

July 2013

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Michael J. Maher

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## Recommended Citation

Maher, M. J. (2007). Gay and Lesbian Students in Catholic High Schools: A Qualitative Study of Alumni Narratives. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 10 (4). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.1004052013>

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## GAY AND LESBIAN STUDENTS IN CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOLS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF ALUMNI NARRATIVES

MICHAEL J. MAHER

*Loyola University Chicago*

*The Catholic Magisterium has made a distinction between homosexual orientation (disordered but not sinful), homosexual activity (sinful, but judged “with prudence”), rights of gay and lesbian people, and the Church’s pastoral responsibilities to gay and lesbian people. Both the Vatican and the American bishops have clearly stated that the topic of homosexuality must be addressed in Catholic education, but the emphases on how it is addressed differ between the Vatican (emphasis on finding causes and cures) and the American bishops (providing pastoral care and inclusion). This article deals with the experiences of gay and lesbian youth in Catholic high schools. It is based on in-depth interviews with 25 (12 female and 13 male) gay and lesbian alumni who attended Catholic high schools in the 1980s and 1990s. What emerged is a theme of “dis-integration.” Things simply did not fit together in their lives in the areas of family, peers, school, spirituality, and identity. This is in stark contrast with Catholic teaching, which proposes that the purpose of Catholic education is the integration of all these areas.*

Both the American bishops and Vatican Congregations have issued a number of statements that address the topic of homosexuality in recent decades (Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1975, 1986, 1994; United States Catholic Conference [USCC], 1976). While all documents touch on a number of issues, those from the American bishops tend to place greater emphasis on the pastoral care of gay and lesbian people while those from the Vatican tend to place greater emphasis on the immorality of homosexual sexual activity (Maher, 2003). A distinction is made between homosexual orientation and homosexual sexual activity. Violence and discrimination against gay and lesbian people is condemned, and the Church is called upon to minister to the needs of gay and lesbian people.

Since the Vatican Council II (1965), the Church has emphasized that children have a right to sex education. The theme that sexuality is a gift of God is present in all magisterial statements. Both the American bishops and

Vatican congregations have also issued a number of statements that address the topic of homosexuality in Catholic education (Pontifical Council for the Family, 1996; Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1983; USCC, 1979, 1981, 1991; USCC, NCCB Committee on Marriage and Family, 1997). All emphasize that homosexuality must be addressed in Catholic education. In general, those from the American bishops tend to place greater emphasis on the pastoral care of gay and lesbian young people while those from the Vatican tend to place greater emphasis on finding causes and cures (or at least means of control) of homosexual behavior (Maher, 2003). The most comprehensive statement from the American bishops regarding the topic of homosexuality and Catholic education was in the document *Human Sexuality: A Catholic Perspective for Education and Lifelong Learning* (USCC, 1991). The final paragraph of the section reads:

Educationally, homosexuality cannot and ought not to be skirted or ignored. The topic must be faced in all objectivity by the pupil and the educator when the case presents itself. First and foremost, we support modeling and teaching respect for every human person, regardless of sexual orientation. Second, a parent or teacher must also present clearly and unambiguously moral norms of the Christian tradition regarding homosexual genital activity, appropriately geared to the age level and maturity of the learner. Finally, parents and other educators must remain open to the possibility that a particular person, whether adolescent or adult, may be struggling to accept his or her own homosexual orientation. The distinction between being homosexual and doing homosexual genital actions, while not always clear and convincing, is a helpful and important one when dealing with the complex issue of homosexuality, particularly in the educational and pastoral arena. (p. 56)

In 1997, the USCC, NCCB Committee on Marriage and Family issued *Always Our Children: Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children and Suggestions for Pastoral Ministers*. Clear emphasis of this document is on acceptance of gay and lesbian sons and daughters and acceptance of self as parents of gay and lesbian children, but still acknowledging that homosexual sexual activity is unacceptable according to the Church. The Committee recommended that Church ministers accept gay and lesbian children and adults, welcome them in the faith community, provide pastoral services for them, and educate themselves on gay and lesbian issues.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Coleman (1995, 1997) has argued strongly that the teachings of both the Vatican and the American bishops compel Catholic high schools to address the topic of homosexuality. It is essential that school faculty and staff must

know the Church's teaching and be able to respond to students who identify as possibly being gay or lesbian, according to Coleman. A few dioceses have begun to actively address homosexuality in Catholic secondary schools. The Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis is one example that has attracted a good deal of attention. In 1995, the Schools Team of the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis created The Pastoral Care and Sexual Identity Study Group of Saint Paul and Minneapolis. Through the work of the study group, students in Catholic high schools discussed homosexuality in class assignments and student newspapers and trainings were provided to teachers and other professional staff (Gevelinger & Zimmerman, 1997).

It is important to note that the issue of gay and lesbian youth deals with more than a political discussion. Researchers have found that gay and lesbian youth are at high risk for suicide, substance abuse, AIDS, violence, and harassment from peers in high schools and in colleges (Bochenek & Brown, 2001; DeBorg, Wood, Sher, & Good, 1998; Gibson, 1989; Herdt & Boxer, 1993).

