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## I Am Gay and Catholic: An Analysis of Identity Integration in LGBTQ+ Members Converting to Catholicism

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I AM GAY AND CATHOLIC: AN ANALYSIS OF IDENTITY INTEGRATION IN  
LGBTQ+ MEMBERS CONVERTING TO CATHOLICISM

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degrees Bachelor of Arts with Mahurin Honors College Graduate  
Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By  
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May 2024

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2024

## ABSTRACT

This article examines the negotiation of sexual and religious identities among Catholic members of the LGBTQ+ community. I explore context-specific identity negotiation to determine how and why, in a time of “cultural warfare” within the Catholic Church surrounding the acceptance of LGBTQ+ participants, LGBTQ+ members choose to convert to Catholicism. Through semi-structured interviews conducted with members of the LGBTQ+ community, I identify and discuss several themes based on the identity integration process of these individuals: (1) Experiencing “The Call” (the initial interest in Catholicism), (2) Encountering the Religious “Other” (association with a welcoming and enduring Catholic LGBTQ+ Community), (3) Immersion in Church Teaching (relationship with Church Teaching and social movements in the Church), (4) Reframing Identity in the Context of the Church (internal restructuring of identity importance). I demonstrate that LGBTQ+ individuals who choose to convert to Catholicism experience minimal levels of cognitive dissonance. I suggest that openness to sexuality during adolescence, a sense of control over one’s identity, and a strong community support system are key factors in the development and negotiation of sexual and religious identities. I conclude by discussing the implications of my research, including specific implications for LGBTQ+ Catholics, religious orders, and outreach ministries.

I dedicate this thesis to LGBTQ+ Catholics who struggle with self-acceptance

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my advisors for their endless encouragement. I would also like to thank the wonderful women who generously shared their stories with me and made this research possible. Lastly, I would like to thank my parents for their continual support through this process.

VITA

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iv
VITA .....	v
LIST OF FIGURES .....	vii
LIST OF TABLES .....	viii
SECTION ONE .....	1
INTRODUCTION & LITERATURE REVIEW .....	1
Perception of God & Self .....	1
Cognitive Dissonance Theory .....	2
Identity Theory & Master Status Theory.....	2
Catholic Church and Homosexuality.....	4
Pope Francis & Culture Wars.....	5
Catechism Teaching in Depth.....	6
Research Goal and Questions .....	8
SECTION TWO.....	9
METHODS .....	9
DATA & ANALYSIS .....	10
Theme 1) Experiencing “The Call” .....	11
Theme 2) Encountering the religious “other”.....	15
Theme 3) Immersion in Church Teaching.....	18
Theme 4) Reframing identity in the context of the Church.....	21
SECTION THREE.....	24
CONCLUSIONS .....	24
IMPLICATIONS.....	25
REFERENCES .....	27



## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Findings Model.....	11
Figure 2. Advantages and Disadvantages of Converting to Catholicism.....	15

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Participant demographics.....	9
Table 2: Factors that facilitate and hinder conversion.....	24

## SECTION ONE

### INTRODUCTION & LITERATURE REVIEW

*Who are you to His love eyes?  
Because I can see myself as something and others say “this”, but...what is my true identity? What is my true value? My true dignity? We are not called to be alone. We belong, we have community. We have others like us and people that want to receive us as the diamond we are with all the value we have.*

The statement above—a reflection from Sofia, a participant in this study—is a statement that LGBTQ+ Catholics seldom hear. The message that regardless of who you are, where you come from, or what you have done, you belong. This message is the chorus of Catholic teaching but seldom finds its way to the pulpit in homilies pertaining to homosexuality. As a result, LGBTQ+ Catholics do not think they belong, do not think they have value, and for some, do not think their life is worth living. These self-perceptions are numerated in the decades of research conducted on individuals holding both a religious and sexual identity (Boorstein, 2016; Deguara, 2018; Festinger, 1957; Houghton & Tasker, 2021; Mahaffy, 1996; Subhi & Geelan, 2012; Rodriguez & Oullette, 2000; Rodriguez, 2010; Thumma, 1991; Wedow et al., 2017; Wilcox, 2002, 2003, 2009; Yip, 1997, 2002, 2005).

#### **Perception of God & Self**

In Deguara’s (2018) study, he specifically examined how LGBTQ+ perceptions of God impacted perceptions of self and relationship with faith. He suggested that perception of God reflects perception of self, therefore the perception of God as loving was an indicator of identity integration and self-verification. Whereas the perception of God as judgmental and cruel was linked to a greater likelihood of suffering negative psychological effects such as anger, guilt, shame, self-pity, and victimization (Deguara, 2018). His study found that successful separation of God from the Church as an institution was a crucial factor in enabling LGBTQ+ Catholics to reduce identity conflict

(Deguara, 2018). The negative effects of identity conflict are further explored through cognitive dissonance theory.

### **Cognitive Dissonance Theory**

Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory provides a theoretical framework for understanding the identity conflict and psychological stress experienced by LGBTQ+ Catholics. In addition to the effects mentioned above, this stress also takes the form of depression, anxiety, hopelessness, and suicidal ideation (Deguara, 2018; Wilcox, 2002, 2003; Yip, 1997). Festinger purports that the degree of cognitive dissonance is dependent on the magnitude of importance attached to each identity. To reduce cognitive dissonance, Festinger suggests three strategies: 1) Behavior Change 2) Rationalization and 3) Environment Change. Mahaffy (1996) explores cognitive dissonance theory and the negotiation of these three strategies in the context of evangelical lesbian women. In her findings, she indicates that timing of identity awareness, dissonance arousal linked with personal responsibility, and reinterpretation of problematic bible verses all play a role in reducing cognitive dissonance. She concludes that the act of coming to terms with a stigmatized sexual identity early in life or voluntarily affiliating with a religious organization may be a source of strength enabling the individual to affirm both identities (Mahaffy, 1996). Subhi and Geelan (2012) expand on these conclusions suggesting that churches can reduce the stress caused by cognitive dissonance by providing a tolerant and safe environment for homosexual people who wish to practice their faith. They also indicate that family members who provide supportive environments for their LGBTQ+ religious children could serve as a buffer from extreme negative psychological effects (2012). Other researchers (Cooper & Fazio, 1984; Jones, 1985; Rodriguez, 2010) considered the use of cognitive dissonance theory but determined the theory was too difficult to operationalize for large-scale, quantitative, psychological research and focused instead on identity theory.

