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Attitudes toward Homosexuality among Catholic-Educated University Graduates

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Depending on the area of academic concentration, formal education beyond the secondary school level may present Catholic-educated individuals with a steady stream of perspectives, theories, and worldviews on a variety of socio-cultural issues, including sexuality, that are different from those of the Catholic Church. Increasingly, liberal attitudes of young Catholics toward gay and lesbian issues may reflect a Catholic cohort that views moral questions as increasingly ambiguous and more open to personal interpretation. The purpose of this study is to uncover the themes related to how the completion of a university social science program and corresponding exposure to perspectives that are different from those of the Catholic Church has influenced Catholic-educated individuals' attitudes toward homosexuality. The attitudes of 12 young adults who have graduated from a Catholic secondary school and have subsequently graduated from a social science program at a nonreligious, liberal university are herein explored.

In a 2000 survey on select social attitudes of young people across Canada, Bibby (2001) reported that 74% of Canadian youth felt that gays and lesbians should be given the same rights as other Canadians. However, Bibby did not elaborate on the particulars of those rights. As such, one might assume that the youths' affirmative responses could have come from a general position of "equal rights for all." In an article comparing the success of Canadian proponents in legalizing same-sex marriage in Canada versus the failure of American proponents to do the same in the United States, Smith (2005) summed up a key difference in cultural ethos between the two countries in that in the United States "the discursive field of public policy and political debate defines the 'gay marriage' debate as a question of moral values while, in the Canadian debate, by contrast, same-sex marriage is treated as a question of human rights" (p. 226). Thus, it may be that the Canadian pro-human rights ethos explains the high percentage of Canadian youth in favor of equal rights for gays and lesbians. However, a comparative glimpse of

attitudes in Bibby's report showed that of youth who attend religious services less than weekly, 79% supported equal rights for gays and lesbians compared to 59% of those who attend services once a week, which is a significant drop in supportive majority. Thus, with only a few exceptions, given most religions' tendency to place restrictions on sexual activity, it may be that religious doctrine has a negative influence on the attitudes that young members have toward the rights of people in same-sex relationships. According to Herek (2004), "for some heterosexuals, negative attitudes toward bisexuals are probably part of a general belief system that includes a high level of religiosity and traditionalism regarding gender and sexuality" (p. 272).

The focus here is to explore just how influential religious authority—specifically that of the Roman Catholic Church—is on the sexual attitudes of Catholic-educated university graduates.¹ In a study of attitudes toward fertility, Blake (1984) remarked that

individuals who are born into a Catholic family will normally be baptized as Catholics and, unless they are totally alienated from the Church, appear to count themselves as "Catholics," regardless of whether their actual practice of the faith falls short of the Church's prescriptions. (p. 338)

Further, depending on the area of academic concentration, formal education beyond the secondary school level may present individuals who have been schooled up to that point in Catholic institutions with a steady stream of perspectives, theories, and worldviews on a variety of sociocultural issues, including sexuality, that are different from those of the Catholic Church.² Exposure to such diverse perspectives may challenge young Catholics to question the belief systems around which they were educated and place greater emphasis on individual choice than on doctrine. To date, no empirical research has been conducted on this subject. Thus, through the analysis of interviews with 12 university students who attended Catholic schools, the change in attitudes toward sexual ethics, specifically homosexuality, is herein explored in relation to a student's departure from a Catholic education system and subsequent completion of a university social science program—a liberal learning environment characterized in part by greater exposure to and acceptance of alternative approaches to sexuality. Further, within the scope of these participants,

1 Catholic-educated university graduates are those who had been educated in a Catholic elementary school and/or secondary school, and had subsequently graduated from a nonreligious university.

2 It is true that higher education is not the only place where one would be faced with perspectives that stray from or are in opposition to those of Catholicism. Going from a Catholic school directly into the working world, for example, may provide exposure to similar perspectives other than those of the Catholic Church, but that is not the focus of this study.

this study will explore the messages being sent about homosexuality in elementary and secondary Catholic schools.

Theoretical Framework

In his book, *Liquid Modernity*, Bauman (2000) wrote about the fluid nature of historical events as they relate to time and space, and the eclipsing of modernity by the postmodern age. This new era is characterized by a rejection of absolute truths that explain the development of society and an appreciation of diverse ways of understanding the world. Adherence to solid institutions and rigid, traditional frameworks has been melting away or breaking down. For Bauman, the solid being melted is that of human conformity, and evidence of such melting can be seen in our society where individual human desires and freedom of choice are exercised; one in which the “codes and rules to which one could conform . . . and by which one could subsequently let oneself be guided . . . are nowadays in increasingly short supply” (p. 7). In other words, patterns of dependency are being liquefied and are increasingly diffusing. An increasing number of young Catholics, for example, are determining questions of right and wrong in the seclusion of their own reflections, adhering to codes that are not written down, or are becoming dependent on institutions other than the Catholic Church (Bowen, 2004; Fulton et al., 2000). Thus, the liquefaction of adherence to Church doctrine will be examined in the context of an increasingly liberal-minded generation of Catholic-educated young adults, a generation that may be placing greater emphasis on individual autonomy than on institutional religious teachings.

