

*In the Bible it is written that God is love, and I realised that if God created me and let me come to this world that means He loves me like He loves others.'*

This is the story of a gay man in Eastern Europe, who is active in his church. He has not yet come out, but has come a long way in reconciling his faith and sexuality.

When my country became independent from Soviet rule in 1991, we had a rebirth of faith. The churches reopened and Christianity was back. I was a student at the time and didn't know anything about God, until one of my friends told me about a small Christian group that met a few times a week in a little place. They prayed, read the Bible, and talked about Christianity. I asked her to take me one day and she did.

After the meeting, I found a peace in me that was different to what I had experienced before, so I kept going. Two years later, the Apostolic Church offered training for Sunday school teachers, which I took up, and I worked as one for seven years. After graduating from university, I returned to my hometown and found a church in one of the villages. I started to attend and, in my early twenties, I was baptised, before doing two years of military service. After my service, I returned home.

One Sunday, the priest asked if I could help him with the service, because he knew I had been a Sunday school teacher. I was shocked and told him I was afraid to serve at the altar as a simple sinner who wasn't ordained, and I was afraid God would punish me. He reassured me and said he would teach me all I needed. So, I started to help him on Sundays, and I learned to do some of the duties of a deacon during the Liturgy.

But my involvement with my church wasn't always smooth; my relatives were worried I'd become a priest and not get married. It was very unusual for them, they didn't know who God is or what Christianity is. But I stayed strong in my faith and told them, 'You didn't have a believer in your family, but now you have and I am not going to leave my church'. Some years later, my relatives followed me, and my mother, sisters and nephews are now baptised too.

I was offered a place at a seminary but I refused. I'm active in my church and help with different activities, but I couldn't imagine being a gay priest. I have not yet come out. My family, most of my straight friends and my church don't know I'm gay. I don't know if I will ever be able to come out; I'm just too afraid to lose what I have gained all these years. I'm not sure I'd be allowed to participate in church services or whether my friends and family would still want to know me if they found out I'm gay. Many people in my country think that homosexuality is a sickness that has to be cured; that if you're gay you're a bad person and they want nothing to do with you. I can sacrifice myself, but not my mother. I don't want to cause her any problems.

When I realised I was gay, I already had my Christian faith and I had a battle in my brain. On the one hand I knew the view of the Church about homosexuality, and on the other hand I knew what my orientation was. I kept asking myself, 'Why me? Why can't I be the same as other people?' These questions stayed with me for years and I tried to find the answers. I searched the internet for articles about homosexuality and psychology and came to understand that I didn't become gay, I was born like that, but it didn't really help me to accept myself. I needed to understand more, because the two natures of me, the Christian and the homosexual, were struggling.

Luckily I found a gay Catholic priest in the USA to write to. He helped me see things from a different point of view and I came to understand Christianity is actually a very free and liberal religion. In the Bible it is written that God is love, and I realised that if God created me and let me come to this world that means He loves me like He loves others. I can say for sure that God is with me and will never leave me, He has saved my life. He lets us make mistakes and learn from our mistakes, but He always leads us. I know God loves me.

You start to accept yourself more as you get older. I can't say that my sexuality and faith are in harmony, but I try to be myself as a gay Christian. First of all I want people to see the human in me. The traditions here are strong, and attitudes can be very homophobic. As a gay person, I think differently from many of these traditions and I interpret scripture according to my own understanding – each person makes their own relationship with God. God examines our hearts and He knows who I am. I have a good relationship with God, but I know He wants me to be better. I hope He will help me to understand more and to get wiser.

I hope for a better time for all of us.