### **Identity Theory & Master Status Theory**

Identity theory renders a useful secondary theoretical framework for understanding identity negotiation and integration strategies. This theory places emphasis on the stress created by identity conflict and the self-verification achieved through

identity integration (Stryker & Burke, 2000; Wedow et al., 2017). Identity integration refers to the alleviation of internal conflict based on the reprioritization of identity through role salience. Role salience, as described by Biggs and Brough (2005), is the shifting of identities based on time and context. For example, throughout a woman's lifetime her role could change from wife to mother (Briggs & Brough, 2005). Each change indicates a shift in attachment of importance from the old role to the new.

Role salience provides a theoretical framework to understand how identity importance shifts during the process of religious conversion. According to Thumma (1991), conversion is a passage that entails a process of reidentification, reordering, and reorientation. In Deguara's study (*see Perception of God & Self*) this included renegotiation of the participants' identity construction. Rambo's seven stage integration model outlines the complex conversion process that accompanies this period of renegotiation (Halama & Halamová, 2005; Rambo, 1992, 1993):

- 1) Historical, religious, social, cultural, and personal *context* of conversion
- 2) *Crisis* in life of potential convert
- 3) *Quest*, which includes an active agency on the part of the convert in his or her predicament
- 4) *Encounter* with a new religious or spiritual option
- 5) *Interaction* between convert and advocate(s) of new religious or spiritual options, which can include building new relationships, adopting new beliefs and attending rituals
- 6) Making a *commitment*, deciding to become a real member of a new religious community
- 7) Experiencing *consequences* of conversion, including consolidation of new identity and commitment, as well as assessing the effect of a new religious option on the convert's life.

Roles can also shift situationally based on the dominant relationship presented in the situation. More salient identities, such as race and sex, can over-power less salient identities, such as occupation or family relation. In the case of equal salience between roles, individuals can experience a considerable degree of stress. Howard Goffman's (1959) "Master Status Theory" provides a foundation to better understand identity theory. In this theory, the master status is the component that acts as the primary identifying aspect of an individual and often shapes one's life. Individuals of marginalized groups, such as sexual minorities, tend to organize their sense of self around the element that

stigmatizes them, their sexual identity (Goffman, 1959; Hart & Richardson, 1981) Whereas religious individuals tend to shape their identities around their religious belief system (Goffman, 1959; Peshkin, 1986; Wedow et al., 2017). Similar to Festinger's resolution strategies for cognitive dissonance, Rodriguez and Oullette (2000) suggest four strategies to reduce identity conflict: 1) Individuals reject religious identity 2) Individuals reject sexual identity 3) Individuals compartmentalize their identities 4) Individuals integrate identities into a single and coherent self-concept. The literature examined thus far all indicates three main paths: 1) Stay in the Church and repress sexuality 2) Leave the Church and express sexuality 3) Equal expression through self-affirming beliefs. Sifting, the construction of religious identity through "sifting out" aspects of religious tradition and teaching that do not align with secular beliefs and actions, is the most common technique adopted by individuals utilizing the third strategy (Dufour, 2000; Wilcox, 2009). This technique is clearly demonstrated in Yip's (1997) study where LGBTQ+ Christians cited slow changes to Church teaching on slavery, mixed marriages, and laity to justify their sexuality and lifestyle (Yip, 1997).

### **Catholic Church and Homosexuality**

The first Church teachings on homosexuality appear in the letters of Paul the Apostle. These letters are understood in the context of ancient Greek and Roman culture in which sexual acts between males were implemented in coming-of-age rituals to establish dominance and hierarchy and commonplace within the military as an expression of comradery and strength (Spencer, 1995). The Council of Elvira in 309 was the first council to publish official canons regulating sexuality (Greenberg & Bystry, 1982). During this time homosexuality was grouped with adultery and prostitution and was punishable by death. This narrative continued through the Council of Trent, the first and second Vatican councils and made its debut as a focal point of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedicts' teachings. From 1979 to 1984, Pope Jogn Paul II gave a series of speeches that would come to be known as the Theology of the Body. These speeches emphasis the worth and value of the human body and the nature of sexuality. In 1993, he released the *Veritatis Splendor* which, through an argument of objective morality, highlights homosexuality and other key issues of the time (i.e. contraception and abortion) as "disordered" and "wrong" (Riga, 1995). Pope Benedict XVI adheres closely

to Pope John Paul II and Church teaching on homosexuality. In his letter to the bishops on the “Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons” he explains that Church teaching, “in rejecting erroneous opinions regarding homosexuality, does not limit but rather defends personal freedom and dignity realistically and authentically understood.” (Ratzinger, 1986). In the same letter Pope Benedict XVI states that violence and discrimination against homosexual individuals is “deplorable” and deserves condemnation from the Church. He emphasizes the “intrinsic dignity” of each person which must be respected by laws and actions (Ratzinger, 1986). However, it is also important to note Pope Benedict XVI’s statement restricting admission of individuals to the seminary or Holy See based on their practice of, tendency toward, or support for homosexuality and gay culture resulted in further repression of sexuality among laity and clergy (Boorstein, 2016).

### **Pope Francis & Culture Wars**

After Pope Benedict XVI’s resignation, Pope Francis’s posture of encounter has aided in the opening of conversation regarding LGBTQ+ individuals. His “who am I to judge” comment regarding gay priests, public embrace of Yayo Grassi and his same-sex partner, and official support for legal protection of LGBTQ+ same-sex couples have created major waves in the Catholic community (America-The Jesuit Review, 2021). In his recent encyclical *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis softens the words of Pope Benedict XVI and the larger teachings of the Church by placing respect and dignity of persons above all else (Francis, 2016). He calls for respectful pastoral guidance, “so that those who manifest a homosexual orientation can receive the assistance they need to understand” God’s will (Francis, 2016). The most shocking of all these actions was Pope Francis’ approval of blessings for same-sex couples under specified conditions in 2023 (Wooden, 2023). His softened tone toward homosexuality was met with intense backlash and discourse within the Church. Culture wars erupted amongst bishops, priests, and lay persons divided on the morality of same-sex marriage and relationships, with one side calling for change to Church teaching and the deeply held beliefs on Theology of the Body (Feng, 2024). Some bishops arguing for these changes have begun consecrating same-sex marriages in their parish and opening the door more widely to the LGBTQ+ community. To understand the implications of these changes, it is important to gather a full understanding of what those teachings contain.