Fluid Sexuality and the Catholic Church

Over the latter part of the 20th century, Western attitudes toward gays and lesbians have evolved toward greater acceptance, integration, and consideration of homosexuality in modern society (Adam, 1995, 2004; Warner, 2002). In an article that explores the effect of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms on the gay and lesbian rights movement, Smith (1998) explained that the goals of gay liberation in the 1970s were “to bring lesbians and gays out of the closet, to build gay community, to gain social acceptance for homosexuality and generally to liberate sexuality from the rigid constraints of a patriarchal and heterosexist social system” (p. 292). Smith also emphasized the significance of the “potential validation” (p. 290) of gay and lesbian rights during that decade in mobilizing supporters and generating hope and cooperation toward achieving the movement’s goals. Many religious institutions, such as the Anglican Church and the United Church, changed their position

on homosexuality during this era of public enlightenment (Bibby, 1993). The Roman Catholic Church, however, remained resolute in its entrenched doctrine. Among the Church's statements on homosexuality, perhaps the most well known are found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992), which teaches about the unacceptability of homosexual acts but urges compassion toward homosexuals:

Homosexuality refers to relations between men or between women who experience an exclusive or predominant sexual attraction toward persons of the same sex . . . Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity, tradition has always declared that "homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered." 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. (n. 2358)

Furthermore, the Vatican has published a number of other statements on homosexuality in noteworthy declarations and letters. The 1975 *Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics* from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith stated that "according to the objective moral order, homosexual relations are acts which lack an essential and indispensable finality" and that "homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered and can in no case be approved of" (sec. 8). In 1986, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* addressed the movement among some laity toward condoning homosexuality:

Nevertheless, increasing numbers of people today, even within the Church, are bringing enormous pressure to bear on the Church to accept the homosexual condition as though it were not disordered and to condone homosexual activity. . . . They reflect, even if not entirely consciously, a materialistic ideology which denies the transcendent nature of the human person as well as the supernatural vocation of every individual. (sec. 8)

Morality and the Postmodern Individual

In a postmodern society, the question of morality becomes complicated in light of postmodernism's fleeting and relative nature. Bauman (2003) described this era of rationalization as one that "recommends light cloaks and condemns steel casings" (p. 47). For example, the postmodern individual may do what is traditionally morally questionable and then justify the action

by referring to individual idiosyncrasies, subjective intentions, or changing cultural expectations. This postmodern view was founded upon a particular view of pluralism. As Markham (1994) asked in his book, *Plurality and Christian Ethics*,

How can one decide between different positions? How can one discover the truth? Isn't it the case that each cultural narrative will have its own criteria of rationality? Even the laws of logic have a cultural history, so even they cannot be used as definitive criteria. (p. 135)

Thus, postmodernists emphasize the plurality of discourses and assert that no single discourse can actually be true. At most, we have socially constructed traditions, to be deconstructed and reconstructed according to the perceived needs of a particular group or society. From this framework, heterosexual marital sex is no longer the reference point for appropriate sexual behavior. It is in itself examined as relative to all other sexual behaviors, feelings, and desires.

Hence, it is this phase of cultural pluralism and its ongoing individualism of beliefs and practices that poses a particular problem for the Catholic Church at the authoritative level in that self-identity becomes constructed individually. This is not simply because sexuality is emerging as a key aspect of self-definition, but because self-identity itself becomes far more dependent on the countless life-changing choices that increasingly must be made. Thus, in a postmodern society it becomes more and more obvious that knowledge itself is a cultural product shaped by circumstance and history. Consequently, an institution that aims to shape both the structure and content of knowledge finds itself competing with various social, cultural, and political conditions that are presenting other forms of truth or knowledge. Indeed, the growing tendency of individuals toward making decisions based on conscience rather than on ideology, combined with the increasing awareness of the social grounding of knowledge, creates a laity with diverse social values attributed to, among other issues, sexuality.

Data and Methodology

This research was guided by the following questions: How was the Catholic Church's position on homosexuality conveyed to respondents during Catholic elementary school and secondary school? How did the respondents feel about this position at the time? And how—after having completed a university social science program and being exposed to perspectives on sexuality that are different from those of the Catholic Church—did their feelings or attitudes

toward homosexuality change, if at all? Bauman's (2000) liquid modernity approach to postmodernism was used to frame this study because the "liquefaction" of adherence to Church doctrine is a useful illustration in the context of an increasingly liberal-minded generation of Catholic-educated young adults, a generation that may be placing greater emphasis on individual autonomy than on institutional religious teachings on sexuality.

