

# Exploring Homosexuality Within Catholicism

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**Abstract:** *Historically, the Catholic Church has marginalized its homosexual followers due to their nonconforming sexuality. Further analysis will examine Pope Francis, prior papacies, and the continued stigma that homosexuals face within the Church in order to determine whether Pope Francis has enacted change. Such research will discredit the attempts of Pope Francis and reveal that while the acceptance of homosexuals within religion has liberalized, Catholic doctrinal law remains prejudiced against homosexual union. As a result, Catholics who identify as homosexual struggle to identify with the Church, which causes them additional strain in their personal endeavor to discover themselves.*

**Keywords:** Catholic Church, homosexuality, Catholicism, homophobia

As of 2021, Christianity maintains the title of the world's largest religion (Teo et al., 2021). Christianity is not a modern religion, evident in its fundamental scripture. While the Ten Commandments lay out the basic ethical stances that all Christians should follow and maintain throughout their lives, the Bible tells the story of God and his son Jesus Christ, setting the outline for the ideology behind Christianity. The Bible establishes ideas that have evolved over the past 2,000 years, which instigates strain in the modern world. The growth of secular ideas conflicts with religious doctrine and adds an overall pressure to the foundation of the Catholic Church. With that, current ethical issues, such as homosexuality, pose a significant threat to the Church and its ethical and fundamental beliefs.

As the Gay Rights Movement gains influence in many countries, the religious sphere remains hesitant to acknowledge and accept such liberal ideas. In particular, the Catholic faith continually rejects homosexuality and condemns same-sex mar-

riage. In fact, despite legality in the United States and many other countries, gay marriage remains a prohibited marital sacrament of the Church. Much of this condemnation and rejection stems from leaders of the Catholic faith, such as the pope. Many popes have openly spoken against homosexuality, as it violates religious doctrines and teachings of the Church. Recently, though, Pope Francis has taken a more liberal approach to this contemporary issue. Pope Francis has made public statements that seemingly reflect acceptance of homosexuality within the Church. However, homosexual Catholics have yet to attain acceptance around the world and the lack of tangible attempts to incorporate homosexuals into Catholicism poses a threat to the self-identity of young individuals.

In particular, high school and college-aged homosexuals have trouble disclosing such a personal matter to others since their sexuality is not always met with acceptance (Kite & Bryant-Lees, 2016, p. 167). High school and college-aged individuals of the LGBTQ community are best studied in the religious context because their demographic is most likely to encounter the identity struggle between sexual orientation and religion. Essentially, homosexuals as a whole lack the endorsement needed to feel included, especially in a religious setting.

This paper examines how attempts to incorporate the homosexual community in the Catholic Church have failed due to prevailing traditional beliefs despite efforts made by Pope Francis to foster such acceptance. The hostile feelings against those of the homosexual community, as expressed by previous popes such as Pope Benedict XVI and Pope John Paul II, contribute to this turbulent issue. The latter remained pontificate from 1978 until his death in 2005 (Coppa, 2006). John Paul II is commonly critiqued for his “unpopular stands on abortion, birth control, priestly celibacy” and other matters that threaten fundamental Catholic beliefs regarding sexual relations (Coppa, 2006, p. 607). His predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, who resigned in 2013, held similar conservative stances (especially when compared to current Pope Francis) but “is not a defender of social status quo” (Barbato, 2017, p. 1164). Benedict XVI is notably recognized for

incorporating secular ideology into his teachings, indicating his willingness to at the least critically address controversial issues, such as gay marriage (Barbato, 2017)

Pope Francis has made great efforts to verbally welcome the homosexual community into the Catholic faith, yet deep-rooted condemnation proves difficult for homosexual youths, who struggle to maintain their faith given such unfavorable circumstances. This deep-rooted condemnation stems well before John Paul II and Benedict XVI, yet their prevalence as "modern" popes best suit the following arguments. Despite Pope Francis' attempts to change the Catholic outlook on homosexuality, condemnation from previous popes remains the norm in the Church and among the faithful.

