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‘Like a fading photograph’. A qualitative study into how the Irish Roman Catholic community understands, accepts, and receives their Church's teachings about homosexuality.

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Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Durham University
Department of Theology and Religion

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List of abbreviations

Table 1. Abbreviations used in the text

Abbreviated Church teaching documents	
Document Name and Date	Abbreviation used in the text
Lumen Gentium. Dogmatic Constitution On The Church. Pope Paul VI. November 1964 .	<i>LG-1964</i>
Dei Verbum. Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation. Pope Paul VI. November 1965 .	<i>DV-1965</i>
Gaudium et Spes. Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. Pope Paul VI. December 1965 .	<i>G&S-1965</i>
Humanae Vitae. On The Regulation Of Birth. Encyclical Letter of Pope Paul VI. July 1968 .	<i>HV-1968</i>
Persona Humana. Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics. Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. December 1975 .	<i>PH-1975</i>
Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. October 1986 .	<i>The 1986-Letter</i>
The Catechism of the Catholic Church. Promulgated by Pope John Paul II. October 1992 .	<i>CCC-1992</i>
Considerations regarding Proposals to Give Legal recognition to Unions between Homosexual Persons. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. June 2003 .	<i>2003-Considerations</i>
Instruction Concerning the Criteria for the Discernment of Vocations with regard to Persons with Homosexual Tendencies in view of their Admission to the Seminary and to Holy Orders. Congregation for Catholic Education. November 2005 .	<i>The 2005-Instruction</i>
Amoris Laetitia. Post-Synodal Exhortation of Pope Francis on Love in the Family. March 2016 .	<i>AL-2016</i>
“Male and Female He Created Them”. Toward a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education. Congregation for Catholic Education. February 2019 .	<i>M&F-2019</i>
Other abbreviated terms	
Wijngaards Institute. Academic Statement on the Ethics of Free and Faithful Same-Sex Relationships. 2021	<i>WI-Statement-2021</i>
The Irish Marriage Referendum of 2015. (Thirty-fourth Amendment of the Constitution of Ireland)	<i>IMR-2015</i>
Natural Moral Law	<i>NML</i>
Religious Studies	<i>RS</i>
The Research Question	<i>RQ</i>
The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (known as the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith since 2022)	<i>CDF</i>
Old Testament	<i>OT</i>
New Testament	<i>NT</i>
The Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican (1962-1965)	<i>Vatican II</i>

Abstract

In 2015, Ireland became the first nation on earth to vote by popular referendum, rather than through its elected legislature, in favour of legal same-sex marriage, and by a convincing majority. With both political jurisdictions on the island of Ireland claiming Roman Catholicism as their majority religious faith, this project takes an in-depth look at a representative cross-section of the active Irish Roman Catholic community in order to discover how their Church's authoritative doctrines on homosexuality have been understood, accepted and received. Despite there being no shortage of theological and ecclesial literature on the issue of homosexuality, there have been few studies into how the particular Roman Catholic magisterial teachings about homosexuality have been understood or accepted by Roman Catholics. This research aims to provide such a study from within the context of a nation that has witnessed rapid changes in social attitudes and from within a faith community deeply affected by recent Church abuse scandals. This piece of contextual theological qualitative research is framed within an interpretivist ontological paradigm adopting a contextualist epistemology. The research uses a method of thematic analysis known as Template Analysis to interpret data gathered from a series of 45 in-depth interviews with participants from different strata of the Irish Catholic community. The research discovered that many of the key aspects of Catholic Church doctrine on homosexuality, its reasoning, application, language, and tone, were largely rejected by a majority of the participants. As the Catholic Church attempts to adopt a more sensitive and pastoral attitude to its LGBTQ+ members, the conclusions suggest that many aspects of Roman Catholic official doctrine on homosexuality were problematic for these members of the Irish Catholic community and were perceived as being unjust and harmful to LGBTQ+ men and women of faith.

Acknowledgements

As a project whose genesis and execution have spanned the years that coincided with a global pandemic and its aftermath, its completion is accompanied by a very deep sense of personal gratitude to the many people whose cooperation and support have made it possible. I thank the participants from the Irish Catholic community whose hospitality and generosity during the uneasy days of social-distancing measures facilitated warm, open, and fruitful encounters. I am deeply grateful to Prof. Gerard Loughlin and Prof. Mathew Guest, who guided the project with reassurance, expertise, supervisory skill, and encouragement. I acknowledge with gratitude the moral and financial support of the Centre for Catholic Studies at the University of Durham, who, under Prof. Paul Murray and Prof. Karen Kilby, with the CCS family, provided valuable solidarity and a strong sense of community. I am indebted to the academic and administrative staff at the Department of Theology and Religion at the University of Durham for their professionalism, practical support, and wisdom. Finally, I thank my partner, parents, family, and friends for the practical and human support that has upheld me during these years; I will always be grateful to you for your care and love.

Chapter 1

1.1 Background

1.1.1. On 3rd October 1992, I was coming towards the end of a week-long retreat with my seminary year group in Co. Laois, Ireland. It had been a powerful experience and I had met the person (a religious sister) who would become my spiritual accompanier through to and beyond ordination to the Roman Catholic priesthood. I had ‘come out’ to her, and this would mark the beginning of a more honest consideration of my sexual orientation, during which time I became increasingly open and comfortable discussing it with what would continue to be a select group of carefully chosen friends and confidantes. From the seclusion of our rural retreat centre, we were unaware in those days before social media that a young Irish singer, Sinéad O’Connor, was singing an ‘a capella’ version of Bob Marley’s song ‘*War*’ on ‘Saturday Night Live’ in NYC. She held up a picture of Pope John Paul II during the final words of the song, ‘we have confidence in the victory of good over evil,’ after which she ripped the picture three times before the camera, followed by the words, ‘fight the real enemy.’ Throwing the fragments of the picture on the studio floor, she extinguished all the candles used as a prop for her performance and left the studio stage. She sparked international outrage, was banned permanently from Saturday Night Live, and received sustained criticism from fellow performers and broadcasters.

1.1.2. Back in seminary at St Patrick’s College, Maynooth, there may have been some discussion about the incident. Undoubtedly, some would have dismissed her as a deranged, attention-seeking celebrity, but many of us remained oblivious. Certainly, she would have had few supporters, save one, a religious order seminarian, who had encountered her in a Dublin coffee-shop shortly after the incident and reported back to us how fragile but powerful her presence was as she quietly drank her coffee. They had made brief eye contact and smiled, and he was prepared to concede that she may not, after all, have been the devil-incarnate. Within the thick fortress walls of the seminary, we were entering the final stages of our seven-year journeys towards ordination. Our second year of theological studies, for those who took these seriously, was also a ‘make or break year,’ during which we would be individually assessed as worthy (or not) candidates for ordination. It was a tense time in that respect, as we focused on keeping the rules and being seen to be the kind of model students who would be called to candidacy. Prayer, study, intense seminary friendships, earnest discussions, walks around the enclosed grounds, regular meals, and spiritual exercises filled most of our days. The world was kept at arms’ length. In 1992, ‘going on’ for priesthood in Ireland was still seen as something of great value, a worthy and exalted vocation, one that was supported by family, community, and perhaps to a lesser degree by pre-seminary friends. All seemed to be stable and orderly within our seminary world. Our contact with the hierarchical Church came about twice within the academic year, in autumn and spring, as the Irish bishops descended to meet, discuss, and walk the grounds with one another and meet (some more awkwardly than others) with their seminarians. Some celebrated

‘private Masses’ at the numerous side-altars around the outside cloisters of the main College Chapel, others concelebrated with larger community groups in the spirit of Vatican II. We never got to hear about their deliberations, and as they packed up and went home, all seemed to be well in the Irish Catholic Church.

1.1.3. The thick seminary walls were impervious to the shifting ground outside, and their stones retained memories of the pontiff whose picture was so ignominiously torn up by an upstart singer, a pope who had hallowed these stones with a celebrated 1979 visit, fourteen years previously. He was met then by a great army of 600 exuberant cassocked Irish seminarians, like a superstar. Yet the superstar Pope, who had welcomed exuberant displays from other crowds throughout his intense 3-day visit to Ireland, seemed eager to quell the singing seminarians in order to deliver his short message to them. He reminded them that their future task would involve bringing Christ to the Irish people who would be unable to receive him without their fervour, faith, and fidelity.¹ For all intents and purposes, and within those thick walls, this vision for the future priests of Ireland remained the same as it had always been. Ireland was secularising apace, but no one would ever have guessed at what would lie ahead, and how quickly both Irish society and the Church that had formed it would be transformed and the influence of the latter collapse.

1.1.4. But, even then, in 1992, the edifice was in danger. From 1991, the notorious paedophile priest, Brendan Smyth, having failed to appear for trial in Belfast, sought and received sanctuary from his abbey in Co. Cavan. His extradition to Northern Ireland and trial in 1994, which were to initiate the avalanche of subsequent scandals, and the collapse of the Irish government were still two years away, but from his place of hiding, his presence was a malevolent omen of change to come.² In May 1992, just before summer exams, the Bishop of Galway, Eamon Casey, resigned his post, as an incredulous Catholic nation got its first taste of a clerical scandal, not involving in this instance the abuse of a child, but the fathering of one, following an affair in the 1970s with his son’s mother, an American woman, Annie Murphy. The covering up of the existence of his child, his earlier request to Ms Murphy that the child be put up for adoption, and subsequent maintenance payments channelled fraudulently from diocesan funds caused a whirlwind of scandal, the likes of which Ireland had never seen publicly aired.³ There was a degree of shock among the seminarians, especially those from Bishop Casey’s diocese. There was a talk about ‘frailty and wounded healers’ delivered by the Senior Dean, but surely, we imagined, this was a one-off event and certainly not a portent of events still to

¹ Address of John Paul II to the Seminarians. Maynooth. October 1979. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1979/october/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19791001_maynooth-ireland.html [accessed 5th November 2024].

² Profile of Father Brendan Smyth, *BBC News*. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/8567868.stm [accessed 18th October 2024].

³ Eamonn Casey, former bishop of Galway, dies aged 89, *The Irish Times*. <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/religion-and-beliefs/eamonn-casey-former-bishop-of-galway-dies-aged-89-1.3008718> [accessed 18th October 2024].

come. Meanwhile, we seminarians listened to Dublin's favourite commercial radio station, 98FM, for the latest hits and words of wisdom from its resident, homely pastor Fr. Michael Cleary, a big personality priest, who regaled the listeners of Greater Dublin with cheery, homely spirituality. He was a friend of Bishop Casey, the two of them acting as public, beaming cheerleaders for Pope John Paul II's triumphant 1979 visit. The following winter in 1993, Fr. Cleary died, and it was revealed subsequently that he, too, had fathered children and maintained an intimate relationship with his housekeeper, their mother, over many years.⁴ By that time, we were well on our way to diaconal ordination with little collective appetite to read too much into such events.

1.1.5. As students, we travelled occasionally into Dublin, and the bus that snaked its way in from Maynooth through inner city Dublin would have passed some of the former 'Magdalene Laundries,' as they had come to be known. The appalling treatment suffered by tens of thousands of women during the existence of these state-sanctioned and Church-run institutions wouldn't become public until 1993, and the last one would not close in Dublin for another three years. The young 'wayward' girl who would tear up a picture of a pope had been a temporary resident of one such Dublin laundry for eighteen months in the 1980s. And yet, as we prepared for life in a Church designed to withstand and survive some inevitable storms, there was little to indicate that any of these omens would be the harbingers of worse to come. Sinéad O'Connor was wrong and misguided, in the opinion of many, to insult so many fervent Catholics. No one would ever have seen her actions as prophetic, dismissed, and ridiculed as only a fallen woman could be in 'Holy Catholic Ireland'.

1.1.6. Other storms were bubbling underneath the surface, the surfaces of our own lives. Was it an open secret that so many of us preparing for priesthood were gay men? We had certainly intuited that there were a significant number of us. The instruction from the Congregation for Education prohibiting gay men from Holy Orders was still 13 years away. Homosexuality was never mentioned aloud. We each had a very select number of trusted friends with whom we shared our secrets, but it was understood loud and clear that a secret was what it would remain. After all, we were all preparing to make a sacred vow of celibacy, and the need to actively engage with the prospect of being an open or sexually active gay man would never arise. For my small circle of friends and I, there was little more than a very occasional bit of discreet, mildly camp behaviour and many earnest discussions about how we might cope with celibacy, some of which occasionally strayed onto the topic of Church teaching about homosexuality. About the latter, we were well aware, but probably in not as much detail as we might have been. Homosexuality was not covered in any of our moral theology lessons, and I think, in retrospect, we were in a quasi-state of denial about the full implications of these teachings. Aware that the thick walls of Maynooth cocooned us within a mildly, though never

⁴ Secret life of Ireland's singing priest, *BBC News*. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/7354013.stm [accessed 18th October 2024].

demonstrably homosexual-friendly space (albeit one that was also potentially hostile), encouraged us to bury our heads in the sand. We lived, in my opinion, with the tensions that being gay candidates for Holy Orders in a Church that held a definitive position about homosexuality generated. We also held vague but unfounded hopes that the Church magisterium might one day reconsider its position on such matters and that it was already somewhat open to the discreet presence of its celibate gay clergy. After all, we were all going to be celibate just like our heterosexual brother priests, so our sexual orientation would not be a defining issue in our future priestly lives.

1.1.7. That was not the full picture, of course. In Ireland, the ground was slowly shifting on the issue of homosexuality and other contentious ethical issues about which the Church, whose teachings we were being formed to teach and uphold, held strong, authoritative opinions. Through a constitutional amendment, the Republic of Ireland had recognised both the right to life of a mother *and* that of her unborn child in 1983. Three referendums in November 1992 had altered the landscape somewhat, permitting three new legal rights: abortion within the state when a mother's life was at risk through the threat of suicide; the legal travel of women to receive abortions in other jurisdictions; and the circulation of contact information of abortion services provided by other jurisdictions within Ireland. Despite heavy Church interventions, these changes were approved by significant majorities.⁵ In 1992, the State had liberalised the provision of condoms and permitted their sale to people over the age of seventeen. For much of the 1970s, artificial contraception had been largely unavailable in the Republic, with these restrictions easing only somewhat and on a notably restricted basis during the 1980s.⁶ Divorce had continued to be a contentious social and ethical issue, banned under the 1937 Irish Constitution; attempts to permit it had been substantially rejected by a referendum in 1986. By the very narrowest of majorities (50.28%), a 1995 referendum permitted divorce for the first time in the Irish State.⁷

Many Irish people were aware of the Church's opposition to change or reform in these areas and may have remembered Pope John Paul II's strongly delivered 1979 message in Limerick, reiterating the need for the Irish to oppose divorce, artificial birth control, abortion, and an ethos that encouraged female careers over the vocation to motherhood. The sanctity of the family was repeatedly emphasised in the Pope's Limerick address,⁸ and yet the dark side of family life, its abusive and

⁵ Referendum on the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution Bill, 1992 – Information, *Referendum Ireland*. <https://www.referendum.ie/archive/referendum-on-information-fourteenth-amendment-of-the-constitution-bill-1992/> [accessed 18th October 2024].

⁶ Laura Kelly, 'Family Planning after the Family Planning Act'. *Cambridge University Press*. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/contraception-and-modern-ireland/family-planning-after-the-family-planning-act/FDD8BB76B53A4296F82074E9D8E19E85> [accessed 18th October 2024].

⁷ Aisling Kenny, 'Divorce in Ireland - A controversial history', *RTE*. <https://www.rte.ie/news/politics/2019/0506/1047643-divorce-history/> [accessed 18th October 2024].

⁸ Homily Of John Paul II, Limerick 1 October 1979, *Vatican*. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1979/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19791001_irlanda-

dysfunctional shadow, was never referred to, and Irish society had yet to fully confront the truth that for a significant minority, the efforts to conform to Catholic family values had caused immeasurable pain. Sinéad O'Connor was one such, the product of a deeply dysfunctional family, a violent and abusive mother, and one who had been sent to one of the notorious homes for the kind of women who failed to conform to family values and female docility. Small wonder, perhaps, that she blazed with a fiery opposition to the ecclesial façade that propped up Irish society, supporting as yet unpopular causes that often opposed the Church's ethical stance on many issues, such as the role of women and LGBTQ+ rights.

1.1.8. With regard to homosexuality, Northern Ireland had finally been forced to adopt its decriminalisation in 1982,⁹ significantly later than in the rest of the UK. In the Republic, despite agitations and campaigns for reform since the 1970s and a successful intervention by the European Court of Human Rights in 1988, domestic governments were disinclined to act on the European ruling. A strong push from a coalition government minister from the minority Labour partner of the coalition finally resulted in the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1993.¹⁰ I don't remember much discussion among the seminary community, indicative of the fact that homosexuality, the 'elephant in the drawing room,' rarely surfaced as a topic in polite clerical company. That situation was mirrored in Irish society, where homosexuality until the early 1990s largely remained in the famous words aired at the trial of one of its gay sons (Oscar Wilde in 1895), 'the love that dare not speak its name'.

Two incidents in 1994 did generate some conversations. Emmet Stagg, a Labour minister in the aforementioned government, had been informally warned by a Guard (Irish Police Officer) about having allowed a gay man into the front seat of his car in an area of the Dublin Phoenix Park known for male prostitution. With no evidence that any transaction or encounter had occurred, no charges were possible. Notably, public outrage was directed at the Garda Síochána (Irish Police Service), who leaked the information to the Press rather than towards the minister, and he was fully supported by his government colleagues and the Taoiseach (Irish Prime Minister) with no further action taken.¹¹ In 1994, a Dublin curate died in a Dublin gay sauna.¹² Two priest friends who were with him

[limerick.html#:~:text=As%20I%20leave%20today%20this,home%20of%20daily%20family%20prayer.](#) [accessed 19th October 2024].

⁹ Man persecuted for his sexuality wins landmark judgment – transforming the law in Northern Ireland and beyond, *Council of Europe Website*, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/impact-convention-human-rights/-/man-persecuted-for-his-sexuality-wins-landmark-judgment-transforming-the-law-in-northern-ireland-and-beyond> [accessed 19th October 2024].

¹⁰ Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act, 1993, *Irish Statute Book*. <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1993/act/20/enacted/en/html> [accessed 19th October 2024].

¹¹ Alan Murdoch, 'Irish minister set to survive scandal', *Independent*. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/irish-minister-set-to-survive-scandal-1427878.html> [accessed 19th October 2024].

¹² Paul O'Kane, 'Priest found dead in Irish gay club', *United Press International*. <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1994/11/13/ED-note-subject-matter-throughout-Priest-found-dead-in-Irish-gay-club/3539784702800/> [accessed 19th October 2024].

administered the Sacrament of the Sick to him, and subsequently, there was some media speculation that such establishments were frequented by other priests from around Ireland. The latter generated much discussion among seminarians, and it was claimed privately that certain seminarians also went to these establishments on a regular basis, recognising priests that they knew from pastoral and even seminary contexts. None of this speculation or gossip, however, could have been substantiated.

1.1.9. Before our time in seminary had ended, in our final year, 1994-5, one of our small group of friends was unceremoniously expelled from the seminary. An ordained deacon with a date for his priestly ordination set, he was told by the Senior Dean that someone had brought it to the attention of the seminary authorities that he was gay. It was as blunt yet uninformative as that. He was given no information about who his accuser was or the nature of the evidence for it. It could have been anyone; it could have been hearsay. It was certainly not unheard of in Ireland for certain devout members of the local community, bound perhaps by professional confidentiality, to illegally inform the authorities about confidential medical information, and I have first-hand, authoritative aural evidence that this, in fact, did occur at Maynooth. He was given no ability to appeal. He was told to have vacated the seminary a fortnight after the decision, left with no financial assistance and the essentially useless seminary qualifications designed only to be beneficial to a future Catholic priest.

Having received a truthful admission from our friend that he was gay but fully committed to a life of celibacy in line with the vows he had undertaken the previous spring, the Dean delivered his verdict with the helpful advice that this young gay man should now go out and ‘find a good wife’, with whom to have children. Some of the more tightly closeted and repressed seminarians (of which there were many) circled their own wagons and ostracised our small group socially until the end of the year, displaying what I regard now as an internalised homophobia that was quite visceral. This was the traumatic ending to our time in seminary. It brought us into close contact with the full weight, cruelty, and fear that characterise some of the institutions where the teachings about homosexuality are taught and practised, teachings which until that point we had regarded as being benign or only mildly relevant. That our friend survived this trauma to flourish and pursue a fulfilling career and a committed relationship with his husband was despite, rather than because of, any empathy, compassion, or Christ-like treatment by those in charge of our ‘formation’.

1.1.10. Behind the scenes, another incident much closer to our seminary home was developing. Without warning in 1994, at the start of the celebrations for the seminary’s highly vaunted bicentennial year in 1995, the College president resigned his post with immediate effect but remained on campus as a professor. As a prominent figure in organising the impending celebrations, the resignation was very unexpected and generated much speculation. At no point did we receive any information from the authorities about a situation that had generated much interest in the Irish media. The bicentennial celebrations continued the following year as planned. Ten years later, the 2005 Ferns

Report by the Irish state into allegations of clerical sexual abuse made significant reference to allegations made against the former president, now laicised (with additional evidence from the 1970s). The report concluded that allegations of sexual abuse could not be reliably substantiated but noted that information about a civil confidentiality agreement made in relation to the allegations was not forthcoming from the former college president despite his being otherwise cooperative with the Inquiry.¹³

1.1.11. The political division between the two jurisdictions of Northern Ireland and the Republic, divided by a border since 1921, and the traumatic civil disorder/warfare referred to as the ‘Troubles’ provided a further backdrop to the shifting sands of these years. The negotiations that would eventually bring about the *Good Friday Agreement* were still years away in 1992. If homosexuality was the ethical elephant, ‘The North’ was, I had deduced from my interactions with fellow students, the political elephant in the drawing rooms of Irish society. As the Irish economy forged ahead and the Irish Republic transformed itself, the painful existence of its squabbling neighbours ‘up North’ was a topic of conversation avoided by many. UK legislation in NI had eventually brought about the legal rights to divorce, contraception, and homosexuality in the North, but not abortion. NI was a society heavily influenced in the 1990s by the views of their divided Christian Churches. Arguably much more socially conservative than their southern neighbours, divorce and contraception had seemed to be tolerated by the Protestant majority but less so, in my experience, by the swelling Catholic minority. Political and religious differences, ongoing daily violence, and civil unrest, along with a withered economy, ensured that on a day-to-day basis, NI people seemed to be less inclined to be at odds with the views of their respective Church leaders on ethical issues, and more focused on the realities of living through the Troubles. All mainstream Churches operated on an ‘all-island basis’, recognising their common 4th Century Christian roots in an undivided island. However, the Catholic Church, in particular, was at pains to emphasise the unity of the island, not largely in defiance of the political divide, but in recognition of the pre-Reformation ecclesiastical unity and the ancient dioceses of Ireland. Like the Anglican Church of Ireland, its dioceses were and remain oblivious to the border, with three large Irish dioceses operating on both sides of it. In this respect, the Irish Catholic Church, along with the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), seemed to give NI Catholics a palpable sense of unity, ordinarily unavailable to the majority of nationalists and republicans living in a jurisdiction that had been created without their consent.

1.1.12. When Sinéad O’Connor tore up a picture of Pope John Paul II in October 1992, a storm seemed to be brewing over the whole island of Ireland that would influence the Irish Catholic Church for the coming three decades and beyond. A misfit, she may well have been labelled, but fast forward thirty-one years to July 2023, when her untimely death was announced, to witness how much that

¹³ Catriona Crowe, ‘On the Ferns report’, *The Dublin Review*. <https://thedublinreview.com/article/on-the-ferns-report/> [accessed 19th October 2024].

storm has affected the seemingly unshakeable Irish Catholic Church of 1992. Divorce is socially acceptable and legal. Contraception is free for large sections of the population, particularly sexual minorities, and as commercially available as it is in every other Western country. Abortion is legal, having been voted into law by popular referendum in 2018. In 2015, Ireland became the first nation on earth to vote by popular referendum, rather than through its legislature, for equal marriage rights for same-sex couples, and to do so with a large majority. The Irish people have had 21 years with two female Presidents, each lawyers, with celebrated human rights expertise, since 1990. Church attendance among Catholics has dropped to astonishingly low rates, especially, but not exclusively, in urban areas.¹⁴ Dioceses across Ireland are currently preparing for pastoral situations without any serving priests. Devastating official inquiries and reports into child-abuse in Church-run institutions and within Catholic dioceses have shocked and numbed Irish Catholics, shredding the reputation of the Catholic Church in Ireland. A recent papal visit by Pope Francis in 2018 was this time perceived as an exercise in humility and apology to small crowds rather than one of triumph to an entire population in 1979.

Something akin to national mourning erupted on the day of Sinéad O'Connor's death for the diminutive and disconcerting singer, pilloried 31 years previously. She was widely lauded and hailed by the media, politicians, and commentators for her prophetic gesture in 1992 when she ripped up a picture of a pope, who is now a canonised saint, but now seen by many Irish Catholics as someone who was exactly as Sinéad O'Connor had said, a pope who had presided over institutional evil on a global scale. One could have been forgiven for wondering exactly who the Irish people now regarded as a saint or, at the very least, a prophet. 1992 was a year that began to send ripples through Irish society and the Irish Catholic community. This community is the focus of this research and is one that has been tossed upon these waves, negotiating its ripples for 32 years, and the findings of this research have been influenced in the strongest way possible by three decades of unprecedented trauma and transformation within this distinctive Catholic community.

1.2 The Irish Roman Catholic Church community

1.2.1. In The Republic of Ireland, during the 2022 census, 3,515,861 identified as Roman Catholic, representing 72.1% of the Irish population, down from 3,831,187 in 2010.¹⁵ In Northern Ireland, the number of people who identified as Roman Catholic during the 2021 census was 805,151, representing 42.3% of the population, and up from 738,033 in 2011.¹⁶ In both parts of the island, Roman Catholics are the largest Christian denomination. The *Iona Institute* (2020: 2) estimated that

¹⁴ 'Infographic: Catholic identity in Ireland in a rapid fall', *America*. <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2024/02/15/catholic-identity-ireland-247328> [accessed 11th November 2024].

¹⁵ 'Profile 5 - Diversity, Migration, Ethnicity, Irish Travellers & Religion F5134 – Population', *Central Statistics Office*. <https://data.cso.ie/> [accessed 21st July 2024].

¹⁶ 'Main Statistics Religion Tables, Census 2021', *Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency*. <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/census-2021-main-statistics-religion-tables> [accessed 17th July 2024].

27% of Irish people attended Mass regularly in 2019, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic.¹⁷ Gladys Ganiel and Chris Morris (2021: 1) cite figures from the 2020 *Northern Ireland Life and Times survey*, which estimate that 46% of Northern-Irish Roman Catholics attended Mass regularly in 2019. In both political jurisdictions this percentage has been in rapid decline for two decades.

1.2.2. The Irish Roman Catholic Church is organised with an all-Ireland structure that takes no account of the political border in existence since 1921. The Church is composed of 26 dioceses, three of these taking in areas on either side of the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. There are currently 26 diocesan bishops with a further seven auxiliary bishops, and the titular head of the Irish Church is, by a long-standing tradition, the Archbishop of Armagh, a cross-border archdiocese. There are approximately 2,116 priests serving in 1,355 parishes (Irish Catholic Directory for 2022). Accurate statistics for the number of male and female religious are difficult to access in public records, but estimates suggest that the approximate number of active male and female religious is currently little more than several hundred, with many more who are sick and retired (see Section 6.1.2). A recent RTE broadcast estimated the total number of religious sisters in Ireland to be approximately 4000, with an average age of 80.¹⁸ Section 3.10 outlines the criteria and rationale used to identify the sub-groups chosen to be representative of the Irish Roman Catholic community for the purposes of this research project.

¹⁷ 'Mass-going During and After the Pandemic', *The Iona Institute*. https://ionainstitute.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/MASSGOING-COVID_Survey.pdf [accessed 11th July 2024].

¹⁸ 'Last orders? Dearbhail McDonald on the Last Nuns in Ireland', *Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ)*. <https://www.rte.ie/history/2024/0115/1426578-last-orders-dearbhair-mcdonald-on-the-last-nuns-in-ireland/#:~:text=Indeed%2C%20the%20number%20of%20nuns,age%20of%2080%20and%20rising.> [accessed 21st July 2024].

1.3. The Teachings

Table 2. The terminology and categories of Church teaching associated with the documents about homosexuality.

Magisterium	Hierarchy of truths	
<p>The magisterium of the Catholic Church is its authority to authentically interpret the ‘Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition’. The magisterium is a living teaching office composed of the ‘bishops in communion with the successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome’ (CCC-1992: 85).</p>	<p><i>Unitatis Redintegratio-1964</i>: 11 states that when comparing doctrine, Catholic theologians ‘should remember that in Catholic doctrine there exists a "hierarchy" of truths since they vary in their relation to the fundamental Christian faith’. <i>CCC-1992</i>: 90 repeats this assertion, but there is no implication that the term ‘hierarchy’ implies that there are doctrines that can be regarded as expendable because the ‘mutual connections between dogmas, and their coherence, can be found in the whole of the Revelation of the mystery of Christ’. Cardinal Schönborn (1994: 42) explains this in the following manner:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">The ‘hierarchy of truth’ does not mean ‘a principle of subtraction,’ as if faith could be reduced to some ‘essentials’ whereas the ‘rest’ is left free or even dismissed as not significant. The ‘hierarchy of truth . . . is a principle of organic structure.’ It should not be confused with the degrees of certainty; it simply means that the different truths of faith are ‘organized’ around a center.</p>	
The categories of Church teaching under consideration in this research project		
<p>One of the sources of the teachings under consideration is the <i>Catechism of the Catholic Church</i>, promulgated by Pope John-Paul II in 1992. It aims to be:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">an organic synthesis of the essential and fundamental contents of Catholic doctrine, as regards both faith and morals, in the light of the Second Vatican Council and the whole of the Church's Tradition. Its principal sources are the Sacred Scriptures, the Fathers of the Church, the liturgy, and the Church's Magisterium. (CCC-1992: 11)</p>		
<p>Another of the teachings being considered is an Apostolic Exhortation, in this case, <i>Amoris Laetitia, the Post-Synodal Exhortation of Pope Francis on Love in the Family (2016)</i>. This type of document is a reflection on a particular topic that does not contain dogmatic definitions and is not a legislative document.</p>		
Dicasteries or congregations of the Roman Curia		
<p>The other teachings under consideration and outlined below have all been issued by dicasteries or congregations of the Roman Curia, these being the official administrative institutions or departments which assist the Pope in his governance of the Church. For example, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) is the dicastery responsible for promulgating and defending Catholic Church doctrine.</p>		
<p><i>Persona Humana-1975</i> is a Declaration, a papal statement in this case issued by the CDF, and usually dealing with Church law, precepts, or judicial decisions on a specific matter.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The 1986 Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons.</i> • <i>The 2003 Considerations regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions between Homosexual Persons.</i> • <i>The 2005 Instruction Concerning the Criteria for the Discernment of Vocations with regard to Persons with Homosexual Tendencies in view of their Admission to the Seminary and to Holy Orders.</i> <p>These teachings can be grouped under the category of an Instruction. Instructions are statements issued by a congregation, always with the approval of the Pope. Instructions are usually intended to explain or clarify documents issued by a Council, decrees by a pope or topical issues of importance or concern for the Church.</p>	<p><i>Male and Female, He created them, (2019)</i> does not carry an official category and is a document issued by the Congregation for Education.</p>

1.3.1. *Persona Humana. Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics. Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. December 1975. (PH-1975)*

1.3.1.1. *Persona Humana* (1975) was issued to clarify the Church's position on a range of issues connected to human sexuality and to reaffirm this position in the light of other opinions which oppose or contradict Church teachings, thereby confusing members of the Church (Sections I-II). It asserts in Sections III-IV that the objective, absolute, and immutable norms which govern sexual ethics are both present and discoverable within human nature and revealed by divine law, affirming, in particular, the immutable value of natural law and linking this to the teaching and spirit of the Gospel. Section-V reasserts the Church position that the finality of the sexual act resides inseparably within its unitive and procreative functions and that only those acts that respect this dual finality and exercised within a 'true marriage' are moral. As a result of this affirmation, the declaration in Section-VII rejects the practice of sexual acts by a couple before marriage, even when marriage is the declared intent of such a union.

1.3.1.2. It is within four brief paragraphs in Section-VIII that the declaration addresses homosexuality. The tendency to excuse homosexuality or regard it indulgently as a result of psychological insights is condemned. It distinguishes between homosexuality, which is curable and transitory, and that which is not. With regard to the latter, it reflects on the argument that for such people, it may be natural and morally excusable to engage in homosexual relations. Despite expressing an understanding for the personal difficulties and societal exclusion such people experience, it prohibits any pastoral approach to them, which may erroneously lead them to see homosexual acts as natural and morally licit. The moral culpability for individuals engaging in such acts may not always be complete, but the acts themselves, bereft of the finality of the sexual act and being contrary to scripture, are always intrinsically disordered.

1.3.1.3. Section-IX affirms the traditional teaching on masturbation, while Section-X reaffirms the deliberate choosing of an intrinsically disordered sexual act as being a mortal sin that causes separation from God. Sections-XI and XII promote a deeper appreciation by all the faithful of the virtue of chastity and its value, recommending spiritual practices and discipline in the pursuit of a chaste life. Section-XIII underscores the responsibility of every member of the Church to work to counteract the errors, ideas, and practices which undermine or contradict Church doctrine on sexual matters.

1.3.2. *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. October 1986. (The 1986-Letter)*

1.3.2.1. Recognising the 'public debate' over the morality of homosexual acts, Section-1 seeks to clarify its own position. The Catholic moral position on what Section-2 acknowledges to be a complex issue finds support, it claims, from 'the more secure findings of the natural sciences'. At any

rate, the Church, with a more global vision, is capable of doing ‘greater justice’ to the ‘rich reality of the human person’ than the horizons of science. Section-3 summarises the treatment of homosexuality in *PH-1975* but expresses concern that subsequent discussions about *PH-1975* prompted ‘an overly benign’ interpretation of the homosexual condition. To underscore the Church’s view that the condition is neither good nor even morally neutral, the inclination is strongly categorised here as ‘a more or less strong tendency ordered towards an intrinsic moral evil’ and, therefore, is itself ‘an objective disorder’. The living out of this condition through sexual expression is deemed to be morally unacceptable, and the central purpose of the Letter will be to clear up any confusion about this.

1.3.2.2. One such ‘gravely erroneous’ area of confusion lies within the notion that the scriptures have little to say about the issue, to the point of offering tacit approval of homosexual activity. Sections 4-6 expound the scriptural position on homosexuality, claiming that despite the shifting context of cultural and historical background during the periods within which the compilation of scripture occurred, there has been a clearly consistent scriptural position on the morality of this issue. Alongside tradition and magisterial teaching, scriptural arguments support the Church’s seamless and consistent position. Genesis 3 explains how original sin caused humankind to obscure the covenantal character of the marital union and descend into a deteriorating state of sinfulness. The story of Sodom in Gn. 19 is cited as an undoubted moral judgement upon homosexual acts. The Levitical prohibition on male homosexual intercourse and associated capital penalties (Lev. 18:22 and 20:13) are referenced to show how such acts exclude sexually active homosexuals from the ‘People of God’ without specifying that such an exclusion is brought about by a capital sentence. The Letter examines 1 Cor. 6: 9, which reinforces the exclusion of sexually active homosexual people from God’s Kingdom. In Rom. 1:18-32, it is claimed that Paul is ‘at a loss to find a clearer example’ of divine-human disharmony than that of ‘homosexual relations’, labelling those who engage in them explicitly as sinners in 1 Tim. 1.

1.3.2.3. Section-7 emphasises that it is only within a heterosexual marital arrangement that sexual activity is moral. In addition to being immoral, homosexual acts annul the symbolism, meaning, and goals of God’s sexual design. Not possessing the complementarity of a heterosexual union or the ability to transmit life, these acts additionally thwart the divine call to a life of self-giving. Homosexual people are certainly capable of being selfless, but when they engage in same-sex acts, their underlying self-indulgent and disordered inclination is confirmed, preventing them from having the fulfilment and happiness that comes from heeding God’s wisdom.

1.3.2.4. Section-8 expresses alarm that people, even from within the Church, are questioning the Church’s doctrine on this issue. The views of such groups are rooted in a materialistic ideology that is in opposition to the full and transcendental truth about the human person and are deliberately used by

such people to sow seeds of confusion for homosexual people and those who care for them pastorally. Section-9 goes on to condemn such internal pressure groups and their claim to represent all homosexual people. Forgoing any attempt to dissuade homosexual people from being sexually active, such groups argue that the Church's condemnation or criticism is unjust and discriminatory. In some jurisdictions, those who agitate for legal changes seek the support of Church pastors for doing so and persist in pursuing legal changes for homosexual people that, in turn, lend the impression to society that homosexual acts are harmless or good. This agitation for change is being done, the Letter continues, even when active homosexuality is threatening the 'lives and well-being of a large number of people' (the mid-1980s backdrop of the HIV AIDS epidemic is not mentioned specifically, but it seems clear that this is what is being referenced). The Letter goes on to hold firm to its clear position on the immorality of homosexual acts, legislative changes or trends notwithstanding. It warns against the 'deceitful propaganda' from pro-homosexual movements that misleads homosexual people and suggests erroneously that their homosexual activity, so damaging to family and society, is acceptable.

1.3.2.5. Section-10 considers the issue of violence in word or deed towards homosexual people and instructs pastors to condemn such violence, affirming that the dignity of each person should be upheld in law. Nevertheless, this correct condemnation of violence should not mislead people into believing that homosexuality is not disordered. Whenever homosexual activity is condoned, and the legislature of civil society protects the kind of morally illicit sexual behaviour to which no one should ever have the right, the Church or society should not be surprised that irrational violence will be the result.

1.3.2.6. Prefacing some specific instructions as to how a homosexual person can follow the Lord, Section-11 warns against viewing the homosexual person as compulsively compelled to indulge in sexual activity, thereby being morally inculpable. Whilst some transient homosexuality may be less culpable, the liberty to seek continual conversion from evil must be the main focus for any homosexual person striving to live a moral life. With this in mind, Section-12 instructs homosexual people to unite their struggles with the sufferings of Christ, for even if such a sacrificial endeavour is ridiculed, it is the way to eternal life and the only way by which such a person can belong to Christ. (Gal. 5:24). God will empower such necessary sacrifices. A refusal to conform to the sacrificial imprint of the Paschal mystery upon this area of their lives will prevent their salvation and their rescue from 'a way of life which constantly threatens to destroy them'. In pursuit of a life of dedicated chastity, homosexual people may seek spiritual strength from the Sacrament of Penance (Confession).

1.3.2.7. Section-13 commends the goodwill expressed to homosexual people by some of the Church's pastors but that this pastoral outreach must simultaneously be faithful to the Lord's will by encouraging such people to be chaste. Section-14 warns Bishops that some 'programmes' of outreach to homosexual Catholics are guilty of a 'studied ambiguity' whereby they mislead the pastors and the faithful. The groups who provide such programmes either disregard or abandon the magisterial

teachings of the Church on homosexuality or openly attack it, agitating for change. Bishops may never support such programmes. Church programmes in which homosexuals associate with one another and receive pastoral care can only ever be permitted (15) when such gatherings are specifically reminded that the sexual expression of their orientation is immoral and that ‘occasions of sin’ are always to be avoided. To avoid giving such necessary reminders of doctrine in a misguided attempt to be pastoral is, in fact, neglectful and ultimately uncaring towards the homosexuals who may gather for such programmes. Authentic and truthful programmes will assist homosexuals to advance in their spiritual life, especially by their frequent use of the Sacrament of Penance, and thereby encourage the Christian community to ‘assist’ their homosexual brothers and sisters ‘without deluding or isolating them’. Section-16 furthermore commends this approach as being the best way to offer deep, ‘multi-levelled’ nourishment to homosexuals. They should never define themselves by restrictive and orientation-based terminology like ‘homosexual’ but rather view themselves, as the Church does, through the prism of their dignity as God’s children.

1.3.2.8. Section-17 gives specific instructions to bishops on how they should proceed. With the knowledge generated by the human and medical sciences, provided this is in conformity with Church teaching, homosexuals should be offered pastoral support. Theologians should endeavour to assist this pastoral support by making contributions which provide homosexuals with the true meaning of human sexuality and marriage. Only those pastors who are sufficiently mature at a spiritual and personal level should be considered to run such pastoral outreach, and their fidelity to and preparedness to communicate Church teaching should be paramount. Bishops should provide catechetical programmes to promote the truth about human sexuality in the context of family life, within which the homosexual issue can be considered. Families deeply troubled with the problem of having a homosexual member can also be helped by such catechesis. Here, the Letter returns to the scandal of pastoral organisations or groups who are wilfully ambiguous about Church teaching or who seek to undermine it. The Letter strongly instructs bishops to deny to these groups the use of Church buildings, property, or associated school premises and any provision that may have been formerly given of specific religious services. Such a denial is neither unjust nor uncharitable, as it is in keeping with a bishop’s primary responsibility to ‘defend and promote family life’. Section-18 concludes by reminding the bishops to whom the Letter is addressed that the suffering of homosexuals will only be intensified by error and that only by speaking ‘the truth in love’ (Eph. 4:15) to homosexuals will they as bishops be following the ‘pastoral solicitude of our compassionate Lord’.

1.3.3. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Promulgated by Pope John Paul II. October 1992. (CCC-1992)

1.3.3.1. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992) is the reference work that, in four parts, offers a summary of Roman Catholic doctrine. It is within Part Three, Section Two, *The Ten Commandments*,

that the *CCC-1992* treats the issue of homosexuality, within Article-6, II, *The Sixth Commandment*, and under the topic, *The Vocation to Chastity*.

1.3.3.2. Paragraph-2357 explains homosexuality as being relations that arise from men and women who are sexually attracted to people of their own sex and claims that its form has shifted through history and within cultures and that its psychological origins remain ‘largely unexplained’. From a foundation rooted in scripture and tradition, the *CCC-1992* reiterates the teaching that homosexual acts are ‘intrinsically disordered’. The reasons for this are because such acts are contrary to natural law, closed to the gift of life, and not rooted in ‘genuine affective or sexual complementarity’, thereby being acts that can never be approved of in any circumstance.

1.3.3.3. Paragraph-2358 acknowledges that the number of such people is ‘not negligible’ and that, for many, their disordered inclinations are experienced as a trial. They must be accepted with respect and compassion, and any unjust discrimination towards them be ‘avoided’. They are called to fulfil God’s will, and if they are Christian, to unite the difficulties associated with ‘their condition’ with ‘the sacrifice of the Lord’s Cross’. Paragraph-2359 clarifies that homosexual persons are, therefore, called to chastity and, by so doing, will achieve inner freedom through the virtue of self-mastery. To achieve this goal, they can be supported ‘at times’ by ‘disinterested friendship’ and by spiritual and sacramental practices, and so, such homosexual people can ‘resolutely approach Christian perfection’.

1.3.4. *Considerations regarding Proposals to Give Legal recognition to Unions between Homosexual Persons. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. June 2003. (2003-Considerations)*

1.3.4.1. Beginning with the assertion (Introduction) that ‘homosexuality is a troubling moral and social phenomenon’ in every country, this document states its purpose as a response to the even greater concern that the Church has for those countries which have or intend to legislate for legal same-sex unions. Whilst not offering additional doctrinal teaching, it intends the document as a resource for bishops who presently or may in the future face the issue of addressing such legislation in their particular jurisdictions. It also offers guidelines for Catholic politicians in dealing with such legislation, and to all people committed to the societal common good, be they Christian or not.

1.3.4.2. Part-1 considers the nature of marriage and its inalienable characteristics. Section-2 summarises the Church’s view that marriage, based on right reason, can only ever be a union between a man and a woman. Such has always been the case across cultural boundaries, and no ideology can erase the certainty that marriage is a divinely ordered institution that fosters the unique communion of a male and a female and one which can generate new human life. Section-3 outlines the scriptural argument that this is so. In Gn. 1:27, sexuality is raised by God to the realm of the personal, uniting in a complementary fashion the nature and spirit of a man and woman. In Gn. 2:24, the institution of marriage as being a fleshly union of male and female is specially ordered by the creator, a point

reinforced in Gn. 1:28, when this complementary union is additionally commanded to be fruitful. Christ, in Mt. 19:3-12 and Mk. 10:6-9 confirms the value of this primordial union and confers upon it the ‘dignity of a sacrament’. Marriage is, therefore, a sign of the covenantal relationship between Christ and his Church (Eph 5:32).

1.3.4.3. Section-4 states that ‘there are absolutely no grounds for considering homosexual unions to be in any way similar or even remotely analogous to God's plan for marriage and family’. They do not contain the holiness of marriage, are contrary to natural law, closed to life, and unrooted in affective or sexual complementarity, and therefore to be disapproved of in every circumstance. To reinforce this judgement, homosexual acts are furthermore condemned with scriptural evidence as being a ‘serious depravity’ (cf. Rom. 1:24-27; 1 Cor. 6:10; 1 Tim. 1:10), and ‘intrinsically disordered’, this scriptural condemnation being reinforced and accepted constantly within Christian and Catholic tradition. Repeating the *CCC-1992*’s guidelines about respect and sensitivity towards homosexual people, their inclination is nonetheless deemed to be objectively disordered, and their sexual activity gravely sinful and contrary to chastity.

1.3.4.4. The second part of the document outlines positions on the problem of homosexual unions. Section-5 distinguishes between the manner in which different civil authorities are responding to this issue. From nations who adopt a position of de facto tolerance without any legal recognition of same-sex unions, the Church nevertheless requires definitive action. These actions include the unmasking by civil authorities of the exploitative ideologies that lie behind the tolerance shown to such homosexual couples and the reiteration by civil authorities of the immoral nature of homosexual unions. Such unions should ‘be contained within certain limits’ to safeguard public morality, with young people being particularly protected from the ideas that may contribute to the ‘spread of the phenomenon’. Those civil authorities in this situation who might consider a move from such a heavily qualified tolerance of evil to the granting of legal recognition are sternly warned that *legalising* evil is a much more serious moral offence. For those jurisdictions where this moral boundary has been breached, the only response by everyone to this legalisation of same-sex unions must be a ‘clear and emphatic opposition’, the withholding of any cooperation with such laws, and universal ‘conscientious objection’.

1.3.4.5. Part-3 outlines four categories of arguments against legal recognition for same-sex unions, summarised below:

Table 3. Arguments in 2003-Considerations against legal recognition for same-sex unions.

Argument	Summary
1) From the order of right reason (Section 6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civil law may never contradict reason. • All human law should be consistent with natural moral law, and to grant equivalency in civil law to same-sex unions exposes these civil authorities as failing in their duty to promote marriage as essential to the common good. • Homosexual behaviour as a private phenomenon is a less serious societal scenario than when it is granted institutional recognition. • Civil laws which offer this legal legitimacy can influence all of society, influencing wider thought patterns and behaviour, particularly those of the young.
2) From the biological and anthropological order (Section 7)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The inability of same-sex couples to be procreative means they cannot contribute to the survival of humanity. • Lacking the essential conjugal and procreative dimensions, homosexual relations lack the qualities that make such relations human. • Regarding the adoption of children by same-sex couples, ‘experience has shown’ that such children are profoundly harmed in terms of their development. This point is heavily reinforced by the assertion by the Church that to permit such adoptions ‘would actually mean doing violence to these children’.
3) From the social order (Section 8)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The legitimisation of same-sex unions in law radically transforms the very concept of marriage, undermining the common good and rendering the State negligent in its duty. • It is neither discriminatory nor unjust to deny such people the right to a marital union when the nature of their union is non-marital by definition. • The claim to possess the right to legal recognition of their unions does not fall under the common civil right to freedom. • Such unions contribute nothing that is positive to the societal development of the person and are, by contrast, harmful to it, especially ‘if their impact on society were to increase’.
4) From the legal order (Section 9)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homosexual unions, in contrast to heterosexual marital unions, contribute nothing to the succession of generations, and in the absence of this function for the common good such unions require no legal recognition. • Cohabiting homosexual partners with legal protections for their union as a couple would undermine the common good of society at large. • If homosexuals require separate protection for their rights, ‘in matters of common interest’, or to ‘protect personal goods’, they can do so, ‘like all citizens from the standpoint of their private autonomy’.

1.3.4.6. Part-4 looks at the position of Catholic politicians with regard to legislation in favour of homosexual unions. Section-10 begins by reminding Catholic politicians that alongside the duty of all Catholics to oppose any legal recognition for same-sex unions, they have a particular responsibility in this regard. In the first instance, they must, upon the proposal of any such legislation, express their opposition clearly and publicly and vote against it under pain of committing a gravely immoral act. If such legislation is already in force, such a politician must, as an act of witness to the truth, make their opposition known. If repeal of such legal recognition is not currently feasible, the Catholic politician could seek ways to lessen the harm and the damage to public morality, provided they additionally reiterate their ‘absolute personal opposition’ to the legal recognition in its entirety.

1.3.4.7. The document concludes with a reminder that respecting homosexual persons does not require the approval of or the legal acceptance of their unions. To approve of such unions undermines the primacy within society of marriage and the family and affords legal approval for ‘deviant behaviour’, thereby obscuring basic human values. The Church cannot fail to defend these values for the good of all.

1.3.5. *Amoris Laetitia. Post-Synodal Exhortation of Pope Francis on Love in the Family. March 2016. (AL-2016)*

1.3.5.1. *Amoris Laetitia* (2016) is a lengthy exhortation that followed the *Synods on the Family*, held in Rome during 2014 and 2015. Five paragraphs in this document address issues that are relevant to and reinforce Church doctrine about certain LGBTQ+ issues. Under the topic, *Some challenges*, Paragraph-52 discusses the weakening of the family and the threat this causes to society. It is ‘only the exclusive and indissoluble union between a man and a woman’ with the stability and fruitfulness it establishes that can be a strengthening agent in society. De facto or same-sex unions share no equivalence to marriage and cannot perform such a societal service.

1.3.5.2. Under the topic, *Certain complex situations*, Paragraph-250 acknowledges the difficult experiences of families who have homosexual members. It reaffirms the teaching of *CCC-1992* on the upholding of the dignity of homosexual people and the careful avoidance of unjust discrimination towards them. Such families should be supported with pastoral care alongside their homosexual members. Paragraph-251 reiterates the teachings from *2003-Considerations* that homosexual unions share no similarity with marriage, with there being no grounds to consider them ‘remotely analogous to God’s plan for marriage and family’. It furthermore decries any attempt to tie international financial aid to the establishment of legal same-sex unions in developing countries.

1.3.5.3. Paragraph-56 introduces gender ideology as another challenge. Selecting a synthesis of quotes from *Relatio Finalis-2015 (The Final Report of the Synod of Bishops to Pope Francis)*, it condemns the erasure of gender difference, which such ideologies use to establish human identity as ‘the choice of the individual’. Lamenting that such ideologies can dictate how children are raised, it emphasises that biological sex and gender may be distinguished but not separated. The same paragraph jumps immediately to a condemnation of alternative reproductive technologies, condemning the sundering of the link between parenthood and human life. The Section concludes with a warning to accept humanity as it was created. Under the topic, *The need for sex education*, Paragraph-285 expresses the need for the young ‘to accept their own body as it was created’ and advises that sex education should assist young people in avoiding ‘the pretension’ of cancelling sexual difference.

1.3.6. *Instruction Concerning the Criteria for the Discernment of Vocations with regard to Persons with Homosexual Tendencies in view of their Admission to the Seminary and to Holy Orders.*

Congregation for Catholic Education. November 2005. (2005-Instruction)

1.3.6.1. Released in November 2005, this Instruction addresses those responsible for the discernment of the vocations to the sacrament of Holy Orders on the question about whether to admit to Holy Orders men who have ‘deep-seated homosexual tendencies’. This consideration is ‘made more urgent by the current situation’, a non-explicit but clear reference and suggested link to the widespread global revelations of sexual abuse by Roman Catholic clergy and religious during these years.

1.3.6.2. Part-1 addresses the affective maturity and spiritual fatherhood required of all candidates for Holy Orders. Conformed in a specific way to Christ and representing him sacramentally, such a man must give his entire self to the Church and, therefore, be a person of affective maturity with the ability to ‘relate correctly to both men and women’. Part-2 looks at homosexuality and the ordained ministry and makes clear that despite respecting homosexual men, those who ‘practise homosexuality, present deep-seated homosexual tendencies, or support the so-called “gay culture” ’ cannot be admitted to seminary or Holy Orders. Such men are gravely hindered from being able to relate correctly to men and women, and the ‘negative consequences’ that can arise from ordaining them can in no way be overlooked. Men who may have experienced the problem of transitory homosexual tendencies may be exempt from this prohibition, provided that they have ‘clearly overcome’ these tendencies at least three years prior to diaconal ordination.

1.3.6.3. Part-3 addresses the discernment required by the Church concerning the suitability of candidates. Their human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral qualities must be carefully judged by the bishop who accepts the candidate for ordination, the rector and others involved in seminary formation. The candidate’s spiritual director, although representing the ‘internal forum’ in the discernment process, must assist him in becoming aware of the chaste, affective maturity required of him as a future priest. If the spiritual director discerns that the candidate either practises homosexuality or has deep-seated homosexual tendencies, he must dissuade the candidate from proceeding to ordination. All additional confessors to the unsuitable candidate must do likewise. The candidate must submit himself to the discernment and judgement of these other men and bear responsibility for his own formation. As a result, it would be ‘gravely dishonest’ for such a man to hide his homosexuality and proceed to ordination. Such an attitude would be ‘deceitful’ and suggest that his personality does not possess the requisite qualities of loyalty, honesty and openness required from a priest.

1.3.7. “Male and Female He Created Them”. Toward a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education. Congregation for Catholic Education. February 2019. (M&F-2019)

This detailed, 31-page document runs to 57 Sections, and therefore its main points are summarised below:

Table 4. Principal points of “Male and Female He Created Them” (2019)

Principal points	Summary and references
Introduction and proposal of a methodology to address the threat of gender theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Document is a response to an educational crisis which has emerged from anthropology ‘opposed to faith and right reason’ (1). • Proposal of a three-fold methodology ‘to listen, to reason and to propose’ (5). • Rejection of the absolutist tenor of gender ideology (6). • To look to ‘other work on gender’, which studies how sexual difference is lived out in different cultures (6).
‘To listen’	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The family has come to be viewed as a ‘contractual and voluntary’ structure (8-9). • A radical separation of gender and sex has been advocated leading to ‘transgenderism’. (10-11). • Alongside the term ‘queer’, this introduces an extreme and nomadic fluidity into someone’s ability to self-identify (12). • The concept and practice of ethically flexible polyamorous relationships has arisen from a breakdown in the male-female duality and the rise of ‘the absolutely free self-determination of each individual’ (13). • There is agreement on the need to combat discrimination, engender respect for the person, value the role of the feminine, and the ‘affective, cultural and spiritual motherhood’ of women (15-18). • The dualistic anthropology that separates bodily matter and the will has created cultural relativism that encourages the right to believe that gender is more important than biological sex (20). • Freedom has become confused with arbitrary decision-making by the individual who then acts as though there were no objective truths, values, or principles (22).
‘To reason’	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A rejection of the ‘fictitious construct’ of the terms ‘gender neuter’ or ‘third gender’ and the use of these terms to ‘annihilate the concept of nature’ (24-5). • Insights offered from philosophy, psychology and physiology, it is claimed, reinforce the essential difference between the two sexes (26-8). • An appeal for dialogue is made between faith and reason, cultivated within educational settings and which draws from ‘the ontological-metaphysical truth’ (29).
‘To propose’	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It proposes a vision of Christian anthropology within which institutions can embed coherent educational programmes based primarily on the recognition that human nature cannot be manipulated at will (30-35). • Human nature is understood as based upon the unity of body and soul in contrast to the anthropological dualism of will and bodily matter. The self only becomes an authentic ‘I’ in relationship with and by openness to the ‘you’ of an ‘other’ and the ‘we’ that results (Gn. 1:27). • To lose the male-female duality of human nature gives rise to the negation of the family as a real concept and results in children bereft of their dignity (31-34). • Education should include the ‘learning to accept our body... valuing [it] in its femininity or masculinity’ (35).
Particular situations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The family is ‘an anthropological fact’ within which ‘the maximum realisation of the reciprocity and complementarity between men and women’ is achieved. • The family is ‘the primary pedagogical environment’ for the education of children, including the sexual and affective dimensions of education. • The family should also enshrine the right of children to be raised by a mother and father as part of their ability to recognise the value and beauty of sexual difference (36-38). • School is the supplementary arena in which a child can come to value their human personhood. • Schools teach children to overcome individualism and discover community.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children should be nurtured within such settings to achieve an affective maturity and learn to critique the harmful influences of pornography and other disorienting messages (39-42). • Society and schools should actively support the family, particularly in the realm of sex education, with transparency and the sharing of mutual information between the school and home. • Age and stage-appropriate programmes that fully respect parental consent and, if necessary, their authorisation are to be the hallmark of such pedagogical activity in the realm of sex education (43-46).
‘Forming the formators’	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers should be thoroughly informed by up-to-date information and resources, ‘a suitable and serious psycho-pedagogic training’, and collaboration with the pedagogical insights cultivated by Catholic higher-education institutes (47-51).
Conclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Isolation and disconnectedness derive from gender ideology. • Christian education offers an antidote to this by way of the valuing of dialogue, the development of the gifts of nature and grace, and mutual interconnectivity. • Educators must go ‘beyond all ideological reductionism or homologizing relativism’ and should help to prepare children for a future marital sexual union. • Parental rights must be upheld and never seen as being in opposition to the aspirations of the Catholic school, which should ensure the provision of age and stage-appropriate sex and affective education (52-57).

1.4. The Irish Bishops’ Conference on homosexuality

1.4.1. The Irish Bishop’s Conference issued a statement in 1993 after the proposal by the Irish government to repeal the law prohibiting homosexual acts among consenting adult men, fixing the age of consent at 17. The statement reiterates some of the main points outlined in *The 1986-Letter*, emphasising that the homosexual orientation is not sinful and that homosexual people should neither be despised or marginalised. With no desire to equate criminal law with moral law regarding this issue, the statement does express concern that the change in law may affect general moral attitudes. It also expresses its reservations about how the proposed change in law may affect the way in which young people may see homosexual relationships as being morally acceptable and, additionally, the way in which it may have an adverse effect on the role and centrality of the family in Irish society. *The Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) 1993 Bill* was passed by Dáil Éireann, the Irish parliament on 24th June 1993.

1.4.2. In May 2015, the Archbishop of Armagh, Eamon Martin, issued a message about the forthcoming referendum on whether to change the Irish constitution to redefine marriage to include same-sex couples. The message repeats some of the arguments used in the *2003-Considerations* and at the *Extraordinary Synod on the Family in Rome (2014)* to oppose the legalisation of same-sex unions. It calls for respect and sensitivity for homosexual people, using the term ‘gay’, which is not one commonly used in Church teaching. Nevertheless, the message strongly asserts the scriptural and NML basis for defending the traditional teachings of the Church on marriage and the Church’s right to do so without unjustly being labelled as homophobic. It condemns a false understanding of the term ‘equality’ on the basis that a legal same-sex union and a complementary heterosexual union, open to life, are not as a ‘fact of nature’ to be considered as equal to one another. Marriage, despite the failures of some marriages to uphold high ideals, is the unique union that fosters the common good, including

the rights of children, in every society, something that has been the case in Ireland under the protection of the 1937 constitution. The Archbishop concludes by expressing these concerns, urging people to pray and reflect carefully before they vote:

If society adopts and imposes a ‘new orthodoxy’ of ‘gender-neutral’ marriage, being defined simply as a union between any two persons – including a man and a man or a woman and woman – then it will become increasingly difficult to speak or teach in public about marriage as being between a man and a woman. Will there be lawsuits against individuals and groups who do not share this vision? What will we be expected to teach children in school about marriage or about homosexual acts? Will those who continue to sincerely believe that marriage is between a man and a woman be forced to act against their faith and conscience?

On 22nd May 2015, Ireland became the first country in the world to make same-sex marriage legal by popular vote. In total, 62% of voters backed the amendment, while 38% voted against it. The Bill that enacted the marriage referendum was signed into law on 29 October 2015.

1.5. The Research Question (RQ)

How do different groups within the Irish Roman Catholic community understand, accept and receive the official teachings of their Church on the issue of homosexuality?

1.5.1. Aware of how this community has been formed and changed by the events of the past three decades and how my own path has been forged within this community, and by these events, I have focused my research on a relatively small but significant component of Roman Catholic doctrine. As a product of this Irish Catholic community and as a gay, legally-partnered, former Catholic priest, I wanted to investigate how the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church about homosexuality had been accepted, understood, and received by a cross-section of the community to which I have belonged for most of my life. The reflexive positionality statement will indicate why this Research Question has personal significance (see 1.6).