In order to uncover the themes related to the completion of a university social science program and exposure to perspectives on sexuality that are different from those of the Catholic Church, the attitudes of 12 young adults are herein explored. Specifically, these young adults had graduated from both a Catholic secondary school and a social science program at the University of Windsor, the latter within the past 2 years. The researcher's objective was to identify the overlapping themes in the respondents' process of negotiating morality and to describe such themes using data that were collected through in-depth, semistructured interviews that covered such topics as the respondents' knowledge of Catholic school teachings related to sexuality, their degree of loyalty to the Church, as well as their and society's attitudes toward current issues of gay and lesbian rights. The interviews, which were tape-recorded between June 20 and July 10, 2006, were conducted in the researcher's office and were completed in 60-75 minutes. Respondents were also encouraged to speak freely about anything they felt was relevant to the topic of homosexuality, sexual ethics, Catholic teachings, Church influence, and societal change.

Nearly all of the respondents had attended a Catholic school for 13 years and completed the Catholic sacraments of Baptism, Communion, Reconciliation, and Confirmation. During their Catholic education, they had been immersed in an educational setting in which religious studies was a credited course, and where daily school prayer and special church attendance were required during each year of elementary and secondary school.

Six females and 6 males were recruited from the community of Windsor, Ontario through acquaintances of the researcher, graduate student listservs, and referrals from two local parish priests. Efforts were made to recruit respondents from a variety of socioeconomic and ethnocultural backgrounds, including those of Italian, Spanish, Lebanese, French, English, and Canadian ethnicity, as well as varying family structures. Moreover, all the respondents were between the ages of 22 and 26 at the time of interviewing. This generation provided particularly interesting perspectives on same-sex relationships because they had witnessed its acceptance in social policy by a Supreme Court ruling in 1999 (*M. v. H.*) and the Civil Marriage Act in 2005 (Bill C-38), only years after graduating from educational systems that inherently, though

perhaps not openly, condemned the extension of such rights. While this may or may not be the case for every young adult, it is certainly the case for their peer group environments, in which context so much of religious identity shaping—or reshaping—occurs.

The respondents—all self-identified as heterosexual—represented a spectrum of Catholic-educated youth from the self-described very religious to nominal and nonreligious. Respondents who were very religious were characterized by weekly church attendance, regular prayer, and the frequent consultation of Catholic doctrine when making moral decisions. Nominal Catholics were characterized by those who attended church once per month or less, prayed occasionally, and seldom consulted their religion on select issues. Nonreligious Catholics were those who neither attended church, nor prayed, nor demonstrated an understanding or appreciation of doctrine, and identified as Catholics in name only. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the respondents by age, program of study, ethnocultural background, and religiosity. The respondents' names have been replaced by pseudonyms.

Analysis

Initial coding and then focused coding (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2003) were used to summarize responses and identify the main themes in the interview data. As a first step (initial coding), the researcher conducted a line-by-line analysis of the transcripts by highlighting key words and phrases and assigning them two- or three-word codes. The next step was focused coding—combining similar codes under one more conceptual category—which allowed the researcher to identify the following six key areas of discussion:

1. The discussion of sexuality in Catholic school
2. The influence of parental attitudes toward homosexuality
3. The influence of the university experience on sexual attitudes
4. The influence of the media on sexual attitudes
5. The negotiation of morality among Catholic-educated students in a post-modern world
6. Same-sex marriage and the postmodern, human rights ethos in Canada

Table 1

Respondents by Age, Program of Study, Ethnocultural Background, and Religiosity

Name	Age	Program of Study	Ethnocultural Background	Religiosity
Adrian	23	Sociology	English and Canadian	Nonreligious
Amanda	26	Psychology	Italian	Religious
Andrew	22	Psychology	Italian and Canadian	Nominal
Christine	25	Psychology	French	Nominal
George	22	Communication Studies	English and French	Very Religious
Heather	23	Family and Social Relations	English	Nonreligious
Janie	26	Sociology	Lebanese	Very Religious
Jodie	25	Psychology	Italian	Very Religious
Michelle	22	Sociology	Spanish	Religious
Phil	24	Communication Studies	Lebanese	Religious
Scott	25	Family and Social Relations	French Canadian	Nonreligious
Tom	26	Sociology	English	Nominal

Limitations

While a qualitative approach was appropriate for this study, there are some limitations. First, given the sample size, the results of this study should not be considered generalizable. Second, all of the respondents attended Catholic schools in the same city and attended the same university. Thus, it is likely that respondents from other geographic areas, and/or young adults not educated at the post secondary level, would have provided a different set of responses about their initial and later attitudes toward homosexuality. Third, given the sensitive nature of the discussion, it is possible that some of the respondents refrained from articulating completely honest opinions (although the researcher did not at any time perceive a respondent to be “holding back”). Finally, no self-identified gay or lesbian person was interviewed. Such interviews may have revealed important insight into the struggle between personal beliefs and Catholic doctrine among gay and lesbian students, and would have made for interesting comparisons to the remarks of other respondents. Despite the researcher’s recruitment efforts, however, finding an openly gay

or lesbian Catholic-educated university student available to participate in this study was not possible.

