

1.4 Second-Class Citizen

Uschi (interview), Poland

Introduction

I'm 45 and Polish and I live in Warsaw. I'm Caucasian and identify as bisexual and cis female. My pronouns are she/her.

Faith

I was born and raised in a family of what we call in Poland 'cultural Catholics', which means people who go to church more or less regularly and baptize their children. Whenever I say Catholic, I mean Roman Catholic, unless I say otherwise. So I was baptised and went to the First Communion but I wasn't raised in a particularly religious environment. I attended religion classes which were not obligatory. My parents made sure that I attended them, but it was not a big topic in our family – God, religion or anything. By the time I was a young teenager, I had become involved in a local group in my parish. It was a movement for young Catholics that is specific to Poland – its official title is the Movement for Light and Life, but called Oasis for short, so an Oasis Group. I was a member of this group for a few years and these were my formative years in terms of becoming the Roman Catholic I am today.

This was the time when I had very emotionally intense religious experiences. I was a teenager, of course, so this was a very emotional time in general, but the groups meetings and the group activities were also very much focused on developing ourselves, thinking about our faith and

about religion. There were discussion groups, Bible studies. But it was also fun – you know, spending fun time together. When I was a member of this group, I was quite active, which meant going to meetings twice a week, and so on. So my parents were worried that this was some kind of sect and they weren't really happy about it. Although it's not a sect – it's a very mainstream movement in the Roman Catholic Church in Poland. But my parents didn't know about it. They were worried and they tried to discourage me from it.

This was the time when I was also getting into a very strong conflict with my parents – I would say, stronger than a regular teenager. Anything I did was rejected by them and anything they said was rejected by me, obviously. So the more they discouraged me, the more engaged I became. This also influenced my emotional life, in terms of relationships.

Sexual Discovery

At the time, I wasn't yet aware of being bisexual, because I was raised in a hetero world. So in my first relationships with men, I kind of repressed my sexuality, because this was how it was supposed to be – you know, sex only after marriage and so on. But coming back to the question of faith, later on as a young adult, when I realised that I was bisexual and when I came out to myself and saw myself as a bisexual person, I was immediately ok with it. So I didn't have any conflict about it. But, of course, I was aware of what the Roman Catholic Church says about same sex relationships and how excluding it is for LGBTI people. I'd say I was around 22 when I came out to myself, which means this was around 2002. So then I was aware that my church doesn't want me the way I am and the way I kind of accept myself. So this triggered in me the reaction of, *well, if you don't want me, I don't want you. I don't want to push myself in there*. Even though my personal faith was still very active and engaged – I read a lot, I prayed a lot – I didn't attend the church. I didn't go to Mass and I didn't take the sacraments. It was difficult, because sacraments are very important for me.

In the meantime, I started a relationship with my partner, whom I'm with right now. All the time, there was this feeling that my faith life was very vivid and really important and intense, but my religious life was kind of wavering. Sometimes I would attend the Mass, sometimes I wouldn't. I didn't take communion, I didn't take the sacraments, I didn't go to confession. Then there was a breakthrough moment, when I was asked by my partner's brother to become a godmother to his child. At first I said, *no, absolutely no way*. First thing, I'm not a regular church member and I wouldn't feel ok. You can treat the role of a godparent in Poland just culturally, and the majority of people treat it rather as a custom and maybe understand the role of a godparents as a bit like a support for the parents, in case something happens to the child – the godparents are supposed to take care of it. But not really in religious terms. But I wanted to be honest, and I knew that the role of a godparent is to bring the child to church and I kind of didn't feel up to it. Then we had a very important conversation in the family – and this is something that will stay with me forever – because we had a family dinner with my partner's family and the topic was again brought up. They requested that I was the godmother. I said, *no, come on, no way*, for various reasons. And my partner's grandmother said that if you asked to be a godmother, you don't say no! Then my partner's mother and her brother said a lot of nice things to me, like I was a responsible person and that they believed I would be a good godmother and that I would care for the child, and so on and so forth. I had this moment of recognition, that this was the Holy Spirit talking to me – like this was the Holy Spirit saying, *Come on, you have this child, you have the church. You have to make the church good for the child, to bring it to church. I mean, the church now is kind of shitty, but this is your calling to make it better for this child*.