1.5.2. The review of the literature in Chapter 2 will demonstrate why the issue of homosexuality has carried wider ethical and ecclesial significance. The teachings, while relatively few in number and carrying varying degrees of weight in terms of their ranking in the hierarchy of Church documents, nevertheless express the way in which the Church assesses the issue of homosexuality. It is clear from these documents that the Church considers the issue of homosexuality to be of the utmost importance, and it uses resources from scripture and its tradition to promote, uphold, and defend its ethical and theological position about this matter. The Church’s position has been increasingly challenged in the decades since the 1960s, that have witnessed the decriminalisation of same-sex acts, LGBTQ+ rights, equality legislation and, more recently, same-sex marriage and adoption rights in many nations,

particularly in the West. Many of the teachings have emerged as a direct response to some of these societal and legal changes, indicating in every instance how sensitive and important the issue of homosexuality is for the Roman Catholic Church beyond the 4-5% of its members who may be directly impacted by the teachings. The concerns expressed in its teachings about homosexuality indicate clearly that the Church realises how intertwined the issue of homosexuality is with many other issues about which it holds strong beliefs upheld by authoritative teachings. For the Church, crucial issues like marriage, family-planning, religious freedom, the family, education, equality, justice, its own employment practices, the nature of its presbyterate, and the credibility of its own authority to teach are just some of the issues with which the issue of homosexuality connects and makes an impact.

1.5.3. The Irish experience of Roman Catholicism, as the island's largest Christian denomination, whilst sharing experiences in common with Catholics across the world, is also one of the reasons why this Research Question is significant. Section 1.1. has highlighted why this might be the case. The Catholic Church has shaped Irish society in a unique manner, and the speed with which the Catholic Church in Ireland has ceased to do so is similarly unique. The Research Question will help us to understand why and how this may be the case, as it engages with some of the men and women who themselves are not only members *of* the Irish Church but are part of the living fabric of the universal Church, by virtue of their baptism, and part of the local Irish Church by virtue of their geographical location or birth. In focusing on homosexuality, an issue that connects so widely to many other issues of interest or concern for the People of God, the analysis will not only address the specific aims of the Research Question but highlight other areas of wider concern to the global Church.

1.6. Reflexive positionality statement

1.6.1. I am a white, Irish middle-aged male from a working-class, but currently middle-class background, living in an urban area of northern England. I identify as a cisgender gay man and am in a legally-recognised partnership. My partner and I have no children or dependents other than elderly parents. Aware of my homosexuality since early adolescence, I have never been overtly uncomfortable with my sexuality. I realise in retrospect that my decision to become a priest may have unconsciously been affected by some cognitive dissonance between my sexual orientation and my Church's teaching on homosexuality. My family and friends have known I was gay since my mid-20s, although I was not 'out' to any parishioners during my thirteen years of ministry. I am educated to postgraduate level, holding two master's degrees, and have worked as a Catholic priest and afterwards as a teacher in three mainstream secondary schools, two of which were Catholic faith schools. I have no physical or mental health issues or disabilities.

1.6.2. My religious views have evolved throughout my life, becoming progressively less conservative, although I have never held particularly strong conservative religious views at any point in my life

beyond those inherited from a traditional Irish Catholic upbringing. I continue to identify as a Roman Catholic, with the provisos referred to in 3.5.2. I disagree strongly with the views and teachings of my Church about homosexuality, although at various points in my life, I have tried to understand, justify, and unsuccessfully accommodate these teachings into my life-choices. I acknowledge that many or all of these personal aspects of my life have had an inevitable bearing on the research, including my decision to undertake such a study, the choice of the topic and Research Question, the interactions with participants, and the analysis of the data with its subsequent presentation.

1.7. The structure of the thesis

1.7.1. This is a qualitative research project that will use in-depth interviews with participants chosen to represent a cross-section of the Irish Catholic community. The data gathered will be analysed and presented using a form of thematic analysis known as Template Analysis. Chapter 2 proposes to offer an assessment of some of the literature that is relevant to the teaching documents under consideration, and the ecclesial, theological, and ethical issues raised by these teachings in relation to the aims of the Research Question. Chapter 3 will outline the methodology of this research project, justifying this methodology as being the most appropriate method to address the Research Question. Chapters 4-8 will, in turn, present an analysis of the data gathered, informed by the Template Analysis, with the aim of addressing the Research Question. Chapter 9 will address the extent to which the research has been successful in answering the Research Question and some of the wider significance of the project. In keeping with best practice for qualitative research, and in particular, for the chosen method of thematic analysis, researcher reflexivity will be evident throughout and woven into the presentation rather than treated as a separate issue.

1.8. LGBTQ+ acronym

1.8.1. The acronym adopted throughout the presentation is LGBTQ+. This acronym refers to people who identify as being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer. Other terms referred to within the presentation are also defined in Table 5.

Table 5. Definitions of identity and sexual-orientation terminology

Term	Definition ¹⁹
Lesbian	Refers to a woman who has a romantic and/or sexual orientation towards women. Some non-binary people may also identify with this term.
Gay	Refers to a man who has a romantic and/or sexual orientation towards men. Also, a generic term for lesbian and gay sexuality - some women define themselves as gay rather than lesbian. Some non-binary people may also identify with this term.
Bisexual or Bi	Bi is an umbrella term used to describe a romantic and/or sexual orientation towards more than one gender. Bi people may describe themselves using one or more of a wide variety of terms, including, but not limited to, bisexual, pan, queer, and some other non-monosexual and non-monoromantic identities.
Transgender or Trans	An umbrella term to describe people whose gender is not the same as, or does not sit comfortably with, the sex they were assigned at birth. Trans people may describe themselves using one or more of a wide variety of terms, including (but not limited to) transgender, transsexual, genderqueer (GQ), genderfluid, non-binary, gender-variant, genderless, agender, nongender, third gender, bigender, trans man, trans woman, trans masculine, trans feminine and neutrois.
Queer	Queer is a term used by those wanting to reject specific labels of romantic orientation, sexual orientation, and/or gender identity. It can also be a way of rejecting the perceived norms of the LGBT community (racism, sizeism, ableism and so forth). Although some LGBT people view the word as a slur, it was reclaimed in the late 80s by the queer community who have embraced it.
Questioning	The process of exploring your own sexual orientation and/or gender identity.
+	The + symbol may denote 'ace', an umbrella term used to describe a lack of, varying, or occasional experiences of sexual attraction. This encompasses asexual people as well as those who identify as demisexual and grey-sexual. Ace people who experience romantic attraction or occasional sexual attraction might also use terms such as gay, bi, lesbian, straight, and queer in conjunction with asexual to describe the direction of their romantic or sexual attraction. In addition to the above definition provided by Stonewall, it should be noted that the + symbol doesn't stand always/solely/simple for ace/asexual, as it sometimes also implies 'I' for someone who is intersex.
Homosexual	This might be considered a more medical term used to describe someone who has a romantic and/or sexual orientation towards someone of the same gender. The term 'gay' is now more generally used.
Homophobia	The fear or dislike of someone based on prejudice or negative attitudes, beliefs, or views about lesbian, gay, or bisexual people. Homophobic bullying may be targeted at people who are, or who are perceived to be, lesbian, gay, or bi.
Cisgender	Someone whose gender identity is the same as the sex they were assigned at birth. Non-trans is also used by some people.
Non-binary	An umbrella term for people whose gender identity doesn't sit comfortably with 'man' or 'woman'. Non-binary identities are varied and can include people who identify with some aspects of binary identities, while others reject them entirely.
Gender dysphoria	Used to describe when a person experiences discomfort or distress because there is a mismatch between their sex assigned at birth and their gender identity.

¹⁹'List of LGBTQ+ terms', *Stonewall*. <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/list-lgbtq-terms> [accessed 5th July 2024].

	This is also the clinical diagnosis for someone who doesn't feel comfortable with the sex they were assigned at birth.
Gender reassignment or realignment	To undergo gender reassignment or realignment usually means to undergo some sort of medical intervention, but it can also mean changing names and pronouns, dressing differently, and living in their self-identified gender.

1.8.2. It should be noted that within the seven teaching documents and much of the ecclesial commentary surrounding them, the Church often chooses to use the terms ‘homosexual’, ‘homosexuality’, or ‘persons with homosexual tendencies’. The origins of the term ‘homosexuality’ date from nineteenth-century Germany.²⁰ Initially used by individuals who were pressing for the repeal of Prussian sodomy laws, it was subsequently adopted by German psychiatrists and psychologists to describe and explain the pathology of same-sex attraction, but its use was not consistent, being used interchangeably with other terminology.²¹ As noted in 2.4.1. the *World Psychiatry Association* chooses to no longer use the term ‘homosexuality’ and instead refers to ‘same-sex orientation and behaviour’. As the Church chooses, for the most part, to use the term ‘homosexuality’, it remains somewhat unclear as to which persons are being referred to within the seven teaching documents and associated commentary.

1.8.3. I work on the assumption that the Church, at a minimum, includes lesbian, gay and bisexual people under the term ‘homosexual’, but it is unclear to what extent the other people represented under the LGBTQ+ acronym are included. Only two of the documents refer to transgender people, and here only loosely, with only one document that mentions the concept of ‘queer’. The LGBTQ+ acronym itself is never used within the documents, although several of them predate the widespread use of the acronym, nor are the terms preferred by some LGBTQ+ people, such as ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’ ever used. Language is contentious, and in the range of issues that are raised by LGBTQ+ people, their lives, relationships, rights, and legal status, the terminology is often disputed and challenged from within and from outside the LGBTQ+ community. The very concept of a definable community which can incorporate all of the identities within the acronym is also contested. Nevertheless, as the term most currently favoured, according to a 2023 YouGov survey,²² LGBTQ+ will generally be used within the presentation, occasionally substituted by other terminology, particularly when referencing the views or comments of authors and participants or the Church teachings.

²⁰ Diederik F. Janssen (2021), ‘Homosexual/Heterosexual: First Print Uses of the Terms by Daniel von Kászonyi (1868–1871)’, *Journal of Homosexuality*, 68(14), 2574–2579.

²¹ George Mendelson, ‘Homosexuality and Psychiatric Nosology’, *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 2003;37(6):678-683.

²² Matthew Smith, ‘LGBT; LGBTQ; LGBTQIA: what acronym does the queer community use?’, *YouGov UK*. https://yougov.co.uk/society/articles/45937-lgbt-lgbtq-lgbtqia-what-acronym-does-queer-communi?redirect_from=%2Ftopics%2Fsociety%2Farticles-reports%2F2023%2F07%2F28%2Flgbt-lgbtq-lgbtqia-what-acronym-does-queer-communi [accessed 15th July 2024].

Chapter 2. Literature review

2.1. Introduction.

This chapter will consider some of the relevant literature surrounding the Church teachings about homosexuality outlined in Chapter 1. The literature will be considered thematically, using the main themes identified from an initial analysis of the main Church teaching documents on homosexuality. These were the main themes used in the gathering of data during the participant-interviews and in the subsequent coding and analysis of this project's data. The Template Analysis method employed in this project, which is fully explained in Chapter 3, places a strong emphasis on the use of key themes identified by the researcher at the start of the research project in order to guide and structure the whole research process. Logically, a parallel thematic consideration of some of the relevant literature seems to offer the most appropriate method in which to mirror the same themes that will provide a structure for the data analysis presentation in Chapters 4-8.

2.2. The scriptural arguments

2.2.1. Many official Church teaching documents will naturally turn firstly to the scriptures, seeking to find within them a foundation for the doctrines contained in the teaching. The main scriptural texts used by the Roman Catholic Church to consider the issue of homosexuality are dealt with in *The 1986-Letter*: 6. They are the Genesis 1-2 account of humankind being fashioned in the image of God; this being reflected in the complementarity of male and female, and the Genesis 19:1-11 narrative about the men of Sodom. The scriptural sources continue with the prohibition of one type of male-male homosexual act in Leviticus 18:22 and the capital punishment prescribed for such acts in Leviticus 20:13. *The 1986-Letter* then considers how Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:9 lists homosexual behaviour among acts that are a barrier to entry into the Kingdom of God. In Romans 1:18-32, Paul uses homosexuality as an example of how pagan people have rejected the revelation of God, and in 1 Tim. 1, those who engage in homosexual acts are also condemned.

2.2.2. The literature that deals with the scriptural texts is extensive, and some of it is dated, but the latter is nevertheless worth considering, as it paved the way for future debate and scholarship on the use of scripture within arguments about the morality of homosexuality. John Boswell (1980) traced a historical analysis of homosexuality in Western Europe from the Christian era until the fourteenth century. We need to consider his work because he drew attention to the fact that the scriptural arguments about homosexuality needed to be reassessed. Like many scholars, he discounted the Sodom narrative in Gn. 19 as having anything significant to say about the morality of homosexuality and the Levitical prohibitions on some same-sex acts as being unimportant in the formation of an early Christian sexual ethic about sexuality. His exegesis of the Pauline texts includes analysis of the terms used in 1 Cor. 6:9, *malakos* (μαλακός) and *arsenokoitai* (ἀρσενικοῖται), and also in 1 Tim. 1:10 about sinners who would not inherit the kingdom of God. *Malakos* is basically translated as a man who is 'soft' or lacking sufficient masculinity, a term which Boswell contended is more broadly

translated here as ‘wanton’ or ‘unrestrained’, and therefore not specifically referencing same-sex acts (1980: 106-7). The rarely-used term *arsenokoitai*, he contended, is one that is used to denote a type of male prostitute (1980: 107). Robin Scroggs (1983: 106-8) advanced the idea that a *malakos* was a soft or feminine-acting male sex worker and that *arsenokoitai* referred to the purveyors or patrons of their sexual services. Boswell also dismissed Rom. 1:26-7, used most frequently by theologians as scriptural evidence against same-sex acts, on the basis that those Gentiles accused by Paul of subverting the natural use of their sexual faculties, (in the phrase, *para physin*, παρά Φύσιν) are in fact heterosexuals engaging in same-sex acts (1980: 109).

The ideas put forward by Boswell and Scroggs have come to be viewed less than favourably. David Greenburg (1988: 212-13) regarded Scroggs’ view about the role of a *malakos* as being arbitrary and speculative and Boswell’s views about 1 Cor. as non-persuasive. Furthermore, regardless of Boswell’s interpretation of Rom. 1, Greenburg (1988: 216-17) found it difficult to accept that Paul, given his ascetical views about heterosexuality, would be anything other than censorious about any forms of same-sex activity about which he may have been aware in his social and cultural milieu. Richard Hays (1986: 184-215) was unconvinced about Boswell’s views on *arsenokoitai*, and although he didn’t dismiss the merits of Boswell’s attempts to broaden interpretations of this term in particular, is famously scathing of Boswell’s analysis of the Romans passage. Hays (1986:191) asserted that Paul, whilst regarding the issue of same-sex activity as secondary to the theological argument in Rom. 1, nevertheless viewed homosexual acts as contrary to the complementarity of the Creator’s clearly heterosexual plan outlined in Gn. 1-2. The inclusion of same-sex acts is, therefore, not accidental.

Hays forensically dissects Boswell’s exegesis and concludes by stating that Boswell blurs the ‘distinction between exegesis and hermeneutics’ and that, in reality, Paul does regard homosexual activity as a ‘vivid and shameful sign of humanity’s confusion and rebellion against God’(Hays 1986: 211). Hays also dismisses the assertions of Scroggs (1983: 106-8) but credits his approach as not being culpable of Boswell’s blurring of world views. In an interesting turn of events, Richard Hays and his theologian son Christopher released a book in September 2024 entitled *The Widening of God’s Mercy: Sexuality Within the Biblical Story*. Within the text, there are arguments that indicate a notable change of position by Hays, together with scriptural arguments which show a God whose mind and heart can change, and who has changed the debate by extending grace to people of different sexualities.

Interestingly, when it came to his assessment of Boswell’s scriptural contribution to the debate, in a Foreword to the 35th-anniversary edition in 2015 of Boswell (1980), Mark Jordan indicated that one of Boswell’s key achievements lay in how he offered the scripture scholarship community an ‘impertinent challenge’ and he asks:

What evidence do contemporary readers have for determining the meanings of crucial words in biblical passages that have been used for centuries to condemn same-sex desire? A candid answer is that Christians find the meanings obvious only because they have determined them in advance. (Jordan 2015: xvii)

Boswell, according to Jordan, elucidated unforeseen responses from the many who sought to correct his scriptural mistakes. In doing so, they discovered appalling and widely accepted errors in biblical translations that e.g. involved the translating of the first-century Greek words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* as simply the nineteenth-century medical term ‘homosexuality’ (RSV 1 Cor. 6:9). Before Boswell, no one thought to check any of these errors and mistranslations, ‘because everyone somehow knew what Paul meant to condemn’ (2015: xvii). Boswell, for these reasons, made possible a necessary reassessment of the scriptural arguments about homosexuality. The dissection of biblical texts in the subsequent years has been exhaustive but not conclusive, as scholars attempt to establish the thinking of biblical authors. These provide few clues as to how they would have judged the only types of same-sex acts and relationships they could have known about within their particular societies.

2.2.3. Robert Gagnon (2002) offered a detailed exegesis of the scriptural texts that contribute to the ethical arguments about homosexuality, encompassing OT witness and the witness of Jesus, Paul, and Deutero-Paul alongside the overall hermeneutical relevance of biblical witness. This is a detailed work in which Gagnon (2002: 326) concluded that same-sex intercourse is primarily rejected as morally illicit in the scriptures because it represents ‘a violation of the gendered existence of male and female ordained by God at creation’ (2002: 293). Countryman (2003) argued that Gagnon’s work is weakened by his use of rhetoric and his frequent expressions of personal revulsion for same-sex acts. In one of very many such examples, Gagnon claimed that the very small number of homosexuals who are not sexually promiscuous, who form stable relationships, and who do not engage in dangerous sexual activities cannot be used as a justification for homosexual activity. He claimed there may be a similarly small percentage of those who practice paedophilia, incest, or polygamy who aren’t promiscuous, have stable partnerships, and so forth, but that this cannot justify their sexual predilections (Gagnon 2002: 293). The line between scholarly exegesis and rhetorical positioning is very blurred here.

2.2.4. Gareth Moore (2003) undertook an examination of the biblical texts. Alongside the views of many scholars, he was adamant that the Sodom narrative is primarily about the sin of inhospitality and that the assertion in *PH-1975* that ‘there can be no doubt of the moral judgement made there against homosexual relations’ is simply false [as] there is no such judgement’ (Moore 2003: 73). The Levitical texts received a similarly robust treatment from Moore, who argued that a prohibition on one specific male-male sexual act could not be used to condemn all other same-sex acts. Furthermore, the fact that male-male anal intercourse was a taboo within the communities governed by Levitical law

was primarily down to the misogyny which condemned any man who lowered himself to assume the sexual position of a woman, and the dominant male who so demeaned him (2003: 78-81).

Regarding Rom. 1, Moore (2003: 95-6) found Boswell's idea that Paul may be referring to people who are misusing their sexual nature by playing at being 'homosexual' does not 'ring true'. However, he did find many other flaws in the attempts to use Rom. 1 as the primary NT text to prohibit same-sex acts. The context of the chapter makes it clear that same-sex activities in whatever form Paul is referring to them are the punishment for the sin of Gentile lack of belief and not the sin itself (Moore 2003: 89). The shameful or dishonour of such acts may have been connected to the diminishment of the Roman male sense of virility or masculinity for those who practice them (Moore 2003: 93). In any event Moore (2003: 93-4) gave credence to Scroggs (1983: 106-8) that various forms of pederasty may have been the dominant form of same-sex activity known to Roman society, and that this renders the Rom. 1 condemnation irrelevant to the activities associated with same-sex relationships in the twenty-first century. Moore was adamant (2003: 96-9) that Paul, despite the claims often made to the contrary, was making no reference whatsoever to lesbian acts, which are never at any point mentioned in the entirety of scripture. Moore (2003: 104-5) ultimately saw the existence of considerable numbers of Christian homosexuals who do accept Christ as the ultimate reason for not accepting Rom. 1. These men and women cannot be compared to the Gentiles to whom Paul uncontroversially directs this passage. For Moore (2003: 105), 'homosexual relationships between devout Christians are simply not a possibility envisaged by the text we have, and the argument of the text therefore does not and cannot apply to them'. Furthermore, none of the other behaviours condemned by Paul in Rom. 1:29-31 (murder, deceit, the hating of God, heartlessness, ruthlessness, and so forth) can be credibly associated with Christian homosexuals who have not rejected God's message and who therefore have not been punished by being handed over to such behaviours by God (Moore 2003: 106).

In dealing with the list of evildoers in 1 Cor. 6:9, including the *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* who will not inherit God's kingdom, Moore (2003: 110) speculated that the list itself seems to be connected to the practice of injustice. In this respect, the context could suggest that Paul was condemning exploitative pederastic acts that demean or dishonour the weaker or less powerful recipient of such acts by a man in authority. For Moore (2003: 112), the type of person being referred to in 1 Cor. 6:9 and 1 Tim. 1:10, with Paul's rarely used term *arsenokoitai* was simply impossible to know. Ultimately, Moore correctly contended that the extent to which these Pauline condemnations could be applied to the majority within same-sex relationships who are not pederasts or seek to feminise their partners is very doubtful.

Enzo Cortese (1997: 30-2) pointed out that it was within the OT that sexual complementarity and God's heterosexual plan for humanity were revealed. Ultimately, the OT places all forms of

human frailty, of which homosexuality is but one, in the explanatory framework of original sin. Romano Penna (1987: 35-8) stated that Paul, whilst not setting out a treatise on homosexuality, did nevertheless condemn same-sex acts in 1 Cor. and 1 Tim. Penna also strongly rejected any attempts to limit the potency of the Rom. 1 argument, as Paul was making an important point about the vice of homosexual acts, of which self-punishment for the offenders was the consequence. Moore (2003: 58-9) warned that homophobia may be the underlying reason for those who zealously use selective scripture to condemn homosexuality. A typical example for him occurred when *The 1986-Letter: 6* states that in Rom. 1, 'Paul is at a loss to find a clearer example of this disharmony [between Creator and creatures] than homosexual relations'. Moore insisted that highlighting homosexuality as the clearest example of divine-human disharmony is simply not in the Pauline text and was an example of rhetoric used to add authority to a text which it does not possess (Moore 2003: 116).

There are frequent references made in many of the Church teachings on homosexuality about the biblical basis for the complementarity of a heterosexual couple, and the divine plan for marital union that we may read into these texts, coming mainly from the opening Genesis narratives. Homosexuality, therefore, represents an aberration, contradicting and subverting the divine blueprint. Moore examined such scriptural arguments, largely based on Gn. 1:27. Lawler, Boyle, and May (1998) had claimed that the male and female communion uniquely manifests God's full image. Moore (2003: 121) argued that the text does not assert that men and women are somehow incomplete images which, when united complement one another to create a more complete image of God. Nor is there any indication of the theme of male-female complementarity. Obviously, there may be a clear reproductive complementarity, but the text simply does not indicate that this means men and women are complementary images of God. Nor does it indicate that the *full* image of God is to be found through their communion, one with the other. This, for Moore (2003: 123) could only mean that textually, 'each person, male or female, is a complete image of God in his or her own right.'

The 1986-Letter: 7 seems to make clear that God has ordained a heterosexual plan for humankind, into which homosexuals do not fit. Gn. 1:27 does not, according to Moore (2003: 124-6), ascribe such symbolic weight and meaning to heterosexual acts, and same-sex acts cannot, therefore, annul or contradict a symbolism that doesn't exist. Salzman and Lawler (2006: 182-205) added weight to Moore's analysis, arguing that sexual complementarity is not confined to the biological and can encompass non-heterosexual and non-reproductive unions. Moore (2003: 146-7) also claimed that the Gn. 2 account, often used to uphold the normativity of heterosexuality, contains no unalterable divine blueprint for heterosexual marriage but rather the joy that God takes in humans finding companions that delight them (Gn. 2:23), alongside an aetiological attempt to explain the origins of marriage in Gn. 2:24. The Genesis texts are also referenced in Mt. 19:3-8, but Moore (2003: 148-50) argued that Jesus may be affirming the lifelong nature of marriage but says nothing about

homosexuality. Moore (2003: 150) rejected John Harvey's (1987) view that the significance of Jesus using these Genesis texts implies a divine approval of heterosexuality over homosexuality.

2.2.5. Pizzuto (2008: 178), citing Bieringer (1997), maintained that revelation is an ongoing process to which *all* parts of the ecclesial body contribute to a deepening awareness of God's revelatory plan. Homosexual Christians, from their experience and as part of the ecclesial body, have a contribution to make to the unfolding ecclesial awareness of this plan. Jordan (2000: 35-6) dismissed the assertion in *The 1986-Letter: 5* that its teaching on same-sex love rests on the solid and constant testimony of scripture. The CDF, he claimed, insists on the truth of its own interpretation of such contested scripture, 'even if modern biblical scholarship... says just the opposite'. There is clearly no consensus on the meaning of such texts, and Jordan is correct to point this out. He asserted that the CDF has dispensed itself from the requirement to be influenced by a wide range of biblical scholarship on these texts and that its arguments rely upon its presumed right to give its readers an 'authoritative scolding' (Jordan 2000: 36). Pizzuto (2008: 175) noted a lack of consistency from a Church which rejects biblical literalism as it applies to a wide range of other issues such as cosmology, evolution and the origins of sin, but fails on the issue of homosexuality to segregate the 'divine substance of the biblical message' from what are clearly its 'human limitations'.

2.2.6. Margaret Farley (2006: 277) reviewed the multiple scholarly interpretations of the biblical texts and concluded that 'there exists no solid ground for an absolute prohibition or a comprehensive, unquestionable blessing for same-sex relationships and actions today'. Using the insights of modern scholarship and exegesis, Farley argued that the task of the Christian community will lie in discerning how important any such isolated textual arguments can actually be. Jordan (2002: 46) suggested that regarding the ethics of sexuality, Christian readers of the Bible needed to 'use new problems or cases to force a reconsideration and recombination of scriptural authorities'. *The 2021 Academic Statement on the Ethics of Free and Faithful Same-Sex Relationships*, by the Wijngaards Institute (from now on, *WI-Statement-2021*), analysed all the arguments used by the Church for its current stance on same-sex acts and relationships. Twenty theologians contributed to its authorship or were among its original signatories, with 56 theologian co-signatories. It assessed the prohibitions in both Testaments as being limited to very specific sexual acts between men and not relevant to same-sex acts or relationships in general, containing no prohibition whatsoever on female same-sex acts or relationships. It cited the particular cultural and social contexts in which biblical authors produced their work as lacking the context of relationship, sexual freedom, and equality, within which many same-sex acts and relationships occur in the twenty-first century. These texts, therefore, have no relevance or authority to proscribe these acts today. The procreative imperative insisted upon by the Church for every sexual act cannot be supported by scripture, and the virtues of companionship and mutual support in a relationship are weighted in scripture with at least the same importance as fecundity. The biblical

analysis of the *WI-Statement-2021* (§3.2.9., 19) concluded convincingly with the assertion that the ‘Bible contains no prohibition or condemnation of free, faithful, and lifelong same-sex relationships’.

2.3. Tradition and Natural Moral Law arguments (NML)

2.3.1. By insisting that all sexual acts contain an openness to procreation, the Church, in its teachings, uses aspects of the NML tradition to appeal to reason and tradition as supporting the prohibition of homosexual acts. This section will look at how some authors have viewed this aspect of Church teaching. Lawler, Boyle, and May (1985, 1996, 1998: 191) explained the main NML argument against homosexual acts by contrasting them with the fruitful and procreative orientation of heterosexual marital love. Homosexual love, they maintained, is not ordered to any ‘transcendent good’, and that such partners cannot be what heterosexual spouses are to one another because their sexual acts are incapable of procreation. By way of illustration, they reference a survey in *Homosexualities: A Study of Diversity Among Men and Women* (1978) by Bell & Weinberg and quoted by Samuel McCracken (1979), indicating that half of the white homosexual men surveyed in San Francisco in 1969-70 had had at least 500 sexual partners. Such deliberate referencing of the sexual excesses of pre-HIV-AIDS U.S.A., through statistics from one unique and atypical urban area, in a work of moral theology seems to indicate a certain confirmation bias by the authors.

2.3.2. The *Catechism-1992* (2357) teaches that homosexual acts ‘are contrary to the natural law...[and] close the sexual act to the gift of life’. Moore (2003: 185-190) examined the relevant arguments of Aquinas against homosexual acts: the frustration of the desire for self-preservation, that they go against the desire humans have as animals, and that they go against the desires springing from the reason that all humans have. Attempts to prove the veracity of these three arguments, singly or in conjunction with one another, created for Moore (2003: 190-92) a quagmire of further hypotheses ‘fraught with difficulties’. The simpler solution—that ‘some people are spontaneously homosexual’ is more coherent (Moore 2003: 193). Moore (2003: 194) contended that just because heterosexual coupling is morally good does not mean that homosexual coupling is not. A *malum*, for Aquinas, is something that all animals shun naturally, but this is not the case in humans or animals when it comes to homosexual behaviour. Moore concluded:

Just as natural law does not entail the rejection of same-sex practices, so acceptance of those practices does not entail a rejection of the concept of natural law. Hence, it is possible not to reject homosexual practices and still to remain faithful to a long theological tradition of the church. (2003: 195)

George (1999) and Finnis (1994) disputed this assertion and insisted on the retention of the strong link between sexual acts and reproductive intent to ensure their ethical goodness. A sufficient amount of heterosexual intercourse is a moral good by perpetuating the species, but Moore (2003: 234) argued that this does not mean we can say that solely unitive heterosexual or non-heterosexual acts are

morally wrong. If the reproductive purpose is not always required for a sexual act to be morally good, 'then the position of Aquinas is undermined, and so too is the condemnation of same-sex acts in *Persona Humana*'. Jordan (2000: 31) is scathing in his critique of how the Church uses NML in *PH-1975*: 8, claiming that 'it wants to appeal to the natural law traditions while disdaining the evidence that has traditionally counted in natural law arguments,' a view with which the *WI-Statement-2021*: §3.2.3: 68 would concur.

2.3.3. The gay political commentator Andrew Sullivan (1995: 32-3) summarised Aquinas' view as establishing that human beings are heterosexuals by nature, law, and the order of the universe and should seek procreation as the natural end of the sexual act. To engage in homosexual acts is to contravene nature, the moral law, and the order of the universe designed by God. Nevertheless, Sullivan observed that natural law is based on the observation of the natural ends and purposes of all actions, and so it must also deal with the unavoidable observation that the occurrence of homosexual behaviour has always been a constant, natural, and observable behaviour for a certain percentage of human beings. For these people, 'naturally and unavoidably homosexual', procreation cannot be the natural end or *telos* of their sexual acts. Sullivan (1995: 46-7) argued for the 'centrality of heterosexual acts in nature, not their exclusiveness'. Men and women attracted sexually to people of their own gender, therefore, do not subvert their own nature, or human nature, or indeed 'deny heterosexual primacy', but act as a naturally occurring foil to the heterosexual norm. To attempt to prohibit the natural expression of such a naturally occurring minority would, according to Sullivan (1995: 47), be the 'real crime against nature'. Aquinas could not have had such a modern concept of sexual orientation or any knowledge about the distinction between heterosexuals and homosexuals.

2.3.4. Livio Melina (1997: 106-9), in a series of articles published by the Vatican in *L'Osservatore Romano* in 1997, reflected that unable to become one flesh, with the absence of the complementary and total giving of body and self, homosexual acts are moments of selfish pleasure and illusory false intimacy, enacted in a prism of solitude that renders its practitioners to be pathological narcissists. This rhetorical quest to address Christian anthropology by labelling homosexuality with such extreme terminology frequently undermines the scholarly persuasiveness of this whole series of articles by scholars chosen from a selection of Pontifical and Catholic universities. Salzman and Lawler (2015: 136-7), by contrast, explored the issue of biological and metaphorical openness to life as applied to same-sex acts and relationships. Whilst not denying that same-sex acts do not possess 'heterogenital or reproductive complementarity', this does not preclude (as with infertile heterosexual couples) the presence of 'personal complementarity'. Exploring the contribution of David McCarthy (1998), they asserted that 'both homosexual and heterosexual couples can exhibit "iconic significance" in their embodied interpersonal unions and sexual acts'. Salzman and Lawler asserted that 'the truly human sexual act is doubly defined...as an act that is in accord with a person's sexual orientation and leads to the human flourishing of both partners'. For them, 'it is 'the integration of orientation with personal

and biological complementarity [that] determines whether or not a sexual act is moral or immoral’ (2015: 152). In their later work, these authors convincingly concluded that all sexual acts, regardless of the couple’s orientation ‘are natural because they coincide with and reflect the fundamental human “nature” of a person created by God. They are moral when they are not only natural but also free, just, and loving’. (Lawler and Salzman 2022a: 570)

2.3.5. Grisez (1993: 570, 653) offered an argument from reason—that in heterosexual intercourse, the fusion of the organs of reproduction creates one organism, and that this one-fleshment is both fruitful and the mechanism by which a couple ‘donate themselves’, one to the other. Same-sex acts have neither fruitfulness nor mutual self-donation, rendering such acts sterile and self-centred. Moore (2003: 260-2) queried the logic of how two biological organs can become one fused organ or how the reproductive heterosexual act in itself enables the ‘gifting of selves’, male to female, in a way that non-procreative sex-acts cannot. He argued that a couple’s communion has less to do with this act of one-fleshment, and more to do with the attitudes and quality of their everyday acts of selflessness and mutual donation. Lovemaking will only strengthen the bond if these everyday acts and attitudes are being carried out and maintained. Moore (2003: 279) found Grisez’s position to be absurd—that heterosexual intercourse could carry such a profound objective meaning that it would be part of the act even if no one ever knew it. Meaning is ascribed to actions by those who engage in them, and this includes sexual acts. ‘Meaning is a human affair’ and ‘to try to ground the meaning of sexual activity in the creative activity of God is to make a fundamental mistake’ (Moore 2003: 280). If, as Fergus Kerr (2007: 215-6) asserts, the idea that every contraceptive act of intercourse is intrinsically immoral ‘seems implausible to an increasing number of people, Catholics included’, the teaching that non-procreative homosexual relations between same-sex partners are intrinsically immoral would seem to be just as implausible.

2.3.6. The UK-based Australian philosopher John Finnis was responsible for one of the strongest defences of natural law in relation to homosexuality. Finnis, writing about the heterosexual marital union and drawing on historical analysis by Grisez (1993), contended that:

parenthood and children and family are the intrinsic fulfilment of a communion which, because it is not merely instrumental, can exist and fulfil the spouses even if procreation happens to be impossible for them. (1994: 1065)

This is *the* intrinsic ‘good’ of marriage, inseparable from its heterosexual nuptial matrix, and it renders the sexual acts that occur between same-sex partners incapable of enabling them to become the biological and ‘personal unit’ that can only occur in a heterosexual marital union. Such same-sex acts are, therefore, only acts of ‘individual self-gratification’, the choosing of which ‘dis-integrates each of them precisely as acting persons’ (Finnis 1994: 1066-7). Finnis (1994: 1066, footnote 46) commented on a quote from Steven Macedo (1993), who suggests that, like sterile couples, same-sex

couples could express their love sexually in a way that would be open to biological life were such a thing possible. Finnis rejected such thinking as fantasy, comparing it to a goatherd wishing to have sex with his goat to create a fawn. Finnis continued by comparing same-sex acts to those between two complete strangers, a prostitute and their client, or a tired factory worker who masturbates alone to ease the stress of his working day. Finnis acting from a position of judgement over same-sex acts, dismissed with provocative analogies the import of these acts for same-sex couples who may perhaps be experientially better placed to judge them than he is.

Labelling the term 'gay' as 'deplorable', Finnis (1994: 1069-70) accused homosexual people through their sexual choices of being deliberately hostile to 'the self-understanding of those members of the community who are willing to commit themselves to real marriage'. Finnis considered this danger to be so acute that any society ought to work towards ensuring that a homosexual lifestyle is not seen as 'a valid, humanly acceptable choice and form of life' and must 'do what it properly can...to discourage such conduct'. Finnis (1994:1076) does not support criminalisation of same-sex acts, but societies should nevertheless avoid the mistake of thinking that such a decriminalisation should go hand in hand with promoting 'homosexualist' lifestyles, marriages, or the legal adoption of children. One can only imagine the philosophical and legal disdain with which Finnis must view the particular liberal democracy in which he currently resides.

2.3.7. Michael Perry (1995: 63), responding to Finnis, considered how deliberately contracepted intercourse for married heterosexuals can be much more than acts of individualised gratification. This being the experiential reality of the majority of married Catholic heterosexuals, Perry asks, if, contra Finnis, "deliberately contracepted" sex is not "deeply hostile" to their self-understanding, why should homosexual sex that takes place in the context of a lifelong, monogamous relationship of faithful love be deeply hostile to their self-understanding? Margaret Farley (2006: 279-80) contended that the tradition, whilst offering no approval for same-sex relationships, does not contain any absolute prohibition on the just, faithful, and loving same-sex relationships that currently exist. It is notable that Farley (2006: 291-2) reserved her most forceful admonitions for figures like Finnis for being unreasoned and irresponsible and for contributing to the social taboos that perpetuate injustice to homosexual people. In a summary of Finnis' position, Farley (2006: 292, footnote 83), noted for her moderate tone, contended that he 'fuels the vehemence of negative judgements with inflammatory language'.

2.3.8. Jordan, commenting on the appeal *PH-1975*: 8 makes to NML as a justification for condemning same-sex acts, assessed it as 'bad Thomism' (2000: 27). He contended that it 'runs together' NML with revelation, something which is meticulously distinguished by Aquinas and confuses the topic by speaking of a natural capacity to know divine law (Jordan 2000: 26). He claimed that rather than being in the tradition of Aquinas, it borrows a great deal from the kind of philosophical, ethical

personalism, made popular by John-Paul II, as innovation rather than the continuation of Catholic ethical tradition. Gerard Loughlin, in *Making Humans* (2015), drew upon the insights of Fergus Kerr (2007) in addressing the issue of how the anthropology of nuptiality drawn exclusively from the opening chapters of Genesis has, for the Church, extraordinarily replaced that of NML thinking. Loughlin furthermore argued that the Church, in espousing the thinking of Karol Wojtyla and Joseph Ratzinger, has come to equate the human body's exclusively heterosexual 'spousal significance' with the image of God in humanity. Loughlin pointed out that 'this means that there is no image of God in the homosexual, and since the image of God is the mark of humanity, no homosexual is fully human'. Jordan (2000: 28) asserted that *PH-1975: 8* is devoid of argument and is ultimately concerned with decreeing that 'sex must be procreative because homosexuality must be condemned'. Gerard Loughlin (2015a: 7) argued that Aquinas had no knowledge of modern same-sex orientation, and the vice he condemns is that of heterosexuals who seek additional sexual pleasure in an unnatural manner. Aquinas, he argues, in condemning 'lying' as unnatural, would agree that modern homosexuals would be lying if they were to practice heterosexuality. He concurs with Eugene Rogers (2007) that this teaching should be an encouragement for homosexuals 'to come out and be out' and flourish in accordance with their nature. This, Loughlin correctly argued, 'would be entirely consonant with natural law, as understood by Thomas' (2015a: 7).

2.3.9. Eugene Rogers looked at a division among ethicists about the issue of homosexuality in regard to those who follow Aquinas' thinking. He claimed that '[t]hose emphasizing natural law may call such relationships unnatural; those emphasizing the virtues may approve of relationships fostering love and justice' (Rogers 1999: 29 also 2013: 148). Rogers argues that for Aquinas, there were four converging arguments against 'the unnatural vice' (Aquinas' term for homosexuality in *Summa Theologiae* II-II, question 154, 12). These are that the unnatural vice exemplifies the vices of injustice and ingratitude, that it fails to comply with natural law, contravenes scripture, and invalidates the correct judgements of those who are wise (Rogers 1999: 31 and also 2013: 149). Rogers argued that for Aquinas these arguments against the unnatural vice are inseparable, in contrast to the manner in which some ethicists focus only on the one argument, that the unnatural vice contravenes natural law.

[T]o be authentically Thomistic, we must craft a space for moral argument in which these four elements of concern again come together: what counts as justice, what counts as natural, what Scripture says, and the wisdom of the interpreter. (Rogers 1999: 32)

Rogers' argument asserted that it is not insignificant in the dispute surrounding the morality of same-sex acts and relationships that some of the converging arguments of Aquinas no longer seem to act as harmoniously as they would have seemed to do for Aquinas (Rogers 1999: 46). The interpretation of the scriptural texts that purport to deal with homosexuality are disputed by some of

those who would have been termed by Aquinas to be ‘the wise’ (*maiores in fide*). The natural sciences also provide evidence that now causes some of ‘the wise’ to be unconvinced that same-sex acts are an unnatural vice. Similarly, empirical observations of those who are homosexual or in relationships can certainly call into question the assertion that such acts or the relationships in which they occur exemplify the vice of injustice. Aquinas would have been in no position to have known any of these developments that have arisen as a result of modern science, scriptural scholarship, and civil laws that have allowed same-sex individuals and relationships to be viewed by society as not inimical to that which serves the virtue of justice. Even on the basis of scripture alone, Rogers is clear that this would be sufficient for maintaining an openness to further dispute.

Insofar as interpretations of Romans 1:26 exist that distinguish what Paul objects to from what gay and lesbian Christians in marriage-like same-sex unions practice, thinking in the style of Aquinas does not just allow, but requires theologians to keep the matter open. (Rogers 2013: 172-3)

The disputes among ‘the wise’ who now have access to new knowledge are, at the very least, a good reason why we cannot look to Aquinas or to natural law alone to settle the issue of whether homosexuality is immoral or not. Rogers (1999: 52) contends that as such, the matter is far from closed currently, permitting and giving theologians the room to cogitate on a matter that continues to be disputed, rather than settled, for ‘Aquinas would have the *maiores infide* seek to learn from those both inside and outside the faith’. David McIlroy (2015) assesses Rogers’ contribution favourably:

If Rogers is right, the natural law argument against same-sex relations (as opposed to a general argument against promiscuity) fails. It fails because there is no independent reading of human nature available to us which, by the power of reason alone, will lead us inexorably to a single set of incontrovertible conclusions, regardless of the cultural conditions to which we are subject and the scientific knowledge to which we have access. (McIlroy 2015: 10)

2.3.10. The *WI-Statement-2021*: 3.1.1 identified significant errors contained within the Church’s NML argument against homosexuality. Notable was their assertion that no act of sexual intercourse ever has procreation as its necessary final outcome, with the link between intercourse and fertilisation being statistical rather than necessary. This means that in practice, most heterosexual acts have neither the capacity or finality of a procreative outcome and differ in no way from same-sex acts of intercourse. The authors of the statement (2021: 1.4) argued that the approval given to the marital, sexual relations between sterile couples renders the Church’s prohibition on sterile homosexual relations illegitimate. ‘Non-conceptive moral ends’ are present in every heterosexual relationship, and the clear presence of these in same-sex unions provides these with moral significance. Being biologically incapable of procreation can be no valid reason for condemning same-sex acts as intrinsically

disordered. The statement presents a more pragmatic interpretation of the NML arguments as they pertain to all sexual acts, akin to those of Margaret Farley (2006) and Lawler and Salzman (2022a), in declaring convincingly that free, just, loving same-sex relations are morally correct in line with the orientation of such partners. NML must resonate with the observable reality of nature as it is revealed in the lives, relationships, and acts of real human beings.

2.4. The insights of the human sciences

2.4.1. The Church in its teachings, does not make many references to the insights that may have been derived from the human sciences, as their discoveries and ideas about same-sex attraction and its genesis have evolved in recent decades. The Church does assert, however, that its own teachings on this issue *are* supported by the more secure scientific opinions (1986-Letter: 2). The World Medical Association issued the following statement in 2024:

A large body of scientific research indicates that being lesbian, gay, or bisexual constitute natural variations of human sexuality without any intrinsically harmful health effects. They do not constitute a disorder or illness that requires treatment or cure and any efforts to do so are contrary to the ethical practice of medicine. (World Medical Association 2024)

In 2016, the World Psychiatric Association stated that ‘along with other international organizations, the WPA considers sexual orientation to be innate and determined by biological, psychological, developmental, and social factors’. The WPA statement contains a reminder that approximately 4% of the human population identifies with a same-sex orientation, with a further 0.5% identifying with a gender other than the one assigned at birth. Homosexuality was removed from the American Psychiatric Association’s official diagnostic manual in 1973, and the WPA statement also contains a reminder that it has been decades since modern medicine treated same-sex attraction as a pathology:

The World Health Organization (WHO) accepts same-sex orientation as a normal variant of human sexuality. The United Nations Human Rights Council values lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights. In two major diagnostic and classification systems (ICD-10 and DSM-5), same-sex sexual orientation, attraction, and behaviour are not seen as pathologies. (World Psychiatric Association 2016)

Both the WMA and the WPA decry violence and discrimination and attempt to practice conversion therapies for same-sex behaviours. The WPA statement indicates that research confirms a drop in mental health issues that LGBT individuals experience when their rights and equality are recognised by society. It is notable that the WPA-2024 statement chooses not to use the term ‘homosexuality’, and instead refers to ‘same-sex orientation and behaviour’. Tracing the gradual move within the medical and psychiatric communities away from the pathologizing of same-sex attraction towards its naturalisation, Gerard Loughlin (2015b: 618) observed that as the term ‘homosexuality’ became freed

from its pathological origins in nineteenth and twentieth-century psychiatry, ‘homosexuals’ adopted new positively framed and self-chosen terms, such as ‘gay’ and ‘queer’. Jordan (2002: 13) discussed the relationship between science and theology and observed that theological thinking about sex cannot ‘proceed as if no one else were talking about it’. He correctly asserted that ‘theology risks crude ignorance if it refuses to learn new legal and medical theories about sexed human bodies’.

2.4.2. Formal WPA and WMA statements have been issued only in recent years, but the evolving insights of the human sciences have been available and accessible for several decades. Jordan (2000: 30) seemed incredulous about the degree to which the Church appeared to either disregard scientific knowledge or consider its own reasoning to be superior. Rather than appeal to actual twentieth-century science, *PH-1975* assumes the veneer of scientific respectability by using nineteenth-century legal and scientific notions of what passed for the knowledge of ‘homosexuality’ a century previously (Jordan 2000: 29). Jordan was derisive of the positives that some people have sought to extract from the distinction made in *PH-1975* between the homosexual *act* and the homosexual *condition*. ‘So, when the Vatican declared itself ready in 1975 to view at least some of us as incurable, we should not have been overjoyed’ (Jordan 2000: 30). The appeal to nineteenth-century science is deliberately deceptive, Jordan contended, as with regard to actual twentieth-century science, it seems to exercise a total veto:

This high-handed way of dealing with medicine and natural science is one of the most disturbing features of the Declaration. To my mind, it effectively undermines all of its appeals to nature and the natural. (Jordan 2000: 30)

Jordan contended that the body of *PH-1975* contradicts its opening aspiration (*PH-1975*: 1) to discover through science the human aspiration to achieve happiness through an ethical quest for the good because:

it tries to do so without seriously engaging the new sciences of human sex. If it borrows older scientific or medical categories, it simply sets aside recent scientific results that don’t agree with its assertions. It selects its facts. (Jordan 2000: 30)

Jordan’s astonishment about the Church’s failure to engage with observational scientific reasoning grew stronger as he considered *The 1986-Letter*. For him, its treatment of actual NML is sparse and devoid of detail, and its claim to rest upon the ‘sure advances’ of the human sciences (*1986-Letter*: 2) makes the presumption that it alone has the authority to decide what ‘sure’ means, after which medical or scientific discoveries are never again referred to.

2.4.3. *The 1986-Letter*: 2 contends that the Catholic moral perspective on homosexuality finds support from the ‘more secure findings’ of the natural sciences, so it is worth considering what some of these ‘more secure findings’ might be. Gianfrancesco Zuanazzi was professor of psychology and

psychopathology at the Pontifical Lateran University in Rome and produced two articles in *L'Osservatore Romano* (Zuanazzi 1997) dealing with some aspects of homosexuality in relation to its scientific, medical, and psychiatric explanations. His first contribution concluded that a variety of factors, biological, personal, and environmental, may be at play in causing the homosexual condition. In the second article, Zuanazzi pursued a vigorous condemnation of homosexuality, backed up by selective scientific, medical, psychiatric, and literary sources. As a psychologist writing a scholarly article in support of the Church's human anthropology, he identified narcissism as being at the heart of homosexual drives; he ridiculed homosexual pseudo-relationships and the homosexual's quest for recognition, referencing the myth of Narcissus and Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray literary construction as being emblematic of this deep-seated tendency.

2.4.4. *The 1986-Letter* claims its moral perspective is supported by the more secure scientific opinions. One may presume, therefore, that the 1997 *L'Osservatore Romano* articles, authored by Catholic academics and collated by the Church's principal media publication might exemplify some of these more secure scientific opinions. In these articles, Zuanazzi, as a pontifical university professor of psychology, referred extensively to the work of the American psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Charles Socarides who founded and worked with the National Association for Research & Therapy of Homosexuality. He was a prominent advocate for conversion therapy and, throughout his later career, was vehemently opposed to the removal of homosexuality from the American Psychiatric Association's diagnostic manual of mental disorders in 1973. Zuanazzi, with no reference given, claimed that Socarides affirmed that:

every homosexual encounter is primarily concerned with disarming the partner by means of seduction, prayer, power, prestige, effeminacy or masculinity, in order to derive satisfaction from the loser...[and] as a rule they are unstable, unfaithful, strewn with jealousy and bitterness, marked by possessive love and demands that will never be satisfied. (Zuanazzi 1997: 61)

Socarides, writing in 1995 (*How America Went Gay*), claimed, 'we know that obligatory homosexuals are caught up in unconscious adaptations to early childhood abuse and neglect', continuing with an angry attack on the deliberate manipulation of psychiatry and society towards viewing homosexuality as a legitimate life choice. Rejecting all genetic or biological explanations for homosexuality, he strongly advocated conversion therapy, of which he claimed to be a very successful practitioner. Condemning the politicisation of homosexuality with regard to rights, Socarides compared it to a war on society which destroys the truth, the spoils of which are its own children. In tandem with his condemnation of the gay rights movement and his advocating the need for strong family values, Socarides divorced three times and witnessed his gay son becoming a principal adviser to President

Clinton on gay and lesbian civil rights from 1993-1999, later becoming the founder of Equality Matters, a media group advocating LGBT rights.

2.4.5. Socarides (1995) is also referenced by Bartholomew Kiely of the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome. In another article for the series published in *L'Osservatore Romano* in 1997, Kiely used Socarides' psychiatric reasoning to reject the possibility of any scientific discoveries about homosexuality ever changing its inherent immorality. The causes of homosexuality, according to Kiely (1997: 100), lie with 'pathogenic family constellations', which include weak, punitive, or hostile parents and opposite-sex parents who are seductive, demeaning, hostile, or 'emotionally disorganised'. Kiely based his assessment of homosexual pathology and the dysfunctional families from which he contended they emerge on a study by Irving Bieber (1979) and his own experience with homosexual confidantes. Bieber also rejected the APA decision of 1973 and was a strong advocate of conversion therapy, claiming with his co-authors a 30 -50 % success rate in shifting a homosexual person's orientation to heterosexuality.

2.4.6. The Catholic Medical Association, an organisation that one might assume would also be a secure scientific source for the Vatican, made a statement entitled *Homosexuality and Hope* in 2001. It cites a lengthy range of studies, the references for which are available only by request to the CMA: (Rice 1999), (Gadd 1998), (Horgan 1995), (Byrne 1963), (Crewdson 1995), (Goldberg 1992), (McGuire 1995), (Porter 1996). On the basis of these, the statement categorically rejected any claims that homosexuality has any genetic predetermination. It contended that the public drive to establish such a biological explanation is politically motivated to bring about a change in civil and religious laws and teachings (CMA 2001: 132-3). The statement provides alternative causes for homosexuality:

Table 6. Catholic Medical Association (CMA) causes for homosexuality in 'Homosexuality and Hope' (2001)

Cause	Reference only available through private request to the CMA)
Distant, violent, or addicted fathers or overprotective, demanding mother.	(Bieber 1962, 1976), (Fitzgibbons, 1999)
Lack of rough and tumble or dislike of team sports.	(Hadden, 1967), (Thompson, 1973)
Teasing due to a lack of hand/eye coordination.	(Bailey, 1993)
Sexual abuse or rape.	(Engel, 1981)
Shyness.	(Golwyn, 1993)
Serious psychological problems such as pathological narcissism.	(Parris, 1993)
Borderline personality disorder.	(Kaplan, 1967)

This statement by medical professionals claimed that empirical evidence affirms the teachings of the Church that homosexual acts are 'intrinsically disordered'. However, the phrase 'intrinsically disordered' is a term which expresses a philosophical and theological idea for which there can surely be no empirical evidence. The statement framed such acts in religious rather than scientific terminology, such as 'temptations' or 'sins against chastity', and it strongly affirmed the real

possibility that homosexuality is preventable and can be altered through a range of successful therapies (CMA 2001: 134, 135-6). It offered pastoral, medical advice to a range of people within the Church who may be in a position to help homosexuals: confessors, doctors, educators, and parents. For example, Catholic educators could defend Church teachings, discourage condom-education, and discourage young people from attending gay support groups (2001: 139). A purportedly scientific statement ended with the following message of hope from Leanne Payne (1981): ‘As a sexual neurosis, homosexuality is regarded as one of the most complex. As a condition for God to heal, it is (in spite of the widespread belief to the contrary) remarkably simple’ (CMA 2001: 140). The tenor of this statement by medical professionals exhibited a curious and inappropriate blending of what they regard as scientific rigour, with religious zeal, rhetoric, and very dangerous sexual-health advice. *The 1986 Letter: 2* did not indicate what the more secure scientific sources that support its moral position actually were. Perhaps, given the quality of the sources referenced above, this was a rather wise omission.

2.4.7. Lawler and Salzman (2022a: 572) referenced the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, particularly *G&S-1965*, in praising the role of social science in the expansion of knowledge and the positive role it plays in the life of society. They noted that successive popes have also valued the research that social science undertakes, with Pope Francis urging people to value and trust science, particularly during the Covid pandemic. They agreed with the words of Cardinal Hollerich, who said in 2022, ‘I believe that the sociological-scientific foundation of this teaching against homosexual acts is no longer correct’.²³ The authors contended that there is ample evidence from social scientific data that personal complementarity exists in same-sex relationships and that the children of such partnerships flourish. They argued that the claim of the magisterium that homosexual acts have no roots in a genuine affective or sexual complementarity is both unsupported and, in fact, contradicted by research data.

2.4.8. Margaret Farley (2006: 280-1) correctly contended that the history of biological and psychological research into same-sex attraction was responsible in part for the pathologizing of homosexuality, a bias that she conceded has partly been corrected in recent years, with scientific research helping to dispel long-standing myths associated with homosexuality. Sceptical of purely biological answers, she warned that a genetic solution could give rise to attempts to view homosexuality as a genetic aberration that could, at some point, be eliminated from the human gene pool. Farley was keen to situate the new scientific insights within the context of how homosexuality has been constructed. Alongside the work of the sociologist David Greenberg (1988), she considered how societies have constructed and labelled various groups as deviant and that beyond the scientific

²³ Katholische Nachrichten-Agentur, ‘Top EU Cardinal Calls for Change in Church Teaching on Gay Relationships’, *National Catholic Reporter*. <https://www.ncronline.org/news/quick-reads/top-eu-cardinal-calls-change-church-teaching-gay-relationship> [accessed 5th July 2024].

explanations for same-sex attraction, questions surrounding the reasons for the exclusion of such minorities should be posed and answered. Farley (2006: 285-6) credited the empirical sciences for having established that the homosexual orientation is not harmful to the people who experience these attractions and that, furthermore, some of the negative religious and philosophical judgements about homosexual people and acts are false. The sciences have assisted in establishing that those with such attractions are incapable of changing their orientation without doing significant harm to the nature of their personhood and that all humans have a capacity to respond in an emotional and sexual way to people of their own and the opposite sex.

2.4.9. Within a positive assessment of the impact that scientific discoveries could have upon the Church and its magisterial teachers, the theologian James Alison (2009) hails the discoveries that the human sciences have revealed. During a public talk entitled *The Fulcrum of Discovery*, he spoke of a liberating truth that has the potential to launch the Church into a new territory of discovery regarding sexuality and its purposes for the majority who are configured as heterosexual and the minority who are not.

In the last fifty years or so we have undergone a genuine human discovery of the sort that we, the human race, don't make all that often. A genuine anthropological discovery: one that is not a matter of fashion, or wishful thinking; not the result of a decline in morals or a collapse of family values. We now know something objectively true about humans that we didn't know before: that there is a regularly occurring, non-pathological minority variant in the human condition, independent of culture, habitat, religion, education, or customs, which we currently call "being gay". (Alison 2009: 2)

That approximately 4% of the human population is 'hardwired' to an attraction to people of their own sex is now established as an objective and factual truth which renders the truth claim of the Church that all humans are 'intrinsically heterosexual' and that those who aren't are therefore defective heterosexuals, to be false (Alison 2009: 9). Alison is clear about the contribution that this new knowledge has made, as one that is backed up by psychological, biological, genetic, medical, and neurological scientific evidence (2000: 9).

2.4.10. The *WI-Statement-2021* begins with a foreword by the Barcelona-based theologian Krzysztof Charamsa, in which he reflects on the past reluctance of the Church to accept and absorb some key cosmological and evolutionary findings, notably the Copernican and Darwinian revolutions. Fear, he claims, was the cause of a paralysis that prevented ecclesial dialogue with scientific knowledge. The twentieth century brought another revolution, one that involved the identity of human beings as sexual creatures, and once more, the Church fearfully resists the knowledge generated by this revolution. He is clear that there exists no scientific grounds to support the procreative imperative that condemns same-sex acts as being intrinsically disordered (2021: 2-4). He continues, 'today there is no longer

any doubt that the variety of sexual orientations is much more than a scientific hypothesis, and as such, it demands to be taken seriously by theological reflection' (2012: 4). Commending the openness of Pope Francis to the contributions of science, particularly in *Evangelii Gaudium*-2013 (24, 40, 231 & 243), the Foreword of the *WI-Statement-2021* calls for the Church to accept the expertise of the human and exegetical sciences in improving its 'current conceptualisation of Christian sexual ethics' in helping it to more fully understand the person created in God's image (2021: 7).

The Introduction to the *WI-Statement-2021* by the theologian Luca Badini Confalonieri reflects on how the condemnations of homosexual acts and unions in the Church teachings about homosexuality were issued with no evidentiary justifications, despite the claim by the Church to be guided by reason. The combined insights from biology, psychology, sociology, and genetics have provided much knowledge about the causes of same-sex attraction, which must now be used by the Church to reevaluate its original teachings. The Foreword has a warning from the 2019 words of Franz-Josef Overbeck, Bishop of Essen, 'Catholic moral teaching on [homosexuality] will be intellectually marginalized to the extent that it avoids engaging with the experiences of the people and the human sciences that reflect on them'. The *WI-Statement-2021*, in its summary of findings, states that sexual orientation is a significant, minority natural variation in a range of human sexuality determined during pregnancy by genetic and social factors. As such, a person's sexual orientation is not the result of a free choice, and no person can consciously alter or change their sexual orientation or identity (2021: 12). The academic statement is informed by a detailed analysis of the various ethical, scriptural, theological, and scientific reasoning, available in its companion Research Report, and condensed in the statement (2021: 13-16).

2.5. Recommended lifestyle for homosexual Christians.

2.5.1. This section looks at some of the arguments from a selection of the literature on how the Church instructs homosexual people to live moral lives. Making it clear that homosexual acts are intrinsically evil and the inclination objectively disordered, *The 1986-Letter*: 3 and *PH-1975*: 8 state clearly that there can be no moral justification for such acts. *The 1986-Letter*: 12 puts forward the solution to the quandary of the homosexual Christian by stipulating a life in which their sufferings are enjoined to those of the crucified Christ and within which their sacrifices will require the crucifixion of their self-indulgent desires and the replacement of vice with virtue. This sacrificial existence demands an entirely chaste state in which homosexuals should seek the spiritual support given particularly by the Sacrament of Penance (confession). *CCC-1992*: 2359 additionally calls on homosexual people to practice self-mastery and prayer and to seek the assistance of sacramental grace and disinterested friendship. In response to the assertion that same-sex oriented people, in only being attracted to people of their own sex, have no requirement to be chaste and celibate, Lawler, Boyle and May (1998: 192) disagreed, on the basis that many other people are called to a chaste life through circumstances outside those of their choosing. They use the situations faced by, e.g. deserted spouses,

those unable to find a marital partner, or those married couples for whom long-term illness makes sexual activity impossible, claiming that they, like homosexuals, can and do receive the grace to live chaste and celibate lives. Like these people, homosexuals can grow in grace, nobly carrying their sacrificial pain, being forgiven when they fall, and being nurtured by the prayers of their Christian community.

They recommend (Lawler, Boyle and May 1998: 193) pastoral initiatives, such as that of Courage, a worldwide support network for homosexual persons founded by John Harvey with a view to helping homosexuals accept Church teachings about them and embrace lives of sacrificial chastity. The goals of Courage International include the encouragement of chastity, spiritual and sacramental support, chaste fellowship with and the support of other same-sex-oriented people, chaste friendships, and the resolve to become good role models to other homosexual people in regard to all the aforementioned. Encourage is an ancillary support network for the families of same-sex-oriented people, and Courage also offers separate support for homosexual clergy or those who wish to offer pastoral support to homosexual people. Courage is officially recognised by the Church and, under its current director, Paul Check, has stated its opposition to conversion therapy practices, but in treating homosexuality as a disorder, it does offer counselling in line with similar 12-step addiction programmes like AA. Its supporters have included Cardinal Raymond Burke, (who recommended that families not invite their partnered homosexual family members to gatherings²⁴) and Cardinal Robert Sarah, a vocal opponent of legal rights for homosexuals.