## **FAMILY**

Relationships with family are often difficult for gay and lesbian youth. Friend (1993) argues that gay and lesbian youth are a distinct minority because they are often oppressed by their own families. Researchers found that half or more of anti-gay violence is perpetrated by family members (Hunter, 1990). Mallon (1994) found that normal adolescent distancing from families becomes abnormally strong for gay and lesbian youth. Fear of expulsion from the home can cause a greater sense of hiding and increased risk for suicide. Knowlton (1992) found that gay men tend to have less mature relationships with their parents than heterosexual men. Knowlton argued that non-conformity to parental expectation of heterosexuality made mature relationships with parents difficult for gay men. Herdt and Boxer (1993) found that family members use death images when describing the coming out of their gay or lesbian child. Lesbian youth tended to have more negative reactions from their fathers than did gay males. Coming out to parents can disrupt the coming out process itself and can disrupt the youth's life in total (such as being expelled from the home). Gay and lesbian youth were more likely to come out to their mothers than to their fathers. Families from strong ethnic or religious backgrounds sometimes have more difficulty accepting a gay or lesbian child.

Savin-Williams (1989) studied the relationship between self-esteem and family relationships for gays and lesbians. Acceptance by the father for lesbians, and by both the father and the mother for gay men had a direct correlation with a greater sense of self-esteem. Lesbians were more likely to be

out to their families if they felt closer to them. Bernstein (1996) found that gay and lesbian youth and young adults were more likely to have better attachment with their parents if their parents were more educated and younger. Also, stronger attachment with the mother tended to improve development, but stronger attachment with the father tended to hamper development. Relationships with parents tended to decline initially after parent awareness, but then increase and return to pre-awareness levels over time. McConkey (1991) found that gay men who displayed the least physical aggression in boyhood also had the poorest relationships with their fathers. Gay men tended to have poorer relationships with their fathers than heterosexual men and also tended to be less physically aggressive in boyhood than heterosexual men.

T. Johnson (1992) found that families adjust to a gay or lesbian son or daughter and become less homophobic over time. Religious concerns can make the process more difficult for families. DeVine (1985) found that families move through stages in accepting the homosexuality of a child. In the first stage, subliminal awareness, the gay or lesbian family member feels isolated, and the family avoids topics such as dating or homosexuality. In the second stage, impact, the family clearly knows that the child is gay and focuses on fear, guilt, and feelings of failure. In the third stage, adjustment, the family realizes that it is impossible to change the child's sexual orientation and concentrates on bargaining and maintaining social image. In the fourth stage, resolution, the family focuses on sense of loss. The final stage, integration, involves the family adjusting to the gay or lesbian child and his or her life.

## **SOCIAL**

While probably all high school students experience difficulty fitting in with their peers, gay and lesbian students face especially difficult challenges. D. Johnson (1996) found that many gay and lesbian youth believe that their acceptance is based on their ability to hide their identities. Town (1996) found that gay male high school students had to work at constructing "acceptable" masculine identities in order to survive in their homophobic school environment. Friend (1993) argued that gay and lesbian youth put a great deal of psychological energy into hiding their sexuality, and most do "pass" as heterosexual in high school. The sense of hiding causes a great deal of stress in gay and lesbian youth, makes them question their social ties, and may result in heterosexual compensation. Mallon (1994) found that the need to hide distorts almost all relationships for gay and lesbian youth and leads to a sense of isolation. For some, especially males, anonymous sex becomes preferable to complete isolation. Herdt and Boxer (1993) found that coming

out does improve youth's self-esteem and their relationships with their friends. Gay and lesbian youth usually come out first to a friend, usually of the same sex and same age, often who is also gay or lesbian. High school culture exerts a strong pressure on youth to heterosexually conform. Gay and lesbian youth usually feel more accepted by girls than by boys, and typically do not see teachers as a source of assistance or protection. Ginsberg (1996) found that gay and lesbian high school students spend much of their time isolated, fearful, and confused. Gay and lesbian support groups in their schools were seen as vital to these students.

One movement that has developed in recent years is for high schools to provide support groups for gay and lesbian students. Herdt and Boxer (1993) found that support groups for gay and lesbian youth provide them with alleviation from the feeling of hiding, people who understood their experiences, and "true friends" who know them for who they really were. Greeley (1994) found that support groups for gay and lesbian youth helped them to overcome their loneliness and develop their social skills. Schneider (1989) found that a support group helped adolescent lesbians develop greater self-esteem.

Studies have also shown that the AIDS epidemic increased homophobia in the American public in the 1980s, and that homophobia is related to attitudes toward people with AIDS (Russell & Ellis, 1993).