## **Catechism Teaching in Depth**

The Catechism is defined as a summary of the Church's official teaching (Schmitz, 2022). The official teachings are rooted in Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition interpreted by the Magisterium which is constituted by the Pope and bishops. It is emphasized that the Magisterium acts as a servant to Sacred Scripture and Tradition, preserving and communicating the truths of the Church over generations (Magisterium, 2024). The Catechism is structured with an introduction explaining its purpose, origin, and authorship. Then it defines key terms in the Catholic church such as doctrine and dogma, the connection between Tradition and Scripture and several other practices unique to the Catholic faith. Of the entire Catechism, the teaching on homosexuality comprises of three short paragraphs. Below is the exact teaching of the Catechism on homosexuality.

Homosexuality refers to relations between men or between women who experience an exclusive or predominant sexual attraction toward persons of the same sex. It has taken a wide variety of forms through the centuries and in diverse cultures. Its psychological genesis remains unexplained. Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity (cf. Gen 19:1-29; Rom 1:24-27; 1 Cor 6:10; 1 Tim 1:10), tradition has always declared that "homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered." (CDF [Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith], *Persona Humana* 8). They are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved.

The number of people who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies is not negligible. This inclination, which is objectively disordered, constitutes for most of them a trial. They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. These persons are called to fulfill God's will in their lives and, if they are Christians, to unite to the sacrifice of the Lord's Cross the difficulties they may encounter from their condition.



Homosexual persons are called to chastity. By the virtues of self-mastery that teach them inner freedom, at times by the support of disinterested friendship, by prayer and sacramental grace, they can and should gradually and resolutely approach Christian perfection. (CCC 2357-2359)

In his book, *Made for Love: Same Sex Attractions in the Catholic Church*, Father Mike Schmitz provides a Catholic priest interpretation of Church teaching on homosexuality. The first paragraph is straightforward in its interpretation, the Church acknowledges the long history of homosexuality and refrains from taking a stance on the nature or nurture debate. Fr. Mike's commentary on the Church's stance in the "origin" debate suggests that the origin of homosexuality is irrelevant in relation to the larger identity of every individual as a child of God (Schmitz, 2017, p 105). Regarding the terms "disordered" and "grave depravity" Fr. Mike indicates they are descriptors of the sexual act itself, not of the person. He explains that "disordered" is a term often used in Church teaching to depict when something is morally wrong. For example, he highlights that lying and gossiping are "disordered desires" of truth, love, and honoring others (107). The note on "sexual complementarity" refers to the Church's teaching on natural law and the biological and affective bonding of male and female during the sexual act.

The Church is keenly aware of the widespread existence of homosexuality and the struggles that individuals encounter because of this sexual orientation. Fr. Mike details his own stories of interactions with LGBTQ+ individuals who struggle with their sexuality (108). It is interesting to note here that the Church in its teachings and Fr. Mike in his analysis do not acknowledge any role in creation of that struggle. Instead, Fr. Mike attributes the violence and discrimination inflicted on LGBTQ+ individuals to the *misinterpretation* of Church teaching which actually calls for "respect, compassion, and sensitivity" toward LGBTQ+ individuals. He adamantly reasserts that "homosexual people *must be accepted* with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. The Church *commands* acceptance...she [the Church] is on the side of every individual" (109). As God's children everyone is called to live out God's will, the Church teaching is specific about uniting one's sacrifices to the cross because it is a symbol of redemption. Fr. Mike indicates suffering can be caused by a number of reasons such as suffering caused by

others, suffering brought onto oneself, but because of the redemptive suffering of Jesus on the cross, suffering can also be seen as a way to deepen relationship with God. In direct sequence Fr. Mike then indicates that all persons are called to chastity, moving away from the “us” versus “them” ideology (113). He emphasizes that *all* individuals experience a form of sexual disorder in their sexual attractions and are called to “turn from those distortions to the loving self-mastery of chastity” in hopes of becoming a saint (113).

In summary, the foundation of Catholic teaching on homosexuality is to guide individuals in their journey to fulfill God’s will in their life. To accomplish this goal, the Church provides a definition and religious understanding of homosexuality, explains why the same-sex sexual acts are viewed as wrong, and emphasizes the dignity of homosexual individuals along with their Christian call to unite their struggles with God.

### **Research Goal and Questions**

The goal of this research is to identify new identity negotiation strategies through the conversion narratives of LGBTQ+ Catholics. I hypothesize that the lack of stigmatization in childhood around sexuality and the softening of rhetoric surrounding Church teaching provide the perfect conditions for the elimination of cognitive dissonance and achievement of self-verification. This research answers three main questions:

1. Why do LGBTQ+ individuals convert to Catholicism?
2. How do LGBTQ+ individuals convert to Catholicism?
- 3a. Does religious conversion create cognitive dissonance?
- 3b. What identity negotiation strategies are implemented to resolve cognitive dissonance and achieve self-verification?

## SECTION TWO

### METHODS

This article draws on data from 4 semi-structured interviews with cis-gendered women in their late 20s. The participants self-identify as same sex attracted (2), bisexual (1), and queer (1). 2 participants are American, 1 is Peruvian, and 1 is Mexican. For the 2 participants living in Latin America, religious culture factored into their experiences with sexuality. All participants completed tertiary education degrees. With the exclusion of one participant, these individuals were selected based on their religious background outside of the Catholic Church. 2 participants were raised atheist and one raised Methodist. The remaining participant grew up with a Catholic family but self-identifies as a convert into the Catholic faith and thus has still been included in this study. All individuals were selected based on their acceptance and identification with both their sexuality and religious identity post-conversion. Table 1 shows participant demographics.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Sex	Nationality	Tertiary educational background	Religious affiliation prior to conversion	Sexual identity	Relationship status pre-conversion	Relationship status post conversion	Discerned religious life? (Y/N)
Sofia	F	Mexican	Public	Catholic	SSA	Dating	Single	Y
Maggie	F	American	Catholic	Methodist	SSA	Married	Single	Y
Carmen	F	Peruvian	Catholic	Atheist/ Buddhist	Bisexual	Dating	Single	N
Beth	F	American	Public	Atheist	Queer	Single	Single	Y

The primary means of recruitment included a) direct contact with organizations that serve LGBTQ+ Catholics (e.g. New Ways Ministry, Eden Invitation, public and private university campus ministries and LGBTQ+ clubs), b) advertisement through digital flyers, and c) snowballing (i.e. inviting participants to recruit further participants). Snowballing was able to assist in locating potentially suitable respondents for interview

through community networks. By the nature of my sampling strategy, this research is limited to participants who currently identify as LGBTQ+ Catholics. There are no participants who represent a secondary shift in identity negotiation that may lead them to leave the Church post conversion.