Its ethos has not been without critical reception, particularly by Dignity USA, a long-standing USA support network for LGBTQ+ Catholics, and New Ways Ministry, a USA-based support and education outreach initiative for LGBTQ+ people. The theologian, human-rights lawyer, and former President of Ireland, Mary McAleese, condemned the methods and ethos of Courage International as being ‘Machiavellian, dangerous and deliberately specious’.²⁵ Archbishop Dionigi Tettamanzi (1997: 15), acknowledging that for some homosexuals, the keeping of the Church teaching will be extremely difficult but never impossible, consoled them with a passage from *Veritatis Splendor* (1993:102), ‘even in the most difficult situations man must respect the norm of morality so that he can be obedient to God’s holy commandment and consistent with his dignity’. Zuanazzi (1997: 67) recommended that homosexuals make an active and free choice to sublimate their sexuality, bravely endure it, and eschew all temptations rather than becoming ‘intoxicated with transgression’.

²⁴ J.H. Westen & P. Baklinski, ‘Cardinal Burke responds to Australian couple’s Synod presentation on family’s gay son’, *Life site News* (Oct, 2019). <https://www.lifesitenews.com/news/exclusive-cardinal-burke-responds-to-australian-couples-synod-presentation/> [accessed 4th June 2024].

²⁵ Jonathan Nisly, ‘Former Irish President Condemns Courage International as “Machiavellian”’, *New Ways Ministry*. <https://www.newwaysministry.org/2019/05/21/former-irish-president-condemns-courage-international-as-machiavellian/> [accessed 7th June 2024].

2.5.2. Jordan (2000: 38) viewed the recommendation of a chaste lifestyle for homosexuals more widely than their abstention from sexual acts. He finds in *The 1986-Letter: 14* a further admonition that homosexuals renounce gay life completely and only associate with one another in groups designed to reinforce and promote the Church's teaching about them. He also claimed that *The 1986-Letter: 16* calls upon homosexual people to ultimately reject their entire homosexual identity. In refusing to acknowledge or use such a label for its homosexual children, the Church, he claimed, 'stigmatizes homosexuality, [and] denies lesbians and gays any opportunity to experience their humanity'.

Concluding her contribution on the ethical status of homosexual acts, Farley (2006: 195) was clear that, 'same-sex relationships and activities can be justified according to the same-sexual ethic as heterosexual relationships and activities', with homosexual people being 'whole human beings whose sexuality is justifiable when it accords with the norms of sexual justice'. Salzman & Lawler (2020: 122-3) assessed the Catholic teaching on homosexual orientation and the prescribed norms in *The 1986-Letter: 12* to be reflective of 'a distorted anthropology and violates human dignity'. Andrew Sullivan, having analysed the arguments from scripture and tradition, concluded with these observations:

It must also be true that to dismiss the possibility of a loving union for homosexuals at all—to banish from the minds and hearts of countless gay men and women the idea that they, too, can find solace and love in one another—is to create the conditions for a human etiolation that no Christian community can contemplate without remorse.

The prescription offered by the Church to homosexual persons, Sullivan contended:

contorted human beings into caricatures of solitary eccentricity, frustrated bitterness, incapacitating anxiety—and helped perpetuate all the human wickedness and cruelty and insensitivity that such lives inevitably carry in their wake. These doctrines could not in practice do what they wanted to do: they could not both affirm human dignity and deny human love. (1994: 55)

2.5.3. Richard Hays (1996: 402) contended that according to the logic of 1 Cor. 7: 8-9, heterosexual people who are unmarried and unable to find a partner, along with others in difficult situations that do not facilitate nuptial sexual relations are in precisely the same situation as homosexual people, in being called to abstinence from sex. Moore (2003: 13) contested the drawing of such a parallel. Comparing two hypothetical Catholic characters, Paul, a heterosexual unmarried man, and Christopher, a homosexual man, Moore asserted that Paul, in finding a woman to eventually marry, will enjoy the blessing and approval of his Church in all the many joys that his marital life will extend to him. Even if he does not, there will always be the hope that he could. Christopher may never have such a hope, for such a hope is neither legitimate or good, as there is no such ethical place for him to

ever occupy. For Christopher to entertain such a hope for love, relationship, and sexual affectivity is to betray his Christian vocation. Were he to have such a relationship, it could never be blessed or celebrated, but only ever be seen by him as the occasion for multiple grave sins, reminding him always of the intrinsic fallenness of his sexual identity. For Christopher, in opposition to Paul, his sexuality contains no correct circumstances for its legitimate expression and no hope. As a continual danger to the state of his immortal soul, Christopher, ‘must constantly watch against himself. Paul’s sexuality is his friend. Christopher’s is his enemy’ (Moore 2003: 14-15).

2.6. Discrimination and violence.

2.6.1. The section in *The 1986-Letter: 10* that deals with discrimination and violence against homosexuals and affirmed in *CCC-1992: 2358* has both been welcomed and condemned. This section looks at how some of the literature assesses this aspect of the teaching. Lawler, Boyle and May (1998: 193) welcomed the call that homosexual people should not be treated unfairly or despised for their different personality structures but echoed *The 1986-Letter* in warning that societies should not be expected to give way to demands to condone or legalise intrinsically immoral acts. Jean-Louis Bruguès (1997: 116-7) acknowledged that homosexual people have been treated with contempt, isolated, and persecuted by their communities. For these reasons, pastors and communities should overcome their apprehensions and repulsion to uphold the Church teaching — that they ought not to be the object of violent malice and try to accept the homosexual and ‘the burden of all he is’. Kenneth Whitehead, (2008) lamented the undue pressure put upon societies to accept unnatural homosexual acts as being normal and legitimate. He protested that undue emphasis on the respect encouraged towards homosexuals in *CCC-1992: 2358* undermines the preceding paragraph’s (*CCC-1992: 2357*) equally, if not more relevant, teaching that homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered. It was clearly a source of deep regret to him that the call to avoid unjust discrimination should thwart the potency of the condemnation that same-sex acts should provoke. In contrast, Andrew Sullivan (1995: 38) praised *The 1986-Letter: 10* as being a ‘stunning’ statement, showing that ‘the Church stood full-square against bigotry, against demeaning homosexuals either by anti-gay slander or violence or by pro-gay attempts to reduce human beings to one aspect of their personhood’.

2.6.2. Gerard Loughlin (2018: 191) commented on the dual message contained within *The 1986-Letter: 10*, as both condemning violence and simultaneously expecting a violent homophobic reaction to pro-homosexual legislation, which would be ‘a natural reaction to the favouring of the unnatural’. Loughlin suggested that such violence is incited by the document inasmuch as it warns against protecting and condoning the acts of a dangerous sin-oriented minority, who threaten the family and society (2018: 192). Jordan (2000: 37) considered the violent homophobia in the Church’s modern teaching more widely, to include its denunciation of gay activism and ideology in *The 1986-Letter: 9-10*, which the Church expects to ‘reap its own reward in gay bashing’, and ‘excuses in advance those who would do violence against them’. Claiming this as the inherited rhetorical device of Catholicism

in regard to homosexuality, he continued by claiming that the threat spelled out in *The 1986-Letter*: 10 ‘echoes very contemporary forms of hate speech’. Furthermore, to avoid ‘being bashed’, homosexuals should desist from acting out their ‘propensities’ and organising or agitating in a way that contradicts Church teaching about them (Jordan 2000: 38).

Jordan looked at a supplementary document issued by the CDF, *Some Considerations Concerning the Response to Legislative Proposals on the Non-Discrimination of Homosexual Persons* (Vatican 1992) which reveals the Church’s thinking on what it means by discrimination and its qualified condemnation of it. This document (1992: 10, 12, 13, 14) claims that sexual orientation is not in the same category as race, ethnicity, sex, or age when it comes to non-discrimination. The rights to work and housing are not automatic and can be limited to someone for their objectively disordered conduct, and indeed there can be no right to homosexuality that could ever form the basis for judicial claims. Jordan furthermore claimed that the 1992 document (14) asserts that ‘good homosexuals’, the kind who conceal their orientation and live chaste lives, need not fear discrimination (2000: 41). It is only those who are out and who disagree with the Church teaching who set themselves up for this sort of discrimination. Obedient Catholics, Jordan added sardonically, should be glad that other openly homosexual people receive such discriminatory treatment as recompense for their rebellion (2000: 41). Jordan made this point forcefully but not without veracity, for there can be little doubt about the ambiguity and contradictory message contained within the Church teachings about violence and discrimination.

2.6.3. With regard to ‘just’ discrimination against homosexuals, to which the Church remains unopposed, Salzman & Lawler (2020) concurred with David Hollenbach and Thomas Shannon (2012). They contended that the Church cannot demand civil legislation that asks the state to enforce discrimination against homosexuals when it has been unsuccessful in convincing many of its own members about the justice of such discrimination. Salzman & Lawler claimed that most Catholics reject the teachings of their Church about the immorality of homosexuality and the harm it brings to society. To defend such just discrimination against homosexuals in any capacity, the burden of proof, they claimed, ‘is on the Church to demonstrate that homosexual acts are destructive of human dignity and cannot serve “the good of the person or society”, and [that] so far, it has not offered any compelling argument’ (2020: 135).

John McNeill was a gay priest, silenced by the Church and his Jesuit Order, who worked widely within the gay community as an activist. He commented thus on *The 1986-Letter* (10):

The Vatican document went so far in its hatred of all things gay as to assert that if homosexuals continue to claim “unthinkable” civil rights, then they should not be surprised by the violence inflicted upon them by gay-bashers and have only themselves to blame. (McNeill 1993, 4th ed., xiv)

As an activist, McNeill may have been described by the Church (*1992-Considerations*) as one of those against whom discrimination could be rightly visited and whose prejudicial views informed his biased point of view. I contend that McNeill was correct with his summary of the barely hidden threat within *The 1986-Letter: 10*, made more clearly in the *1992-Considerations*. Sullivan (1995) may have been correct to rejoice that the Church finally acknowledges the dignity of a homosexual person, but it seems clear from the adjacent paragraph in *The 1986-Letter: 10* that this dignity comes with many preconditions, curtailed civil and legal rights, and the barely veiled threat of societal violence for those who question or oppose the Church's viewpoint. The academic signatories of the *WI-Statement-2021* warn that discrimination towards LGBTQ+ people and the threat of violence are not minor issues:

The reach of the Roman Catholic Church is momentous, and so is the harm it inflicts on LGBT people. To this day, the latter are regularly subjected to verbal and physical abuse, employment discrimination, firing, and even death'. (Introduction: 8)

The Church has the duty to speak clearly and to resolutely avoid ambiguity in its teachings by never providing an excuse with which certain people can nourish their homophobia or threaten to destroy LGBTQ+ lives.

2.7. The legalisation of same-sex unions.

2.7.1. As the first legislatures in the world were either considering or enacting legislation to legalise same-sex unions or to redefine marriage to make this possible for same-sex couples, the Church issued a strong explanation of its opposition in *2003-Considerations* and later in *AL-2016*. A considerable commentary on the issue of the legal recognition of same-sex unions preceded and followed the publication of these teachings, and some of the literature dealing with this key issue will be assessed in this section. Finnis (1994: 1076) concluded his assessment of the immorality of homosexual acts and their legal status in society with a warning that by legalising same-sex acts, the state could run the additional risk of calls for the recognition of homosexual marriages and the adoption of children by such couples. Lawler, Boyle and May (1996: 191) made it clear that 'the coupling of same-sex persons through homosexual acts can in no way be regarded as the consummation and actualization of the marital union of husband and wife', even in the case of a stable, committed same-sex relationship. Giorgio Berti (1997: 82) contended that law must always express the requirements of the natural order and that with regard to marriage, no one has the right to interfere with the order incorporated within its primordial design. D'Agostino (1997: 91) anticipated the later teachings by insisting that there is no analogy between homosexual and heterosexual unions:

The attempt to make law enter by force into those areas, corresponds to an illusion that a more pervasive legalization of their existence can give homosexuals that interior balance from whose lack they so clearly suffer'. (Berti 1997: 91)

It seems here that for homosexuals, the law should not be allowed to offer them any escape from the indelible mark of their intrinsically disordered and imbalanced orientation. Piero Schlesinger (1997: 97) rejected the assertion that the withholding of legalised same-sex unions by the state would count as discrimination. He concluded his article in the series produced by *L'Osservatore Romano* with the expressive words, 'God forbid, let us not contaminate with inappropriate concessions the fundamental institutions of civil life, which are among the few that can give joy to mankind'. In pursuing such reckless claims, it would appear that for Schlesinger, a professor of law at a Milanese Catholic university, same-sex couples pollute the civility of society, and remove the joy from others to which they themselves may certainly have no such rights.

2.7.2. Salzman and Lawler (2020), focused on *AL-2016: 251*, interpreting Francis' words as a softening of tone. They attribute to Francis a generosity of spirit that would make it impossible for him, on his pastoral convictions, to deny the presence of love and, therefore, God within the committed love of same-sex unions. Salzman and Lawler's optimism seemed well-founded in the wake of the 2023 Declaration, *Fiducia Supplicans*, voicing Francis' own call for the permission of conditional, private blessings for couples in same-sex unions. Nevertheless, Gerard Loughlin viewed the original lines of Pope Francis in *AL-2016: 250-1*, less favourably than Salzman and Lawler. Observing that Michel Foucault (1981) was correct in noting, 'that what truly affronts the homophobe is not gay sex, but gay affections', Loughlin termed the *AL-2016* commentary on same-sex unions as homophobic, thereby illustrating Foucault's contention. In addition, Loughlin claimed that it constructs the family as homophobic, on the assumption that families with gay members will struggle with, be traumatised by, and require pastoral support for the presence of their homosexual children (Loughlin 2018: 193). While doubting that Francis has shown himself to be homophobic, (which is not what Loughlin claims), it would be difficult to ascribe to Francis complete clarity of thought on this issue, even though the input for *AL-2016* would have come from additional sources, as well as mirroring the thought of Pope Francis. It is true to claim that certain recent texts, somewhat softer than they once were, still contain a certain phobic appraisal of same-sex affectivity.

2.7.3. Farley considered how civil legislation plays an important role in achieving an alleviation of societal negativity about LGBTQ+ issues (2006: 293). According to Farley, changes in civil legislation assist societies 'in transforming the hatred, rejection, and stigmatization of gays and lesbians that is still being reinforced by teachings of 'unnatural sex, disordered desire, and dangerous love'. She rejected the argument that legal same-sex unions will weaken support for traditional, heterosexual marriage on the basis that legalised divorce, in existence for many decades, is a much greater threat. Farley contended that legal same-sex unions might actually strengthen and reinforce the value afforded by society to all stable forms of committed relationships. For her, the key question to be considered here by Christian churches is how they can structure the kind of practices that will

authentically support their homosexual members ‘in the holiness of their own vocations within and beyond the community of faith’ (Farley 2006: 293-4).

2.7.4. In a similar vein, the *WI-Statement-2021* quite correctly rejects the assertion in the *2003-Considerations: 7-8* that legalised same-sex unions would simultaneously harm the partners themselves, the societies in which they live, and do violence to the children living in such households. For these academic signatories, ‘such contentions are not supported by the psychological and sociological evidence currently available’ (2021: 3.1.5, p. 16). The absence of biological fruitfulness from some same-sex unions is no basis for their immorality: ‘Both same-sex and heterosexual relationships are capable of being fruitful in a broad sense: for the partners, their children if they procreate, adopt, or foster, and for society at large’ (*WI-Statement-2021*: 3.1.6, p. 16). The *WI-Statement-2021* in its recommendations, calls for the Church, in regard to stable same-sex unions, to ‘set out the criteria for their moral evaluation, pastoral accompaniment, and liturgical celebration’ (2021: 2.2, p.14).

2.8. The prohibition of men with deep-seated homosexual tendencies from Holy Orders

2.8.1. Strong and often negative rhetoric is a powerful component of the literature that defends Church teaching on homosexuality, and this seems to be the case in the literature which defends the teachings that homosexual men are unsuitable candidates for Holy Orders. This section looks at some of the literature on either side of the arguments surrounding this teaching. Prof. Earl Fernandes began his 2011 contribution by asserting that *The 2005-Instruction*, prohibiting homosexual men from Holy Orders, was entirely consistent with similar prohibitive stipulations from throughout the twentieth century. It was, for him, far from ‘being a reactive text [and] was the fruit of years of study and reflection’ (Fernandes 2011: 317). Fernandes, after outlining a series of psychological and theological theories about the disordered nature of homosexual men, asserted how a homosexual man is incapable of embodying the sacramental symbolism required of a priest. Only a male heterosexual can represent Christ, the male heterosexual spouse of the Church, and only a heterosexual male can represent the classical heterosexual dynamic between a governing husband and his obedient wife (Fernandes 2011: 322). As suitable for neither Holy Orders or marriage, a homosexual man would see priesthood as an escape, and therefore, his vocation would not be a free act of self-giving. In addition, a homosexual priest would view the men he interacts with pastorally, as potential sexual conquests and women as being a form of security for their many unresolved psychological needs. Fernandes contended that homosexual men, unable to practice self-mastery, will inevitably be overcome with selfishness and individualism, which will conspire to make a life of priestly service impossible (2011: 323). Fernandes conceded that gay men will be ordained and that, in the words of Pope Benedict in *Light of the World*, this will be ‘one of the miseries of the Church’ (Benedict XVI 2010a: 153).

2.8.2. James Gould (2007) discussed the issues surrounding the psychological screening required by seminaries to address the prohibitions in *The 2005-Instruction*. In a rhetorical analysis, he examined the decline in values and the rise of permissive behaviours within the American seminary system, resulting in a spiritual malaise that laid the foundations for the unprecedented crisis caused by the sex-abuse scandals. Gould upheld the prohibition of gay men with deep-seated tendencies and the need to adequately screen such candidates using sound psychological opinions. Such opinions are provided by, e.g. Richard Fitzgibbons, co-author to the CMA (Catholic Medical Association) statement, "Homosexuality and Hope (2001)". Fitzgibbons (referred to by Gould on p.242) warned of the unsuitability of homosexual candidates as men suffering from profoundly weak self-identities, loneliness, sadness, poor body image and insecure masculinity. Gould strongly promoted reorientation therapy for these men suffering from transitional homosexuality (2007: 241-2). Kleponis and Fitzgibbons (2011) found themselves drawn to the idea of blaming homosexual men for the Church's problem with clerical and religious child-sex abuse.

[T]he Vatican document on making the distinction between deep-seated homosexual tendencies and transitory same-sex attractions is very important in the attempt to prevent the abuse of adolescent males and children and to protect the Church from further shame and sorrow. (2011: 361-2)

2.8.3. Not surprisingly, there has been much counterargument about this piece of teaching. Plante (2007) conducted an analysis of the psychological health of homosexual candidates for priesthood in a religious order, with 63 candidates in total, 49 identifying as heterosexual and 14 as homosexual. Plante noted that the number of homosexual men applying to become candidates is certainly higher than their presence in the population, but that 'these men are as well-adjusted as and not significantly different in their psychological profiles from heterosexual men' (2007: 498). Éric Fassin from L'École Normale Supérieure, Paris (2010) analysed *The 2005-Instruction* and found it to be based on a political rather than authentically psychological motivation. Fassin pointed to the seeming erasure in *The 2005-Instruction* of the distinction made in *The 1986-Letter* between the homosexual orientation and homosexual acts, as those candidates now excluded include those who are homosexual in orientation alone. The inclusion within the prohibition of those who support gay culture was, for him, further proof of this political agenda (Fassin 2010: 3). Fassin cited the former psychoanalyst and priest, Tony Anatrella, who helped to craft *The 2005-Instruction* as confirming the political nature of this Instruction through his comments on *The 2005-Instruction*:

In the last few years, homosexuality has become an increasingly disturbing phenomenon, and it is considered in several countries as a normal "quality," whereas it has always been a problem in the psychic organization of sexuality, and it has never played a determinant role in the definition of society. (Anatrella 2006: 27-33)

Fassin asserted that according to Anatrella, the ‘psychic problem is eternal, [and] the political one defines our current condition’ and represents an increasingly disturbing social phenomenon. As a result, those with tendencies must now be banned from pursuing Holy Orders alongside those who commit acts or support a gay culture (Fassin 2010: 3-4). Anatrella was investigated by his Parisian archdiocese following multiple allegations that he sexually molested male clients, some of them minors, during psychological therapy sessions to treat their sexual orientation. Following the canonical investigation, he was barred from priestly ministry, directed to a life of prayer and penance, and instructed to renounce any further professional therapeutic work.

Fassin (2010: 15) contended that alongside the political motivation for *The 2005-Instruction*, the defenders of the Instruction have latterly conjured up a theological rationale. This is revealed by Benedict XVI in *The Light of the World*, in which he explained that homosexual men sacrifice nothing upon entering priesthood as they already are required to be continent as would homosexuals in any state of life. Without this necessary Christ-like sacrifice, at the heart of priestly commitment, it would ‘lead to the possibility of sublimating continence into celibacy, a sexual vocation into a religious one’ (Benedict XVI 2010a: 151-2). Fassin viewed the irony of a position whereby the Church would be ‘defined simultaneously by its discourse against gay rights and by its largely gay composition—the former paradoxically accounting for the latter’. Fassin contended that *The 2005-Instruction* shows how radical the contradictions have become for the Church. It excludes homosexual men from priesthood for political and absurd theological reasons, condemns feminism and gay culture, and exalts the heterosexual natural order while insisting its priests refrain from male-female collaboration in a vocation that is exclusively male and unnaturally continent.

2.8.4. *The 2005-Instruction* received a circumspect response from the gay theologian James Alison. Posting on his website (*Letter of response to friends in the aftermath of the Vatican instruction of 29 November 2005*) in the immediate aftermath of the document’s publication, he downplays the significance of the document in adding anything other than what was already Church doctrine. He surmised that seminary authorities and diocesan bishops will be similarly circumspect in making any decision to either adopt or to quietly disregard *The 2005-Instruction* in its more literalist interpretation. He expressed hope that a consequence of the document would not be to encourage further secrecy, particularly among the increasingly conservative seminarian intake who may sublimate their homosexual orientations, just as they harden their ideological positions. Alison was not offended by the possible implications of *The 2005-Instruction* that his priesthood and vocation were a mistake that should never have occurred, and claimed that ‘the sacrament of Orders is from God, and works relatively independently of both the affective adequacy and the canonical systems of those upon whom it is bestowed’. Alison was hopeful that *The 2005-Instruction* would become an impetus for deeper honesty about the issue of homosexuality and how it affects the lives of many current clergy and those yet to be ordained.

2.8.5. Pizzuto, on the other hand, argued that the Church's call for respect and sensitivity to homosexual people is contradicted by *The 2005-Instruction*:

We must ask on what basis the Church can claim that without exception all homosexual men are unfit to serve as priests when in fact homosexual priests and bishops have been serving the Church with great dedication, effectiveness, and fidelity throughout history. Even today, a preponderance of the priests who are being directed to enforce this unabashedly homophobic policy statement are themselves homosexual—a fact that is as absurd as it is duplicitous. (Pizzuto 2008: 181)

As a former Catholic priest and current Episcopalian pastor-theologian, Pizzuto echoed Alison's sentiment that 'only with an honest disclosure of this truth as an authentic starting point, can the hierarchy genuinely begin to stand behind its lip service of feigned solidarity with homosexual persons' (2008: 181). As a former Catholic priest, I find Pizzuto's reaction to *The 2005-Instruction* understandable and his call for more ecclesial honesty about homosexuality and the priesthood to be appropriate.

2.9. The tone and language of the teachings about homosexuality

2.9.1. A notable aspect of the Church's teachings about homosexuality is the language and tone employed by the authors of the documents, some of which have received criticism, particularly the repeated references to homosexuality as an intrinsic disorder that creates a tendency for homosexual people to commit intrinsically evil sexual acts. This section will look at how some authors view the use of such language and tone. Lawler, Boyle, and May (1996: 202) acknowledged the strength of the terminology used in *The 1986-Letter*: 3, confirming the objective disorder of a homosexual orientation and the intrinsic evil of homosexual acts. They rejected accusations of homophobia on the basis that 'the Congregation has to speak the truth' and that, as with concupiscence and alcoholism, homosexuality can be termed 'disordered' without condemnation of the subjects involved. They maintained that the CDF is solely concerned with the pastoral care of such people and leading them away from their tendency 'to engage in objectively bad sexual acts'. They asserted that for some homosexuals, reparative or spiritual therapy could alter their orientation towards one that was no longer intrinsically disordered (1996: 186). Livio Melina (1997: 110) denied that the terminology is discriminatory or accusatory of homosexual people as the subjects of a disordered inclination. He looked to the Council of Trent's definition of concupiscence (*Decretum de peccato originali*, n.5: DS 1515) as justification for the assertion that various negative conditions such as sadism, kleptomania, pyromania, and so forth are preceded by disordered inclinations. All such disordered inclinations may ultimately derive, if not from personal sin, then certainly from original sin, and therefore become an opportunity for holiness and cooperation in the redemptive act of Christ's cross.

2.9.2. Jordan (2000: 34) also raised the assessment by the tradition that all sexuality has been objectively disordered since the Fall, raising the obvious question about why, in particular, the homosexual orientation is especially disordered. Jordan assessed the judgement placed upon the homosexual tendency in *The 1986-Letter: 3* to be one that is confused, ungrounded in traditional theology, and simply a conclusion derived from outdated nineteenth-century medical views of homosexual deviance. The shrill rhetoric within *The 1986-Letter*, Jordan observed, is addressed to homosexuals in the third person, as they are darkly scolded and threatened, ensuring that ‘the Letter enacts the exclusion it prescribes’ (2000: 39). The reassurances that *The 1986-Letter: 3* distinguishes the homosexual person from their intrinsically evil acts is to be barely taken seriously. Moore (2003: 14) observes that, according to the Church teachings, the sexuality of a heterosexual person may at times lead them to commit individual sinful acts that are evidence of their fallenness, but ultimately their sexuality in the right context will allow them an expression of the love that redeems us. A homosexual person’s sexuality for the Church is not merely an expression of the fallenness of humankind, but quite clearly of the specific fallenness of homosexuals. Their sexuality ‘does not express itself in disordered ways; it is intrinsically disordered’. Homosexuals must engage in a life-long battle with themselves in a way that no heterosexual will ever have to, seeing a fundamental and vital aspect of their lives as being repugnant, wicked, and a threat to their salvation. It seems apparent that the language and tone of *The 1986-Letter: 3* offer little comfort for a homosexual person, condemning them as a uniquely fallen subset of the wider population.

2.9.3. Loughlin (2018: 189) noted that homophobia is a trait learned through an array of language games that, in the wider sense of the term, can include the various teachings of the Roman Church. With James Alison (2007), Loughlin contended that:

the letter imagines a class of person that not only is oriented to sin, as with original sin, but is oriented to a particular sin, the sin against nature. Homosexuals are doubly bound for sin, a teaching that in some ways deforms the doctrine of creation.
(Loughlin 2018: 190)

The peculiar apparatus of the Church is to construct a homophobia which establishes the homosexual as a ‘marked deviation’ from the heterosexual norm and is a phobia integral to, rather than external to, the Church. Such homophobia for Loughlin establishes ‘the homosexual as not fully human and so not fully entitled to human rights’. This is a view with which I strongly concur, for the carefully constructed language game at the core of *The 1986-Letter* is not a series of throwaway comments but appears to be evidence of a carefully designed homophobic apparatus, which is neither benign or excusable.

2.9.4. In his theology website, James Alison (*Some musings concerning the phrases “objectively disordered” and “intrinsically disordered (or evil)” in current Church discourse regarding LGBT issues*, 2020a), made an assessment of the terminology, language, and tone of *The 1986-Letter: 3*:

the body of a gay man or a lesbian woman automatically and inherently seeks fulfilment in relations with someone of the opposite sex; and that however strongly the desire of that person seems to be expressed in relations with someone of the same-sex, their desire is in fact, and however little they may feel it, heading away from where it should be heading; that is to say, it is “objectively disordered”.

Furthermore, the expert authorship of the teachings claims to know something true about homosexuals that they do not, that their bodies intend something with which the pattern of their desire is not in accord. Alison rejected this claim as ‘pure pharisaism’, grounded in no scientifically verifiable evidence. This, for Alison, was a sleight of hand and the only tool with which the Church could justify its current prohibitions, namely that homosexuals are defective heterosexuals. The teaching does little more than to enforce a sacral ‘club rule’, and create a group who must be othered, because:

the moment you stop demanding that gay and lesbian people treat themselves as though they are not really gay or lesbian, but instead defective heterosexuals, then you are faced with the fact that there is nothing in divine revelation concerning sexual relations between unrelated consenting adults of the same sex. (Alison 2020a)

With intellectual clarity, Alison (2020a) quite correctly contended that the only logical admission is that ‘the Church has quite literally no teaching at all on the subject’, or at least no teaching that has any credible substance.

2.10. Transgender people, gender incongruence, and issues connected to gender theory

2.10.1. The debate about people whose gender identity is misaligned with their biological sex is one that has achieved great prominence in public discourse during recent years. Similarly, gender theory is a topic that receives considerably more attention than it did, with both these areas and those related to them frequently being politicised. The Church has only recently referred to these complex issues in its teachings. This section looks at how some of the literature has dealt with these issues in relation to the teachings that the Church has produced. The World Medical Association offers a useful summary of the term ‘transgender’ and the variety of groups the term encompasses:

Along the transgender spectrum, there are people who, despite having a distinct anatomically identifiable sex, seek to change their primary and secondary sex characteristics and gender role completely in order to live as a member of the opposite sex (transsexual). Others choose to identify their gender as falling outside the

sex/gender binary of either male or female (genderqueer). The generic term “transgender” represents an attempt to describe these groups without stigmatisation or pathological characterisation. It is also used as a term of positive self-identification. (WMA Statement on Transgender People 2015)

The statement is clear that the issue of a person’s sexual orientation is independent of a person being transgender. It advises that although some transgender people may benefit from counselling to address attendant social or relational issues, this does not imply any mental impairment. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders of the American Psychiatric Association (DSM-5) uses the term ‘gender dysphoria’ for those who experience distress from gender incongruence, but it is not considered by the WMA to be a mental disorder. Surgical and/or hormonal interventions may be used to assist those with long-lasting gender dysphoria, but many people globally who are transgender, for a host of complex socio-economic reasons, have no access to these treatments. The statement recognises a person’s right to determine their own gender. It condemns all forms of discrimination and violence against transgender people and behaviour modification practices, and it calls for appropriate healthcare and medical interventions to be made available to transgender people.

2.10.2. Timothy Murphy, writing in *Bioethics* (2019) claimed that *M&F-2019*, in resisting the loosening of the ‘boundaries of gender...distorts the practice of healthcare and puts the very health of intersex and transgender people at risk’. His assessment of *M&F-2019* was that the Church explicitly wants to underscore the essential link between a concrete male or female gender and a person’s identity, sexuality, and parental rights and relationships. The Church, Murphy contended, condemns transgender people who make a subjective choice about their gender in opposition to the objectivity of their natural gender, corresponding to their biological sex. This, he claimed, is in opposition to contemporary science, which ‘tends to see people’s sex on a spectrum, from people with male-typical genetics at one end, to people with female-typical genetics at the other end, and everyone else somewhere in between’ (Murphy 2019: 981). He attributed to the Church an attitude of disingenuity, inferring that its brand of gender ideology was being defended in its attacks on ‘transgenderism’ and contemporary gender theory; ‘make no mistake here: the Vatican is as much engaged in “gender theory” as any of the views it criticizes’. He dismissed the call for dialogue in *M&F-2019* as unlikely to progress, with the radically opposing views that the Church holds in relation to those informed by contemporary science and increasingly by Western societies. For Murphy:

it seems that civil society is likely to increase its respect for transgender and intersex people, by respecting the integrity of their identities, their right to bodily integrity, their expectation of healthcare sympathetic to those identities, and the right to parenthood, among other things. By comparison, the Vatican’s expectation that

medicine should work to bring people's bodies and genders into line with a Procrustean view of human nature is morally retrograde. (2019: 983)

2.10.3. Julio Tudela, Enrique Burguete and Just Aznar (2021: 38) responded to Murphy on behalf of the Catholic Medical Association (CMA). Acknowledging that scientific opinion is divided, they asserted that many scientists, 'confirm the evidence of a binary human sexuality'. Sex and gender are certainly different, but for these authors, this did not preclude the real likelihood that the two can be intrinsically connected, and they contended that this was not unscientific:

what does not seem scientific is to pretend to treat both realities, sex and gender as independent and unrelated, ignoring that the human person is a unit of physical and psychological dynamisms, inevitably related. (Catholic Medical Association 2021: 38)

The legitimate ways in which modern society redefines cultural gender roles, for them, did not negate the role that biological sex traits play in defining each human being. In this respect, they were in agreement with the overall thrust of *M&F-2019*. The CMA authors urged great caution with regard to any surgical or hormonal medical treatment used to alleviate gender incongruence, warning (after Dhejne et al. 2011 and Hruz 2020) of serious health risks and complications.

2.10.4. Margaret Farley (2006: 153) recognised that 'the stories of person's lives are more complex than labels can accommodate'. For Farley, when a transgender person does change their bodily identity, experience seems to confirm that that person's identity, far from changing, becomes even deeper and more congruent with the deepest personal identity they always experienced. She argued that 'concrete stories of person's lives are perhaps...the best way to come to insights into human experiences' (footnote 90, p.155). There are calls for dialogue within *M&F-2019*, on this complex issue, and one would hope that a key area of such dialogue would involve the experiential encounter and witness of those identified under the term transgender. Boucher and Chinnah stated that in regard to scientific knowledge,

the review of the literature suggests that there is a disparity between the brains of those who identify differently to their assigned gender at birth, highlighting a multifactorial underpinning of the gender identity. Further research is required to shed light on the molecular mechanism of this, allowing for greater education and understanding of this scientific and social phenomenon. (2020: 90)

Experience and scientific knowledge ought to govern this debate alongside the necessary philosophical and theological insights that have the right to inform but not dictate the agenda. At the heart of this complex issue are human beings, and any Church response to their existence should not add to their burden in a world where they can become easy and convenient pickings for populist politicians and their adherents.

2.11. A change in tone in the papacy of Pope Francis?

2.11.1. The leadership of Pope Francis, for some, has changed the tone of the debate surrounding LGBTQ+ people. The ‘Who am I to judge?’ remarks made by Pope Francis on his return from World Youth Day in Rio in 2013 have generated a great deal of discussion. Alongside other comments, it is not an easy task to ascribe to this new tone a change of substance as opposed to a change of style. This section looks at how some authors have treated this development. James Martin (2017: 93) wrote of how hurtful and homophobic attitudes are being eclipsed by a slowly changing tide ‘and that Pope Francis’ papacy and the actions of a number of Church leaders today are helping to heal some of that hurt’. Commenting on Francis’ exhortation, Martin maintained that Francis’ words: ‘we would like before all else to reaffirm that every person, regardless of sexual orientation, ought to be respected in his or her dignity and treated with consideration’ (*AL-2016*: 250) were ‘immense’ (2017: 102). They furthermore avoid any repetition of the contentious terminology of *The 1986-Letter* regarding intrinsic evil or objective disorder. He commended Francis’ tone as being prophetic, for the clear stance it sets out to nations where religious and societal homophobia and violence are endemic. For him, ‘what seems arid to LGBT people in one country may be, to those in another country, water in a barren desert’ (Martin 2017: 102). A week before Pope Francis travelled to Africa in 2023, where anti-LGBTQ+ laws are common, he conducted an interview with the Associated Press in which he condemned the criminalisation of homosexuality and called for Catholic bishops who support such criminalisation to have a process of conversion.²⁶ James Alison (*Pope Francis, Decriminalization of Homosexuality, and the Question of “Sin”* 2023) made a favourable assessment:

For the first time, the leader of one of the world’s major religious groups has made it clear that whatever one may think of the sinfulness of homosexual acts, none of this justifies criminalizing them. Secondly, and less obviously, he bent over backwards, as far as he could, to point out that any sinfulness involved is the same as that of all of us, and certainly not something to be pointed at as characterizing an “out group”.

2.11.2. Lawler and Salzman (2022b: 8) commended Francis for his commitment to ensuring legal rights for those in same-sex unions, even as he was duty-bound to uphold traditional teachings about heterosexual marriage, in such a way that underscores the legal rights and dignity of those in same-sex unions. This, they claimed, ‘should encourage Catholics of all stripes to be more respectful and welcoming of LGBTQ individuals and couples and their human rights’. Salzman & Lawler offered further praise to Francis for the subtle way they attribute true catholicity to his theological contribution to the wider debate in *AL-2016*.

²⁶Nicole Winefield, ‘The AP Interview: Pope says homosexuality not a crime’, *The Associated Press*. <https://apnews.com/article/pope-francis-gay-rights-ap-interview-1359756ae22f27f87c1d4d6b9c8ce212> [accessed 7th July 2024].

First, he makes a distinction in cohabitation [i.e. its committed nature versus casual sexual encounters]; second, he invokes a long-established Catholic moral tradition that teaches that circumstances can extenuate and even nullify moral culpability; third, he invokes another long-established Catholic ethical tradition, namely, the authority and inviolability of individual conscience. (2022: 15)

Salzman & Lawler (2022: 15-6) saw no reason why the Church may not apply the same logic to same-sex unions which may not be fulfilling the Church's ideal for heterosexual marriage but do contain constructive elements that require from the Church the constructive response of accompanying 'with mercy and patience' the positive signs of growth within all committed relationships (AL-2016: 307). For James Alison (*Pope Francis backing same-sex unions isn't a surprise. But it's still a big deal* 2020b), it seemed obvious from comments espoused by Francis in Evgeny Afineevsky's documentary *Francesco* that Francis was:

clearly representing such civil unions as a good and desirable thing, to be actively promoted, rather than a lesser evil...[and that]... he affirms the rightness of same-sex couples forming a family and being part of the family of the Church. (Alison 2020b)

If Francis believed that same-sex couples were in an objective state of mortal sin by virtue of their de facto relationships, Alison contended that he would be seeking to end rather than to legally cement them. For Alison, the positive shift has already occurred, and within Catholicism, there are not the doctrinal or scriptural quandaries that face other Christian denominations. The publication in December 2023 of the Declaration, *Fiducia Supplicans*, granting priests the right to privately bless two individuals in a same-sex union, is perhaps a sign that Alison's words are well-founded.

2.11.3. Nevertheless, the difficulty with such a piecemeal approach to change, based on spontaneous comments, is that words can be interpreted or misinterpreted in a variety of ways. In a polarised Church, introducing topics for debate can be both useful and problematic, as the comments can have the effect of satisfying no one. For genuine change to occur, Gerard Loughlin (2018: 194) contended that the Church needed to lay aside the distinctions it continues to employ, 'between the fully human and the not quite human – the pitiful to whom mercy must be shown'. Valentina Napolitano (2019: 66) observes that:

Francis stands at a point of layered contradiction and contestation. Considered a traitor by part of the Roman Curia and perceived more as a pastor than a theologian by others, he jolts the passionate machine of the Catholic Church by decentering and rescaling its locations of power.

Through an array of juxtaposed actions, comments, gestures, personal correspondence, initiatives, and invitations to inclusivity, alongside support for conservative or traditional beliefs, Francis appears to

be disrupting and unsettling the status quo. That the issue of LGBTQ+ inclusion is not his major priority and that there is neither doctrinal change or consistent papal commentary to substantiate his 'reform' does not detract from its significance.

2.12. Conscience, the authority of experience, and the *sensus fidelium*

2.12.1. Although not one of the specific issues covered during the data-gathering and analysis, it would be difficult to side-step the issue of conscience and the *sensus fidelium* when it comes to research that centres on the acceptance of a Church doctrine. This section looks at a small sample of the literature that may be pertinent to these important issues. Lawler, Boyle and May asserted that the authoritative teachings of the Church are binding and must be used to inform and instruct a person's conscience (1998: 110-11). Furthermore, they assert (1998: 115) that the authority of the magisterium extends to, e.g., the specific precepts of NML, the observance of these being demanded by the Creator and therefore required for salvation (*CCC-1992*: 2036). Dissent on the basis of personal good sense or integrity is also illegitimate. The latter scenario, in the case of justifying, e.g., homosexual acts, is simply a matter of a person pitting their subjective opinions against the objective and rational strength of Church teaching (1998: 117). For them, conscience is only properly informed when it is informed, guided by, and in conformity with Church teaching, and dissent of any hue can never have a justification.

The final moral evaluation of an action by a Catholic must be the judgement of his or her Catholic conscience. There is no way to maintain the authenticity of the conscience without holding faithfully to the insistent moral teaching of the Church. In the light of what faith teaches, the mature Catholic freely and intelligently guides his or her conscience toward what is really good-which following Christ requires.

(Lawler, Boyle and May 1998: 121)

In the *Contestatio* issued by the CDF in 1997 to Jeannine Gramick and Robert Nugent against their book *Building Bridges* (1992), Cardinal Ratzinger, its Prefect, critiqued the book primarily for its justifying homosexual acts on the basis of 'primacy of conscience'. Cardinal Ratzinger condemned this as being faulty moral reasoning and the reduction of moral judgement to a subjectivist concept. (McGinley 2004: 178-180).

2.12.2. Lawler, Boyle, and May broached no possibility of Church teaching being unguided or unrooted in the divine command, which alone can bring salvation. This cannot, of course, be in harmony with the various teachings which have either changed or been 'quietly dropped, with typical creative amnesia' (Kerr 2007: 217). The *WI-Statement-2021* included a quote from Pope Francis acknowledging that the Church, too, must evolve its teachings about certain ethical issues in line with advances in human self-understanding.

Human self-understanding changes with time and so also human consciousness deepens. Let us think of when slavery was accepted or the death penalty was allowed without any problem. So, we grow in the understanding of the truth...[t]he thinking of the church must recover genius and better understand how human beings understand themselves today, in order to develop and deepen the Church's teaching.²⁷

Experience may not be the same thing as conscience, and clearly, the Church would not regard the former as a substitute for the latter, but the way human beings experience themselves and others can inform a growth in understanding, the kind of which Francis agrees must allow teaching to develop and deepen.

2.12.3. Salzman & Lawler (2020: 128-9) highlighted the experience that faithful same-sex couples have about their own relationships, the complementarity and affectivity that they know to be a part of these unions, and the role of their sexual acts within the context of their love. Moore (2003: 168-9) considered the observational evidence that would be required to ascertain that homosexual acts confirm the self-indulgent and disordered sexual inclination of homosexual people (*The 1986-Letter*: 7). Moore assumed correctly that no such empirical evidence exists and that it would just take one example from any time or place of a homosexual who *was* being loving while also sexually active to disprove the assertion. Moore asked why the gaining of pleasure from engaging in homosexual acts is more likely to make one less capable of loving as a result (2003: 173). The obvious conclusion to draw is that for any same-sex couple who also happen to have a sexual relationship, 'it is the pattern of their lives that makes their sexual activity self-indulgent and selfish, not vice versa'. On this basis, the authoritative teaching in *The 1986-Letter* makes an unsubstantiated claim with no empirical evidence or sound a priori reasoning (2003: 175). It must follow rationally that conscience cannot be bound to follow or obey teaching that ignores the knowledge that comes from lived experience. In disdaining the evidence upon which rational arguments are constructed, the assertions made in *The 1986-Letter* and elsewhere leave the Church only having *rhetorical* arguments, the assurances for which are only derived from 'the confidence of its own assertions' (Jordan 2000: 31).

2.12.4. Lawler, Boyle, and May (1998: 120) were clear that experience or opinions formed by the world around them may not give believers the consent to abandon Church teachings, especially when these beliefs have been held in common by the majority of believers for centuries. To invoke the *sensus fidelium* to justify changes to ethical positions long held by the Church would be to 'place doctrinal faith with some sort of relativism'. For them, the *sensus fidelium* may never contradict the

²⁷ 'Human Self-Understanding (19)' *Interview with Pope Francis by Fr Antonio Spadaro*. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-francesco_20130921_intervista-spadaro.html [accessed 8th July 2024].

beliefs held consistently by the faithful over time or be confused with the ‘transient convictions rooted in philosophies and visions of life received from sources alien to the Church’ (1998: 120).

2.12.5. Margaret Farley (2006: 286-8) offered a balanced and convincing assessment of the role of contemporary experience when it comes to offering an ethical appraisal of same-sex relationships and acts. Although she cautioned that experience alone cannot be the sole source of moral insight, it seemed clear to her that there is widespread, concrete evidence ‘that homosexuality can be a way of embodying responsible human love and sustaining human and Christian friendship’ (2006: 286). Heterosexual spouses, Farley argued, who practice contraceptive intercourse simultaneously gave witness to high levels of selflessness in their affective spousal and parental roles. The same applies to the partners in a same-sex union, as their sexual acts do not in any way preclude relationships with one another that sustain well-being, mutual flourishing, and selfless roles of service in their families, societies, and churches. Farley passed experience as a tool for moral measurement through a filter of criteria that ensure the experiences being assessed ‘cohere with general norms of justice’ (2006: 287). According to Farley, by doing so, ‘we do have testimony and witness from women and men of integrity that should matter in human and Christian ethical discernment’ (2006: 288). Farley was clear that ‘the witness of experience is enough to demand of the Christian community that it reflects anew on the norms for homosexual love’ (2006: 288). Salzman and Lawler endorsed Farley’s position by adding evidence from research that shows the functionality and flourishing of same-sex relationships:

Developmental psychologist Lawrence Kurdek has supported Farley’s anecdotal evidence with extensive research data on gay and lesbian couples that demonstrate social scientifically that they tend to have a more equitable distribution of household labor, demonstrate greater conflict resolution skills, have less support from members of their families but greater support from friends and, most significantly, experience similar levels of relational satisfaction compared to heterosexual couples.²⁸ (2020: 129)

2.12.6. James Alison (2009: 13) compared the current period of assessing new knowledge to enlighten new ethical thinking and teaching about same-sex relationships as being similar to the reassessment of knowledge that became necessary after the discovery of the New World altered the navigator maps that had previously guided voyagers for generations. New objective knowledge about the world demanded a change that also had impacts on the truth claims made by the Church of the day about the world and its geography. Further knowledge about the earth’s origins and those of its multiple life-forms, its place in the solar system, and the origins of the universe all required adjustments to long-

²⁸ Salzman & Lawler provide several references for research data to back up these claims: Kurdek, 2004 (pp.88-900), Kurdek, 2005 (pp. 251-4), Kurdek, 2006, (pp. 509-528), Savin-Williams/Esterberg, 2000, (pp. 207-212), and Salzman & Lawler, 2008, (pp, 228-230).

held doctrinal beliefs about these issues. To lay a claim of relativism at the discovery of new knowledge about any phenomenon in the natural world or within human experience is, as Alison rightly contended, erroneous and anti-Catholic. The Church, in decrying relativism, insists that ‘there is such a thing as something that is true independently of the perspective and wish list of any of us, and that that truth in some sense imposes itself on us’ (2009: 8). In the light of new objective discoveries about 4% of the population who are hardwired to be attracted to people of their same-sex, the Church cannot itself exercise relativism.

In other words, the same authorities who told us that we have to go along with their understanding of the homosexual inclination because it is true, are also, thank heaven, insisting [through their eschewal of relativism] that the truth doesn’t depend on them, and that they and their teaching are receptive to that which is discovered to be objectively true in whatever field it should emerge. (Alison 2009: 8)

Alison rightly queried the authority of anyone, ecclesial or otherwise, who may insist on teaching something that is no longer demonstrably true. To do so is self-injurious as it erodes the very authority such people cling to and renders them as ridiculous as copyright owners of the 1491 World Atlas would have been to insist that navigators use their maps that were no longer fit for purpose. Alison invited magisterial authorities, in harmony with the faithful, to live within the tension of discovery, in which new ethical answers can be formulated to deal with new knowledge. I contend that this is a mature and faithful way of invoking the *sensus fidelium* and endorse Alison’s invitation to trust that:

faith enables us not to be frightened of being drawn into inhabiting a larger world than we could have imagined. Faith dares us into exercising our reason because it enables us to trust that over time, and through that use of our reason, God will show us what is true and how it is good for us. (2009: 14)

2.12.7. Summary

In relation to the scriptural arguments offered by the Church, the more convincing arguments arose from literature in which authors were prepared to see beyond a literalist interpretation of selective scriptural passages. Additionally, the literature that argued for theological openness in the interpretation of the NML tradition as it applies to homosexuality offered a stronger and more evidence-based justification for challenging the assertion that non-procreative same sex acts are always disordered. In relation to how the Church utilises the insights of science in framing its doctrinal arguments about homosexuality, the literature convincingly illustrated a degree of scientific ignorance within these teachings. The lifestyle of perpetual chastity prescribed for homosexual people by the Church was rarely defended in a convincing manner, with the literature that challenged these unjust demands offering stronger reasons to question this teaching. There were no credible justifications provided in the literature for the Church’s ambiguous and problematic teachings about

violence and discrimination against LGBTQ+ people, nor were there strong evidence-based arguments in the literature that justified the claims that same-sex marriage bore no similarity to heterosexual marriage and would damage society. The literature that attempted a defence of the prohibition of homosexual men from Holy Orders was deeply problematic. The stronger opposing arguments were often made with the additional query as to what the underlying motivation of this strident doctrine could be. As within wider society, the more reasonable arguments surrounding gender theory, gender identity and transgender people, were offered by the literature that advocated a science-based approach to the ecclesial learning curve required for these issues. The problematic language and tone of the current teachings about homosexuality were never successfully defended in the literature, and the better contributions highlighted the disturbing implications of the phrases used to categorise LGBTQ+ people. The literature grappled with how Pope Francis has approached the issues connected to LGBTQ+ people, but some of it suggested that there was a definitive quest by Francis to stimulate debate. The strongest sources reviewed, argued that the advent of new knowledge about homosexuality, previously unavailable, has invited the Church to invoke the *sensus fidelium* and be open to the possibility of a development of doctrine about these issues.

Chapter 3. Methodology

3.1. Introduction

This project aims to generate knowledge about how the Irish Roman Catholic community has understood, accepted and received its Church's teachings on homosexuality. The realities under investigation are threefold: the Irish Roman Catholic community, the doctrinal teachings of a Christian Church, and the interaction between the two. This chapter aims to present a roadmap for the project or a 'to-do' list that can act as a guide for similar research projects to follow. The ontological parameters for the project will be briefly examined, and the epistemological foundations for the project will be explained. The practical methods by which the data was acquired will be presented in detail, and the methods used to analyse and interpret the data as knowledge will be explained and evidenced. Influencing the research will be the reflexive and axiological positioning of the researcher, and care must be taken within such a project to pay due attention to this important facet. This 'road map' aims to present an emergent, systematic, and disciplined account of how the project unfolded from its foundations to its findings and will attempt to demonstrate appropriate coherence through the adoption of a reflexive approach. This chapter should demonstrate the project's foundations and how the knowledge required to answer the Research Question was achieved and analysed, with subsequent chapters presenting the data, what it showed, and why this knowledge may be significant.

3.2. Ontological positioning

Establishing an ontological matrix for research which seeks to examine how the teachings of a religious tradition resonate with a sociological reality like a Church community creates challenges and questions. Such teachings may be based upon what their authors regard as being absolute moral principles, grounded in the ultimate reality of a divine being. Both researcher and participants, as Roman Catholics may subscribe to certain moral values, objective or otherwise, and hold some belief in a divine entity. At first glance, a realist ontology seems to underlie some of these realities. As a piece of qualitative research, however, the project will be founded on methods that have been refined in the social and human sciences. The ontological position that logically grounds such qualitative research based on the values and experiences of a contextually situated community is relativism. Braun & Clarke state that:

relativism conceptualises reality as product of human action and interaction and does not subscribe to the notion of a singular reality that exists independent of human practices. Reality and truth are contingent, local and multiple. (2022: 173-4)

A key issue will be to look at the interaction between theology and a qualitative research methodology. As the project will analyse data which capture the attitudes of a particular group of contextually situated human beings, it could be argued that relativism is a more useful framework within which to embed the project. However, since the doctrines under investigation may claim a

realist foundation, negotiating the relationship between qualitative research methods and the foundational truths that inform religious doctrine is far from straightforward. Braun & Clarke claim that truth in research is ‘what is developed from an analysis, supported by the data and all the scholarly processes involved to demonstrate and evidence the claims’. They furthermore claim that relativism will easily ‘tie people in knots in all sorts of ways’ (2022: 174).

One such knot, and beyond the scope of this project to unravel, is that relativism makes suggestions about morality that may be problematic for theologian researchers, with the claim made by some that it undermines the basis for morality. If analysed data from this project suggests that some Irish Catholics, for example, no longer accept certain foundational truths proposed by their Church, does this suggest that their morality has become rudderless and cut adrift from the anchor of moral values that claim an objective foundation? Accusations of moral relativism can, however, shut down necessary debates over contentious moral doctrines. Braun & Clarke contend that ‘adopting ontological relativism doesn’t mean adopting moral or material relativism’ (2022: 174).

Transformation of certain contentious and arguably constructed religious and moral doctrines is only feasible when one can critique them without the counter-accusation of being morally vapid. Vivien Burr (1998: 29) supports Derek Edwards, Malcolm Ashmore, and Jonathan Potter (1995: 34, 36-39) by claiming that the realist may have an enviable certainty as to the basis upon which to be moral, but the radical scepticism of the relativist can also be an indispensable tool for effecting moral choice and change. Burr argues for the power of relativism to act as a ‘lever of resistance’ against the claims made by ‘reality’, and that relativism has the capacity to challenge all truth claims. In so doing, ontological relativism rightly resists the position of realists in their quest to have their reality and associated moral positions pinned down (Burr 1998: 23). There seems to be a pragmatic case to be made for positioning this research within the ontology of a relativist framework, without necessarily compromising the claims made by theology for the additional existence of certain deeper foundational truths. The extent to which the moral doctrines of the Catholic Church about homosexuality are actually rooted in such espoused foundational truths can thereby be examined with more freedom when the investigation is situated within relativist or interpretivist ontological parameters.

3.3. Epistemological positioning

3.3.1 Anna Madill (2000: 9) opens her account of contextual constructionism with a quote from Pidgeon & Henwood (1997: 270): ‘bringing to public light researcher subjectivities, tells a more complete account of the research process than is to be found in the customary sanitised versions of scientific report-writing’. Madill drawing upon Jaeger & Rosnow (1988), defines contextualism as ‘the position that all knowledge is local, provisional, and situation-dependent’, with results varying in accord with the context of data collection and analysis. Madill argues that contextualism is especially suited to be used in human science research, in which the participants and the researcher are both ‘conscious beings interpreting and acting on the world around them within networks of cultural

meaning’(2000: 9). This certainly justifies the framing of this project within such an epistemological approach. It should be acknowledged that a certain similarity emerges between contextual constructionism and critical realism. Braun and Clarke define critical realism as a ‘philosophical/meta-theoretical tradition that assumes that a material reality exists independent of our ideas about it, but that our experiences and representations of reality are mediated by language and culture’(2022: 286). It draws upon the work of Roy Bhaskar (1975, 1979), being developed by Andrew Sayer (1992), Margaret Archer (1995), Andrew Collier (1994) and others. There are certainly many aspects of the realities under investigation within this project that can claim the possibility of an unobserved independent realist foundation. These include the scientific realist explanations for the phenomenon of same-sex orientation, the reality of values such as truth, justice, love and the reality of objective moral laws rooted in the reality of a divine being. The Church, its members, and those who identify as LGBTQ+ might all claim some refuge in certain aspects of realism to justify their positions. None of these positions, as critical realism claims, can remain unmediated by language, culture, and experience, even if they may have a realist foundation. Nevertheless, critical realism is a very complex philosophical tradition. After careful research, I determined that as attractive as it was in providing a possible halfway house between realism and relativism, the heavy emphasis on ontology within the critical realist tradition and its controversial and awkward pairing with theology rendered it less useful than contextual constructionism for this project.

3.3.2. Madill (2000: 9) references Pidgeon and Henwood (1997: 250) in identifying four ways in which knowledge can be produced: participant-understanding, researcher-interpretation, ‘cultural meaning systems’ that influence interpretation, and scientific judgement of validity. Contextualism in research seeks to ground results in participant-description (Tindall 1994), something that will fit in well with this project’s rich participant-descriptions. Rather than seeking a consensus, Madill (2000: 10) argues that a contextualist approach aims for ‘completeness’ rather than convergence from the data collecting methods. The rich and thick descriptive dataset, gathered from in-depth participant-interviews in this study, aims to provide such a ‘completeness’. Additionally, a contextualist approach fits well with this project due to the emphasis that it places on researcher subjectivity. Wilkinson (1988: 493-502) argues that the researcher is required to articulate their own perspective as they interpret the participant data. Alongside good reflexivity, a contextualist approach invites the researcher to make clear the degree to which they and their participants share ‘basic cultural assumptions’. This project’s interaction with participants was significantly informed by researcher-knowledge or prior membership of these groups, alongside a significant shared background. Madill claims that such ‘empathy provided by a shared humanity and common cultural understanding can be an important bridge between researcher and participant and a valuable analytic resource’(2000: 10).

3.3.3. Referring to Charmaz (1995) and Miller et al. (1997), Madill suggests that the contextualist researcher will adopt a variety of analytical approaches matching their research interests and training,

allowing ‘the reader to evaluate the inevitable contribution this makes towards their understanding of the materials’ (Marshall 1986). This is facilitated here by the use of the flexible method of Template Analysis built around the use of a researcher-generated coding system. Jaegar and Rosnow positively assess a contextualist approach as viewing knowledge as an ‘active, practical and constructive affair’, in which the individual comes to know their worlds through purposive action. This, in turn, ‘influences the course of further development and possibilities’, by situating researchers and participants within the wider socio-cultural milieu, so furthering the ‘discovery, construction and transformation’ of knowledge (Jaegar and Rosnow 1988: 73). A contextualist approach to this Research Question aims to contribute to widening the contextualised, lived-Catholic-theology of LGBTQ+ people through hearing in context voices that may transform, through experience rather than doctrine, the just, unconditional inclusion of LGBTQ+ people in their Catholic communities.

3.4. Contextual theology

3.4.1. In 2023, Pope Francis issued a *motu proprio* (papal document issued and signed by his own initiative) entitled ‘*Ad Theologiam Promovendam*’, which begins with Francis’ remarks to the Roman Curia in 2019.

In order to promote theology in the future, one cannot limit oneself to abstractly re-proposing formulas and schemes of the past. Called to prophetically interpret the present and to discern new paths for the future, in the light of Revelation, theology will have to confront profound cultural transformations, aware that: "What we are experiencing is not simply an era of change, but a change of epoch. (*Address to the Roman Curia*, 21 December 2019)

Within the *motu proprio*, Francis urges an epistemological and methodological rethinking of theology, or paradigm shift that:

commits it, in the first place, to being a fundamentally contextual theology, capable of reading and interpreting the Gospel in the conditions in which men and women live daily, in different geographical environments, social and cultural. (*Ad Theologiam Promovendam-2023*: 4)

The document continues by establishing that unless theology sees itself as intimately connected with other disciplines and forms of knowledge, it risks becoming isolated, insignificant, and self-referential (*Ad Theologiam Promovendam-2023*: 5). Theology, Francis continues, must blend its attention to transcendental knowledge with that gleaned from voices of people, often suffering the wounds of humanity, and to creation (*Ad Theologiam Promovendam-2023*: 7). Ultimately, he concludes, theology should develop through an inductive method, beginning from the contexts and concrete situations of people’s lives, and being challenged by that reality, for he asserts, ‘it is necessary that the knowledge of the common sense of the people be given priority above all’ (*Ad Theologiam Promovendam-2023*:

8). It seems clear from this personal intervention of the pope that contextual theology is being given a place of significance.

3.4.2. Stephen Bevans states similarly that the attempt to understand Christian faith in terms of context is truly a ‘theological imperative’. Doing theology, he claims, must take into account both the experience of the past and that of the present, explained by the context in which ‘Christians of a concrete time and place find themselves’, with Edward Schillebeeckx (1981: 51), referring to this as mutually critical dialogue between past and present experience (Bevans 2018: 1). This is not a new way of doing theology, Bevans claims, for it is consistent with how valid theology was always done. The real-life experience of people ‘as a privileged, Spirit-filled source (“locus”) of theology’ must necessarily be the dialogue partner in the method of doing theology (2018: 4). Bevans offers six models of contextual theology, which can be regarded as complementary, rather than exclusive of one another, but each of which may be more or less adequate for particular contexts of various global Church communities. The models of most interest for this project include Bevans’ ‘anthropological’, ‘praxis’ and ‘transcendental’ models.

3.4.3. In many respects, there is a remarkable degree of overlap between the call by Francis in *Ad Theologiam Promovendam-2023* to recontextualise the theological method, the thinking of Schillebeeckx and Bevans, the discipline of practical theology, and some of the voices from queer theology, a close relative of contextual theology. As Bevans (2018: 46) states, ‘[g]ood theology always needs to be humble, aware that no theology can say it all, and that contexts are ever changing’. Some of these contextual approaches to theology offer a broad lens with which to conduct this piece of context-based theological research. Pete Ward (2022: 11) emphasises how theological research drawing from a qualitative paradigm has a salvific function when it contributes to transformation. Such transforming occurs from hearing voices that were neglected by the certainty attached to doctrine and propositional truths embedded within structures that have been emphasised at the expense of human experience.

3.4.4. The anthropological model emphasises the ways in which cultural identity is relevant to theology alongside the scripture and tradition. The latter are clearly important, but they, too, have been honed by the influence of cultural identities over millennia. Full, free, and publicly-expressed cultural identity for LGBTQ+ Christians is a very new phenomenon and one that has only become possible within limited cultural and global settings. A theological model, such as the anthropological model that acknowledges the cultural identity of groups like e.g. LGBTQ+ people, is attractive, as it must certainly pay attention to scripture and tradition but can critically view what these have to say about LGBTQ+ people.

