it. I told him I wasn't gay, but he didn't believe me. The picture had been taken by friends of me with some gay friends at the parade. The girl in the picture beside me is my girl-friend. I tried explaining this to him, but he wouldn't listen. He took the keys off me, and made us all leave. I haven't been back to his church since then. But I hear he gave the room we had to a single mothers' group.

Mrs Wilson (pseudonym)

I was asked to write this short piece because it might help people like my son. I am from Northern Ireland, I now live in London. I left Belfast three years ago, after living there all my life. Why? My son Paul was bullied constantly at school for being different. He liked other boys. I never understood it, but I loved him, he was my flesh and blood. But he had a hard time. He went to a Catholic school. I won't name it. I went to his teacher about it and was referred to his year head, who told me Paul had brought it on himself by being different. He knew why he was being bullied and did nothing to stop it for himself, despite being warned several times not to provoke the other boys. Paul used to come home with cuts and bruises. My husband died years ago so I was left alone to raise Paul and did my best. I finally approached the headmaster, and asked for him to intervene. He said he was aware of Paul's case and considered the best way to deal with it was to remove him from the school. I protested at this and told him my son was not to blame for this. He wouldn't listen and told me he would let Paul finish out the term, but that I should start looking for a new school. It was halfway through 5<sup>th</sup> year, his GCSE year. He still said it was the best solution and would suit everyone. I sent a letter of complaint to the school's board of governors, and to the CCMS and to the bishop. I got no response. Paul was devastated. The bullies loved this. They stepped up their torment of my son. I had contacted social services. They said they would do what they could but were very limited. I came home from work one evening to find the house empty. The lights were off and my dinner was in the oven. On the fridge under a magnet was a note from my son saying he loved me but couldn't face it anymore. He wanted it to end and didn't want me to get hurt anymore because of him. It was signed, "Love you Always, Paul". I dropped the note and called his name; I shouted and screamed for him. No response. I went to his bedroom and found him hanging from his bedpost with his school tie... I tried to cut him down, tearing at the tie with my bare nails, and he fell in my arms, barely able to breathe. His face was red and purple, and he had been crying. He had a black eye too.

I took Paul out of that infernal school, and took him out of Northern Ireland. We live with my brother in London. Paul went back to school and finished his GCSE's and A-levels and is now in his first year at medical school. He goes to a gay youth group here, and he loves it. He has even started seeing a boy now. I still don't fully understand the whole gay thing. What I do understand is that I love him and that is all that matters. I trusted in his school to help him develop as a human being, full of love and Christian charity, the way I raised him. They let me down. They let him down. May God forgive them!

Neill 19

I am a 19 year old that lives in Holywood. I told my parents last week that I was gay. I had told my mum earlier that day when she called me up to find out where I was that I wanted to talk to her and dad about something. When I got home I was really nervous. I told them both to sit down. I then babbled on about I had not told them earlier because I had only recently accepted it. I then told them I was gay. My dad's response was "Right and", then my mum said "Is that it" as if to say you made us sit down and get worried for this. Looking back I knew I should have told them earlier and the main reason I didn't was because I wasn't sure how my mother would react. I knew my dad would be fine with it but I was getting mixed messages from my mother as she had said in the past who would want to be gay it is disgusting.

The rest of my family might not be ready to know yet as my brother is too young but the main thing is my parents are Ok with it.