

## Pride of the Believers

Greg Clemons

2 Corinthians 6:1-13

June 24, 2012 Gay Pride Sunday

## The Coming-Out God

Marc Mullinax

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An opening prayer (from *Out in Scripture*):

*God of grace and God of glory, on your people pour your power. Grant us the ability to be open and vulnerable to one another, accepting each other in love. Reveal to us the limits of our own capacity to know what we deem to be the truth. Pour your spirit into us and enable us to see that your work is not simply about popularity, fame, or fortune. Provide us the insight to know that your ministry is advanced in various ways, often in hard and difficult places. Amen.*

As I begin my words this evening, I will read, first from the Spanish original and then in English, one of my favorite passages from an Argentine novel I recently translated into English:

*Desde muy temprano, la mañana designada para la inolvidable pompa, los convidados colmaron las naves. Por supuesto, la chusma sólo sería admitida después de que la nobleza, formada por las complejas ramas de la familia Von Orbs zu Orbs, se retirara del templo. No convenía mezclar allí perfumes contradictorios.*

*Starting very early on the morning selected for the unforgettable event, guests filled the naves of the cathedral. Of course the commoners would only be admitted after the royalty forming the complex branches of the von Orbs zu Orbs family tree had left; it was not a good idea to mix up unfamiliar scents in there.*

This passage is about the arrival of royalty, their departure, and then the commoners being allowed into an enormous cathedral, the size of which I envision to be similar to the one at Chartres or Notre Dame in Paris. The commoners and the members of the aristocratic Von Orbs family are on hand for its inauguration. However, they do not know that its humble builder, a man named Hercules, has secretly designed a complex set of ropes and pulleys that with one good solid yank will bring about the complete destruction of the gigantic structure in an attempt to kill off his wife's clan.

At a specific moment in the opening ceremony, the evil Count Benno Von Orbs zu Orbs, brother-in-law of Hercules, thinking he is sounding the bells of the cathedral, pulls on a beautiful purple tassel attached to a braided cord rising up toward the dome to the rigged system of pulleys and wires. Within seconds, the enormous church comes crashing to the ground, killing most of its visitors.

The paragraph I read to you is from the opening chapter of the 1967 novel *Crónicas Reales*, or *Royal Chronicles*, as I have translated it. Now, aside from the scene in my opening quotation, about which in a few minutes I will comment, within and around this novel are some curious pieces of information that I just love to share with students as I am teaching. One of the jobs of a translator is to transform a written text in one language into a text in a second language with as near perfect sense and feel as it was written in the original language; this without question also has been and continues to be today the job of biblical scholars such as our beloved friend Marc Mullinax.

One of my jobs as a literature professor is to make a text in a second language connect with "the real world"—whatever on Earth that is! Each spring in the Senior Seminar for Spanish majors at Mars Hill College, their first assignment is to translate this novel's opening chapter. Included within their first written reactions to such an apparently trivial task are comments such as: "How in the world do you do this?" or, "Wow, this requires a lot of work!" or as one student this spring said, "Now I *know* I don't want to be a translator when I graduate!" But their second question, after a little more thought, is usually, "What did the author mean by this?" or, "What does he mean when he writes here in Spanish X, Y or Z?"

I'd like to offer an explanation of what the author might have meant when he warned against mixing unfamiliar scents, so let's head back to the initial passage I quoted. At Mars Hill College, as I work with students on classroom assignments (such as giving students the chance to translate texts) and out-of-class projects (in my case, being an advocate and friend for GLBTQ students, helping students decide if they want to travel abroad, or providing assistance to my freshmen about deepening their comprehension about AIDS and HIV through the Western North Carolina AIDS Project), I tie as much information about the "real world" as I can to those tasks.

Manuel Mujica Lainez, the writer of *Royal Chronicles*, was born in Buenos Aires in 1910 and passed away at his family's estate near Córdoba, Argentina, in 1984. His family was one of *the* founding families of the city of Buenos Aires, descendants all of noble Spanish conquistadors from north central Spain. He was married in his early 20s to Ana Alvear, whose family line was more patrician even than his. They had three children, and Manuel went on to become one of Argentina's premier journalists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

During his lifetime, he published 30 novels, translated several works from French into Spanish, and collaborated with photographers and artists on what I call large "coffee table books," or decorative door stops that are known for their display of beautiful, exquisite, and aesthetically pleasing objects. I am in regular contact with his daughter in Buenos Aires about what our next project to honor her father will be.