The interviews were conducted by me, a Catholic, bisexual, female college student. An array of shared experiences regarding sexuality and Catholicism built rapport between me and the interviewee. The interviews lasted an average of 1 hour and 10 minutes, were recorded via a small digital recorder, and later transcribed through Otter.ai. Participants were sent their transcript to edit or clarify their statement. Thematic analysis of the transcripts was conducted both by hand and through Atlas.ti. The interview guide contained 12 open-ended, free response questions from three major categories: background of sexuality, background of religion, and opinions on the “culture wars” within the Church. Brief notes were taken during the interview process to gauge respondent attitudes and reactions to questions. Respondent names appearing in this text are pseudonyms.

## DATA & ANALYSIS

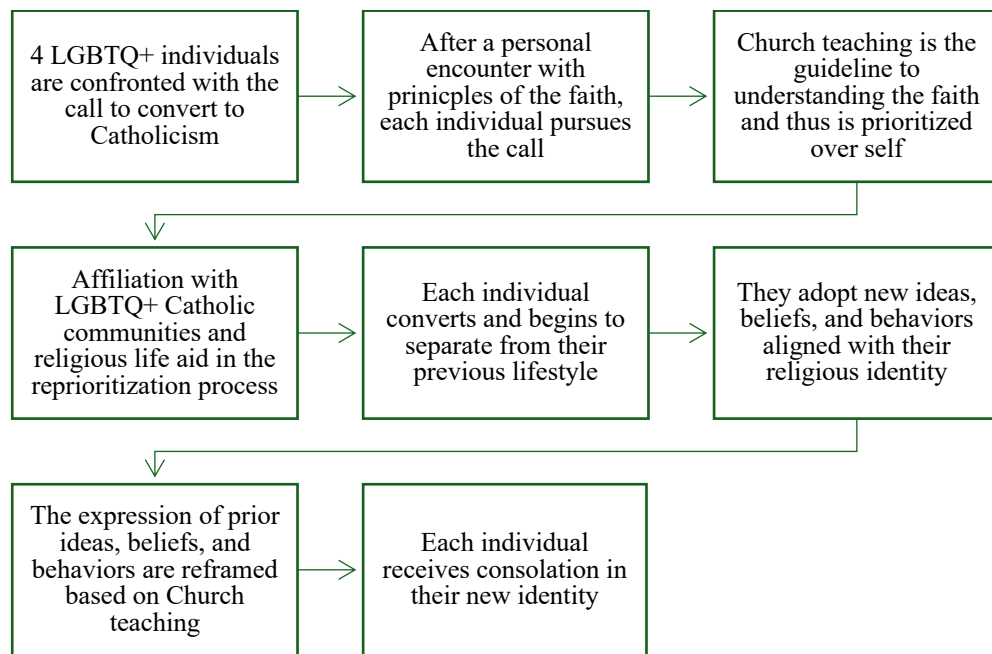
The themes created in this study were derived from the thematic analysis process in which codes are created in each interview, then a cross analysis of those codes reveals patterns that are grouped together and refined to become an overarching theme. The grouping of codes was determined based on each code’s ability to answer the research questions mentioned in the beginning of this study and listed below for reference.

1. How do LGBTQ+ individuals convert to Catholicism?
2. Why do LGBTQ+ individuals convert to Catholicism?
- 3a. Does religious conversion create identity conflict?
- 3b. What identity negotiation strategies are implemented to resolve identity conflict?

This study yielded insight into the process of conversion and identity negotiation for LGBTQ+ individuals converting to Catholicism. Four main themes have been created through based on the stages of identity negotiation the participants experienced: 1) Experiencing “The Call” 2) Encountering the Religious “Other” 3) Immersion in Church

Teaching 4) Reframing Identity in the context of the Church. Under each theme is a selection of sub-themes that provide context for the negotiation process: 1.1-1.3) Positive Framing of Sexuality, Life Dissatisfaction, Invitation through personal interests; 2.1&2.2) Factors that Facilitate Conversion, Factors that Hinder Conversion; 3.1-3.3) Separation from current events, Trust, Struggle; 4.1&4.2) God and sexuality, Paths on the Journey. The sub-themes suggest a cognitive dissonance resolution strategy different from previous research which includes total acceptance of Church teaching and an altered framework for viewing sexuality. The model below is a map of the general path taken by the participants in this study.

Figure 1: Findings Model



Within the transcript extracts presented below, brief pauses are represented by ..., the removal of text is demonstrated by [...], and information that has been added for clarification or removed to help protect the participant’s identity is demonstrated by [text].

### Theme 1) Experiencing “The Call”

The call is the initial stage of identity negotiation within the religious conversion context. During this stage participants experience an invitation to Catholicism. This theme answers the question of “why” LGBTQ+ individuals convert to Catholicism

through the examination of three sub-themes: *Positive framing of sexuality; Life dissatisfaction; Invitation through personal interests.*

### *Theme 1.1 Positive Framing of Sexuality*

Positive framing of sexuality is seen as the embrace of sexuality as a positive facet of one's identity. Individuals who possessed this mindset embraced sexuality as part of the human experience or expressed an ability to control the degree of their sexuality. Positive framing was common amongst participants who were socialized in adolescence to view their sexuality positively. These individuals experienced no internal conflict regarding their sexuality prior to conversion. Maggie's view of sexuality demonstrates the positive frame created through perceived control of sexuality. She explains:

*Sexuality can be this, kind of like a seed or a plant. [...] For me, though, I think I was born with like a seed, and **if I wouldn't have nurtured it, it wouldn't have grown into my full sexuality that it was.** But I think through coming into the Church and stuff, you know, it's gotten a lot smaller, and it's going back to being that seed.*

In this excerpt, Maggie is referencing nurturing her sexuality through her education in an LGBTQ+ human rights organization and her same-sex marriage. As noted by the bolded phrase, she gives herself power over the degree of her sexuality through what she chooses to experience. While she indicates that some people are "just giant oak trees" that cannot go back to a seed, she sees her sexuality as something that can be nurtured in either direction. This mindset fosters a positive outlook on sexuality, defining it as a sum of experiences and a fluid concept that changes over time. The other positive frame created through the perception of sexuality as a part of the regular human experience is demonstrated by Beth's view of her sexuality:

*Taking into context that I was raised in a household where like, being gay was not looked, you know, it wasn't looked down upon in any way [...] I was like, "**Oh, everybody is like me,**" you know?*

Here it is noted that Beth does not grow up with a stigma around her sexuality and thus does not form a negative self-image regarding her identity as queer. In comparison with Carmen and Sofia, two women from Latin America, the role of positive framing of sexuality in self-verification is evident. Carmen and Sofia grew up in conservative Catholic cultures and struggled with identity conflict early in their adolescence. Sofia noted feelings of shame and fear of rejection surrounding her sexuality in the context of

Mexican culture and Carmen indicated she felt “fragmented” as a result of hiding her sexuality from her family and friends in Peru. Based on the comparison between participants, I argue that positive framing of sexuality is essential to creating a foundation of self-acceptance. That foundation provides a shield against the negative effects of cognitive dissonance that may arise during the identity negotiation process in religious conversion.

