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Children of God: Catholic Retreat for Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Youth and Allies

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Children of God:

Catholic Retreat for Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Youth and Allies

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### Abstract

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people are leaving the Catholic Church at alarming rates due to a perceived hostility concerning the topic of homosexuality. This research paper explores the foundation and integration of a Catholic spiritual identity with an LGB identity in youth. It seeks to answer whether one can develop an affirming Catholic retreat for LGB youth that remains in the confines of official doctrine. Literature review finds that faith formation and LGB identity development are linked and can work to either support or undermine each other. Studies show that the Catholic laity largely does not view homosexual acts as sinful, antithetical to the official teachings of the Church. Not affirming gay marriage and expecting chastity is the major contradiction that drives LGB Catholics into identity “disintegration” leading to internalized shame and suicidal ideation. To promote healthy integration of identities, this paper, pulling from past retreats and LGB affirming Catholic literature, creates a retreat with the following six key aspects: (a) affirmation; (b) pairing of self-reflection and community; (c) confession; (d) re-approaching scripture; (e) re-approaching tradition; and (f) role of the LGB Christian. The “Children of God” retreat fulfills its task of remaining within Church doctrine, even with its promotion of feminist dialog. It educates youth and challenges them to take ownership of their identity and faith. Implementation of the retreat is intended. Future work should be done on trans\* spirituality for its inclusion in this retreat.

Children of God: Catholic Retreat for Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Youth and Allies

“In his Son and through him, [God] invites men to become, in the Holy Spirit, his adopted children and thus heirs of his blessed life” (Catholic Church, 1993, para. 1). In the opening paragraph of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, God calls every human person to become a child of God. Yet, for lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people within the Catholic Church, that often constitutes a struggle (Buchanan, Dzelme, Harris, & Hecker, 2001). This paper seeks to research formation and integration of a Catholic, spiritual identity with a gay or lesbian identity, particularly in youth. The main question of this paper is whether one can develop a supportive and affirming Catholic retreat for LGB youth while still remaining in the confines of Catholic doctrine.

This paper will answer that question in the following way. As a gay Catholic myself, I am concerned with how many “former Catholic” gay men I meet. I feel called to create an LGB Catholic retreat that will help youth better integrate a Catholic spirituality and a gay sexuality to avoid this exodus of LGB people from the Church. I conduct a literature review on this topic to determine Catholic doctrine, the current Church climate, the source of problem, retreats as a possible solution, and finally what key aspects to include in a retreat such as this. An analysis of the literature reveals the problem lies not with the church congregation, but rather with identity integration. The few affirming strategies in existence place focus on changing the Church and others’ perspectives, rather than the individual youth in this critical stage of identity development. To combat these problems, I present an outline and resources for a LGB Catholic retreat focused on healthy identity integration and resolution in LGB youth. A brief discussion of this applied project shows an abundance of supportive resources. The Catholic Church is an ideal setting for such growth, but the struggle to reach those who need it most is also examined. I

conclude with the plan for implementation of this retreat in Catholic youth programs and the implication such a retreat has on youth learning by encouraging them to take ownership of their own education and identity formation.

### **A Church in Pain: Rationale for this Project**

LGB people are leaving the Catholic Church at a rapid pace and at much higher rates than their straight neighbors (Wagner, Serafini, Rabkin, Remien, & Williams, 1994). According to a Pew Research Center (2013a) study, only 14% of the LGBT population in America identified as Catholic, whereas 22% of the general public did (p. 91). Most are driven away by hostility of the Church and religious community (Pew Research Center, 2013a). Often LGB people who remain religious are driven into depression, and in some cases suicide (as cited in Wagner et al., 1994; Schuck, & Liddle, 2001; Aarons, 1995). Youth suicide is an obvious topic of concern, but of equal concern is the former.

As an openly gay, openly Catholic man myself, I approached the topic of this research through the personal lens of a gay Catholic perspective. It is the unique combination of a Catholic worldview and a queer analytical lens that drove me to address the issues of people leaving the Church and the Church's harm inflicted on its young people. I seek to research a way to foster simultaneous growth of a religious and sexual identity. Having attended a number of spiritual retreats myself, I considered that an educational and religious retreat experience might help to remedy the concerns I described above. However, if a retreat is to be implemented, in a Catholic high school setting, for instance, it must be within the limited scope of Catholic doctrine. This brought me to the question at hand, are there enough resources available to create a doctrinally accurate, yet affirming LGB retreat for Catholic youth? Other things I hoped to learn in conducting this research were as follows: the prevalent issues in identity integration for

gay Catholics, the possible interconnectedness of spiritual and sexual identities, and whether retreats such as this were successful in the past.