But the exciting parts about biographies, for me at least, are the "secrets," the "little known tidbits" of information, things I can "sniff out"—the scandalous facts that we researchers uncover, more often than not for the common good, shame, or pride of the surviving family members. Manuel Mujica Lainez was famous for many things: he was an extremely talented writer, he had impeccable taste for art and sculpture from around the world, he loved his family dearly, and he had a tremendous sense of sarcastic humor.

He was also a gay man, a personal fact that he shared with a select few of his fellow writers and with his family. But after several years of archival research on him, I have come to the conclusion that this secret was known by virtually everyone. But few literary critics have made note of this. For me, it has become an intriguing aspect of this man's complex self that helps us to better understand him.

I return to my opening quote. Only after the aristocrats had left the church would the commoners, or as the narrator calls them scornfully in Spanish, *la chusma*—"the rabble"—be allowed to enter the cathedral. The narrator says, "It was not a good idea to mix up unfamiliar scents in here"—meaning basically don't admit someone wearing Chanel Number 5 with someone else wearing a scent of lesser quality or price on the same day!

Now I don't know about you, but I find it somewhat unsettling that this paragraph's writer, a gay man, tells the reader that we need to be careful with whom we associate. A gay man, a member of what we call today an "underrepresented minority," is telling us to keep social classes apart: separate *la chusma* from the more "acceptable" classes!

His novel was published in 1967, a time of tremendously exciting social upheaval in Argentina. It was a time when, if anything, social classes were trying to come together for the common good. When he published this novel, Manuel was 56. He was witnessing around him in Argentina momentous social changes, such as the sexual revolution, the appearance of female and homosexual liberation, and revolutionary music from such singers, groups, and events as Bob Dylan, The Beatles, and Woodstock.

His regular employment with Argentina's major national newspaper without a doubt allowed him to read about the activism of two of my heroes, Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X—and across the UPI or AP wires no doubt hear about the short-lived glory of the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood in San Francisco. In other words, he was by no means blind to the world outside his front door.

Then why open his novel in 1967 with such a generalization about class distinction, one that smells of bigotry? All this from a man in whose family estate near Cordoba, Argentina, hangs a black-and-white picture of him wearing a turtleneck and a woman's wig, the spitting image of Carol Channing?

If you have been paying attention thus far, you are asking the right question: Why did Manuel write that statement as a gay man? I have two answers, neither of which is exhaustive.

First, he began writing the novel in the dead of winter in the Southern Cone, on July 28, 1966, exactly one month to the day after Argentina suffered a military takeover lead by General Juan Onganía. As with most military coups in Latin America, this one created tremendous fear among the people. In Argentina the military were rounding up off streets all over the country those they called "subversives": mostly men with long hair wearing bell-bottom pants whose appearance suggested non-conformity.

Less for what he wore than for his sexual orientation, Manuel knew he had to be quite careful about his choice of words as he started writing *Royal Chronicles*. But because of the elite status of his family and ancestral weight of their family name, he figured that the military would not dare arrest a descendant of one of the founders of Argentina.

Second, he was a writer within a tight group of elite Argentine intellectuals poised to shape the course of their national literature. He and his counterparts premised their literary texts on techniques such as multiple or shifting points of view and chapters that could be read in different orders.

Thus, being the wordsmith he was, he was able to use semantics in ways his readers could interpret any way they wanted to during years when anything but the status quo was being accepted and taken as the norm. In fact, the 12 chapters were not written in the order they now appear. The chapter that includes tonight's quote about separating social classes by smell was actually written fifth—on August 19, 1966, just under one month after the military coup.

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Right after the horrendous events that we refer to as "9-11," I began noticing a higher-than-normal increase in one aspect of Asheville I love dearly: the bumper sticker. At this point in time I think we had already seen plenty of "We Still Pray" and "God Loves AVL." Then appeared one that I still see around town today: "The Power of Pride."

In 1 Samuel 17 we read a description of Goliath as he is ready to take on any Israelite. By giving us the many details of his outerwear, we are nearly forced to take pride in such accumulation, in such possessions, in such displays of showiness. (Such is the same approach in Homer's *Iliad* as the warriors prepare for battle.)