## **Background**

Until the 1960s, "most homosexuals remained deeply closeted to avoid the social stigma associated with the same-sex lifestyle" (Alwood, 2015, p. 11). This stigma lasted until the 1969 Stonewall riots, which some scholars believe initiated the Gay Rights Movement as it is known today (Alwood, 2015, p.11). The Stonewall riots were protests in New York City in response to a need for gay liberation that had been building for much of the 1960s. The riots further "paved the way for a new generation to come out into a world of unprecedented personal freedoms," (Mumford, 2019, p. 85). The "shifting social climate" of the 1960s, as also reflected in the passage of the Civil Rights Act, brought attention to minority groups that did not receive the same treatment as traditionally accepted groups, such as white heterosexuals (Kite & Bryant-Lees, 2016, p. 164). The Civil Rights Movement served as a model for the Gay Rights Movement, encouraging gay and lesbian individuals across America to speak up in advocacy for fundamental human rights (Alwood, 2015, p. 19). Since then, gay and lesbians couples have been more open about their relationships.

The Gay Rights Movement continued to grow throughout the following decades. In the 1980s and 1990s, parenting rights and military service acceptances were granted to gay and les-

bian persons (Alwood, 2015, p.19). By 2015, the United States had federally legalized same-sex marriage. These policy changes serve as examples of the liberalization of social issues in the United States. Further, these policies illustrate the American citizenry's accepting attitude towards homosexuality. In 2003, two blockbuster Supreme Court cases in the United States—*Lawrence v. Texas* and *Goodridge v. Department of Public Health*—further spurred the movement of gay rights as human rights (Hammack et al., 2018, p. 60). *Lawrence v. Texas* aimed to remove “the sanction of criminal punishment from those who commit sodomy” (Tribe, 2004, p.1896). Essentially, this case prohibited punishment for those who had engaged in same-sex relations. As in *Goodridge v. Department of Public Health*, the “Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts” found that the state could not “constitutionally deny same-sex couples from marrying and receiving the full spectrum of legal, financial, and social benefits that marriage provides” (Ulve, 2007, p.159-160). These two cases essentially stripped discriminatory practices by securing due process of law to those of homosexual orientation. Furthermore, these rulings represent the shift in support in favor of LGBTQ rights. This increase in support, perhaps not so surprisingly, was not acknowledged by the Catholic Church until 2013 when Pope Francis took the papacy.

Unlike the growth of the LGBTQ movement in the United States and other countries, the same acceptance has yet to be achieved within the religious sphere and through religious institutions. Since the birth of Christianity, homosexuality has been condemned, and the Church to this day remains “openly against homosexual acts,” (Pietkiewicz & Kołodziejczyk-Skrzypek, 2016, p. 1573). Christianity views God as the Creator of all things and that His creations should take up their natural purpose. Male and females are naturally complimentary to one another, hence their ability to reproduce. Homosexuality, however, conflicts with the Catholic responsibility to honor God's creations as intended. Relationships shared between those of the same gender embody the “destruction of God's own work,” defying the fundamental nature of humans as set out in Catholicism (Derks, 2017, p. 42).

## **Relevant Implications of Catholic Scripture**

The Bible begins with the verse, “In the beginning, God created heaven and earth” and tells the story of God as Creator of light and darkness, land and sea, male and female, and of virtually everything known today. This preface instills the most foundational Catholic belief that God is Creator of the universe and hence of everything within it. The Catechism of the Catholic Church is an important book that defines the fundamental and sacred beliefs and practices of the Catholic faith. The Catechism explains the value of gender as it relates to marriage (Catholic Church). This particular section of the Catechism highlights the bond between man and women — “the union of man and woman in marriage is a way of imitating in the flesh the Creator’s generosity and fecundity” (Catholic Church, 2335). The union of a male and female, essentially, is a command from God to utilize his graciousness.

In the Catholic faith, there are seven holy sacraments that one may partake in to honor God and in turn receive his grace, one of which is matrimony. The Catechism explains that “the vocation to marriage is written in the very nature of man and woman as they came from the hand of the Creator” (Catholic Church, 1603). The inherent potential to marry an individual of the opposite sex is a blessing from God. Here, three important Catholic notions overlap: marriage, the separate sexes, and God as the Creator. In conjunction, these three important foundations of Catholic scripture establish that to honor God as Creator, the sacrament of matrimony is achievable through union of man and women. This leaves no room for ambiguity and hence denies the religious validity of homosexual relationships.