## **CATHOLIC YOUTH AND CATHOLIC SCHOOL STUDENTS**

A few studies have been conducted in the area of attitudes of Catholic youth on the topic of homosexuality. Numbers are not completely in agreement with these studies. This may be due to regional differences in the study samples and also changes in attitudes over time. In general, it would seem that most Catholic youth do not see homosexuality as an acceptable lifestyle. Despite this, many Catholic youth support the civil rights of gay and lesbian people. It also seems that tolerance of gay and lesbian people has increased over time among Catholic youth (McNamara, 1992). DiGiacomo (1993) found that males in Catholic high schools experienced peer pressure to have sex with girls in order to avoid being labeled as gay. This writer's own research indicates that students who graduate from Catholic high schools tend to have more positive attitudes toward homosexuality than those who graduate from non-Catholic high schools (Maher, 2001, 2004).

In a review of studies into Catholic education over a 25-year period, Convey (1992) found that students in Catholic high schools displayed values that were less self-centered than values of students in public high schools. Students in Catholic high schools were found to support equal opportunities and rights for women. Researchers found that Catholic high schools placed greater emphasis on community as a part of their culture than did public high

schools. Catholic high schools were more successful in achieving community for a number of reasons including their smaller enrollments, their emphasis on shared religious identity and values, and through intentional efforts. In studies that compared the cultures of coeducational and single-sex schools, the role of “adolescent subculture,” which valued physical beauty and heterosexual popularity, was a key factor. Studies indicated that this subculture was strongest among boys in single-sex schools and lowest among girls in single-sex schools.

## **INSTITUTIONAL**

When describing the response of schools to the topic of homosexuality, the strongest theme noted by researchers and other writers is “silence.” Pitot (1996) found that schools are silent on the topic of homosexuality in the curriculum, in the library holdings, and in providing adult role models. Schools cannot address these issues, however, until they address homophobia. Segal (1995) found that schools reinforce in both overt and subtle ways the preference of heterosexuality and silence on the topic of homosexuality. Gay and lesbian students are forced to adapt to school climates, but schools do not adapt to the presence of gay and lesbian students. Tellijohann (1995) found that less than half of high school health teachers covered the topic of homosexuality, and when they did so, it was for less than one class period. Bucher (1984) found that homosexuality was very often not included in the sex education curriculum in secondary schools. Keilwasser and Wolf (1992) argued that silence on the topic of homosexuality in schools represents a symbolic “annihilation” of gay and lesbian youth and creates a “spiral of silence.” The Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll of U.S. citizens (Elam, Rose, & Gallup, 1996) found that 63% of Americans opposed teaching about homosexuality in the secondary school curriculum. Interestingly, Catholics were more likely to support its inclusion in the curriculum than non-Catholics. Catholics were also more likely than non-Catholics to think it should be presented as an acceptable lifestyle.

While silence is the overall response to the topic of homosexuality, schools also reinforce in more subtle ways a preferential status for heterosexuality. Reed (1994) has argued that high schools are highly sexualized environments which reward heterosexuality and punish homosexuality. Gay and lesbian students experience high school alone in a very distinct and strong way. Epstein (1997) has also argued that schools are highly sexualized. Homophobia, machismo, and misogyny define adolescent versions of masculinity in school culture. Friend (1993) argued that schools engage in “systematic exclusion” of silence on the topic of homosexuality and “systematic inclusion” of only negative images of homosexuality. MacLeod (1996) found that lesbian students viewed their schools as unsafe and unsupportive envi-

ronments. Students ridiculed homosexuality, and the curriculum tied it to disease. School libraries were absent of material.

Education, both formal and informal, does have the potential to reduce homophobia in students. Reinhardt (1997) found that college students who had friends and acquaintances who were gay and lesbian or who had had positive interactions with gays and lesbians were less likely to have homophobic attitudes. Reinhardt also found that men were more homophobic than women, that all were more likely to be homophobic toward gay men than toward lesbian women, and that those who attended church regularly were more likely to be homophobic. Pirtle (1994) found that college students had less negative attitudes toward gays and lesbians after interacting with a panel of gay and lesbian people. A number of studies have shown that homophobia can be reduced through gay and lesbian speakers panels, role-playing exercises, and through knowing a gay or lesbian person (Aitken, 1993; McClintock, 1992).

## **TEACHERS AND STAFF**

Numerous studies have shown that many (especially male) college students majoring in education are uncomfortable with the topic of homosexuality and are reluctant to include it in the curriculum (Taylor, 2001). Studies have also shown that attitudes of college students majoring in education can be improved through workshops and classes (Bateman, 1995; Lipkin, 1990, Remafedi, 1993). Interestingly, Soloff (2001) also found that education students who were highly religious were also most able to change their negative attitudes toward gay and lesbian people. Hunt (1993) found that students in counselor education programs felt that they were not well prepared to work with gay and lesbian clients. Sears (1988) found that school counselors believed that they had not been prepared to work with gay and lesbian clients. Male counselors have been found to have discomfort working with people with AIDS related to their own homophobia (Hayes & Gelso, 1993). Pettinger (1995) found that most practicing school psychologists had positive attitudes toward gay and lesbian youth.

Schools are not only difficult places for gay and lesbian students, but also for gay and lesbian teachers. Juul (1995) found that gay and lesbian teachers in rural and suburban settings were significantly less open about their sexuality, more fearful of exposure, and less accepting themselves of their own identities than urban gay and lesbian teachers. Smith (1985) found that gay and lesbian teachers often put extra time and effort into being exceptional teachers in order to protect themselves and "compensate" for being gay and lesbian. Kissen (1993) found that gay and lesbian teachers frequently experience physical and emotional symptoms that they attribute to the



strain in their lives caused by hiding. They often regret not being able to reach out to gay and lesbian youth.