It's almost as if once he turned around, all bundled up and ready, he walked away and there was one of those bumper stickers on his butt, "The Power of Pride," for all to see! And the same was, or perhaps continues to be, true for those bumper sticker-wielding conservatives who seem to be telling us, "The more I can show you about my faithfulness to my country, the more power I have over you."

But as David preps for his battle against Goliath, he chooses not to wear all the "necessary" battle gear, carrying only a slingshot and a rock. By lessening his load, by taking pride in just himself, he is able to bring Goliath to his downfall. "To heck with all the additional 'wants' and 'needs,' I am good just the way I am," he seems to tell us.

In 2 Corinthians 6:1-13, we are given pause to reflect on all that we have been through: the hardships, the onslaught of "proud ones" extolling their smugness on us as if to call us lesser citizens than they. As if designed for Gay Pride Day here at COM, the Scripture tells us:

*Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation. We put no obstacle in any one's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we commend*

*ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labors, watching, hunger; by purity, knowledge, forbearance, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God... We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing.*

Over the years, during the month of June, as I have attended Gay Pride marches in different cities around the country, I always returned home struck by two things: the extravagance of pure spectacle that is a Gay Pride parade and its very joyous simplicity. We gays sure know how to put on a show! On many occasions my partner Jim and I, watching a float roll by, have said to each other, "How did they do that?!" or "Where *did* they find those outfits?!"

On many more—as I remember taking in all the different types, sizes, abilities and disabilities, colors, hues, sexual orientations, ages of all the attendees—I remained awestruck by the sheer boundless energy of pride, by all the people gathered together in one park or on one street to celebrate being together, to believe that our one uniting bond is our sexual orientation. Unlike Manuel's opening description of separating social classes, at Gay Pride no one cares what perfume or cologne you wear—just be yourself, as extravagant as you want or as simple as you care to make it!

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Today as I reflect on Gay Pride Month with you, I do it quietly, without a bumper sticker, similar to how Manuel must have done it. I take the time to remember those gay men and women (and all colors and stripes in between) for whose actions, written words, strength, and lack of embarrassment I am duly thankful.

I can remember the first Gay Pride parade I went to, in Atlanta, Georgia, in the late 1980s. I was so excited to leave north central Florida, where I was attending graduate school, for Atlanta, a place I knew only as much further north and figured would be cooler. Our little group rolled into "Hot-lanta" giddy with excitement and bursting with gay pride.

The parade was on a Sunday, so we spent the entire weekend out with friends we knew and of course making new ones. The weekend unrolled like a song from a Pet Shop Boys album! Like a child at Christmas, I hardly slept the night before the march. We woke up Sunday morning, grabbed some breakfast, and headed to Piedmont Park to await the parade.

Since I had never seen one before, I had no idea what to expect. We heard the approach of the first engines leading the parade. There was a group of about 20 topless lesbians—or as they affectionately called themselves, "dykes on bikes"—leading off the procession. (This, I have learned over the years, is how many cities around the country start off their parades. I'll save you the details about those women on motorcycles, but let's just say I saw things my momma never told me about when I was growing up a sheltered little boy in the Midwest!)

I still think back on my first Gay Pride parade with wonder, with surprise, with awe—and of course with pride. If it weren't for these summer rituals across the United States, the rites of passage we all believed in, we in our gay communities would have no way of celebrating who we are, where we have come from, where we are headed.

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I run every Sunday with Frontrunners at Carrier Park. Frontrunners is a national GLBTQ and straight-allies running group for all who are interested in running. Four of us show up regularly here in

Asheville. One of them, Tim, attended Bob Jones University in Greenville, South Carolina. He has told us his stories about campus life as a gay man. (“*What* campus life?” I have often asked!)

Well, today, June 24<sup>th</sup>, 2012, he and fellow alums are marching in the New York City Gay Pride parade! He is excited (and a bit nervous, he admits) to finally be able to express himself outwardly. He is out to his family, and he has been with a wonderful man now for many years.

Today I think of Tim and his fellow BJU alums and of Psalm 9 with its exhortations to us: “For God who avenges blood is mindful of them and does not forget the cry of the afflicted. Be gracious to me, O Lord! Behold what I suffer from those who hate me, O thou who liftest me up from the gates of death, that I may recount all thy praises...For the needy shall not always be forgotten, and the hope of the poor shall not perish forever.”

Gay youth today, many seem to think, have it so easy. Society seems to be more “accepting” of different sexual orientations and expressions of sexuality. A simple definition of *family* is no longer found on page 596 of Merriam Webster’s dictionary.