### *Theme 1.2 Life Dissatisfaction*

Life Dissatisfaction highlights the antecedent problem that encourages individuals to take on a major process like religious conversion. This theme pinpoints a feeling of emptiness or “need for more” felt by each participant prior to conversion. An interesting aspect of this feeling is that it arose despite the apparent wealth, success, or happiness experienced by the individual. Sofia and Maggie both describe their dissatisfaction arising when they thought they had everything they wanted. In Sofia’s story, she had separated from the Church, cut her relationship with God, and was living how she wanted:

*I was doing what I wanted [...] **But I was like very empty.** It was a very, like, wow, it really like was a hard time because I wasn't happy. I was like very, very sad. Super sad. Even though I was like choosing [what I wanted], it was very hard.*

In Maggie’s story, she had a great marriage with her wife, pets, a house, her dream job, and checked off all her boxes:

*I had to go home, and like, take stock of my life. I was just like, **I was miserable. I was absolutely miserable.** But I had everything I ever wanted at 21, like, I had everything and I was like, I should be happy. I have everything I ever wanted and everything everyone ever told me I should want.*

In both stories, a feeling of emptiness overwhelmed the short-term happiness experienced from relationships, jobs, and possessions. This is significant because it is the beginning of the “abandonment of self” pattern that weaves throughout their stories, in which each woman seeks to find lasting joy outside of herself. Carmen and Beth’s stories begin out of a dissatisfaction with their current religious affiliation. Carmen, originally Atheist, began practicing Buddhism to address her growing depression. She initially noticed her depression subside but began to feel unexplainable anxiety:

*I started to get a lot of anxiety that I couldn't explain. [...] I couldn't find a source for my anxiety. But yeah, it didn't matter how much I meditated, I couldn't get the anxiety away. I started to get really, really bad. I started to sleep really badly. It had repercussions in my entire life.*

On top of her anxiety, Carmen was taking philosophy courses at her Catholic university that “were completely opposite” from the teachings she learned within her Buddhist community. The conflict caused her to stop practicing Buddhism and return back to Atheism for the remainder of college despite her desire for organized religion. Beth, a self-identified contrarian, began college as an Atheist and developed an interest in religion in response to college friends around her leaving their religion. The beginning of Beth and Carmen’s search is significant because it highlights the search for truth and curiosity that guides their journey to Catholicism.

### *Theme 1.3 Invitation through personal interests*

Building from life dissatisfaction, the invitation is an answer to the antecedent problem and aligns with the individual’s personal interests. This theme answers the specific question of why these four women decided to convert to Catholicism. Although the invitation is personalized, this theme can be generalized as the jumping off point of an individual’s conversion process and determines the route taken by the individual in pursuing the religion.

Each participant received a different invitation related to their interests. Sofia’s invitation came in the form of a Facebook message inviting her to participate in *Misiones*, a Holy Week event involving service to the community and daily mass. Maggie’s invitation came in the form of the repeated phrase, “worship and serve Christ at the alter and Christ in the poor” which she heard in a meditation session where she combined her background in yoga and her Methodist to “open the sunroof of [her] mind to God’s voice.” Carmen’s invitation came during COVID in the form of an online course on Catholic philosophers. Beth’s invitation came as a memory of a high school classmate who used to debate with her about religion. Interestingly, every participant expressed an initial resistance to converting to Catholicism. Maggie explored Anglican and Episcopalian orders and Beth explored theologically liberal, LGBTQ+ affirming nominations before recognizing their calls were to Catholicism.



Invitation through personal interests is significant in the narrative of understanding “why” LGBTQ+ individuals convert to Catholicism because it provides an understanding of how individuals with identities seemingly contrary to the Catholic Church begin to shift their concept of self. Linking back to the literature on Master Status theory (*see page 2*), the invitation to adopt a new Master Status often occurs through the old Master Status. The invitation is accepted because it does not threaten their concept of self but rather expands on their internal desires. The personalized nature of the invitation is essential to building on the foundation of self-acceptance (*see Theme 1.1 Positive Framing of Sexuality*) which has implications for how the Church conducts outreach today (*see Implications page 25*).

**Theme 2) Encountering the religious “other”**

Encountering the religious other is the secondary stage of identity negotiation in which individuals begin to encounter religious life and dispel misconceptions previously held about Catholicism. This theme describes the essential role of community engagement and peer support in identity negotiation. During this stage, participants begin to explore their immersion in Catholicism through communication with peers, religious life, organizations, and educational courses on Church texts. This theme answers “how” LGBTQ+ individuals convert to Catholicism (*see Research Question 2*) through an analysis of communities that facilitate and hinder the conversion process. The table below provides a description based on participants’ relationships with different groups involved in the conversion process.

Table 2: Factors that facilitate and hinder conversion

<b>Facilitate Conversion Process</b>	<b>Hinder Conversion Process</b>
Religious life (sisters, brothers)	Family
LGBTQ+ Catholic Community	Friends
Local Parish	
Saint Testimonials & other religious texts	

*Factors that Facilitate Conversion*

As seen in the table above, the factors that facilitate conversion outnumber the factors that hinder conversion. The table is ordered by the importance and level of

influence participants attached to their interaction with each group. For example, connection with an individual from a religious order was ranked highest in value based on the existence of personal relationships developed between participants and a sister from a religious order. These relationships allowed each participant to navigate issues that arose over the course of her conversion.

*Maggie: I texted sister [Lily] immediately and asked her and said, "Sister [Lily], oh my gosh, I have to be Catholic now and I don't want to be, but I need Jesus, and I don't want to be [Catholic]."*

Here Maggie is connecting with her spiritual advisor and friend, sister Lily, after an intense moment of spiritual conversion, where she recognizes the true presence of Jesus in the Eucharist (a principle of the Catholic faith). Despite her negative perceptions of the Catholic Church developed from "hateful renditions of the truth" spoken by Christians at pride parades, she acknowledges her desire for Jesus and need to convert to Catholicism.