### **Literature Review**

#### **The Catholic Church on Homosexuality: An Exploration of Doctrine**

The first section of the literature review will briefly summarize the Catholic Church's official stance on homosexuality using primary source documents. The *Catechism* (1993) contains the official doctrine of the Church. Looking up homosexuality in the index, one navigates to the following line; "Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity, tradition has always declared that 'homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered' (para. 2357). Relegating all appropriate sexual expression to strictly within "conjugal love of man and woman" (para. 2360), homosexual persons are "called to chastity" (para. 2359) as the sacrament of marriage is unavailable to them. While seen as "objectively disordered" (para. 2358), a homosexual orientation is not, in and of itself, sinful as it is not chosen of free will, rather the sexual act itself is viewed as sin, according to the Vatican (Ratzinger, 1986).

The Church calls for homosexual people to be "accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity" (Catholic Church, 1993, para. 2358). In 1977, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' (USCCB) Committee on Marriage and Family issued a statement calling for better pastoral care of homosexual people. Yet, in 2005, the Catholic Church openly voiced a banning of all men with homosexual "tendencies" from joining the seminary (Goodman, 2005). The irony, of course, is that there are numerous anecdotes, albeit few scientific studies, available identifying a large portion of the current Catholic clergy as gay men (Nugent, 1997; Murray,

2008). A culture of homophobia, apparently internalized, pervades the Roman Catholic clergy and is obviously being propagated to the congregation.

Where does the Church gather the justification for its negative comments about homosexual orientation? The *Catechism* (1993) pointed to “Sacred Scripture” and “tradition” (para. 2357). In terms of Sacred Scripture, it referenced four Bible verses, but literature on Scripture identifies, at most, seven verses that are used against the LGB community (Lopata & Lopata, 2003; Helminiak & Stewart, 2000; McNeill, 1993; Michaelson, 2011; Vines, 2014). In summary, the *Bible* (2011) contains two verses referring to the story of Sodom (Genesis 19; Judges 19), two verses relating homosexual activity to an “abomination” in the Purity codes (Leviticus 18:22; Leviticus 20:13), one verse criticizing the Roman people for “unnatural relations” (Romans 1:26-27), and two verses describing “sodomites” as not inheriting the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:10). In terms of tradition, the Catholic Church pulls heavily from the works of St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Augustine of Hippo. From these thinkers, comes the concept of natural law and the procreative norm. From here, the Church understands that any sexual act closed to the “gift of life,” such as homogenital activity is “contrary to the natural law” and “under no circumstances can they be approved” (Catholic Church, 1993, para. 2357).

Church teachings have many positive messages to convey as well. For instance, consider the following quote on the equality and differences among men;

Created in the image of the one God and equally endowed with rational souls, all men have the same nature and the same origin. Redeemed by the sacrifice of Christ, all are called to participate in the same divine beatitude: all therefore enjoy an equal dignity. (Catholic Church, 1993, para. 1934)

The overwhelming majority of Catholic texts speak of the love for and dignity of each of God's children.

### **The Current Church Climate**

The culture of opposition facing LGB Catholics is two-fold. It can come from the congregation, local community of the Church, or from the clergy, the hierarchy of the Church. I will examine both possible sources now, in turn. According to a Pew Research Center survey in 2013b, Catholics are growing in acceptance of homosexuality; whereas 62% accepted homosexuality in June 2003, 71% accepted it in May 2013. Additionally, while Catholics still see conflict between their religious beliefs and homosexuality, considering it a sin to engage in homosexual behavior is sharply declining, down 16% from October 2003 to now only 33% considering it a sin in May 2013 (Pew Research Center, 2013b). The Catholic laity has a nearly universal and antithetical stance on homosexual behavior as the official doctrine. Perhaps this accounts for the rise in positive anecdotes of gay Catholics (Essmann, 2014). But yet, a significant portion of LGBT Americans feel unwelcome at places of worship, labeling the Catholic Church as third most hostile religious institution toward LGBT people (Pew Research Center, 2013a).