Bevans’ praxis model encourages a researcher to focus on faith as something that necessarily precipitates and enacts social change. Any theology that considers LGBTQ+ people must address the issues that continue to prevent them from full societal-inclusion, especially in contexts where violence,

discrimination, and the threat of death blight LGBTQ+ lives. Elizabeth Stuart (2018: 49) contends that LGBTQ+ people should remain within their faith communities, for ‘if at the end of the rainbow, there is not an ultimate NO to oppression it is hard to work out why we should be doing theology at all’.

Bevans’ transcendental method is more subtle, focusing on how an individual becomes authentic in their faith life, and in their ‘being-in-the-world’ (Bevans 2018: 7). Theology that emphasises the authentic subjectivity of someone in a specific cultural context is less concerned with content and more with ‘being faithful to a process of honest and authentic inquiry’ (Bevans 2018: 23). Bevans states that this faithfulness will be towards what Bernard Lonergan (1972: 292) terms the ‘transcendental imperatives’—be attentive, be intelligent, be reasonable, be responsible. Bevans here notes the addition by David Tracy (1996: 19) of ‘be loving, and, if necessary, change’. Many LGBTQ+ Catholic Christians do not want to leave their Church, as it confers upon them their baptismal identity. As they remain faithful to this identity within their Church, they actively live out the transcendental imperatives of Lonergan and Tracy. Stuart argues that this ought to be the case, for the Church is already an ‘exodus community’ from which LGBTQ+ Christians should not re-exodus themselves but remain as ‘othered’ members of what was always a ‘ragtag ragbag’ community. In doing so, by living authentically, they exercise a prophetic voice that reminds the Church of its otherness, as against the ‘theo-social world constructed around heterosexuality’ (Stuart 2018: 48).

None of these three contextual theological models is a perfect fit within which LGBTQ+ people and their Christian identities can be theologically grounded, for as Bevans says, none of the models are mutually exclusive, and more than one may inform a person or community’s efforts at ‘doing theology’. If contextual theology gives LGBTQ+ Christian people a space from within which to live free, faithful lives, aspects of Bevans’ models are useful reference points.

3.4.5. Practical theology is a branch of theology, proactive in embracing qualitative research methodologies, with Swinton & Mowat defining practical theology as:

critical, theological reflection on the practices of the Church as they interact with the practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God’s redemptive practices in, to and for the world. (2006: 7)

There are clear links between contextual theologies and practical theology. Bevans (2018: 46) contends that while every version of practical theology is contextual theology, the same does not apply in reverse, with only the praxis model fully conforming to the usual norms of practical theology (2018: 42). Nevertheless, the emphasis upon experience in both theologies does unite the two, and invites further exploration as to how each can critically inform the other.

3.4.6. Patrick Cheng gives a three-stranded definition to the elusive term, queer theology, writing:

If theology is “talk about God,”...there are at least three possible definitions for “queer theology.” First, queer theology is LGBT people “talking about God.” Second, queer theology is “talking about God” in a self-consciously transgressive manner, especially in terms of challenging societal norms about sexuality and gender. Third, queer theology is “talk about God” that challenges and deconstructs the natural binary categories of sexual and gender identity. (2011: 19)

Colby Dickinson and Meghan Toomey, in seeking to contextualise queer theology, recognise how it emerges from and is connected to other theological approaches which aim to disrupt theology, freeing it from ‘the various confinements of mainstream representations and practices’ (2017: 3). In this respect queer theology recognises and draws from, ‘its lineage with contextual theologies’, particularly those grounded in social contexts and experiences, with liberation theologies providing a lens for feminist, gay & lesbian theologies in particular (Greenough 2020: 9). Greenough explores how some queer theologians have emphasised the rupturing role of queer theologies, as being contextual (2020: 35-6). He references Lisa Isherwood and Marcella Althaus-Reid, who claim that ‘theology has always been contextual, and it has always depended on a theoretical framework of interpretation of the world’ (2004: 4). Furthermore Althaus-Reid insists that the power of traditional theology is built upon ‘exclusive and exclusionary’ methods, indifferent to ‘the reality of people’s concerns’, methods to which queer theology turns its attention to re-examine and disrupt (2000: 5).

Gerard Loughlin suggests that such a disrupting method returns theology to its original strangeness.

even when theology was culturally dominant, it was strange, for it sought the strange; it sought to know the unknowable in Christ, the mystery it was called to seek through following Jesus. And of course, it has always been in danger of losing this strangeness by pretending that it has comprehended the mystery, that it can name that which is beyond all names. Indeed –and despite its own best schooling – it has often succumbed to this danger, which it names “idolatry”. (2017: 7)

Dickinson and Toomey argue that theology requires this disruptive queerness, which Loughlin argues is one of its necessary qualities. In accepting this, we accept that theology requires its interior and exterior boundaries to be erased and develop new understandings based on the voices and perspectives that have been hidden, subdued or erased. Such resistance, questioning, and an ‘intellect formed by deconstruction’ should be embedded within the theological method, which must relinquish its control over knowledge rooted in certainty or enmeshed in controlling structures. They argue that ‘queering theology must be the heart of any legitimate theological endeavour’, for it is the diverse God from whom theology takes its title and rationale who issues a call to disrupt inherited structures and identities

handed down to us by the ever-evolving systems of control and power. Dickinson and Toomey conclude by insisting that '[t]here is no better place for doing theology than in the face of manifestations of this power, for this must be the most fecund locus for encountering revelation of the divine' (2017: 13-14).

3.4.7. Having explored a variety of contextual theologies, it does seem apparent that a contextualist epistemological paradigm feels like a fitting position from which to 'do' the theology embedded within this qualitative research by exploring how the human experience of a contextually situated Christian community may disrupt and challenge the doctrines surrounding LGBTQ+ people.

3.5. Axiology

3.5.1. The analysis of interview-participants will be a holistic portrait, incorporating their 'emic' perspectives, internal to and informed by their contextual position, as well as the 'etic' researcher-perspective entering participant experiences from the outside. This etic perspective is nevertheless strongly influenced by my 'experiential' links to the subjects of this research. I am, in many respects, an insider-researcher, defined by Braun & Clarke as 'in some or many ways a member of the group they are studying (e.g., sharing a racial or ethnic heritage or particular life experience with the participant group)' (2022: 18). An outsider researcher is not such a member, but Braun & Clarke advise that the researcher can occupy both positions, particularly as in my case, I encountered the unique perspective of each participant, sharing a privileged window into their contextual experience.

3.5.2. The method of sampling ensured that the participants were not known to me personally, even if I did know some in a non-personal capacity, but I was familiar with the roles and ecclesial responsibilities that each group enjoyed. As an Irish Catholic, I am aware of Ireland's long and complex relationship with its largest Christian denomination. Like many of my nation's co-religionists, I have been affected by recent decades of revelations regarding the abuse of minors and vulnerable adults by Roman Catholic clergy and religious. I am inevitably a part of what is being researched, and under no circumstances can I, as the 'researcher', be separated from the 'researched' in *this* project. The research is, therefore, subjective. I have first-hand experience of either belonging to or working alongside members of each of the identified sub-groups. I have been a Roman Catholic priest and made an informed vocational decision to leave ministry, partly as a result of my disagreement with Church teachings about homosexuality. I continue to dispute these teachings, and as a legally-partnered gay man, I live in contravention of these teachings with no personal qualms of conscience. I continue to identify as a theist and Roman Catholic, regularly attending a local Catholic Church and accepting many of the key doctrinal beliefs of the Christian religion, albeit more broadly than once was the case. My axiological position in regard to this project could be none other than value-bound, and I can claim no objective standpoint in regard to my values and beliefs in connection to this study. The emphasis on personal reflexivity in the project will be thorough, pursuing the aim of allowing me to identify how and when the subjective perspective is present. The qualitative paradigm

demands no researcher objectivity other than producing research which the reader may judge for its biases. Conducting participant-interviews in an ethical, methodical manner, upholding professional researcher interview-practices, and producing verbatim transcripts are steps that may prevent unacceptable levels of researcher bias. Some of the methods used to ensure good reflexive practice are detailed below.

3.6. Reflexivity

3.6.1. Braun & Clarke in considering the merits of reflexive practice, state that in a qualitative project:

it seems rather odd to provide such information about participants to ‘situate your sample’, but not about yourself. Locating your standpoint is especially important if an aspect of your identity is particularly pertinent to the research topic. (2013: 303)

They advise against having a separate ‘reflexive section’ and suggest that the personal reflection is woven into the fabric of the entire report, an approach I will adopt to demonstrate transparency and coherence, showing how both I, as the researcher, and the chosen methods shaped the research. Braun & Clarke (2022: 19) consider a research-journal as ‘a repository for documenting and storing thoughts for subsequent reflection, interrogation and meaning-making’. A journal was kept and maintained throughout the project, with a particular focus on reflexive observations after each participant-interview. This was maintained for the duration of the project, with key thoughts, observations, and reflections added regularly. Braun & Clarke (2022: 19) do not recommend that such journals become more than personal assistants to the researcher, although sharing the material may have some value as the project is shaped. I include a short extract from the research-journal recorded during the fieldwork phase of the project in Appendix 9.

3.6.2. Transcribing data from interviews was itself a reflexive review of every participant interaction, and the value of this engagement with the raw data was enormous. NVivo software facilitated the addition of reflexive observation-notes at every stage of the coding process, facilitating the incorporation of reflexivity into the analysis. The presentation of the analysis was an exercise in reflexive practice, which was woven into every chapter. During the period of interview-transcription, a researcher colleague interviewed me using the same design and materials used for the 54 participant-interviews. This was enormously helpful, and I retained this interview transcript to inform reflexivity throughout the project, a practice I strongly suggest as being particularly valuable. I include a small sample of this transcript in Appendix 11. Sue Wilkinson (1988) considers reflexivity in a project to consist of three main areas, each of which should be evident throughout this project, summarised here by Braun & Clarke (2022:13):

- Personal reflexivity — how the researcher-values shape their research and knowledge-production.

- Functional reflexivity — how the methods and other aspects of design shape the research and knowledge-production.
- Disciplinary reflexivity — how academic disciplines shape knowledge-production.

The reflexive researcher positionality statement for this research project can be accessed in Section 1.6.

3.7. Qualitative research

3.7.1. Braun & Clarke (2013: 3) define qualitative research as using ‘words as data, collected and analysed in all sorts of ways’. This refreshingly simple definition of a complex term is used to refer to both the techniques of data collection and analysis, as well as the wider frameworks or paradigm within which the research is conducted. Use of qualitative techniques within a qualitative paradigm is what Braun & Clarke (2013: 3) refer to as ‘Big Q qualitative research’. A fundamental aspect of Big Q qualitative research is the assumption that there are ‘multiple versions of reality...closely linked to the context in which they occur’ (2013: 4). Qualitative research, they contend, deals with words as data collected through naturally occurring methods rather than experiment. The interest for the qualitative researcher is generated in the meaning derived from the data analysis and tends to be inductive. The qualitative researcher sees the use of their subjectivity as a major strength.

3.7.2. Of particular relevance to this project and its epistemological positioning is Braun & Clarke’s emphasis on the importance of context. The data generated in qualitative analysis are produced in particular contexts, and so it both recognises and incorporates the subjectivity of the data into the analysis. Braun & Clarke here refer to the perspectival subjectivity of Kvale (1996: 212)— the idea that how we see and understand ‘reflects our identities and experiences’, these being the contexts within which we have existed. From such subjective contextual data, the understanding of the perspectives and meanings of the participants can be more readily appreciated. Braun & Clarke claim that a qualitative approach gives participants’ framing of perspective priority over the researcher’s and generates a rich, full understanding of the research topic. Unafraid of the complexity of meaning and of reality in general, qualitative research has an inbuilt flexibility that accommodates the messiness and contradictory nature of human meaning and experience. All of this broadens the kind of knowledge that qualitative research can help to discover.

3.7.3. Clifford Geertz (1973) introduced the term ‘thick description’ as a qualitative research methodology that seeks to provide a very rich and in-depth account of the phenomena being researched. The qualitative researcher is faced with

a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which he must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render. (Geertz 1973: 10)

For Braun & Clarke (2013: 24) thick description occurs whenever the context of the phenomenon and the data collected is described and incorporated. This contextualisation can enhance the understanding of the phenomenon being researched and allow features that may be unique to the study to be explored, as well as increasing access to the subjective experiences of the research-participants. The term ‘thick’ is often used alongside the term ‘rich’ to capture something of the ‘complexity and contradictions’ of the participant experience captured within the data, and in so doing, it can demonstrate rigor and transparency. King, Horrocks and Brooks (2019: 217-18) assess the strength of a thick description as assisting the reader in making a judgment as to whether the ‘interpretation emerging from the analysis seems consistent with the description presented’.

As the researcher is the one who selects the material for presentation, a thick description does not assure the quality of the analysis, but this can certainly be assisted with the inclusion of as much detail about the research focus as is practicable. Such a thick description ought to, according to King et al. (2019), help the reader assess how the researcher reached their conclusions from the data collected. It provides an audit trail, in which the reader is shown e.g., how the development of themes or codes progressed and enhanced the quality of the thick description. A detailed account can show credibility but also assist the researcher in the reflexive critique of their own potential biases, enhancing the project’s transparency. In seeking to understand how the teachings of the Catholic Church about homosexuality have been understood, accepted, or received by the research-participants, such a thick description of their experience and perspective will provide an opening to discover and interpret meaning from their words and reactions. The thick description of participant voices will be strongly incorporated into the data presentation and analysis, and this will also assist in answering the Research Question by providing credibility, trustworthiness, and transparency.

3.8. The relationship between theology and qualitative research

3.8.1. Pete Ward (2022: 8-9) considers the uneasy relationship between theology and qualitative research.

The relationship between the two is not an obvious one, nor is it frictionless. Traditionally theology is, in Kantian terms, situated within the “world of ideas,” whereas qualitative methods aim at describing the “world of experiences.” In theory, the two are incommensurable. In practice, however, an increasing number of researchers insist on the relationship and find it fruitful (Ward & Tveitereid 2022: 2).

He argues that the received wisdom has always connected qualitative research methods with social science and that the theologian who incorporates qualitative research methods into their project must practice some nimble footwork in negotiating the dance-steps between one discipline and the other. Ward (2022: 9) asserts that qualitative research ideally assists in the exploration of contextual theology and that through its emphasis on paying attention to the voices of people and groups,

especially the marginalised, it offers a ‘disciplined and structured approach’ for achieving this aim. Nevertheless, one of the most obvious reasons for the awkwardness of the dance-steps between these two disciplines is that theology is about God as a reality, and the knowledge of such a being is accessed in an entirely different manner to the usual subjects of qualitative research.

3.8.2. Qualitative research may indeed be used to assess the views of people about God as an agent in their lives and associated issues of interest, but its subjective nature means that such views must remain those of the participants and can generate no empirical knowledge about God. John Swinton (2022: 87), in assessing the compatibility of qualitative research methods and theology, contends that the key concern in theology is not knowledge *about* God but knowledge *of* God, the latter being salvific and of interest to the theologian. A theologian-researcher adopting qualitative methods must, he contends, identify and incorporate their spiritual position as a necessary part of the reflexive self-awareness that is the foundation of qualitative research. Ward (2022: 13) similarly suggests that when combining qualitative research methods with theology, the latter cannot simply be ‘sprinkled across the top to make things look right’. The Research Question will have some theological connection, and it will be important to consider which theological emphases are embedded within it.

3.8.3. In addition, like Swinton (2022), Ward (2022: 13) argues that the qualitative-researcher-theologian will:

need to reflect upon the extent to which their own commitments and beliefs shape the choice of project, and in an ongoing commitment to reflexivity that is fundamental to qualitative research these will need to be returned to at key moments in the project.

The theologian-researcher must be upfront about the area of theological knowledge to which they hope to make a contribution and the ways in which theology will be a part of the ‘theoretical shape of the project’ (2022: 14). The relationship between qualitative research and theology is delicate, complex and multi-layered, and this must be acknowledged. Nevertheless, with Swinton (2022: 87), Ward (2022: 11) concurs that salvific purposes are of interest to the theologian and that such purposes may be achieved when the theologian-qualitative-researcher contributes to ‘transformation’ through hearing voices that have never been heard when doctrine and propositional truths were traditionally emphasised at the expense of human experience. As Ward (2022:11) correctly states, qualitative research, ‘generates a further layer to what it means to say the word “theology.” ’

3.9. Method: Template Analysis

3.9.1. The British psychologist, Nigel King, developed a tool for the analysis of data known as Template Analysis (Brooks et al. 2015; N. King 1998, 2004, 2012, 2016; N. King & Brookes 2016, 2018).

Template Analysis is a form of thematic analysis which emphasises the use of hierarchical coding but balances a relatively high degree of structure in the process of analysing textual data with the flexibility to adapt it to the needs of a particular study. Central to the technique is the development of a coding template, usually on the basis of a subset of data, which is then applied to further data, revised, and refined. The approach is flexible regarding the style and the format of the template that is produced. Unlike some other thematic approaches to data coding, it does not suggest in advance a set sequence of coding levels. Rather, it encourages the analyst to develop themes more extensively where the richest data (in relation to the research question) are found. Equally, Template Analysis does not insist on an explicit distinction between descriptive and interpretive themes, nor on a particular position for each type of theme in the coding structure. The data involved in Template Analysis studies are usually interview transcripts. (Brooks, J. et al. 2015: 203)

Braun & Clarke (2022: 242) refer to King’s method as a ‘set of techniques’ as opposed to a methodology, and according to King (2012: 426) it is a ‘style of thematic analysis’ which combines a highly structural analysis with the flexibility that individual studies may require. The main procedural steps of the method are outlined in Table 7.

Table 7. Key features of Template Analysis.

Step	Summary	Important considerations
1. Defining themes and codes	A theme is a recurring feature of the interview data that encapsulates ‘perceptions and/or experiences, seen by the researcher as relevant to the research question of a particular study’ King (2017: 430). Coding attaches a label to a section of data text, identifying it with a theme.	-Theme implies repetition rather than an isolated occurrence. -Themes are by necessity subjective. -Overlap of themes, whilst inevitable, should not compromise their distinctiveness. -‘Placeholder’ themes may also be developed to organise associated themes, e.g. those of a particular sub-group.
2. Hierarchical coding	The ‘hierarchical organization of codes, with groups of similar codes clustered together to produce more general higher order codes’. (King 2017: 431)	-The researcher is free to develop as many theme -levels as is useful. The more sub-themes developed becomes an indication of how rich and insightful a particular top-level theme may be to the analysis. -Lateral links which cut across main themes can be expressed through the use of additional <i>integrative themes</i> .
3. Parallel coding	The same segment of the data may be classified with two or more codes at the same level.	-This is considered to be non-problematic in qualitative research, and in most thematic analysis methods generally.
4. Integrative themes	Themes that pervade much of the data pool and which may be shown on the template,	-King refers to these as ‘undercurrents running through participants’ accounts; often, perhaps, not addressed explicitly but

	as connecting to other themes in a lateral way.	very apparent to the careful reader'. (King 2017: 432)
5. Displaying the template: Lists and or mind-maps	Lists: 'themes can be presented in a list, with levels indicated by indentation, typography (e.g., font size and style) and/or a numbering system'. Mind-maps: these 'allows lateral links between thematic clusters to be shown more clearly than in the list style', but require a good deal more space. (King 2017: 433)	-List presentation remains the most common in many published works, but this should not be to the detriment of displaying lateral links between thematic clusters.
6. Quality checks	King identifies independent coding and critical comparison, but this was not feasible for me as a solo researcher, so his recommendation of the use of an audit trail was the quality check best suited to this project.	-'An audit trail in qualitative research is a record of the steps the researcher has gone through in carrying out an analysis and the way his or her thinking has developed.' (King 2017: 432)
7. Presentation of analysis	King recommends no particular method here other than the researcher being mindful of the level of depth required by the project in order to address the Research Question and the readership of the document.	-King (2017: 446) suggests three presentation approaches of which No. 3 was used in this project: 1. A set of individual case studies, followed by a discussion of the differences and similarities between cases. 2. An account structured around the main themes identified, drawing illustrative examples from each transcript. 3. A thematic presentation of the findings, using a different individual case study to illustrate each of the main themes. This can be a useful synthesis of approaches (1) and (2) above; the key challenge is to select the cases in a way that fairly represents the themes in the data as a whole. King emphasises the extensive use of direct participant quotes in any approach used.

3.9.2. Given the structured nature of the participant-interviews, I judged Template Analysis to be suitable for this study, alongside the flexibility it continued to afford the project as the iterative analysis of the large dataset progressed. An attractive aspect of the method is that the researcher has the flexibility of developing their own template on the basis of an initial analysis of sampled data and that there is no 'set sequence of coding levels' which must be followed, as there is with other forms of thematic analysis. The technique has been successfully used in business and management (Kenny and Briner 2010), health (Howard et al. 2008), education (Au 2007) and a variety of other disciplines. It is also suitable for studies with a very small number of cases or, as with this project, a relatively high number of cases.

3.9.3. Template Analysis is not a distinct methodology and can be used with different epistemological positions, suitable for this project for which a definite position was less obvious. King (2012: 427) specifically mentions the contextual constructivist position (Madill et al. 2000) as being a suitable epistemological position from within which to employ this method. As King (2012: 427) states, with this position, ‘the researcher assumes that there are always multiple interpretations to be made of any phenomenon, which will depend upon the position of the researcher and the context of the research’. As a result, the issue of coding reliability is less relevant, and the reflexivity of the researcher is emphasised as in this project. King (2012: 248) maintains that a researcher who takes a contextual constructivist stance and is sceptical of the ‘existence of “real” internal states to be discovered through empirical research’ may feel that Template Analysis is ‘more conducive to their position’ than for example the assumptions of grounded theory which assume the discovery of ‘real’ beliefs and so forth. King (2012: 429) acknowledges strong similarities between Template Analysis and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) but suggests that the emphasis on the depth of individual cases in IPA makes it more suitable for projects smaller than this one. The emphasis on the use of and development of *a priori codes* (see 3.12.2) in Template Analysis, makes it more time-efficient and conducive to larger case numbers. King (2012) identifies three reasons why Template Analysis could be chosen by a researcher over other versions of thematic analysis.

Table 8. Reasons why Template Analysis could be chosen by a researcher.

Advantage of Template Analysis over other thematic analysis methods	Development	Advantage for this project
1) The flexibility of the coding structure with researchers not tied to a specific method of devising themes that develop from those that are ‘descriptive’ towards those that are ‘interpretive’ and finally ‘overarching’.	King (2012: 429) contends that the distinction between themes is somewhat subjective and unclear, with substantial overlap between descriptive and interpretive themes often being present. Template Analysis, he claims, with its emphasis on researcher flexibility, allows the researcher to ‘develop themes more extensively where the richest data (in relation to the Research Question) are found.’	This was a very attractive and appropriate approach for the thick data, gathered from the fieldwork carried out for this study.
2) King (2012: 430) maintains that in Template Analysis, the use of <i>a priori codes</i> provides a middle position between thematic analyses that take either a ‘top-down’ or ‘bottom-up’ approach to themes.	‘Top-down’ may be exemplified by the matrix analysis of Nadin and Cassell 2004, or the framework analysis of Pope et al., 2000, and ‘bottom-up’ by grounded theory or IPA methods. The use of a certain number of <i>a priori themes</i> that may be developed or discarded later offers valuable flexibility to the researcher.	The highly structured data-gathering in this research lent itself to a method that allowed some transferability of <i>a priori themes</i> while also permitting refinement as the initial iterative analysis progressed and developed.

<p>3) King (2012: 430) commends Template Analysis as a method in which ‘analysis progresses...through an iterative process of applying, modifying and re-applying the initial template.’</p>	<p>This renders Template Analysis more efficient than methods that require every step of the method to be carried out afresh with each new piece of textual data.</p>	<p>With such a very large volume of text (none of the richness of which I wanted to disregard), the inbuilt efficiency associated with Template Analysis was useful, and one that would not result in an analysis lacking depth, one of the concerns of Braun and Clarke. (2022: 244)</p>
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3.9.4. Finally, King (2012: 446) suggests some approaches that the researcher may use to present the Template Analysis. The approach that seemed most appropriate for this study was an ‘account structured around the main themes identified, drawing illustrative examples from each transcript as required’. However, in order to avoid the potential disadvantage of over-generalisation and losing sight of individual experiences in the data, an account of one individual from each sub-group was incorporated, and their contribution used as a precursor to the main thematic presentation. King strongly insists on the use of many direct participant quotes ‘to aid the understanding of specific points of interpretation and more extensive passages, giving readers a flavour of the original texts’ (2012: 447). With a very rich dataset, this was a fortunate necessity and one which avoided the possibility of over-generalising the data analysis. In choosing King’s Template Analysis, I was convinced that the advantages suited the nature of this research study, with the disadvantages overcome by substantial iterative engagement with the thick data, ensuring that the template only existed to serve its meaningful interpretation.

Table 9. Advantages and disadvantages of Template Analysis (King 2012: 447)

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highly flexible approach that can be modified for the needs of any study. • Fewer prescriptions and procedures than other thematic analysis methods. • The principles behind the technique are easily grasped by those relatively unfamiliar with qualitative methods. • Works very well in studies that seek to examine the perspectives of different groups within an organizational context. • Forces the researcher to take a systematic and well-structured approach to handling the data. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong emphasis on the coding structure may stand in the way of a personal engagement with the data for those who prefer an open, unstructured engagement with texts. • Some may focus excessively on the details of template construction, neglecting the crucial point that the template is a means to an end (making sense of the data) and not the purpose of the analysis in itself.

3.10. The sub-groups

3.10.1. The Research Question addresses the reception of teachings about homosexuality by the Irish Catholic community, and so all the participants lived on the island of Ireland, as the Irish Catholic Church is not divided by the existence of a political border. The Church organises itself under the term

the ‘people of God’ (*LG-1964*, Ch. 2-4), into the clergy composed of bishops, priests and deacons, and the laity. The sample reflected this initial categorisation by including members of both the clergy and the laity. In recognition of the greater numbers of laity within the ‘people of God’, I sought a larger sample of laity. The laity are given ecclesial recognition as a group within the Church who live their secular calling in the world through their marital/single state, parenthood, and various occupations and ways of life. The simple criterion for inclusion within the group of clerical participants was ordination to Holy Orders as bishop, priest or deacon, and their being incardinated into an Irish diocese. The criteria for inclusion in the laity participant group were their baptism and their particular lay calling. While the initial hope had been to seek participants from the 16-18 year old age group as a separate sub-section of the laity, this did not occur for practical reasons, detailed later.

3.10.2. Education is a key concern of the Catholic Church across the world, with Ireland being a country notably influenced by Catholic education. *Gravissimum Educationis-1965* and *Apostolicam Actuositatem-1965* emphasise the role of both education and educators within the Church community, so the participation of a distinct sub-group of Catholic educators was desirable. Professionally and contractually, they are responsible for communicating and explaining Catholic faith and doctrine to the majority of Irish Catholic young people (see Ch.7). The criteria for selection for this sub-group was their professional status as either a teacher in a Catholic-maintained, or grammar school or their professional status as a trained and diocesan-appointed youth-ministry leader. All of the teachers selected worked in secondary education with 11-18 year old students and those who were trained as youth-ministry leaders worked with an overlapping and older age group ranging from 15-22.

3.10.3. *Lumen Gentium-1964*, Ch. 6 addresses the existence of a distinct canonical state of professed men and women ‘religious’ who are derived from both the clerical and the lay state, and who are dedicated to lives which are bound to living the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience. The participation of a small group of male and female religious was sought, with the criteria for their inclusion being their professed way of life and belonging to a canonically approved order or congregation based in Ireland. Although relatively small in number, religious have held an influential role within the Irish Catholic community, albeit one that is changing rapidly.

3.10.4. It was important to include a sub-group of LGBTQ+ Catholics, who would be lay Catholic men and women who identified themselves with one or other of the terms denoted within the expanding LGBTQ+ acronym. These were chosen to represent the Catholics, who were the indirect subjects of the Church teachings being examined. The LGBTQ+ group were the only participants chosen on the basis of their sexual orientation. The sexual orientation of the clergy and religious participants was (with one exception) never directly declared, and it was not appropriate or sensitive to make enquiries about their sexual orientation. Based on their interviews, all members of the

Catholic-educator and the laity participant sub-groups identified publicly as heterosexual. Four of the lay people were parents to someone who identified as LGBTQ+.

3.10.5. I had hoped to identify two additional sub-groups, young Catholics from a 16-18 year-old-age group, and seminarians or postulants in training for priesthood or professed religious life. The first of these became the casualty of circumstances, as the coinciding of some scheduled interviews prior to public examination season meant that these participants cancelled their interviews with little notice. Schools were unable to facilitate requests to interview students due to severe Covid-related staff shortages. There was some reluctance expressed privately that the nature of the topic was deemed to be sensitive and controversial, with parental/governor consent likely to be less forthcoming. Disappointing as this was, the educators supplied detailed information, albeit second-hand data, about the views of the younger Catholics with whom they worked and interacted.

The potential participants for a sub-group of seminarians/postulants occupied a very small potential pool (20 diocesan seminarians for Ireland in 2023 and an unknown, but even smaller number of religious postulants). It became clear from private correspondence that a formal request to interview seminarians on a sensitive issue, given *The 2005-Instruction* (which excludes homosexual men from Holy Orders), would not be successful. I did undertake one interview via videotelephony with an Irish seminarian based elsewhere, but the recording of this interview was incomplete and later excluded. I don't feel that the omission of the seminarian/postulant sub-group, again through unforeseen obstacles, provides a serious gap in the data collected. Numerically, these represent a small component of the Irish Catholic community, and their opinions would have been those of a niche group of men or possibly women in the case of female religious.

3.10.6. I was keen to neither over or underrepresent numbers in any particular sub-group, but was nonetheless largely at the mercy of the overall response. The response rate exceeded my expectations, and the two sampling methods I utilised, 'stratified-purposeful', and 'snowball', yielded more participant interviews than were able to be used in the analysis. I did interview all respondents, ensuring that a total of 54 participants were interviewed. In the interests of neither under or over-representing any one group or due to data quality issues, I excluded some interviews and used 45 interviews in the analysis. There were clearly elements of overlap between membership of the different participant sub-groups. All but eight of the 45 participants were lay people (religious sisters or non-clergy male religious are technically defined as coming from the lay state), with only the ordained clergy being outside this criterion. Some of the lay participants had been Catholic educators, as had some of the religious sisters. One of the diocesan clergy identified as gay. Such an overlap of criteria was unavoidable. For the purposes of answering the Research Question, I feel these sub-categories were an effective way of representing this community.

Table 10. Number of participants by sub-group

Sub-group	Participants interviewed	Participant interviews used in the analysis
Diocesan Clergy	9 (including 1 seminarian, whose interview was subsequently excluded due to recording quality issues).	6
Laity	17	16
Religious	8	6
Catholic Educators	7	7
LGBTQ+ Catholics	13	10
TOTAL	54	45

Table 11. Gender of participants

Sub-group	Male	Female
Diocesan Clergy	6	0
Laity	7	9
Religious	2	4
Catholic Educators	2	5
LGBTQ+ Catholics	8	2
TOTAL	25	20

Table 12. Age of participants

Sub-group	Age 18-35	Age 36-55	Age 56-75	Age 76+
Diocesan Clergy		3	3	
Laity	2	3	9	2
Religious		1	4	1
Catholic Educators	4	3		
LGBTQ+ Catholics	1	6	2	1
TOTAL	7	16	18	4

3.11. Sampling

3.11.1. Nick Emmel (2013) synthesised the work of Michael Quinn Patton (1990, 2002) on purposeful sampling, a kind which is not driven by any theoretical concerns, but by the ‘practical and pragmatic considerations’ of the particular research (2013: 33) Emmel (2013: 33) reminds us of Patton’s (1990: 151) assertion that practical reasons always outweigh the theoretical, in an effort to gather the richest research data. Patton (2002) suggests the researcher should ‘determine what people, programmes, organisations, communities or populations of interest are’ (Emmel 2013: 40). With this in mind, I established a picture of what I considered the typical membership of each of the sub-groups to be. The typicality would be based on simple criteria, such as those referenced in 3.10., for each sub-group, e.g. ‘ordination’ and ‘incardination’ for diocesan clergy, or ‘baptism’ for laity participants. I erred on the

side of widening; rather than narrowing my sample size, and using a modified version of stratified purposeful sampling, sample lists were drawn up.

3.11.2. LGBTQ+ Catholics do not exist in a definable group or community, and for confidentiality purposes, a snowball sampling strategy was employed for this sub-group. Such a sample begins with the identification by the researcher of:

well-situated people to nominate people who can provide insight into a phenomenon because they know a lot about it [and who] will, potentially, lead the researcher to many different sources (Emmel 2013: 40).

This generated a larger pool of potential participants than was required. A disadvantage of this snowballing strategy was that it skewed the sample towards gay men. Attempts to redress this imbalance were not productive, and I was unsuccessful in increasing the number of lesbian Catholics or receiving any positive responses from transgender Catholics. Nevertheless, the input of two lesbian participants and the lay parent of a transgender child provided rich, high-quality data for inclusion in the analysis.

3.11.3. Initially, I had hoped to embark upon the kind of ethnographic research informed by Laurence Taylor 1995, Scheper-Hughes 2001, Warner 1995, Fadiman 1997, Fox 2005, Luhmann 2012 and Tarlo 2010. These authors had immersed themselves into particular communities in an effort to paint a wide-ranging research-portrait of a particular community. This would have involved a similar immersion into one Irish diocese, focusing perhaps on two parishes for the lay participants, and the wider diocesan area for the other sub-groups. The practical issues connected to the ongoing pandemic rendered this unfeasible. One Irish diocese remained the principal focus with the positive support of a diocesan bishop secured some months prior to the fieldwork. Nineteen participant-interviews used for the analysis came from this diocese 'A'. This bishop acted loosely in the role of a 'gatekeeper', a term explained by King, Horrocks, and Brooks (2019: 59), as, 'someone who has the authority to grant or deny permission to access potential participants, and/or the ability to facilitate such access'. As a gatekeeper, this bishop affirmed the merit of the project being carried out in his diocese, to potential participants when they asked him for additional validation of my credentials. A further eighteen participant-interviews used in the analysis came from an adjoining Irish diocese 'B', broadly similar in terms of its mixture of urban and rural hinterlands and parishes. The 'Diocesan See' was vacant at that time, but access was assisted by some useful personal contacts whom King, Horrocks, and Brooks, (2019: 59-60) define as 'insiders', who help to:

identify organisational members who met the sampling criteria of the study, pass project information sheets and letters requesting participation to them, and forward queries to the research team.

I was confident that this insider assistance, cultivated from personal experience of the Irish Catholic community, was very useful. Such insiders were also useful in the employment of the snowballing sample method required for the LGBTQ+ Catholic participants for the project. Thirty-seven of the 45 interviews used in the analysis came from two adjoining Irish dioceses (Dioceses A and B), with broadly similar demographic characteristics. The remaining eight participants whose data were used in the analysis were dispersed more widely, coming from two other large Irish dioceses, both characterised by large urban populations.

3.11.4. For each sub-group in Diocese A, the diocesan administrative structures were consulted, drawing upon lists of clergy, parishes, professed religious communities and Catholic schools with which I could make contact. Contact was established with insiders from the Irish LGBTQ+ community, to seek their assistance. A cover letter, personalised for each potential participant, detailing the researcher's background, aims of the research, assurances of confidentiality, anonymity, data protection and the contact details of my supervisors at Durham University (Appendix 3) was drafted. Most were sent via email or by post when this was not available. Religion and sexuality are viewed as controversial topics, and on that basis, as many clergy, parishes, religious communities, and Catholic schools were contacted as possible from the large urban areas of Diocese A, its larger provincial towns, and some of its more rural areas. Potential contacts were drawn up based on parish population, school size and urban/rural locations. For religious, given their relatively small presence in Diocese A, I contacted all of them.

3.11.5. Positive responses were followed by a further correspondence supplying further practical details. Non-responses were followed up but only occasionally generated a positive response. After five weeks, requests for potential participants were widened to include a neighbouring diocese, B, larger in population and similar in terms of its blend of rural, provincial, and large urban areas. Diocesan administrative details were researched, and a similar number of emails and letters were sent. Insider recommendations for contacts from each of the sub-groups were used to provide another pool of potential participants. I received further positive responses from this diocese. In the meantime, the number of potential participants for the LGBTQ+ Catholic sub-group increased sharply, as the snowball sampling method began to spread more widely, with respondents from both dioceses (A and B) and a larger number from other parts of the island, north and south of the border.

3.11.6. It was fortunate that none of the confirmed interviews were cancelled due to the ongoing pandemic. Some withdrew for practical reasons, including one of the LGBTQ+ participants who withdrew on the basis of the personal distress experienced when he researched Catholic Church teaching about homosexuality, feeling unable to proceed. Prior to arranged interviews with six 16-18-year-old Catholics from Diocese A, they withdrew through examination pressures. Given the practical impossibility of rescheduling these interviews, a decision was made to eliminate this sub-group from

the research project at that point. Table 13 shows the response rate and how this progressed across the 10-week period of sampling, alongside the later amendments due to withdrawal of participants or exclusion of participant-interviews by the researcher.

Table 13. The progression of responses during the sampling period

Pre-defined sub-group.	Positive responses from potential participants in Diocese (A) during the total sampling period (mid-January to mid-March 2022).	Combined negative and non-responses from potential participants, Diocese (A) during the total sampling period (mid-January to mid-March 2022).	Positive responses from potential participants in Diocese (B) in a 4-week sampling period (mid-Feb to mid-Mar 2022).	Combined negative and non-responses from potential participants in Diocese (B) in a 4-week sampling period (mid-Feb to mid-Mar 2022).	Positive responses from potential participants in other dioceses in the 5-week period of snowball sampling (mid-Jan to mid-Mar 2022).	Combined negative and non-responses from potential participants in other dioceses in the 5-week period of snowball sampling (mid-Jan to mid-Mar 2022).
Diocesan clergy	4	10	3			
Laity	11	2	7	4	1	
Religious	3	14	3	10	2	
Catholic educators	3	9	4			
LGBTQ+ Catholics	2		4		8	7
Seminarians and postulants*	1					<i>Personal advice was received that these participants would not be accessible.</i>
16-18-year-old Catholics*	6	Six diocesan Catholic secondary schools indicated their unwillingness or inability to participate.				
TOTAL responses	30 (46.1% +)	35 (53.9% -)	21 (60% +)	14 (40% -)	11 (61.1 +)	7 (38.9% -)
Withdrawal of participant	7		1			
Excluded post-interview	4		2		3	
Total used in data analysis	19		18		8	TOTAL 45
* Upon review and during the fieldwork period, this entire sub-group were withdrawn from the project due to either a low response rate by potential participants or the unforeseen withdrawal of participant volunteers.						

Table 14. Number of interviews carried out and analysed by sample location

Sub-group	Total number of participants interviewed from Diocese A.	Total number of interviews from Diocese A analysed.	Total number of participants interviewed from Diocese B.	Total number of interviews from Diocese B analysed.	Total number of interviews from other Irish dioceses.	Total number of interviews from other Irish dioceses analysed.	
Diocesan clergy	7 (<i>incl. 1 seminarian</i>)	4	3	2			
Laity	10	9	6	6	1	1	
Religious	3	2	3	2	2	2	
Catholic educators	3	3	4	4			
LGBTQ+ Catholics	1	1	4	4	7	5	
Total	24	19	20	18	10	8	
Total participant-interviews used in final analysis		19		18		8	Total 45

Table 15. Participant demographic breakdown and ecclesial participation

Name (these are pseudonyms employed to ensure anonymity). Male (M) Female (F)	Location Diocese A (A) Diocese B (B) Other diocese (O) Rural (r) Urban (u)	Age-group 1) 18-35 (1) 2) 36-55 (2) 3)56-75 (3) 4) 75 + (4)	Employment Category Currently employed (E) Retired (R) Student (S)	Ecclesial participation Weekly or daily Mass attendance (P) Regular but non-weekly Mass attendance. (OC) Does not currently attend Mass but previously did so regularly as an adult. (NP) Current ecclesial ministry or active parish/ecclesial role. * Previous ecclesial ministry or active parish/ecclesial role. **
Diocesan clergy n = 6				
Charles M	A u	3	E	P *
Oisín M	A u	3	E	P *
Jason M	A r	2	E	P *
Odhrán M	B u	3	E	P *
Nigel M	B u	2	E	P *
Iarlaithe M	A u	2	E	P *
Laity n = 16 Parent of a LGBTQ+ child (+)				
Isaac M	A r	3	R	P *
John M	B r (+)	3	R	P **
Zara F	B r (+)	3	R	P
Charlotte F	A u	1	E	P
Vincent M	A u	3	R	P *
Amy F	A u	1	S	P
Ian M	A u	3	E	P
Olivia F	A u	3	E	P
Laura F	A u	2	E	P *
Ivan M	A u	1	S	P
Mike M	A u	3	R	P *
Isla F	B u (+)	3	R	P *
Amelia F	B r	3	E	P
Linda F	B r	3	R	P *
Roisín F	B u (+)	3	E	P *
Brian M	O u	3	E	P *
Religious n = 6				
Oliver M	B u	3	E	P *
Harry M	B u	3	E	P *
Deirdre F	A u	4	E	P *
Dearbhail F	A u	2	E	P *
Maureen F	O u	3	E	P *
Mona F	O u	3	E	P *
Catholic educators n = 7 current or former diocesan youth minister (Y), teacher (T), religious studies teacher (RS), current or former head of department (H), other school pastoral responsibility (o), senior leadership or governor. (L)				

Katrina F	A r	1	E (Y)	P *
Maura F	A u	1	E (Y)	P *
Frank M	B u	2	E (R S H o)	P
Owen M	A u	1	E (R S H o)	P
Christina F	B u	2	E (R S o)	P
Nuala F	B u	2	E (Y R S H o L)	P *
Lucy F	B r	2	E (T H o L)	P *
LGBTQ+ Catholics n = 10 LGBTQ+ identity lesbian (l), gay (g), bisexual (b), queer. (q)				
Oengus M (g)	B u	2	E	NP **
Fiachra M (g)	B u	2	E	NP **
Lorraine F (l)	B u	3	E	OC **
Karen F (l)	B u	2	E	OC **
Oistin M (b)	A r	3	E	P
Dermot M (q)	O u	1	E	OC
Antony M (g)	O u	2	E	NP
Jonathan M (b)	O u	2	E	NP
Henry M (g)	O u	4	R	P *
Felix M (g)	O u	2	E	OC **

Table 16. Percentage (%) breakdown of participant data by demographic and ecclesial criteria

Locality-urban or rural	%	Diocese of origin	%	Age	%	Employment status	%	Ecclesial participation	%
Urban	80%	A	42%	18-35	15.6%	Currently employed or in active ministry*	77.5%	Weekly or daily attendance at Mass.	82.2%
Rural	20%	B	40%	36-55	33.4%	Retired	17.5%	Regular but non-weekly attendance at Mass.	8.9%
		Other	18%	56-75	46.6%	Student	5%	Does not currently attend Mass but previously did so regularly as an adult.	8.9%
				76+	4.4%			Has a current ecclesial ministry or active parish/ecclesial role. **	68.8%
*Most Irish diocesan clergy and religious are in active roles long after the legal retirement age.									
** Priests and religious have such active ecclesial roles by default.									

With ethical approval from Durham University and a list of 61 potential participants, an information pack was delivered by email or post, with a cover letter, consent form, project information, researcher

background and contact details, and information about how the data would be collected and stored. It also contained a privacy notice, with data storage information (Appendix 4). By mid-March 2022, the fieldwork commenced with travel and accommodation details finalised for a period of three months

3.12. Interviews

3.12.1. The decision to conduct a series of in-depth interviews, one of the most commonly used data collection methods in qualitative research, was supported by a great deal of literature. Braun & Clarke (2013: 77) explain the goal of the interview as ‘getting a participant to talk about their experiences and perspectives, and to capture their language and concepts, in relation to a topic that you have determined’. This was clearly one of the primary goals when gathering data that would answer the Research Question for this project. Furthermore, Nigel King, Christine Horrocks, and Joanna Brooks (2019: 20) speak about the interview encounter as flexible and open-ended, focusing on people’s experience above their general opinions or beliefs, with the interviewer-participant relationship being a crucial part of the method. Michael Patton (1990: 283) refers to the semi-structured interview as the ‘interview guided approach’ in which topics and issues can be determined by the interviewer in advance, as a guiding outline, from which the interviewer can decide the sequence and wording of the questions as the interview proceeds. Again, this justified the use of such an interview technique for the purposes of acquiring data, which was thorough and comprehensive and tailored to the information required to answer the Research Question.

3.12.2. Braun & Clarke (2013: 50) highlight the usefulness of the semi-structured interview for sensitive issues and the subsequent control that the method affords the researcher over the data, increasing its usefulness. With this in mind, this was deemed to be the best data-collection method for accessing the kind of experience-based opinions and beliefs of the participants. ‘*A priori*’ themes, extracted from the teachings, would address the Research Question, and a systematised collation of data captured through a relaxed, conversational, and flexible format was envisaged in the choice of this method. The planning, fieldwork, and transcription, with the coding and analysis of thick, rich data, was certainly a protracted experience. The data produced was of a very high quality, in terms of its richness, and the time consumed by this method was worthwhile.

3.12.3. The use of pilot interviews conducted prior to the main fieldwork period helped to refine the structure, questions, and interview technique. The relatively structured and consistent template format of the questions, along with the inclusion of an information sheet read by participants before each set of questions, facilitated consistency alongside the flexibility of a conversational interview style. Participant-interviews that had veered substantially from the original theme-structured guidelines or which had been compromised by a preponderance of conversation over consistency were eliminated from the analysis. Braun & Clarke (2013: 50), and Brinkmann (2015: 555-9) warn about the power relations that may advantage a researcher to the detriment of their participants, and care was taken to

avoid potential researcher manipulation in the interview design, execution, and by reflexively appraising each interview. No personal interactions with participants or their freely given responses were taken for granted. A research journal, usually completed on the day of any interview, facilitated reflection on researcher attitudes, feelings, dispositions, and observations about the dynamic of the particular encounter. Braun & Clarke (2013: 50) insist that a ‘well-conducted qualitative interview can generate amazing data, and you’ll get rich, detailed and quite often unanticipated accounts if you use the method well’. On reflection, their positive assessment of this method proved to be germane, and all of the participant-interviews with the data they generated, were well worth the time and effort.

3.13. The interview design

3.13.1. Braun & Clarke (2013: 51) explain that rapport with the participant and good preparation are the main factors in the successful use of the qualitative interview as a method. In nearly every case a good rapport was established, and the preparation was finely honed in the period that preceded the fieldwork. Braun & Clarke (2013: 55) maintain that in the research design, every question must be such that they will help to answer the Research Question. Reflexivity should ensure that the researcher has imagined what being asked such a question might feel like, and would be meaningful to the participant. A reflexive assessment of every interview afterwards can help the researcher to adjust their approach, wording, or explanation in ever more appropriate ways, and this was a discipline I rigidly applied. Prior to the data analysis, a researcher colleague interviewed me using the format and questions employed during the fieldwork. At that point, I could no longer alter the outcome of the interviews, and clearly, personal views on my own research topic altered the dynamic somewhat. Nevertheless, these obvious considerations aside, my colleague and I felt that the design and format were retrospectively useful, and had assisted in generating useful data.

3.13.2. Although the final methodological approach had still to be firmly established prior to the fieldwork, some form of thematic analysis by Braun & Clarke, subsequently synthesised in their work, *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide* (2022), seemed to be a viable option. Nigel King’s Template Analysis method recommends the extraction of *a priori themes* to be used in the Template Analysis of data, from earlier data collection methods. Some of these *a priori themes* were an obvious starting point in the interview design. Based upon the reflexive study and analysis of the Church teachings about homosexuality, certain core themes emerged around which to structure an interview format. Such questions would help to ascertain the participants’ understanding, acceptance, and reception of the various aspects of these teachings. Knowing the teachings intimately, and with assistance from the literature, I was in a position to frame a format to address the aims of the Research Question. The ten themes and the rationale for their use are as follows, with the source material for each theme outlined in Table 17.

3.13.3. The use of scripture to justify or support the current teachings about homosexuality was the first theme, in which I wished to ascertain whether participants considered these to be authoritative, useful or illuminating in assessing the merit of the teachings. This was followed by the use of references to NML, the procreative imperative insisted upon by the Church, and the natural complementarity of male and female within the teachings, to help me understand whether respondents considered these to be authoritative, valid, or logical arguments and to discover participant concerns about, or support for these NML arguments. The final source used by the Church in its teachings are the relatively small references, which show how the Church assesses the input and value of discoveries from the human sciences about the homosexual orientation. Here, I was interested in how the participants viewed the Church's approach to scientific evidence about homosexuality and how this impacted their assessment of the efficacy or authority of Church teachings about the homosexual orientation.

3.13.4. The next interview themes looked at areas of the teachings that focused on issues directly relevant to LGBTQ+ people and their lives. Firstly, there were the prescriptions for the sacrificial, spiritual, and affective discipline that homosexual people must undertake in order to remain faithful and achieve salvation. The questions would try to gauge the reactions, acceptance, and levels of agreement of participants with these definitive recommendations for how homosexual people should live moral lives. The next theme from the teachings dealt with the definitive condemnation of unjust discrimination and violence against homosexual people, which lies alongside an expression of understanding of why such violence may occur. I hoped to find out whether participants would see any contradictions between this aspect of the teachings, which represent a strong rebuttal of violence, and an understanding of why it occurs, as well as the Church's own discriminatory practices. Another issue that affects LGBTQ+ Catholics are the reasons why the Church opposes all legalised same-sex unions, as it expresses the dangers this allegedly brings to society and the need for legislators to oppose and frustrate all such legislation. With same-sex marriage now legally enshrined in Irish law, the responses to these questions would assess the extent to which people agreed with the reasons that the Church gives to continue its opposition, or if and why their own positions may have differed. Finally, another theme looked at the reasons why the Church prohibits men with deep-seated homosexual tendencies from being accepted as candidates for Holy Orders. I hoped that these questions would help to indicate the extent to which the participants accepted or agreed with the rationale for this teaching, given their possible knowledge that some priests are homosexual, and to see how participants viewed the Church's implicit linking of homosexual priests to the sex-abuse scandals.

3.13.5. The next theme was very significant, as it looked at the language and tone used in the teachings that have been experienced by some people as being harsh, condemnatory, and exclusionary of LGBTQ+ people. Some of these phrases and the tone were explored to discover the reaction to the

very definitive and particular language and tone used. Recent documents from the Church on the influence of gender theory, gender dysphoria (for those who accept this term), and gender reassignment for some transgender people provided the next theme. As an issue that has become high profile and very topical in society, I hoped that this theme would help to assess if participant concerns mirrored those of the Church. Finally, under the papacy of Francis, there have been a range of acts and words, often ad-hoc and spontaneous, which may lend the perception that a new attitude or tone has emerged about how the Church includes its LGBTQ+ members. This exists alongside the Pope’s continuing support for the teachings and their continuing authority for the Church. This tenth theme was used to ascertain whether the participants viewed any of these words or gestures by Pope Francis as significant and whether they might herald a potential for change in pastoral outreach or doctrine about LGBTQ+ issues.

Table 17. Interview format themes

Theme	Teachings or sources
1. Scripture	- <i>Persona Humana. Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics</i> -1975: 8 - <i>Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons</i> -1996: 4-6. - <i>The Catechism of the Catholic Church</i> -1992: 2357. - <i>Considerations regarding Proposals to Give Legal recognition to Unions between Homosexual Persons</i> -2003: 3-4.
2. Natural moral law (NML) and complementarity	- <i>Persona Humana. Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics</i> -1975: 8. - <i>Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons</i> -1986: 3, 7. - <i>The Catechism of the Catholic Church</i> -1992: 2357. - <i>Considerations regarding Proposals to Give Legal recognition to Unions between Homosexual Persons</i> -2003: 2, 4, 7, 5.
3. Human sciences	- <i>Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons</i> -1986: 2. -“ <i>Male and Female He Created Them</i> ”. <i>Toward a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education</i> -2019: 24-25.
4. Recommendations for faithful homosexual people	- <i>Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons</i> -1986: 12. - <i>The Catechism of the Catholic Church</i> -1992: 2357-2359.
5. Violence and discrimination towards homosexual people	- <i>Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons</i> 1986, 10. - <i>The Catechism of the Catholic Church</i> -1992: 2358. - <i>Amoris Laetitia. On Love in the Family</i> -2016: 250.
6. The legalisation of same-sex unions	- <i>Considerations regarding Proposals to Give Legal recognition to Unions between Homosexual Persons</i> -2003 (the entire document). - <i>Amoris Laetitia. On Love in the Family</i> -2016: 52, 251.
7. The prohibition on homosexual men from Holy Orders	- <i>Instruction Concerning the Criteria for the Discernment of Vocations with regard to Persons with Homosexual Tendencies in view of their Admission to the Seminary and to Holy Orders</i> -2005, (the entire document).

8. The language and tone used within the teachings	-All documents, but particular attention paid to <i>Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons-1986</i> .
9. Issues surrounding gender theory and transgender people	- <i>Amoris Laetitia. On Love in the Family-2016</i> : 56, 285. -“ <i>Male and Female He Created Them</i> ”. <i>Toward a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education-2019</i> : (the entire document).
10. A change in tone under Pope Francis	-Assorted researcher-selected accounts of certain gestures or acts of Pope Francis since 2013, with selected quotes from him and some European bishops about LGBTQ+ issues. (see Appendix 6). The sources for this material can be viewed in the References Section under ‘ Sources with no author cited. ’

3.13.6. It seemed clear from the outset, that my familiarity with the various Church teachings about homosexuality would not be shared by most of the participants. It was necessary to compile user-friendly information that could be used within each interview, summarising for participants in non-technical language the main themes of the teaching, as it applied to each of the ten pre-identified themes. It was important to keep these summaries very short, easy to read, and crucially, free from any researcher judgement or bias, but containing the essential aspects of each theme-related piece of teaching. It was also necessary to briefly explain certain contextual factors, e.g., the provision of some basic scholarly opinions about the context of the scripture passages used in certain arguments about homosexuality. It was a challenging task to summarise complex documents, in a format required by a simple fact sheet. I was conscious that the participants would come from a variety of backgrounds, with varying degrees of familiarity with Church teachings and their underlying theology. I neither wanted to patronise those who may be more familiar with this genre of teaching nor intimidate participants with less familiarity. These were redrafted many times, before the choosing of a final format, particularly after the pilot interviews highlighted flaws in the original length and format. Practical issues were also highlighted, e.g., the realisation that the sheets should be A3-sized rather than A4 and using a large print font. These proved to be very helpful, enabling participants to quickly absorb the information prior to each set of questions, and were used as a reference resource when they answered. With lamination, each sheet could be easily sanitised in line with Covid prevention measures. The positive feedback received from the participants about these sheets and the ease with which I was able to build their use into each of the interviews validated the decision to include this resource. These information sheets may be viewed in Appendix 6.

3.13.7. Patton (1990: 295-7) stressed the requirement for a researcher to use open-ended questions in their interviews, and alongside Payne (1951), that these should also be neutral, singular, and clear. Participants should be enabled at each stage of the interview to ‘respond in their own terms’, permitting them to ‘take whatever direction and use whatever words they want in order to represent what they have to say’. Patton strongly advised against using dichotomous questions that curtail or limit the participant’s response, and to avoid questions that include presuppositions (1990: 303-4).

King, Horrocks, and Brooks (2019: 51-2) offered practical advice on this delicate interplay between interviewer and participant.

I followed each interview with a reflexive journal appraisal of the encounter, allowing personal observations to inform the following interview. Conscious of the possibility of influencing the participant response, participants were requested, after the earlier interviews had ended, to comment on their perceptions about this. Assurances were given by them that they had not felt 'led' towards any particular response, and had felt at ease in giving responses, leading to my increased confidence that the questioning style and interview format were conducive to providing useful responses. Clarity of questioning is considered a key element in a successful interview and Patton (1990: 309-16) advises on the need to check with participants if further clarity is required from any particular response. King, Horrocks, and Brooks (2019: 53-55) and Patton (1990: 324-327) offer further advice in this regard under the topic of 'probing'. Braun & Clarke (2013: 90-1) recommend the scheduling of no more than one interview per day, as one can easily underestimate the energy that each encounter expends. For practical purposes, this advice was not possible to follow, but in actual fact, the encounters were often energising, and the neutrality was relatively easy to maintain, even if energy was expended in assuring its maintenance during each encounter.

3.13.8. Prior to the fieldwork, a series of questions associated with each of the ten themes had been drawn up, but a ruthless cull of these was carried out after the pilot-interviews and following the first fieldwork interview experiences, as it would have proven impossible to use them all. It soon became clear which key questions would address the aims of the Research Question more succinctly, and only a selection of the additional questions was needed in the very rare encounters where the participant had less to say. Appendix 7 shows the original questions, alongside those that were most frequently or regularly used. The flexibility of the semi-structured interview allowed the pattern and style to be varied in order to suit particular participants or the mood of each encounter. Nevertheless, during reflexive appraisal, transcription, and analysis, it became apparent that both format and questioning technique had yielded thickly descriptive data, suitable for responding to the Research Question set within a contextualist epistemology.

On arrival in Ireland, a series of four pilot-interviews with volunteer participants was carried out. On the basis of these encounters, the information sheets were redrafted, and the questioning style, content, and pace were reconsidered. These pilot-interviews also enabled the development of confidence about how to pitch interviews, practice neutrality, and build a rapport with participants. The skills required to reassure participants and create an atmosphere that combined a reassuring, relaxed manner with a professional, competent approach were practised and developed. The pilot-interviews also facilitated familiarity with the logistics of recording the interviews, dealing with the

necessary administrative paperwork prior to each encounter, and using the information sheets effectively and seamlessly.

3.13.9. The majority of the interviews were undertaken at venues most convenient for the participants. This entailed journeys of varying lengths, with rented accommodation arranged when a series of interviews occurred further afield. All clergy were interviewed in their homes, which for Catholic clergy are also their workplaces. Most religious participants were interviewed in their own community settings, with one interviewed at a private residence, and another in a hotel lobby. Six of the lay participants were interviewed at parish premises, nine in their homes, and one in a local café. Four of the Catholic educators were interviewed in their workplaces and three in their homes. All of the LGBTQ+ participants were interviewed in their own homes. A flexible approach was undertaken in the arranging of dates and times best suited to each participant, always mindful of the continuation of pandemic social distancing and high Covid rates. Each interview began with an introduction to establish rapport and, more often than not, a cup of tea. The consent form was checked and signed, alongside a verbal reminder of participant-confidentiality, anonymisation of personal details, data privacy, and the right to withdraw from the project at any time. Interviews were recorded on two IC-Sony-Recorders, both of which were laptop-compatible, one acting as a backup. The quality of the sound recordings was generally faultless, and the convenience of the recording devices enabled the sole focus to be placed on the interviewing dynamic, timing, and rapport rather than complex technology. The recordings were checked and uploaded onto both a laptop and an alternative storage device after each interview, and the security practices specified in the data management plan (see Appendix 5) were rigorously carried out throughout and beyond the fieldwork period. After transcription of the interviews, the recordings were deleted from the recording devices, and the NVivo transcription software also deleted the recordings, in accordance with data privacy guidelines after a fixed period. Copies of the recordings are stored safely in an encrypted storage device and will, on completion of the project, be stored securely in accordance with university data protection guidelines and protocol (see Appendices 4-5).

3.13.10. I came to regard each encounter gratefully and with a sense of reverence. The pandemic created an unusual degree of extra vigilance and tension during the fieldwork period, as the very high rates of Covid-19 presented the real possibility of interview cancellation or postponement if the researcher or participant contracted the virus. Each encounter was carried out with social distancing, sanitisation of seating and resources, and the use of surgical face-masks when necessary. Fortunately, no interview had to be rearranged, and none of the participants contracted Covid during these months. Eight participant interviews did not occur through participant withdrawal, and the fieldwork period was completed in late June 2022, with 54 recorded interviews from five sub-groups of the Irish Catholic community.

3.14. Analysis

3.14.1. Initial notes and observations were the starting point for the analysis, generating decisions to exclude a total of nine interviews for a variety of reasons. The earliest exclusions occurred if interviews had veered substantially away from the structure, contained too many unanswered questions, or if timings had compromised important areas of the format. A double interview, which became too conversational, and another recorded via Zoom, with a disjointed recording, were also excluded. As the lengthy transcription process wore on, two interviews longer than three hours were excluded, with a full quota of rich enough data from their participant sub-group having already been gathered. Forty-five interviews were selected for transcription, the shortest being 43 minutes and the longest 125 minutes, with an average length of 70 minutes.

3.14.2. An initial attempt at manual transcription became an impossible task, given the high volume of recorded interview material. The purchase of the (2020 R1) version of NVivo transcription software from QSR (Qualitative Solutions and Research) International thereafter facilitated the process of transcribing the interview data. The inability of the NVivo software to deal effectively with the strong accents of many of the participants meant that most transcripts additionally required extensive manual intervention. This part of the research process took over five months, and 45 participant-interviews would probably be regarded as being at the high end of normal for a small-scale qualitative investigation undertaken by a solo researcher. It would be up to other researchers to determine if such a volume of participants could be repeated in a similar study. I contend, however, that the quality, depth, and richness of the data, as the eventual outcome of this time consumption, was worth the effort.