Since Catholic marriage defines the union between man and woman, a closer examination of the beliefs of the Bible provides direct notions that reject homosexuality. In the Old Testament, “homosexuality is presented as being punishable by death (Leviticus 20:13),” and in the New Testament, homosexuality is “viewed as preventing ones’ passage to the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:9 –10; Romans 1:26 –27, 32)” (Etengoff & Rodriguez, 2017, p.424-425). These are Christian beliefs that embody the historical stance of many denominations, and most impor-

tantly here, the Catholic faith. While both testaments disapprove of homosexuality in some way, the New Testament takes a more liberal approach to the issue. Whereas the Old Testament references homosexuality as a sin punishable by death, the New Testament only implies that homosexuals could not enter Heaven.

Despite the negative implications of homosexuality recorded within Catholic scripture, Catholic priest James Martin challenges this widespread viewpoint. He explains that the Gospel values of “love, mercy, and compassion are the building blocks of all church teaching” (Martin, 2018, p. 34). It is understood that individuals are born homosexual, so they must be treated with such fundamental Gospel values. Given this, homosexuality itself is not a sin, Martin argues, but rather the implications and behaviors associated with homosexuality establish contradictory values within Catholic teachings. The marriage and childbirth of homosexual couples are simply not compatible with fundamental Catholic beliefs. The examples presented are only a few of the longstanding, concrete notions that guide the Church from its standpoint on homosexuality. Considering all the implicated scripture, even in consideration of the slight deviation evident among the Old Testament and the New Testament, Catholic scripture remains hostile and prejudiced against homosexuality.

### **Traditional Denial of Homosexuality Prevails**

Despite the efforts of Pope Francis to foster acceptance of the homosexual community, the long-standing tradition of denying homosexuals a place in the Church remains the norm. An examination of previous popes allows for a basic understanding of the precedent that rejects homosexuality within Catholicism. In an extensive, published interview, *Light of the World*, Pope Benedict XVI explains that “the meaning and direction of sexuality is to bring about the union of man and woman and in this way give humanity posterity, children, [and] future...” (Mullady, 2011, p. 295). Here, Pope Benedict XVI solidifies the concept previously discussed: God created the separate sexes

to facilitate marriage and reproduction. Pope Benedict XVI reinforces the belief that man and woman naturally belong together for reproduction purposes because it is a part of nature. He further supports this belief by stating, "Everything else is against sexuality's intrinsic meaning and direction," implying that anything contrary to heterosexuality and reproduction are sinful (Mullady, 2011, p. 295).

The more specific statements of Pope Benedict XVI further reveals his harsh treatment of homosexuals. He marginalizes their homosexual identity through his inability to properly refer to their minority group status (Derks, 2017). He indirectly insults the homosexual community by claiming that "they deny their nature" by deliberately choosing homosexuality, and, in turn, "[defy] God's work" (as cited in Derks, 2017, p. 47). Pope Benedict XVI insinuates that homosexuals are ungrateful and selfish because they deny the traditional nature of sexuality established by God. Such condemnation traces back to the beginning of the Church. For relevancy, this paper discusses the beliefs of Pope John Paul II, prior to Pope Benedict XVI, and how they paved the way for the contemporary attitudes denouncing Catholic homosexuality.

During his nearly 30-year tenure, Pope John Paul II denounced homosexual relations repeatedly. Ironically, Jodok Troy's analysis of the tenures of the last seven popes indicates that Pope John Paul II "referenced human rights more than the rest of the popes" (2019, p. 79). Despite this, Pope John Paul II remained firm in the teachings of the Bible that opposed gay relations and supported heterosexual relations: "John Paul II's theology left no room to account for same-sex attraction or the emotional and psychological needs of gay and lesbian persons who needed human companionship" (Reid, 2020, p. 233). He indirectly denounced homosexual relations through his emphasis on heterosexual relations. Essentially, because the Bible tells the story of man and woman, no other possibilities remain.