Results and Discussion

Six themes emerged from the data, each one speaking to how homosexuality is explained (or not explained) and understood in important areas of the students' lives: the discussion of sexuality in Catholic school; the influence of parental attitudes toward homosexuality; the influence of the university experience on the sexual attitudes of Catholic-educated students; the influence of the media on the sexual attitudes of Catholic-educated students; the negotiation of morality among Catholic-educated students in a postmodern world; and attitudes toward same-sex marriage in the postmodern, human rights ethos in Canada.

The Discussion of Sexuality in Catholic School

Though the interviews sought, in part, to explore the respondents' initial exposure and response to the concept of homosexuality, the researcher found that none of the respondents were made aware of the concept of sexual orientation in a classroom setting. Rather, their first exposure occurred in the context of a ridiculing or condemning remark from a peer or parent. Amanda, a psychology master's student, recalled:

I don't think it was presented in school formally by a religion teacher. It was more through peers and name-calling. Like, they might have said, "In the Catholic Church, if you're gay then you're going to hell," or something.

As the researcher anticipated being able to identify commonalities between his own experience and those of the respondents, he was surprised to discover that, contrary to his own initial response, the remarks of most of the respondents could be described as ambiguous toward or accepting of the concept of homosexuality despite the negative presentations put forward by peers. Christine, also a psychology master's student, shared a sentiment held by all of the respondents: "I guess I always felt that a person's sexual orientation or who they're attracted to is their own business. It didn't affect me in any way."

As the discussion moved to how the topic of homosexuality was treated in Catholic school, the researcher learned that, throughout Catholic school education, social distancing from homosexuals and homosexuality had been reinforced by essentially overlooking the group's existence in society. In 13

years of Catholic education, not a single respondent could recall ever discussing homosexuality in any class. It was also revealed that Church doctrine on such controversial sexual topics as abortion and premarital sex were glossed over at best and that the Church's doctrinal position on homosexuality was never mentioned. Says Jodie, whose father is a secondary school religion teacher and as such may speak as a relative insider compared to the other respondents, "We learned about natural family planning. The teachers never discussed at length any controversial issues because there were certain topics that they just weren't allowed to talk about." As a consequence, most respondents were apt to point out that such absence of discussion in the classroom came at the expense of their own cultural awareness in that the formation of an educated position became impossible when they, as students, were not informed. Moreover, as sexual topics were brushed over, George, a graduate of communication studies, did detect an insinuated viewpoint that same-sex relationships were "bad":

No one ever came out directly and said, "You know, homosexuality is bad. The Bible says it's bad, so this is bad." It was very subtly done and you just started to pick it up through the tone of things.

Indeed, in an exclusively heteronormative environment, homosexuality had been viewed as abnormal. There was an apparent awareness that the intentional removal of homosexuality from discussion had contributed to a sense of social removal from gay and lesbian people, thereby fostering a view of homosexuals not as individuals but as an ephemeral concept far removed from their Catholic school bubble. Andrew, who holds a psychology degree, described the effect of having the discussion of homosexuality so covertly suppressed:

I honestly think I may have felt some anxiety and confusion about it. I mean, it was so not ever talked about that I guess it was taboo. And when something's taboo, you're, like, afraid of how to act when that taboo is put in front of you in real life.

When homosexuality is "taboo," as Andrew stated, one becomes removed from an understanding of gays and lesbians, and the humanity of homosexual people is overshadowed by uninformed generalizations. That generalizations can lead to prejudice had a few respondents reflecting on their emotional resistance to accepting homosexuals. As Andrew further stated, "Well, it had a stereotype, right? So getting around the stereotype was difficult because it was so ingrained. That's all I knew and that's all I felt I needed to know."

It should also be noted that although none of the 12 respondents recalled being presented with Church doctrine on homosexuality, 9 recalled being more or less aware of the Church's disapproval. Christine was the lone respondent who was unaware of the Church's position even at the time of interviewing. When the researcher suspended the string of questioning to read to Christine the Church's official position from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992), her response to the new information was one of disappointment: "I'm surprised by that. To say it's completely wrong, it's atypical, that something's intrinsically wrong with you, I totally disagree with it. It's really hurtful, actually."

The Influence of Parental Attitudes toward Homosexuality

Beginning with childhood, most of the respondents regularly accompanied their parents to Catholic Mass two to four times per month during their early Catholic school years. As Amanda recalled, "It seems, like, when I was younger, the way my parents thought about everything was the way everyone thought about everything." Indeed, the very awareness that it was not typically their choice to attend Mass contributed to a lack of spiritual fulfillment for a few of the respondents. To this end, Andrew's humorous recollection demonstrates when the interests of one generation run parallel rather than intersecting with those of another:

One time my dad came out of Church and he said something like, "Doesn't it feel good to come out of Church?" or whatever. And I was like, "Yeah"—but it was for a different reason: He was glad because he got something out of it; I was glad because it was over [laughs].

