

## **LGBTQ+ Experiences in Catholic Schools**

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In November 2019, I attended a weekend retreat called “Kairos” with my Catholic high school senior class. The retreat was an opportunity for students to strengthen their individual relationships and spirituality by participating in various faith-based bonding activities.

On the final night of the retreat, one of my classmates announced to nearly our entire senior class that his weekend experiences made him comfortable enough to admit that he was bisexual. The room fell silent. Eyes widened and scanned the room to see who might respond first. We were a pretty accepting group of students – but a shared uneasiness crept through the room as ears perked to see how the room of Catholic moderators (including our campus minister, Catholic theology teachers, and priests) would respond to his statement. After what felt like entire minutes of uncomfortable silence, our campus minister, quietly and indirectly, thanked him for sharing his feelings. Her discomfort was present in her tone and body language, her statement made ingenuine by all notions besides the words themselves. The mood of the room shifted for the rest of the night.

In this case, my peer could be considered lucky; many LGBTQ+ students around the world face much crueler treatment when discussing their sexual identities. These discussions often become more complicated in Catholic environments – namely, Catholic schools – where the religious ideology condemns students for their identity, putting them at risk of bullying, a denied education, a lacking support system, or inadequate resources for students to learn and understand various identities – including their own. Because of these challenges, it is important to study the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ students and teachers in Catholic schools, and therefore what their experiences can teach us about addressing potential issues in the future.

Thus, a question is proposed: what does academic research conclude about the experiences of LGBTQ+ identifying individuals in Catholic schools? According to various

academic and narrative sources, the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals vary based upon (a) the general interpretations of Catholic doctrine; (b) the individual's role as a student or faculty member; (c) the legislation of the country and whether the school is funded by the state; (d) how individuals responded to setbacks or policies. Let us analyze each of these themes in greater detail, beginning with the various interpretations of Catholic doctrine.

### **Interpretation of Catholic Doctrine**

There are two overarching ways Catholic doctrine is interpreted that affect LGBTQ+ experiences in Catholic schools. One interpretation is that Catholic teachings should be applied based upon the “natural tendency” of gender binaries and heteronormativity, with homosexual tendencies seen as “intrinsically disordered,” (Guernsey, 2016). The opposing side of the dichotomy argues that Catholic teachings should be understood based upon the general principles of loving and accepting others no matter their supposed sins or flaws (Liboro et al., 2015; Callaghan, 2014, 2018; Huchting and Fisher, 2019; Coll, 2020).

Supporting the first side of the debate, Guernsey (2016) argues that it is the “right and responsibility” of Catholic schools to “live the truth in complete fidelity to Christ and his Church.” Thus, students, no matter their supposed gender or sexual preferences, should be expected to “participate in the complete mission [of Catholicism] ...and never do anything that works against the mission.” This includes educating students about the supposed dangers and unnatural characteristics of acting upon homosexual (or otherwise non-heteronormative) urges. According to this perspective, LGBTQ+ individuals should be generally accepted within Catholic schools, but their behaviors and or identities should not be encouraged or validated (Guernsey, 2016).

Opposingly, many Catholics' beliefs are progressing alongside societal beliefs; they are leaning toward a more accepting view of LGBTQ+ individuals in and outside the Church. Though this understanding is by no means universal, many individuals believe that opportunities should be equalized, and LGBTQ+ individuals should not be denied resources and opportunities based on their sexual or gender identity (Liboro et al., 2015; Callaghan, 2014, 2018; Huchting and Fisher, 2019; Coll, 2020). This is a much more open-minded perspective toward sexual minorities in Catholic schools, based upon the understanding that "Catholic educators are...called to consider the dignity of each human person, to protect the vulnerable, and to walk in solidarity with the oppressed," (Huchting and Fisher, 2019, p. 5) and that "if they really aspired to be kind and accepting Catholics, then they had the obligation to support their schools' LGBT youth" (Liboro et al., 2015, p. 10).

The interpretations of Catholic doctrine are an important starting point in analyzing the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in Catholic schools. However, more complications arise in the fact that on either side of this debate, the level of acceptance within Catholic schools is not applied evenly between students and faculty. An LGBTQ+ individual's role in the school (as a student or faculty member) is another essential determinant of these experiences.