Pope John Paul II is important in this context because he takes the official teachings of the Catholic Church and applies them to gender theology. In his teachings, Pope John Paul II ex-

plains the concept of “gender complementarity,” that is, “there are ‘essential characteristics’ that accompany maleness and femaleness, and these differences ‘complete’ men and women in relation to each other” (Jung & Coray, 2012, p.40). John Paul II credits this concept for the justification behind male and female union (Jung & Coray, 2012). Pope John Paul II applied gender complementarity to stories of the Bible. For example, the “essential characteristics” specific to Mary explain why she is the earthly mother of Jesus (Jung & Coray, 2012, p.40). Mary’s obedience to God in relation to motherhood serves as a characteristic expected of females: service to higher authorities, which can also include service to a male counterpart (Jung & Coray, 2012). The characteristics of Mary, and of other females, help to explain that the balance of male and female characteristics justify heterosexual union. Gender complementarity, essentially, was a way in which Pope John II could support and maintain the church’s teachings about sexuality.

Gender complementarity, however, is only a concept that explains male and female relations. In essence, it excludes homosexuality because it strictly explains heterosexual relations. By using this theory, Pope John Paul II emphasizes sexuality in the way the Church has always maintained. His theology completely leaves out the LGBTQ community. Pope John Paul II’s emphasis on heterosexual relations allows for an indirect denouncing of homosexual Catholics. His failure to directly acknowledge this problem signifies that the Church was not ready to reconsider their viewpoint on the acceptance of LGBTQ Catholics.

As a result of the foundation of rejection, the homosexual community remains somewhat disassociated with the Catholic Church, whose figureheads consistently solidify nonacceptance as the norm. Pope Francis has and can only do so much to reverse this norm. One pope, in almost a decade of papacy, is not nearly enough to enact true change. Even though “Pope Francis’s recent rhetoric surrounding homosexuality has been understood as a break from a dominant and traditional script of condemnation,” further examination will determine that his



rhetoric has not changed any tangible aspect of this issue (Jacobson et al., 2015, p. 464). The most tangible way to accept homosexuals within the Church is by legalizing homosexual marriage within Catholic doctrinal law, which would allow homosexuals physical comfort and acceptance in the face of religion.

### **Continued Rejection of Homosexuality Within the Church**

Even though the homosexual community often disagrees with Catholic teachings, “a broad range of LGBTQ individuals nevertheless continue to identify with Catholicism, find meaning in religious identity and practices, and turn to religion to solve problems” (Wedow et al., 2017, p. 294). Since the end of the 20th century, Catholic Church officials have expressed a noticeably different attitude towards homosexuals. Despite “arguing that homosexual acts are sinful... bishops emphasized pastoral care for gay and lesbian Catholics that includes respect for their dignity as human beings created by God,” which represents a general shift towards acceptance (Wedow et al., 2017, p. 294). As a result, Church teachings have somewhat softened to allow the inclusion of and respect for Catholic homosexuals. For example, “the Catholic Church’s Holy See Delegation declared in 2008 that criminal penalties for homosexuals are a violation of human rights,” which best reflects the shift in outlook from the Old Testament to the New Testament (Entengoff & Rodriguez, 2017, p.425). Despite this shift, the Catholic outlook condemning homosexuality as a whole remains intact. The inclusion of same-sex marriage has yet to be attained, despite the open-minded nature of Pope Francis. Today, homosexual Catholics are still prohibited to engage in the sacrament of matrimony that heterosexual followers of the faith have always been permitted to fulfill.

A large following of the Catholic faith has reacted divergently to the liberal ideas that Pope Francis has addressed within the Church. There appears to be “marked individual differences in levels of sexual prejudice as well as varying levels of comfort and exposure to the LGBT community” despite the general lib-

eralization of gay attitudes (Kite & Bryant-Lees, 2016, p.164). A Pew Research poll that measured the percentage of U.S. Catholic adults who favor same-sex marriage found a 21% increase in support of same-sex marriage between the years 2001-2019 (Pew Research Center, 2019). Because this increase in acceptance occurred during Pope Francis' papacy, it is worth noting his potential contribution to the matter. Pope Francis has taken on an "attempt at exercising the moral authority of the Church by conveying a new, more welcoming approach" towards homosexuality (Crespo & Gregory, 2020, p. 127). His efforts, perhaps, have established a change in an authoritative attitude that has trickled down to followers of the Catholic faith. Despite the increase in homosexual acceptance, 39% of U.S. Catholic adults continually disapprove of same-sex marriage, representing the ambiguous nature of Catholics as a whole (Pew Research Center, 2019).

