

Chasing Windmills, Changing Hearts

Reflection by Friend of the LGBTQ+ Initiative Paul Smith (Baltimore, MD)

My arms are weary. Sometimes it feels like we're not getting anywhere with expanding a welcoming space for the LGBTQIA+ community within the Catholic church. I don't mind taking two steps forward and one step back. But recently, it seems like we are going two steps backward with no progress forward. The long journey towards unreachable stars that we may never see can be daunting and lonely. Am I making any progress in the face of a growing conservative movement that makes it okay to hurt those who are different? Given the political climate of our country, is there even an end in sight? Am I wasting my time with heroic and romantic ideals of revolutions and changed hearts? This fear grew in me and I longed to learn more about impossible dreams. As this fear that I was simply "chasing windmills" evolved, I decided to read about the original windmill fighter: Don Quixote. I have heard about the novel as a story of a fool that reaches toward impossible goals. Maybe it was time to read it.

Don Quixote is the story of an "old man" (he's 48 years old...the same age I am today) who is so taken with romantic stories of knights and damsels in distress that he declares himself a knight errant and, with his faithful servant Sancho Pansa, pursues evil to restore justice to 17th Century Spain. He is portrayed as a buffoon who mistakes windmills for monsters and monks for thieves. Sancho is quite aware of the foolhardiness of his master, but his loyalty is so great that he sallies forth alongside him anyway.

The novel is long. It clocks in at just under a thousand pages. I found it humorous at first... reading about the misadventures of a fool confusing a barber for an assassin and an innkeeper for a king. As a reader, I quickly took on the role of Sancho, seeing the problems before they arose due to the foolishness of Don Quixote. But after a while, reading it became tedious. Why can't Don Quixote ever learn from his mistakes? Why can't he see that he is fighting unbeatable foes? Why can't he realize that he never seems to make any progress?

I am generally a "slow and steady wins the race" kind of guy and I was committed to finishing it. So I took it slow... going about my normal life as I read a chapter a day... making small, but measurable progress. Though there seemed to be no reward in reading this book, I had to believe in an unseen ideal that finishing it would grant me some kind of wisdom to take with me through the rest of my life. I had to have faith to keep reading. It was a meta experience. I had to become a believer like Don Quixote in order to complete the book. Reading it became a discernment prayer for me.

Then something incredible happened in the last 200 pages — minor characters in the novel started to celebrate Don Quixote. He became widely known and heroic. The tales of his bravery preceded him. His deeds gave hope to the powerless and inspiration to the disenchanted. In the end, when Don Quixote was on his deathbed and haunted by the thought that his life had been one foolish gambit after another, it was Sancho who became the idealist. It was Sancho who took on the role of believer. My relationship with Sancho stayed true. Like Sancho, I had to become a believer as well. It's an amazing thing that God can make romantics from realists and idealists out of pragmatists.

I don't know if in my lifetime I will ever see a Catholic church that fully accepts, welcomes, and respects its LGBTQIA+ members. **But I have faith that the small things that I and so many of us do will eventually lead to a world that is better for this. I believe that each act of protest, revolution, and kindness we undertake gets us one dream closer to achieving the impossible.** Whenever I am afraid I am wasting my time, I remember that Don Quixote was making a difference without even knowing it. Even if progress cannot be seen and is only present in the inspiration given to others who WILL one day achieve the goals we are working toward, we must keep moving forward. We must keep believing, for WE ARE Don Quixote.