Like Andrew, as the majority of respondents grew older, their weekly Church attendance became inversely related to increased independence from their parents. Although they may have still regarded themselves as Catholic toward the end of Catholic school, they were no longer as influenced by parental controls that required them to take part in one of the Church's most fundamental activities. Amanda recalled:

Once I got my driver's license I didn't have to necessarily do everything my parents did, like go to church on a regular basis. And I kind of would make other plans that wouldn't necessarily include going to church as part of my plans for the weekend . . . I'd be scheduling things with friends so things were coming before going to church . . . So it became a challenge to attend on a regular basis.

For most of the respondents, holy days of obligation such as Easter and Christmas, in addition to the occasional wedding or funeral, were the sole grounds for attending Catholic Mass by the time they reached university, which is consistent with findings by Perl and Gray (2007), who concluded that “Catholic high school affects religious identification more directly than it affects religious practice” (p. 278).

In addition, it may be said that parents desire that their child grow up to be the kind of person who, among other things, lives up to his or her parents’ ideals. It can also be argued that sometimes parental desires can come at the expense of the child’s interests, especially when those interests are deeply rooted in culture and tradition. Indeed, parental indoctrination, particularly when coupled with an absence of exposure to alternative views, has the potential to limit in many ways the kind of adult whom the child will become. Janie, a sociology master’s student and the daughter of Lebanese parents, described her childhood as hierarchical in nature:

We’re Lebanese first even though we live in Canada. We were brought up that we listen to Lebanese ways of life so my parents, you know, were very strict with me, as I’m a girl. So it really influenced the way I thought about certain things. You know, you’re not supposed to have sex before marriage, you’re not supposed to drink, you’re not supposed to go out, downtown.

Given the strictness of her upbringing, it is not surprising that Janie was the sole respondent whose first response to homosexuality was narrow:

I’m not going to lie. At first I was like, “What?!” [Laughs.] You know, we were brought up a certain way, you know, male-female marriage. Especially in a Catholic home, you know, my parents are against it. No one in our family is homosexual that we know of yet. So I was pretty much against it.

Indeed, the limiting of a child’s exposure only to religious and moral views identical to one’s own can be perilous. For Heather, a graduate of the family and social relations program, it was this kind of strict promotion of doctrine that turned her off to the Catholic Church as well as to religion in general. In her case, it was not a parent’s vehemence but that of an insistent and perhaps belligerent authority figure who initiated her perception that Catholicism offered nothing more than incoherent rules and regulations that limited human freedom. Heather reflected:

I remember in Grade 3, coming home scared because my teacher would constantly be telling me that I would go to hell. Well, like, not me in general but everyone. Like, everything was a sin and they forced us to go to confession and they constantly put in your head that everything you do is a sin and you're going to hell. You're sinning, you're going to hell. And I remember coming home so scared. I think it was around that time that I was like, "This is ridiculous. I shouldn't fear life."

For Heather, the Church was presented to her from a very young age as an authoritarian figure rather than a compassionate institution. Further, Heather noted that her third grade teacher did something more serious than infuse trepidation, but something that may raise the eyebrows of anyone involved in Catholic education: "It, like, traumatized me. I'm almost anti religion based on the fact that I was raised Catholic." On the extreme ends, the harsh communication of certain messages by Catholic authority figures might lead a student either totally to accept or totally reject them. In the latter case, students like Heather choose to dismiss Catholic teachings—including those on homosexuality—at face value. Heather continued: "I think there are probably religions out there that are very good, but I think the Catholic religion is a joke."

The Influence of the University Experience on the Sexual Attitudes of Catholic-Educated Students

For many of these Catholic-educated respondents, it was in a university class that they first knowingly shared a room with a gay or lesbian person. As Adrian, a graduate of sociology, recalled:

As far as I knew there was one guy in our high school who was openly gay out of 1,900 students. When you get to university, it's so diverse. There's people of all different backgrounds. You become more accepting of it.

Further, the post secondary arena marked the first time most of the respondents found themselves in subordinate relation to an openly gay or lesbian instructor. As Jodie, a psychology master's student, observed:

I think younger people become more comfortable about it, especially in academic circles. It's very much accepted because you're exposed to more cultures, more ideas. We have professors that are gay. You have, you know, just more cultures coming together so you see more. Everything is just more tolerated.

Thus, becoming more open-minded as a result of a social science education may be seen not only as an academic by-product, but also as an attitudinal trait of which to be very proud. After all, the respondents appeared aware of their participation in a post secondary education system in which multifaceted opinion was encouraged. With an exposure to alternative worldviews came the realization that there existed more than one religion, that within each religion lived a number of diverse ideologies, and that within every ideology lived an infinite number of different viewpoints. For Amanda, this was a sharp turning point:

I went to a Catholic grade school and a Catholic high school, so 99% of the people that I attended school with and saw on a regular basis were Catholic. Whereas in university, I'd say maybe, like, 15% of my class was Catholic, if that. And you come to a realization that there's all these different religions and [there are] people [who] aren't practicing, people [who] are atheist, [people who] maybe don't necessarily believe in God. I wasn't exposed to that when I was younger.