If the community of believers is not making LGBT feel welcome, the hierarchy of the Church is the next likely suspect. Currently, there appears to be a shift in tone regarding the Vatican's discussion of homosexuality. With Pope Francis's recent "who am I to judge?" response to homosexuals in the clergy (Chappell, 2013), and Archbishop Desmond Tutu stating he'd rather go to hell than a homophobic heaven (Raushenbush, 2013), perception of the Church's condemnation may have reason to change. However, the Church still shows a reluctance in action to evaluate its doctrine or to even engage the issue of homosexuality (HRC

staff, 2014). This indicates that much of the LGB community's negative reaction to Catholicism stems from the long-standing, unchanging harsh word choice of Church doctrine.

### **The Problem: Separation of Church and Sex**

In this section of the literature review, I identify the largest source of conflict in Church doctrine for LGB people and its effect on that community. Catholic education, in some localities, is striving to be inclusive of lesbian and gay students through incorporation of homosexuality into its curriculum (Gevelinger & Zimmerman, 1997). However, its focus on chastity often leads to “doublespeak” and a furtherance of homophobia (Callaghan, 2007). While chastity is mandated to homosexual people, the virtue is characterized as a gift to only a select few (Catholic Church, 2345). Not every person is called to chastity. “It is not good for the man to be alone” (*Bible*, 2011, Genesis 2:18). Those who are not have the sexual outlet of marriage. That is, those who are heterosexual. This blaring contradiction between gift and mandate is the cause of much distress for LGB people (Lopata & Lopata, 2003; Vines, 2014; McNeill 1993). The Catholic definition of marriage is an institutional barrier with which LGB people, as sexual beings, are faced (Love, 1998).

The sexually active, LGB Catholic, if choosing to remain affiliated with the Catholic Church and adopting the teachings as they are stated, must either believe they are constantly living in a state of sin or must cognitively separate their religious and sexual identities. Nungesser (1983) indicates that the person following the former path begins to internalize this homophobia (as cited in Wagner et al., 1994). And according to Lipkin (1999), “internalized stigma may cause one to think one's relationship is dirty and shameful” (p. 161). This reaction limits the LGB person's ability to love others and love themselves and often results in shame, depression, or suicidal ideation (Schuck & Liddle, 2001; as cited in Lipkin, 1999, p. 154).

These religious conflicts and “struggle to incorporate sexual orientation and identity within the context of one’s existing religious or spiritual identity” (Buchanan et al., 2001) often leads to a delay in coming out (Schuck & Liddle, 2001). Ultimately, many LGB Catholics begin to follow the second path I listed of quarantining identities separately from one another. Maher found just this in his 2007 study of students in Catholic high school: a “theme of ‘disintegration’ in lives” concerning family, peers, school, spirituality, and identity. He notes that this contradicts the Catholic teaching of integrating every aspect of one’s life, particularly to “acknowledge and accept [one’s] sexual *identity*” (Catholic Church, 1993, para. 2333).

### **Identity Formation and Integration**

With an understanding of the source of identity conflict and the LGB Catholic need for and call to integration of self, I will now move into a summary of literature concerning the method of both faith development and gay identity formation and how the two may interact. The most widely referenced developmental model for religion is Fowler’s “Six Stages of Faith Development” (as cited in Poynter & Washington, 2005, p. 43). With even a cursory comparison to gay/lesbian identity development models outlined in Lipkin (1999, p. 100-104), one clearly sees a great deal of parallels, particularly surrounding the “stage” of coming out in the gay community and of taking personal responsibility for one’s beliefs, both occurring at the same “age.” In fact, DuMontier (2000) “hypothesized interactions between sexual orientation and faith development” (as cited in Bilodeau & Renn, 2005, p. 28). Birch (2011) verifies this hypothesis in Catholic students, finding that spiritual identity and GLB identity are linked, affecting one another. In particular, they can work to strengthen one another;

‘I’m still as strong a Christian as I have always been, maybe stronger because I believe more myself...I feel closer to God because I’m true to myself, and this is how God wanted me to be, I shouldn’t deny his creation’ [gay Catholic]. (Birch, 2011, p. 78)

This integration, however, “requires a genuine openness to others and a willingness to enter into dialogue” (Rutledge, 1989 as cited in Poynter & Washington, 2005, p. 43). In other words, one must “come out” as a spiritual milestone or religious act to move toward healthy integration of identity (Shallenberger, 1996; Michaelson, 2011). Wagner et al., in their 1994 study of Catholic gay men, found that while integration of religion and sexuality may not reduce one’s amount of internalized homophobia, it does help one “overcome developmental delays of gay orientation.”

