

# DALEY'S TECHNICOLOR DREAMCOAT

In 2004, Father Fred Daley was one of the few openly gay priests in America. Today, he continues his mission to support social justice work.

Words by Eden Stratton  
Photos provided

**Father Fred Daley** is a difficult man to track down. He isn't an avid email user, and his voice inbox happily chirps that he doesn't text. His head of pastoral care, Barbara Hadley, tells me not to worry.

"He's a busy man," she said. "But he always makes time for people."

Days later, after leaving enough voicemails to fill an inbox, I get a call.

Despite the phone's crackle, Daley's voice is warm and jovial. He's completely unbothered by my slew of messages, and is interested in the articles I'm writing. Upon hearing that he's the subject of a profile, he starts simply — at the beginning.

In 1947, Father Daley was born in Syracuse, and fondly remembers growing up with his twin brother John. Hailing from an Irish-Catholic family, the Daley's were heavily involved with their church and came to mass almost every Sunday. However, Daley said that his upbringing was never rigid or strict, and had a relatively typical childhood.

Daley said that in those days, plenty of children felt called to become a priest. They experienced a presence from God, and wouldn't hesitate to tell the Catholic school's nuns. Daley had always admired the priests in his church and felt a calling to pursue ministry. Unlike his peers, however, soft-spoken Daley didn't vocalize his thoughts until he entered the eighth grade. The defining moment came when his teacher, Sister Helen-Lucille, asked if he ever thought about pursuing seminary school.

"A sister thinks I could be a priest, so [I thought] maybe I could," Daley said. "That was a big moment [in] making the intention to go in that direction."

From that conversation onward, Daley continued to foster his interest in priesthood and would eventually go to seminary school upon his high school graduation. It was eight years of rigorous study — plenty of time for Daley to reconsider his aspirations. The Catholic Church demanded personal sacrifices, requiring its priests to take a vow of celibacy. However, Daley remained convinced that God had called him for a higher purpose.

"Being with the community of other seminarians, [my] call was certainly affirmed by those around me, as well by God," he said. "There was never a time that I thought, 'well, maybe I should be doing something else,' or 'maybe this [isn't] what I'm supposed to be doing.'"

Upon his ordination in 1974, Daley was placed at a parish in Utica, New York. He instantly was taken with life as an associate priest, filling his days with baptisms, funerals, and services. Daley was especially motivated to do good in his surrounding community.

It wasn't a new mission for Daley. Since childhood, he had been pushed to help those who were less fortunate. When Daley was in second grade, his mother asked him and his brother to make a list of children they wanted to invite to their birthday party. When she saw that they had

omitted the names of the underprivileged children in the neighborhood, she quickly pushed her boys to include them.

The brothers did. When the day came, the children's mother called to confirm that her children actually were invited. They usually were overlooked, ostracized by their classmates, and never the first candidates to be invited to a birthday party.

Daley's mother insisted they were welcome. When the children came, they brought fire trucks for Daley and John, wrapped securely in aluminum foil.

To Daley, they were the nicest presents of all. "I always look back at that, my mother in particular, [who] was always pointing out [and] caring for those that are marginalized," he said.

As a priest, Daley kept making an effort to include those who hadn't been given a seat at the table. But as time went on, he began to feel an ache within himself. Today, he speculates that it was depression, but in the 1970s it was an abstract and uncommon diagnosis. While the ache persisted, by his late 20s he eventually realized its cause.

Daley was gay.



As the rest of the world was basking in the sexual revolution of the 70s, the young Daley had gone through seminary school with no idea if he was gay, straight, or somewhere in between. If the seminary students were going to “make it to the end” of their schooling he said, sexual repression was the only option.

By the time Daley realized his sexuality, he was an ordained priest. He had taken his vows of celibacy and was seen as a religious leader in his community. While organizations such as New Ways Ministries tried to reconcile homosexuality with Catholicism, the mainstream church maintained its position against it.

Despite the obstacles, Daley turned to others for help.

“I remember going to a priest for spiritual direction and that began a slow journey with the help of some therapy to eventually accept who I was, and then beginning to rejoice in who I am and who God created me to be,” Daley said. “That journey was a painful journey, but it was a fruitful one.”

Daley would continue his ministry work throughout the years, focusing on poverty, racial justice, and LGBTQ+ rights, opening soup kitchens and shelters. In his words, Daley’s approach to the priesthood was taking on issues with “the Bible in one hand, and the New York Times in the other.”

But, the peace wouldn’t last. In 2002, the Boston Globe reported widespread sexual abuse by Catholic clergy members, and Daley said the Church was beginning to use gay priests as scapegoats. While Daley was only out to close friends and family members, the tensions were becoming palpable.

In 2004, a young journalist approached Daley concerning his recent award from United Way Ministries. As she asked Daley about his history and his journey, the priest felt an immense wave of peace. As the journalist asked about his involvement in the LGBTQ+ community, he simply said that he was gay.

In an instant, everyone knew.

“That night I went to receive the award and I think the probably the longest stretch of time in my

life,” Daley said.

To Daley’s surprise, almost all of the parish members would show him support. A woman named Mary, who was as conservative as one could be, simply gave Father Daley a hug when she heard the news.

“It’s okay, Father,” she said. “I love men too.”

In 2008, Daley would come to All Saints Church, which was in a period of profound upheaval. The parish, which was formerly St. Therese, merged with Our Lady of Solace — a predominantly African-American church. St. Therese would keep their parish building, but members from Our Lady of Solace would be forced to give up their building due to the lack of space.

Daley was tasked with bringing the two parishes together. Instead of ignoring the pain of the parishioners from Our Lady of Solace, he acknowledged them.

“He just brought everybody together and let them express their anger and the sadness,” Barbara Hadley, All Saints’ head of the pastoral case, said. “He just gave credence to what their feelings were.

We all gradually came together as one.”

Today, Daley continues his ministry work. While his life remains relatively the same as it was before he came out, he has received plenty of pushback. He was once rejected from a missionary trip by Catholic leadership and only received notice a week before his departure.

“I got a call from the vice president of Catholic Relief Services saying that they had found out that I was an openly gay priest,” he said. “Therefore, I would not be acceptable.”

To his parish, however, Daley represents the best that All Saints has to offer. In his time at All Saints, Daley has established multiple church task forces combating racism, sexism, and homophobia. Cherie Cogan, the New American Minister of All Saints, said that Daley personally handles every negative letter that comes their way.

“People send letters here whenever they’re not happy with [everything All Saints] does,” Cogan said. “He takes the steps to answer the letters or to explain the reason we do the things.”

“Sometimes, I wonder if he’s Jesus Christ.”