In order to best study the effects of Pope Francis's new attitude, it is important to focus on the demographic group that homosexuality and religious conflict most applies to: LGBTQ youth. This specific group includes those in their latter teenage years and early adulthood, generally those in high school and college. Wedow et al. (2017) offers that this age group is important because "religious and sexual identity negotiation occurs perhaps most intensively among young persons and college students in particular" (p. 292). Given that Pope Francis serves as the Catholic figurehead during a significant time in the lives of the current generation of LGBTQ youth, it is critical to analyze their perspectives on the effectiveness of Catholic reform.

The attempts of Pope Francis to shift the Catholic outlook towards acceptance of homosexuality intersects two issues. One issue deals with the idea that condemnation of homosexuality from previous popes solidifies nonacceptance as the norm. Because all previous popes have rejected homosexuality, the attempts of Pope Francis have not been enough to reverse this stigma. The second issue arises from the fact that same-sex marriage remains illegal under Catholic law. Reid (2019) notes that, "on the subject of same-sex relations, we have witnessed over

the last decade a sea change in Catholics attitudes on a global scale," yet traditional Catholic doctrinal law remains the same (p. 239). These two issues, in conjunction, explain the direct and indirect obstacles that challenge Pope Francis. Essentially, the intangible norm to reject homosexuality coupled with the Catholic scripture that forbids homosexual union explains why the attempts of Pope Francis has not succeeded. Additionally, these two issues form the basis of discriminatory treatment of homosexuals by the Church.

### **The Efforts of Pope Francis**

An examination of Pope Francis demonstrates his efforts to initiate a change in outlook that acknowledges a place for gay individuals and couples in the Church. Over the course of his papacy, Pope Francis has made public attempts to accommodate homosexuals. During a press briefing in June 2013, not even six months into his papacy, Pope Francis expressed an open-minded attitude towards homosexual relations. In response to a comment regarding homosexuality among priests, he expressed, "If someone is gay and searches for the Lord and has good will, who am I to judge?" (Aquino, 2017, p. 219). His words stunned Catholics around the world and hopes in the LGBTQ community quickly increased. Two years later, the pope expressed a similar attitude of acceptance "when he welcomed Yayo Grassi, a gay former student, to a private audience" during his visit to Washington, D.C. (Aquino, 2017, p. 220). Grassi was accompanied by his gay partner at the time, and Pope Francis was seen bidding the couple farewell, kissing both of their cheeks (Aquino, 2017, p. 220). The video of this interaction shocked many Catholics; again, the Pope's unorthodox attitude towards the LGBTQ community draws attention.

Attempts by Pope Francis to extend good will to homosexuals continues in more recent years. Despite not speaking on homosexuality too often, "Pope Francis has taken further steps to signal, at least, a willingness to rethink long-held positions on same-sex relations" (Reid, 2020, p. 235). In 2016, on his way back to Rome from Armenia, he told reporters that the Church

and its followers “must express their sincere regrets to gay persons for the historically horrific ways they have been treated” (Reid, 2020, p. 235). This remark signals an inclination to treat homosexuals as any other follower of the Church. In fact, in a 2018 comment to a gay Chilean man, Pope Francis says that being “gay does not matter. God made you like this and loves you like this and I don’t care. The Pope loves you like this. You have to be happy with who you are” (as cited in Reid, 2020, p. 235). What differentiates Pope Francis from previous popes is that he “steps out of the narratives that employ naming and shaming practices,” (Troy, 2019, p. 76) which is especially evident when he tells the Chilean that he loves him despite his homosexuality. These examples all embody the personal and moral beliefs of Pope Francis in that homosexuals deserve a place in the Church.