### **The Individual's Role in the School**

When considering the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in Catholic schools, we are quick to ponder what challenges or solutions are posed for students – but what about faculty? Both LGBTQ+ identifying students and faculty face some overlapping challenges; however, there are also divisions among their experiences.

Teachers within the Catholic school system face a unique challenge: oftentimes, if they reveal their identity, they risk losing their job. In a study conducted by Callaghan (2014, p. 7),

four of seven teacher participants lost their jobs for “behaving in ways deemed contrary to Catholicity related to sexuality and gender identity.” Some can escape this risk by hiding their identity, but many choose not to do so within their work environment (Callaghan, 2014). The argument is often posed that Catholic school teachers, upon accepting their position, agree to exemplify Catholic doctrine in their everyday lives. For example, in Canada, teachers are required to “sign an employment contract...requiring them to uphold all elements of Catholic doctrine 24 hours a day, seven days a week” (Callaghan, 2014, p. 2). This argument, however, does not justify the discriminatory actions taken against LGBTQ+ faculty members. Callaghan (2014) argues that many heterosexual or cisgendered faculty members behave in ways that are also against Catholic doctrine (i.e., use of contraception or having children outside of wedlock), yet they do not face the same risk of losing their jobs as their LGBTQ+ colleagues.

This presents a connected challenge: a teacher’s requirement to suppress their identity can affect LGBTQ+ students and their experiences in schools. One study (Parodi-Brown, 2019) found that sexual minority students with support systems among teachers had much better school experiences, but that they also wished more LGBTQ+ teachers could openly act as role models. Liboro et al. (2015, p. 13) remark that “grassroots-level efforts to support LGBT students always gained greater momentum and stronger ground when teachers supported them from the beginning.” When students felt like teachers might not support them or their identities, it was much more difficult for students to feel comfortable in their learning environment. Thankfully, studies have shown that most Catholic school teachers prioritize providing students with a basis of academic study and personal development, rather than upon Catholic doctrine (Bryk et al., 1995).

Teachers focusing on academic curricula (rather than Catholicity) is important to ensure all students feel welcomed and valued in their educational environment; but the responsibility to protect LGBTQ+ students reaches far beyond just faculty members. In many countries, the government has stepped in to address conflicts regarding LGBTQ+ students in Catholic schools; thus, the legislation and funding of a region is another important factor of these experiences.

### **Government Legislation and Funding**

LGBTQ+ individuals' experiences in Catholic schools are heavily dependent upon whether or not their school is funded by the government. If so, the school is subject to national education laws and anti-discrimination policies; if not, the school is part of the private sector and able to maintain more autonomy in upholding discriminatory policies. Based on the available research, let us consider Catholic schools in three countries: the United States, Scotland, and Canada.

In the United States, Catholic schools receive little to no funding from the government based upon the constitutional division of Church and state. Therefore, US Catholic schools are not subject to anti-discrimination laws, and many schools seek to ensure that “students struggling with issues of human sexuality or gender dysphoria...are held to the same faith-based standards as all students in the school” (Guernsey, 2016). Guernsey (2016) also suggests that “all students must be willing to work within the religious mission of the school and comport themselves accordingly to the social and moral norms of the distinctive Catholic environment they have freely chosen.” Essentially, because students and teachers are making the active choice to remain in an environment in which teaching is rooted in Catholic ideology, they are expected to consistently uphold “all policies and procedures (including dress code and facilities)” (Guernsey, 2016), even if these “policies and procedures” do not align with a student’s sexual or gender identity.

This is not the case internationally, however. In countries such as Scotland and Canada, where Catholic schools and the government are more intertwined, much inclusive progress has been made on the state and school policy levels for LGBTQ+ students and teachers alike. According to Coll (2020, p. 9), “In Scotland, the Director of Scottish Catholic Education Service opens her staff development sessions with the question, ‘Did you see on the news or in the paper that story about the Catholic school in Scotland discriminating against a child identifying as LGBT?’ When the answer is ‘NO’ she responds, ‘That is because there is no story.’” Scotland enforces the 2010 Equality Act, a non-discrimination act, upon Catholic and secular schools alike, and the country takes pride in remaining “one of the most progressive countries in Europe in terms of... (LGBTI) equality” (Coll, 2020, p. 4).