There is a great deal of literature discussing the possible and extremely beneficial integration of spirituality and sexuality. Conversely, there is literature on the dangerous repercussions of attempting to separate the two. McNeill, in the first edition (1976) of his book, *The Church and the Homosexual*, wrote of the “goal of heterosexual adjustment,” promoting that every Catholic gay or lesbian try to live a straight lifestyle, in practice, if possible, before resorting to the adoption of a gay identity. In later editions of the book, he appended and retracted this section quoting its universal failure rate and its serious psychological problems (McNeill, 1993, Appendix 1). Instead, McNeill (1988) wrote a new book for gay Catholics on using organizations like DignityUSA (2014), an LGBT Catholic community group, and other strategies to promote a healthy development of spirituality that included sexual relationships.

### **The Solution: Marry Church and Sex**

The literature points to the necessity that for a majority of LGB Catholics, a healthy religious life requires an ownership and expression of sexuality. Likewise, a healthy gay identity

may require the maintenance of one's religious worldview. The question to ask now is whether this can be accomplished in retreat form. To answer this, I conducted research into pre-existing retreats and their effectiveness. Moving in order of most general to most applicable, Johnson (n.d.) describes a gay men's retreat which's effectiveness is derived from its seclusion from the outside world and culture, replacing that with total acceptance. Weinberg (2013) also touches on the positive impact of an LGB-inclusive environment during a Catholic spiritual retreat; removing the fear of judgment allowed him to engage with the spiritual on a more personal level. Weldon (2014) details the life-changing influence of mysticism, linking sexuality to the Divine, while on retreat. Reynolds (2013), after giving an anecdote of his experience coming-out on a Catholic retreat, emphasizes the positive contributions and "responsibility of a community to help its members over [struggles with pain]" rather than the individual struggling alone. Finally, Corrigan (2013) advertises a Catholic retreat "to embrace gays, lesbians, and their families." While St. Mary's retreat was positively received by the community, many Catholic retreats for LGB people are canceled and attacked by the local diocese for "encourag[ing] defiance of the Church's teachings" (Archbold, 2012). The positivity of LGB retreats is clear, but the Church's culture of silence still seeks to suppress.

### **Children of God: What to Include?**

The final step in reviewing the literature was to collect resources that could be utilized in the creation of an affirming and educational retreat for LGB Catholics and allies and to organize them into key aspects of the retreat. Adopting the strengths of the retreats described in the previous section, there is a need for reconciliation and self-reflection, mass and community, and education on "biblical data concerning [homosexuality]," all of which were included in St. Mary's LGB retreat (Corrigan, 2013). These all respectively target the three main sources of

religious conflict found by Shuck and Liddle in their 2001 study of LGB individuals: denominational teachings, congregational prejudice, and scriptural passages.

There are a surprising number of resources available concerning a LGB-affirming standpoint on the Catholic tradition, including Michaelson's (2011) *God vs. Gay?*, both of McNeill's books, *The Church and the Homosexual* (1993) and *Taking a Chance on God* (1988), Vines' book (2014) and YouTube video (2014) both entitled *God and the Gay Christian*, Farley's (2006) *Just Love*, Lopata and Lopata's (2003) *Fortunate Families*, the USCCB's (1997) *Always Our Children*, and on-line databases, blogs, and resources such as Weldon's (2014) *Queering the Church*. Consolidating the main points of each of these resources, I am left with six key aspects a successful LGB Catholic retreat will cover.

1. Affirmation. The resources pulled from the *Bible* (Michaelson, 2011), "Image of God" concept (Vines, 2014), and the USCCB's call to affirm the gay experience and existence as natural and God-given (Lopata & Lopata, 2003; McNeill, 1988).
2. Pairing of self-reflection and community. Quoting from the Ten Commandments, "you shall not bear false witness" (*Bible*, 2011, Exodus 20:16), Michaelson (2011) considers "coming out" to community as religious.
3. Confession. McNeill (1988 & 1993), as well as the USCCB (1997), lay the groundwork for the necessity of spiritual guidance and pastoral care to a community plagued with pain, anger, fear, and lack of trust.
4. Re-approach scripture. Nearly every resource contains a section devoted to re-evaluating Sacred Scripture "clobber texts" and re-appropriating passages for the LGB community. This is achieved through application of a translational (Michaelson, 2011), a contextual (Vines, 2014), or a historical (McNeill, 1993) lens. Additionally,