*Carmen: One of the first things that I told her was, "You know what, I like women." **It was a lovely surprise that she didn't care, in a good way. She was like, "Oh, okay, we'll talk about that."** [...] So we're friends now, we're really good friends. She's fantastic.*

In this excerpt, Carmen contacted a religious sister after attending an online workshop on vocations and consulted her about religious compatibility with her sexuality. Carmen was relieved to receive acceptance without judgement. As seen in these two excerpts, the development of personal relationships based on acceptance and non-judgement between a member of religious life and an LGBTQ+ individual can be the key difference in achieving self-verification.

Another important group that facilitated and sustained the conversion process was the connection with an LGBTQ+ Catholic community. An LGBTQ+ Catholic community was sought out by each participant as a result of a need for peer support. It is important to note that each participant is a member of the same LGBTQ+ Catholic Community, a community oriented toward following Church teaching through celibacy. Maggie reported feeling a "queer deficit" in her life and searched online for LGBTQ+ Catholic groups. Sofia reported a similar feeling of deficit, recognizing "there was a part of [her] sexuality [she] had no one else to share with," specifically regarding her commitment to following Church teaching through celibacy. Carmen sought out the community to

answer her questions regarding how to follow Church teaching, “I was actively looking for any source that could give me something else” regarding her sexuality. Carmen and Sofia were particularly touched by the testimonials shared within the LGBTQ+ Community, Sofia demonstrates this emotion best in her excitement witnessing the first testimony given by a member in the community:

*[She] was sharing about the hard things of Theology of the Body and their LGBTQ experience or same sex attractions. And I was, "Oh my God, NO WAY. She is talking about my experience! I was like, fired up, like oh my God!"*

Lastly, connection with local parishes and further education through courses on Catholic teaching and saint testimonials served as a method to deeper understand the teachings and practices of the Catholic faith. It is through this immersion that Beth began to fully believe in Catholicism and begin to trust in all Church teachings, even ones that contradicted messages she heard growing up about sexuality and abortion.

#### *Factors that Hinder Conversion*

Family and friends were identified as two groups that made the conversion to Catholicism more difficult. Friends were often respectful of the participants’ affiliation with Catholicism, participants reported they did not connect as deeply with friends they made prior to conversion. While the families of the participants were supportive of their sexuality, most participants reported conflict over their conversion to Catholicism. Maggie indicated that her parents have “zero respect for the Catholic Church” but try to be supportive of her. Carmen expressed similar sentiment, explaining that her family thinks she is crazy for being Catholic. In addition to being harmful to family relationships, negative responses from family members can be isolating for LGBTQ+ individuals. In reflecting on her family’s attitude toward her conversion, Beth responds that she finds it hard to relate to other LGBTQ+ Catholics,

*I feel bad because, like, I can say my family is perfectly fine with my sexuality. They were way more mad about my religion. Whereas like, I really feel bad for people whose parents hurt them.*

Although Beth’s family has said hurtful things regarding her conversion to Catholicism, she feels almost privileged because she did not grow up with the “taboo” around sexuality that other LGBTQ+ Catholics have experienced.

Encountering the religious other is an essential part of the conversion process and identity negotiation for LGBTQ+ Catholics. Non-judgment from religious life in the Catholic Church, peer support in LGBTQ+ Catholic communities, connection with a local parish, and education through religious texts all play a significant role in building on the foundation of self-acceptance formed during the initial “call” stage. It is important to note in this section that several factors may have increased the participants’ likelihood to encounter an individual from a religious order such as affiliation with the same LGBTQ+ community and increased religious life visibility in dominantly Catholic cultures. It is also important to note that each participant’s individual desire to follow Church teaching led them to discovering the same LGBTQ+ Catholic organization. However, their engagement in the community varies. Beth and Carmen disconnected from the organization and focused on involvement with local parishes, while Maggie continues to connect with friends from the organization and Sofia has joined a committee within the organization to develop more programs for LGBTQ+ Catholics.

### **Theme 3) Immersion in Church Teaching**

Immersion is the third stage of identity negotiation in the conversion process. During this stage participants familiarize themselves in the context of current events in the Church and Church teaching. Therefore, this theme answers the research question: Does religious conversion create cognitive dissonance? (*see Research Question 3a*) This theme is important because as main vessel of understanding the principles of the Catholic faith, Church teaching is a lifeline for the participants in this study but also a main source for cognitive dissonance within literature. The relationship between participants and Church teaching is demonstrated through the following sub themes: *Separation from current events; Trust; Struggle*.

#### *Theme 3.1 Separation from current events*

Separation from current events places each participant’s identity negotiation process in context to the culture wars within the Church. Participants have the option to side with traditional practices of the faith or join with more theologically liberal ideals. Interestingly, each participant chose to distance herself from the discussion. While Maggie and Beth express that they have the capacity to understand both sides of the debate, they choose to align with Church teachings. However, each participant affirmed

that within the debate, they are concerned and hurt by the side that is opposed to LGBTQ+ individuals. Beth describes her hurt regarding some attitudes within the Church towards LGBTQ+ individuals:

*It's also hurtful to me from the other side when, when bishops or other church leaders are disdainful towards LGBT people or like, appear to be grossed out by them, or kind of talk about them...And I say them, I mean like us. Me...in a pitying way. Like, you know, we have to accept these poor tortured souls.*

Carmen adds to this noting her concern for the lack of dignity and respect afforded to LGBTQ+ individuals.

*I'm particularly concerned and really saddened by this side of the church that is very harsh and unwilling to be open and receive. Because, you know, **before we are gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc., before we are anything, you know, we are individuals. We have all been created by God, we have all been made with love for love, and I think that it is very unfair. Those generalizations are very unfair because every story is different.***

Sofia sums up the views of each participant in her response encouraging individuals to adopt the posture of Pope Francis in *Fratelli Tutti*, an encyclical written by Pope Francis inviting Catholics to communion, social friendship with others, to build a better and more just world.

*I think we need to be more like [...] Fratelli Tutti [...] be more open for encounters with the other, to receive the other, to have mercy and to accompany the other person with kindness, with mercy, especially the people that are in the margins like LGBTQ people.*

This theme demonstrates that each participant's decision to convert was not related to the context of the culture wars and their identity as LGBTQ+ does not mean they prefer theologically liberal ideology. Instead, each participant aligns with the traditional teachings of the Church in all forms, especially in the call for love and acceptance which aligns with Church teaching on homosexuality (*see Catholic Church and Homosexuality page 4*).