I was 32, because the child is now 13. And I treated it just like a call of the Holy Spirit, so I kind of returned to the church, but on my own terms. This was also the time when I learned a lot about the idea in the Catholic Church of the primacy of conscience. This was the time when I began to engage in *Faith & Rainbow* and we talked a lot about this idea. The general idea of primacy of conscience is that conscience is the most important thing. It's more important than church teaching; it's more im-

portant than what the Pope says; it's actually *the* most important [thing]. Of course, in the Catholic Church there is this document called The Catechism of the Catholic Church and in the Catechism, there are all sorts of *yes, buts*. The conscience needs to be properly formed under the guidance of the Catholic Church, blah blah blah. But the main idea is that conscience is the most important. Now I have two god-children – one from my partner's family, the other from my brother's family – and I think it's important that the parents of these children are not very religious themselves. For them, it was more important that I was kind of a responsible person. They preferred that to someone who was radically orthodox.

Returning to the Fold

So as I said, this was the time when I returned to the Catholic Church, but on my own terms. I stood firmly by this opinion that there was nothing wrong with being queer, non-straight – or in my case, bisexual – that my relationship with my partner was not a sin, and so there's nothing to confess. So when I go to confession, I confess that I quarrelled with her or I didn't treat her with respect, and not that we had sex – because this is something that's good and beautiful.

So I kind of returned to the church with this mindset, and as a consequence, got engaged not only in *Faith & Rainbow*, which I will talk about later – it's important – but also in a movement of lay Catholics, the Congress of Catholics. Its name is significant in Polish as it includes both genders – male and female Catholics and it kind of stresses female participation in it. It's a Polish organisation that wants to improve the church from the inside, modernise it and make it more responsive to developments in the world. I was active in it for five years. I've only recently dropped out because I simply have no more time nor space for it. But I support them with all my heart. So my religious life is now quite regular, I would say, and intense in terms of being active in *Faith & Rainbow* and the Congress of Catholics and in various other activities and charities.

My faith life is also quite intense, because I try to attend Mass regularly, every Sunday. I pray a lot. I don't do any specific spiritual practices like meditation or specific prayers. I try to pray in the sense of constantly being in the presence of God, rather than saying prayers word by word. So this is a little bit meditative, but I would call it maybe mindfulness in the presence of God. I would say that's for me.

In terms of where I go to Mass, that depends. I have my local parish where I turn up from time to time at the Mass just to remind the parish priest that I exist, because he knows both of us. We have two parish priests and they both know us as a couple. So sometimes I go there, but I attend two other churches regularly that are not parish churches. One is a Dominican church and the other is kind of a community church for artists. Neither of them are parish churches. The artists' ministry church is quite open; the priest is open-minded and there's a supportive community. I really like it.

Sexuality

I'd like to share how my attraction to more than one gender developed and evolved over the years. As I said, I was brought up in a heteronormative environment so I believe that until my late teenage years, I didn't really know anything about non-straight people. I'd heard of gays somewhere but you have to remember, these were the 1990s in Poland, so not much was said about it. I was also brought up in an average sized town, maybe not a small town, but it was also not a city. My parents don't have higher education. They are reasonably open-minded, given their background, but I didn't know anything about LGBT people. It was only when I went to study in Warsaw that my horizons kind of broadened. I also started asking questions, started asking myself, *how do I feel, what are my sexual feelings towards women?*

At this time, I was also in between relationships with men, and I started treating myself with curiosity, looking at my reactions. At a certain point – I was in my early 20s – I realised that *yes, obviously I'm bisexual*, even though I'd had no experiences of romantic relationships with

women, or sexual relationships. I maybe had kind of infatuations, but nothing very serious. Then I realised, *yeah, I'm bisexual!*

So I was between relationships, and I realised that I could kind of be open to relationships with women and actually, after coming out, all of my serious and long-lasting relationships were with women, serious in terms of not just meeting once or twice, but really thinking seriously about them. For an outsider, it could look like I turned from straight to gay, because I only had relationships with men and then I only had relationships with women. But my identity is definitely bisexual, and my relationship with my partner is monogamous. I don't feel like I would like to kind of complete my sexual or romantic desires by having a relationship with a man, too. But I am bisexual and it's a very important identity.