- these sources, along with Weldon (2014) highlight “LGB stories” throughout the Bible.
5. Re-approach tradition. As the chastity mandate-gift dichotomy was identified as the largest contention between the Catholic community and the LGB community, it must be addressed. Lopata & Lopata (2003) call for consistency in all Church teachings and remind the reader of the “primacy of conscience.” Michaelson (2011) re-approaches by highlighting God’s placement of intimacy in human life. McNeill focuses on first, understanding natural law historical development (1993) and second, celebrating God’s call to life, body, and sexuality (1988). Vines (2014) argues that the gift of chastity contradiction should mean marriage equality. And Farley (2006) expands the definition of a marriage’s “fruitfulness” to include bringing life into the world in the form of love and joy, not just children.
  6. Role of LGB Christian. The final key aspect is to put one’s life in perspective of the greater community; how can a gay Catholic uniquely enhance their surrounding family and congregation (Michaelson, 2011; McNeill 1988 & 1993; Lopata & Lopata, 2003).

### **Analysis of Literature**

Through literature review, I established the confines of Catholic doctrine within which I must create this applied project. I discussed the source of LGB Catholic distress as primarily stemming from the teachings of the Church, its adherence to a limiting contradiction about chastity, and refusal to engage the topic. I introduced the relative success of past retreats in promoting an integration of LGB identity and Catholic identity. And finally, I summarized the key aspects to include in this Children of God retreat as well as the resources available for each.

Before describing the retreat itself, I am going to point out where the literature is insufficient and give my critique the discussion around the topic of youth integration of spiritual and sexual identities.

### **Insufficiencies: No One Is Talking**

I will discuss three areas where the literature is definitely lacking. The most apparent silence is on the Catholic Church's engagement with the topic of sexuality. Since the onset of stoicism in the middle ages, few in the Holy See have sought to challenge St. Thomas's dictations concerning "natural" sexual expression (McNeill, 1993). A second lacking is the availability of affirming strategies. The problem is well defined and discussed. But a majority of the potential solutions focus on convincing the straight world to change its perceptions of its lesbian, gay, and bisexual children and neighbors (Marin, 2009; DignityUSA, 2014; Lopata & Lopata, 2003). As the literature showed, the heterosexual, general public already has a generally positive attitude toward LGB people. Solutions should focus more on facilitating a growth of the LGB Catholic community. The inability of solutions to meet the LGB community where it is at further keeps it subjugated. These solutions treat the community as something that must be accommodated or better tolerated as opposed to viewed as equal.

The final insufficiency in the literature is the supreme lack of resources for trans\* individuals. Where the Church is quiet about homosexuality, it is silent regarding the unique experiences of its trans\* members. Like homosexuality, there are "clobber texts" from Sacred Scripture for the trans\* community, mainly concerning cross-dressing (*Bible*, 2011). Some feminist writers address a re-interpretation of these texts, but from a gender equality lens and not a trans\* experiential lens (Farley, 2006). An interesting dialogue in which one could engage is the trans\* community's experience of the Divine. Catholic teaching states that God is neither

male nor female; neither omnigender nor agender; neither intersex nor sex; neither man nor woman (Catholic Church, 2011). Given the expansion in gender fluidity and deconstruction of the gender binary propagated by the trans\* community, could these individuals be experiencing the reality that is the Divine on a much deeper level than their cis-gender neighbors?

Unfortunately, the literature to answer these types of questions was just not available. For this reason, I chose to purposefully focus this retreat on sexual orientation as opposed to gender identity and expression until a time when the research on the topic has been more fully engaged. However, I will end this discussion with one final remark. In 1987, McNeill wrote an article prophesying that the topic of homosexuality was the next key issue that would cause the Church to grow. It seems the experience of trans\* Catholics may be the new frontier that causes the Church to reevaluate.

### **Critiques: The Focus Is Wrong**

My major critiques of the literature on integration of homosexuality with Catholic religiosity are three-fold. First, the articles and books mostly focus on changing the Catholic Church's understanding of and teachings on homosexuality. While this is a necessary aspect of the discussion, there was little attempt to engage, affirm, and support the material and community presently. Upon investigation, I found an immense amount of positive attributes of the Church's worldview that could be applied to the LGB experience, yet were not readily involved in the dialog between academics and the LGB community. Second, nearly every resource I could collect put the obligation of solving the "homosexuality problem" on the Church. Most of the literature provided "pastoral care" strategies for priests and Church officials or for parents of LGB youth (McNeill, 1993; Lopata & Lopata, 2013; USCCB, 1997). But very little of the literature pushed the LGB community to acknowledge its own power and authority

and take ownership of making change. Quite possibly this is because, as Rutledge (1989) points out, by entering into this dialog one runs “the risk of changing [one’s] own way of making meaning and relating to the world” (as cited in Poynter & Washington, 2005, p. 43).