Indeed, for many of the respondents, Catholicism became merely one strand of potential influence among countless others or, at most, an initial and relative framework with which to develop one's spirituality and moral compass. Moreover, from Adrian's perspective, after having been told what to believe throughout Catholic school, university stirred him to "question everything." The knowledge of competing ideologies prompted him to reserve judgment until an issue was weighed against his own personal ethics. Said Adrian, "University made me see that everything that I ever accepted, I didn't accept with anything behind it. I just accepted it blindly."

The Influence of the Media on the Sexual Attitudes of Catholic-Educated Students

Although George was one of the only respondents who had graduated from a communications program in which media literacy was an integral component, all of the respondents demonstrated a keen awareness of the power of the mass media to influence public opinion. They recognized that today's media-driven world that incorporates television, music, the Internet, instant messaging, and an increasing number of portable media devices into daily life has young people spending more hours connecting with the media than with any element of the classroom. As Amanda remarked, "I would think the news media would have had more of an influence than [Catholic school] classes."

Moreover, in terms of the portrayal of gays and lesbians in the media, Janie's reflection summarizes that of the majority of respondents:

I think that the media affected my perception of homosexuality because of the way that it was portrayed when I was younger versus how it's portrayed now. Kind of an acceptance of it through the media probably caused me to have more of an acceptance with it.

Thus, the respondents recognized that homosexuality is no longer portrayed in the mainstream media as something that is immoral. Furthermore, the respondents pointed out that the gay and lesbian lifestyles have become quite popular over the past years, naming long-running television shows such as *Will and Grace*, *Sex and the City*, and the rising popularity of comedian and talk-show host Ellen DeGeneres. However, most of the respondents were also keenly aware and critical of what they believed to be the continuous spectacle of gay stereotypes that, although entertaining, do not, in their eyes, accurately represent real-life people as much as they do cartoon characters. Michelle's observation is intuitive:

They always seem to be presented as frivolous, more fashion-conscious. They're always presented in stereotypes. Like, you never see a geeky gay guy. You always see some fabulously dressed, flaming queer who's dressed outrageously and trying to get laid [laughs]. You never see somebody in a relationship or somebody who is just socially inept. You just see stereotypes.

The exploitative sentiment underlying Michelle's comment is what had a few other respondents questioning whether the current popularity of apparent "gay culture" in the media suggests a societal acceptance of gays and lesbians or whether it is simply a happening trend. After all, the respondents had grown up with a media culture that in less than a decade went from frowning upon homosexuality to approving a somewhat censored, labeled version. Having demonstrated an informed media-savvy, they could both appreciate the media's ability to influence attitudes and be skeptical of how attitudes were being shaped.

The Negotiation of Morality among Catholic-Educated Students in a Postmodern World

A postmodern society sees a decline in the consultation of moral authority on sexual issues. Thus, as the Church aims conclusively to decide the debate over

homosexuality on moral grounds, perhaps the phenomenon of social norms determining morality becomes moot as social norms are no longer measured in absolutes. In fact, all but one respondent had no difficulty with this cross-road. Only George had trouble reconciling his personal human rights ethos with that of the Church's official position. The dialogue between the researcher and the respondent gives context to the dilemma and is worth quoting:

Researcher: [probing] Are homosexual *acts* a sin?

George: [long pause] Yeah, they are. They are a sin. They are a sin relative to the Catholic faith. Are they something that I view as a sin against God? No, I don't see it that way. But the Church certainly does. So who's defining sin right now? Am I defining sin or are we going by the Bible's definition of sin?

Researcher: Well, this goes back to the question of how much you give to the authority of the Church. Which matters more: your opinion of whether or not it's a sin or the Catholic Church's opinion?

George: Yeah. You're right. You're right. I know exactly what you're saying. Personally, myself, my own beliefs, I don't see homosexuality as a sin but at the same time—and this might completely discredit me—I don't see it as a sin but I'm a Catholic and I can understand how the Catholic Church views it as a sin. That's their belief. That's their outlook on that specific thing. I am of the opinion that I do not agree with everything in the Catholic Church. I try to be the best Catholic I can be, but there are just some things that I don't agree with—that being one. It's a sin to them. Does it mean it's a sin to me? No. That's probably as well as I can put it.

Here one sees George recognizing that there may be a contradiction in his statements in that earlier in the interview he was defending gay and lesbian rights and yet almost found himself empathizing with the Church's position on homosexual acts. Still, perhaps seeing that an individual who moves off the doctrinal path may be seen as rejecting the rules of the religion they are supposed to be living out, he further clarified his position and reiterated his commitment to the Church:

I disagree with the authority of the Church on it. But I don't devalue the authority of the Church a whole lot because of it. I just have an understanding that that is their stance. It has been their stance for a long time. Do I agree with it? No. Am I going to abandon the religion altogether? No.