### *Theme 3.2 Trust*

Trust in Catholic Tradition is a significant theme in this stage of immersion in Church teaching. Trust plays an essential role in limiting cognitive dissonance caused by doubt and questioning. Each participant reported feelings of peace, joy, and consolation as a result of their conversion to Catholicism. For some peace and joy are linked directly

to trust. Maggie emphasizes that as a queer Catholic, trust is essential to achieving a sense of joy:

*Oh my gosh, I have so much peace, so much joy, and it has to come from trust, especially as a queer person. Because there's so much doubt about Church teachings and things you're just like, "Okay, I just gotta trust and go with it." [...] If you don't trust the Church, then you're always going to be at odds, and you're not going to really find that peace and joy.*

For all participants, accepting Church teaching on homosexuality was difficult at first. Beth admitted that when initially considering converting to Catholicism she decided to simply not follow Church teaching on homosexuality and abortion. However, as she read more about Church teaching and compared it to the arguments against the Church, she found herself believing in Church teaching. Sofia expressed similar sentiments after reading Pope John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*. All participants related their trust in Church teaching to their trust in God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit and through that trust were able to mitigate the negative effects of cognitive dissonance.

### *Theme: 3.3 Struggle*

Struggle describes each participant's identity negotiation process in regard to Church teaching. For each participant, the negative preconceptions of Catholicism and the Church teachings on homosexuality were cause for hesitation. Maggie indicated she spent one month "coming to terms" with her call to Catholicism. However, for the participants in this study, believing in Church teaching was easy. Living through Church teaching is the challenge. Beth explains this contrast through her response describing her acceptance of Church teaching but uncertainty in how to interact with others:

*I know that it's not sinful to have same sex attractions. But I've also definitely have questioned myself, I'm like, "Is this something I should be open with?" So it's more like trying to reconcile myself versus trying to reconcile the teachings. To me, it's like internal.*

When asked what it means to be Catholic, Carmen illustrated the same image of accepting Church teaching but struggling with living out those teachings:

*Interviewer: What does being Catholic mean to you?*

*Carmen: I would say fight and joy, immense joy. Fight because I'm fighting against a lot of habits [...] and ideas and preconceptions that I developed throughout my life. Joy because, you know, fight may be the daily thing, but those moments of joy are just... (chuckle) bigger, brighter, more beautiful, more fulfilling than anything.*

Maggie's struggle comes from the stigma around homosexuality in the Church that limits the number of religious orders willing to discern with her. In her discernment process she has reached out to countless religious orders, however, most decline in the first email because of her history with anxiety and queer background.

*So I sent out a bunch of emails to see which doors God would open if I knocked, and then I would discern with them. But it turns out there are not that many... [There is a] huge stigma. You cannot...if I did [openly] identify as homosexual, I'm pretty sure all the orders that I have discerned with would not have discerned with me. Yeah, no.*

The stigma around homosexuality limits Maggie's ability to speak freely and about her experiences with sexuality. Her struggle is around explaining that to be queer does not mean to participate in queerness in a sexual way.

This theme highlights an interesting contrast from previous research on LGBTQ+ Catholics. The struggles experienced by the participants in this study do not come from cognitive dissonance related to Church teaching. Rather, the struggle is a result of fighting against stigma around sexuality in the Church.

#### **Theme 4) Reframing identity in the context of the Church**

Reframing identity in the context of the Church is the final stage in the identity negotiation process when the participant considers the context of their life before and during *The Call*, applies their learned understanding of the Catholic Church from *Encountering the Religious Other* and *Immersion in Church Teaching* phases, and reprioritizes their understanding of self to achieve self-verification. This theme answers the research question: What identity negotiation strategies are implemented to resolve cognitive dissonance and achieve self-verification (*see Research Question 3b*) through the sub-themes: *God and sexuality; Paths on the Journey*.

##### *Theme 4.1 God and sexuality*

The theme of God and sexuality highlights the reprioritization of religious identity over sexuality while also experiencing God through sexuality. The result of this duality in perception of sexuality is an intersection that allows these individuals to maintain their sexuality and their religious identity. Beth explains this intersection perfectly in her response:

*[Our sexuality is] not like the core central part of who we are. It's an important part, but it's not the determining part.*

Here Beth describes the concept of role salience. Prior to conversion, each participant had a different master status, either their sexuality or another aspect of their identity. Post conversion, religious identity shifted to the master status and sexuality, along with other identities, shifted underneath religion in their salience. Maggie's reflection on the shifting in her identities further cements this idea:

*And it used to be so important to have a sexual identity, [...] but because I'm a child of God first, I'm like, "do I really need to label my sexuality?" [...] I don't want to name it because that puts me back into the clinging to it. And I don't want to do that because I want to cling to God rather than a sexual identity.*

Here Maggie acknowledges that she is placing priority in her religious identity over her sexuality by resisting attaching a label to her sexuality. Throughout the interviews, labels were seen as identities that brought unwanted stigma and were often resisted by the participants. At the same time, participants embraced their sexuality as an aspect of their human experience. Carmen, recalling her prior feelings of shame related to conservative Peruvian culture, embraced a more accepting view of sexuality post conversion. Seeing her sexuality as a lens to experience faith similar to how her nationality as Peruvian is a lens:

*[Being bisexual] to me was the place where light entered really. You know, my way of knowing of God. [...] I experienced God as a bisexual woman, [...] So, yeah, it's just one of the pair of glasses that I wear; and because I cannot live without glasses that's how important it is...and that's how present it is in my life.*

Sofia expressed a similar shift post conversion, shaking her previously negative framing of sexuality and embracing her sexuality as an important part of her human experience:

*[These same sex attractions] are part of my life. I can't like cut them because it's like, if I cut an arm you know? This experience is part of myself.*

This theme demonstrates that self-verification was achieved through reframing sexual identity and religious identity to reflect values that corresponded with Church teachings and thus did not attribute to cognitive dissonance or identity conflict.



#### *Theme 4.2 Paths on the Journey*

The final theme discussed in this paper is an important takeaway that each participant shared regarding their experiences as LGBTQ+ Catholics. Participants held initial fears about their call toward Catholicism because they recognized that Church teaching calls for LGBTQ+ Catholics to remain celibate. Beth relayed worries about feeling lonely and lacking a deep, close relationship with someone. Carmen described uncertainty around what to do with her body. Sofia aptly expressed her initial sentiment regarding celibacy, "Oh, you're single, welcome to singleness, woo." However, despite these initial fears, each participant shared their excitement when they recognized there was another option. Beth comments on the "third path" which allows her to find joy in relationships and embrace herself fully while also embracing faith fully.