My final and largest critique of the literature review is the heavy focus on adult spiritual development. The arena of youth spiritual development, particularly how it might be influenced by a non-heteronormative sexual orientation, is rather empty. The studies concerning school age youth were done reflectively on alumni (Maher, 2007; Birch, 2011). According to the Pew Research Center (2013a), the average age of sexual identity exploration is between age 12, when most LGB people thought they were not straight, and age 20, when most LGB people began to come out. The ages for gay men in particular are even younger. This average LGB identity formation timeframe matches very cleanly with Fowler’s faith formation stages 3 and 4 (as cited in Poynter & Washington, 2005, p. 43). In these stages, youth are experiencing and processing the inconsistencies within their beliefs and begin to “take responsibility for a worldview that is internally driven.” In a sense, school-age children are experiencing a tumultuous conglomeration of “coming out” experiences in each aspect of life. This time is also when homophobia begins to be internalized if not put in check (Maher, 2007). This interior shame then correlates to greater difficulty coming out for nearly two thirds of all religious LGB individuals (Schuck & Liddle, 2001). Nearly half of these gay Catholic men will leave the Church (Wagner et al., 1994). The delay in LGB identity development can be somewhat solved by groups like DignityUSA, but much of the internalized homophobia remains (Wagner et al., 1994). The problem must be addressed at its source, while identity formation and integration is just beginning.

**Children of God: Catholic Retreat for LGB Youth and Allies (Applied Project)**

In this section of the research paper I will discuss the composition of the applied project intended to combat the harms described in the literature review. I collected resources with which educate, affirm, and support Catholic youth before homophobia could internalize. From these materials, I created the framework of a Catholic retreat geared specifically for LGB youth and allies. The retreat is designed to capitalize on the youth's stages of identity development. Youth in middle and high school, both in terms of faith formation and in LGB identity growth, are generally in a state of contradiction and exploration, having not reached acceptance or synthesis (as cited in Poynter & Washington, 2005, p. 43; as cited in Lipkin, 1999, p. 100-104). By presenting a method to integrate one's sexuality with spirituality during this critical time, much of the conflict that drives LGB people away from the Church will never materialize internally.

The retreat outline itself can be found in the appendices to this research paper. The document formatting, schedules, and some supplementary material was taken from two, existing retreats. These were the Imago Dei retreat created by Nathan Drahms (personal communication, 10 November 2014) and the Kairos retreat created for the Catholic Newman Community at the University of Rochester (Fr. Brian Cool, personal communication, 19 November 2014). Both retreat outlines had been implemented and adjusted for improvements. I chose to borrow the core structures of these retreats to maintain the functionality of timing and logistics. The concepts and material covered in this retreat for LGB youth differ greatly, however.

The major activities on this retreat address the six major tensions consolidated in the final section of the literature review. They are roughly in this order as well. The lifegraph activity seeks to affirm each individual's experience while developing a sense of community. An older member of the LGB community will share the story of their life, drawing on a piece of paper,

plotting the ups and downs of their experiences. This person should be chosen carefully, as they are called to be a positive reflection of identity synthesis. Following the large group witness of this lifegraph, each retreatant is given time to reflect, plot their own lifegraph, and then share it in small group. This couples introspection with community affirmation, covering the first two key points. The following activities mirror the same pattern of large group presentation, personal reflection, small group discussion.

The next activity is the “Saint and Scripture.” A peer leader will begin by reading a chosen Bible verse and then relating it to the LGB life experience. The same can be done for the life of a Saint. Each retreatant then selects a Saint and a Bible verse from the *Queering the Church* webpage and journals about how each relates to their life. While each retreatant will use a different personal lens in self-reflection, in general, the large group sharing will be through a general queer lens. The third activity begins with a talk about the Sacrament of Reconciliation given by a priest. He is encouraged to explain the sacrament and speak to the human need for letting go of anger, fear, and guilt. Following the talk is a reconciliation service and the priest(s) are available to hear Confession. Each of these priests will have been trained in LGB-affirming language, issues, and pastoral care.