Litton (1999) had a number of interesting findings from a study of gay and lesbian teachers in Catholic elementary schools. The teachers chose to work at Catholic schools because of their religious beliefs, but they also saw conflicts between their religion and their sexuality. They experienced oppression, feared coming out to students (despite believing there would be some benefits to it), and believed their administrators would not support them coming out. While most were very open about their sexual identities with only a limited number of colleagues, most also felt that many of their colleagues knew. They worked to create schools that were more inclusive and more in keeping with their view of the Gospel, the call to love one another. They believed that they needed to work harder to be the best teachers in order to make it more difficult for their administrators to dismiss them.

The National Catholic Educational Association has published and supported some studies into the attitudes of Catholic school teachers and principals on a variety of topics, including homosexuality. In a survey of Catholic elementary school teachers, Kushner and Helbling (1995) found that 52.2% believed that a teacher in a Catholic elementary school should not be terminated if it is discovered that he or she is homosexual, while 34.6% indicated agreement that homosexuals should not be allowed to teach in Catholic schools. Harkins (1993) conducted a similar study of Catholic elementary school principals. The majority (64%) of principals agreed that homosexuals should not be hired to teach in Catholic elementary schools. In a survey of Catholic secondary schoolteachers, Benson and Guerra (1985) found that a civil rights protection for homosexuals was supported by 44% of teachers. The majority (62%) of teachers believed that sexual relationships between two consenting adults of the same sex were morally wrong. All three studies found that the values these teachers and administrators believed that Catholic schools should emphasize for their students included compassion, tolerance, respect, and self-esteem.

In a study of Catholic priests in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, Campbell (1991) found that most believed that their seminary training did not prepare them to work with gay Catholics. Years of pastoral experience and also the experience of counseling gay and lesbian people were seen as most effective to prepare for this work. Other research has shown similar findings in Protestant pastors (Vaughn, 1998).

## **SPIRITUAL**

While there have been only a few studies into the experiences of gay and lesbian Catholics, they tend to show a group of people who overcome social and

ecclesial obstacles in order to come to happiness in their adult lives, sometimes within the Church. In a study of gay and lesbian Catholics, Harris (2001) found lower internalized homophobia and higher levels of sexual identity development were related to an individual being able to derive personal religious beliefs and make personal religious decisions independently from other authorities such as family, clergy, and religious institutions. Toman (1997) found that gay Catholic men who were more religious during their adolescence had greater difficulty with their coming out process, but that this did not prevent these same males from eventually achieving an affirmative gay lifestyle later in adulthood. O'Brien (1991) found that gay and lesbian Catholics were comfortable in their sexual orientation for the most part, sought long-term relationships, and found Dignity, an unsanctioned Catholic gay organization, to be a source of spiritual growth. Both Dignity and New Ways Ministry are organizations for gay and lesbian Catholics, which have had difficult relationships with Church hierarchy (Nugent & Gramick, 1992; Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1986, 1999).

Other studies have shown a relationship of spirituality and sexuality identity development for gay and lesbian youth. Wilson (1996) found that for Native American gay and lesbian people, the experience of sexuality was inseparable from the experience of culture and community. Ream (2001) found that gay and lesbian youth who were raised in a religious environment were at a higher risk for internalized homophobia, but that their religion also acted as a "protector" for them in battling internalized homophobia.

## **IDENTITY**

The task of identity development, possibly the central task of adolescence, is particularly difficult for gay and lesbian youth. Jackson and Sullivan (1994) found that gay and lesbian youth are more prone to identity-development issues than other youth. Internalized homophobia can damage their self-concepts and self-esteem. They often compartmentalize their sexuality as a coping mechanism. Durby (1994) found that gay and lesbian youth put a great deal of time and energy into hiding their sexuality, which gives their sexual orientation exaggerated significance; it affects the totality of their lives. Moskos (2000) found that gay and lesbian youth cope with the stigma of homosexuality in a number of unhealthy ways, such as withdrawal and self-hatred, family alienation, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation. The result is psychological, cognitive, and emotional developmental deficits. Gay and lesbian youth who are able to develop a positive identity demonstrate better psychological health and greater self-esteem. Herdt and Boxer (1993) found that many gay and lesbian youth do not view their "coming out" as a free act;

they feel great pressure to be true to themselves. Gay youth often engage in “magical thinking” in which they believe they will begin to act in stereotypical ways if they come out. Coming out is often described by gay and lesbian youth in death images.