3.15. Coding

3.15.1. Braun & Clarke (2022: 53) define coding as the ‘process of...applying code labels to specific segments of each data item’. The code thereby is the ‘output of the coding process’, which may be an idea, concept, or meaning derived from a segment of the data and may be refined several times during the analysis. The code label is simply a short word or phrase used by the researcher and attached to it as a shorthand identifier for the code. The key to the process is the identification of any meaning that can be drawn from a close reading of the data, which is potentially relevant to the Research Question. Not everything within the data will, therefore, be coded, though much will be, and some segments of the data containing a diversity of meanings may be coded with different codes simultaneously. The NVivo (2020 R1) software facilitated a careful reading and re-reading of each participant-interview alongside effective coding, refinement, and storage of the codes in a manner that was easy to access and process, as well as the inclusion of relevant notes or comments attached to a segment of data. Clearly, the software merely facilitates a process that still requires maximum researcher engagement with the dataset. Invaluable for the analysis was the exploration feature in the software, which allowed the data to be queried and analysed, theme by theme, for each of the five sub-groups, allowing a

thorough contextualist framing and interpretation of the data to unfold during the analysis process. This project has adopted Nigel King’s Template Analysis as its analytical tool. According to Braun & Clarke (2022: 243), codes in Template Analysis can be both descriptive and interpretive (King 2004), and are essentially tools for identifying themes in the dataset. The template is the coding frame whose structure is then applied to the entire dataset. This offered me the opportunity to move from a broadened perspective to one that could be increasingly refined. The codes generated the template (which King 2004 insists is a tool for effective analysis, not an end in itself), using both deductive and inductive processes.

3.15.2. One of the reasons for the selection of King’s Template Analysis was that it, unlike other methods of thematic analysis, (such as reflexive TA developed by Braun & Clarke), encourages the use of a certain number of *a priori themes*, identified by the researcher ahead of the data collection and analysis. Church teaching documents are often highly structured sources with clearly identifiable themes, and therefore such *a priori themes* seemed readily apparent from the nature and structure of the teachings about homosexuality, and these themes could readily be adapted as preliminary codes in the initial analysis. These themes had already been incorporated into the structure of the interviews, something that distinguishes King’s Template Analysis from the methods of Braun & Clarke. This is advantageous and makes the handling of larger datasets more efficient, but does not preclude the possibility of opening up or developing the *a priori themes/codes* as the analysis develops. According to Braun & Clarke (2022: 243), the codes and the themes are used interchangeably within the analysis. Braun & Clarke (2022: 244) warn that the emphasis placed upon such *a priori themes* in Template Analysis may reduce openness, organic interpretation, and the interpretive dimension emphasised within their own method. They warn that topic summaries may become the default in some forms of Template Analysis rather than the meaning-making that is built into other forms of thematic analysis, like their own. Aware of these potential shortcomings in the method, my assessment is that the analysis that emerged from the use of pre-determined themes did result in an appropriate and meaningful engagement with data. The reflexivity encouraged for this method was an essential component of this project and prevented the analysis from being depleted of the meaning-making at the core of Big Q qualitative research.

Table 18. Key features of Template Analysis and how they were developed in this project

Step	Summary	Important considerations
1. Defining themes and codes	A theme is a recurring feature of the interview data that encapsulates ‘perceptions and/or experiences, seen by the researcher as relevant to the research question of a particular study’ (King 2017: 430). Coding attaches a label to a section of data text, identifying it with a theme.	-Theme implies repetition rather than an isolated occurrence. -Themes are, by necessity, subjective. -For example, in a code emerging from the theme of ‘scripture in the teachings’, the following code emerged, ‘Frustration,

	<p><i>For example, a theme used in this project was 'Sources of Authority 1. Scripture', and one code generated from this theme was 'Scriptural arguments not accepted.'</i></p>	<p><i>disappointment or anger at the passages selected by the Church to make its scriptural arguments.'</i></p> <p>-Overlap of themes, whilst inevitable, should not compromise their distinctiveness.</p> <p>-'Placeholder' themes may also be developed to organise associated themes.</p> <p>-For example, those of a particular sub-group such as 'Diocesan clergy' in this research.</p>
<p>2. Hierarchical coding</p>	<p>The 'hierarchical organization of codes, with groups of similar codes clustered together to produce more general higher-order codes'. (King 2017:431)</p> <p><i>For example, for Theme 3 in this research: The Top-Level Code was Sources of Authority 3. Human Sciences. The higher-order code was: '3.1. The teachings are insufficiently guided by knowledge from the human sciences.' Around these were clustered the following lower-order codes:</i></p> <p><i>3.1.1. The Church's approach to the scientific knowledge about LGBTQ+ issues is selective, defensive, and, or arrogant.</i></p> <p><i>3.1.1.1. The Church seems to welcome scientific insights about other issues.</i></p> <p><i>3.1.1.2. The teachings do not give any evidence for the scientific sources considered by the Church to be 'secure.'</i></p>	<p>-The researcher is free to develop as many theme -levels as is useful. The more sub-themes developed become an indication of how rich and insightful a particular top-level theme may be to the analysis.</p> <p>-For example, within the top level code 7, 'Marriage and civil unions for same-sex couples', there were two main higher order codes denoting either acceptance or rejection of Church arguments, which together had 14 lower order themes that became sub-codes.</p> <p>-See Appendix 8 for a full display of all codes used.</p> <p>-Lateral links which cut across main themes can be expressed through the use of additional integrative themes.</p> <p>-For example, in this research, Code 9 was an integrative theme, 'Tone and Language used within the Church teachings on homosexuality.'</p>
<p>3. Parallel coding</p>	<p>The same segment of the data may be classified with two or more codes at the same level.</p> <p><i>For example, a participant comment about the phrase 'intrinsic disorder' used in the teachings about the homosexual 'condition' could have been used within Top Level Code 2 on Natural Moral Law, Top Level Code 5 on the recommended lifestyle for faithful Catholic homosexual</i></p>	<p>-This is considered to be non-problematic in qualitative research, and in most thematic analysis methods generally.</p>

	<i>people, and in the Integrative Code 9, 'Tone and Language used within the Church teachings on homosexuality.'</i>	
4. Integrative themes	<p>Themes that pervade much of the data pool and which may be shown on the template as connecting to other themes in a lateral way.</p> <p><i>For example, Integrative Code 4, 'General or additional issues raised about sources of authority in the teachings' was used to capture views on authority that were raised throughout an entire participant interview rather than from within one theme's particular questions.</i></p>	-King refers to these as 'undercurrents running through participants' accounts; often, perhaps, not addressed explicitly but very apparent to the careful reader'. (King 2017: 432)
5. Displaying the template: Lists and or mind-maps	<p>Lists: 'themes can be presented in a list, with levels indicated by indentation, typography (e.g., font size and style) and/or a numbering system'.</p> <p>Mind-maps: these 'allows lateral links between thematic clusters to be shown more clearly than in the list style', but require a good deal more space. (King 2017: 433)</p> <p><i>For example, all the codes in the template can be viewed in Appendices 8 and 9, displayed in a list, and then in diagram format.</i></p>	-List presentation remains the most common in many published works, but this should not be to the detriment of displaying lateral links between thematic clusters.
6. Quality checks	<p>King identifies independent coding and critical comparison, but this was not feasible for a solo researcher, so his recommendation of the use of an audit trail was the quality check best suited to this project.</p> <p><i>For example, in this project, the audit trail is evidenced within the entire project, the presentation of methodology, the data coding and analysis, and the reflexive practices of the researcher.</i></p>	-'An audit trail in qualitative research is a record of the steps the researcher has gone through in carrying out an analysis and the way his or her thinking has developed.' (King 2017: 432)
7. Presentation of analysis	<p>King recommends no particular method here other than the researcher being mindful of the level of depth required by the project in order to address the Research Question and the readership of the document.</p> <p><i>For example, this research used an account structured around the 14 main</i></p>	-King (2017: 446) suggests three presentation approaches of which No. 3 was used in this project: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A set of individual case studies, followed by a discussion of the differences and similarities between cases. 2. An account structured around the main themes identified, drawing illustrative examples from each transcript.

	<p><i>themes identified, drawing illustrative examples from each transcript. A prose account of the data analysis from each of the five sub-groups generated five separate chapters within the thesis.</i></p> <p><i>Each chapter included an introductory snapshot of one sub-group participant, followed by an analysis of the whole sub-group, extensively embedded with quotations.</i></p>	<p>3. A thematic presentation of the findings, using a different individual case study to illustrate each of the main themes. This can be a useful synthesis of approaches (1) and (2) above; the key challenge is to select the cases in a way that fairly represents the themes in the data as a whole.</p> <p>-King emphasises the extensive use of direct participant quotations in any approach used.</p> <p>-For example, this can be readily evidenced within the prose in the five chapters of data analysis.</p>
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3.15.3. To facilitate the use of King’s seven steps of Template Analysis, a period of time was allocated to a re-familiarisation with the 45 transcripts and the notes taken during the transcription process. Uploading these as files and cases onto NVivo enabled the start of some initial coding, taking a script from each of the five sub-groups and using the various functions of NVivo (2020 R1) to carefully generate some initial codes for the five scripts, based on an iterative reading technique. Each of the 45 participants was identified as a case, and these cases were then classified according to which of the five sub-groups they belonged to. Codes are very easily created in the software, and text, words, phrases, and their reference files can be tagged with one or several codes simultaneously. Initial analysis of the five sample scripts assisted in the identification of initial themes (Table 19). The structure and format of the interview were used to identify some obvious themes and was the logical way of analysing the data, although deeper layers developed as a hierarchy of sub-codes/themes were created from the data. This did not compromise the analysis and, in fact, seemed to enhance the process, as it became clear that these main themes-codes were helpful in answering the Research Question, and generating useful, rich, knowledge-producing data.

3.15.4. A series of ever-expanding hierarchical sub-codes developed with each new reading of the script. It took a significant period of time to come up with a coding template that did justice to the multiple interview themes and their many hierarchical off-shoot codes. The NVivo software amply facilitates the creation of new codes and sub-codes in situ, with as many levels of hierarchical ordering as the dataset requires. It was a process of trial and error to establish when further complexity was hindering rather than helping the process of analysing such a very large dataset. I added five more scripts to the initial sample pool, and by the tenth script analysis, the themes and their sub-coding categories had generally been finalised. Table 21 gives an example of how the coding hierarchy developed during this process for one initial theme (the exclusion of homosexual men from Holy Orders). Top-level codes were then identified alongside a number of integrative themes to

produce eleven main codes. Subsequent reorganisation of these and the creation of one further integrative code supplied the final template with nine top-level codes and five integrative codes, each with its hierarchy of sub-codes. This finalised template thereafter remained very close to the original throughout the coding process, although the NVivo software easily facilitates the cutting, merging, or addition of new codes if modification is required. Any such modifications were minor and easily applied, using NVivo to amend previously analysed scripts with the modified template. King (2004, 2017) highlights flexibility over rigidity in this method and the need for the template to serve the data, not the other way around. The finalised coding template applied to the entire dataset can be examined in Appendix 9.

Table 19. Initial themes from sample scripts

Initial Themes	Description
1. Sources of authority.	The authoritative sources that the Church employs within its teachings about LGBTQ+ issues and people to construct its main points or arguments. These include scripture, natural moral law and occasionally the human sciences.
2. Recommendations.	The recommended spiritual, ascetic and affective practices that will sustain a homosexual person in their life of sexual continence.
3. Discrimination and violence.	The condemnation of violence and discrimination towards homosexual people, alongside an indication that this may occur when society introduces overly lenient legislation to protect homosexual behaviour.
4. Legalisation of same-sex unions.	The arguments that urge society to prohibit legalised same-sex unions or marriage, or to limit or frustrate such legislation, or its impacts once enacted.
5. Exclusion from Holy Orders of homosexual men.	The reasons given by the Church for its exclusion of men with ‘deep-seated homosexual tendencies’ from ordained ministry.
6. Gender theory and transgender people.	Some of the issues raised and concerns expressed by the Church connected to gender theory, fluidity, or re-assignment for transgender people.
7. A change of tone under Pope Francis?	Reactions and opinions of gestures and words used by Pope Francis since 2013, alongside those of some bishops, suggesting that the tone of the Church towards LGBTQ+ people has changed, even if its teachings have not.

Table 20. The initial identification of integrative themes, which were common to all of the top-level themes

Integrative themes	Description
1. Tone and Language used within the Church teachings on homosexuality.	The theme of tone and language, although covered by a separate section within the interview, emerged throughout the dataset and, therefore, often connected laterally to many or all of the initial themes.
2. Changing attitude to the Catholic Church, particularly in Ireland.	This theme emerged often and throughout many of the participant interviews and was an important lateral theme for research pertaining to the Irish Catholic community in the 21 st Century.
3. Links between the issues associated with teachings about LGBTQ+ people and other significant issues for the Church.	It became clear from the sample scripts that the teachings about homosexuality were connected to other important issues for the Church regarding sexual ethics, gender roles, and clerical discipline. This lateral link allowed these connections to be made in the analysis.
4. Agreement/disagreement, acceptance or non-acceptance of teachings that may indicate their reception/non-reception.	An important theme drawing together the data from the other initial and integrative themes was an attempt to assess how these teachings have been received or not received by the Irish Catholic community.

Table 21. An example of how one theme evolved during the initial analysis.

Initial theme and sub-themes after 5 sample transcripts.	Theme and expanded theme-hierarchy after re-reading the original samples with five additional transcripts (with amended numbering to accommodate the hierarchy expansion).
5.1. Non-acceptance of the Church teaching on the non-admission of homosexual men to Holy Orders.	5.1. Non-acceptance of the Church teaching on the non-admission of homosexual men to Holy Orders.
	<i>5.1.1. Homosexual priests can relate pastorally and properly to both genders. Celibacy is a bigger barrier to relating to others.</i>
	<i>5.1.2. The term 'deep-seated homosexual tendencies' is ambiguous.</i>
	<i>5.1.3. The inferred but unspecified link between homosexuality and the problem of paedophilia or pederasty is unfounded and unjust.</i>
	<i>5.1.3.1. This teaching may reflect an unwillingness of the Church to acknowledge the disproportionately high numbers of homosexual priests or indicate internalised homophobia in the magisterium.</i>
5.1.1. Both heterosexual and homosexual priests are called to celibacy, so there is no issue here.	5.1.4. Both heterosexual and homosexual priests are called to celibacy, so there is no issue here.
5.1.2. Homosexual candidates for Holy Orders should be open about their sexuality, but this teaching may encourage secrecy.	5.1.5. Homosexual candidates for Holy Orders should be open about their sexuality, but this teaching may encourage secrecy.

<p>5.2. Acceptance of some aspects of the Church teaching on the non-admission of homosexual men to Holy Orders, alongside disagreement that they should be excluded.</p> <p>5.3. Affective and sexual maturity for any candidate is important regardless of sexual orientation.</p>	<p><i>5.1.5.1. Institutions that form candidates for priesthood or their dioceses probably apply these teachings with some discretion.</i></p> <p><i>5.1.6. Rejection of the assertion that negative consequences follow the ordination of homosexual men and affirmation that homosexual men are often good priests.</i></p> <p>5.2. Acceptance of some aspects of the Church teaching on the non-admission of homosexual men to Holy Orders, alongside disagreement that they should be excluded.</p> <p><i>5.2.1. Homosexual priests may create problematic issues.</i></p> <p>5.3. Affective and sexual maturity for any candidate is important regardless of sexual orientation.</p> <p><i>5.4. Some men became priests to evade or cope with the negativity of being Catholic and homosexual.</i></p>
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Table 22. An example of how one top-level code was displayed for the researcher’s use during written analysis and presentation of data from 45 participant interviews. (all of these are included in Appendix 8)

Themes and sub-themes	No. of participants	No. of references
Top-Level Code 5. Recommended lifestyle for faithful Catholic homosexual* people.	45	248
5.1. Non-acceptance of the recommended lifestyle for faithful homosexual Catholics.	41	222
5.1.1. The call to universal chastity is unfairly applied to homosexuality.	21	41
5.1.1.1. Rejection of the suggestion that spiritual practices can be used to manage a homosexual orientation.	32	70
5.1.1.1.1. References made to conversion therapy practices (even though the Catholic Church does recommend these in its teachings).	13	20
5.1.2. Rejection of the teaching that homosexual acts are self-destructive or self-indulgent.	12	20
5.1.3. Reference made about the claim that their 'lifestyle' threatens to destroy homosexuals.	9	21
5.1.4. The Church vision for homosexual people is joyless and not life-giving.	25	50
5.2. Acceptance (partial or full) of the recommended lifestyle for homosexual Catholics.	4	26
5.2.1. Discomfort with the uncompromising vision, but also with changing authoritative teachings.	2	18
5.2.2. Homosexual people are being asked to live chaste lives, as are all Catholics, regardless of sexual orientation.	3	8

* 'homosexual' is the only term used by the Church teachings and cannot be supposed to include, e.g., transgender, queer, or other identities within the LGBTQ+ acronym.

3.16. Generalisability and transferability

3.16.1. The methodology of this research project is one that can be transferred to other similar studies. Qualitative research, as outlined by Pete Ward and Knut Tveitereid (2022: 1-2), has found an increasingly important home within theological research, particularly those concerned with contextual theologies. They correctly argue that such research permits close attention to be given to communities and individuals traditionally excluded from theological enterprise and that this inclusion can influence the drive toward making an effective difference to the lives of people. The robustness of good

qualitative scholarship can shape theological engagement with communities and generate new and transformative ‘insights and perspectives’. Such a piece of qualitative research, employing one variation of the thematic analysis method may not be statistically generalisable, but as Braun & Clarke (2022: 143) correctly assert, this is no reason for a qualitative researcher to apologise as the ‘norms or ideals around knowledge’ generated by qualitative research do not demand this.

3.16.2. Generalisability and its relationship to qualitative research is an issue that many researchers are attempting to reconcile and develop (e.g., Carminati 2018, Polit & Beck 2010, Smith 2017). In the absence of a consensus, I adopt the stance of applying a broader transferability concept to this project. Braun & Clarke (2022: 144) explore a range of different generalisability options. One of these is informed by the work of Lewis et al. (2014) who developed the idea of inferential transferability based on the conclusions reached by the evidence of the research. This is when research describes the context richly enough and with sufficient depth to allow a reader to evaluate any potential for the methodology to be applicable to other projects. It is the task of the reader to determine the transferability, but as Braun & Clarke (2022:144) point out, after Yardley (2015), the researcher must demonstrate that they have provided sufficient ‘sensitivity to context’ within their research to ‘maximise the potential for such transferability’. Chenail (2010: 5) considers various ways in which qualitative research can attempt to pursue generalisability and raises the idea of case-to-case generalisation:

To facilitate the reader’s ability to make this case-to-case generalization, the researcher’s “responsibility ends with providing sufficient descriptive data to make such similarity judgments possible”, so “case-to-case transfer is enhanced by thick description that allows assessment of the applicability of study conclusions to one’s own situation.” (Firestone 1993:18)

3.16.3. It is clear that qualitative research must make a case for a type of generalisability different from those used within quantitative research. Braun & Clarke (2013: 280) acknowledge that some authors, such as Johnson (1997), argue that generalisability is not a meaningful goal in qualitative research. On the other hand, the case can be made that research would be pointless if each project was so unique that its relevance could not be used to inform other projects, a point made by Yardley (2008: 238). Braun & Clarke (2013: 282) suggest that the idea of transferability, such as those discussed above and first derived from the work of Lincoln & Guba (1985), is one that can be profitably adopted by qualitative researchers. As discussed, transferability, as an alternative for generalisability, relies on the researcher describing specific contextual details about participants, settings, and circumstances in sufficient depth to enable a reader to weigh up whether or not they can make a ‘safe transfer’ to the circumstances of a different project. Furthermore, the 45 participants in this project were from five distinct sub-groups, pre-identified by the researcher to be representative of the Irish Catholic

community in all its complexity. Care was taken to ensure that, far from being a gathering of random participant-opinions about the Church teachings on homosexuality from an amorphous group of Irish Catholics, this project would set out to gather data from individuals who were stakeholders in their faith community. The nature of this carefully constructed sample means that despite the relatively small numbers involved, the views of these participants can be taken to offer some representative insight into how stakeholders of the Irish Catholic community understand, accept, and receive these teachings about homosexuality.

3.16.4. I posit transferability as a valid approach in this project, relying as it does on the provision of thick, richly descriptive data with great contextual depth and detail throughout the project and its analysis. The contextualist epistemology, the use of Template Analysis that demands richly descriptive data analysis, and heightened attention to good reflexive practice ensure that the criteria for such transferability are met. It is true that this project is focused on members of a very particular, contextually situated ecclesial community, with the data about them gathered from and analysed by a researcher with a unique ecclesial background. The methodology is, however, one that is certainly transferable, with the Template Analysis method containing sufficient flexibility to facilitate its easy application to a variety of different qualitative studies. The depth of the analysis and the rich contextual and descriptive detail covering the views and attitudes of these participants to their Church's teachings about homosexuality is a good foundation from which a reader may decide to safely transfer these circumstances and settings to another project. In the context of Western nations, as they slowly move towards ever-greater levels of inclusion, legal protection, and recognition of LGBTQ+ people and other minorities, the methodology of this project and its analytical 'findings' are safely transferable to similar studies about other contested and controversial issues of importance to the fields of religion, ethics and society.

3.17. Ethics

3.17.1. A full consideration of the ethical issues that such a project may encounter was carried out in the months prior to the start of fieldwork, alongside a risk assessment, carried out and submitted to the university for approval, which was granted. Each potential participant was given an overview of the project, with the assurance that their anonymity would be fully ensured at every point in the gathering, analysis, and presentation of their data. A brief biographical sketch of the researcher's background, alongside the contact details of university supervisory staff who could corroborate credentials was supplied. After the participant had agreed to be interviewed, each participant read and signed a detailed consent form to cooperate in the interview process. A copy of this is included in Appendix 1. It was emphasised that they were free at any point to withdraw consent before, during, or after the interview. Their anonymity would be assured by the use of pseudonyms, and at no point would their specific locations, places of employment, dioceses, or religious congregations be identified. This was important, given the strong teachings about homosexuality under the light of this project's scrutiny

and the sensitivity of the topic of human sexuality, particularly as it merges with religious views. Each participant was free to have the interview conducted at a place of their own choosing so as to fully ensure confidentiality during the interviews.

3.17.2. The recordings of each interview were stored digitally on secure encrypted devices. The transcription software used was ethically approved in accordance with university ethical guidelines, and the data management plan included in Appendix 5 makes clear that the subsequent storage of the data will be in full accord with these guidelines. The transcribed, anonymised scripts were stored in full accord with EU data storage guidelines for a fixed number of months, attached to the privately purchased NVivo account, and in accordance with NVivo privacy policy, all data was deleted one year after transcription. Participants were given hard copies of the privacy policy as it pertained to the data they would provide, included in Appendix 4. At every point in the data gathering processes, analysis, and presentation, data associated with any participant and my own field notes and research journals were held in a secure location and only viewed by the researcher and occasionally the supervisory staff. Every care was taken to ensure that participants could not be identified from the analysis and presentation of data. Full ethical approval was granted to the research project by the Theology and Religion Department at Durham University in advance of the fieldwork period. Relevant enhanced DBS checks were carried out and granted for any interactions that would potentially include minors, but in the event, such interactions did not occur. I ensured that all health and safety procedures were adhered to, particularly those required during the fieldwork period when Covid-19 rates of infection were very high in the fieldwork location.

3.17.3. Summary

The Research Question sought to discover if Roman Catholic doctrine about homosexuality had been received by members of the Irish Roman Catholic community. On the basis of the critical readings of the methodological literature, it seemed clear that this Research Question would be best framed within a relativist ontology, informed by the insights garnered from a contextual constructionist epistemology. This piece of qualitative theological research clearly fell within the realm of contextual theology, which helped to provide the background for the methodological decisions that were made. Researcher reflexivity was an essential component, providing the kind of thick, rich qualitative data for analysis that would be credible, trustworthy and transparent. From a variety of potential qualitative methods, I determined that a form of thematic analysis known as Template Analysis would provide adequate structure and flexibility, as well as providing a useful toolkit for answering the Research Question. Identifying five distinct sub-groups of the Irish Roman Catholic community, and utilising both stratified purposeful sampling and snowball sampling methods to create the sample, I conducted a series of 53 in-depth interviews, using a thematic, semi-structured interview design. The extensive data generated from the 45 interviews that were selected for inclusion were analysed using the coding

techniques recommended by the Template Analysis method, with the aim of creating an analysis that would both answer the Research Question and meet the demands for transferability. The highest standards of ethical research practice were observed, further adding to the trustworthiness and transparency of this research project.

Chapter 4. Analysis of diocesan clergy participant data

4.1. Background

4.1.1. The Roman Catholic Church has a rich deposit of teachings and doctrine that deals with the threefold strata of Holy Orders: diaconate, priesthood, and the episcopate. The main teachings include *Optatum Totius* (1965), the Second Vatican Council's decree on priestly training, followed by *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (1965), the decree on the ministry and life of priests. *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, on the gift of the priestly vocation, was issued in 1970 and updated in 1985 and 2016. Meanwhile, in 1992, a Post-Synodal Exhortation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, dealing with the formation of priests in modern-day circumstances, was issued by Pope John Paul II. An Apostolic Letter from Pope John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (1994) dealt with the reservation of priestly ordination to men alone. In 2005, the Congregation for Catholic Education issued an Instruction which established the non-admission of men with homosexual tendencies to Holy Orders.

4.1.2. As a participant group, the diocesan clergy would have been familiar with how the Church regards its own authority to teach. *Christus Dominus* (1965: 4) states that a bishop, in conjunction with the Pope, holds, as part of the episcopal order, the plenary power over the universal Church. He shares the papal office of teaching within his particular diocese and is mandated to teach 'according to the doctrine of the Church' (1965: 12). Priests are called to exercise the priesthood in unity with their diocesan bishop and in turn, share in his teaching role, having a duty to preach God's word (1965: 30). *Dei Verbum* (1965: 25), identifies one of the main responsibilities of the priest as reading, studying, discerning and preaching the scriptures, a mandate reiterated in *Verbum Domini* (2010: 26, 52, 59, 79-80). Since 1989, all those ordained to Holy Orders are required to swear a solemn profession of faith and an oath of fidelity, in which they profess faith in everything contained in the Word of God and the Tradition, promising to hand it on, explain it, and avoid any contrary teachings. The clergy participants in this project would have made this profession and promised this oath. Their attitudes to the teachings are of particular interest in revealing the importance of authority for the Catholic community more widely.

4.1.3. Priestly ordination in the Roman Catholic tradition is preceded by a lengthy period of formation in a seminary or house of formation, during which spiritual, liturgical, and theological education, alongside the pastoral skills required for ministry, are developed. Seminaries are obliged to provide a full human, intellectual, and spiritual formation in keeping with the norms of priestly formation outlined in canon law and *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (1992). The process is supported by a range of personnel, ranging from in-house academic staff, seminary leadership teams, spiritual directors, and other external professionals. Only after a rigorous period of formation will a man become an official candidate, followed by ordination to the diaconate and, thereafter, the presbyterate. It is a vocation that is not open to women, a teaching that, notwithstanding its forceful reiteration by Pope John Paul II in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (1994), has been challenged by many Catholics (Pew Research Centre

2015: 73). Since *The 2005-Instruction*, ordination has also been closed to men who present deep-seated homosexual tendencies. The latter exclusion might be regarded as problematic, as the Catholic priesthood has always attracted a disproportionately high number of men with homosexual tendencies (see below).

4.1.4. Robert Nugent (1989: 220-218) discussed how seminaries and houses of religious formation became increasingly watchful and wary of homosexual candidates during the 1980s. The years under the papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI created an ever more vigilant atmosphere. Debate about contentious ethical issues was discouraged in seminaries, theological settings and within the presbyterate, and priests became ever more aware of their mandate to uphold Church teaching in the public forum. This was strongly emphasised as being essential for future priests throughout my time in seminary (1988-1995). Donald Cozzens (2000: 109) identified a homosexual subculture in seminaries and dioceses, estimating the percentage to be 58%, with Plante (2004, 2005) and Sipe (2004) estimating the percentage to be 25-40%. The gay Catholic priest and theologian James Alison (2007: 51) estimated that 50% of Catholic priests being gay was a conservative estimate. There have also been many in-depth discussions about the topic in notable media publications (*New York Times* 2019, *New York Magazine* 2019). In truth, there can be no accurate empirical evidence for any of these estimates, as any attempt to collect such data would be hindered by a widespread reluctance of homosexual clergy to reveal their orientation. I would personally affirm the reluctance with which a homosexual priest would feel free to reveal his sexual orientation, made more difficult with the issuing of *The 2005-Instruction*, but from my experience, these estimates seem plausible.

4.1.5. Far from opening up the issue for wider discussion, *The 2005-Instruction* can only, as a matter of course, discourage openness among priests and seminarians and perpetuate the fear associated with the revelation of a sexual orientation already diagnosed by their Church as intrinsically disordered. The association of the ordination of homosexual clergy with ‘negative consequences’ (*The 2005-Instruction*: 2) seems to link homosexuality to the clerical child-sex abuse scandals that have been revealed in recent decades. Some of the issues that this association has raised have been examined by Plante (2005a, 2005b, 2007) and Sipe (2004). An additional factor is the likelihood that some of the men who authored and issued these various teachings will themselves have been homosexual members of the clergy, whose sexual orientation may have been hidden, unacknowledged, or disowned.

4.1.6. *The 2005-Instruction* built upon a growing concern about the disproportionately high numbers of gay men in priestly ministry and formation. Earl Fernandes (2011) argues that the document was consistent with previous teachings and was not a knee-jerk response to the child-sex abuse scandals. However, even prior to this teaching, gay men actively concealed their sexual orientation, including within the very forums where priests and seminarians were expected to be open and honest with

spiritual directors and formation personnel. To be ‘found out’ prior to ordination risked expulsion from seminary, and at least three of my seminarian acquaintances were dismissed from seminary following external revelations of their sexual orientation, submitted to the seminary authorities. *The 2005-Instruction* created a new atmosphere within seminaries and among clergy. Those homosexual men who had been ordained prior to or after *The 2005-Instruction* would be instinctively cautious about revealing their orientation. Some priests in ministry, such as myself, aware of their sexual orientation and having come to terms with it, were disheartened and dismayed.

4.1.7. Seminaries continued to attract a high number of gay men (Plante 2007), but *The 2005-Instruction* created an atmosphere of intense secrecy rather than a healthy environment for developing a mature sexuality. Within a closeted and fearful environment, the widespread use of social media encouraged further repressed acting out of same-sex sexual activity. Frédéric Martel (2019: 398-417) discusses the repercussions of this document and its contribution to priests and seminarians leading a ‘yet more closeted double life than before’ (2019: 402). The Irish National Seminary in Maynooth received unwelcome publicity in 2016 when it was claimed that there was widespread use of the gay dating app *Grindr* among seminarians.²⁹ This kind of incident has occurred alongside a rise in the numbers of increasingly conservative seminarians and recently ordained clergy,³⁰ in many Western countries. If a notable percentage of these are homosexual, particularly in the light of the prohibitive *2005-Instruction*, they will inevitably experience varying degrees of internalised homophobia. Mark Jordan (2000: 16) refers to this phenomenon as the ‘homophobic rage’ of these ‘closeted clergymen whose hatred of their own desires has become strict “orthodoxy”’. For many complex institutional, doctrinal, and personal reasons, the topic of homosexuality and the Catholic priesthood is fraught with fear and risk for some of its members.

4.1.8. This is the participant group with which I was most familiar, with a combined total of twenty years in seminary and priestly ministry. I spent seven years in formation, three at a small diocesan seminary, undertaking undergraduate studies at a secular university and postgraduate studies in philosophy. This was followed by four years at the National Seminary, undertaking a second degree in theology and a further postgraduate qualification. Academic studies were combined with spiritual and pastoral input and punctuated by various key stages in the process of moving towards ordination. I was ordained a deacon in 1994 and a priest in 1995. Posted to a large urban parish in Belfast, I spent my first five years there, with an additional three years in another large Belfast parish. It became increasingly difficult during these years for me to reconcile my role as a pastor with my commitment

²⁹ Henry McDonald, ‘Gay Sex Claims Engulf Ireland’s Oldest Priest-training College’, *The Guardian* (2nd August 2016). <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/02/gay-sex-allegations-ireland-priest-st-patricks-college>. [accessed on 22/09/2023].

³⁰Michael Sean Winters, ‘New survey raises concerns about increasingly conservative clergy’, *National Catholic Reporter*: <https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/new-survey-raises-concerns-about-increasingly-conservative-clergy>. [accessed 22/09/2023].

to uphold certain ethical teachings of the Church, not least of all those pertaining to homosexuality. I undertook two years of postgraduate theological studies in Rome, returning to a placement in a third Belfast parish. *The 2005-Instruction* was released within the first few months of this pastoral appointment, and I saw within it a definitive rejection of my priestly ministry. After a lengthy period of discernment, I decided to leave ministry accompanied by a very amicable separation, from which I remain in good standing with my diocese and local bishop. I have never sought a laicisation from Holy Orders, with no desire to expunge twenty years of formation and priesthood from the fabric of my life.

4.1.9. Six diocesan clergy were interviewed. One of this sub-group, Jason, was a prison chaplain and assistant priest in a large provincial town. Oisín, Nigel, Iarlaithe and Odhrán were experienced parish priests with pastoral and administrative responsibilities for large urban parishes. Charles was a bishop of an Irish diocese. The clergy interviewed ranged in age from 52 to 72.

4.2. Odhrán

4.2.1. I will start the analysis account of each sub-group with an illustrative snapshot of one representative participant who very clearly expressed some of the key concerns, issues and ideas, before presenting an analysis of the entire sub-group data. Many of the participants expressed clear and interesting views with great articulacy, so the choosing of one as illustrative does not indicate that this person's views carry more weight than any of the others. Odhrán is an experienced parish priest in his late 50s, having served in a variety of mainly urban settings throughout a large Irish diocese since his ordination in the early 1990s. He struck me as a clever, articulate, and wise pastor with a keen sense of humour, who, from his conversation, was clearly in good standing with his bishop and had a warm and compassionate pastoral approach to his parishioners. My impression was that he served the Church with great pastoral sensitivity, wisdom, and dedication. Odhrán was deeply opposed to all the major aspects of the Church teachings about homosexuality. This was not due to his opposition to the Church magisterium or a desire to undermine it, which *The 1986-Letter*: 8-9 infers to be the case when people query the Church's stance on homosexuality. My impression was that his views arose from a sharp mind, finely tuned to theological and philosophical teachings, up to date with theological and pastoral developments and the experience of being deeply immersed in the lives of the people to whom he ministers.

4.2.2. With regard to sources of authority, Odhrán reflected that for him, it characterised a certain type of pre-Vatican II theology in which arguments for a moral or dogmatic position were framed by simply claiming that scripture and tradition act as a guarantor of their veracity. He argued that in the teachings that prohibit homosexual acts, no real or convincing arguments were being made at all. All he could see was the assertion by the Church that isolated scriptural quotations and selected parts of the tradition proved that homosexual acts were immoral. He respected natural law but did not see its

emphasis on isolated acts with divinely defined ‘ends’ as doing justice to the full dignity of the homosexual person and the entirety of their lives and relationships. In its seemingly impervious attitude to what the human sciences have to contribute to the debate, he said, ‘I would contend, as I look at these statements, that...the Church has much to learn and is presently refusing to learn about homosexual people, from these human sciences. I think it's actually supremely arrogant of the Church to claim otherwise’.

4.2.3. Odhran found it illogical that the Church emphasises the importance of sexuality but insists that all homosexual persons live chaste, non-sexual lives with no hope of enjoying a loving relationship that contains any sexual genital expression. This he regarded as inhumane, disregarding the ‘existential reality of the overwhelming majority of homosexual people’ and the experience of those who know, love and care for them in their relationships, families, and communities. He labelled the Church’s insistence on this unrealistic demand to be a perversion and itself a disordered teaching. He condemned the Church for failing to take responsibility for its own direct contribution to discrimination and its indirect effect on violence towards homosexual persons. When it came to the legalisation of same-sex relationships through marriage, he dissected each of the arguments that the Church made in *2003-Considerations: 6-9*. The emphasis on the procreative dimension of every sexual act was, for him, ‘vulgar and reductivist’. He regarded legalised same-sex unions to be a healthy, positive bonus to a society that has been enhanced and not harmed by an unproblematic and necessary change to the definition of marriage.

4.2.4. Odhran was fully aware that a not insubstantial number of priests are homosexual, even though he is not. Odhran was scathing in his criticism of *The 2005-Instruction* that prohibits homosexual men from Holy Orders. In his very strong opinion, gay priests known to him, those both celibate and sexually active, are among the finest and most pastorally effective priests he knows. He viewed the claim in *The 2005-Instruction* that homosexual priests cannot relate correctly to the men and women they serve as ‘utter nonsense’ which is ‘vulgar and excessively simplistic’. He placed any such inability by the clergy, gay or straight, to relate ‘correctly’ at the feet of the clerical culture that infects seminaries and the presbyterate and not caused by a particular sexual orientation. He also noted in response to the hostile reference to ‘gay culture’ in *The 2005-Instruction*, that there was also a deeply unhealthy heterosexual culture traditionally prevalent throughout the presbyterate:

a heterosexual, clerical priestly culture that's totally dysfunctional, that involves the utter disrespect of women, a male chauvinist approach to things, very often reliant on maladaptive behaviours such as gambling and the excessive use of alcohol.

4.2.5. Odhran acknowledged his own care and sensitivity when it came to choosing the words and language used in homilies, sacramental liturgies, and pastoral encounters, aware of the power and effect that all words can have, especially when delivered from a platform of authority. He was utterly

scathing of the terms and words that have been used to describe homosexual persons within the teachings. As an intellectually astute pastor, the effect and malice of these words clearly caused him enormous distress:

To tell them that this is intrinsically disordered, in my opinion, is to tell them that they're behaving in a way that is less than human, in a way that's injurious to the common good, and certainly in a way that is inimical to the divine will. I simply cannot accept that... I see that as grossly offensive... as well as being anthropologically and philosophically incorrect and disordered in itself!

4.2.6. Having pursued all of his undergraduate and postgraduate theological studies in Rome, close to the heart of the Church's organisation, he was living there when *The 1986-Letter* was issued. His final words about the teachings, and notably those of a faithful, heterosexual pastor who would not, in my opinion, lightly wish to undermine the Church, were notable:

I think there's so much dishonesty in the official stance or position of the Church because an awful lot of the people who are saying these things and overseeing these matters are themselves gay. There's nothing, of course, wrong with that... but I feel that there's very often double standards and hypocrisy. And if modern society is angered by anything, I think it's that, and it does exist in our Church with regards to this.

Intuitively, Odhran, from his experience of the Church, had deduced what Mark Jordan (2000: 80) argues is the complexity at the heart of Church teachings about homosexuality, for 'the machinery of church oppression may be in many important ways just what homosexual men use to oppress other homosexual men'.

4.3. Clergy: Scriptural basis for the teachings

4.3.1. None of this group were convinced by the scriptural arguments that *The 1986-Letter* claims to be clear and consistent. All participants were sceptical of non-contextual segments of scripture being used as a clear or consistent argument and indicated a wariness of building an argument in this manner. Charles was particularly uncomfortable with such argumentation and drew attention to the lack of context and historical background to the scriptural passages used in *The 1986-Letter*: 6. Jason was concerned that the teachings of Christ and the gospels were not referenced in these scriptural arguments and discounted the other scriptural 'arguments' on that basis. Oisín referred to the context that he regularly tried to provide for his people when preaching about scriptural texts, something that was absent from these magisterial teachings on homosexuality. Iarlaithe was broadly supportive of the teaching but acknowledged that scripture needed to be supplemented by the vision coming from Church tradition in order to be effective and do justice to the truth. Nigel dismissed these arguments out of hand as being 'irrelevant'. With rich pastoral experiences to draw upon, it appeared from their

responses that it was counter-intuitive to adopt a literalist approach to scripture or to present it out of context in a manner that they would never adopt in their own teaching roles and homiletic practice.

4.4. Clergy: Natural Moral Law (NML)

4.4.1. The inability of homosexual acts to be open to the creation of biological new life as the ‘end’ of their sexual activity renders homosexual acts in the teachings to be immoral and self-indulgent. This issue is most commonly raised by priests in the context of the pre-nuptial inquiry conducted with all couples prior to their contracting a sacramental marriage, where both parties are required to declare that they will be open to procreation. These priests were undoubtedly aware that the teaching of the Church on the issue of contraception is often ignored by Catholics in many Western countries (Pew Research Centre, 2015: 75). Charles found the NML arguments that restrict morality to a physical, divinely intended ‘end’ to be a limited view that fails to do justice to the whole person. Odhran built upon this limited view of the person by calling these arguments insufficient and ‘crudely simplistic’. He argued that the actual nature of a homosexual person *is* an inclination to same-sex attraction and that grace builds on this nature.

4.4.2. Oisín queried the premise that all sexual acts required an openness to life, aware that the majority of such acts are rarely intentionally open to life, with only a minority ever resulting in procreation. Jason admonished the arguments as being act-centred and ignorant of the loving relationships in which such sexual acts may occur. He speculated that potentially closeted authors of such material may have only experienced homosexual acts in demeaning, secretive and non-loving contexts. Iarlaithe alone attempted a defence of the teachings but admitted that such a high ideal in sexual morality was rarely met by anyone, be they heterosexual, married, celibate or homosexual. For him, the likelihood that a majority of people fail to achieve such high standards does not negate the truth or the effects of grace despite the fallen nature of all human beings. Overall, this group rejected the idea that the application of NML necessarily makes same-sex acts immoral. Familiar with the conjugal realities that their parishioners experience, their assessment seemed closer to the theologian Julie Clague’s (2008: 36-7) analysis of NML as a ‘blunt instrument’ that makes no distinction between widely differing categories of sexual behaviour and thus causes the Church to have lost its moral credibility when it comes to teaching about same-sex relationships.

4.5. Clergy: The human sciences

4.5.1. Iarlaithe maintained that science and religion dealt with different spheres and operated out of different worldviews. He said that science was not without its critics and referred to the writing of the gay British political commentator Douglas Murray (2019), who claimed that the human sciences had been influenced by ‘cultural Marxism’. Iarlaithe agreed with the claim in *The 1986-Letter: 2* that the Church view does more justice to the whole person, including those who are homosexual, than can science alone. Charles was fully respectful of the necessary contribution that the empirical and human

sciences had to play in the advance of knowledge and truth, adding his interpretation of *G&S-1965*: 36, that ‘truth cannot be divided’. He rejected any attempt to sideline scientific knowledge, simply on the basis that it might counteract a cherished spiritual, religious, or ethical view. He praised the role that science played in defining the whole picture of the human person.

4.5.2. Odhran offered a very detailed critique of the Church’s anthropological view, out of which he claimed arose its flawed understanding of homosexuality. Intellect and will had been the Church’s basis for its comprehension of the human person, he claimed, and it was largely uninformed by psychology and continues to be closed to the challenge offered by the human sciences to its views. He warned that the very term ‘disorder’ used by the Church had been used to justify the brutal and inhumane treatments prescribed to cure homosexuality in the past. Oisín also expressed his discomfort that the Church seems to have set its face against the advancing knowledge about same-sex desire, which is a ‘truth of nature’ that science shows has always been present among humans and animals. This contributes, he suggested, to some LGBTQ+ people being unable to accept their nature, as science reveals it to be. He adds that this truth now seems apparent to ordinary people who accept their own LGBTQ+ family and community members with the love, mercy and maturity not shown to them by their Church. Jason and Nigel rejected the idea that the Church offered a more just or global vision for the homosexual person, with Jason adding that arrogance prevents the Church from wanting to learn anything that science may say to counteract their own views.

4.6. Clergy: Other issues arising from the discussion about authority

4.6.1. As an adopted child, Jason knew how ‘life-giving’ adoptive parents could be and was angry that *The 1986-Letter*: 7 refers to the self-indulgent inclination of homosexual people, some of whom, as couples, choose to share their lives with adopted children. Jason, Nigel and Odhran recognised a deep disconnect between the teachings and the real lived experience of LGBTQ+ people. They were aware of many Catholics who have come to know, value, and show unconditional love to their LGBTQ+ family, friends, and colleagues in a way the Church cannot seem to bring itself to do. Oisín criticised a tendency by some clergy and particularly the magisterium to dismiss the learning that can derive from observing the lived experiences of real people. He, like Jason, regretted the emphasis that the Church has placed on the morality of personal sexual acts to the exclusion of highlighting other widespread ethical and societal injustices and has been saddened by the exclusionary effects that these teachings have had on LGBTQ+ parishioners.

4.7. Clergy: How LGBTQ+ people should live moral lives

4.7.1. Jason was angered by the recommended lifestyle of prayer, sacramental encounter and celibacy for LGBTQ+ people, outlined in the teaching documents, particularly in *The 1986-Letter*. He was particularly adamant that the sacraments of Reconciliation or Eucharist were not cures for sexual orientation. Celibacy, he claimed, was difficult in any circumstance and certainly not to be demanded

from people whose ‘God-given nature’ had never been theirs to choose. Nigel spoke movingly of the recent wake and funeral of a gay man who had died by suicide and the warmth and love his partner experienced from the local community. These ordinary Catholics from a traditional Irish rural hinterland instinctively saw something good and wholesome within this same-sex relationship that drew them in their many hundreds to come and offer support to a grieving partner. Nigel was angered that the Church would not offer a similar level of support to LGBTQ+ people who desire to enter committed and loving relationships.

4.7.2. Odhran spoke at length about the fundamental purpose of all human sexuality to unite persons in a deep and fulfilling manner and the overcoming of existential aloneness. The demand that all LGBTQ+ people must never experience the normal path to fulfilling a fundamental and God-given desire was inhuman and utterly disconnected from reality. On a similar note, Oisín considered this part of the teaching as offering LGBTQ+ people an optionless vision, devoid of the hope for connection, companionship and love. Iarlaithé alone defended the demands, claiming that the deepest bonds of love and connection could transcend the need for these to be expressed through intimate, genital acts and thereby still be accessible to LGBTQ+ people. It was notable that he made this personal observation from his experience as someone who had, in freedom, chosen a celibate lifestyle, a freedom of choice not granted to LGBTQ+ Catholics by their Church.

4.8. Clergy: The teachings about discrimination and violence towards LGBTQ+ people

4.8.1. Charles suggested that it was sadly predictable that it was the CDF which had authored the contentious phrase in *The 1986-Letter* expressing its non-surprise that irrational violence in society could follow the adoption of lenient civil legislation on LGBTQ+ issues. He went on to clearly state that in an era where there was already too much irrational violence in society, those ‘who expect high moral standards from others, should themselves work to high standards’. Regarding discrimination, he said that society is always discriminating on the basis of many criteria and that differentiation, rather than discrimination between persons, on certain criteria such as gender, ability, sexuality and so forth was legitimate, providing this was just. He used the issue of marriage equality as an example of this and suggested that this was perhaps one reason why the Church, in defending heterosexual marriage, had adopted the distinction between just and unjust discrimination.

4.8.2. Jason called on the Church to be unambiguous in its condemnation of violence towards LGBTQ+ people. Nigel recounted with emotion, the scene of a brutal and violent homophobic murder to which he had been called as a priest to administer the rituals of the Church. He had been deeply affected by witnessing the destructive rage that had clearly fuelled such extreme violence towards a gay man. He also referred to recent homophobic murders that had taken place during the previous month in Sligo (April 2022). With strong emotion, he said, ‘we should always be shocked, horrified and upset’ by homophobic violence and that it should always be condemned without equivocation.

Odhran found it difficult to see how the Church could exonerate itself from the consequences of its own immoderate, aggressive, and strident language around the issue of homosexuality, language that does discriminate against LGBTQ+ people and that could fuel violence towards them. Framing the ‘homosexual person as other’, he claimed, is an invitation for some people to act irrationally. He noted that he, as a pastor, was profoundly aware of the potential of his words to wound and do ‘violence’ to people and the need for extreme care and caution. He was angered that the CDF, responsible for communicating global teachings, could not exercise similar levels of responsibility. Oisín suggested that this aspect of the teachings could be used to justify violence in the minds of some and did not consider someone’s sexual orientation and their ‘right to love another consenting adult’ to be a legitimate criterion when it came to discrimination. Iarlaithe seemed shocked and surprised that the ambiguous phrase about irrational violence had been included, and he fully understood how some might see it as unacceptable.

4.9. Clergy: The teachings about civil marriage legislation

4.9.1. Charles framed his views within the context of what was beneficial to the common good and how the radical individualisation of human rights could endanger this. He ventured that the Church could act as a voice to challenge and critique society when it proposed the adoption of risky strategies that endangered the common good. Iarlaithe’s concerns too, were for the common good and the wider disintegration of domestic and marital life apparent to him as the pastor of a large urban parish. The Church was not governed by cultural mores, he said, but by divine revelation, which offered an alternative vision for all people. He claimed that redefining marriage, in practice, had already occurred in society before the advent of same-sex marriage legislation and was evidently damaging the ‘cells and building blocks’ upon which a stable society was founded.

4.9.2. Nigel was visibly angered by the suggestion that same-sex marriage would damage society. It was, for him, the lack of awareness and interaction with such same-sex couples by the magisterium that allowed them to use harsh words with no connection to lived experience. Odhran noted that the Church, whilst claiming the unchanging nature of marriage, had historically overseen and approved many redefinitions in the laws, spirituality and canonicity of sacramental marriage. Redefinition of marriage in the legal sphere posed no problem to him, and in contrast to Charles and Iarlaithe, he contended that great benefits would accrue to the common good in terms of equality, fulfilment and happiness for a minority that had been unhappily deprived of these.

4.9.3. On the call for Catholic politicians to legislate according to their Church’s teaching on this issue, Odhran cited Thomas More and the need for absolute primacy of conscience, regardless of what the Church may prescribe. He also spoke strongly in favour of being able to officially celebrate some liturgical expression of a same-sex couple’s union but wasn’t sure that many of his clerical colleagues would feel similarly. Oisín suggested a similar openness, aware that this could be difficult in the

current ecclesial environment. He spoke of the frequency with which many of his colleagues were happy to ‘privately’ bless or celebrate liturgical rituals for heterosexual couples whose second or canonically irregular relationships were excluded from sacramental expression. He didn’t imagine that there should be a difficulty in extending this to same-sex couples. Ultimately, he did not see why two different views of marriage, the legal and the ecclesial, could not coexist and recalled how many of the fears raised by the ‘No’ campaign in the 2015-IMR had failed to materialise. Jason simply suggested that society and the people he encountered had ‘moved beyond’ the concerns and fears expressed by the Church in its opposition to same-sex marriage and that he would be pleased to celebrate full sacramental marriage for same-sex couples at some point.

4.10. Clergy: The non-admission of homosexual candidates to Holy Orders

4.10.1. This was an area of teaching that was directly relevant to this particular participant group. Charles, as a bishop, was in the position of accepting candidates for his diocese and was pragmatic about the teachings. He speculated that the origin of *The 2005-Instruction* may be located in the prevailing child-sex abuse scandals of that time, although he did not himself connect homosexuality to child-abuse. Charles was bemused by the term ‘deep-seated’, as he regarded all sexual orientation to be thus. Ultimately he believed that if a man showed himself willing to make the sacrifices required for a life of celibacy, his sexual orientation should not be a barrier to becoming a candidate for Holy Orders. He had admitted gay men into seminary, having been convinced that the necessary affective and sexual maturity was present. He added that some failings in the life-long struggle to be celibate were experienced by all candidates and priests, regardless of orientation. For Iarlaithé, who was generally supportive of other teachings, the issue was not about excluding homosexual men, but rather ‘those who have not integrated their homosexual tendencies’. He agreed that sexual orientation in itself should not be a barrier to Holy Orders and that the ability to live a celibate life was the only relevant criterion for consideration.

4.10.2. Nigel lamented the dishonesty and secrecy that this teaching generated in the lives of priests and bishops known to him and how it could only encourage the unhealthy concealment of orientation by any homosexual candidate in seminary. Having been previously in charge of his diocesan admissions to seminary, he decried the hypocrisy of homosexual formation staff known to him who made negative decisions based on a candidate’s sexual orientation. He was appalled by any attempt to equate homosexuality with child-sex-abuse. Oisín was currently in charge of assisting men in his diocese with their discernment of a vocation to Holy Orders. He agreed that if a man was deeply immersed in a gay lifestyle, e.g. frequenting the gay-scene, this could be problematic. However, the same would apply to a heterosexual man unable to integrate his heterosexuality. He was adamant that gay men had excellent qualities that enabled them to be effective, pastorally sensitive priests. He was very concerned that the teachings engendered a ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ mentality among priests and candidates, and were themselves damaging to a person’s affective and sexual maturity.

4.10.3. Jason regarded his homosexuality as one of his richest gifts, giving him a particular compassion for those on the margins in his parish and prison chaplaincy ministries, and enabling effectual relationships with both women and men. He was grateful for the support of his diocesan bishop in enabling him to be truthful about his orientation. Odhran, as a heterosexual pastor, clearly stated that ‘some of the most balanced, emotionally integrated, pastorally effective priests I have known have been gay, both practising or active and non-practising or non-active’. Any inability to relate correctly to men or women, he concluded, was down to an unhealthy clericalist culture, and he labelled the teaching that gay men were unable to relate properly to others as being ‘astonishingly stupid, vulgar, simplistic, prejudiced’ and ultimately damaging to priests and the Church.

4.11. Clergy: The tone and language used in the Church teachings about homosexuality

4.11.1. Charles, as a leader of the Church, suggested that many of his episcopal colleagues had ‘moved on’ from describing the homosexual orientation in terms of it being objectively disordered or acts as being intrinsically evil, with such ‘Thomistic language’, being very much ‘of its time’. He contended that a better model could be found in Jesus, who was interested only in dealing with people as he found them and didn’t, for example, demand that the Samaritan woman enter a hermitage rather than return to her lover. He wondered how many LGBTQ+ Catholics actually ever heard these words about themselves used in any contemporary parish or pastoral environments and whether, in fact, such phrases were more likely to be unearthed as propaganda to ‘bash the Church’. He contended that the Catholic environments experienced by LGBTQ+ Catholics were ‘much more modulated’ and the caricature much more tolerant than the Church is popularly given credit for. Iarlaithe conceded that the term ‘disorder’ could be construed (perhaps wilfully by its hearers) as offensive but that this was not its intent. He preferred to frame all sexual *hamartia* or ‘falling short’ as a human tendency towards disorder, something of which he, as a heterosexual man, was also guilty.

4.11.2. Jason regarded the tone and language of the teaching to have encouraged self-loathing in his earlier life and claimed that the term ‘intrinsic disorder’ had caused him real damage and was a term loaded with malice and evil intent. He was adamant that self-harm and suicide among LGBTQ+ people were certainly not to be ruled out as the indirect consequences of the Church using such language. Nigel was also visibly upset by the language, which, in his opinion, could only harm and impose impossible burdens of guilt and shame on LGBTQ+ people. Despairing of some colleagues who do use their pastoral platforms to pursue a homophobic agenda, he is careful never to use language that wounds or excludes people.

4.11.3. Odhran was forensic in how he analysed the philosophical and theological language in the documents. To him, it is clear that the message sent out to LGBTQ+ people from this tone and language is that they are ‘driven ineluctably to that which is destructive of themselves and others’ and that this can only run completely counter to the actual experience of LGBTQ+ people, their lovers,

friends, and families. He wondered how LGBTQ+ Catholics could even bear to remain communicant members of a Church that brands them as people who act as impulsively, unreflectively, and stupidly as animals. Odhran was incredulous that *The 1986-Letter* includes the ‘consolation’ that the Church regards no one as homosexual or heterosexual but only as a child of God. To this, he replied with laughter, ‘It’s just not true...what I would simply say to that is, “see above”, for that’s not what I’ve been reading!’

4.11.4. Oisín reflected on how the language and tone of the teachings seemed to frame homosexuality as a problem, something to be carried as a burden or managed by prayer and sacrament. He was dismayed by this and regarded it as deeply unhelpful to LGBTQ+ people, particularly as those known to him often led lives that were integrated, healthy and happy rather than problematic or burdensome. He reflected on the flawed assumption that heterosexual sexual acts were always open to life when, in fact, for the vast majority of straight couples that he encountered, this was not the case. He called for a withdrawal of the term ‘disordered’ and speculated that such language could emerge from the minds of those operating out of a cognitive dissonance with regard to their own unacknowledged homosexuality.

4.12. Clergy: The teachings about gender-fluidity and transgender people

4.12.1. Charles was deeply critical of the theoretical basis for the gender fluidity debate, repeating his view that ‘a theory is only a theory’. He was similarly critical of the intolerance shown towards any alternative views that critiqued the prevailing cultural and societal orthodoxy surrounding gender fluidity. Whilst not doubting that some people genuinely did experience gender dysphoria, he wondered how it can be satisfactorily defined and certified without the abuses that can damage the cohesion of human society. He was concerned for the welfare of young people caught up in these debates who already juggle a myriad of other societal pressures. Iarlaithe shared these concerns and mentioned the ongoing national debates around transgender people and the divisions within feminism about the issue. He did add, though, that the Church should not be in the business of trying to win some intellectual debate when it comes to dealing with people’s lives and that the Church approach should always be compassionate and person-centred. Jason, along with all the other clergy participants, shared a caution about the age at which a person should be permitted to undergo gender reassignment using hormonal or surgical procedures, but never having met any transgender people, they all admitted that they may be prejudiced by a lack of knowledge.

4.13. Clergy: A change of tone on LGBTQ+ issues by Pope Francis and some Church leaders

4.13.1. Overall, the pastoral approach of Pope Francis was supported by this group. Charles praised the approach of the Pope in taking LGBTQ+ people ‘as they were’, and treating them with humanity, in line with the model provided by Jesus. He summarised Francis’s approach as a long-term journey to enable more people to know Christ and one that he, as a bishop, was happy to support and share, even

if the longer-term results were something he may not live to see. Jason praised the liberating tone of Francis' papacy, and he believed that it was rooted in the Pope's prior experience of oppression in Latin America. Nigel and Oisin were heartened by the words and gestures of Francis and hoped that they represented a change of approach, but both were less optimistic that the teachings would change. Oisin suggested that in the clericalist milieu of the Vatican, with much-closeted homosexuality and internalised homophobia, the Pope's reforming agenda was always at risk of being tempered by conservative reactionary forces.

4.13.2. Odhran welcomed the tone of Francis' papacy in general but emphasised that if he were a LGBTQ+ person, he would feel that the gestures and words fell far short of what they might require and that action is always a stronger response to injustice than words and gestures. He saw some of the latter as being potentially patronising for LGBTQ+ people, adding with characteristic wit that Francis's stated desire 'to meet gay people' was ironic, given his abode, and his request that 'they pray for him' suggested he viewed them as 'inmates in a sanatorium'. He would like to see concrete pastoral solutions developed of the kind that he, as a pastor, could implement and use to welcome LGBTQ+ Catholics and liturgically celebrate their committed unions. Iarlaithe praised the person-centred approach in evidence within his papacy but was worried that this was open to misinterpretation by those with a reforming agenda for issues of sexuality in general. He reminded me that the Church was not in the business of adopting modern sexual mores to keep up with the times and that not all LGBTQ+ Catholics wanted reform on teachings, mentioning the existence of the American Catholic LGB³¹ group Courage, who advocate the pursuit of a celibate, chaste life for LGB Catholics, in line with Church teachings.

4.14. Clergy: On how attitudes to the Church had changed, particularly in Ireland

4.14.1. Charles, as a bishop in Ireland, spoke frequently of the critical role that the Church as a minority voice has today, stripped of its historical, institutional power, exercising a prophetic voice which challenged unquestioned ideologies, individualism, and societal trends. This new position, he claimed, was not to adopt the unthinking or blinkered role of a culture warrior but rather to be a stakeholder in the societal pursuit of the common good, adopting the biblical model of applying a prophetic critique in pursuit of kingdom values, and an openness to dialogue with the other societal stakeholders.

4.14.2. Jason had much to say about how the Church had acted in the past in Ireland, abusing its power in a manner of settings and the pain it had caused to LGBTQ+ people and other marginalised groups. He reckoned that the vast majority of lay Catholics that he encountered, and especially the young, had no respect for the Church and its exclusionary teachings about LGBTQ+ people. This was strongly echoed by Nigel, who had frequently referred to the warm, welcoming attitudes of many of

³¹ Courage do not, (to my knowledge) actively support the other groups included in the LGBTQ+ acronym.

his parishioners to their LGBTQ+ co-parishioners. His strong perception was that the vast majority of lay Catholics whom he encountered in ministry regarded the social and legal changes which had occurred for LGBTQ+ people in Ireland to be a good, positive, and life-giving change for the better. He added that the sex abuse scandals had rendered Church leadership to be something of a toothless moral messenger, from which Irish Catholics would not tolerate any attempt to browbeat its flock in matters of sexual morality.

4.14.3. Odhran spoke of how his pastoral experiences had revealed to him a laity composed of grandparents, parents, siblings, and friends of LGBTQ+ people whose unconditional love for their family members was at odds with the approach of their Church to its LGBTQ+ ‘children’. This sea-change in Irish society, where people have encountered LGBTQ+ people as family, not as ‘other’, has utterly changed the Catholic lay approach to LGBTQ+ people, very much at odds with their magisterium, though clearly not all their pastors. This sea-change in acceptance was also referred to frequently by Oisín in his pastoral experience of people who wholeheartedly approve of and welcome the dramatic legislative and social changes that have occurred in Ireland in a short space of time. Iarlaithe ministered in an urban setting beset with all manner of societal issues and remained adamant that a person-centred, loving pastoral approach to all his parishioners was not at odds with the Church’s mission to remain an advocate for lasting truth-based values and a vision of sexual morality that was in keeping with orthodox teaching.