Canada is another interesting case. Like Scotland, the systems are more intertwined, and “Canadian Catholic schools are held legally accountable to provincial governments rather than Church authorities” (Callaghan, 2014, p. 1). After a push from students to be more respectful of LGBTQ+ students and their wish to form Gay/Straight Alliance (GSA) clubs within Catholic schools, the Canadian government – with some pushback from Catholic school governing boards – instituted Bill 13, or the *Accepting Schools Act*, which required secular and Catholic schools to (a) “promote a positive school climate that is inclusive and accepting of all pupils” and (b) allow for “activities or organizations that promote the awareness and understanding of, and respect for, people of all sexual orientations and gender identities” (Liboro et al., 2015, p. 7; Callaghan 2014).

Note that we have only analyzed three countries, simply because this is where available information exists on this topic. This poses a few more questions: what are policies like in other countries? What could we learn from other countries where studies have not been conducted?

Though in the United States students are encouraged to follow Catholic doctrine more specifically, inclusionary policies have been encouraged in places like Scotland and Canada. Further analysis of these countries and others could encourage a better understanding of how to create a safer educational environment for these individuals.

### **Responses to Setbacks and School Policies**

As we have seen, progress has been made at the government level; however, much of this progress resulted from movements at the individual or community level. Throughout the surveyed literature, there are many discussed instances of LGBTQ+ identifying individuals using their experiences as inspiration to implement solutions in their schools or communities.

Cianciotto (2012) discusses the narrative of Louie Garay, a young man who used homophobic childhood bullying as motivation to help others. After coming out to a few of his friends in his Catholic middle school, Louie faced immediate homophobia that persisted into high school. However, he approached the issue head-on, organized the school's first GSA, partnered with multiple LGBTQ+ associated organizations, and eventually gained "national recognition" for his work.

In her book *Homophobia in the Hallways* (2018), author Tonya Callaghan discusses her own experience as a lesbian teacher in Catholic schools, and how the suicide of one of her students in 2004 led her to fight back against the homophobic policies of the school. She held meetings with various schoolboards and later conducted research on LGBTQ+ individuals in Canadian Catholic schools. Callaghan proceeds in the book to discuss student Leanne Iskander and her endeavors to establish the first GSA in Ontario's St. Joseph's Catholic Secondary School. Iskander refused to give up after being first denied, and she eventually reached her goal of an approved GSA at St. Joseph's. In addition to this, many students at other schools have



challenged policies by creating associated inclusionary clubs so minority students – of sexuality and non-sexuality identities alike – can find a safe space in their school communities (Liboro et al., 2015).

## **Conclusion**

As much as LGBTQ+ individuals' experiences vary, we have seen how they overlap in the following categories: (a) how Catholic doctrine is understood; (b) whether the individual is a student or teacher; (c) the laws and policies of the school and region; (d) how individuals respond to their circumstances. Catholic doctrine can be viewed in its more biblical understanding, or with a wider view of accepting and loving all people. Students and faculty members each face their own challenges in Catholic schools, with faculty members facing a higher risk of losing their jobs. The government funding (or lack thereof) given to Catholic schools in varying countries determines how the school is held accountable to regional laws. And lastly, school members can have lasting impacts on their communities by taking the initiative to challenge policies.

There are unique challenges posed to students and faculty within Catholic school environments, but research has shown that upon calling attention to these issues, solutions can be found, and issues can be resolved. Research has helped international Catholic schools to adapt their policies and resources to create a safer atmosphere for non-heterosexual and non-cisgendered students. But this work is not complete. Upon surveying the available literature, little is known about these spaces in countries outside of the United States, Scotland, and Canada. The research process is not complete; there is still much to learn and understand about the experiences of LGBTQ+ identifying individuals – students and teachers alike – in Catholic school environments.

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