Indeed, the passion with which many of the respondents spoke of both their willingness to remain Catholic while disagreeing with certain

fundamental principles suggests a moral maturity whereby the respondent had sorted through the rules learned in Catholic school, rejected those that no longer applied, and accepted those that still did apply. Jodie's willingness to "work with" the Church is another example of such moral negotiation. A former altar server of 6 years and currently a lay reader at her church, Jodie believes that respectful dissent should not be viewed as disloyalty to Church authority, but as a necessary and valuable component of her Catholic growth and understanding:

If there's something I don't agree with in the Church, I don't want to reject the Church completely. I think there's a lot of good in it. I want to work with it. I want to be able to understand, open the dialogue, and grow. I want the Church to grow. You know what I mean? So, I try to work with it but sometimes it's very difficult [laughs].

Jodie's remarks are evidence of a generation of young practicing Catholics who view uniformity as an impediment to unity. Indeed, they seek plurality and diversification within the Church that they believe may, on the one hand, further disturb the unity of an already divided institution, and, on the other hand, enrich it and deepen its compassion for all human beings.

However, there was once a time for some of the respondents in which the desire for change was inspired by naiveté. Michelle, a graduate of sociology, recalled the first time that the reality of Church hierarchy and patriarchy sunk in:

When I was a kid I actually did want to become a priest [laughs]. I did! And when I realized that probably wasn't going to happen, I was very disappointed for some reason [laughs]. I was! I was really disappointed.

Michelle also made clear her awareness that as much as the ordination of women to the priesthood needed continual discussion, she could not expect actual movement toward change unless laws began to shift at the papal level. For Michelle and the priesthood, as with all the respondents and the relaxing of doctrine, the underlying question of timing was of significance. When will the time come for traditions to change? As Jodie commented:

It [the Catholic Church] needs to understand that, you know . . . there's biological evolution, there's moral evolution, there's spiritual evolution. We're supposed to be more enlightened and I feel like the Church is refusing to even

discuss, you know, homosexuality, females being priests, marriage for priests, contraceptives, issues like that.

The lack of confidence in Church leadership had clearly weakened the respondents' optimism for the future of the Church unless an institutional overhaul bridged the chasm between rigid doctrine and individual decision-making. Moreover, this raises another question that speaks to the state of the Church in which sex scandals are still fresh in the minds of Catholics and non-Catholics alike: How does a damaged Church rebuild its foundation in order to stand tall again? With disappointment in their voices, most of the respondents pointed to the media's exposure of pedophilic priests as having disgraced them and the credibility of the Church. They were quick to point out what was, for some of the respondents, one of the greatest acts of hypocrisy conceivable—a sentiment supported in studies by Jenkins (2000, 2003), Steinfels (2004), Maher (2007), and Ronan (2008) that explore the anger among Catholics over the sexual abuse of children and young people by Roman Catholic priests. As Christine stated with frustration:

It's like, you lose faith, you know? Like, if these priests are supposed to be speaking the Word of God and they're hurting these children and they're abusing these children, it's like, what's going on? It's so condescending.

Further, the respondents noted that the media's justifiable attention to the harm caused by the sex abuse scandal had inflated into a constant torrent of suspicion and ridicule against the Church. Adrian's observation was a sobering one: "Let's put it this way, I don't think many non-Catholics feel an urge to convert to Catholicism, you know what I mean?" Indeed, today's young people are so constantly exposed to cynical evaluations of Catholicism that perhaps they are decidedly cautious of placing hope in rigid institutions. Such ambiguity toward faith and suspicion of institutional authority has left respondents like Christine holding Church doctrine at arm's length while relying on personal experience in moral decision-making:

I do align myself with some aspects of Catholic morality. But in the issues we face today I find I have a different perspective because of what I've learned over time on my own, you know? It just depends on the issue and what experiences I've had with it.

Indeed, the emphasis on personal experience revealed a group of respondents with distinctively unintimidated attitudes toward the Church and who

felt more secure in their dissent and less compelled to claim confidence in the Church's teachings. The respondents viewed Catholicism as a belief system characterized by rigidity, ritual, and dogma, whereas their attitudes toward spirituality had been that of openness and respect for both personal experience and alternative ways of understanding the world. Perhaps they no longer wished to belong to the Church in the way the Church currently insists upon. By contextualizing the Catholic faith into our fluid culture, the actual practice of Catholicism of today's young laity is different from the ostensibly solid cultures of the past. Fulton and his colleagues (2000) drove home this point in their introduction to a cross-national study of young adult Catholics:

As church-controlled religion has declined, a shift has occurred in personal consciousness in the form of the growth of semi-autonomous morality and religiosity. This shift affects the young adults of today, who are the first major generation to encounter this change in all its fullness. (p. 2)

Attitudes toward Same-Sex Marriage in the Postmodern, Human Rights Ethos in Canada