4.15. Clergy: On links between the teachings about homosexuality and other notable issues for the Church

4.15.1. Iarlaithe linked the *Humanae Vitae* (1968) prohibition on the use of artificial birth control for Catholics to these teachings on homosexuality. He viewed this as a watershed moment, sparking a sexual revolution that placed many Catholics at odds with their Church’s vision for sexuality, marriage, and the family. That so many no longer see a link between sexual activity and procreation and accept same-sex relationships is, according to him, a logical corollary of what he regarded as a misguided revolution. He was unconcerned that even if ‘99.9% of Catholics’ did not live according to this procreative and unitive vision for sexuality, the 0.1% who did so would be a sufficient witness to an achievable vision rooted in objective truth. By contrast, Jason condemned the teaching on contraception as one that had added to the economic and health burdens of countless Irish women from a Church that had historically emphasised sexual morality rather than highlighting basic justice issues for women and minorities.

4.15.2. Jason also viewed the clerical discipline of celibacy as something that, for many priests, condemned them to sad, lonely, and angry lives. Odhran considered much of what the Church teaches in the sexual sphere to emerge from a male celibate experience and that insensitivity to real experience disconnected these teachings from reality. He condemned the insensitive language used in the teachings about homosexuality, arguing that a pastor instinctively knows never to wound or

condemn people who may have, e.g., procured abortions or been bereaved by suicide and that the same pastoral principle applies to any marginalised group or individual. Oisín spoke from his confessional experiences about his weariness that the Church has trained generations of Catholics to obsess over ‘sexual sins’ like masturbation and the use of artificial contraception but given them few tools to assess their moral lives in a wider, more holistic and healthy manner.

4.16. Clergy: Overall levels of agreement or disagreement with the teachings about homosexuality

4.16.1. On many of the areas covered by these teachings, the clergy participants were in strong disagreement with their Church. Scriptural and NML arguments to support the teachings were rejected, and the absence of scientific knowledge regretted. On key areas of how the teachings affected LGBTQ+ people, through the Church’s recommended lifestyle, violence, same-sex unions, and Holy Orders, tone and language, there was often a strong rejection of Church teaching. Iarlaithe was the participant who most strongly agreed with the teachings, only expressing strong disagreement with *The 2005-Instruction*’s prohibition of homosexual men from Holy Orders. He also expressed surprise that the Church’s condemnation of violence to homosexual people was more ambiguous than it might have been. Charles’s views were evenly divided, his agreement with certain aspects of the teaching matching his disagreement with others. His primary concern as a bishop was that the Church should maintain its right to exercise a prophetic critique on prevailing societal forces in the interests of the common good. In certain key areas, such as NML, scripture, the ordination of homosexual men, the ambiguity in the teachings about violence, and the language and tone of the documents, he expressed clear reservations or disagreement. For the other four priests, the issues arising from the teachings with which they disagreed far outweighed those with which they agreed. For the latter, these were exclusively around the concern that younger gender-questioning people should not be encouraged to undergo a permanent gender reassignment prematurely, and in this, they were reflecting a concern shared more widely by society.

4.16.2. Unlike any of the other participant sub-groups, this group of diocesan clergy had solemnly promised under oath to respect, uphold and teach what the Church teaches. One might assume that this entailed respect for the authority and right of the Church to teach, as well as for the arguments and sources that the Church uses to teach authoritatively. As an admittedly small sample, I recognised in this group many of the pastoral traits and sensitivities of my former colleagues, and as men whose ages ranged from 52-72, they were typical of the current age profile of Irish diocesan priests.³² The most striking issue arising from these participants was the status that they awarded to human experience. They made frequent references to how their own pastoral experiences of LGBTQ+

³² Patsy McGarry, ‘More than a third of Irish Catholic priests are aged over 60, survey finds’, *The Irish Times* (November 2022). <https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/social-affairs/2022/11/02/more-than-a-third-of-irish-catholic-priests-are-over-60-and-just-25-are-under-40-survey-finds/> [accessed 20th October 2024].

people, either directly or through interactions with their families and communities, had taken precedence over the claims to authority made by their Church in formulating and justifying the teachings about homosexuality. More than any other group, one might have expected these participants to have been more defensive of and eager to agree with the magisterium, which issues and upholds these doctrines. Experience is often regarded as one of life's best teachers, and my assessment of these participants was that the lived human experience derived from their pastoral interactions was a more authoritative teacher than the teaching office of their Church. If those who have been commissioned by ordination to promote the authoritative teachings of their Church seem to see human experience as more authoritative, it would be interesting in the following chapters to assess if other participant sub-groups will have similar or divergent views and for similar or divergent reasons.

Chapter 5. Analysis of the laity participant data

5.1. Background

5.1.1. *Lumen Gentium* (1964: 31) defines the Catholic laity in a manner repeated in all subsequent teachings about this largest group of the Catholic community:

The term laity is here understood to mean all the faithful except those in holy orders and those in the state of religious life specially approved by the Church. These faithful are by baptism made one body with Christ and are constituted among the People of God...they carry out for their own part the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world.

LG-1964 and *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (1965) transformed the ecclesial vision and aspirations for the role of the laity in the Catholic Church, marking a distinctive contrast with the Church's pre-conciliar attitude to its largest group of members. The apostolate of the laity was seen as specific to their unique place in the world, as those best placed within the Church to renew the world through the many roles they occupy within it. Although the role is highly esteemed, they are instructed to 'heed the doctrine set forth by the magisterium of the Church'...and 'in matters of opinion...to avoid setting forth their own opinion as the doctrine of the Church' (*Code of Canon Law-1983: 227*). In addition, *CCC-1992: 1792* warns that 'a mistaken notion of autonomy of conscience' and a 'rejection of the Church's authority and her teaching' can be the root cause of serious errors of judgement regarding a person's moral judgement. The magisterium of the Church emphasises that the laity enjoy few insights or rights when it comes to determining moral truths.

5.1.2. Until ordination at 25, my status within the Catholic Church was that of a layperson. We lived in a typical rural Irish Catholic parish of its era (1970s-1980s). For Northern Irish Catholics during the 'Troubles', the local Catholic parish was a focal point for worship, socialising, education, and the maintenance of our identity as members of a large minority in a state perceived by us to be Protestant and unionist. Lay participation in parish life was strong and enthusiastic. After ordination, I served in three large urban parishes in Belfast, where many lay Catholics had stopped attending weekly Mass, but the majority still chose the Church for baptisms, weddings, funerals and the sacramental rites of passage. In these parishes, I worked with many enthusiastic lay men and women, passionate in their dedication to parish and faith. Alongside a normalisation of Northern Irish society during the years following the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 was the disclosure of many historic child-sex abuse scandals involving Irish priests and religious. These had profound effects on the lay people I worked alongside, as the traditional Irish Catholic deference to clergy and religious quite understandably collapsed. The initial shock of Irish lay people was, in my experience, gradually replaced with a deep, weary sadness, disappointment, anger, and, from some, a notable cynicism regarding the role of the clergy and the Irish Church hierarchy. The relationship between Irish lay people and their clergy had

altered definitively. Within these years, I decided to leave ministry but never having sought a formal dispensation from Holy Orders, I live as a de facto lay Catholic, with my involvement in my local parish low-key, and, by choice, discreet.

5.1.3. There were sixteen members of the Catholic laity in this sub-group. These were all ‘practising’ Catholics, going to Mass weekly or daily. Amy and Ivan were the youngest lay participants, both single and students in their early 20s at Irish universities. Charlotte was a single professional woman in her 30s, and Vincent was a retired, single professional in his late 60s and a convert to Catholicism. Laura and Roisin were professional married women and mothers in their 50s. Ian and Olivia, in their 60s, were married parents, both in full-time employment. Amelia, Brian, Mike, Linda and Isla were all married parents and retired professionals in their 60s. Isaac, Zara, and John were retired, married parents in their 70s. In addition, Isla, Zara, John, and Roisin had children who identified as being LGBTQ+.

Table 23. Lay participants

Name (pseudonym)	Age-group	Employment Category	Ecclesial participation Weekly or daily Mass attendance (P) Current ecclesial ministry or active parish/ecclesial role. * Previous ecclesial ministry or active parish/ecclesial role. **
Male (M) Female (F)			
Isaac M	56-75	Retired	P *
John M	56-75	Retired	P **
Zara F	56-75	Retired	P
Charlotte F	18-35	Employed	P
Vincent M	56-75	Retired	P *
Amy F	18-35	Student	P
Ian M	56-75	Employed	P
Olivia F	56-75	Employed	P
Laura F	36-55	Employed	P *
Ivan M	18-35	Student	P
Mike M	56-75	Retired	P *
Isla F	56-75	Retired	P *
Amelia F	56-75	Employed	P
Linda F	56-75	Retired	P *
Roisin F	56-75	Employed	P *
Brian M	56-75	Employed	P *

5.2. Linda.

5.2.1. Linda is a Catholic lay woman in her mid-60s, married for 40 years with two children, and I begin the analysis of this largest sub-group with her profile as being representative of the themes, views and concerns that were raised more generally by these men and women. A teacher in a Catholic secondary school for over 30 years, Linda had always been involved in her rural parish and was currently involved in several pastoral outreach projects, being a member of her parish council. She was brought up in a traditional Catholic household and strongly formed by the views of her parish clergy over the years. These views were challenged by her own observations, the opinions of her students and later, by her own children. She was the survivor of a series of encounters with an emotionally and sexually abusive Catholic priest who had been considered a family acquaintance. As an adult, the details of this historical abuse were reported to the diocesan authorities, but no action was taken against the priest, now deceased.

5.2.2. Linda admitted that she had often deferred to the Church's 'wisdom' when it came to scripture. However, it became clear that she was not convinced by the clarity and consistency of the scriptural argument about homosexuality:

It's a bit unclear, to put it mildly, and it's hard to see, in my opinion, that the Church can be so adamant in black-and-white terms when there's not the black-and-white evidence behind it.

Linda was familiar with the NML arguments that justify the prohibition of both same-sex sexual activity and artificial birth control. For personal gynaecological reasons, she began to question the necessary link that the Church made between every sexual act and procreation. Linda spoke about her attempts to adhere to these teachings, and her many friends who disregarded Church teaching. She now rejects the link between sexual acts and procreation:

it's not a given part of every heterosexual act, so therefore, homosexual sex acts are also for something bigger if you like...and that's 'giving and self-giving', and its why we were given this beautiful gift of sex.

Linda's subject as a teacher was science-based, and she was scathing in her criticism of how the Church, from a position of 'arrogance and intransigence', had not been open to more recent scientific insights about homosexuality. She took exception throughout the interview to the term 'condition', as used of those who exhibit homosexual tendencies. She wondered how the Church could purport to do 'greater justice to the rich reality' of such 'afflicted' LGBTQ+ people than science, the insights of which are 'neutral, factual and based on observation'.

5.2.3. Linda knows a number of LGBTQ+ people, and her experience of meeting, befriending, and hearing homosexual people in later life made her react passionately to the teaching that homosexual

people should live an unpartnered life of sexual abstinence, sustained by faith, prayer, and sacrament. Linda is a Catholic whose life has been sustained by prayer, faith, and sacrament, and familiar with the universal Christian vocation to unite oneself with the sufferings of Christ, but she was angered by the way this has been misdirected at homosexual people.

I am just about to explode, honest to God...the Cross is real, and everybody suffers. And if I'm crippled with pain, I try to offer it up. But that's a big ask, that your homosexuality should be linked to the Cross. And how in the name of heavens is doing what's natural and being the people that they are, going to 'threaten to destroy them'?

5.2.4. Linda was incensed by what she considered to be a contradictory message about violence towards homosexual people, 'you know, in one way they're saying, "if this is the life they choose, while we don't want there to be any violence if they keep living like this, they're going to nearly have to expect it" '. When it came to the teaching about the legalisation of same-sex unions, Linda, with forty years of happy marriage, could not agree with any of the points made in the *2003-Considerations*. Nor did she feel that her heterosexual, sacramental marriage, or its definition, was undermined by the legalisation of same-sex unions. Linda knows many priests, working closely with her pastors, a series of school chaplains, and having developed strong friendships with a wide range of clergy. Despite her traumatic and abusive experience of one priest, she retains a very high regard for priests and their office. She recounted her friendship with a pastor who had ministered sensitively to her elderly father and retold the story of him 'coming out' to her. On the basis of his proven pastoral qualities, she angrily rejected the assertion that homosexual priests are unable to relate properly to their people, 'really when they say they cannot relate correctly to both men and women, I just think that's the biggest load of balderdash and nonsense I've ever heard in my life!'

5.2.5. Linda was dismayed by the tone and language used in the teaching documents. She values language as poetry, in literature and in the art of conversation, being very sensitive to how language can wound people and having been personally subject to its misuse. Linda was horrified by how the Church teaches about and 'addresses' its LGBTQ+ members. Of the phrases used in *The 1986-Letter*, which speak of 'objective disorder' and 'intrinsic evil', she said, 'No! That is judgmental and wrong and highly offensive; it's morally wrong to tell somebody that this is what they are. That's a very serious statement, and I couldn't agree.' She paraphrased the Church's message to LGBTQ+ people as it saying to them, 'you're not a child of God, and you're certainly not equal to the other *good* children of God'. When it came to the teaching about gender fluidity, Linda shared some of the concerns about the age at which a young person should consider permanent gender reassignment. She admitted that she knew no one who had gender dysphoria or who had transitioned but realised that gender didn't always match a person's biological sex. She struggled to get her 'head around' the idea of permanent surgery but conceded that if she had the opportunity to know a person who was transgender and

listened to their story, her views would be open to evolution. Like many from this group, it seemed that more authority was attached to personal experience than to ecclesial teachings about certain ethical issues. For Pope Francis and his change of tone and attitude to LGBTQ+ people, Linda gave a positive response. She considered his approach and outreach to be much more ‘Christ-like’ and representative of her ‘New Testament faith’ and the witness of Jesus. Linda found some of the more positive overtures by Pope Francis to be a tentatively hopeful antidote to the negativity and judgemental tone in much of the teaching. Expressing her love for a deeply imperfect Church, she said:

so much of that stuff is negative, and I don’t see anywhere when Jesus was negative; his life and teaching were based simply on love, and love doesn’t always condone everything, but is bigger than a law. You either live by observing laws, or you live by observing love, and love is bigger than the law. The love of God is bigger than the laws of God.

Linda was an illuminating example of someone from this group who captured the traits common to many of them. She had a good deal to say about all of the issues raised during the interview and provided many interesting anecdotes, personal stories and captivating ‘turns of phrase’. Her own journey of faith, from being a Catholic who never queried Church teaching to one who now critiques her Church articulately on a range of issues, was quite typical of the wider group. Her own personal experience of clerical abuse, alongside her obvious commitment to the Church with her deep personal faith made her a particularly good example of a lay person who has allowed her continuing relationship with the Church and its authority to be filtered through her experiences of life, work, marriage, personal interactions and reflection. Her input, illustrative of what many of this group had to say, struck me as capturing something of the essence of the concept known as the *sensus fidelium*.

5.3. Laity: The scriptural basis for the teachings

5.3.1. Lay Catholics since Vatican II have been encouraged to ‘learn by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures the "excellent knowledge of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 3:8)’ (*DV-1965*: 25). This contrasts with a pre-conciliar perception that Catholics were not encouraged to read or study scripture independently. Catholic lay people are more familiar with scripture now, if not through widespread devotional reading, then through the scriptural passages proclaimed within the Eucharistic celebration in a three-year lectionary cycle, one for Sundays and another for weekdays. The majority of Irish priests base their homilies on these lectionary readings, explaining some of its context and message. Irish Catholic lay people who go to Church regularly will, therefore, be familiar with a certain amount of scripture and some of its context.

5.3.2. The majority of lay participants in this group had an instinct that good arguments are never based on selective scriptural quotations without context or explanation. The Northern Irish

participants were familiar with the use of isolated texts by evangelical Protestant clergy to proselytise via street preaching, door-to-door visits, billboards, and other traditional means. The phrase, ‘even the devil can cite scripture for his own purposes,’ was used by several participants in refuting the scriptural selectivity used by their own Church to teach about homosexual acts. Most recognised the absence of an actual argument and were perplexed that no explanation or context was being offered if these quotations were indeed the foundation of such a clear and consistent argument. Laura was one of several who balked at the inappropriateness of a passage about attempted male gang rape in Gn. 19 being used to refute homosexuality. She was also dismayed that the Levitical promotion of capital punishment for homosexuality was used within the argument at all. Mike said that it showed dishonesty to misuse a text (Gn. 19) that was clearly about inhospitality to strangers, a context which he asserted would have been known to the authors of these teachings. Isla and Linda observed how several of the passages were open to interpretation, including some of the Pauline vocabulary surrounding same-sex activity. Laura suggested that the Pauline argument in Romans 1 was a comparison between Christian believers and Gentiles and didn’t represent an actual argument as to why homosexuality was ethically wrong. She also pointed out that many women would reject other Pauline edicts surrounding hair, jewellery, dress, etiquette, and public expression of their opinions.

5.3.3. John wondered how important any text could actually be if they were, as he claimed, never used or heard in liturgical or homiletic settings. Roisin dismissed the quoting of selected passages as being a method of control by Church authorities over sections of the Catholic laity, including women and minorities, something echoed by Zara, who commented on the exclusively male authorship of all biblical passages. Vincent was disturbed by the literalist approach to scripture, something from his former Presbyterianism that he had rejected and not expected to have encountered in a piece of Catholic teaching. He claimed that a literalist approach to scripture by his former Church had contributed to his gay grandson’s suicide attempt. He was dismayed, as a result, that the Church to which he had ‘converted’ at no small social cost seemed to also take a literalist approach to scripture on this issue. Six of the participants were perplexed as to why the gospels and teachings of Jesus were never used in any of these scriptural arguments. Referring to the story of the woman taken in adultery from John 8 (a recently used lectionary text), several wondered why the gospel values about the primacy of love over law, mercy with compassion, and the eschewal of hypocrisy were absent from these teachings.

5.3.4. Ian and Olivia admitted that they had never heard these particular scriptural passages before but accepted them because they felt that this was what a Catholic ought to do. They admitted that they had a personal disgust about same-sex acts and that these biblical prohibitions backed up their own personal views. Ivan accepted the scriptural arguments as being authoritative for him, conceding that the Levitical capital penalty for homosexual acts was obviously unacceptable. The Pauline arguments held more sway for him, as St. Paul would certainly have been aware of homosexuality, rendering

these texts relevant and authoritative. He added that Jesus did tell the adulterous woman to ‘go, sin no more’ (Jn. 8:11).

5.4. Laity: Natural Moral Law (NML)

5.4.1. All of this group were heterosexual; twelve were (or had been) married with children, and four were single. Within marriages clearly open to procreation, none of the twelve agreed that openness to biological life was the criterion that determined the morality of sexual acts or the relationships in which they occurred. When ecclesial authority meets experience, many participants put it plainly, from their experience, that the majority of heterosexual sexual acts were never intentionally open to procreation, with Roisin calling for honesty from the Church about this widely acknowledged reality. Three of the unmarried participants concurred with this view, with Amy, one of the youngest participants, laughing at any supposition that people from her generation would believe in procreation being the purposeful end of every sexual act.

5.4.2. A large number of participants made reference to heterosexual married couples who were infertile or who chose to be childless, wondering if, according to the teachings on homosexuality, all these marriages should be declared null and void by the Church. Several mentioned how pleasure was a legitimate and natural purpose for a couple who loved one another and that applying this purpose to a same-sex couple legitimised the natural, ethical goodness of their unions. Mike maintained that body-soul dualism and a suspicion of sexuality had caused the Church to deny the legitimate goal of pleasure within a relationship, with Linda claiming that her adherence to Church teaching on this issue had left her with a jaundiced, fear-filled attitude to sex. Rejecting this teaching, she said with conviction that a couple are capable of being intimate in many non-procreative and pleasurable ways.

5.4.3. Some of the participants queried the basis of NML. Charlotte claimed that for same-sex couples, the sexual and affective giving of themselves to one another represented the choosing of good over evil, something she regarded as the central ethical issue. This made loving, relational same-sex acts naturally good in themselves. Isaac said that the desire to express same-sex love was natural and therefore good and was a natural minority trait. Mike believed that objective truth had to resonate with real-life subjects, claiming that many people today accept the goodness of same-sex relationships as an objective truth. John queried how a beneficent creator God would deliberately want a stable percentage of his human creation in every time and place to never experience sexual or affective love. Roisin condemned the Church’s definition of what was ‘natural’ as being ‘easy and ignorant’ and irresponsibly blind to the greater moral imperative to care for the planet and curtail overpopulation. Many of this group rejected the idea that same-sex love was only ever self-indulgent, for the self-giving inherent in the act of love-making alongside the non-sexual aspects of such relationships proved this not to be the case. Several referenced the ability of same-sex couples to adopt, foster or have their own biological offspring as proving the falsity of the Church’s claim about self-indulgence.

Mike, Brian, Amy, and others spoke about the selflessness shown by same-sex couples known to them. Zara had lost one of her children to suicide and spoke of how the past rhetoric of the Church about suicide had caused unspeakable pain. Her loss made her value the ‘motherly love’ of God, and for her, the rhetoric of the Church on this issue of homosexuality was inimical of God’s unconditional love.

5.4.4. Ian supported the teaching, his disgust at same-sex acts being proof for him of the unnaturalness of homosexuality, but he admitted that on this issue, he held strong personal opinions that others may not share. Ivan claimed that sexual pleasure without the potential ‘consequences’ of a pregnancy was always self-indulgent, emphasising that the use of artificial contraception was a much more serious moral breach than same-sex acts, as this was practised by many more Catholics.

5.5. Laity: The Human sciences

5.5.1. The majority of lay participants criticised the approach to scientific insights in the teachings. The term ‘cherry-picking’ or similar phrases were used about how the Church uses science to inform its teachings on homosexuality. John labelled this approach ‘pathetic’, Linda condemned it as ‘blinker and tedious’ and Isla as being ‘arrogant’ and showing ‘tunnel-vision’. Many queried the Church’s qualifications to critique the authority of science and its new discoveries about sexual orientation and gender dysphoria. Brian and Mike welcomed the insights of science and how they assist self-understanding and the knowledge of ‘our purpose’. Brian recalled Newman’s words about growth being connected to an ‘openness to change’ and that the Church seemed reluctant to do this. Mike referenced the Church’s changes with regard to its previously unshakeable positions on cosmology and evolution as examples of how it can change despite the claims that it cannot.

5.5.2. Roisin and Laura reflected on the Church’s fear of being challenged and its refusal to accept anything that might contradict its authority. Linda reflected on how claiming access to divine authority allowed the Church to absolve itself for its lack of openness to change. Amy wondered why the Church didn’t put forward any strong reasons for its rejection of new scientific knowledge about same-sex attraction, musing that even a primary school child would be challenged by their teacher if they just disagreed ‘because!’ rather than giving a specific reason. Most participants rejected the view that the Church’s vision for the homosexual person did more justice to them than the scientific view, expressing their incredulity at this claim, given the otherwise harsh tone of the Church teaching and its treatment of LGBTQ+ people. Ivan was a physicist but had nothing to say about how the Church should heed science. He said that LGBTQ+ people should accept what he conceded was a harsh vision as being superior to that of science because this would ensure their salvation. Ivan’s absence of curiosity about bridging his religious views with his scientific background was interesting.

5.6. Laity: On other issues arising from the discussion about authority

5.6.1. Many in this group spoke of how the Church's views about homosexual people, their relationships and sexual acts ran counter to the experiential knowledge that convinced them and many people that the Church was wrong. Four of this group had LGBTQ+ children, and Isla, a former lay advisor for a Catholic marriage organisation, reflected on how accompanying her lesbian daughter had caused a conversion and reset in the way she had previously received Church teaching on sexuality. All of these parents, and the others who knew same-sex couples, rejected the teaching on the basis that it was, to use a sample of their words: 'exclusionary', 'warped', 'unwelcoming', 'jaundiced and impoverished', 'narrow', 'damaging and ostracising of LGBTQ+ people, and 'afraid of otherness'. Many of this group spoke about the reality of any couple's sexual lives and how the Church seemed to know nothing about the day-to-day reality of living in committed relationships and the role that sexual acts played. The reduction and limitation of sexual expression to solely procreative 'ends' or particular acts was naïve and nonsensical to them. John reflected on his own marriage of 50+ years and considered it to have been more about a journey of mutual companionship and support forged in real-life circumstances than it had ever been about procreative sexual acts, despite their undoubted presence. That this journey of companionship couldn't be permitted by the Church to his gay son caused him to be angry and disillusioned.

5.7. Laity: The teachings on how LGBTQ+ people should live moral lives

5.7.1. A majority of this group had enjoyed conjugal, married relationships but found the insistence that LGBTQ+ people live chaste lives, devoid of any intimate relationships, sustained with self-sacrifice, prayer, and sacramental support to be nonsensical and an impossible demand. Interestingly, two participants who found homosexuality to be personally distasteful delivered strong denunciations. Ian was offended by the 'idea of homosexuality' but said that the demand for LGBTQ+ people to be celibate was unrealistic. Olivia spoke of how, after her first marriage had ended, she had been told by her priest 'to go home and pray the rosary every night' for the grace to live a celibate life. For her, 'human nature was too strong', and she decided that she 'wasn't going to sit at home with a hump on my back...when I could have the comfort of a man'. Remarried (irregularly), she could see how 'impossible and ridiculous' the demands placed by the Church were for its LGBTQ+ members.

5.7.2 Many of this group highlighted what they perceived to be the harsh and punitive tone of the teachings. Brian said that the teaching was asking LGBTQ+ people to 'deny who they were', with Roisin saying they were being asked to repent for the duration of their lives 'for the very essence of their being', and asked pointedly 'where LGBTQ+ people were supposed to go with that?' John asked why a constant, stable percentage of the human population created by God was 'being specially punished' and told to 'man up and bear the cross'. Zara, from her experience, reflected that 'we all suffer' and that this was no reason to insist that LGBTQ+ people should suffer additionally on top of what comes the way of everyone. The joyless tone of the recommended lifestyle was highlighted by

many of this group, their comments indicating that the experience of fully intimate, marital companionship for some of them had brought an abundance of joy, which they would not deny to LGBTQ+ people. Laura and Vincent got upset that young Catholics might heed such a ‘heartless’ vision, with Vincent mentioning how, alongside the issuing of such punitive teaching for LGBTQ+ people, the Irish Church had covered up and facilitated horrific sex abuse crimes. Linda was horrified by the ‘draconian vision’ for LGBTQ+ people, decrying the Church’s vision for them as a ‘life of misery, a life sentence, not a way of life’.

5.7.3. Amelia and Brian rejected the comparison of LGBTQ+ celibacy with the required chastity of some other Catholics as not being legitimate, with Brian stating that other people at least have the chance to love in a sexually expressive manner and that LGBTQ+ people should not be the only exception to this. Isla, reflecting on her lesbian daughter and her own years of caring for her seriously ill spouse, during which time sexual intimacy was not possible, said that the teachings resulted in LGBTQ+ people ‘not being given a life’. Linda reflected that most heterosexual people will have some element of choice in their lifetime, but LGBTQ+ people never have any. Roisin despaired of the idea that LGBTQ+ people are told that they can never, for the duration of a lifetime, know a deep affective loving relationship or sexual intimacy through no choice of their own. Mike ridiculed the recommended pursuit of ‘disinterested friendships’ for LGBTQ+ people (*CCC-1992: 2359*) and said that all people were entitled to pursue such relationships, regardless of sexual orientation. Isaac said that the tenor of this teaching made LGBTQ+ people feel ‘subnormal’, making ‘fish of one and flesh of another’ and reducing homosexuals to a category of people who have insatiable sexual appetites that must never be met.

5.7.4. The strongest accusations of callousness by the Church emerged when participants considered the claim that homosexual people are drawn into ‘self-destructive’ ways of life. Aware that this was partially a reference to the HIV-AIDS pandemic, many participants became upset. Zara said it was a devious way of making a point, with Isla claiming it lacked basic charity. John accused the authors of being heartless and unscientific, while a visibly upset Laura echoed the accusation of heartlessness, saying pointedly that ‘whoever wrote this needs help’. When it was pointed out that Cardinal Ratzinger was the principal signatory, this trained psychiatrist asked in exasperation how anyone could remain in such a Church. Roisin, with great emotion, reflected on the lack of compassion shown here, dragging the tone down to a ‘new level of inhumanity’, and issued while gay men, lesbians, and medics were showing unparalleled acts of love and solidarity with dying gay men across the world. She recounted tearfully a documentary she had watched about the gay victims of the American killer John Wayne Gacy, who had murdered at least 33 gay men in the 1960s-70s. Reflecting with emotion on how many families of these victims never claimed their bodies due to the shame of having a gay child, she condemned an uncompassionate Church and its teachings:

People here have a passion for making someone feel worse by their words, actions or deeds, and it is a much greater sin to be adding to the suffering of another human being, even if you believe they are wrong for being homosexual or being in a relationship.

Zara and Isla, as mothers, reflected that this aspect of the teaching, in particular, contradicted the very nature of a loving, parental Creator.

5.7.5. Ivan alone supported the recommended lifestyle for LGBTQ+ Catholics. He suggested, on the basis of testimonies he had heard on social media, that LGB Catholics (he made no reference to the other groups) could consider marrying someone of the opposite sex to avoid an otherwise solitary, celibate life. He said that this could be a marital arrangement by mutual consent and with full awareness of the other person's sexual orientation. When pressed about the need to consummate such a theoretical marriage, he said that this could still happen as a token of their mutual self-sacrifice rather than pleasure and that it could cement an affective bond of mutual respect between the two, if not one based on sexual attraction.

5.8. Laity: The teachings about discrimination and violence towards LGBTQ+ people

5.8.1. The strongest reactions of these participants were to the assertion that when civil legislation condones homosexual behaviour, there should be no surprise at the irrational violence that may follow. This phrase was construed by the majority as being a condoning or justification of violence, despite such violence being simultaneously condemned by *The 1986-Letter* as irrational. Ian, who found homosexuality distasteful, said that the teaching could give some people an excuse to be violent. Isaac compared this reasoning to someone trying to hypothetically justify the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine, as being a legitimate reaction to the provocation caused by Ukrainian self-determination. John called it a 'a thinly veiled threat' comparing his Church to local NI politicians who condemn violence but simultaneously encourage it through rhetoric and fear-mongering. Linda asked, 'what in the name of God is that about?', warning that such intemperate words have real-life consequences for LGBTQ+ people. Vincent labelled the 'no surprise' phrase as 'disgraceful', saying that 'whoever wrote that should take up a new line of work'. Roisin, with raw emotion, asked if the Church was essentially saying that 'these people are so distorted and such a danger to civilisation that there should be no surprise' when they bring violence upon themselves.

5.8.2. The contradiction for many of this group was that the Church, in condemning discrimination and violence towards homosexual people, was itself guilty of both, with several participants claiming that the tone and language of the Church were exclusionary, violent and discriminatory. Mike said that the Church discriminates against LGBTQ+ people by not ordaining, marrying, or permitting them to be employed in a host of Church roles, and Isla concurred, saying that the only legitimate basis for employment discrimination hinges on that person's professional ability. Laura, Linda, and Roisin

labelled the Church as discriminatory on the basis of its demand that all homosexual people live celibate, solitary lives, with Mike highlighting the Church treatment of the homosexual community during the HIV-AIDS pandemic, particularly in the USA as a form of exclusionary violence.

5.8.3. Roisin, with great emotion, as she considered her transgender son, spoke of the erosive, low-level violence that the Church encouraged in its teachings and the attitudes these engendered in society. She spoke of the emotional wounds inflicted when families refuse to attend a same-sex wedding on the basis of their Christian/Catholic beliefs or the expulsion of LGBTQ+ children from their parental homes. She recalled having to house a young gay person over Christmas who had been ‘kicked out’ of his family home because of his orientation and said that this was a form of emotional violence indirectly caused by the homophobia that springs from Church teaching. She claimed that the emotional trauma and mental violence meted out as a consequence of Church teaching, its tone, repetition, and language, represented for the LGBTQ+ person, ‘a chip, chip, chipping away of who they are, day in, day out’. Ivan didn’t think that the Church would ever deliberately promote any form of violence and that the teaching was simply stating logically that a latent distaste for homosexuality in society would sometimes engender an irrational response, one naturally unsanctioned by the Church.

5.9. Laity: The teachings about civil marriage legislation

5.9.1. It was the almost unanimous opinion of these participants, many of them married people, that the majority of the Church arguments against legal same-sex unions were unfounded and wrong. The assertion that legal same-sex unions redefine marriage and cause harm to families and society caused Amy, a law student, to assert that marriage is always being redefined. She warned that the *2003-Considerations* seemed to be comparing two different categories, homosexual sexual acts and loving, stable homosexual marriages and that such mixing of categories was careless and misleading. Brian recalled his campaigning for the ‘Yes campaign’ during the 2015-IMR and that his doorstep perception was that a redefinition of marriage was not a source of concern for society in Ireland. Ian seemed surprised that anyone would think that redefinition posed a threat to society or the institution of heterosexual marriage despite his own distaste for homosexuality.

5.9.2. Isla considered that same-sex unions, forged through adversity and without the societal support afforded to their heterosexual equivalents, could be superior in many ways in terms of their commitment and the quality of their bond. She said that same-sex unions were different but equal expressions of love. Mike argued that the existence of heterosexual civil marriage, different to but equal under the law, alongside sacramental marriage in most societies, had not undermined or threatened the latter, so why should legal same-sex unions do so? Roisin argued that legal same-sex unions and heterosexual marriages were not mutually exclusive, wondering if the Church supposed their existence would entice people away from heterosexuality towards same-sex attraction. Four

participants called for same-sex unions to be blessed by a Church, which Brian contended blessed all manner of inanimate objects and circumstances, but not the love of a same-sex couple.

5.9.3. Many of the participants were vexed that the *2003-Considerations* rejects any analogy between heterosexual marriage and homosexual unions. They recognised from marital experience that only a small role is played by procreative sexual acts in a typical marriage, despite the welcome presence of their children, and insisted that marriage was composed of many other important elements, just as accessible to same-sex couples. John and Zara reflected on the emotional support, consideration, and care they had built into their long marriage and that this was more important than procreative sexual acts, now a very distant memory. Isla, John, and Linda wondered how the Church was so certain they knew the mind and plan of God for marriage and the family, as the authors of these documents had no experiential knowledge of either. Olivia and Ian conceded that there were obvious practical similarities between same-sex unions and heterosexual marriages.

5.9.4. The *2003-Considerations: 7* claims that violence is done to the children adopted into same-sex unions. Isla supported adoption by same-sex couples and was angered by the harsh and ironic phrase, ‘doing violence’ to children, given the Irish experience of actual ecclesial, institutional violence towards children. She also considered that many blended and alternative families were at least as functional as the traditional heterosexual nuclear family had been in Ireland. Roisin was dismayed that a Church that labelled same-sex acts as disordered and self-indulgent would simultaneously be discouraging the stability and potential monogamy of stable same-sex unions. With 34 years of educational experience, the things that she knew every child needed were for them to be loved, valued, respected and kept safe, and that these could be met successfully by same-sex parents.

5.9.5. These participants had strong views on the Church’s instruction that lawmakers should actively oppose, frustrate or overturn attempts to legalise same-sex unions. The majority, including John, a former local politician, were adamant that legislators had a duty to separate their legislative function from their own personal religious views, even if they had a right to be informed by the latter. Zara reflected a common concern among these participants that the Church had no right to tell Catholic politicians ‘to do its bidding’. Roisin was incensed by a local priest who had recently instructed congregants on their requirement as Catholics to only vote for the one party in NI that had opposed abortion and same-sex marriage, the DUP.

5.10. Laity: The non-admission of homosexual candidates to Holy Orders

5.10.1. None of the lay participants agreed with any aspect of this teaching, the instinct of them all being that homosexual men are well-suited to be sensitive pastors and effective priests and that *The 2005-Instruction* is in every respect definitively wrong. A large number of the lay participants seemed to be well aware that many priests were homosexual and that this rendered *The 2005-Instruction* ‘naïve’, ‘dishonest’, and ‘irrational’ (Isla, John and Brian). John mentioned a recent radio programme

in which an Irish bishop had spoken of knowing many excellent gay priests and counting them as close friends. Mike, Isla and Brian spoke of how their own knowledge of priests whom they knew or supposed to be gay counteracted the teaching that such priests were incapable of relating correctly to men and women. Even Ian and Ivan cited their personal acquaintance with gay clergy as being a cause to disagree that celibate gay men would not be suitable priests. This, I noted as particularly significant, as these participants had often spoken of their regard for the authority of Church teaching, but counted personal experience that counteracted the teaching as more authoritative. Several participants claimed that gay men were better suited to priesthood than heterosexual men and likely to be more compassionate, with clerical celibacy and gender being the biggest barriers to the relational skills of all priests, particularly with regard to women. Brian and Mike observed that the giftedness of homosexual clergy could become more apparent if such men could be open about their orientation, with John claiming that *The 2005-Instruction* represented an ‘own goal’ by the Church and could turn many eminently suitable men away from ministry.

5.10.2. Amelia, Laura, and Roisin mentioned that since celibacy was mandated for all priests, there was no problematic issue in ordaining homosexual men. Four participants reacted strongly to the warning that negative consequences would arise from ordaining homosexual men, with the implication that these consequences are in part linked to the abuse scandals. Isaac cited clericalism and coverups of abuse by the Church hierarchy as a bigger issue here than the sexual orientation of priests. Isla, Mike, and Roisin identified the need for affective sexual maturity for all seminarians and priests as being important, reacting angrily to the implication that gay men were more likely to be predatory or abusive. Roisin and Zara both said that heterosexual men were more likely to abuse, with Roisin claiming that her many years in education backed this up as being factual. Linda, a survivor of emotional and sexual abuse by a heterosexual priest in her adolescence, was angered that gay men were being targeted as the problem.

5.10.3. The insistence from this teaching that homosexual candidates should be honest about their orientation, knowing that this would precipitate their dismissal, was a cause of incredulity for some. Brian suggested that this would ‘drive it further underground’, inhibiting gay seminarians and priests from channelling their giftedness. Mike agreed, adding that by fomenting a culture of secrecy, the teaching is deeply harmful to the mental and spiritual welfare of priests and seminarians. Roisin and Zara both suggested that the whole Church was being damaged by this culture of secrecy, whilst John fully understood why some seminarians and many priests would ‘hold their own counsel’ and choose not to reveal their sexual orientation to anyone in authority.

5.11. Laity: The tone and language used in the Church teachings about homosexuality

5.11.1. Some of this group heard the language and tone of the teaching documents for the first time during the interviews, and others had encountered some of it before. These teachings seek to bring

clarity to the faithful, but what seemed most clear to this group was the harshly negative tone that characterised them. Untrained in theology and philosophy, it was still clear to these lay participants that these teachings and the language that framed them were, in fact, a negative judgment of homosexual people. The phrases: ‘intrinsically disordered’, ‘objective disorder’, and ‘intrinsic moral evil’ used in *PH-1975*, *The 1986-Letter* and *CCC-1992* generated angry and often outraged criticism from this group. Ten of the lay participants used the term ‘offensive’ or ‘highly offensive’ to describe the phrases that the Church uses to describe homosexual acts and orientation. Other words they used to describe these phrases included ‘terrible’, ‘discriminatory’, ‘awful’, ‘ridiculous’, ‘abhorrent’, ‘judgemental’, ‘hurtful’, ‘insulting’, ‘derogatory’, ‘unacceptable’ and ‘morally wrong’. The majority chose to expand upon their initial reactions, some at considerable length. Amelia asked if anyone would dare to tell a disabled person that they were disordered, and Roisin wondered if Jesus would ever have used such terminology to describe a child of God. Zara similarly asked what an understanding, loving God would make of such a description of his child, with her own experience of LGBTQ+ people counteracting any view that they were disordered.

5.11.2. Confirming the authority of their experience above doctrine, many of these heterosexual people imagined what it might be like for them to hear these words used about themselves. Brian wondered how a homosexual person would feel to be told their inclination to love another would lead them to an intrinsic moral evil. Isla imagined that it would leave her feeling like she had no place in the world and that she was a mistake. John and Mike would have been insulted upon hearing such words directed at them. John suggested that the phrase stating that the homosexual inclination was a ‘tendency ordered toward intrinsic moral evil’ was even worse than calling it a sin, which, by not doing so, the Church seemed to think was some kind of helpful concession. Mike imagined that he could not choose to stay part of a Church that labelled him in this way, and Vincent imagined that a homosexual person would be left with no choice but to either stay and accept the unacceptable or to leave and seek alternative spiritual solace. Several participants said that hearing these words about yourself would certainly contribute to a negative self-perception or image.

5.11.3. Isla and Mike both claimed that moral judgement can only be applied to the concrete acts that result from an inclination, not the inclination itself, with Isla reflecting that it was senseless to label one part of the sexual orientation spectrum as intrinsically disordered and another virtuous. Mike added that in the context of relational and affective love, homosexual love could only be morally good and wondered if some of those who authored or promoted such teachings indulged covertly in these same ‘disordered acts’ but with no relational or affective context, causing them to exhibit internalised homophobia.

5.11.4. Roisin, reflecting on the reference to the self-destructiveness of a homosexual lifestyle in *The 1986-Letter*, with the implied link to HIV-AIDS, asked whether the Church was effectively saying

‘these people have a plague, brought upon themselves because of how they lived and if only they had followed our teachings, none of it would have happened’. Several mentioned the ‘patronising tone’ of *PH-1975*: 8, which lamented the plight of homosexual people and their inability to fit into society. The issue of exclusion, they claimed, lay with society rather than with LGBTQ+ people. Some participants referred specifically to the comment in *The 1986-Letter*:16 that the Church regarded people as children of God rather than as heterosexual or homosexual. This raised some eyebrows and ironic laughter from several participants who wondered why the authors had expended so much effort and choice language highlighting their distinctively homosexual disorder if there was, after all, no difference in the sight of God between his children. Brian felt that being told that your acts were intrinsically evil, that you were objectively disordered, but that you are also equal, loved, and a child of God was a confusing mixed message. Linda said with irony and exasperation:

It’s a pity poor God didn’t realise that when he made people, he made some of them flawed and didn’t make them all equal [said with sarcasm]. That’s some hell of a statement...they put an awful lot of emphasis on the poor old homosexuals if they believe that they’re all children of God.

5.11.5. The prominent lay woman, lawyer, canon lawyer, and former President of Ireland, Mary McAleese, as a mother to a gay son, has highlighted the harm caused to the mental well-being of LGBTQ+ people by the teachings of their Church.³³ Amy and Brian reflected on how being told by a Church whose opinion is considered to be important that something fundamental to your identity is ordered towards intrinsic moral evil would be detrimental to mental health. In certain circumstances, they claimed, this could result in acts of self-harm or even suicide. Olivia thought that LGBTQ+ people, having an enhanced sensitivity, might be harmed even more by the harsh tone of the teachings and that anyone, regardless of orientation, being ‘told that they’re abnormal’ would be affected negatively. Mike suggested that the ‘drip feed’ of such a negative message would contribute to higher levels of worry, anxiety, and depression for LGBTQ+ people, alongside the isolation caused by a lack of self and societal acceptance. Isaac claimed that ‘unquestionable harm’ was done through ‘blaming people for who they are’, and Roisin, visibly distressed, said, ‘telling people your very existence is wrong...where do you go with that?’ Brian and Roisin believed that the tone and teaching about homosexuality needed to change, highlighting the contradiction of the recent softening of pastoral tone towards LGBTQ+ people alongside the existence of harsh rhetoric in the official teachings. Roisin, reflecting on the mental and emotional abuse suffered by residents of the Magdalene Laundries in Ireland over decades, asked, ‘have we not learned that the wrong word and language can be the worst kind of violence that somebody suffers?’ She called for the Church to repent, apologise

³³ Joe Humphreys, ‘Catholic Church teaching on homosexuality ‘evil’, McAleese says’, *The Irish Times* (29th June 2018). <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/catholic-church-teaching-on-homosexuality-evil-mcaleese-says-1.3548765> [accessed on 12th May 2024].

for immoderate and harmful language in these teachings, and remove or replace it. There were no lay participants who agreed that the tone or language used in these teachings was appropriate or correct. It was notable here that the tone or language used applied to none of them directly, the notably strong reaction to the tone of these teachings emerging almost entirely from an exercise of deep empathy for how it might feel to be the direct recipients of such teaching.

5.12. Laity: The teachings about gender-fluidity and transgender people

5.12.1. Many of this group shared some of the concerns expressed by the Church on the issue of gender fluidity and transgender people in *AL-2016* and the *M&F-2019*. Ivan was concerned about the influence of social media and that society was having the issue of gender fluidity and theory ‘pushed down its throat’. On the whole, however, their main concern was focused on the age at which children should be exposed to ideas that emerge from gender theory. Many said that firm decisions about gender reassignment should only be permitted post-puberty or during early adulthood. Amelia, as a childhood ‘tomboy’, said that had she been introduced to the concept of gender fluidity as a child, she might have become very confused and that adulthood had brought a stronger sense of her femininity. Isla said that adolescence was a confusing enough period in a person’s life without the burden of being invited to take responsibility for a life-altering surgery or hormonal therapy. Linda and Olivia struggled to understand why someone would wish to have a surgical gender reassignment, but Linda was open to her views being changed. Olivia and Charlotte wondered if underlying mental health issues could lie behind someone’s gender dysphoria and thought it very necessary for a person to explore this fully before ever proceeding towards gender reassignment.

5.12.2. Isaac spoke of society itself being on a learning curve and that societal knowledge ought to be expanded by what science and expert opinion had to contribute and refined through debate and discussion. On that note, several participants took issue with the teachings for taking an unduly simplistic approach to this issue. Amy thought that *M&F-2019*, for all its detail, may have been an ‘after-thought’. Brian contended that the Church was ‘locked into a binary model of gender identity’ and its own human anthropology informed its inadequate and simplistic ‘thou shalt not approach’. Vincent and Laura warned the Church against oversimplifying the issues, with the implication that gender dysphoria may be based on a whim that someone casually drifts into. New knowledge, some claimed, should be dictated by a person-centred approach. John and Mike reflected that they had learned to adjust their views about homosexuality based on experiential encounters with homosexual people and that transgender people deserved a similar opportunity to influence others by being listened to. Compassion for and attempts to understand the experience of gender dysphoria, despite their own lack of knowledge, were notable among this group. Zara, alongside her instinct to protect children from harmful ideas, spoke about compassionate feelings for those tormented by gender confusion at a young age, with Linda reflecting on how liberating an eventual transition might be for someone despite her own inhibitions. Ian, with uncompromising views, conceded that he wouldn’t

judge a transgender person as he hadn't walked in their shoes. It was again notable that regarding an issue about which these participants had the least direct experience, there was a preparedness to empathise and a willingness to learn more should the opportunity arise. The overlap of some of their views with those of the Church had less to do with deferral to its authority and more to do with parental concerns about child welfare as well as a lack of direct encounters with transgender people.

5.12.3. As the mother of a transgender son, Roisin had direct experience of this issue, and it was significant that with this experience came views that were notably at variance with those of her Church. She was very familiar with *M&F-2019*, and with this enhanced knowledge, she judged it to exhibit a 'cherry-picking' approach to the scientific expertise available. She also judged it to have emerged from a binary position on gender that did no justice to the struggles and soul-searching with which people with gender dysphoria must deal. She conceded that it was not the Church alone who exhibited such simplistic views, wondering with emotion how anyone could seriously imagine that a person would undergo the torment and agony of a transition in order to, e.g. gain access to a changing room. Nevertheless, within *M&F-2019*, Roisin saw no attempt to understand the day-to-day crises, emotional traumas and personal anxieties faced by people like her son, who, from an early age, had experienced a profound mismatch between biological sex and gender.

Roisin had accompanied her son as a devout lay Catholic mother and expert educationalist, learning from him in a unique crucible of personal experience. She felt strongly that the facile and profoundly inadequate response of her Church to this issue was distressingly disappointing. Of *M&F-2019*, she said, 'it's lazy, and it's not thought-provoking, and it's not opening up an argument'. She called for the Church to improve its woefully inadequate knowledge about gender fluidity by 'including people like me...and having a conversation with people like me and saying, "What do *you* think, what have *your* experiences been?"' and letting us *all* have a voice'. Despite some positive encounters with individual local priests, she had yet to feel that her experiential knowledge had been heard by her Church. It is interesting that the final section of *M&F-2019*: 47-51 is entitled 'Forming the Formators' and includes a strong appeal to Catholic educators to educate others about gender, in keeping with Christian anthropology. Roisin, herself a Catholic educator with sought-after expertise in her own Catholic diocese, would undoubtedly have some unique, compelling, and alternative views with which to 'form the formators'.

5.13. Laity: Change of tone on LGBTQ+ issues by Pope Francis and some Church leaders

5.13.1. There were mixed reactions by the lay participants when they were shown a selection of quotes and actions of Pope Francis alongside recent suggestions by some European bishops that the teachings and pastoral outreach to LGBTQ+ people should change. The famous 'who am I to judge?' remarks were well-known and received with a good deal of positivity. Amelia, Linda, Olivia, Roisin, and John were effusive, with Roisin sharing the comment with her transgender son in an effort to keep

him ‘hanging in there’ with his own Catholic faith by telling him, ‘you’ve no idea how huge this is!’ John saw in these words a great expression of mercy and magnanimous compassion, the likes of which he had never before seen from a pope. This, for him, reflected the love of God, and the humility of a pope bowing to God’s superior wisdom was something he saw as ‘totally and utterly profound’. Others welcomed this particular intervention by Francis with the immediate qualification that it did not go far enough. Mike, Roisin, Zara, and Amelia all said that further action and a change in teaching and outreach were also required. Roisin conceded, though, that it was ‘the little sideways remarks that change history’. Laura was especially disappointed and underwhelmed, saying that the famous quote was simply a variation of the attitude, ‘love the sinner, hate the sin’ and that LGBTQ+ people needed more than that. Brian gave ‘Francis’ performance on LGBTQ+ issues’ a low rating but admitted that with his 2013 remark, there was a move in the right direction and a great improvement on the attitudes of his two predecessors. Isaac saw Francis’ remark as ‘breaking the hard crust’ and showing a preparedness to engage with societal debate. Both he and Brian used the term ‘seed-sower’ in relation to Francis’ limited but significant intervention, and Vincent commended it for its ‘trickle-down potential’ to reshape attitudes within the global Church.

5.13.2. Ivan discounted the remark as ‘pastoral but weightless’ and condemned the media for manipulating the remark for its own agenda. He expressed his distaste for the ‘rich and liberal German Church’, some of whose bishops had called for a change to teaching. Ian was also unimpressed and wondered if Francis was feeling the pressure to conform to modern views about LGBTQ+ matters, as for him, ‘wrong is always wrong’. Other comments that drew admiration included Francis’ 2018 remark, ‘God made you like this and loves you like this...you have to be happy with who you are’. Amelia, Isla and Linda were moved by this comment, and for Linda, it mirrored the message of ‘love above legalism’ that she believed to be at the heart of the New Testament message. Laura, however, was disappointed that these words were contradicted by the teachings, which effectively prohibited a homosexual person from either ‘being who they actually were’ or finding the love that might help them achieve the happiness which the Pope said he wished for gay people. Similarly, Isla suggested that in relation to ‘being loved as they are’, LGBTQ+ people ‘wouldn’t know that’ from the rest of the teachings. Bemusedly, she also suggested that the Pope, on expressing his desire to ‘meet with gay and lesbian people’, ‘wouldn’t need to travel too far to meet them’.

5.13.3. Some participants drew attention to the impression that Pope Francis seemed to muddy the waters and then ‘backtrack’ to affirm traditional teaching. While some saw this as confusing, others recognised within this approach a possible strategy. Brian commended the Pope with his ancient title ‘pontifex’ or ‘bridge-builder’ and said that the seeming contradictions in his approach to LGBTQ+ matters were part of the process that might initiate gradual change. Other concrete changes were needed, however, including repentance, apology, and definitive changes in teaching. Roisin, in a similar vein, impatient as she was to see more radical change, recognised his role in a polarised

Church as one of ‘holding the tension’. Overall, this group saw some positive signs from Pope Francis’ approach and the episcopal calls for change in pastoral outreach and teachings. They were hopeful but simultaneously saw them as insufficient and unduly slow.

5.14. Laity: On how attitudes to the Church had changed, particularly in Ireland

5.14.1. This group of participants was in a good position to feel the pulse of change in contemporary Irish society. Many were in a position to remember an Irish society formed by a very influential Church but now had views that were different to those of their Church. The simple explanation for this shift lies largely at the door of personal experience. The majority of the lay participants now measure what their Church has to say about LGBTQ+ people against their own personal experience. Twelve of the sixteen cited direct experience of knowing gay members of their families, communities, and friendship networks as evidence that LGBTQ+ people and couples were good people, as opposed to deviants ordered towards intrinsic evil. Amelia, a woman of very few words, reflecting on same-sex couples within her extended family, said, ‘if I got a wedding invite tomorrow, I’d be there...it’s just two people who love each other’. Brian spoke of his experience of campaigning for a ‘Yes’ vote in the 2015-IMR. On hearing about a very rural parish in the far West of Ireland where 80% of people had voted ‘Yes’, he recalled how a priest explained on radio that ‘they had sons or daughters or grandchildren who were gay, and they knew them as their family...as decent, loving, caring people’. Brian surmised that in the light of this, all Church teaching to the contrary was seen to ‘just fall away when it doesn’t line up with Christ’s commandment to “love one another”’. The overriding impression from this group was that society now had a view about LGBTQ+ people at great variance with what their Church had to say about them and how counter-productive and wasteful it was for the Church to set its face in a direction that lost not only its LGBTQ+ members, but their friends, families, and allies.

5.14.2. Many spoke about the model of fear, guilt and control that had directed an era of Catholicism in the Ireland they remembered. In rejecting this model, they claimed that a newfound freedom to think for themselves had caused a big shift in how they viewed many of the Church teachings, especially those around sexuality. Mike spoke of how the Church surrounded normal adolescent sexual development and normal experimentation with great clouds of oppressive guilt and fear. Realising now how such exploration was normal caused him to begin questioning a whole range of other issues, including those connected to homosexuality. John also spoke of how release from a childhood dominated by the guilt and fear-inducing words of influential priests had caused him to question his faith more deeply. John was now more confident about informing himself on issues surrounding sexuality and from a wider variety of sources than those given by the Church. Brian said that the Church was no longer regarded as having superior knowledge and wisdom to guide people on issues of sexuality. Isaac, along with others, said that being released from fear of the Church caused

many to see through the ‘dominating and fearsome’ control exercised by the clergy and to reject the ‘do as I say, not as I do’ attitude that they now recognised as one of their dysfunctions.

5.14.3. It was notable that many of the women mentioned how their attitudes to the Church’s powerful and influential teaching about procreative sex had caused them to rethink many issues surrounding sexuality. These were women who had obeyed the Church and had had relatively large families. They were not radicalised feminist opponents of Church doctrine. They had reflected on their previous fear-filled absorption of the Church’s prohibition of artificial birth control, and now, well past the time in their lives for conceiving children, they widely rejected this doctrine. Zara, the mother of seven children, spoke of how she had always internally rejected the teaching about birth control but obeyed the Church, despite adverse health effects and financial implications. I got no sense that Zara regretted this, but the threat of coercion through ‘being damned to hell’ had robbed her of her own governance to choose. As the mother of a gay son, she now found it easy to reject its teachings on homosexuality as readily as she now rejects its teachings about procreative sex. Olivia and Linda reflected that it was only later in life, through experience of their evolving marital relationships, that their attitudes to sex had been released from fear, guilt, and the burden of procreative outcomes. It was also women who raised the issues connected to the abuse of other women in ‘Magdalene Laundries’ and the ‘mother and baby homes’ in Ireland. For Laura and Linda, this was prime evidence of a country and society infected with the dysfunction of unhealthy attitudes to sex and sexuality, which had come directly from a Church that effectively governed the nation. All of this, they claimed, has encouraged Irish Catholics to seek alternative authority sources than those of its own discredited Church.

5.15. Laity: Overall levels of agreement or disagreement with the teachings about homosexuality

5.15.1. It seemed clear that this group of lay people held views significantly at odds with those of their Church about homosexuality. The Church’s use of scripture, the NML argument about procreative sexual activity and its failure to take the contributions of the human sciences seriously were all heavily critiqued by the majority of participants in this group. The Church’s ‘vision’ for how a homosexual person ought to live a moral life was rejected almost entirely. Its teachings on violence and discrimination were condemned as contradictory and ambiguous at best and as a justification for violence at worst. The majority failed to accept the main arguments of their Church about the legalisation of same-sex unions, the redefinition of marriage, and the supposed harm that such legalisation would have on society. The entire group rejected the teachings on the exclusion from Holy Orders of men with deep-seated homosexual tendencies. The group were shocked and angered by the tone and language used in these teachings, and some of the strongest comments arose here. On the issue of gender fluidity and transgender people, there was the strongest level of agreement with the Church’s views. However, this largely hinged on a concern, particularly by parents, that younger adolescents might make premature, life-altering decisions. I got no sense of strong ideological opposition to the possibility that an adult with gender dysphoria could validly take steps towards

gender reassignment. There was, in addition, a great deal of compassion expressed towards those with gender dysphoria. The change of tone towards LGBTQ+ people brought in by Pope Francis was broadly welcomed, but a cautious, ‘wait and see’ attitude was strongly expressed.

5.15.2. The use of the term ‘the Church’ by this group was interesting and informative, as oftentimes, the phrase seemed to indicate that for them, it was an external disconnected body, imposing teachings which contradicted their experience of life. All of this group were practising Catholics, and many were actively involved in the life of their local parishes. It was interesting that what they referred to as ‘the Church’ had little connection with their own experience of being active members of that same Church, as the term used by them clearly referred to either the magisterium or perhaps to the clerical leadership of their Church. This disconnect was amplified by the fact that this group frequently referred to the authority of experience, either their own direct experiences or those imagined through empathy.

5.15.3. From their experiences of listening to scripture proclaimed and expounded in Church, many did not recognise the compassion or love which they had learned to associate with the message of Jesus. From their experience of marital life and the role of sexual intimacy, they found it difficult to accept the procreative imperative for intercourse insisted upon by their Church as justification for its mandate for how LGBTQ+ people must live sexually inactive lives. Their experience of the complex realities of their own marital relationships caused them to reject the authoritative condemnation of same-sex unions by the teachings as being self-indulgent and their legalisation as posing a threat to society. Their personal experience of homosexual clergy facilitated their total rejection of the Church teaching on this issue, and their experience of LGBTQ+ people made it easy for them to reject the authoritative language and tone attached to people who, for them, were family members, friends and neighbours, rather than intrinsically disordered objects of pity. Even when they had no direct experience of an issue, many tried to imagine what it would feel like to, e.g., hear themselves described negatively by their Church or how their own attitude to transgender issues might evolve if they knew more about the issues or individuals involved. Roisin and the other parents of LGBTQ+ children powerfully exemplified how the authority of experience carried a much higher value than that of their Church’s teachings, but it seemed clear that for many in this group, all of whom were practising, active Catholic lay people, their Church’s authority to instruct or teach them on various issues had faded.

Chapter 6. Analysis of the religious participant data

6.1. Background

6.1.1. Religious life is a stable form of life chosen by men and women who make a canonically approved profession of the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty, and obedience (*LG-1964*: 6). This they do in order to be of service to the wider Church, not as intermediaries between the lay and clerical state, but as living signs of even greater witness to gospel values in a wide variety of settings. Education, healthcare, missionary activity, and contemplation have been just some of the widely varied settings that professed religious men and women have occupied. *Perfectae Caritatis* (1965:1), emphasised the need for religious to be suitably instructed ‘in the currents and attitudes of sentiment and thought prevalent in social life today’.

6.1.2. Liz Murphy (2021a, 2021b) has outlined the rise and decline of religious life in Ireland. At the time of the second Vatican Council, ‘peak membership’ of the various religious congregations had been reached after a corresponding rise in the number of congregations from the late eighteenth century. It is difficult to access accurate statistics for the number of male and female religious in Ireland. Alan McSweeney (2022: 12-13, 17-19) provided an amalgamation of statistics available. He estimated the number of working religious sisters in Ireland to have peaked at 13,409 in 1966 and dropped to 619 by 2016, with up to 5000 additional retired or ill sisters in 2018. He estimated the total number of male religious in Ireland to have peaked at 2,671 in 1966, and to have dropped to 420 in 1991, the last year for which he was able to access statistics. Many Irish people have been influenced by these modest numbers of religious through their presence in education, healthcare and parishes. From the 1980s, Murphy traced how religious moved away from their institutional presence to a more pastoral involvement in a variety of settings, with many also becoming responsible for the increasingly large numbers of elderly and sick religious.

6.1.3. Murphy (2021a) outlines how the abuse scandals impacted religious life in Ireland, provoking a crisis of confidence and purpose for many male and female religious in Ireland. She quotes Terry Prone (2009: 84):

Never before has a single, formerly powerful, and highly regarded sector of Irish society turned, within little more than a decade, into a focus for almost universal contempt and condemnation...The majority of the congregations operate within the certainty of proximate extinction.

Murphy contends that religious in Ireland are aware that their particular work or mission is entering its final phase and are hoping for a demise that will enable their mission to end with a sense of completion. They desire to be at peace with their legacy, humbled by their traumatic fall from grace and to surrender to a plan, no longer of *their* making.