In addition to these seemingly direct implications of his support towards homosexuals, Pope Francis utilizes broad implications of individual virtue to further support his individual belief in support of homosexuality within the Church: “Francis notes that we must recognize the good at work in every person, even in situations that fall short of what the church proposes as the fullness of gospel living” (Martin, 2018, p. 36). A failure to live as the Gospel proposes does not make a person bad or unholy. Given that the gospel preaches important values that Catholics should adhere to, Pope Francis recognizes that an individual’s religious shortcomings (as in homosexuality) does not qualify them as an unholy person. Despite this, homosexuality remains a sin, something that Pope Francis has yet to refute. In totality, though, it appears that the efforts of Pope Francis suggest that since God can love homosexuals, they can also love themselves.

In the eyes of the Church, there is an important difference between homosexuality as an identity and homosexuality as related to sexual relations. Aquino (2017) notes that “Catholic teaching had long emphasized a distinction between homosexual orientation and homosexual sex” (p. 222). Whereas homosexual orientation is innocuous, homosexual sex is evil and sinful (Aquino, 2017). Perhaps this notion of homosexuality as a feeling is what Pope Francis aims to protect. When

he seemingly speaks of homosexuality in accepting terms, he is merely protecting the face value of the LGBTQ community, not the physical behavior that the community entails. The face value of the LGBTQ community can be described as same-sex attraction and affection, as is any intimate relationship. Considering this possibility, it becomes apparent that the efforts of Pope Francis are not legitimate in enacting true change. While he somewhat successfully tackles the first issue of condemning the solidified norm from previous papacies, he has not done anything to legalize same-sex marriage. Instead, the pope's efforts are only legitimate in changing the attitude towards homosexual individuals. The discrepancy "between homosexual orientation and homosexual sex" hinder the establishment of LGBTQ rights within the Church (Aquino, 2017, p. 222).

### **Overcoming Solidified Rejection**

In his analysis of the evolution of doctrinal law within the Catholic Church, Charles Reid (2020) sums it up saying "One can detect a substantial shift from a simple condemnation of particular acts, grounded in a narrow reading of scripture or natural law, and towards a greater willingness to view homosexuality as a more or less enduring and regularly occurring feature of the human condition" (p. 211). These changes are most notable in the Roman Rota, "one of two supreme appellate tribunals located at the Vatican... especially charged with reviewing petitions for the nullity of marriage" (Reid, 2020, p. 218). Over the course of the last century, the Roman Rota has slowly moved away from severe and harsh condemnation of homosexuality. This tribunal continually and presently prohibits homosexual marriage but has "opened the door to dialogue—and to criticism—on the basis of a widely shared set of foundational ideas" regarding homosexual union (Reid, 2020, p. 218). Ultimately, Catholic doctrine remains unchanged, but the outlook and approach to the consideration of homosexual marriage has liberalized, which suggests that Pope Francis has succeeded in an attitudinal way.

The fixed nature of Catholic doctrine regarding marriage provides the greatest explanation for the current pope's fail-

ure, along with the continued struggles of Catholic homosexuals. Evidence that Pope Francis has done little to enact change within the Church in support of the homosexual community is seen through the continued struggles of LGBTQ individuals to cope with their identity. Andrew Wood and Abigail Conley (2013) examine the concept of religious/spiritual (R/S) identity struggles, asserting that LGBT “individuals are at risk of having negative experiences with religion because of mainstream religions’ non-LGBT-affirming stances” (p. 95). These experiences include harassment, sexual microaggressions, interpersonal struggles, and more (Wood & Conley, 2013). Homosexuals suffer greatly under the umbrella of religion and Catholicism is no exception. “LGBT individuals from conservative R/S backgrounds feel shame and guilt about their sexual identity” because of said negative experiences (Wood & Conley, 2013, p. 101). Because these individuals lose a sense of belonging within the Church, they consequently lose a sense of their own identity.