But let us not forget that bigotry and homophobia, the “afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, and tumults” of 2 Corinthians 6 are all around us. Let us never forget the brutal murder of Matthew Shepard or the ugly events at Tufts University. The young homosexuals who are targets face more obstacles, work, and struggles than anyone should ever have to experience.

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and tumults” of 2 Corinthians 6 are all around us.***

At Circle of Mercy we do a really good job of mixing “unfamiliar scents,” and this evening we officially recognize (my advanced apologies; I have no other way of saying it) the aroma of sexual orientation. For us gathered in this room, our Open and Affirming status is a continual, defining feature of who we are.

Like the Argentine writer Manuel Mujica Lainez, whose sexual orientation was but one of his defining features, you who support efforts to look at sexual orientation as just that are the true believers. Orientation is just one part of a gay person, not the central feature, as many in our society today want to think.

As a gay man, I am proud to know that you are proud to be part of this effort. To all of you, thank you very much, and God bless. Amen.

## **The Coming-Out God by Marc Mullinax**

It’s sorta strange for me to be here on this Gay Pride Sunday. Across our nation and around the world, mostly in non-religious gatherings, Gay Pride celebrants are marching, parading, and celebrating. Love comes in a lot of colors, and configurations. As Nancy Sehested reminded us a few weeks ago, “biblical marriage” was a complicated picture. As then, so now. Love happens in a lot of ways. Part of this Circle’s mission is to be around to recognize and celebrate it.

Okay, Marc, O straight one, where do you fit in? What gives you the right to fill this space on *this* day? You’ve never marched, never had to hide, never had your job in jeopardy, never felt life to be in danger. Where’s *your* closet?

Point 1, and it’s a bit weak: Some psychologies have it that we are not 100 percent gay or straight, that there’s this mixture of whatever we think we are (straight or gay or bi), plus a little bit of whatever we think (or hope) that we are not. The closest I have come consciously to understanding being gay—the

only ledge upon which I feel like I can stand up here—occurred back in 1991, during the week that the United States bombed Iraq in that year's Gulf War.

I was in Rio de Janeiro, on a liberation theology study course through Union Seminary, sponsored by the Plowshares Institute. Sid Foster, who now edits the daily "Out In Scripture" website (<http://sites.hrc.org/scripture/bios.asp>), was my roommate.

I was cool with that. I went to a seminary where people of whiteness, and maleness, and straightness, and Southern-ness, were all in a minority. My best friend at Mars Hill College back in the 1970s had come out to me, and I thought I'd got this this gay, this non-straight, thing covered.

One afternoon in Rio, Sid and I are walking together around the city on a beautiful summery January afternoon, thankful that we were not in some meeting or schedule, just seeing the sights. We wander into a zone of the city that neither of us knew about, but all I knew, after a minute or two, was that whatever gay-dar I had was pinging off the charts. I noticed people scoping me out, which after a half-second was *not* cool. (Glad to be scoped out, not glad it was someone I would not scope back.)

After a few agonizing and silent minutes, I say, "Uh, Sid, um, I think we are in a part of the city you, more than I, would really like to see." Still trying to play the cool card.

He looks around, and it seems for the first time that he gets it: "Wow, great! We're in the gay district of Rio. How cool!"

"Um, Sid," I finally blurted out, trying to be open and cool at the same time. "There are these guys really looking at me. What's going on here?"

He said, "I reckon they are checking us both out, and wondering if we're together or not."

I replied, "Well, but ... it's ... um ... how can I say this ... uncomfortable for me."

Sid's understanding kicked in. "Oh, I get it."

"What do I do?" I finally asked him. "I don't mind being here, but I do mind the attention."

After a few minutes, he stuck out his hand. "Here, hold my hand, and you'll be just fine." And so I did. And I was. And I felt happy and gay for about an hour. Which is not much of a ledge on which I can stand here before you. Such is my gay cred.

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*Credo*: I believe. I believe that God is in the coming-out business. God is the Coming-Out One. God is love. All love wants to do, is *come out* and be known. Without shame. Full of grace and hope. I feel that the kind of love that God loves is evangelical, which is to say that love is contagious. You can't keep anything good down. It just erupts and people notice.

