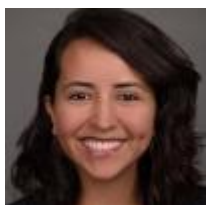Participants in the Imago Dei assembly, held June 27-30 at the Bergamo Center for Lifelong Learning in Dayton, Ohio. The gathering was hosted by the LGBTQ+ Initiative of the Marianist Social Justice Collaborative. (Courtesy of LGBTQ+ Initiative)

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LGBTQ+ people are made in the image and likeness of God and are born with an inherent dignity that must be respected. This principle is reflected in the richness of Catholic social teaching, and beautifully understood and lived out by the [Marianist Social Justice Collaborative](#).

The LGBTQ+ Initiative of the Marianist Social Justice Collaborative recently hosted [Imago Dei](#), a June 27-30 conference celebrating LGBTQ+ ministry, at the Bergamo Center for Lifelong Learning in Dayton, Ohio. More than 135 participants from across the U.S. — including LGBTQ+ Catholics, allies, ministers and friends — gathered to learn, get to know each other and explore the possibilities and limitations in evolving pastoral care of LGBTQ+ persons within the Roman Catholic tradition.

"We have been thrilled with the broad sponsorship from Catholic organizations, institutions, and many vowed religious congregations of sisters, brothers, and priests," said Sarah Gray, executive director of the Marianist Social Justice Collaborative.

Imago Dei marked the 50th anniversary of the first groundbreaking Bergamo conference held in 1974, then called "The Gay Christian." The original conference was an effort to respond to the call from the Second Vatican Council. Some of the original conference attendees were present at Imago Dei, such as Loretto Sr. [Jeannine Gramick](#), who has been doing prophetic and groundbreaking work in the field for more than 50 years.

On Friday morning, Jesuit Fr. [James Martin](#) delivered the keynote address and presented a summary of the [synod on synodality](#), reminding us that the Holy Spirit is still working in the church and encouraging us not to despair.

The morning prayer and keynote were followed by two sets of concurrent sessions with topics such as the intersection of race and LGBTQ+ ministry, and queer ecology.

Saturday's plenary session was a panel on ministry to transgender persons moderated by Dominican Sr. [Louisa Derouen](#). One of the participants in the panel was opera star Breanna Sinclairé, who made history by being the first trans singer to

perform the national anthem at a professional sporting event. Sinclairé shared her inspiring story and the challenges and injustice she has had to overcome, highlighting the fact that trans people regularly suffer discrimination, harassment and injustice — and the fact that these rates are even higher against trans people of color.

This panel was followed by a set of concurrent sessions, which included a session about the gift of the nonbinary child, and the session I led on best practice in inclusive parish ministries.

The Saturday activities also included a panel titled "The Blessing of LGBTQ+ Persons in the Church: A Response to Fiducia Supplicans," where LGBTQ+ Catholics who are married or partnered shared where they see God in their relationships and the unique gifts that being a same-sex couple brings to the church. Among the gifts mentioned were love, companionship, discernment and a deep spirituality.

"This gathering embodies our longtime Marianist commitment to inclusivity and Mary's warmth of welcome in all our communities and ministries," said Brian Halderman, chair of the LGBTQ+ Initiative. "We are building on Pope Francis' call to encounter all peoples, especially those whom the church has historically pushed to the margins."

At the closing liturgy on Sunday, Tony and Beth Garascia — longtime lay Marianists and parents of three children, two of whom are LGBTQ — shared a reflection. "Throughout this weekend we have been called to be fiercely compassionate," said Tony. "Fierce compassion is the way forward."