Popular developmental theories for gay and lesbian youth include those of Plummer (1975), Ponse (1978), and Cass (1979, 1984). The work of Troiden (1988, 1989) best fits the descriptions of their life development as told by the subjects in this study. Troiden found that identity development for gay and lesbian youth involves a series of events over time leading to acceptance of the term “homosexual” to describe oneself. It is a drama set against the backdrop of social stigma. It focuses on the meaning of events rather than the frequency of occurrence of behaviors. For males, it tends to come out through sexual experiences, while for females it tends to come out more through emotional attachments. Troiden proposed four stages but acknowledged that the stages are not neat and that an individual can move up and down between stages. Troiden’s first stage, sensitization, is pre-pubescent. It is marked by the child feeling strongly different from his or her peers. Often, this difference is seen as not clearly meeting the social expectations based on one’s gender. It does not have sexual significance at this stage. This sense of difference takes on sexual meaning in Troiden’s second stage, identity confusion, which usually takes place in early adolescence. The child believes that he or she “might be homosexual.” The third stage, identity assumption, usually occurs in late adolescence. The child or adult begins to tolerate, but not embrace, his or her homosexuality. It is at this stage that “coming out” usually begins. It is necessary for the individual to meet other gay and lesbian people to achieve this stage. The final stage, commitment, usually occurs in adulthood. It is at this stage that the individual sees his or her homosexuality as part of his or her total identity and would not become heterosexual even if it were possible.

It is worth special note that two of the male subjects had attended residential seminary high schools, and both reported that sex between students was common there. One unfortunate outcome of the recent priest sex abuse scandals has been a movement to eradicate gay seminary students (Boisvert & Goss, 2005; Nugent, 1989; Thavis, 2002). Several writers and researchers have argued that a large number of Catholic seminarians are gay, and the percentage seems to be growing (Cozzens, 2000; Jordan, 2000; Sipe, 1990; Thomas, 2000; Wolf, 1989). The Vatican does officially teach that gay men should not be admitted to religious orders and/or seminaries (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2005; Rossini, 2002; Sacred Congregation for the Religious, 1961).

## METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the study was to describe the experiences of gay and lesbian youth in Catholic high schools. In 1995 and 1996, in-depth interviews were conducted with 25 (12 female and 13 male) adult gay and lesbian alumni who attended Catholic high schools in the 1980s and 1990s. The subjects were recruited through the organization Dignity and through advertisements in gay and lesbian publications and Internet bulletin boards. Also, many subjects referred other potential subjects to the study. This was under the direction of faculty in the Department of Education at Saint Louis University and the university's Institutional Review Board.

Before the interview process began, subjects did an exercise with their old high school yearbooks. They were asked to go through their yearbooks and form two lists of 15 items each. One list was titled "safe" and the other "unsafe." They were then to choose an adjective to describe each item on the list. Subjects without yearbooks were asked to do this from memory. The number of interviews conducted with each subject varied. The average over-all time spent in interviewing each subject was about 2 hours.

The first interview involved the subject explaining why he or she chose these items for each list. In the second interview, the subject was presented a typed page of the items he or she included in the "unsafe" list along with the adjectives. The subject was asked to describe what effect these elements had on his or her life in high school. Later interviews included these questions if they were not answered through the initial exercises:

- What was your impression of what a gay person was like while you were in high school? What do you think was the impression of the other students in your school? The teachers? The staff and administration?
- What were the sources of your information on homosexuality? Were you aware of resources that you did not use? If so, why did you not use these resources?
- How did your own experiences and feelings compare with these impressions/ this information? Did you perceive yourself to be gay? How did you perceive yourself at that time?
- What role did the Catholic aspect of the school have in influencing these impressions and your self-awareness?
- Did you experience depression as a response to your feelings and the environment?
- What role did dating play in your life at that time? Did you date girls? Did you date boys?
- If you could change anything about your high school experience, what would have made it better?

- What advice would you give on this topic to students, faculty, parents, and the Church?

There is a methodological concern over studying memories of experiences rather than experiences as they are currently lived. In order to combat this, subjects were frequently asked, "Is that what you think now, or is that what you would have said then?" Subjects also stated that the exercise with their yearbooks was helpful in putting them in touch with their feelings while in high school.

A pilot study with two subjects was conducted before advertising for more subjects. Saint Louis University faculty reviewed the methodology and results of the pilot before the study proceeded.

The data from the interviews were analyzed through a phenomenological approach; common themes that stretched across most of the subjects were the focus. Issues that the subjects brought up fell into five categories: family, social, institutional, spiritual, and identity. These are discussed in depth below along with the findings of other researchers. All names of subjects in this article are pseudonyms.

## RESULTS

### FAMILY

All of the subjects were in some way disconnected from their families while they were in high school. At the very least, this was in the form of not talking to their families about their sexuality. In fact, only one of the subjects had "come out" to his family while in high school, and that was under strong duress. The fear of rejection by the family or even from the family was very strong for the subjects. It must be noted that some of the difficulties were due to problems already in the family. While these family problems were not caused by the young person's sexuality, the problems did contribute to even greater difficulty in dealing with his or her sexuality. A handful of the subjects also noted violence or verbal abuse from family members, sometimes related to their sexuality.

"Patrick" attended a high school boarding seminary run by a men's religious order. He graduated in 1984. While most of his motivation for attending seminary was a desire to become a priest, he also very much wanted to get away from his father. "He would always talk about 'queers' and 'fags' with a lot of hate."