The effect is similar to an idea developed in race theory known as ‘double consciousness.’ Double consciousness presents itself as a concept of “two-ness,” which bears the fundamental principle of balancing two identities (Brannon et al., 2015). Introduced by W.E.B. DuBois, double consciousness began as an explanation for “a duality in African American life” as the racial minority struggled to assimilate with American culture (Meer, 2019, p.7). In this context, “double consciousness can function as [two] self-schemas—an independent self-schema tied to mainstream American culture and an interdependent self-schema tied to African American culture” (Brannon et al., 2015, p. 586). On the surface, double consciousness provides an overarching explanation for the differences between “origin and destination” and how minority groups find their way in an environment that differs from their internal identification (Meer, 2019, p. 54).

As the concept of double consciousness expanded, scholars found that “a range of issues” embodied this struggle (Meer, 2019, p. 51). Double consciousness can apply to virtually any

minority group who is challenged with balancing two conflicting identities. Members of the LGBTQ community are part of a minority within their religious sphere, for example. The affiliation between homosexuality and Catholicism serves as the “two-ness” struggle for those who identify with both groups (Brannon et al., 2015). Here, the internal identity of being homosexual challenges the Catholic fundamentals that reject that very identity.

Due to such religious denouncement, homosexuals continually struggle to cope with their identity within the Church given that they feel unwanted. For over 2,000 years, the Vatican continued such traditions of condemnation by “reinforcing anti-gay attitudes and behaviors throughout the world” (Jacobson et al., 2015, p. 164). The reinforcement of such negative attitudes creates an atmosphere of strain and interpersonal struggle for those of the gay community, which clearly highlights the concept of double consciousness.

Even with the introduction of Pope Francis to the Vatican, homosexuals continue to struggle with their sexual orientation in conjunction with their religion. Research conducted in Poland between 2014-2015 analyzed eight homosexual Polish males to determine how their Catholic affiliation shaped their identities (Pietkiewicz & Kołodziejczyk-Skrzypek, 2016, p. 1575). The men were between the ages of 24-25, which still allows them classification as LGBTQ youth. The men were questioned about their internal struggles as gay individuals in which all eight of them reported experiencing a “spiritual dilemma” (Pietkiewicz & Kołodziejczyk-Skrzypek, 2016 p. 1578). Even though the Church acknowledges homosexuality, fundamental religious norms degrading homosexuality (as expressed by Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI) caused “internalization of religious principles,” making “participants feel extremely guilty and fear eternal condemnation” due to their sexual identity (Pietkiewicz & Kołodziejczyk-Skrzypek, 2016 p. 1578).

Feelings of rejection and fear push homosexuals away from the Church because they struggle to find a balance between their sexual and spiritual identities. This can be explained by

DuBois' notion of self, which plays a crucial role in the concept of double consciousness (Meer, 2019). When one looks "at one's self through the eyes of others," they "conceive the culturally embedded and socially mediated" perspectives that have long stood (Meer, 2019, p. 52-53). For example, when homosexual Catholics analyze themselves through the perspective of non-homosexual Catholics, they begin to understand themselves as outsiders, alienated from their religious identity. Consequently, homosexual Catholics adopt this majority view and develop a negative perspective upon their own identity (Meer, 2019). These feelings of rejection and fear not only push homosexuals away from the Church but also cause them great strain within their personality (Meer, 2019)

Pietkiewicz & Kołodziejczyk-Skrzypek (2016) note the serious effects of struggling to balance this two-ness. In an analysis of other related studies, research participants whose internal conflict intersected homosexuality and religion reported "depressive moods, self-loathing, suicidal ideations, and feelings of social exclusion" (Pietkiewicz & Kołodziejczyk-Skrzypek, 2016, p. 1574). This strain, as DuBois proposes, is merely the distorted sense of self that the majority has influenced over the minority (Meer, 2019). However, DuBois proposes a way in which the minority moves past the majority's influence. DuBois explains that there is a "second sight" within the majority's perspective in which minority individuals can take the negative notions and transform them into an empowering meaning (Meer, 2019, p. 53). A starting statement may look something like this: Black Americans view themselves as oppressed because the white majority discriminates against them (Meer, 2019). However, the "second sight" concept further "allows African Americans to understand the promise of freedom in a way that white Americans cannot" (Meer, 2019, p. 53). The negative notion of oppression emboldens the African American concept of freedom. Oppression ignites a stronger and more meaningful desire to attain freedom. African Americans see freedom as something extremely valuable because it signifies a victory against adversity. Freedom for African Americans is not inherently given to



them because they were born a certain race; instead, freedom is fought for and respectably earned. As a result, African American notions of freedom give them their own sense of an American identity.