It's a creation issue. Either God made people gay and straight and transgender, or God made mistakes. Either God made us as we are, or there are freaks of nature, and it's just a simple math game: whoever's got the most numbers wins, or decides, or makes laws, or speaks for the majority's God, and has the last word about who's a "freak" and who is normal.

Amendment One [defining marriage as only between one man and one woman] was the will of that majority God. North Carolina has just joined 30 other states in codifying a belief that God Almighty Himself delivered the guidebook for human mating to a desert tribe in the Middle East a few millennia ago, and that God has no plans to update that guidebook, certainly not to indulge the domestic aspirations of homosexuals.

It's a creation issue, at its heart. Does God make us as we are—gay, straight, bi, transgender—or are we to put others in some Procrustean Bed of Gender so that they can then fit our molds of correctness, and sexiness, and worthiness?

I will not comment on the legislative vandalism of Amendment One, but I will, in the minutes left me, try to leave one and only one thought in your hearts, minds, and bodies. God is the Coming One, and the Coming-Out One.

How do I do this? You need a book to explain it. Basically, the story goes like this. God does something, in Israel, in Jesus, in Iraq, in Korea, in wherever, and we muck it up in our interpretation. We think that our own status quos and the ways-we-have-done-things, and our own images in the mirror, are somehow a perch from which we can understand divine intention.

Historically we have, in our own nation, perched high on the hubristic heights of our own making. We have seen God at work but thought that African-Americans were 2/3 of a human being, without souls, couldn't feel pain, didn't feel loss. We have seen God at work but thought that women are to be kept more silent, more quiescent, more on the sidelines. We thought we saw God at work around the world, only to interpret that work as the need for missionaries and Bible translators to go in and "uplift" others with a gospel born and nurtured more in the West than in the New Testament.

And so the question becomes: Do we first make people into our own image in order to show them that they are in God's image? It's a creation issue. How *does* the idea come through that God is a straight white man, probably Southern?

***Do we first make people into our own image  
in order to show them that they are in God's image?***

But no, God continually breaks our carefully painted, manicured images by doing the unexpected. Genesis records how God came out at creation, out of isolation and into relationship. Didn't have to. Broke the mold for gods back then.

God came out at the burning bush to Moses. This is not a God who just sits on the divine manicure when injustice threatens. God formed a covenant, which is a contract made personal and eternal, between the Divine Self and the Israelites. God came out in the Law, the Covenants, the Fiery Pillar at night. God came out and went into the Red Sea to liberate.

God came out against any impression that later formed in that ragtag group of Israelites who thought they had God in their hip pockets, to show that God would even marry a sex worker to show how coming-out faithful God is.

God came out in a manger in Bethlehem, out of the closet of strict, antiseptic, don't-get-your-hands-dirty divinity, and into the germ, squirmy, swarmy army of humanity, showing that the human form and essence is a darn good way to re-present the Divinity.

God came out at Pentecost—some say as a woman, since all those Semitic languages use *Ruah* for Spirit, and the cognate noun is feminine. But come out God did, in fire and testimony, and ever-again breaking all the human codes and modes for how God was *supposed* to look and appear.

God does the surprising thing. God is in the creation business. Because Gay Pride is a creation issue. And "whatever works" seems to be God's law. There is no disease, or medical stigma, social illegality, or transgression when love happens. Maybe we could all use a little Gay Pride today.

God still comes out. Out of the public sphere and into the prisons. God is out in the middle schools. God comes out of the mouths of children, and goes on marches, and says, "I hate no one." God comes out of the closets of scripture interpretation too-long dominated by too-tight-in-the-crotch

interpretations that God sanctions only one way to love, only one way to do marriage, only one way to do sex.

God came out, and keeps on coming out, to surprise, and cause wonder, and, if we get it, to induce in us a larger love for all that is ... well ... divine. This is the life of faith, as I see it. Let us cancel out the messages: "Keep away from that, be careful, that's hateful" ... because once the inexorable dynamic of love has been set in motion, and comes out, you might as well try to keep bees from honey, crooks from money, philosophers from maybes, and politicians from babies.

You can't keep love down. Love is evangelical. Love is like your dog—just wants to play out all the possibilities of having fun, and being creative, and doing good stuff. As poet Pablo Neruda wrote, "You can pick all the flowers, but you can't stop the spring." You can raise signs of hate, but how can you stop the signs of God's always Coming Out?

Come out, come out, whoever you are! And may the God of peace accompany you on your going in and your coming out! Amen.