"Gina" graduated from an all-girls suburban high school in 1995. At the time of the interview, she was in terrible turmoil about conflicts she was having with her mother. A few months before the interviews, her mother opened

a letter in Gina's backpack while Gina was visiting. The letter to a friend revealed that Gina was a lesbian. "She told me, 'I think it's wrong. I think it's unnatural. I don't think it's right. I don't accept it, and I never will!' And then she went into the whole thing about me kind of crashing her dreams of having grandchildren and the whole thing." The issue of not feeling loved was very strong for Gina. "I guess that I don't feel loved anymore, but I don't, at least not by my mom, because she doesn't accept me for who I am."

## **SOCIAL**

All of the subjects described being disconnected from their peer group in high school. In fact, this was one of the strongest areas in which difficulties were reported. This was particularly fascinating, given the wide range of social roles these people played. About half of the subjects reported being labeled as "fags" or "dykes" by their peers and had few or no friends in high school. On the other hand, several were very popular with their peers and served as class presidents, on homecoming queen courts, and other coveted high school positions. Yet, all reported difficulties fitting in with their peers. Among the popular students, most said that they felt their friends were not truly their friends because they did not know them for who they were. Most of the subjects reported that derogatory terms (such as "fag" and "dyke") were commonly used among their peers. Frequently, however, the subjects also reported that this was not always meant as a literal labeling of a person, but just as a "put-down." While it was not a common phenomenon, two of the subjects reported being victims of gay-bashing violence. Almost all of the subjects reported witnessing violence or harassment perpetuated against other students who were labeled as gay, and this had a profound effect on them as well. It was also commonly mentioned that verbal harassment and violence and the use of derogatory terms decreased in the later years of high school. While one of the subjects found support in a group of mostly gay students (although that was not discussed within the group), most avoided cliques stereotyped to be gay or lesbian.

While a number of subjects experienced different forms of harassment while they were in Catholic high schools, no story was so dramatic as Mark's. "Mark" was in the high school graduating class of 1993, but he never graduated. He attended a diocesan, rural, coeducational high school.

It started out verbal, and then it progressed to other things, to physical harassment, to vandalism of a lot of my property. And it weaved its way into a lot of my life, to the point I was taking it home, and it got to the point that even home wasn't a safe place.

Mark was physically assaulted by students on an average of once every 2 days. He was verbally assaulted several times each day. Students broke into his locker frequently in order to pour perfumes into it. They also destroyed his assignments or vandalized them, writing things like “faggot” and “sodomy” by his name. “And what pissed me off the most was that every one of those teachers knew what was going on, and never once did they do one damned thing about it.” After all the abuse, and with the threat of more abuse at home, Mark became suicidal. He decided to drop out of school.

“Sue” also attended a rural, diocesan coeducational high school. She graduated in 1987. Tensions with fitting in led to greater problems for Sue.

If I didn't like something, I either avoided the situation, slept through it, or took drugs. High school really got difficult for me my junior and senior year. I really wasn't bonding with anyone, felt out of place, didn't have any great friendships, and was sort of at odds with the administration and some of the teachers. At the time, it just seemed easier to sneak some of my mom's prescription pills to help me through the day.

## **INSTITUTIONAL**

The subjects described being disconnected from their schools as institutions in a number of ways. Overwhelmingly, they stated that homosexuality was never or only very rarely mentioned in their high school curriculum. They saw many of the faculty as generally judgmental people and as people who would not (or did not) protect them from peer harassment. Faculty who made them feel safe were those who communicated a genuine care for the students. Unfortunately, in cases where they did believe a teacher to be gay or lesbian, they did not seek them out as a resource; rather, they avoided them for fear of also (or further) being labeled as gay. They usually spoke to no one at the schools about their struggles, including school counselors. In some cases, they feared that there was a lack of true confidentiality. They experienced heavy pressure to conform to specific gender roles in their schools, including pressure to date the opposite sex. Gender structures also influenced their relationship with the institution. For most male subjects, locker rooms and bathrooms held a strong fear; fear of both being aroused and thereby discovered, and also fear of violence or harassment in these all-male, unsupervised environments. The female subjects who attended all-girls schools believed their unisex environments were safer for them. On the other hand, the male subjects who attended all-boys schools found their unisex environments more threatening.

“Kevin” graduated from high school in 1994. He attended a suburban, all-boys school. Kevin had some of the most fascinating observations on the values and culture of his school of any of the subjects.

Surprisingly, theater was safe. It was safe because you could meet chicks in the-ater.... Film appreciation was cool because you got to watch movies. Band was cool because you got to play rock music. Mass became cool because one teacher had a rock band, and he used to play U2 music at Mass, and one priest used to cuss in his homilies. A religious service club was bad until they started doing it with one of the girls' schools. Then it became okay because you could meet chicks.... This was true for all the clubs; advisors for cool things were cool. Advisors for nerd things were nerds. They were viewed as geeks because they were nurturing and caring versus the coaches who rode their students. Sports recognition was public and informal. Academic recognition was you got a pin at a ceremony. The school gave athletes cool recognition, and they gave nerds nerdy recognition.