The fourth activity marks the next portion of the retreat, the educational section. This talk, again given by a priest, explores what the Bible speaks to the topic of homosexuality. He will speak to the various interpretations of the texts; a plethora of resources have been provided for the writing of this talk. A succinct YouTube video is also provided as an introduction (Vines, 2014). For instance, the sin of Sodom is better understood as inhospitality and not homosexuality (Michaelson, 2011). Or Paul’s prohibition to the Romans was to end the practice of pedantry, not

all homosexual activity (McNeill, 1993). The LGB-affirming Scripture passages should also be explored.

The fifth talk is also educational, but occurs as a peer-led discussion on the Catholic Church's tradition and doctrine concerning homosexuality. In this large-group community setting, the contradiction between chastity as a mandate and as a gift should be explored. The final activity, on the role of the LGB Christian, is open to be run however the leader of the retreat desires.

The retreat will begin, end, and heavily utilize the image of "children of God" (*Bible*, 2011, Galatians 3:23-29). I entitled this retreat "Children of God" to remind all in attendance of their innate, divinely-given self-worth and dignity (affirmation), of their familial connections to those around them (community), and of their responsibility to God (role of the LGB Christian). Each of the six key aspects are addressed through a focus on three broad goals: developing personal identity, relating the Church to the LGB experience, and fostering growth of a LGB Christian community. Each goal also corresponds to an aspect of the "Children of God" image. The first goal, integration of identity is achieved through the lifegraph, self-reflection, and confession. This is the aim for the first portion of the retreat. As a child of God, you are loved and treasured. Following that, comes relating the Church to the people through an analysis of Scripture and tradition. As children of God, we are all brothers and sisters in community. And the final goal to foster community growth links to the role of the LGB Christian talk. As children of God, we all have a responsibility to God, each other, and ourselves.

### **A Community Reformed: Discussion of Project**

Now that I have explained the project itself, I will reflect on the process of creating the Children of God retreat. Namely, I'll explore what I learned, my interpretation of the retreat,

what supported its creation, and what challenged its creation. In my accumulation of resources for the retreat talks, one doctrinal inconsistency kept reoccurring. I learned that the contradiction in teaching concerning chastity seem to be a key component to LGB unrest with the Church. What options are left an LGB person not allowed to express themselves sexually through marriage and not called to chastity? Failure or abandonment of faith. How does one approach this discussion while remaining within doctrinal guidelines when the “rules” themselves conflict?

Additionally, I was also surprised to learn that the organization of the retreat was relatively painless. Besides the unique education aspects targeted at LGB youth topics, much of this retreat is like any other Catholic retreat. I am not upset at this revelation, rather it speaks to a positive phenomenon Essmann lays out nicely in his 2014 article on “Coming out Catholic.” “Welcome is a joyous absurdity of openness and love, of oneness, and what I love most about my parish is that I’m not a gay Catholic there. I’m just Catholic.”

Initially, I was hesitant about opening the floor to dialog and discussion during this retreat. Particularly with engaged youth retreatants, ideas that challenged the current Catholic stance on homosexuality would undoubtedly begin to grow. While this academic dialog is wonderful, I was afraid it defeated the purpose of creating a retreat that stayed within the bounds of official Church teachings. However, upon careful inspection, the Catholic Church seeks to foster an engagement with one’s faith. Only through challenging it can it truly be internalized and incorporated into one’s worldview. Simply presenting the Church’s teaching in its entirety, contradictions and all, then allowing for self-reflection and pondering is not antithetical to the functioning of the Church, rather it is part of a long history of doing so. Much of the modern Church’s understanding of sexuality and its proper expression come from the work of medieval

thinkers. In their time, they were re-evaluating Scripture and engaging in fresh dialog concerning topics of interest to the time. Quite possibly, the LGB community is the next step in this long history of reframing.

My overall interpretation of this Children of God retreat is that it is a viable resource created for Catholic schools, parishes, or dioceses to nurture, support, and teach LGB Catholics, as well as the general parish community. Ultimately, at its core, the Catholic Church is very affirming in its teaching, but the current aversion of the hierarchy is perpetuating what Rankin (2005) refers to as a “culture of silence” (p. 21). “Differences disturb the norm; a culture of silence reinforces the norm for those who are different.” By avoiding the topic entirely, the clergy is fostering confusion, fear, and animosity in LGB Catholics.