In terms of differences between relationships with men and with women, I can't really name anything specific, definitely not that my relationships with women have been, for example, more emotional than with men. Of course, the dynamics are different, but they were both the same – satisfactory or not satisfactory – in the same way. With regard to my current relationship, we've been together for 20 years now. So this year we have an anniversary!

Coming Out

I came out when I was 20 something; it was around 2002. It was after I left my hometown (1998) and I started living in Warsaw. I went to study in Warsaw and I just stayed. At first I thought I would return, because when I started university, I was in a relationship with a man who lived back there. And the idea was for me to finish my studies and come back. But in the meantime, everything – and I mean everything – showed me that it was better for me to live in Warsaw, in terms of being away from my parents in terms of being independent, on my own, in terms of professional opportunities. All of it.

My coming out stories are very diverse, starting from the very traumatic coming out to my parents, to the absolutely non-traumatic coming

out in my work environment. My parents, as I said, are from a mid-sized town, but their backgrounds are rural – they are both from rural families. They are quite conservative; they are not narrow-minded, but they are kind of like *petit bourgeoisie* – you know, everything is supposed to be properly presentable, and the way people see us is very important. So for them, my coming out was a shock and they were very negative about it. I came out to them in a letter. I thought it would be a good idea to write it down, so that they didn't hear it from me, but had time to kind of cool down. It was a bad idea, as it turned out. I wrote that I am in a serious relationship with a woman, and that I wanted to be in serious relationship, and that I was bisexual. And I think it was all a shock and it really caused a very negative reaction. My mother didn't speak to me for eight years. I have always had better contact with my father than with my mother and even though he struggled with the situation really, he tried to maintain contact with me as much as he could. We would call one another once a week or every other week and he would just ask if I was ok and that was it. So that was a very difficult time.

In time, our relationship, my relationship, with my parents improved. Now we talk about things, we visit one another. They visit us; we visit them. But I don't have any kind of strong relationship with my mother. My partner and I started visiting them together a few years ago; it's important for me to stress that my parents' reaction was never about my partner, it was about me. And my partner is a nice person, she's likeable. So with time, my relationship with my parents ... I wouldn't say improved.... has normalised. My coming out and my relationship was the shattering of my parents' expectations. On a side note, my brother did the same shattering of expectations because he went to live abroad, and we don't have any other siblings. We're both kind of not directly available for our parents.

So our relationship with my parents is now ok, but I'm not really enthusiastic about it. My brother has always been very supportive; I came out to him a little earlier than to my parents, and he was totally ok. He's younger than me, five years younger, and he was totally ok with it all the time, very supportive. His wife was also very supportive. She was the one who tried to talk my parents into accepting me and she managed,

to some extent. The relationship with my partner's family is a totally different issue, because they had accepted her almost from the beginning, when she came out. Her whole family was either accepting, or didn't say anything. I had a very warm and really nice relationship with her grandmother before she died a few years ago. We're very much welcome and loved, and the family are here in Warsaw, so we have a very strong kind of safety net because of them.