Kevin saw these attitudes toward the curriculum as coming from a much deeper set of values.

Values were not allowed in general. To be critical, that was okay. To actually care about something, that was unmanly. Caring was feminine.... It was a fine, fine line where if you could justify in some way using the set of adolescent values of rock music, sports, sex, women, if there was something from that culture that you could mix with one of the intellectual things, it would be okay. If you couldn't, it was wrong.

"Alice" graduated in 1981. She attended a very exclusive suburban girls' high school. While Alice did not yet realize that she was a lesbian in high school, her experiences with the institution shaped many of the issues she would face in her coming out, only a few years later. The school gave a special award to one senior each year.

Everyone I knew said that I would get that award, and I kept saying, "I don't think so. I'm not Catholic, I just don't have the right family background, my sister has caused all sorts of problems this year." A staff person, she wanted me to be prepared, so she told me that I wasn't going to get the award, and she told me why. I didn't really care by then, but I did feel judged.... It was just kind of a bittersweet end, because I was my high school. That was my life. I loved my school. I loved it. I was like there all the time. It was really a perfect place for me, and then it was like discovering Watergate when you think the government is perfect.

## **SPIRITUAL**

For a handful of the subjects, religion and spirituality were a source of comfort for them during their high school years. For the majority, however, religion and



spirituality were a source of conflict. Most of the subjects said that the topic of homosexuality was rarely or never discussed in the curriculum. On those few occasions when it did enter the curriculum, however, it was often in religion class, and often cast in a negative light. Retreats tended to focus on opening up and sharing personal thoughts and feelings with their peers, but they did not feel safe sharing their personal thoughts and feelings with their peers. For about half of the subjects, especially for women, feeling that religion or religious beliefs were being forced on them was extremely uncomfortable. Also the examples of priests, nuns, and brothers sometimes had a negative effect on their views of religion. A few of the subjects perceived vowed religious who worked in their schools as both homosexual and homophobic. The majority finished Catholic high school with an intense anger toward religion.

“Emily” graduated in 1991 from a coeducational, diocesan, high school in a small town. Emily was the only subject who described herself as having a “girlfriend” (or “boyfriend” in the case of males) in high school. Emily’s relationship with “Nora” began when Emily was a freshman and Nora was a sophomore.

I was in love. But we didn’t think that there was [*sic*] any other people in the whole world. In fact, we were going to grow up, get married and have kids, but we were going to live next door to each other and go on vacations so we could be alone.

Emily did have some very homophobic encounters with adults at the school. Interestingly, all of them involved adults who Emily saw as being gay. Also, all were religious persons. The most dramatic involved her parish priest who was also the chaplain of the high school. Emily had heard that someone had seen him in a gay bar.

I hate him! I can’t stand him! I see him, and I get so mad. Because I came out, I said something in Confession, and he told me that I would go to Hell. And I was in the thing where he couldn’t see who I was, and he peeked out and looked at me. And he always looked at me like I was not good enough, like I was a bad person. I stopped going to church, I stopped going to his church. He just angers me to no end!

“Allen” attended an urban, all-boys high school. He graduated in 1987. He was very involved in campus ministry and helped with the retreats in his high school. The retreats posed a challenge for Allen.

The retreats were very positive experiences for me, but there was still something I felt was unsafe about them. On one retreat I was helping to give, I got

into this long conversation with one of the guys, and I sort of started to come out to him.... The retreat experience was sort of a vulnerable place for me, and not in a totally positive way. I usually have a positive connotation to that word, "vulnerable," because when we opened up, we became very close to each other. But that word really has a negative connotation when I think about that retreat.

## IDENTITY

The area of identity development and confusion was one of the strongest themes to come out in the interviews. The subjects had a very wide range of sexual identity awareness while they were in high school. A handful had absolutely no idea that they were gay or lesbian, while about the same number were very keenly aware of this, and the majority fell between these. One of the major problems that they faced was negative images of gay and lesbian people to which they could not relate (or simply no images at all). Based on impressions from the media, from family, and from peers, they often saw gay and lesbian people as cross-gendered, promiscuous, and predatory. They did not see themselves fitting these images, and therefore could not understand how they could be gay. The majority of the female subjects simply had no impressions of what a lesbian would be like. This is related to another finding from the interviews; the subjects had no relationship with the adult gay world, for the most part. They were virtually unaware of events in the news related to gay and lesbian people, and the progress won by the gay movement in the 1980s and 1990s seemed to have had no effect on them in their high school experiences. In addition to the range of identity awareness, there was also a wide range of sexual experience with both the opposite sex and the same sex. This seemed to have no real effect on identity development or awareness, however. A small minority who had no or little sexual experience with the same sex could still clearly identify homosexuality as a personal issue for them. A handful, however, who had extensive sexual experiences with the same sex still did not think of themselves as gay or lesbian while they were in high school.

"Dan" graduated from a high school boarding seminary in 1987. The impression that Dan and his peers had of gays was of effeminate men. This seemed to also be held by the staff.