Additionally, I feel that a Catholic retreat not only can assist in the development of a strong LGB identity, it is a unique environment that particularly fosters this type of growth. The Church advocates for integration of self, for the sense of oneness in community, for the dignity of every human person, and for forgiveness (Catholic Church, 2011). In particular, the concept of “coming out” and being reborn into the person you are called to be in Christ should be familiar to Catholics in the Sacrament of Baptism. The rebirth in Baptism and ownership of self in Confirmation are both accompanied by the adoption of a new name that “better suits” the new person you have become. This imagery and metaphor is very relatable to the trans\* experience.

I found a great deal of support for the development of this retreat in an abundance of affirming literature on the topic of homosexuality. The dialog and education is in existence, however not widespread enough. As mentioned previously, the Catholic Church is still seen as extremely hostile to the LGBT community (Pew Research Center, 2013a), whereas their sexual identity could be uniquely useful in growing their relationship to Christ (Birch, 2011).

Conversely, I found a great deal of challenge trying to develop aspects of the retreat for trans\* people. The dialog just has not developed to the same extent.

The final challenge I am facing is the implementation strategy for this retreat. Can you reach those who really need it? Generally, concerning LGBT issues, the only people who make an appearance to listen are the ones who are already solid in their understanding of self. How would one go about educating the non-supportive congregation members who contribute to the homophobic climate of a Church community? Does supporting “ally” attendance to this retreat provide enough safety for a closeted LGB to attend without being outed? How does one avoid the ever-present concern of being roadblocked by an unsupportive parish or diocese?

### **Implement, Implement, Implement: Implications of this Research**

The challenges described in the previous section provide ample fodder for future research topics. This Children of God retreat could undergo a huge development with the addition of trans\*-supportive resources, but that would first require an investigation of the unique trans\* spirituality. The differences between sexual orientation and gender identity/expression may be so stark, in a religious context, that one might be prompted to create an entirely separate retreat. Additionally, adapting this retreat into a much shorter teaching resource for an entire parish community would be a useful avenue to pursue. Finally, a poignant topic for further study would be an investigation into the current climate of one’s diocese concerning homosexuality. In particular, one could probe for a willingness to implement this retreat.

This brings me to a discussion of how I, and others, might use this research; implementation. This resource has a direct application to any Catholic high school or parish youth program. Additionally, the resource can easily be adapted for adults or college students. I intend to make these adaptations and begin the planning of this retreat through the Catholic

Newman Community at the University of Rochester in the Spring semester. If well-received, I hope to extend the invitation and implementation to other parishes in the Rochester diocese. Regardless, if availability of time is a constraint, the education aspects of this retreat can be readily adopted in a classroom setting.

In terms of the larger context that is teaching and learning, this retreat fosters the ultimate aim of education. This retreat encourages the youth to think on their own and engage in discussion. This retreat pushes retreatants to take ownership of their learning, faith, and identity, while still providing the supportive context of a Catholic community. The retreat's focus on integration and seeing oneself as the union of many parts better youth learning. It also reminds teachers and priests that every student exists at the intersection of many, unique identities and must be approached as such.

### **A Church in Healing: Conclusion**

This research paper and applied project did not create any original insights. Others developed and implemented LGB Catholic retreats in the past to varying degrees of success. However, there is a general lack of initiative to consolidate resources and implement such a retreat. At least it appears to be a lack of initiative; otherwise, there are significant roadblocks in place that are preventing such retreats from being well advertised and executed.

The originality of this research and applied project is in its creation for and intention toward implementation. This retreat, as opposed to past retreats referenced in the literature review, has a novel focus. The Children of God retreat focuses on LGB youth specifically. It does not appeal well to family and friends of a LGB person, though it does not discourage them from attending. Additionally, it emphasizes identity formation and integration, therefore is best applicable for school-age youth.

In conducting this research, I learned a great deal more about my Catholic faith and my sexuality. I was excited to find that my personal experiences were validated by many other anecdotes and statistical studies. I have always felt a deep-rooted connection between my sexual orientation and my faith. I turned to God when struggling to understand my sexuality and I use my experiences of “coming out” to better engage with God. I was struck to learn that this interplay between a gay identity and a Catholic identity has been studied. In regards to myself, after doing a significant amount of literature searching, I learned that I tend to agree with many feminist, Catholic thinkers. I seek to reform the Church, not leave it. In gathering this research, I learned that I am very different than most on this point. The thought of leaving the Catholic faith has never crossed my mind, but the drive to make a difference for the gay Catholic community has not left my mind.

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