Being Out as Bisexual

Our parish priests don't know I'm bisexual. The priests of our parish are very traditional and they obviously struggle with the idea of us as a couple. In Poland, we have a custom that once a year, the priest visits everyone in the parish. Then they make notes about each household in the parish files. Children are supposed to present their books and notes from religion class. It's ridiculous, nobody likes it. But it happens. They visit us every two years, because our parish is quite big. It's pretty awkward, but the priests try to be really brave. They come in and they either try to act like they don't condemn anything and don't say anything bad about us, they're not negative – but they're kind of withdrawn and very official and very formal. I think one of them said 'your partner' though, so it's not like 'your colleague' or 'your friend.' We are a couple and we present ourselves as a couple. I think that's a lot for them to take in. I don't really think it makes sense to try and explain to them what a bisexual is. At the artists' community church – I don't know whether the priest knows that I'm bisexual, I'll have to ask him – he knows that I'm in a same-sex relationship. He knows that I'm active in *Faith & Rainbow*; he knows all of this.

There have never been any issues at work; they know I'm bisexual – but then I am the most senior person in my company! The company is small, but apart from my boss, I have worked there the longest. I've always been there for everybody so nobody's going to trouble me. And it's always been obvious, because we are quite closely knit at the company, so we talk about family life, and so on. So everybody knows I'm with Magda,

that I'm her partner and so on. And I never kind of did any coming out, like *Hey, I'm Uschi, I'm not straight, I'm bi!* I'm always talking about my partner, it's obvious that I'm not straight. I never say, *Hi I'm bisexual*, but some of them know because, when we talk about our past relationships, I always mention I was in relationships with men. So some of them know, some of them don't.

I like my pigeonhole, I like my label, but it should be more relaxed. People should be less fixated on labels. If you see something in a person, don't assume that it's always been like that and it will always be like that – and that's not only about sexuality or orientation, but also gender identity or ability or disability or illness or health, or anything.

Just don't make assumptions.

The Ideal Church

An ideal church for me would be a Roman Catholic Church where I can get married to my partner and where I am just treated like another member – not only because of my orientation or my sexual relationship, but also as a woman, which is an issue in the Roman Catholic church. Being female and queer is just... difficult. I dream of a church of equals. That would be it. Everybody is equal and nobody is too stressed about judging others.

It's more difficult to be a woman than LGBT in the Catholic Church. I say this because I'm used to playing second fiddle to men at church, to being a second-class citizen. I'm quite ok in our society, as a woman, but as a LGBT+ person, I'm not. In the church, I'm neither ok as a woman nor as a LGBT+ person. In Poland, as a state, I'm a second-class citizen. So it's just the same in the Church and it hasn't really got any better. Right now we're fighting for a civil union law, which it is hoped will be adopted by the parliament, because at the moment we have a parliament that's more centre-left. However, we have a conservative president and a constitutional court and even if the act is adopted in the parliament, there's no way it's going to be signed by the president or at least by the present president. We're going to have a presidential election in May or June, so

we'll see. I've been fighting for same sex civil unions for the last 20 something years. I'm kind of tired.

I would consider leaving Poland if it was not safe for us to live here. But it would be very difficult, because my partner would feel very, very bad about leaving Poland. Sometimes we joke that if we had to leave, we would leave for two countries that start with the letter H in Polish – Spain and the Netherlands, “Hiszpania” and “Holandia”. So it would either be Spain or the Netherlands. These are the places that we would consider, but right now, we don't want to leave. I speak Spanish and we like Spain, but in the Netherlands we have a safety net – my brother and his family.

Who is Jesus to Me?

Jesus is God. I am very much into the idea of the Trinity. So he's not the most important, but he is God. He's the most male of the whole Trinity. I think maybe my relationship with Jesus is not as important to me as God the Father and the Holy Spirit, because for me, he's kind of in between. I'm not really sure whether he's human and I should treat him as human, or he's God and I should treat him as God. But I love reading the Gospel and I love reading what he said and what he did. Obviously, he is a God for me, but there is this kind of unclarity. So my relationship, in terms of the Trinity, is definitely strongest with the Holy Spirit.