I think I worked hard at keeping as masculine of an appearance as I could, because I had seen the way they treated other students that acted feminine. It wasn't only a thing with other peers; it was also a formational issue a lot of times. A character issue was that a male student was not supposed to act that way. They really made an effort, if you were feminine, they really tried to "butch you up" so to speak. It would be brought up in your evaluation if they thought you were taking on feminine characteristics.

Dan's first sexual experience was with his roommate his junior year. He began having more sexual encounters with his fellow students. In his senior year, he had sexual encounters with about one third of the students who were in the junior and senior classes at that time. The occurrences became more and more frequent, and Dan felt ashamed about them. "That was kind of my time of feeling like I wasn't in control of my sexuality, like it was running away with me." While Dan was clearer about his sexuality than many other subjects, it cannot be said that he had integrated his sexuality into his identity.

I knew, I think I knew at the time that I was gay, and I didn't want to admit it. I think that's where the secrecy came in, the doing it at night in the dark, you know. It was a dark part of myself that I didn't want other people to know about. It was a horrible, bad, evil part of myself. All the going out of my way to be nice to people, I was probably compensating in a way. I was making up for being gay, but also not wanting to admit it. I thought it would be a better thing if I were heterosexual, but because I wasn't, I would have to work harder at portraying this image of being someone normal.

"Denise" graduated from her urban, all-girls high school in 1987. "I was like such an advocate for gay rights in high school. Oh, I was so passionate. But it never occurred to me that I was gay. I just felt very strongly about it." Denise had very limited perceptions of lesbians in high school.

I don't think that I ever really thought that being a lesbian was really an option. It just wasn't. I grew up in this home where there was a man and woman and these three boys, and they went out with girls, and I was supposed to go out with a boy. I never knew a lesbian. I just didn't think about it. It just wasn't an option.

She could not remember thinking of any of her classmates as lesbians. Her peers did not perceive her as gay either,

Because I always had a boyfriend and I had long hair...I did not enjoy having sex with boys in high school. I did it because I thought it was a way I could get some affection and attention or something. I didn't really enjoy it. It was okay, but it was just kind of there. But I really was not clued into that.

She did think that the principal and another nun were in love. "Maybe that's part of the whole thing about being a lesbian. I didn't look like 'Sr. Loretta,' and I didn't want to."

## CONCLUSION: DIS-INTEGRATION

The term this researcher coined to describe these five areas of difficulty and disconnection is “dis-integration.” Things simply did not fit together in their lives in the areas of family, peers, school, spirituality, and identity. For example, “Tom,” who graduated from a coeducational suburban high school in 1988, shared,

I think in a way it just kind of built up a wall inside myself, like a place you don't go. The fact that it happened to be inside myself didn't seem to particularly matter. It's just a place that you don't go, like the teachers' lounge or something like that. I just accepted it and went on with my life. It didn't seem particularly bad that this place was inside me.

This is in stark contrast with Catholic teaching, which proposes that the purpose of Catholic education is the integration of all these areas.

In 1977, the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education wrote, “The specific mission of the school, then, is a critical, systematic transmission of culture in the light of faith and the bringing forth of the power of Christian virtue by the integration of culture with faith and of faith with living” (§49). Both the American bishops and Vatican congregations have emphasized a theme of “integration” in Catholic education; integration of family and school, social life and academic life, faith and knowledge, knowledge and behavior. One take on this has been the emphasis in statements of the American bishops on Catholic schools as communities (USCC, 1972, 1979). “Community is at the heart of Christian education not simply as a concept to be taught but as a reality to be lived” (USCC, 1972, §23).

This theme of integration is also seen in the bishops' concerns for how sexuality is viewed and how sex education is conducted in Catholic schools. “Education in human sexuality focuses on development of the total Christian person, along with the development of the family and community....Even though sex education should have its own curriculum, it should be integrated into other content areas and classes” (USCC, 1981, p. 67). “Sexuality is a fundamental component of personality in and through which we, as male or female, express our relatedness to self, others, the world, and even God” (USCC, 1991, p. 9).

“Dis-integration” poses a particular challenge for Catholic schools, precisely because they are Catholic schools. While the findings in this study do not suggest that life is worse for gay and lesbian students in Catholic high schools versus public high schools (and in fact, some evidence suggests that it is probably better), public high schools do not have the same goals as Catholic high schools. One of those distinctively Catholic educational goals

is integration. Catholic schools seem to have failed in achieving this goal for gay and lesbian students. The integration of faith, knowledge, experience, school, community, and family is lacking. Efforts to integrate the topic of homosexuality into the curriculum and to address the pastoral needs of gay and lesbian students in Catholic schools have begun in some limited dioceses. These efforts must be studied, but in the meantime, silence is not the answer.

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*Michael J. Maher has served as the chaplain to the School of Education at Loyola University Chicago since 1996. This article is the third in a series to present the research he conducted for his book, Being Gay and Lesbian in a Catholic High School, Beyond the Uniform. Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to Dr. Michael J. Maher, University Ministry, Loyola University Chicago, 25 E. Pearson, Room 1461, Chicago, IL 60611.*