While the question of whether or not same-sex marriage will undermine the institution of marriage can be debated at length, the respondents approached the issue primarily from a human rights perspective and expressed that gay couples deserve the same rights as heterosexual couples to join their love for each other officially. Anything less, according to Adrian, would be "un-Canadian." Moreover, Amanda stated, "I think that it should be legalized. I think that you shouldn't put barriers or boundaries on who someone can love." From a Catholic perspective, Amanda suggested that the sanctity of marriage should apply to all and not be dependent on the gender of the individuals: "I think that if two people want to recognize their marriage as a holy, legal bond, then they should be able to." As well, Jodie's commentary touched on what she believes to be the sense of sexual insecurity forwarded by the Church:

I mean marriage is so much more than genitals [laughs], you know what I mean? Like, I don't understand why, why that's so hard for other people to grasp [laughs]. Like, there's so much intimacy and, you know, having a life together. And for them to not be able to have it, you know, it seems wrong. It seems very un-Christian if you want to put the Church spin on it.

Furthermore, from a postmodern perspective, whereas the Church sees the bond of marriage as a vow before God, the postmodern society views

marriage as a legal event conducted by a civil authority; it is a change in status. In this sense, marriage in a postmodern society is less a sacramental union than a contract that takes on the temporary nature of secular arrangements (Bauman, 2003). It is this contract perspective, based on the sociocultural meanings of our time, that allows for the growing support for same-sex marriage. As well, by calling into question the legitimacy of certain moral boundaries, the majority of respondents have, by association, called into question the legitimacy of the Church authority striving to enforce them. Michelle explained her approach to what she believes to be responsible dissent:

I suppose I think of the Church as sort of a father figure. You know, they try and tell you, and teach you, and raise you right, I suppose. But in the end, it's sort of your own life decision that they will either have to live with or not.

In summary, it appears that most of the respondents can be described as having a relatively liberal view of homosexuality that is characterized by either a negotiated dissent and willingness to work around specific Church doctrines or by a flat-out rejection of both Catholic teachings on sexual issues and its authority in general. It was made clear that this particular group of respondents was not troubled by any so-called moral consequence of extending social acceptance to gays and lesbians. Rather, there was an unambiguous concern for the implications of denying the human rights of any person, which resulted from a variety of factors, including attending university. George's reflection was forthright:

Does it seem right to me? No, it doesn't. Something's wrong. Because I'm not homosexual, I can't envision it being right. But, you know, it's right to them. Does that give us the right to look at it and say it's wrong because we feel it's wrong? I can't agree with that.

Conclusions

The changing relationships between Church and society and the changes in Catholic teachings have produced trends in the way Catholics think about faith and moral values. Some of these changes are in accordance with official Church teachings; others are not. Indeed, an exposure to cultural diversity and various perspectives on sexuality in university will continue to stimulate young Catholics to weigh an array of viewpoints when thinking about sexuality as opposed to deferring immediately to what the Church has to say. With an exposure to alternative worldviews comes the realization that

there exists more than one religion, that within each religion lives a number of diverse ideologies, and that within each ideology lives an infinite number of personal viewpoints. Thus, there is a certain disconnect between young Catholics and the Catholic Church, or as Hoge (2002) put it in a survey of American Catholics, "Young Catholics had a vision of Catholicism which included less Church authority and less rigid boundaries than was the case of older Catholics" (p. 301).

Given the results of this study, the researcher hesitates to describe the young Catholic community as one in decline, but rather as one that is changing. These young Catholics are creating a new way to experience their Catholicism by wishing to "work with" the Church. For the majority of respondents, they do not wish to replace Catholicism in light of their more recent compassion for gays and lesbians, but they want to refresh it. They do not wish to reduce Catholicism, but rather expand it. The future direction of this growth may very well be headed by a generation of Catholics who have reordered their priorities in favor of a less authoritarian and more personal, socially conscious, socially compassionate, and personalized faith. For as Hoge (2002) also learned, the students in this study seek open, honest dialogue about various points of view; in the world of young Catholics, it is okay to dissent, to ask questions, and to question the answers one gets.

At the same time, this study revealed a side of a young Catholic cohort that has seriously lost confidence in the integrity and values of Catholic narratives on sexuality as presented in Catholic school. The implications of this study's results for Catholic schools is that Catholic-educated students are acknowledging that the Catholic Church, as with most organized religions, teaches some doctrines of exclusivity; and they are recognizing that some of the social problems the world has experienced in recent decades are not the result of morals shifting, but of morals not shifting. Whether noted by the respondents as the moral maturity that comes with adolescent experience, the increased cultural awareness that comes with a social science education, or the unidentified social-psychological factors that inspired a sense of social justice over entrenched dogma, the respondents all held to the perspective that when gays and lesbians are denied civil rights, the rights of other groups are also endangered. Therefore, that the Catholic-educated students in this study have in a sense risen above some of the rigid standards of sexuality that have been ingrained from childhood and reinforced in school is a reality that Catholic school officials must address head-on; for the refusal even to consider the possibility of transcending some beliefs may well lead to a morality without integrity in the eyes of young Catholics.

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