6.1.4. The religious group is the only participant sub-group of which I have not been a member. Nevertheless, I have a wide experience of how religious communities have shaped and influenced Irish life disproportionate to their small numbers. I was educated in a school established by a female religious order and came into regular contact with male religious in a nearby monastery, as well as those who led parish ‘missions’. My time in seminary and priesthood brought me into regular contact with religious, in parish, lay-formation programmes, schools, hospitals and retreat work. My spiritual director was a female religious, and my year-long discernment process prior to leaving ministry was guided by a male religious counsellor. A subsequent career in Catholic schools maintained my contact with religious who served as school chaplains.

6.1.5. There were six religious men and women interviewed as part of this project. The two male religious participants, Oliver and Harry, were in their 70s and in active ministry in a large urban setting with significant pastoral and spiritual responsibilities. Two of the female religious were members of an active congregation in another large urban area. One of them, Deirdre, had held international leadership roles in her congregation and was actively involved in social and community groups. Dearbhail, in her 50s, was involved in a medical role. Maureen, in her 70s, worked in a deprived urban setting, facilitating spiritual development and running environmental and social justice groups. Mona, a former teacher in her 70s, was pastorally active in a deprived urban setting, involved in the international administration of her congregation, provided spiritual direction and led retreats. These six religious participants were broadly representative of the male and female religious I had encountered and with whom I had worked—men and women actively involved in a wide variety of pastoral activity, with a diverse range of skills, in administration or leadership at home or abroad. They had a broad awareness of current theological debate and were keenly aware of ecclesial issues and controversies, a typical trait among the Irish religious I have known.

Table 24. Religious participants

Name (anonymised) Male (M) Female (F)	Age-group	Employment Category	Ecclesial and professional roles <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Congregation leadership role. L • Community outreach. C • Education. E • Healthcare. . • Retreat-leadership. R • Spiritual direction/accompaniment. SD • Counselling or marriage guidance. CM
Oliver M	56-75	In full-time ministry.	L C R SD CM
Harry M	56-75	In full-time ministry.	L C R SD CM
Deirdre F	76+	Retired and in full-time role.	L C E CM
Dearbhail F	36-55	In full-time ministry.	C H SD CM
Maureen F	56-75	Retired and in full-time role.	L C E SD CM
Mona F	56-75	In full-time ministry.	L C E R SD

6.2. Maureen

6.2.1. Each of the religious participants brought a unique experiential point of view to their interviews, with no one holding a monopoly on insight. It seemed that Maureen was the religious participant most engaged with the particular area of homosexuality, as she had changed her views about the issue and taken an active position with regard to LGBTQ+ outreach. For this reason, a profile of Maureen seemed to be a useful way to introduce these participants. Maureen was a member of a religious congregation whose communities are located in urban areas throughout the country. Today their congregation has an outreach to all those affected by poverty, violence, and discrimination, and work for social justice and the pursuit of human rights, particularly for women and children in the areas in which they live. Their ministries include the care of domestic violence victims, social care of homeless young people, parish ministry and prison ministry. They are a congregation with a current national membership in the very low 100s, whose average age is 81.

6.2.2. Maureen began by recounting how she had undergone a change of attitude regarding homosexuality, from one where she accepted the Church’s teachings about homosexuality to her current belief that LGBTQ+ Catholics were a group of marginalised Catholics toward whom she wished to offer some kind of outreach. Her own attitudes had been overturned, having listened to some of the interventions from the former Irish President, Mary McAleese, on LGBTQ+ exclusion by

the Church. Maureen had tried to initiate some small-scale ventures involving outreach to small numbers of interested LGBTQ+ people. Despite her obvious commitment to this issue, Maureen was cautious about being overheard, even in the relative privacy of the interviewing location. Maureen responded with a depth of passion and measured anger at the language, tone, and basis of the teachings that we discussed. Often her articulate and insightful responses were illustrated by personal stories and anecdotes, and she spoke with great empathy for LGBTQ+ people, often trying to imagine how they might hear or respond to some of the phrases and tone of these Church teachings.

6.2.3. Maureen was frequently saddened, and shocked by some of the language and tone employed by the Church when it teaches about homosexuality. She often linked the exclusion that LGBTQ+ people felt from their Church with the exclusion she experienced as a woman. With no personal desire to be ordained into Holy Orders, she nonetheless was angered at what she perceived to be the unjust exclusion of women from ministry and many other areas of ecclesial life and governance. She felt that all marginalised groups in the Church had much in common and should dialogue with one another and challenge their common exclusion. Maureen spoke during the interview about the need for an evidence-based approach when it came to assessing the societal effects of same-sex marriage, adoption by same-sex parents, and the guidelines about the age at which gender reassignment for transgender people should best occur.

6.2.4. Maureen clearly valued the spirituality and many of the traditions of the Church to which she had devoted her life and ministry, but was adamant that a certain urgency was required in the process of reform before the Church lost more of its members. She felt that the Church viewed and taught about sexual issues by focusing on genital activity, disregarding the context of relationships and emotional-affective bonding. Her opinion was that the Church was playing ‘catch-up’ on some important issues of global concern, like poverty, injustice, and climate change, but had yet to forge a new understanding of ‘what it is to be a human being, and the many diverse expressions of humanity’. Supportive of Pope Francis, she was nevertheless impatient with the slow progress that was being made about the exclusion of marginalised groups, despite some welcome words and gestures from him.

6.3. Religious: The scriptural basis for the teachings

6.3.1. The majority of this participant group read, prayed with, and used scripture in spiritual direction and their pastoral ministry and recognised that the scriptural arguments were offered without context. Mona argued that this omission of context made the Church’s scriptural argument unconvincing. Dearbhail said that there were no arguments here, merely isolated texts and that selective use of scripture was being used to justify the ‘blind spots’ that Church officials have. Maureen and Harry both argued that piecemeal selection of scripture to construct an argument without context was a flawed approach, one which Maureen argued offended the intelligence of the reader. Oliver

recognised the importance of using scripture to complete a theological response to any ethical issue but argued that without critique and scrutiny, the use of certain contested scriptural passages was primitive and lacked intelligence. Deirdre focused on the many factors that remain unknown to us, for example, the type of sexual acts referred to in the Pauline texts. She was concerned that the broader sweep of salvation history, detailing God's loving relationship with humankind, was ignored in the piecemeal use of condemnatory scriptural passages. Mona, similarly, queried the 'lack of balance' shown by St. Paul in his various condemnations and also asked why the gospel tenets of love and the requirement to not judge others were overlooked by the Church here.

6.3.2. Deirdre claimed that the modern understanding of human nature has developed considerably since the time that the scriptural denunciations were made, with Mona also querying the value of using ancient texts that have an inadequate view of the human person's nature. She was clear that she believed that some texts reflected a limited understanding of human sexuality, having emerged from the milieu of a society where the inequality of women governed all societal understanding of sexual acts. The procreative imperative had its roots in socio-economic conditions that made large families an economic necessity. Mona argued that emotional expression, unitive bonding, and the equality of two sexual partners were concepts that did not exist during much of the Church's history and its biblical origins. Maureen saw an 'obsession with genitality', as underpinning some of the biblical denunciations of homosexuality, while Harry claimed that sexuality was viewed by the Church as being 'suspect', with the scriptural hooks used to support this jaded vision undermining the efficacy and relevance of the Church's voice.

6.4. Religious: Natural Moral Law (NML)

6.4.1. Having taken vows of chastity, these women and men had no lived experience of marriage, or parenthood but did offer informed opinions about the role of NML in the teachings about homosexuality. Deirdre commented that the Church's position has not been consistent, as prior to the 1930 encyclical, *Casti Connubii*, the Church had viewed procreation as the sole purpose of the marital sexual act. With the unitive dimension of the sexual act increasingly emphasised after Vatican II, she asked why another shift in thinking could not occur to take account of same-sex couples who are unable to procreate, but who deepen their unitive bond in the sexual act. Dearbhail said that the inability of any couple to procreate was neither moral or immoral and that, as such, no judgement can be applied to unitive sexual activity in a same-sex relationship. Maureen also insisted that the sexual act in the life of any couple was complex, fulfilling many possible, non-procreative and ethically legitimate purposes, including unitive bonding and the mutual exchange of pleasure. Mona took issue with the procreative imperative, noting that the burden of bearing a child always fell to the woman and that this had placed excessive demands on Irish women to raise large families. The rejection of *HV-1968* by many Irish Catholic women, she felt, was a rejection of the procreative imperative by the women upon whom the biggest consequences always fell. The sexual act having other important

purposes for most heterosexual Catholic couples, meant that same-sex couples ought to have the same moral right to non-procreative sexual acts.

6.4.2. Labelling the non-procreative sexual acts of same-sex partners as self-indulgent and disordered, drew criticism from all of the participants. Deirdre asked if the same should be applied to infertile couples who have sexual intercourse, while Oliver, reflecting on his two gay nephews, said that judging such couples with this terminology was unpastoral and unfortunate. Dearbhail, Harry, and Mona said that every human relationship had a mix of selfishness and selflessness and that there was nothing within the nature of a same-sex relationship that made it especially susceptible to being self-indulgent. Mona reflected on the many challenges that arise from complex human relationships, be they within marriage or in community life. All relationships require love to work, and the presence or absence of love determines the moral status of any human relationship. Maureen spoke of how the 2015-IMR campaign caused her and her contemporaries to reconsider the nature of such relationships. The committed love of the same-sex couples who campaigned for a Yes vote in the referendum, caused her to reject teachings that claim LGBTQ+ people have a disordered and self-indulgent inclination.

6.4.3. Maureen claimed the Church view of human nature was fundamentally flawed, as it enshrined an inequality between male and female, exemplified by its exclusion of women from Holy Orders. Harry lamented the way in which the procreative imperative had caused the Church to cultivate a view that framed all sexual activity in terms of sin and fallenness, proposing that the Church ought to adopt a fresh view of sexual activity to take account of a variety of different situations. A ‘one size fits all’ approach to sex has failed to take account of the variety of relationships that exist, and arose from a tainted view of human sexuality as ‘fleshly and therefore bad’. Oliver accepted NML arguments in the wider teaching about human sexuality and reckoned that the ‘wilderness’ that a secular and media-influenced view of sex and sexuality has created was proof that the Church’s views about human sexuality are vindicated and to be vigorously defended. He acknowledged though, that his personal acceptance of the theoretical truth of Church teaching on homosexuality may not always match the experiential and subjective reality of such complex same-sex relationships.

6.5. Religious: The human sciences

6.5.1. The slow pace with which the Church teaching responds to new knowledge from the human sciences was acknowledged by the majority, who contended that the Church needed to work harder to catch up with scientific and anthropological insights about sexuality and gender roles. Mona suggested that more humility was required by the Church which sometimes spoke with certainty about God, whose plans were not always obvious, and whose own nature is not to be limited by human certainties. She wondered if a resistance by some in the magisterium to new insights about human sexuality may arise from a state of cognitive dissonance regarding their own repressed sexual desires.

Maureen also wondered if the fear of losing control of the debate was the governing factor that determined the rigidity of the teachings of the Church on gender and sexuality. Harry considered that in the light of many new scientific developments that have emerged about human sexuality since *The 1986-Letter* the Church had no reason to be afraid of entering an evaluative dialogue with such knowledge. Dearbhail was broadly positive that such a shift was already taking place and that the Church ought to never insist upon upholding ethical positions that were at odds with what the sciences continue to reveal about the nature and psychology of human sexuality.

6.5.2. Deirdre reflected that issues such as sexual identity, gender dysphoria and surrogacy, along with many others, were not black and white and that science also needed a moral compass. It would be mutually advantageous, she claimed, if the scientific community and the Church could accompany one another on a journey towards discovering truth. Maureen agreed that the Church had no requirement to ‘climb on every bandwagon’, and that the Church needed to critique and challenge the knowledge that science revealed. About many contested issues, including surrogacy, gender identity, gender reassignment and so forth, much more evidence has yet to be revealed and will take many more years to collate. Until such times, it was appropriate for the Church to ‘hold their counsel’. Oliver had spent a lot of time carefully examining the scientific arguments regarding human sexual orientation, which were not persuasive to him and should not be uncritically accepted by the Church as it assesses LGBTQ+ acts and relationships.

6.5.3. When it came to the question of whether or not the Church did more justice to the wholeness and dignity of the LGBTQ+ person, there was a nuanced response. Deirdre considered it to be possible that the spiritual wealth of the Church could be useful to LGBTQ+ people, but that their repressive experience of their Church would prevent this. Harry said that the Church did offer a broad vision for LGBTQ+ people, but to be authentic, it needed to dialogue with LGBTQ+ people who had the relevant experiential knowledge. Oliver did believe that the vision of the Church could offer LGBTQ+ people assistance as they encountered the dangers of accessing the gay lifestyle. Having counselled LGBTQ+ people, it was his strongly held belief that a lifestyle of promiscuity held many pitfalls that were not life-enhancing. The Church could offer a better vision, but had been ‘hopelessly inadequate’ in presenting to LGBTQ+ people a vision for their lives that was positive, hopeful and fulfilling and that the ‘Church vision ought to be much more attractive and much more persuasive than it is’. He quoted at length from Eve Tushnet (2021) who, as a gay, Catholic, celibate woman, modelled a fulfilled, hopeful life for LGBTQ+ people within the vision offered by the Church. He referenced Sandra Schneiders (1986) who emphasised the value of life-affirming, affective and intimate friendships for those who are celibate.

6.6. Religious: On other issues arising from the discussion about authority

6.6.1 Deirdre praised the theology of the Irish Redemptorist theologian Raphael Gallagher as an example of someone who was prepared to reevaluate the theology of human sexuality. Oliver found the words he attributed to Cardinal Basil Hume, which asked the ultimate question, ‘how do we love well?’, to be a useful antidote to debates about the kind of genital activities that are permitted, these acts being ‘a rather long way down the list of questions to consider’. Mona and Maureen spoke about the need for the Church to read the signs of the times and to exercise an Ignatian spirit of discernment in discovering where the presence of God was to be found in the modern experience of sexuality and relationships. Mona contended that God was ‘more than laws, thank God’, while Harry claimed that the Church ‘didn’t even respect heterosexual marriage, never mind homosexuality’.

6.6.2. Maureen criticised the Church for failing to learn from people ‘from a place of encounter’, and failing to learn from real people out of a fear that encourages legalism. She suggested the creation of a Vatican office that could be called the ‘department for evolution of thinking’. Mona spoke about her experiences and those of many female religious of never being taken seriously by the Church in terms of their contribution. The male clerical attitude to female religious was epitomised by a phrase she had heard used frequently about religious women, ‘les bonnes petites soeurs’. This dismissiveness resonated with her when she reflected on the bravery of the early gay rights activists, ridiculed as a minority, whose rights were not taken seriously in an Ireland dominated by the Catholic Church. Mona condemned the ‘false reasoning’ of the Church’s insistence that all decisions of conscience had to conform with what it believed and taught. The Church, she insisted, needed to move from a fearful, defensive mentality to more adequately guide Catholics in conscience-based moral decision-making.

6.7. Religious: The teachings on how LGBTQ+ people should live moral lives

6.7.1. Deirdre reflected on her gay nephew, whose life and relationship appeared to her to be happy, fulfilled, and non-self-destructive, a visible example to her of how wrong the Church was to see such relationships as problematic and self-destructive. Promiscuity, she said, may be more common among the LGBTQ+ community, but the drive to promiscuity may, for some LGBTQ+ people, derive from a lack of societal and familial acceptance. In referring to the harm that sexual promiscuity can do to a person’s self-esteem, Mona claimed this to be just as applicable to heterosexual people. The view that the homosexual person was living an inherently self-destructive life represented, for her, the limited, biased, and possibly ‘closeted’ sexual experience of some magisterial teachers. Dearbhail felt that encouraging people towards ‘having mature, responsible relationships’, regardless of their sexual orientation, was important, and Maureen considered chastity as an ‘attitude of authenticity’ within relationships, rather than a penitential restriction. Harry rejected the view that homosexuality and its expression in same-sex relationships was inherently self-destructive. The oblique reference to HIV-AIDS, which may have underpinned the reference to a self-destructive lifestyle in *The 1986-Letter*: 9, 12, may have been contextually understandable but pastorally insensitive.

6.7.2. Suggestions that the problematic condition of being homosexual could be managed or ameliorated by spiritual practices were received with disdain. Dearbhail was angry that *PH-1975*: 8 supplied a negative premise, that LGBTQ+ people had an inherent inability to fit into society. This ‘harmful vitriol’ was made worse by the recommendation in *The 1986-Letter* that prayer and the sacrament of Penance could assist a homosexual person’s conversion. She found echoes here of the ‘abhorrent conversion therapy practices’ advocated by some Christian groups. As someone who valued both prayer and the sacraments, this was ‘harmful rubbish’. Harry queried how the teachings frame the life of a LGBTQ+ person in terms of a problem or a difficulty. The recommendation in *The 1986-Letter* that LGBTQ+ people unite this problematic condition with Christ’s cross was, for him, a ‘terrible statement to make’. Mona wondered where Christ’s generous and positive Johannine invitation to bring people the ‘fullness of life’ was to be found in the negative framing of these teachings, and the labelling of the LGBTQ+ person’s life as one that threatened to destroy them. Maureen asked if the Church saw the life of a LGBTQ+ person as being a ‘gift of God to be rejoiced about, or a scourge?’ She reflected on the words of Catherine of Siena, ‘if you are who you are called to be, then you will set the world on fire’ (from the *Letter to Stefano Maconi*, 1376), which would be impossible if a person was told to see their life as only a problem, cross or a penance. She claimed that LGBTQ+ Catholics were being asked to embrace ‘more than normal suffering’ and to carry additional sufferings linked exclusively to their sexual orientation. Oliver, by contrast, suggested that the example of gay Catholics like Eve Tushnet offered some proof that the demands of the Church on LGBTQ+ people were neither unjust or impossible, but that it had failed in its duty to teach in an attractive or persuasive manner.

6.8. Religious: The teachings about discrimination and violence towards LGBTQ+ people

6.8.1. All of the participants identified contradictions in the teachings of the Church about discrimination and violence towards LGBTQ+ people. Deirdre welcomed the words from *The 1986-Letter* and *CCC-1992*, which condemned violence against homosexual people and recommended respect, compassion, and sensitivity towards them. However, both she and Dearbhail saw the concomitant paragraph in *The 1986-Letter* expressing non-surprise at the violence that would follow lenient civil legislation as contradicting its earlier condemnation. ‘Violence should be a surprise’, Deirdre said, ‘otherwise, you’re saying it should be expected’. Harry was troubled by what he termed ‘a bad statement’, based on illogicality, given that it is never the role of civil legislation to support a religious definition of what constitutes disordered behaviour. He was hopeful that this statement might no longer be the prevailing Vatican viewpoint. Oliver, more broadly supportive of the teachings than the other religious participants, was distressed that the Church might risk a lack of clarity over its otherwise welcome message of condemnation of violence. ‘Anything’, he said, ‘that could be construed as justifying the appalling way in which gay people have been treated and discriminated against...just isn’t an option’. Maureen contended that the Church itself helps to create ‘internal

violence' against LGBTQ+ people and their identities, through its 'laws, attitudes, and negative narratives'. The logicity of its statement on irrational violence was angrily contested, and she asked if anyone would get away with a similar statement when it came to, e.g., the irrational violence of domestic abuse. This qualification of violence by the Church was 'dangerous and made no sense'.

6.8.2. Deirdre saw the issue of discrimination as being difficult. She recognised that Catholic schools had the right to require their teachers to be respectful of Catholic beliefs and that RE teachers should teach in accordance with the Church's values and doctrines. Nevertheless, young people would be unphased, she supposed, by a gay teacher, who might represent the diversity of relationships prevalent in society and providing they could teach effectively, their personal, sexual lives were irrelevant. Dearbhail remembered when an unmarried woman might have once been dismissed from roles for being pregnant and was unsupportive of how the Church in certain jurisdictions had gained exemption from equality legislation to discriminate against LGBTQ+ people obtaining or retaining particular educational, or parish pastoral roles. Mona queried how the Church could condemn unjust discrimination, while itself barring women from ecclesial roles, gay men from seeking ordination and LGBTQ+ people from seeking marriage and selected employment opportunities.

6.9. Religious: The teachings about civil marriage legislation

6.9.1. The harm that would be caused to society by the redefinition of marriage (*2003-Considerations*) was not evident to Deirdre, who wondered where such evidence could be found. She referred to her large extended family, which included many couples in canonically irregular or non-marital relationships, her conclusion being that these worked just as well as those of other family members in conventional sacramental marriages. She wondered if such non-marital heterosexual relationships seem to work in practice, why would legal same-sex unions be less likely to succeed? Dearbhail and Mona recalled how, during the 2015-IMR, the majority of their own religious sisters supported the amendment to the constitution, which changed the definition of marriage. Mona claimed this was based on many of them knowing same-sex couples and that affording them the protections and equality of a marital legal union was both positive and non-problematic.

Dearbhail wondered, as sacramental marriage was not being compromised, why space for a variety of legal relationships to coexist under civil law could not be welcomed. On that note, Deirdre critiqued the Church for claiming an exclusive right to define marriage or to decree the definitive nature of God's plans for marriage and the family. She recalled that the Church held no particular interest in or jurisdiction over marriage until many Christian centuries had passed and that priests could get married for much of this period. Realistically, the line between a legal and a sacramental marital union was, in her opinion, 'very fine'. She also wondered how the Church could happily and confidently invoke a divine blessing for all manner of inanimate objects, but be certain that God would withhold such a blessing for a same-sex relationship. Mona, a qualified spiritual

guide/accompanier, reflected on the inability of anyone to definitively pronounce on God's ways, plans and preferences and said that 'limiting God' seemed to be the undesirable trait of many magisterial Church teachers.

6.9.2. His role in supporting and accompanying Catholic heterosexual married couples made the 'the rush' to legally redefine marriage vexing for Harry. He reflected on his perception that heterosexual marriage was now stripped of its wonder and popular status, and generally regarded as mundane. He fully supported the provision for legal same-sex unions, but said that the need to define it as marriage was something that had not been fully considered. He would have preferred the legal decision to have been preceded by an extended period of respectful dialogue across the various strata of society with civil partnerships being a good, if imperfect first step. He regretted that this risked him and others being labelled 'homophobic'. Oliver was troubled at the redefinition of an institution he 'vigorously defended' as that of 'a life commitment between a man and a woman'. He recalled conversations with a co-worker, who, in his opinion, 'distorted' the English language to refer to the male partner of her son as 'his husband and her son-in-law'.

6.9.3. Dearbhail recalled a family member who, in the 1970s, had received a dispensation from the Church to marry her first cousin. The reason given for the dispensation, despite the couple's consanguinity, was that she was in her 50s and there could be no chance of a child issuing from this relationship. It was proof to Dearbhail that in such cases, the Church was actively and specifically affirming the sacramental and canonical validity of a non-procreative union. Maureen argued that as same-sex couples could legally adopt children, and some can or do have their own biological offspring, the logic of the Church argument that same-sex couples are non-generative does not hold. She expressed concern about the warning that permitting children to be adopted into same-sex legal unions would mean 'doing violence' to them, wondering where the Church had found the empirical evidence to substantiate such a definitive and bold claim, back in 2003.

6.9.4. With regard to Catholic political legislators and the demand placed on them by the Church to oppose, frustrate or overturn such legislation, Maureen was clear that Catholic legislators had to follow their consciences with regard to such decisions, rather than obeying a mandate from the Church. Deirdre recognised that Catholic politicians had a difficult role in negotiating their personal faith and the duty to represent all constituents, but that ultimately, the latter was the factor that should hold the most sway. She cited the USA as an example of how compromised the fusion of politics and religion could become, particularly when there was an inconsistent application by legislators of their professed Christian beliefs to all areas of societal justice and ethical concern.

6.10. Religious: The non-admission of homosexual candidates to Holy Orders

6.10.1. This group of religious men and women worked closely with clergy and the two male religious participants were themselves priests. Some of the group had been involved in formation programmes

for diocesan clergy, and in the formation of their own novices or postulants. All would have counted diocesan and religious clergy as friends, co-workers and colleagues. Their reactions to *The 2005-Instruction*, which prohibits the ordination of men with deep-seated homosexual tendencies, were based on many collective years of direct experience of the Catholic presbyterate. Deirdre surmised that a candidate or priest who actively supported gay culture could create problems for himself and his ministry, but otherwise saw no truth in the rationale that homosexual men lacked the ability to relate correctly to men and women. She knew a parish priest who was openly gay and fully supported by his parishioners and whose ability to relate well to his parishioners was beyond dispute. Deirdre thought that the implied link between clerical homosexuality, paedophilia, pederasty and abuse was unjust to homosexual priests. Her work in child protection made her realise the complexity surrounding paedophilic abuse and how simplistic it would be to blame sexual orientation for the abuse crisis.

6.10.2. Dearbhail spoke of a priest to whom she had been close, who had declared his views that gay men were unsuitable for priesthood due to their insatiable sexual appetites, after which she lost respect for him. In her own life, she thought it obvious that professional working relationships were based on unique interpersonal interactions that rarely had much to do with that person's sexual orientation. She queried what the Church meant by 'relating correctly' and, like many of the other participants, she added that many heterosexual priests in Ireland had traditionally related badly to people and women in particular. An impoverished formation system was, she claimed, responsible for this, rather than sexual orientation. Maureen wondered what the subtext for this 'terrible statement' about 'inability to relate correctly' could be and wondered if this was just an extension of the magisterial belief that homosexuality was intrinsically disordered and if the Church inherently believed all gay men to be predatory in their relations with other men.

6.10.3. Harry did not see any good argument as to why gay men should not be ordained, aside from possible difficulties some gay men might experience in an all-male environment during formation or in community life. He didn't think that gay men would have any more problems than heterosexual men in adopting celibacy. Oliver spoke of a book, *The Sexual Celibate* (Donald Goergen 1975), which contended that men at either extremity of the heterosexual-homosexual spectrum were unsuitable for ordination. He was unclear about the term 'deep-seated homosexual tendencies' but imagined it would refer to someone who was unhealthily homosexual in an extreme or uncontrollable way that would render celibacy impossible. He thought that the best determinant of a man's suitability to celibate priesthood, regardless of sexual orientation, should be based on evidence that he was or was not a healthily sexual person.

6.10.4. Deirdre believed that all candidates for ordination should be honest about their sexual orientation, but that God's call to a homosexual candidate should not be thwarted by the Church in this regard. Harry also recommended honesty from homosexual candidates but conceded that the

Instruction made this difficult, adding that their honesty should not come at the price of being asked to leave formation. Mona has had a long-standing formal role in the formation of many diocesan priests, and her experience suggested to her that mandatory celibacy creates many difficulties for the men whose formation she has guided. Both homosexual and heterosexual candidates, in her professional and spiritual assessment, struggle intensely with mandatory celibacy during formation and beyond, and this creates a culture of dishonesty for both groups. Celibacy itself, Mona claimed, is the main culprit in generating many of the negative consequences and relational issues for a large number of priests and seminarians, which *The 2005-Instruction* contends are linked to homosexuality. Maureen shared the view that seminarians ought to be honest about their sexual orientation, but that the process puts any gay seminarian ‘in an awful bind’. She reckoned that the seminary formation process was flawed and in need of much improvement, with much-needed input from female voices being a potential remedy. Oliver had also been involved for many years in the formation of candidates for his congregation and was the spiritual director/accompanier to many diocesan and religious clergy, both gay and straight. It was his opinion that *The 2005-Instruction* and its stance definitively required ‘interpretation’. The Church, he added, ‘is too good at diktats’.

6.11. Religious: The tone and language used in the Church teachings about homosexuality

6.11.1. The phrase in *The 1986-Letter*: 3 that refers to the homosexual inclination being an objective disorder was troubling for Deirdre, and she expressed exasperation at language which she considered to be judgemental. How can the Church, she asked, decide that its own negative judgement, rather than the positive lived experience of homosexual people is correct? Dearbhail said, ‘to see it written in black and white...shocks and dismays me’, and she was particularly vexed by the claim that homosexual acts represented ‘intrinsic moral evil’, labelling this as ‘shocking and really destructive’. Harry surmised that with the use of the language and tone of *The 1986-Letter* in particular, ‘you can almost hear the doors to dialogue being closed and the keys locking inside’, and said that *The 1986-Letter* ‘should be buried deep in the earth, as it poisons the air’.

Mona considered the terminology used in *The 1986-Letter* as being violent to LGBTQ+ people, even as the Church simultaneously condemned violence, adding that much violence to LGBTQ+ people had been perpetuated, in part by the Church itself, over the centuries. She was visibly angered that such negative words were issued alongside the institutional covering up of abuse of children, young people, and women. She thought it likely that phrases such as ‘intrinsic evil’ and ‘objective disorder’ could be harmful to the welfare of a LGBTQ+ person. Maureen recounted how at one time, she had agreed that homosexual people were ordered towards moral evil when reading a biography of her childhood hero, Roger Casement, the Irish nationalist leader, and his alleged pederasty led her to become disillusioned. Having come to know and befriend LGBTQ+ people in the intervening years, she now rejects her earlier beliefs. She considered that the Church’s attempt to distinguish the homosexual act from the person is illogical, as the sexual act arises out of that person’s

humanity, inextricably linked to their sexual orientation. The Church's message, she said, about LGBTQ+ people was influential and potentially harmful, particularly to LGBTQ+ people in rural areas. Oliver has two gay nephews with whom he maintains friendly contact and knows many gay men, some of them clergy and fellow religious, and some of these within the context of spiritual accompaniment/direction. He understood the technical theological and moral terminology used by the Church in such phrases as 'intrinsic disorder' and so forth, but was certain that these terms would not be words that LGBTQ+ people would use to view their own acts and orientation. I found it notable that Oliver approached teachings that he respected with a great deal of personal humility and compassion, open to having his beliefs challenged if evidence led him in that direction.

6.11.2 Deirdre profoundly disagreed with the accusation that homosexual people were inclined towards self-indulgence, and was saddened by the way in which the homosexual way of life was labelled as self-destructive. Dearbhail reflected that all people could be self-indulgent and that the battle against this was one which was common to all. The recommended application of spiritual remedies for the alleged self-indulgence of homosexuality was, in her view, a form of conversion therapy, that was nothing more than 'harmful rubbish'. Mona expressed discomfort with *PH-1975: 8*, claiming that homosexual people had difficulty fitting into society, and asked which society the Church referred to. Dearbhail was visibly upset by the claim in *PH-1975: 8* that homosexuals couldn't fit into society, claiming it to be a 'vitriolic' statement and would have led directly to people dying from suicide. Harry took issue with the reference in *PH-1975: 8* to the 'personal difficulties' faced by homosexual people and the erroneous framing of homosexuality as a problem rather than being a positive part of a homosexual person's humanity. With great sadness, he said, 'to identify suffering with being homosexual...is a terrible statement'.

6.11.3. The Church's assertion in *The 1986-Letter* that it refuses to see people in terms of their sexual orientation but only in terms of their common status as God's children raised a few eyebrows. Deirdre wondered why there was any need by the Church to distinguish homosexual people at all if this was really the case. Harry, visibly bemused, laughed, and citing an alleged comment by St. Alphonsus Liguori, said, 'would that the half of it were true'. Mona wondered rhetorically, how the Church claimed to defend the non-importance of a person's sexuality within teachings that negativized LGBTQ+ sexuality and Maureen asked, 'What's wrong with just saying, "you're heterosexual, or homosexual, and a child of God?"'

6.12. Religious: The teachings about gender-fluidity and transgender people.

6.12.1. Deirdre had met and listened to a number of transgender people in her life and work and did not doubt that gender dysphoria was a real phenomenon and deeply distressing for people when they wrestle with such a fundamental part of their identity. For her, it is a complex area about which the Church should tread with caution. She felt that those who have genuine gender dysphoria should be

treated with compassion and supported through the process of gender reassignment. The assertion in *AL-2016* that young people should be helped to ‘accept their own bodies as they were created’ was seen by Deirdre as insufficient for those people who cannot accept this. Harry had met transgender people and knew of their struggle prior to transitioning, and Maureen argued that a complex area of human experience needed to be handled sensitively and without simplistic condemnation by the Church. Mona had never met anyone who had transitioned but said that ‘our identities are in continual evolution throughout our lives’ and believed that the key to approaching the issue of gender dysphoria was to withhold hasty or simplistic judgements.

6.12.2. Some of the participants shared their concerns about the degree to which children or young adolescents might be influenced or pressured into making irreversible decisions about gender reassignment. Deirdre worried that some younger people may make decisions that they might later regret, but welcomed the degree to which children seem to be more receptive to new knowledge. She recounted how she had known transgender and also transvestite men who were sex workers when she worked in Central and South America. She recalled how effortlessly these people were accepted by the children who knew them and that, in her opinion, ‘children will accept things...and that people can be different’. She welcomed the positive benefits that breadth of knowledge brings to younger people and wider society.

6.12.3. Harry felt that the entire issue of gender identity was very complex and that all young people needed to be free to develop their sexual and gender identities without the undue pressures that might arise from the media or the popular perception that gender fluidity is somehow ‘on trend’. He also worried that the foundations of such ideas surrounding gender fluidity were based largely in the realm of emotion and feelings, which fluctuate and provide ‘dicey foundations for any truth’. Science and empirical data about gender dysphoria ought to lead the debate, rather than emotion. He advocated a societal and Church response that was both cautious and open to authentic dialogue. Dearbhail recognised that children and young people seemed to have a very heightened awareness of the topic of gender fluidity. She considered the entire issue to be a deeply complex ‘minefield’, and that introducing ideas into children’s heads about gender identity and fluidity was ‘playing with fire’. On the other hand, she recognised that the Church’s default position to reject gender fluidity was another extreme position and that it should adopt a cautionary approach that avoided extremities. Both Harry and Maureen saw some strands of such openness to dialogue present in *M&F-2019*.

6.13. Religious: Change of tone on LGBTQ+ issues by Pope Francis and some Church leaders

6.13.1. There was little doubt that this group of religious had a very positive appraisal of both Pope Francis and the ways in which they perceived that he was pursuing a careful strategy of reform with regard to the Church and a cautious outreach to LGBTQ+ people. Deirdre was moved by his remarks to the parents of LGBT children in 2020 when he said that ‘the Church loves your children as they

are', showing, in her opinion, a positive, healthy, and person-centred approach that put people ahead of teaching. She also spoke of her welcome awareness that Pope Francis had reached out to Sr. Jeanine Gramick and Fr. Tom Nugent, both having been censured by the CDF in 1999 under Cardinal Ratzinger, for their LGBTQ+ ministry and to Fr. James Alison the theologian who has written extensively about LGBTQ+ issues. Her perception was that Francis was pursuing a gradual, consistent, and strategic thread of slow but insistent reform that included the issues connected to LGBTQ+ people.

6.13.2. Dearbhail was 'very moved' by Pope Francis' famous 'who am I to judge?' comments in 2013, adding that they were 'huge' and that many of her friends in religious life shared this positive welcome of these celebrated words. It was clear, in her opinion, that Francis wants to open a conversation about LGBTQ+ issues. Harry was similarly effusive, saying that these comments showed that 'Francis is a great man' and had shown his deeply pastoral nature by putting his words and attitudes toward LGBTQ+ people into action. Mona thought the same comments were 'wonderful' and also referred, with great personal pleasure, to the 2020 comments made by him to the Italian parents of LGBT children, and his outreach to the LGBTQ+ advocate and writer Fr. James Martin. She considered Francis to be a 'do as I do, not as I say', leader, who has shown his 'loving openness' to LGBTQ+ people. She pondered on his backstory, as someone who she believes underwent an 'Oscar Romero type of conversion' while in Argentina. From his awareness of personal frailty, she believed he has shrewdly pursued a policy of reform, aware that all change is a long-term process. For Oliver, the 'who am I to judge?' remark was 'of enormous significance', and showed that in terms of his leadership and outreach to marginalised groups like LGBTQ+ Catholics, Francis was 'moving away from a dogmatic and judgemental attitude to something much more person-centred'. He said that the significance of this, in contradistinction to how the Church had historically treated homosexual people and referred to them, should not be underestimated. Maureen also praised Francis for his willingness to see beyond simple judgements about the worth of a committed relationship, even when such bonds were not canonical or sacramental. She said that through him it was clear that a 'way was being paved for a more loving, human and compassionate approach' to LGBTQ+ people.

6.13.3. Deirdre said that 'very often behaviour precedes law' and that she saw such a process of discernment at work within the structures of her own and other religious congregations. She asserted that what we were seeing now through Francis' words and gestures was the change in behaviour that might eventually precede a further change in law or teaching. Dearbhail also reflected on the way her own congregation enacted change, and the lengthy process of discussion, discernment and teasing out of issues that occurred when the chapter of her congregation met to consider change. She praised the current and ongoing synodal process within the Church as it forges a path to reform. For Maureen, it was beyond any doubt that changes were in motion, but that the Church would continue to be characteristically cautious. Oliver advocated an approach to same-sex relationships that should

‘treasure the love that’s there’, while enhancing it with the fruit of prayer and the gospel message. Deirdre and Mona both commended the comments from some bishops about a change in approach to homosexual teachings, both having a high respect for German theologians and commending the German Church as a model for good Church governance and ecclesiology. Maureen wondered if Pope Francis, aware of his many curial detractors and episcopal opponents, might be using some European prelates to field his own personal opinions about controversial areas of Church reform.

6.14. Religious: On how attitudes to the Church had changed, particularly in Ireland

6.14.1. With their many combined years working within and alongside Irish society and the Church, this group were well-placed to comment on the changes they had witnessed and perceived. Deirdre spoke of the effects of the abuse crisis and reflected on how the attitudes of the Church hierarchy to the paedophilia of clergy and religious indicated an ignorance on their part about the seriousness of the offence and its long-lasting damage to the victims of sexual abuse. Mona spoke of how the trust of many ‘good people’ had been eroded year after year and scandal after scandal. The exposure of certain high-profile clerics who had broken their celibacy vows with women while promoting *HV-1968*’s prohibition on artificial birth control began to cause many people to question the Church and cease their ‘practice of faith’. This was followed by the waves of revelations about abuse by clergy, religious, and their coverups by the Irish episcopate and religious leadership. Dearbhail suggested that the attitude of deference to the Church by lay Catholics has been replaced by a deep-seated anger, exemplified by the 2018 Irish Abortion Referendum in which many people, she claimed, voted to amend the Irish Constitution, as a swipe at the Church, rather than their strong conviction that abortion was moral.

6.14.2. Deirdre went on to discuss how attitudes to family life have progressively moved away from those held by a Church which in the past had great influence. This evolution has been accompanied by widespread acceptance of various expressions of family life and relationships that were previously condemned or unheard of in Irish society. Mona spoke of how homosexuality was underground in Ireland for much of the twentieth century, with fringe literary figures, actors, or prominent non-Catholics being the only public face of homosexuality. The Church and the Irish society it inhabited had little interest in a topic about which it knew very little. Dearbhail spoke of the level of support that many religious sisters had given to changing the Irish Constitution in favour of legal same-sex marriage in 2015, and that from among her friends and fellow religious, she knew no one who had voted against the amendment. The Irish Episcopal Conference had supported the ‘No’ campaign and advocated such an outcome, so the adoption of such a position by religious was perhaps a very notable example of how profoundly attitudes to the Church and its authority had changed.

6.15. Religious: Links between the teachings about homosexuality and other notable issues for the Church

6.15.1. Deirdre, like the other female religious and in common with many from other participant groups, raised the issue of how women are undervalued by the Church. Maureen saw a similarity with Church teachings about homosexuality and the way in which it also uses NML to emphasise the child-bearing role of a woman but to exclude women from ecclesial leadership positions. She warned with emotion that the Church was in danger of losing both women and its LGBTQ+ members. Mona reflected at length on how the Church has traditionally framed its vision for human sexuality through the lens of a heterosexual male perspective with emphasis placed on the procreation of the male line. The roles of pleasure, emotion, or a female or non-heterosexual perspective were sidelined and ignored to the detriment of both groups. The primary role of women as child-bearers was often to their physical and emotional disadvantage, even as it was to the advantage of heterosexual men, their instinct for sexual pleasure, and the securing of their lineage through abundant offspring. Homosexual people also necessarily fell victim to this exclusive framing of sexuality entirely by heterosexual men, and this jaundiced appraisal of sexuality was embedded in doctrine and given to a small group of male clerics to protect and promote. The refusal to countenance the possibility that women could be released from the procreative imperative in *HV-1968*, alongside the continuing prohibition on same-sex sexual expression, was policed by clergy, some of whom had private lives at odds with the standards they insisted upon for others. This, she added, has progressively become a source of great disillusionment, leading to a silent rebellion against these teachings for many faithful Irish Catholics. Dearbhail reflected on how the refusal of the Church in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (1994) to consider female ordination echoed its current refusal to alter its teachings about homosexuality. She was hopeful that both issues might eventually ‘evolve in the right direction’.

6.16. Religious: Overall levels of agreement or disagreement with the teachings about homosexuality

6.16.1. This was a small, thoughtful, and reflective group of participants. Many religious had already gravitated towards a ministry that involved an outreach to the poor, addicted, disadvantaged, and marginalised members of Irish society, as their previous traditional roles in education and health were usurped by the agencies of the State. Many will have processed the devastation of their status in Irish society with a degree of pragmatism and in the process, discerned that their new experience of being marginal has led them naturally towards service of others on the fringes of society and the Church. I felt that their responses gave a particularly rich and well-considered insight into the extent to which Church teachings about homosexuality have been received and accepted by the Irish Catholic community, of which they are now a numerically small but important segment.

6.16.2. In relation to the various sources of authority that the Church refers to within its teachings about homosexuality, this group largely rejected the manner in which the Church utilises such sources

to support its arguments and assertions. It was obvious that they were familiar with scripture, perhaps not unexpectedly so, and none of them supported the use of isolated texts, without context and selected to confirm a pre-existing bias about the purposes of human sexuality. The majority of these religious did not accept that the non-procreative capacity of a homosexual act rendered such acts to be immoral or self-indulgent per se. There was additionally dismay expressed by many of this group that the Church was not more willing to look at some of the insights from the human sciences when it came to its consideration of homosexuality. Overall, this sub-group thought that the Church should widen its overarching approach to all human sexuality, utilising new knowledge where appropriate and retaining an openness to dialogue with society and the scientific community.

6.16.3. There was a unanimous rejection of the interpretation of chastity which prohibited homosexual people from ever experiencing deep affective and sexual relationships. As a group that had voluntarily chosen to refrain from all such relationships, there was no appetite for homosexual people having to involuntarily accept the way of life that they, as religious, had actively and freely chosen. A vow that might, in theory, bring them freedom and inner joy would not do so for those upon whom it was imposed. All were dismayed that the Church qualified its otherwise welcome objection to violence against LGBTQ+ people and they advocated a less ambiguous condemnation from the magisterium of both violence and discrimination against LGBTQ+ people.

The female religious all rejected the Church arguments against legalised same-sex unions and the call by their Church that legislators oppose or frustrate such legislative moves. The male religious expressed reservations about same-sex marriage, but neither was explicitly against legal forms of same-sex unions for financial, emotional and security reasons. All of this group rejected the idea that homosexual men were unsuitable candidates for priestly ordination and all of the reasons the Church advanced for this prohibition. The tone and language used by the Church within these teachings were roundly rejected and condemned by all members of this group. The hurtful impact, and potential damage these words and phrases might cause LGBTQ+ people was a source of deep dismay and sorrow.

6.16.4. The views of this sub-group mirrored those of the other groups in that compassion for those with gender dysphoria was accompanied by concern by some that children and young people might be pressured into making premature decisions with regard to any potential gender reassignment. Overall, the group were reluctant to make any definitive judgments over an issue about which they were not sufficiently informed. All of this group were enthusiastic supporters of Pope Francis and the direction of reform that his papacy has embraced. All of them welcomed the outreach he seems to have initiated towards LGBTQ+ people, even if it has had to be tempered by a degree of realpolitik in a polarised global Church. Many were hopeful that a slow process of reform that would eventually embrace marginalised groups like LGBTQ+ Catholics was underway in the Church.

6.16.5. The life experiences of these religious overlapped with and yet were distinct from the experience of the clergy and laity. All of them had adopted a variety of professional roles in society, alongside their pastoral and ministerial activities. As religious, they will have experienced in a particular manner how the attitudes of Irish lay Catholics to their Church have moved from being deferential to sceptical. As religious, they will have reflected upon and been affected by the humbling of their congregations through ageing, decline and the legacy of religious involvement in the abuse of children, women and vulnerable adults. Religious in Ireland have always had a unique role to play within the Irish Church, and my assessment of this admittedly small group was of men and women who viewed the Church teachings about homosexuality through a unique experiential lens. This lens allowed them to critique the authority of the Church as people who continued to aspire to the high ideals of their faith, who were grounded in the complex reality of the human condition, and who, to some extent, were now marginalised from society in the same way that LGBTQ+ people had been. Their nuanced critique of the Church teachings about homosexuality, like the other sub-group participants, arose directly from their own very unique experience of life, Church and society. As with the other groups, their experience appeared to diminish the extent to which they accepted the authority of their Church to teach them about homosexuality alongside many other issues.

Chapter 7. Analysis of the Catholic-educators participant data.

7.1. Background

7.1.1. The Catholic Church has had a considerable influence on education in Ireland. Authority for Catholic denominational schools in the Irish Republic is shared between the State, school patrons, delegated managers, and boards of trustees. The majority of Catholic denominational school patrons are diocesan Catholic bishops, who appoint a local Parish Priest, alongside his appointed management board, as the official school manager. Funding is by the State, but some local community funding is still generated. In 2019, 89% of primary schools in the Republic and 48% of post-primary schools were Catholic denominational schools.³⁴ In Northern Ireland, the majority of Catholic children attend Catholic-maintained primary and post-primary schools or voluntary Catholic grammar schools after successful academic selection. Catholic-maintained schools, both in the primary and post-primary sector, are maintained by the Council for Catholic-maintained Schools (CCMS), with local clergy often chairing or maintaining a presence on their boards of governors. Catholic voluntary grammar schools are governed independently by their own appointed boards of governors, which usually have clerical representatives of the diocese, local parishes and/or the Religious Orders that originally founded them. The majority of Catholic children in Northern Ireland are educated on a denominational basis, attending schools that are maintained and governed with a strong Catholic ethos. The majority of Catholic children in both jurisdictions of Ireland will receive a substantial amount of religious education within the curriculum, alongside the pastoral presence in their schools of an appointed chaplain or local priest. All primary school children in Catholic schools will receive most of their preparation for the key sacramental celebrations of Penance, Eucharist, and Confirmation prior to the age of 11 in a school setting in conjunction with their local Catholic parish. Recruitment of staff for Catholic schools, both academic and ancillary, will also have substantial input from Church representatives who sit on or chair their respective boards of governors or management boards.

7.1.2. Since 1588, the Vatican has had an official dicastery responsible for overseeing aspects of the Church's interests in education. *Gravissimum Educationis* (GE-1965) is the main contribution of the Second Vatican Council to the Catholic vision for education and highlights the role of the Catholic teacher as being, 'in the real sense of the word an apostolate most suited to and necessary for our times (GE-1965: 27). In 2022, the Church emphasised that Catholic 'teachers must be outstanding in correct doctrine and integrity of life' and that school leaders act to ensure that all instruction and education within their schools be, 'grounded in the principles of the Catholic faith and imparted by

³⁴ 'Education in Ireland. Statistical Snapshot' *Oireachtas Library & Research Service*. https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/libraryResearch/2020/2020-04-03_1-rs-infographic-education-in-ireland-a-statistical-snapshot_en.pdf [accessed on 28/08/2024].

teachers of right doctrine and probity of life'.³⁵ The current Dicastery for Culture and Catholic Education was established in 2022 and promotes 'the fundamental principles of...Catholic education' in all Catholic schools and places of learning and ensures that the Catholic identity of such establishments is safeguarded. Along with local bishops and national episcopal conferences, the dicastery 'ensures that the integrity of the Catholic faith is safeguarded in doctrinal teaching' (*Praedicate Evangelium*-2022: 159, 1-2).

7.1.3. For at least two decades, the Irish Catholic Church has supplemented the educational outreach of its extensive network of schools with a strong focus on the importance of youth ministry in every Catholic diocese. The Irish Episcopal Conference in 2009 declared that every diocese was expected to appoint a well-trained diocesan youth ministry team and a coordinator who would oversee the establishment of parish youth ministry teams with parish coordinators. Pope Francis is mindful of the importance of youth ministry, encouraging the development of a kerygmatic experience of God and Christian fraternity for young people. He warns that in such endeavours, 'rather than being too concerned with communicating a great deal of doctrine, let us first try to awaken and consolidate the great experiences that sustain the Christian life'.³⁶ It is for these reasons that it was important to establish the views and opinions of a selection of Catholic teachers, school leaders and youth ministers, as they exercise a significant role in the Irish Catholic community.

7.1.4. Like most Irish people, I attended a Catholic primary school and post-primary school, and later as part of my studies in the national seminary, received a theology degree. As a priest, I was the chaplain to twelve Catholic schools and served on various boards of Catholic school governors. I pursued additional theological studies in Rome, achieving a Licence in Theology. After leaving ministry, I retrained as a teacher of Religious Studies (RS) and worked for seven years in two Catholic post-primary schools in England, becoming familiar with the role and expectations of being employed by the Catholic Education Service of England and Wales. This included an expectation that I would not be open about my same-sex relationship, something known only by Department Heads, to whom I had revealed this as a matter of personal integrity. Section 124 A of the 1998 *School Standards and Framework Act* permits discrimination in certain posts within faith schools in England and Wales in order to preserve their particular religious identity. Conduct deemed to be in contravention of Church religious teachings can result in the termination of employment. As a teacher of Religious Studies, I held what the 1998 Act refers to as a 'reserved position' (an appointment that can only be given to a

³⁵ Congregation for Catholic Education, 'The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue' (Vatican 2022), 47, 50.

https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20220125_istruzione-identita-scuola-cattolica_en.html [accessed 5th July 2024].

³⁶ Francis, 'Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, Christus Vivit, Christ is Alive' (Vatican, 2019), 212.

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html [accessed 16th May 2024].

practising Catholic whose marital status conforms with Church doctrine). Being in a same-sex relationship contravened Section 124 A. It is noteworthy that such exemptions to equality legislation included in the 1998 Act do not apply to Northern Ireland, and no such legislative equality exemptions for the Catholic Church exist in the Republic of Ireland either.

7.1.5. This particular participant-group included five teachers, three women and two men. Three of the teachers worked in a large, co-educational, urban, Catholic-maintained secondary school, one in a large provincial single-sex Catholic grammar school, and another in a smaller, co-educational, Catholic-maintained secondary school, with a mixed rural and small town catchment. All of the teachers had been or were currently involved in the pastoral systems of their schools, and this work included a significant religious element. Two additional participants were the leaders of a diocesan youth ministry team, based in a large urban centre.

Table 25. Catholic Educators

Name (Pseudonym) Male (M) Female (F)	Age-group	Education Roles	Ecclesial participation Weekly or daily Mass attendance. (P) Current ecclesial ministry or active parish/ecclesial role. * Previous ecclesial ministry or active parish/ecclesial role. **
Katrina F	20-35	Head of Diocesan Youth Ministry and Joint Leader of Parish Youth Ministry, with pastoral experience.	P *
Maura F	20-35	Joint Leader of Parish Youth Ministry, with pastoral experience.	P *
Frank M	36-55	Teacher and Head of Religious Studies with pastoral and senior managerial experience.	P
Owen M	20-35	Teacher and Head of Religious Studies with pastoral and senior managerial experience.	P
Christina F	36-55	Teacher of Religious Studies with pastoral experience.	P
Nuala F	36-55	Teacher and former Head of Religious Studies with pastoral and senior managerial experience. Current Vice-Principal.	P *
Lucy F	36-55	Teacher and Head of Art, with pastoral and senior managerial experience.	P *

7.2. Nuala

7.2.1. Nuala was the most experienced member of this group of Catholic educators. All of them impressed me with their professionalism and rich insights, and in many respects, Nuala, with the longest tenure and greatest expertise, exhibited and embodied qualities common to all of them, serving as an ideal exemplar of these professional men and women. In her late 40s, she had been a teacher for almost 30 years, working continuously in the same large urban Catholic secondary school for girls. The mixed catchment area of her school took in some of the more socially and economically disadvantaged parts of a large city. With Religious Studies as her specialist subject, she had been Head of RS at this school for over half of her time there. Moving on to senior management a number of years ago, she still taught some RS, helping to oversee an amalgamation with a large boys' secondary school serving the same catchment area. At the time of the interview, Nuala was a vice principal of her school. Nuala had also been appointed as the diocesan youth ministry leader and was a lay advisor to her local diocesan bishop. Nuala had additionally been co-opted to her diocesan panel responsible for the training of men for diaconal ministry, ran youth ministry cells in two parishes and was a professionally trained spiritual director. Nuala was a committed, practising Catholic with a deep personal faith, and strongly supportive of Catholic education and her Church. Personally reflective, she was very familiar with a wide range of theological issues and their nuances. Nuala was a heterosexual, single woman who had chosen to remain celibate and in every respect she represented the antithesis of an anti-Church opponent.

7.2.2. Nuala was very well-informed about many aspects of the Church's theological positions and teachings. It was clear that she filtered many of her views and opinions through her lived Catholic spirituality and familiarity with the gospels. From a large family and with a wide social circle of friends and colleagues, lay, religious, clergy, and non-religious, she was friendly with several LGBTQ+ people, many of whom were or had been Catholic. As such, she had often been the confidante of LGBTQ+ Catholics who had struggled greatly with their Church's position on homosexuality. The majority of Nuala's interactions for nearly three decades had been with 11-19-year-old Catholics and she could be expected to know a great deal about their views and opinions, struggles, and positions on some aspects of Church doctrine.

7.2.3. The young people with whom she worked were deeply dismissive of the teachings on homosexuality and gender fluidity. On many occasions, during our interview, Nuala cited a personal example from her many classroom or pastoral interactions to back up her own positions about this aspect of Church teaching. Nuala also had some of the strongest opinions among all the participants, that for the more vulnerable and younger members of the Catholic community, aspects of these teachings were harmful and damaging. Her wide experience over three decades of interacting with young people, often from vulnerable backgrounds, might be expected to have given her a more than average amount of insight into how this could be the case. The interview was often laced with Nuala's

sharp and witty sense of humour, and it was clear that even as she critiqued and condemned many aspects of the Church's teachings on this issue, she remained positive and hopeful that under Pope Francis and his more inclusive tone, these teachings did not have the final word.

7.3. Educators: The scriptural basis for the teachings

7.3.1. For these educators, the scriptural references used by the Church created many issues. Lucy recognised that the use of isolated scripture created a 'very scant' argument and was angered by the use of the story of an 'attempted male gang-rape' offered without context in Gn. 19., to condemn all homosexuality. Owen explained the teaching dilemma of using such passages out of context, expressing surprise that the Church would adopt an atypically literalist approach to such texts. Nuala spoke at length about the absence of context and was adamant that the Church was deliberately 'constructing an argument' about homosexuality and 'skewing the scriptures to make that argument fit'. She contended that her LGBTQ+ students would thereby misconstrue homosexuality as some kind of immoral 'aberration'. Frank recognised the difficulty of using such non-contextual passages with students to construct a supposedly clear argument. He accepted that the biblical arguments were consistent but recognised that students reacted to them in a way that made his successful 'navigation of the texts' with them, problematic. His students found the contrast between the Old Testament's punitive views and the loving outreach of Jesus to the marginalised, difficult to reconcile.

Christina tried to offer context by telling students that biblically approved institutions like slavery were now regarded as unjust and no longer supported by modern Christians. The students, however, naturally queried why the Church still adhered to the biblical prohibitions about homosexuality, refusing to change what they regarded as a modern injustice. She confessed that these scriptural texts presented her with profound pedagogical difficulties. Katrina saw no clarity in the way the Church used such passages, contending that, in fact, there was absolutely no argument given, as to why God would find homosexuality so abhorrent. The context for her was that the passages were authored by men in a male-centric society. Using such a narrow range of scriptural content was evidence to Katrina of a Church that was non-person-centred, obsessed with genital sexual acts and oblivious to the context of love or relationships. This highlighted a key concept that emerged from these participants. These passages were for Christina very damaging and hard to combat for the young people she worked with in her ministry.

7.3.2. These participants seemed keenly aware of the obvious missing voice of Christ from the Church's scriptural arguments, and this was the first anomaly that their students raised. Owen supposed that the views and words of Jesus, so clearly person-centred and opposed to legalism, might prove uncomfortable for the Church's arguments with their 'pharisaic undertones'. Lucy thought that the scriptures chosen by the Church to condemn homosexuality were a 'contrast' to the love-oriented message of Jesus and his ministry, so obviously focused on the marginalised. Christina was so

frustrated with the textual selection that she went out of her way to emphasise in lessons, the inclusive and love-centred approach of Jesus as an antidote. Both she and Nuala had used a poem by the transgender poet and theologian Jay Hulme called ‘*Jesus at the Gay Bar*’³⁷ with their students in lessons about sexual orientation. This poem and its inclusive message made an enormous impression on their students, and its use was praised by official CCMS inspectors. Maura and Katrina were frustrated by the narrowness of the teachings’ choice of scripture in opposition to the breadth of Jesus’ approach, who ‘always saw more of what a person was’. Frank admitted that the inclusivity of Jesus added an element of confusion to the pedagogical task of trying to offer his students a consistent picture of how Jesus’ expansive approach could be reconciled with the narrowness of the Old Testament.

7.3.3. The majority of the participants felt that a full comprehension of sexual orientation would not have been accessible to biblical societies. Lucy and Owen recognised that the biblical authors operated from a male-centric worldview and lived in societies with values very different to our own, citing the Levitical penalty of capital punishment for male homosexual acts as an example of this antiquated worldview. Reflecting on how much society’s understanding of homosexuality had evolved even within her lifetime, Nuala discounted the possibility that biblical societies had sufficient knowledge to condemn homosexuality as being immoral or unnatural. A lack of knowledge about the true nature of homosexuality also seemed obvious to Katrina and Maura from both the Old Testament and Pauline texts used by the Church.

7.4. Educators: Natural Moral Law (NML)

7.4.1. All of this group had been in a position of having to either teach or explain this facet of the teaching to 11-19-year-old Catholics. Nuala viewed the emphasis placed on procreation in the teachings to be ‘reductionist and act-centred’. Teaching this to A-Level students and hearing their responses to it made Owen aware of how inconsistent the Church was when it applied NML to the issue of homosexuality but overlooked it in cases of medical or age-related infertility. As one spouse in a childless marriage, Lucy wondered if the Church also regarded her marriage and those of infertile couples to be self-indulgent and disordered. Reflecting on her relationship, she was visibly angry that the Church seemed to measure its value and worth in narrow terms. Often in her Catholic school, she had been verbally judged for her childlessness and was adamant that every loving relationship created opportunities for selfless service and that in an age of climate crisis and overpopulation, remaining childless was, for some, a much more ethical act. She also encountered many unloved students produced, she claimed, ‘selfishly’ by parents who regarded them as ‘mini-me’s’. Maura reflected on how the day-to-day living out of a couple’s marriage vows brought out many additional and important

³⁷Jay Hulme, ‘Jesus at the Gay Bar’, *Jay Hulme: Poet, Performer, Educator*. <https://jayhulme.com/blog/jesus-at-the-gay-bar> [accessed 19/12/2023].

unitive dimensions of human love than their child-producing potential. Frank, however, did agree that the perpetuation of the species was the natural ‘telos’ of the sexual act.

7.4.2. Nuala considered that teaching ethics had challenged her to see that an effective ethical theory had to take account of the outcome of particular acts, especially upon the people affected by them. The quality of the relationship should be the primary criterion by which the morality of homosexual relationships should be measured, rather than individual genital acts. She rejected the idea that moral relativism inevitably followed such an ethical outlook, seeing no reason why the Church could not ‘widen its understanding’ to discover God’s purposes in a stable, loving same-sex relationship. Owen looked at how Jesus often challenged an ‘absolutist approach to laws and morality’ in the gospel accounts, something his students seemed to recognise naturally. He went on to look at how the Church itself allowed certain elements of proportionalism and flexibility into its own application of NML and within its *Just War Theory*. Holding theology degrees, Maura and Katrina were familiar with NML and its arguments, believing that as a theory it held little capacity to deal adequately with the many ‘grey areas’ and the contextual backdrops that constituted most people’s ethical dilemmas and decisions. For Maura, a person’s goodness was an accumulation of all that made them ‘how they are as an actual person’, and the idea that within a loving relationship, any individual act of same-sex lovemaking could be judged solely by a procreative criterion was absurd. Christina raised the issue of how same-sex attraction was ‘natural’ for someone who was homosexual and that biological-genetic factors called into question the absolutist, procreative criterion by which the Church judged same-sex acts and relationships.

7.4.3. Frank, who admired NML, conceded that genetic predisposition towards homosexuality and other factors related to hard determinism did ‘change things’ when it came to the applicability of this theory to same-sex attraction. He extracted comfort from seeing NML in its bigger context and within the broader positive framework of the Church’s vision for sexuality, contraception, fidelity, marriage and family. It was also necessary in his opinion, for the Church to ‘surround a precious thing with rules for a good reason’. Despite acknowledging that good can come from a committed same-sex relationship, he couldn’t see how the Church could set aside its logical adherence to NML on the issue of homosexuality. Frank was convinced of the truth of what the Church taught and that his role as Head of RS was in part to communicate this objective truth sensitively to his students. He was simultaneously aware that there were possible challenges or exceptions to the rule but was not prepared to accept the *exception fallacy*.