DuBois' "second sight" notion, originally intended to explain how African Americans overcame their dual identity, can likewise apply to homosexual Catholics (Meer, 2019, p. 53). Homosexual Catholics view themselves as nonconformists to the Church because of their perspective of the non-homosexual majority. However, the "second sight" concept further allows homosexual Catholics to understand God's love in ways that others cannot (Meer, 2019, p. 53). The negative notion of nonconforming to the Church's teachings allows homosexual Catholics to confront their relationship with God, which may embolden their sense of religion. Instead of rejecting their spirituality and abandoning their religion, homosexual Catholics learn that they must love themselves first in order to find peace with God and the standards of the Church. As nonconforming Catholics, homosexuals share a unique relationship with God that they must validate and accept for themselves. As a result, they are better able to accept their internal homosexual identity.

Despite the negative outcome that many LGBTQ youth face when their sexuality intersects with their religion, some research analyzes the success of the minority. When interviewing college students at St. Agatha's University, those that identified as being either gay or lesbian and who also came to accept their identity credited this success with a variety of influences (Wedow et al., 2017). Such students disclosed that they felt more acceptance with their homosexuality when they had found others who similarly identified with them (Wedow et al., 2017). As previously discussed, a lot of LGBTQ individuals who struggle with their identity tend to base their "spiritual dilemma" on the teachings of the Church (Pietkiewicz & Kołodziejczyk-Skrzypek, 2016, p. 1578). Those LGBTQ students who were able to overcome this dilemma did not rely on religious doctrine to guide their belief systems. Instead, students "re-interpreted Church teaching in a way that downplayed the marginalizing

aspect of the Catholic Church doctrine regarding homosexuality” (Wedow et al., 2018, pp. 301-302). These students defined their religious identity by minimalizing the power of Catholic doctrine; they “selectively embrace” parts of official teaching that they believe in and disregard parts that conflict with homosexuality (Wedow et al., 2018, p. 302). Such an identity crisis, therefore, may be handled by avoiding the source of conflict.

Additionally, of the interview participants who navigated their identity crisis, it might be helpful to note that none of them credited Pope Francis as influential in their navigation (Wedow et al., 2017). Perhaps overreaching—but enough to consider—the language and attempts of Pope Francis to foster a safer and accepting community for LGBTQ Catholics has had little significant effect. Of the LGBTQ interview participants, the majority disclosed that they have yet to come to terms with this religious conflict (Wedow et al., 2018). Although this study cannot generalize certain ideas, it inadvertently supports the failure of Pope Francis to enact true change.

## **Conclusion**

For those of the LGBTQ population, identifying as homosexual has proven difficult throughout time, and that difficulty continues to this day. Largely contributing to the struggle of identifying as homosexual is religion, particularly Catholicism. Homosexual individuals struggle to identify with the Catholic Church because the Church condemns their sexuality, which further creates an internalized identity struggle. The Church has always remained firm on their rejection of homosexual union. The Church has evolved overtime, though, towards a more accepting outlook. However, acknowledgement is not enough. In order for homosexuals to safely identify with the Church, they must be accepted on a large scale. They must be accepted by religious leaders and by religious doctrine. In fact, according to Reid (2020), “Catholics were encouraged to be ‘accepting and valuing’ of homosexual orientation though not at the expense of Catholic doctrine” (p. 237).

The relatively recent papacy of Pope Francis confirms that

attempts to change said outlook have mixed results. It appears that the outlook has liberalized, but the tangible aspect of legalizing homosexual union remains unchanged. Pope Francis has publicly supported gay couples and has encouraged the Roman Rota to promote discussions about homosexual union. However, Catholic doctrine maintains that homosexual marriage is contrary to longstanding religious notions. Much of this failure transpires from the perpetual hostility that has widely permeated the Church. If the Church revised its legal doctrine to include homosexual matrimony, then more individuals would feel comfortable conforming to the Catholic faith and remaining a part of the Church.

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