*It really was like God lighting this path because I truly didn't see it. You know, I thought like, **there's only two ways like either I reject religion and kind of stay as I am or I have to become a Christian and become repressed and judgmental.** It turns out there is another way and I feel glad that God has led me on that way.*

Sofia comments that there needs be more information focusing on the positives of single life.

*I haven't heard a lot of people share about the joys, the fire in the heart that you can [...] be for others, and the hope that you can feel on this path of life.*

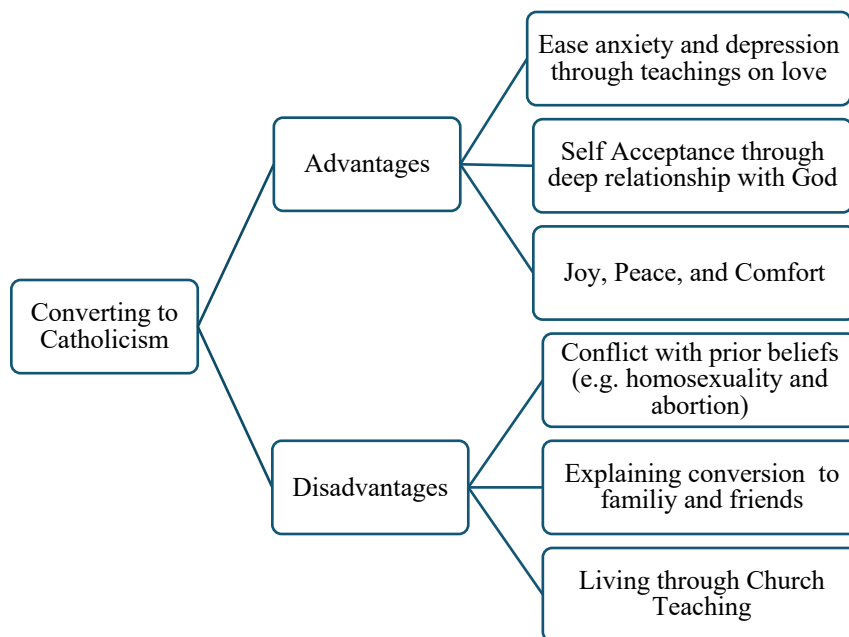
The third path offers an alternative view of life as an LGBTQ+ Catholic that is filled with love, passion, joy, and peace. Sofia describes this path as the rest of the garden in the Biblical story of the Garden of Eden. It is all things that are available to enjoy and are promised to satisfy. Sofia indicates that this is what should grab people's attention rather than focusing on the one thing that is not available.

## SECTION THREE

### CONCLUSIONS

The four themes discussed in the analysis of this paper answer the research questions posed at the beginning of this paper by following the narratives of each individual and highlighting themes that appeared across narratives. The following figure summarizes the findings from the data analysis portion. It simplifies the data to three advantages and disadvantages of religious conversion experienced by the participants in this study.

Figure 2 : Converting to Catholicism Model



This study is an important step towards broadening understanding of LGBTQ+ Catholic experiences. Not only does this work provide a detailed examination of identity negotiation, but it is also one of the few in sexuality and religious identity literature that looks at converts into the Catholic Church. The results presented here indicate that LGBTQ+ Catholics can embrace both their sexuality and religious identity fully without the negative effects of cognitive dissonance. For the participants, self-verification was achieved through reprioritization of sexual and religious identities. Integral to

reprioritization was trust in Church teaching sparked by education through religious texts, witness to peer testimony, and personal relationship with a religious sister.

The current study builds on findings emphasizing the role of accepting religious communities in alleviating the effects of cognitive dissonance. However, this study suggests acceptance and friendship with religious figures (i.e. sisters or brothers) are equally, if not more, integral to the individual's identity negotiation process. Unlike the previous papers where religious individualism plays a strong role in self-verification, the participants from this current study all indicate that alignment with, and specifically "trust" in, Church teaching is essential to avoiding cognitive dissonance. Rather than feeling called to change Church teaching regarding homosexuality, like some cradle Catholics reported in previous studies (Subhi & Geelan, 2012; Wedow et al., 2017; Yip, 1997), these four women all agree that Church teaching should be accepted in full and even reported more joy in their lives through living in accordance with Church teaching (i.e. celibacy). This call to adhere to, rather than change, Church teaching is likely a result of the conversion process in which changes to religious affiliation and attitudes toward other moral teachings contextualize changes to sexuality.

The sample size and outreach method within this study limits the generalizability of the findings to other LGBTQ+ Catholics. Additionally, because I focused specifically on participants in the present study, it was not possible to address all potential identity negotiation strategies implemented by LGBTQ+ Catholic converts (i.e. male converts, trans-gender converts), nor did I attempt to do so. Instead, I focused on obtaining a thorough understanding of the experiences of these four women and exploring more deeply the concept of identity negotiation between their sexuality and Catholic beliefs. As a result, the insight gained from this study is still valuable in expanding the literature on sexuality and religious identity negotiation.

## IMPLICATIONS

For LGBTQ+ outreach communities, based on the findings from this research, I suggest continuing to soften rhetoric regarding LGBTQ+ Catholics. Similar to steps taken under Pope Francis' posture of "encounter," I believe the best way to minister to LGBTQ+ individuals is to follow the sequence of events detailed in this paper. First,

meet the individual where she is and connect with her through her interests. The focus of this encounter is non-judgement and acceptance. Second, allow the individual to explore testimonies and all teachings of the Church, not just those aimed towards sexual morality, placing emphasis on the teachings of love. Third, introduce the individual to members in religious life. Fourth, allow the individual to immerse herself in practices of the Church where she feels comfortable (e.g. daily mass or adoration may be a good substitute to counter discomfort around Sunday mass). Fifth, encourage the individual to engage with peers of similar experiences and goals. Last, and most importantly, allow the individual space to navigate the identity negotiation taking place.

For LGBTQ+ Catholics struggling in the journey to self-verification, I recommend immersion in Church teaching and texts, connection with a religious sister and LGBTQ+ Catholic community, and reflection on personal curiosities and needs regarding Catholicism. I also recommend reading literature on studies done regarding LGBTQ+ Christians.

For religious orders, based on Maggie's list of numerous orders that declined because of mental illness or her queer identity, I suggest an openness to recognizing the harmful impacts of generalizations and stigmatizing sexuality. LGBTQ+ Catholics who desire deep intimacy with God through religious life should not be denied based on misconceptions of queer identity. If celibacy is the only option, and a deep personal relationship with God is encouraged, then there must be a change in the attitude of religious life towards LGBTQ+ individuals in their orders. If there can be gay priests, there can be gay nuns.

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