Jesus definitely feels queer-friendly to me, because he was friendly towards practically everyone who was a good person. I have a problem with saying he welcomed those on the margins. Because saying that Jesus accepts us because he accepted everybody from the margins puts us at the margins – and I don't want to be on the margins. I want to be in the middle, in the mainstream. I think this narrative is in almost all the Christian churches, that we are on the margins, that the church should go to the margins and meet us and welcome us.

I have a problem with the story of Zaccheus, the one who climbed the tree to see Jesus, because he was a sinner and Jesus came to him. It's like when you say Jesus went out and welcomed sinners. Of course everybody is a sinner, but somehow the LGBT people are “more” sinners than the

rest. I have a problem with this narrative of Jesus coming to the people on the margins and Jesus welcoming the sinners, because then you assume that we LGBT people are on the margins and we are the only sinners, which is not true.

On Being Bi

I would say the bright side of being bi is the broader perspective. It's important for me that I have the experience of being in relationships with men and women. I think I have more experience, a broader perspective, but not in terms of what Woody Allen said, that you can date twice as many people! I'm not speaking about dating opportunities. It's more about knowing what it's like to be in a relationship with a man and with a woman.

In terms of being out as a bisexual person in the church context, I need to stress that I don't have a lot of social relationships in the church. I am, or used to be, active in various charities, and sometimes I socialise with people in the church outside of this context, but not much, apart from that initiative I mentioned earlier, the Congress of Catholics. And then I would say it is revolutionary that I say absolutely openly that I am in a relationship with a woman, whenever the context is appropriate, of course. I think that's shocking enough for people and usually I don't come out as bi. I don't have the energy to try and clarify that I am bisexual. It's enough that I am in a relationship with a woman. So whenever I'm asked about what I am, in such a context, I prefer to identify by being in a relationship with a woman. If there is space for it, then I clarify that I am bisexual. It's also quite difficult for me to explain it to children. For children in our family, or in our friends' children, for whom it's quite obvious that I'm in a relationship with another woman, it's kind of unnecessary to explain that I'm bisexual. Some teenagers will ask me about my past and I am totally open to sharing and to explaining, but very often I just feel there is neither space nor a need to do it.

Hopes for the Future

My hopes for the future are political and more related to me being in a same-sex relationship, than with me being bisexual. I hope for civil unions and I really hope for marriage equality somewhere in the future. Maybe I will live long enough to see that. And I also hope for more equality in my church, for the recognition of equality and equal dignity – for women, for LGBT people, for everybody.

I used to be more politically active, now I'm not so much, but it's always somewhere at the back of my mind. I try to do as much as I can as a member of the organisation, to do whatever I can. I'd say that when *Faith & Rainbow* started 15 years ago, we started as a self-help group. Now we're developing more into awareness raising and educational activities, though self-help and creating safe spaces are always the most important thing for us. But we're moving a little bit into awareness raising and educating society and religious communities. Recently, for example, we've had a very interesting awareness raising campaign about conversion "therapies" and other such pseudo-scientific psychological practices and how harmful they are. So we're trying to educate people as much as we can. There isn't so much conversion therapy in Poland but there is the Catholic Church and its teaching. It includes this idea that yes, some people are born homosexual and they should be treated with respect, but they are called to live in chastity. So you're not supposed to have sex and this idea fuels certain groups to try... it's not so much about trying to turn gays into straight people – although also happens – but rather into living a chaste life. There are some such groups in Poland (not many, luckily), and we have people who have been really damaged and hurt. I don't think in the Catholic Church it's on the same scale as in the evangelical churches.

Not everyone in *Faith & Rainbow* is Catholic. It is an ecumenical group and we stress it a lot; it's important for our identity. We don't really have non-believers, but we have non-denominational members, sure, and people who are searching or who are spiritual rather than Christian – seekers, maybe. We have a lot of supporters and allies who respect what we do, who support what we do, who are not necessarily

religious people. For example, from within the LGBT community, we have some supporters and some allies, who just don't get why we do the religion thing!

This chapter reflects the personal experiences, memories and interpretations of the author. Names and identifying details have been changed or omitted for privacy.