7.5. Educators: The human sciences

7.5.1. There was general dismay that the Church appeared to be selective in how it chose to incorporate scientific views about sexual orientation. Christina viewed sexual orientation as a ‘given’, and was perplexed as to why the Church should present arguments that disregarded this. Lucy had

observed her LGBTQ+ students and listened to their parents claim that the traits of ‘difference’ had been present in their children from a very early age. If majority scientific opinion confirms that sexual orientation is a naturally occurring phenomenon, then the Church has no right to disregard this. Frank seemed particularly dismayed that the Church seemed to overlook any scientific opinions that did not fully support its teachings. He often found himself in a position, professionally and socially, of defending the Church as *not* being anti-science. If ‘the Church wants to be trusted and to have any reputation’, it must, he believed, consider the full spectrum of human knowledge about sexual orientation. Nuala considered the Church’s assertion that its perspective ‘finds support in the more secure findings of the natural sciences’ to be dishonest when this is clearly not the case. Katrina thought that to ‘pick and choose’ scientific research that supports a particular narrative rendered the Church’s use of science to be ‘null and void’, and Maura believed that when the Church selects certain facts to support an opinion, its ‘tunnel vision becomes damaging’ for the subjects of its doctrine.

7.5.2. The group as a whole tended to think that the Church was not able to do more justice to LGBTQ+ people or offer them a better vision for their lives than insights that arise from a scientific view. Christina wondered if this were actually the case, why so many people, including all of her students, had arrived at the perception that the ‘Church doesn’t like gay people’. This widely held perception did not arise out of a vacuum, in her opinion. For Owen, the Church vision for LGBTQ+ people may well operate out of an ‘eschatological understanding’ of the person, but was not compatible with a ‘modern understanding of pastoral care and justice’. Katrina contended that the Church’s obsession with the genital activities of LGBTQ+ people cast doubt on its claim to offer them a more just and holistic vision. Nuala imagined that the Church *could* offer a better vision for LGBTQ+ people, but this would require it to embrace the full range of human knowledge about sexual orientation and to hear about the lived experience of LGBTQ+ people directly. Frank believed that the Church had a better, albeit poorly communicated, vision for the human person, this being rooted in ‘absolute truths’ and more trustworthy for providing a person with ‘meaning and purpose’.

7.6. Educators: On other issues arising from the discussion on authority

7.6.1. Katrina argued that the Church’s sexual ethics arose from a male-centred worldview, that had emerged from a more primitive, patriarchal society that viewed women only as the bearers of multiple children. For Nuala, their celibate, male perspective created a fearful attitude among some Church teachers, preventing them from seeing the wider context in which genital sexual acts can occur. Lucy condemned the foundation of some Church teachings as a ‘male-centred, fantasy vision of reality’ used to promote homophobia. Despite his general support for the teachings, Frank maintained that the Church should notice the lived reality and affectivity of same-sex relationships, and he wondered how he would reconcile his own convictions about objective Church teaching with a hypothetical future revelation that one of his own children might be LGBTQ+. It was very significant that Frank’s

current, strongly held support for the Church's authority might one day be called into question in personal circumstances where lived experience and Church doctrine might one day clash.

7.6.2. Katrina and Maura had spent time with a group of LGBTQ+ Catholics as part of their ministry outreach and were shaken by the rejection that so many of them had experienced from the Church. They expressed astonishment at LGBTQ+ Catholics who opted to stay within their Church, fully understanding why some would leave. They left this encounter with a sense that the Church needed to learn from the authority that came from the experiences of LGBTQ+ people who lived their Catholic lives perpetually 'on guard', feeling inadequate, unwelcome, and unable to be what the Church requires of them. Nuala referred to the broad Genesis vision of humankind created in God's image and asked why LGBTQ+ people couldn't be fully accepted, just as they had been created. Teaching Muslim students whose faith held similarly prohibitive teachings about homosexuality, showed her that such teachings could only be sustained when they had community support, something she was clear that her Catholic students and community did not offer. Owen raised the issue of how the teachings about LGBTQ+ issues seemed to ignore more authoritative gospel messages, such as the Johannine message that Jesus came to bring people 'life to the full' (Jn 10:10).

7.7. Educators: The teachings on how LGBTQ+ people should live moral lives

7.7.1. The claim in *The 1986-Letter* that homosexual people have a self-indulgent orientation that constantly threatens to destroy them was dismissed by Nuala, who reflected on the lives of her wide circle of gay male friends, witnessing no such evidence. Owen noted that self-destructive tendencies and promiscuity could become a feature in any person's life, but that one's sexual orientation did not make a person more or less disposed towards these. Frank supposed that the Church was speaking from an eschatological perspective, warning about the ultimate damnation associated with homosexual acts, alongside other mortal sins like adultery, or abortion. It was the prescription offered by *The 1986-Letter* that homosexual people live chaste lives, supported by prayer, sacrament, and self-denial, that caused the greatest reaction from this group. Katrina and Maura imagined that they would feel anger, resentment and a sense of marginalisation on being asked to follow this teaching. Christina agreed, arguing that such a prescribed way of life would be impossible, unacceptable, exclusionary and demeaning. Suffering comes to all people, she contended, and LGBTQ+ people should not have to see their sexuality as an additional source of suffering, with the process of 'coming out' and societal stigmas already representing additional forms of suffering unique to them.

7.7.2. Lucy was outraged by the 'draconian and barbaric call to total self-denial' that required the malady of homosexuality to be 'prayed away', with Nuala finding these recommendations to be patronising, and lacking any understanding that a person's sexual orientation was not chosen. She had chosen a life of celibacy for herself but balked at any attempt to impose such a lifestyle on others. She was saddened by such a narrow prescription for her gay friends that would bring a joyless and

damaging template for living. Owen reckoned that these teachings were ‘not really compatible with our humanity, and our being made in God’s image and likeness’, with a majority of LGBTQ+ Catholics rejecting it and being forced into an irreconcilable relationship with their Church. Frank was conflicted by these teachings, viewing them as ‘a tough read’, and ‘not at all helpful to a person’. Despite his view that all were called to chastity, he conceded that such an imposition and the denial of such basic goods as companionship and children was a particularly difficult burden for LGBTQ+ Catholics.

7.8. Educators: The teachings about discrimination and violence towards LGBTQ+ people

7.8.1. For Katrina, the supposition that violence would be caused by pro-LGBTQ+ legislation in *The 1986-Letter* was indicative of the Church’s ‘sex-obsession’. Maura considered that violence should always elicit a reaction of surprise, and to be unsurprised by it was the equivalent of saying it was ‘nearly accepted and the right thing’ to react in this way. Both of these colleagues spoke with exasperation about the contradictions of the Church both condemning *and* appearing to condone violence within the same paragraph. Maura was adamant that this was an area of the teaching that required urgent alteration. Several other participants viewed this teaching as either condoning violent responses to LGBTQ+ rights or issuing a dark warning against their adoption by societies yet to do so. Violence, in Nuala’s opinion, was often a method used to control others, and she discerned a fear-fuelled need to control homosexual people within these teachings by limiting their access to legal protection and rights. Frank, by contrast, saw this aspect of the teaching as confirmation that all people, regardless of faith or its lack, saw something problematic in homosexual behaviour and that violence, however unwelcome, was an indicator that homosexuality was a ‘stumbling block’ and a ‘problem’. He said that the Church was merely ‘predicting’ or ‘red-flagging’ the obvious reaction from people who have discerned that a ‘universal law or moral truth’ has been contravened in homosexual behaviour.

7.8.2. The teachers all found the concept of justly discriminating against a teacher on the basis of their homosexuality or same-sex relationship status to be unacceptable. Lucy and Nuala used their experience of LGBTQ+ colleagues as examples of how they were ideal professionals, ‘adored’ by students and serving as ‘excellent role models’ for them. Lucy was aware of another colleague who was wary about revealing the reality of her partnership with another woman out of fear that it could have potential repercussions in her career progression and spoke of the stress that this brought to her friend. Some of the teachers were quite shocked to discover that certain forms of discrimination against LGBTQ+ teachers (see 7.1.4) were legally protected within Catholic schools in England and Wales. Frank surmised that the Church could only justify such a form of discrimination (based on the probity of a teacher’s life), if it also discriminated against prospective teachers for all manner of other moral and religious infringements from abortion, adultery, cohabitation, and the use of contraception to non-attendance of Sunday Mass, or Confession. To do this, he concluded, would ensure that ‘you’d

have no one working in your schools'. The contradiction between the Church's condemnation of discrimination in *The 1986-Letter* and its own practices of discrimination was an issue frequently raised by their students, with Frank citing one of their typical responses, 'We hear your nice words about no discrimination, but you won't marry or ordain them'. Maura also claimed that the Church, in its verbal promotion of LGBTQ+ respect and dignity, was to be found lacking in its actions, with Lucy wondering how the Church could honestly promote genuine respect towards LGBTQ+ people whilst condemning their lifestyle in the manner it did.

7.9. Educators: The teachings about civil marriage legislation

7.9.1. Frank and Nuala made a distinction between civil partnerships and marriage, believing that the latter should remain an exclusively heterosexual option. Frank maintained his belief in the traditional definition of marriage, upheld by the Church, supported by NML, and defended by Jesus. He seemed conflicted, as he supported protective legal arrangements for same-sex couples without necessarily approving of the sexual acts these might include. Nuala queried why a same-sex couple would desire to conform to the norms of a heterosexual institution, maintaining that a civil partnership was fully equal and a more fitting expression of the unique nature of a same-sex relationship. She believed that the Church should allow such ceremonies to be celebrated in a Church setting for Catholic couples who requested such an arrangement. Christina fully supported the legal rights afforded by same-sex civil marriage, but said that the distinction between the civil and religious spheres was significant. Her students often confronted her with the question, 'What harm are they doing if they love each other?' and Christina was inclined to agree with this assertion. Lucy believed that same-sex couples should be able to marry legally and for those who were Catholic, sacramentally, as some LGBTQ+ Catholic couples might have a deeper faith commitment than many heterosexual Catholics she knew.

7.9.2. Katrina and Maura disagreed that the effects on society would be detrimental, pointing out that this was unproven by any evidence. Nuala agreed, asserting that it was, by contrast, a 'life-giving' change that afforded same-sex couples an outlet that nurtured, rather than harmed them, and so benefitted society. Owen was adamant that marriage as an institution predated Christianity and that its redefinition posed no harm to the society in which the Church existed. He agreed with the former Irish President, Mary McAleese, that the legalisation of marriage for same-sex couples had helped to remove 'the architecture of homophobia from Irish society' and was a positive societal change. Lucy considered marriage to already be a 'social construction that had been defined in a set manner' by people who now wanted no change to their definition. As such, she saw no harm whatsoever in redefining marriage to include same-sex couples. By way of contrast, Frank believed, using the 'slippery slope argument', that the redefinition of a traditionally defined institution like marriage 'opened the way to everything and anything'.

7.9.3. Christina was conflicted between her personal view that traditional male and female parenting was the ideal situation for child-rearing and her knowledge that many same-sex couples could and did provide loving, nurturing homes for adopted children. Unaware of any evidence to contradict this, she conceded that the degree to which children are loved would be the main determining factor in any parents' suitability to raise children. Owen considered that the Church had cynically climbed upon this 'bandwagon' about the potential harm caused to children without any evidence, and Nuala was angered that the Church spoke of the violence done to children in same-sex unions, fully aware of the violence meted out to many children in dysfunctional heterosexual unions, approved and blessed by the Church. Frank once again seemed conflicted by his awareness that same-sex couples provided good, stable homes for their children, conceding this to be preferable to children being raised from within the dysfunctionality of some heterosexual unions.

7.9.4. Many of this group agreed that legislators had a primary responsibility to their electorate rather than their Church's teachings and needed to inform themselves of all the arguments and the wider repercussions of proposed legislation. Owen acknowledged that there was a debate about whether religion had a 'role in the public square' of modern democracies, but strongly believed that alliances between Church and State 'hadn't worked out particularly well in the past', especially in Ireland. He believed that except in extreme situations (of which same-sex marriage was not one), politicians should 'park their religion' and avoid the creation of societal laws based solely upon their faith perspectives. Nuala believed that being a baptised Catholic did not mandate a politician to adhere to what their Church taught about particular issues, but Frank took an opposing position and argued that 'if your baptism makes you priest, prophet and king, can you divide your private and public roles?' He acknowledged, nevertheless, that in reality, most legislators would probably make decisions that provided them with the most electoral support.

7.10. Educators: The non-admission of homosexual candidates to Holy Orders

7.10.1. In common with nearly all the other participants, this teaching received no support from any of this sub-group, and they strongly disagreed with *The 2005-Instruction* and its assertion that homosexual priests lacked the ability to relate correctly to both men and women. Katrina said that it was self-evident that many priests were homosexual but that any inability to relate to people was caused by celibacy, gender or personality rather than their sexual orientation, with Lucy suggesting that some gay priests might relate more empathetically to women and minorities. Frank was one of several who identified one of the main criteria for suitability to Holy Orders as being the man's ability to live a mature celibate life, dismissing the assertion that homosexual priests were unable to relate to others. Christina and Nuala spoke of gay priests known to them who had left ministry to pursue relationships and praised the pastoral capabilities of these men, their popular appeal, and ability to reach out to the young and marginalised in their parishes. For Christina, the departure of her priest friend was a tragedy, and the consensus was that 'the priesthood lost a good priest'.

7.10.2. The teaching about the ordination of homosexual men carrying negative consequences, with the implied link to sex-abuse scandals, was categorically rejected. Maura and Katrina pointed out that abusive tendencies were more likely in heterosexual men, with Frank maintaining that paedophilia had causes quite distinct from a person's sexual orientation. Lucy was very angry at the implied link between homosexual clergy and abuse, contending that homosexual priests were a convenient scapegoat for wider ecclesial shortcomings in regard to child abuse. She referred to a heterosexual priest living in her home parish who had fathered a child and who, by neglecting his responsibilities, showed that such negative consequences were irrespective of a person's sexual orientation. Owen called the inferred link between abuse and clerical homosexuality 'illogical, unfair, and without any foundation in fact'. Like many of the participants, he identified the main source of scandal attached to clerical abuse in Ireland as the 'covering up of the problem' by the Church hierarchy. As such, in his view, it was to these men, rather than homosexual priests, that the finger of ecclesial blame should point.

7.10.3. Katrina was troubled by the section that instructed formators to refuse admission to candidates who had 'deep-seated homosexual tendencies'. Both she and Maura considered this as thwarting the likelihood that God was, in fact, calling such homosexual men to priesthood. Frank felt that it was in the candidate's own interests to be open and honest about his sexual orientation but that the Instruction's tone on this matter 'risked turning away and losing a lot of good priests'. Lucy was concerned that the Instruction would encourage unhealthy secrecy among homosexual candidates, eroding their self-esteem and giftedness. Nuala, from her own lay-role in diaconal formation, considered *The 2005-Instruction* as fostering an unhealthy view that being homosexual was wrong and best kept hidden. She was worried that the Church was adding to the burden of homosexual seminarians and priests, the additional mental strain and anxiety of being 'found out' or 'outed' as gay men.

7.11. Educators: The tone and language used in the Church teachings about homosexuality

7.11.1. A common concern from these participants was the emotional damage that hearing negative language could cause, derived from witnessing this among the young people they worked alongside and reinforced by the extremely professional care they all took when using language in their teaching or ministry. The phrases 'intrinsic evil' and 'objective disorder' were 'insulting' for Katrina, burdening LGBTQ+ people with potential guilt about an intrinsic aspect of themselves that they had neither the inclination or capability to alter. Maura wondered where such supposed objective moral disorders came from if not from the God who creates people in the divine image. Frank, the participant most in sympathy with these teachings, labelled these phrases as being 'difficult terminology, not helpful for people on the frontline, trying to present a more positive vision', and they led his LGBTQ+ students to infer that 'there is something wrong with me that needs to be fixed'. The 'objective' and unchosen nature of their sexual orientation would make such young people despair that 'I'm always going to be

this thing'. For Frank, in working with large groups of young people, 'language matters', and once again and significantly he said with real conviction, 'I'd never want my son to be told he was intrinsically disordered'.

7.11.2. Christina reflected with real sorrow on a very vulnerable LGBTQ+ student expressing the depth of his feelings about this particular terminology during a lesson. Like Frank, she was adamant that with young people and indeed for everyone, language matters. She recounted a lesson that included reflecting on homophobic terms that students heard among their peers. The class reflected on and agreed that terms like 'faggot', 'sissy', 'queer' and many others had the ability to inflict damaging wounds on LGBTQ+ students. In Christina's professional opinion, terminology such as 'objective disorder' and 'intrinsic moral evil' were the theological and ecclesial equivalents of 'faggot' and 'sissy', levied at LGBTQ+ people by their Church, and were arguably much more damaging as a result. Lucy was visibly shaken upon seeing this terminology, describing the language and tone as 'truly awful'. In common with the others, she was clear that 'language matters a lot and can't be trivialised'. Nuala was deeply disturbed by the impact of such terminology. 'It's the most condemning statement that could be made', she said, implying to LGBTQ+ people that they had deliberately corrupted their own nature or that God had made some kind of terrible mistake with them. Both of these were appalling propositions for Nuala, well-practised in the many skills of faith formation for the young people with whom she worked. Owen said that the theological and philosophical background to such terminology could not absolve it from its 'absolutely offensive' tone, leaving LGBTQ+ people and students supposing this evil to be 'within them and inbuilt', something that 'can never change', and from which there can be 'no escape'.

7.11.3. It was for the more vulnerable and impressionable young people with whom they worked that the most concern was expressed about the potential damage that such tone and language could cause. Katrina and Maura were adamant that these teachings were, in Katrina's words, 'very, very damaging to people's mental health...and very hard to combat'. Christina said that there had to be accountability on the part of those who authored such terminology as their words had the effect of being 'like a bomb whenever you hear them'. She was '100%' adamant that such words could directly or indirectly lead a vulnerable young person towards self-harm. Frank was convinced that 'our most dangerous weapons are our tongues and our words' and worried that his students who heard such terminology would never get the necessary time to 'unpick' or contextualise words which would make an 'immediate and lasting impact'. Lucy, fastidious about the care with which she employed language in the classroom, surmised that even for those who were more robust, the continual repetition of such words could 'start to wear you down'. Nuala reflected on one vulnerable gay student she had taught and said, 'There's no doubt in my mind that there are young people who have not accepted their sexuality because of Church teaching, and it has caused serious damage'. Moving on, Nuala found the assertion in *The 1986-Letter* that the Church regards people as neither heterosexual or homosexual but

only as children of God to be hilarious. With much mirth, she reflected that if an A-Level student who had argued consistently for one side of an argument then concluded with an entirely incongruous or alternative point of view, they ‘would be failed’ by her and any public examiner. For Owen, the language and tone of these documents were scandalous, ‘I think it should be challenged’, he said, ‘but in challenging it, you’re even giving it credence’, and for his generation and younger, ‘people won’t even take that language on’.

7.12. Educators: The teachings about gender-fluidity and transgender people

7.12.1. This was an area about which this group of participants had a great deal to say. Katrina felt that gender transition should be fully supported, but only beyond a stage when it could be well established that it was not a whim, and after which full hormonal maturity had been reached. She reckoned that each person ought to be assessed on a case-by-case basis to determine the correct age for that person and that the Church should apply its caution with compassion and in a non-judgemental manner. Many of the educators expressed a broadly similar point of view. One key area of concern was around the possibility that some young people could be raised in a gender-neutral environment, giving them no basis to establish a definitive gender identity and so causing the young person distress and difficulty as they mature. Christina and Nuala were uncomfortable about the confusion for students that could result from viewing gender as a fluctuating concept, particularly when they approached and underwent puberty. Frank was deeply concerned about the concepts of gender fluidity and neutrality and the extreme confusion this created in a school environment. His instinct was to agree with Pope Francis that young people should be encouraged to accept the gender identity and biological sex with which they were born, but realised that this would not rest easily with students who did experience genuine gender dysphoria.

7.12.2. This was clearly an issue that this group experienced as a particular ‘minefield’ to use a phrase that several of them employed. In their professional environments, the issue of gender fluidity for young people caused many complex administrative and pastoral dilemmas, about which many of them acknowledged an insufficient amount of personal knowledge and workplace guidelines. Katrina echoed the views of the entire group in expressing a strong desire to fully and sensitively support each young person, in addition to a realisation that the factors involved were complex and manifold. Maura expressed concerns about the awkward situations that gender fluidity created for any adult who worked with young people and that negotiating this required careful cooperation between the professionals, the young people and their parents or carers. Christina also cited the complexity of the issue regarding names and pronouns and that it could be very damaging, e.g., to dismiss ideas of gender fluidity among young people as merely being a whim or a fad. She spoke about the mother of one of her students who had begun the process of gender reassignment who said to her ‘I’d rather have him as my son than dead as my daughter’.

7.12.3. Frank very obviously struggled on a personal level with the very concept of gender fluidity, as it seemed to contradict the scriptural and NML-based anthropology in which he strongly believed. Significantly, he subdued his personal misgivings in the realisation that ‘whatever they’re going through is much worse than my issues with it’. He did seem very concerned about the complex logistical and administrative adaptations that gender fluidity brought to the school environment, which required constantly evolving guidelines. Ultimately, he wondered how Catholic schools would adapt in the years to come. Lucy was also aware of the complexities but particularly aware of how her school was a safe space for some of her students from a largely rural catchment, some of whom were experiencing gender confusion or dysphoria with little support. Ultimately, Nuala as a senior manager, saw the role of the school as providing a safe, accepting, and compassionate space in which every student could progress along the journey towards establishing a gender identity that ‘rested well with them’. Owen echoed the view that this issue created challenges for schools but was clear that society and the schools of which they are a part needed to be led by scientific knowledge in an area that, for many of the young people involved, was not a matter of choice.

7.13. Educators: Change of tone on LGBTQ+ issues by Pope Francis and some Church leaders

7.13.1. The words and actions of Pope Francis, suggesting the advent of subtle changes of attitude towards LGBTQ+ people, were warmly received by this group. Katrina was impressed that the ‘who am I to judge?’ comment of Francis was indicative of his desire to lead by example on this issue as an equal rather than an autocrat. She, like several of the group, commented on how warmly young people received this message from a pope who seemed to see the personhood of LGBTQ+ people ahead of their sexual activity. Christina was clear that the ‘who am I to judge?’ statement was very useful with her students and went some way towards helping students to counteract the ‘Church hates gay people’ perception that they had largely assimilated. Like several of the others, she saw Francis as adopting the model set by Jesus’ ministry to the marginalised people of his time. Frank had been broadly supportive of traditional teaching yet clearly struggled at times with its pastoral application. It seemed from the fulsome praise he offered Pope Francis that he was impressed by the delicacy of an approach to LGBTQ+ people that was pastoral but doctrinally orthodox. He commended Francis’ indication to LGBTQ+ people that ‘pastorally he’s on your side, he hasn’t changed anything, but he’s walking alongside you’. As a conservative Catholic, Frank was clear that despite the conservative backlash to Pope Francis from certain quarters in the Church, Francis was ‘doing the right thing’. Lucy was also impressed by the degree to which Francis’ outreach through word and gesture to LGBTQ+ people seemed to mirror the ministry of Jesus to the outcast. Nuala agreed, and a key phrase she used with students was Francis’ comment to a gay survivor of sex-abuse from 2018, ‘you have to be happy with who you are’. Nuala saw a consistent pattern in Francis’ outreach that was modelled on practice and example rather than on changing doctrines.

7.13.2. Christina, nevertheless, reflected on how her students were able to identify a discrepancy between words and actions and that in this respect, many exclusionary words and teachings of the Church remained unchanged, Francis' warmer words notwithstanding. Lucy also felt that her Church should become proactive in tackling the problems of homophobia that she believed some Catholic people justified through their religious faith. Nuala acknowledged that it was easy for her to warmly welcome Francis' words, but for LGBTQ+ Catholics, there must be great frustration that there was little change of substance, especially with regard to offensive and damaging doctrinal language. Owen wondered if, ultimately, the teachings about LGBTQ+ issues might simply be disregarded in practice, even by clergy, and that they would fade from view and cease to be relevant. He was somewhat sceptical of how the inclusive words of Francis were often 'reined in' after they had been made and that there was little evidence of any will to change the substance of teachings, as this would require major alterations to other related Catholic teachings about, e.g. birth control. He reckoned that the Church *could* change its teachings, as it had done so in the past, but that there may be little appetite to do so, on this issue.

7.14. Educators: On how attitudes to the Church had changed, particularly in Ireland

7.14.1 The change of attitude to LGBTQ+ people was raised and often reflected upon through the lens of how the young people they worked with held attitudes at variance with those expressed in the Church teachings. Katrina reflected on how, even in rural areas of the diocese within which she worked, most people knew family members or others who were LGBTQ+ and that this had helped to change attitudes in Ireland faster than Church doctrine ever would. Maura thought that for young people, the issue of a person's sexual orientation was no longer something that caused stigmatisation or exclusion and that they simply 'saw the person', rather than their sexual preferences. Christina also thought that attitudes to LGBTQ+ people had changed greatly in Ireland. She reflected on how the appearance of a same-sex couple on the last TV series of 'Strictly Come Dancing' had barely generated any comments from her professional and social colleagues, seeing this as proof of how social mores, even in rural Ireland, had evolved. Nuala observed that her students simply did not regard a person's sexual orientation to be any grounds upon which to judge, discriminate or stigmatise someone and that such judgement of LGBTQ+ people was, in her opinion, something exclusive to some older Catholics and their ecclesial leaders. She noted that her Muslim students came from communities that still supported their religion's condemnation of homosexuality and how strongly this contrasted with her own Catholic students, coming from communities that reject their own Church's similar condemnations of homosexual acts. Owen, who had been involved in several recent diocesan synodal sessions with representatives of Irish young people, said that, with regard to other Catholic ethical teachings on same-sex marriage and even abortion, young Catholics in his diocese 'disagree with them, almost universally'.

7.14.2. Katrina focused on how the imperative of ‘producing offspring’, so emphasised by the Church, had been applied with a hypocritical attitude of judgement and stigmatisation of women who did produce offspring but in the wrong circumstances. The incarceration and abuse of unmarried mothers in the various institutions ran by the Church and supported by the State was proof of how unevenly the NML obedience to the primary precept of ‘reproduction’ had been applied. She now strongly supposed that the majority of Catholics no longer accepted the Church’s insistence on a link between sexual activity and an openness to biological life. Lucy reflected on how, in the past, there was enormous Church-led pressure on Irish Catholic women to produce large families, creating enormous stress and pressure, but that this had now changed dramatically. Nuala spoke of how the Church’s upholding of what it regarded as the traditional nuclear family no longer matched ‘the reality on the ground’. People were largely comfortable with multiple expressions of non-traditional family units, and in her opinion, the terms ‘home’ or ‘family’ were identified with any domestic situation ‘where there was love’. Katrina reflected on the repressive and fearful attitude which had in the past helped to create the circumstances in which domestic, clerical, and institutional child-sex abuse was covered up. That the deference to Church teachings, which shrouded sexual activity in fear, guilt and repression, has disappeared in modern Irish society was something she viewed as being a healthy and positive change.

7.15. Educators: Links between the teachings about homosexuality and other notable issues for the Church

7.15.1. The ‘side-lining of women’ was, for Katrina, a parallel injustice to the stigmatisation of homosexuality and one that the Church continued to practice through its exclusion of women from ecclesial leadership roles. Lucy labelled the Church’s attitude to women alongside its attitudes to LGBTQ+ people as being ‘backward’, with a huge ecclesial rethink of such attitudes being the only thing that would now prevent the Church from losing substantial members of both these groups. Involuntary celibacy for priests was something that, for Katrina, continues to rob priests of one of life’s potential joys and discriminates against those who would feel called to both priesthood and marriage with parenthood. Nuala agreed that the exaltation of chastity as a virtue practised by the clergy and religious had created an ecclesial ‘obsession with sex’, to the exclusion of them promoting other important Christian virtues or challenging their absence. Lucy believed that the discipline of celibacy had placed priests ‘on a pedestal’, rendering them out of touch with real people, their lives, families, and relationships, and hindering their ability to connect with them in preaching. A number of the group raised the continued prohibition on artificial contraception by the Church as indicative of its intransigence and unwillingness to let go of the link it has insisted upon between sex and procreation. For Lucy, this prohibition on artificial birth control continued to be the Church’s ‘way of trying to control how women behave’.

7.16. Educators: Overall levels of agreement or disagreement with the teachings about homosexuality

7.16.1. This group of participants were all professional Catholic educators paid to communicate a Catholic Christian ethos to the students and young people with whom they worked. All rejected the manner in which the Church employed scripture within its teachings about homosexuality, seeing it as being used selectively and entirely without context to match its own negative views on homosexuality. The majority rejected the necessity of a procreative link to every sexual act which formed the basis for the use of NML in the Church's prohibition of homosexual acts. Frank was the only exception to this, admiring the integrity and objectivity of NML as an ethical theory, even as he struggled at times to reconcile its inability to deal with real-life ethical dilemmas. All of the group criticised the Church for its failure to adequately absorb some of the recent findings of the human sciences when it taught about LGBTQ+ issues.

7.16.2. All of these participants rejected the way in which the Church recommends that homosexual people should lead their lives. Every member of this group was clear that being required to pursue celibate lives with no possibility of forming a stable or committed loving relationship would be damaging and detrimental to those who attempted to do so. The group, with one exception, was deeply repelled by the contradictions within the Church's teachings about violence and discrimination towards LGBTQ+ people. Frank alone felt that the Church was mirroring an instinctive, NML-lead abhorrence of homosexual acts by some people. These educators emphasised that the young people with whom they worked saw the discrimination practised by the Church towards LGBTQ+ people with sharpness and clarity, recognising the contradictions in these teachings in a manner that their Church could not.

7.16.3. With regard to legislation to facilitate legal same-sex unions, there was more divergence of opinion, although the majority disagreed with Church teaching and wholeheartedly agreed with *some* form of same-sex legal unions, advocating Church-based blessing or marriage for same-sex couples. With no exception, the group was dismissive of the more recent Church prohibition on homosexual men being ordained to Holy Orders. Scathing of the use of language and tone by the Church in its teachings, these professionals were considerably more sensitive and aware of the potentially negative power of language than were the authors of the Church doctrine on homosexuality. Unlike them, the official teachers of doctrine had the luxury to choose *their* words in circumstances very different to the crucible of a modern classroom environment.

7.16.4. These Catholic educators combined great sensitivity and compassion for people who experienced gender dysphoria with a professional concern about the maturity of those who might seek to make life-altering surgical or hormonal changes. Nevertheless, some held misgivings about the possibility that gender fluidity had become something of a trend and worried that this could, in certain circumstances, create pressure on some vulnerable students. The caution expressed by the Church

teachings on this issue was shared to some degree by this group. It was abundantly clear, however, that in contrast to doctrinal concerns, they were much more concerned at a human level for how they could best support and accompany all young people in their charge experiencing gender identity issues. All of the group were very supportive of, and impressed by the change of tone and the various words and actions of outreach to LGBTQ+ people by Pope Francis. All commented on how the young people with whom they worked seemed to be affected positively by the relatively simple words, and overtures of Pope Francis to LGBTQ+ people. The educators felt that the outreach of this pope seemed to mirror more adequately the positive ethos of the Catholicism they tried to convey to young people and the outreach and ministry to the marginalised, modelled by Jesus.

7.16.5. This group of participants had been professionally employed to educate and minister to young Catholics, guided by the authoritative teachings of the Church. Like the other groups, these men and women also lived and worked alongside LGBTQ+ people and couples as colleagues, friends, and neighbours. Their direct experience of such LGBTQ+ people caused them to view the authoritative words of their Church about these people and their options for life as being unfair, discriminatory and even harmful, causing them to honestly doubt the authority that underlay their Church's teachings. Nevertheless, this group was uniquely placed to critique the authoritative basis for the Church's teaching about this issue. It was clear to me that these were consummate professionals who took their role as educators and ministers to young Catholic people with the utmost seriousness. Much of what they said and many of the views they expressed about the teachings were passed through a filter of how they were received by the young people with whom they interacted. They witnessed firsthand the incisive ability of these young Catholics to see contradictions, injustice, and hypocrisy in teachings they regarded as incongruous with the teachings of Christ and the positive ethos of a Catholic setting. These educators struggled in many cases, to square this incongruity within their pedagogical practices. They worried deeply about the harmful effects that language and poorly delivered Church teachings could have on impressionable minds, particularly the most vulnerable students about whom they clearly cared deeply. It was perhaps Frank, the participant most inclined to be ideologically supportive of the teachings, who showed that ultimately, and for all these participants, true authority derives from experiential reality. On several occasions, it was clear that his respect for the Church's authority to teach clashed with his own experience of teaching what the Church required of him. Significantly, he knew that he would struggle to reconcile his submission to Church authority were one of his own children to come out as LGBTQ+. These were teachers and ministers who had learned through their work that authentic, genuinely authoritative teaching is delivered with care, respect for, and awareness of the recipient and their experiences; qualities they largely failed to recognise in their own Church's teachings about homosexuality.

Chapter 8. Analysis of the LGBTQ+ Catholic participant data

8.1. Background

8.1.1. The final group of participants were Irish Catholics who identified as members of the LGBTQ+ community and for this research, it seemed obvious that these men and women should form a distinct sub-group among the participants. Unlike the other four groups, this was not due to their particular role or vocation. Nevertheless, among the clergy, religious, laity, Catholic educators, the CDF and members of the magisterium, there are Catholics who fit somewhere into the identities represented by the LGBTQ+ acronym. The other sub-groups have been introduced in the analysis by a presentation of the Church's positive vision for them, but a LGBTQ+ Catholic would not be able to find anything that was inspirational or affirming from the teaching documents about them, but would quickly discover that their orientation was framed almost entirely as something negative and problematic. They might well draw the conclusion that their Church has reserved for its LGBTQ+ members some of its harshest language. At best, LGBTQ+ people are referenced throughout the teaching documents as being a problem: the Latin title of the main teaching document about LGBTQ+ people, *The 1986-Letter*, is '*Homosexualitatis Problema*' or 'the problem of homosexuality'.

8.1.2. LGBTQ+ people are also discussed in terms of what they are *not*. Reassuringly perhaps, LGBTQ+ people are not to be the victims of violence or discrimination, but on the proviso that they do not seek too many legal protections for their pseudo-rights. LGBTQ+ people are not the kind of citizens who have the ability to fit in well or be accepted within the societies they inhabit. They should not look to the scriptures or tradition of their faith to offer them reassurance about their sexual orientation, nor should they define themselves by their sexual orientation, for their Church regards them not as LGBTQ+ but as children of God, presumably and mysteriously detached from their sexual orientation. As such detached entities, LGBTQ+ people should not indulge in the intrinsically disordered sexual acts to which they are inclined by their orientation and not regard their orientation as being ordered towards that which is in any way good or moral. LGBTQ+ people could probably not take much comfort from the observation that their disordered inclination represents a trial, burden or problem which entails for them a life of sacrificial celibacy, but they cannot belong to Christ unless they crucify all their self-indulgent passions.

LGBTQ+ Catholics should not seek to form groups that might support them unless their purpose is to remind them of their disorder and the remedies offered by their Church. Within a legal union, LGBTQ+ Catholics should not consider the nature of their union to be remotely analogous to God's plan for marriage. As adoptive parents, such unions would not be conducive to their children's full human development, to the point of doing violence to them. A gay Catholic man would not be considered a suitable candidate for Holy Orders and if he were already a priest, would not possess the capacity to relate correctly to the men and women to whom he ministered, nor could he overlook the

negative consequences of his being ordained. If the Catholic person was experiencing gender dysphoria, they may not, as the Church directs, be able to accept their own body as it was created.

8.1.3. I am a LGBTQ+ Catholic who became aware of the Church's teachings about homosexuality through some pamphlets available from my local church, absorbing their negative diagnosis of a sexual orientation about which I was fully aware by the start of adolescence. This brief introduction to Church teaching notwithstanding, a deeply grounded faith and reflective personality seemed to bring with it a solid acceptance of my sexual orientation, and I did not experience the angst and shame that other young LGBTQ+ Christians have experienced (Joel R. Anderson & Yasin Koc 2020 and Jeremy J. Gibbs & Jeremy Goldbach 2015).

I was fully aware that I was pursuing a vocation to Holy Orders as a gay man, but a developing unhappiness after ordination was undoubtedly linked with my increasing dis-ease with what the Church taught about homosexuality and the cognitive dissonance this generated. *The 2005-Instruction* provided a seedbed from which my decision to leave ministry was nurtured. Since leaving ministry, I have adopted a detached attitude to these teachings on the whole, but remain conscious of the former Irish President, Mary McAleese's strongly worded condemnations of the teachings (Francis DeBernardo 2018 and Madeline Foley 2020) of how damaging they can be. The teachings have harmed people, they continue to do so in countries where LGBTQ+ people are persecuted, and hold the potential to generate further harm should future societal upheavals erode rights and protections for LGBTQ+ people that are still in their infancy. I remain a Catholic, but now view ecclesial matters from a certain distance, experiencing the liberation of being a marginalised LGBTQ+ Catholic after many years spent within the core structures of the Church.

8.1.4. There were ten LGBTQ+ participants sampled, as described in Chapter 3. Antony and Jonathan, in their 50s, were married to one another, with Antony having been in a previous heterosexual marriage and identifying as bisexual. Karen, in her early 50s and Lorraine, in her 40s, were a lesbian couple. Dermot, a man in his early 20s, identified as queer, considering his gender to be fluid. Oistin was a bisexual man in his late 50s who had been previously married to a woman, and Fiachra was a gay, partnered man in his early 40s. Oengus, Felix and Henry were gay single men, Oengus in his 40s, Felix in his early 50s, and Henry in his early 80s.

Table 26. LGBTQ+ participants

Name (pseudonyms) Male (M) Female (F) Lesbian (l) Gay (g) Bisexual (b) Queer (q)	Age-group	Employment Category	Ecclesial participation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Weekly or daily Mass attendance. (P) Regular but non-weekly Mass attendance. (OC) Does not currently attend Mass but previously did so regularly as an adult. (NP) Current ecclesial ministry or active parish/ecclesial role. * Previous ecclesial ministry or active parish/ecclesial role. **
Oengus M (g)	36-55	Employed	NP **
Fiachra M (g)	36-55	Employed	NP **
Lorraine F (l)	56-75	Employed	OC **
Karen F (l)	36-55	Employed	OC **
Oistin M (b)	56-75	Employed	P
Dermot M (q)	18-35	Employed	OC
Antony M (g)	36-55	Employed	NP
Jonathan M (b)	36-55	Employed	NP
Henry M (g)	75+	Retired	P *
Felix M (g)	36-55	Employed	OC **

NB. Some of these participant quotations contain strong language or expletives.

8.2. Oengus

8.2.1. Each of the LGBTQ+ participants brought their unique experiences of being both LGBTQ+ and Catholic to the conversations we shared. Oengus captured in a pithy and passionate verbal manner many of the contradictions and much of the pain these men and women experienced from the teachings their Church directs at them. Oengus was a gay man in his early 40s. He has a rich background in the fields of theology, spirituality, creative writing, poetry, conflict-resolution broadcasting, and retreat-giving. His early eagerness for his Catholic Christian faith was scarred by an encounter in his late adolescence and early 20s with conversion therapy, instigated by a charismatic Christian group to which he had revealed his homosexual orientation. The traumatic experiences of being prayed over in an exorcism format left deep scars. After healing and the passage of time, his capacity for critical thinking enabled these experiences to become the platform from which he asked wider and deeper questions about his life, spirituality, and his belonging to credal Christianity.

8.2.2. Having pursued theology beyond third level, he contemplated a vocation to priesthood. In *The 2005-Instruction* he saw a rejection of his vocation, spirituality, and sexual orientation, which opened for him alternative pathways of seeking spiritual grounding than from the Catholic Church. As a person concerned with text and its meaning, he was dismayed by the fearful and watchful environment of the Catholic university he attended in the early 1990s. The theology programme there

used scripture unimaginatively when, in his view, the Church should be ‘more radical in its scripture reading’. Instead, the Church, particularly when it came to the ‘texts of terror’ on homosexuality, ignored other interpretations of its selected texts, paying no attention to the overarching and radical message of gospel inclusivity or other biblical texts. With regard to NML, he criticised the Church in framing a negative and restrictive argument about homosexuality in the name of Thomas Aquinas, a man noted for his expansive outlook. Aquinas, for him, as someone ‘who believed in evidence...and our capacity to use our brains...would acquiesce with many of the things that Catholic gay theologians are saying’. As a younger Catholic, he had been proud that his Church appeared to relate more positively to the findings of science, particularly in the fields of evolution and cosmology. Sadly, his disappointment grew as he realised that through its teachings about him and other LGBTQ+ people, his Church ignored evidence and even constructed arguments based on no evidence at all. Oengus believed the negativity of the Church’s teaching was influenced by the internalised homophobia of magisterial teachers, terrified of a sexual orientation some of them possessed, misunderstood, and despised.

8.2.3. Many of Oengus’s views were supported by anecdotal narratives about people who had accompanied him in life. From a spiritual director who guided him through the crisis of dealing with the rejection he experienced from *The 2005-Instruction* to gay priest friends whose energy, ‘pastoral brilliance’ and callings were dimmed and extinguished by the negativity of the same Instruction. After his traumatic ‘reparative therapy’, he met with a well-adjusted, openly gay friend. On asking this friend if ‘love is possible for gay people, for I’ve been told it’s not?’, the friend said simply, ‘come and meet them’, offering to bring Oengus to meet some couples who had forged the loving relationships that his Church told him were impossible. For Oengus, this was a defining moment of liberation, ‘it was all I needed to hear, and it changed everything’. Oengus has since gone into exile from a Church to which he once belonged and to which he looks back with some hope that it might one day repent of its narrowness and inhospitality. There remains in him a sadness about the Church which claims to be an ‘authority on the human person, the mystery of being alive, and what it means to love, but it’s not!’ Oengus doesn’t remain hopeful that his Church possesses the capacity for meaningful change, but as an exile from it, he cares deeply that it should.

8.3. LGBTQ+ Catholics: The scriptural basis for the teachings

8.3.1. Jonathan condemned the selectivity of texts and the interpretations used by the Church, and Dermot queried the manner in which the Church selected ‘negative and fearful’ Old Testament texts whilst ignoring the more love-based, inclusive gospel message. He was baffled that the teachings seemed to equate consensual same-sex love with the Gn. 19. account of attempted gang rape, and wondered what Jesus would make of the scriptures being misused in such a fashion to exclude marginalised people. Henry was contemptuous about how the Church ignored any historical-social context, the Levitical prohibitions, for example, being clearly influenced by that society’s desire to

maintain the male patriarchy coupled with the mistaken assumption that the male semen was the exclusive agent in reproduction.

8.3.2. Karen and Lorraine, as people of faith, tried to engage with this scripture without ‘cherry-picking the texts’ they liked but were struck by how unapologetically the Church itself ‘cherry-picked’ its own texts, supplying neither cultural or societal context. Oengus had always found the Church’s use of scripture to be ‘so flimsy’. He argued that the ‘Church interprets scripture through a lens of moral theology where you have a predetermined moral outcome about a particular type of conservative sexual ethic’. He criticised the attempts made by the Church to build a theology of the body, complementarity and marriage from the slim pickings available in scriptural texts. ‘There’s barely a marriage there that you’d want to be a part of or an account of family life that’s not fucked up or frightening’. He was aghast at the simplistic acceptance of translating the Greek term *arsenokoitai*³⁸ as ‘homosexuality’ and always used without context.

8.3.3. Unlike the other groups of participants, the selection by the Church of these scriptural passages refers directly to them, and their reactions are important. Jonathan reflected that such texts had informed an underlying homophobia in his parents and family. Dermot was disappointed to see how his Church used scripture here, and this alone could tempt him to disregard everything else that the Church had to teach on this matter. Fiachra was dismayed by the casual and non-contextual use of random texts confirming for him that the Church had become an ‘alienating and unwelcoming’ place for him as someone who had once been deeply involved with it. A theme among this group was their expression of anger and disappointment about how the Church taught, followed always by a defiant determination not to let the message hurt or harm them any more than it had once been able to. Henry had long since chosen not to ‘get too hung up on scriptures’ as he didn’t ‘believe that they are the definitive revelation of the Almighty’. Lorraine and Karen noted that as females, their own same-sex desires were ignored by these scriptural references, but chose to disregard the overall negativity. Oistin knew that his experience of being a man attracted to other men was something inherently good and positive, allowing him to ignore the negativity of the scriptural assessment and its use as a ‘weapon with which to moralise’. Oengus claimed that the Church appeared to switch off its intelligence when it came to using the scriptures in such arguments and forfeited its authority to teach as a result.

8.4. LGBTQ+ Catholics: Natural Moral Law (NML)

8.4.1. Within his heterosexual marriage, it had seemed clear to Antony and his wife that sex was ‘for making babies’ and that outside this primary purpose, it was not to be fully approved of by the Church. ‘If that’s what they thought of heterosexual relationships’, he observed, ‘they’re never going to agree to two men’. Dermot wondered how the decision not to have children harmed anyone, and

³⁸ 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 and 1 Timothy 1:10.

Fiachra raised the issue of there being many heterosexual couples who choose not to procreate or should never procreate due to their abusive parenting. As a GP, Felix wondered about how the teachings would apply to infertile couples, those who have sex during a pregnancy term, or couples where the wife is post-menopausal, none of whom could procreate during intercourse. He wondered at the Church's blindness to the joys of consensual pleasure for pleasure's sake alone, for that too was 'something wonderful'.

Karen remembered with bemusement about hearing how the Lucan example of Elizabeth and Zachariah had been used to justify non-procreative sex for infertile couples, as the story 'proved' that within every act of heterosexual marital intercourse, there was 'always hope'. She and Lorraine laughed as they suggested that they, too, could adopt such a hopeful attitude to their own intimate acts. Oengus remembered with disdain how it had been claimed in his theology course that infertile couples 'would have had the capacity if they'd married earlier'. His pithy reaction had been, 'oh my God, this is entering the realms of metaphysics; we're now bending time to get over the fact that we're talking about a penis and a vagina'.

8.4.2. The claim in *The 1986-Letter* that same-sex acts are self-indulgent and part of a self-destructive way of life was condemned by Jonathan and Karen, both querying how the Church could know or judge the extent to which they and their partners acted from either selfishness or selflessness. Oistin had a son, with whom he and his former wife shared ongoing parental 'life and love' in a non-selfish, non-destructive manner, similar to many other LGBTQ+ couples. Felix reflected on how he had first 'come out' to his socially conservative Catholic parents. His mother had affirmed her love and unconditional acceptance, but his father had said that Felix was 'going against natural law' and would 'burn in hell for all eternity'. A less entrenched attitude emerged with the passage of time, but it reinforced for Felix how 'black and white' NML could be when it met real-life situations. It also allowed him to reflect with gratitude on how his devout Catholic mother was swiftly able to put the welfare of her child ahead of the edicts underpinned by NML.

Henry claimed that NML was an ethical theory carved out of a primitive view of the natural order, long ago made obsolete, and was frustrated that the Church was incapable of broaching any other framework for sexual morality. Oengus condemned the use of NML to prohibit homosexual acts as 'the narrowing idolatry of only interpreting the issue through the question of genitalia, which is a biologist point of view'. Fruitfulness, he argued, could very well be framed much more broadly, and Thomas Aquinas had actually been 'a very secular person' who believed that 'the capacity of your brain should be evolving, not turned back'. Aquinas, he contended, believed in the use of evidence, while the Church ignored 'evidence of love and fruitfulness in the lives of LGBTQ+ people' and scientific insights about homosexuality.

8.5. LGBTQ+ Catholics: The human sciences

8.5.1. A common theme among these participants was how the Church told them that they were something that did not match the evidence of their own experience. Science, in contrast, seemed to provide them with a narrative based upon evidence. Antony, with great emotion, expressed his frustration that the Church judged his orientation and relationship with his husband in terms of a moral choice. Reflecting on the upheaval that followed his coming out, he said ‘I drove away from my family [wife and children] in a van...it’s not something you choose’. Dermot was a sociologist and said that the human sciences produce evidence to further the pursuit of human knowledge, not as anti-Church propaganda. Felix warned that ‘you can’t ignore evidence’, and the Church, by doing so, could ‘very quickly argue itself into complete irrelevance’. Henry regarded the prophets of the current age to be the scientists, scholars, and artists ‘revealing the mysteries of God’s creation’ and that we must listen and engage with their ‘evidence of God’s actions’. Oengus had admired his Church’s openness to science but was saddened that this did not extend to homosexuality, ‘love the sciences, the way you say you do, and don’t make up shit about people who are standing in front of you saying, “this isn’t true about our lives”’. Oistin believed the evidence of his own life that assured him that his attraction to other men was ‘a gift’ and that ‘it was beautiful’. If the human sciences supported this, he was glad to welcome their contribution.

8.5.2. Dermot reckoned that a ‘holistic’ approach to sexuality generated by the insights of science provided a basis for dialogue about human sexuality, and if the Church wanted to be involved in such a dialogue, it could certainly offer its vision in a respectful way. Henry felt that an arrogant Church remained uninterested in reinterpreting NML arguments in the light of scientific insight and thereby forfeited its right to claim a superior vision to that of science. Karen supposed that the Church *could* offer such a vision for LGBTQ+ people if it were prepared to absorb the best wisdom and insights from other sources, including science. Lorraine was adamant that any vision provided by the Church for them would have to embrace the fact that ‘God has created us as lesbians, and wants us to be the best people we can be, and that being lesbian is part of that’. She and Lorraine concluded that the Church and the vision it offered to LGBTQ+ people was like an old photograph, losing its clarity, impact, and relevance over the years, ‘it’s fading, and fading and fading’, Karen said, ‘and that is quite sad’. Oengus said that in the incarnation, God showed a ‘great curiosity about the human experiment’ and that, as a result, we needed to ‘pay attention to the “carne”...the flesh and humanity around you’. He claimed that the Church ignored the reality of evidence, exemplified by its assertion that homosexual people should not label themselves in such a way—‘you’re not really homosexual, it doesn’t define you, is as if to say, your personhood and your sexuality are completely distinct’. The Church thereby becomes the ‘the one that limits us’.

8.6. LGBTQ+ Catholics: On other issues arising from the discussion about authority

8.6.1. These participants were reconciled to their sexual orientation despite, rather than because of, what the Church told them. Their own evidence had to count for a lot, as for them, accepting the truth of their orientation had been done without the usual societal or ecclesial affirmations available to heterosexual people, and they had learned to trust their experience. Fiachra claimed that the teachings were telling him that he is wrong about his own experience of his own life, leaving him no option but to reject its authority in favour of his own. Felix reflected on how his personal experience of same-sex acts as being ‘wonderful, good, positive, special, and fun’ contradicted how the Church viewed the same acts as self-indulgent, disordered and intrinsically evil. Henry recalled a recent questionnaire from his parish connected to the *Synod on the Family*. One of the questions was, ‘what can we do to convince people to see things as we do?’. For Henry, this proved that the Church had a closed mindset and would never be willing to listen to experience.

8.6.2. Karen said of the teachings, ‘the presumption is, you’re miserable’, but ‘what the Church needs to hear is that I don’t suffer because I am homosexual, I suffer from how I am treated because I am homosexual’. Reflecting on the 2015-IMR, she said that people ‘loved their family and friends who were gay and therefore said [of the teachings], “we can’t be doing with that”’. Karen reflected on how within her Church, ‘no lived gay reality is presented in a positive light...nothing about my life is here...nothing that would affirm my reality’. At best, she considered herself and her partner to be ‘problems to be ministered to’ by her Church. Lorraine saw a Church focused on their sexual activity rather than the experience of their love and the value of their relationship.

8.6.3. These participants seemed to go further in wondering from what deeper motivation the Church really drew its condemnation of homosexual behaviour. Felix recounted an experience of a Catholic university chaplain to whom he had revealed his same-sex attractions. He was repeatedly told by this pastor that ‘it was only a phase he would grow out of’. The priest advised him of the negativity attached to being gay— ‘there’s nothing gay about it, you don’t see any gay people who are happy in their life of lust’. When Felix shared his decision to come out to family and friends with the priest, he said, ‘calm down now, Felix, calm down’. To which Felix replied, ‘it’s not me who needs to calm down, Father’. Felix quickly recognised how this priest was ‘floundering in his own issues’ and, as a pastor, was unable to assist him in his integration of faith and sexual identity. He now wondered if it was easy for some closeted or sexually immature gay clergy to maintain condemnation of a homosexuality they regarded as their own internal enemy. Jonathan, suspicious of why the Church spent so much energy fighting homosexuality, concluded that partly as a result of so many closeted gay clergy, there was deep-seated ‘fear that it will all unravel’. Oengus spoke with sorrow about the time when he finally had to reject the authority of the Church after *The 2005-Instruction*. It was as if the Church was saying, ‘we’re willing to make this shit up just to make your intrinsic disorder clearer’. The Instruction, he claimed, ‘showed a level of malevolence towards homosexual priests,

plenty of whom were involved in writing it, including Pope Benedict...manifesting their own hatred of LGBT life, culture and dignity'. For Oengus, this was a departure point, 'I was cast adrift by this', he said, and 'to go back would have been doing a violence to myself'.

8.6.4. These men and women did not feel welcomed by their Church. Jonathan said, 'you're not really wanted, and not included in the Church's conversation about you', even as they 'tell you how to live your life'. Fiachra had been committed to the life of his local parish and diocese, leading music ministry well into his 30s. He feels that his same-sex relationship is 'not acknowledged or welcomed, but condemned and judged, and they're actually saying to me "who I am is not who I should be" '. The option to remain within the Church would be 'like going to a party that you haven't been invited to, you don't feel welcome, because you're not supposed to be there'. Karen and Lorraine had both been deeply involved in their local parishes and both had been employed in youth ministry over the years. Their Church-based ministry has ended as a result of their own fears about how their relationship might come to the attention of their former Church employers. They both said that they loved the Church, its rituals, and theology, but the exclusion is a key factor for them in keeping their distance. Lorraine wondered if this was, in fact, what the Church actually wanted in the long run, adding that 'the Church has no interest in where we go to'. Oistin echoed these sentiments when he said that the message he has absorbed from his Church is that 'you're in isolation, and you're not a good person if you're gay'.

8.7. LGBTQ+ Catholics: The teachings on how LGBTQ+ people should live moral lives

8.7.1. Unlike all the other participants, the LGBTQ+ Catholics knew that these recommendations were being directed at them, and they knew internally the impact of hearing these words and recommendations, carrying an instruction as to how they should live moral lives. For this group, negativity was precisely what they had learned to anticipate from a Church that for many of them, was a spiritual home which they no longer wanted to inhabit. Antony felt that these recommendations were telling him 'to never find happiness in a loving relationship'. He recalled an Irish politician in his 70s who had 'come out' as gay during the 2015-IMR campaign, filled with regrets for the life he never got to live, having obeyed the Church, to the point where it was now too late. Dermot was grateful that he was now at a point in his life where he 'could scoff at this' but 'found it really upsetting' that more impressionable Catholics might take it seriously. Fiachra greeted the instructions with ironic laughter, saying, 'it's a bit of a joke, isn't it? there's nothing here that I can relate to, and it summarises really well why homosexual people have left the Church because this is not normal'. Felix initially seemed relatively unphased but added, 'I'm not sure if I'd still be alive if I had tried to follow these instructions'.

8.7.2. Henry, with a bat of his hand, said derisively, 'this is a bit of patronising codswallop...totally negative and childish kind of stuff, really'. Karen was vexed by the spiritual remedies offered by the

Church to suffering LGBTQ+ people as they embraced its advice, ‘God doesn’t want your suffering’, she said with conviction, asking, ‘how could God actually gain any pleasure from you leading a life that’s less?’. It was as if the Church were saying to her and LGBTQ+ people, ‘you can have this part of a life, but not that part, and we are the ones who get to decide’. Lorraine said the vision offered was ‘life-sapping’ and evidence that the Church teachers had recreated a ‘God in their own narrow image and likeness’. Oengus excoriated the Church’s ‘limited imagination about what the role of pleasure in the body is, ignorant of the possibility of love being there too’. He said of these recommendations, ‘it reflects over and over again their fucking obsession with it all, spending their time “praying the gay away”, and trying to control themselves’. Oistin reflected on his life with varied experiences of sexual encounters and relationships and concluded that he had experienced the majority of them as positive and life-affirming aspects of his life’s journey. He could say with certainty that he would never ‘contemplate living according to those instructions’.

8.7.3. These LGBTQ+ participants reacted strongly to their orientation being described in *The 1986-Letter* as self-indulgent and destructive. Jonathan said that heterosexual people surely had self-indulgent passions and desires too, and Dermot wondered rhetorically what evidence of self-destructive lives the Church had used to underpin this statement. Felix dismissed the teaching as being beneath contempt and spoke about many examples of self-sacrifice from LGBTQ+ people that he has known and the ‘sacrifices made by people ostracised by society at every level’ during the HIV-AIDS pandemic, who were ‘the saints of their day’. As a GP, he agreed that anecdotal evidence would suggest that LGBTQ+ people suffer from higher rates of poor mental health and addiction, but that this ‘was not inherently because of being homosexual, but due to how LGBTQ+ people are treated within society, and the impacts of that’. Furthermore, as a GP, he had seen much self-destruction at play in people’s lives and observed that ‘sexuality is rarely a significant issue in it at all’. He added with a grin that he rejected the teachings and would ‘take the chance that he may burn in hell for all eternity’. Oengus remains a profoundly spiritual man but said, ‘I don’t recognise what the life of a sexually healthy and mature LGBT person is in the depictions being put across’. As a result, he has had to ‘separate himself from their voice’, a voice that says, ‘our interpretation of your life is authoritative’.

8.8. LGBTQ+ Catholics: The teachings about discrimination and violence towards LGBTQ+ people

8.8.1. Antony was clear that the teaching in *The 1986-Letter* about violence to homosexual people meant that, ‘if there’s violence against you, well it’s your own fault really’, and Karen drew attention to the nations where the death penalty still exists for homosexuality. Felix, a well-integrated gay man at ease with his sexual orientation, nevertheless spoke of a possible ‘future backlash against the LGBTQ+ community’ when it would be ‘too late to climb back into the closet’, adding that death at the hands of a violent mob could feasibly be how his life might end. Dermot suggested that the

Church was saying, ‘oh, we’ll turn a blind eye to violence; we told you it was going to happen’, while Henry mirrored this reaction by saying that the Church was quite clearly ‘condoning gay-bashing or coming very close to it’. Karen surmised that ‘if you’re not completely against discrimination and abuse of homosexual people, by default you’re in favour’. Oengus asked, ‘who gets to define where violence begins?’ as in regard to his conversion therapy, he recalled, ‘I didn’t have any physical bruises, but fuck, the shame that was ingrained...that’s pretty violent, and theologically violent too’. Oistin greeted this text with anger, ‘it’s fucking awful...they’re giving people liberty to knock the shit out of homosexuals and undoes all its previous condemnation’.

8.8.2. This was understandably an emotive topic for this group, and some went into further detail about their reactions to it. Karen suggested that the Church in this text was ‘allowing somebody to do its dirty work for them...to do the social control for it, so it doesn’t come across as the bogeyman’. Dermot was adamant that this part of the text emerged directly from the ‘internalised homophobia’ in the Church and experienced acutely by the people who drafted it. Felix was saddened that the text had emerged at the height of the HIV-AIDS epidemic and that these words were spoken to ‘people who were already dying in their droves, many having been cast away’ by family and community. Oengus was appalled that the Church issued these condemnations of violence without ‘searching its own conscience’ over its own historic violence against the ‘other’. Henry accused the Church of being the practitioner of ‘blatant discrimination’ against teachers, and pastoral and parish appointees, particularly in the USA, and Felix pointed to the discrimination outlined in *The 2005-Instruction*, prohibiting homosexual men from entering Holy Orders. Working for the NHS, he was in little danger of being discriminated against on the basis of sexual orientation, as his ‘organisation has to comply with the law, in a way that the Church perhaps doesn’t have to’.

8.9. LGBTQ+ Catholics: The teachings about civil marriage legislation

8.9.1. None of these men or women agreed with the *2003-Considerations*’ warning of the damage that the ‘legalisation of evil’, in the form of legal same-sex unions, would do to society. Antony has four children of school age from his heterosexual marriage and said that they were ‘unphased’ by their non-traditional experience of family life. Jonathan said that time and time again, dire warnings from the Church accompanied proposed changes to the Irish Constitution, warnings that have ultimately been experienced as baseless. He said that today, most Irish people tend to ignore the Church when it warns about the societal damage that might accompany new legislation. Dermot and Henry wondered how the Church had so much certainty that same-sex unions bore absolutely no relation to the divine plan for marriage and family, and Lorraine surmised that God was always present where there was love regardless of the situation. Oistin reflected on the presumed functionality attached by the Church to the heterosexual institution of marriage and family. As a separated couple, he and his former wife agree that they possess a much more functional, convivial, and respectful personal relationship than many known to them who remain within toxic marriages, endorsed and upheld by the Church.

8.9.2. Felix said that many practices and institutions have been redefined throughout history, with redefinition being a positive way of adapting to new knowledge and understanding. Oengus added that the redefinition of marriage was nothing new and that it had been redefined culturally, socially, and legally for millennia. Henry quipped, ‘isn’t it an awful pity the Creator didn’t have the benefit of the Roman Curia when he set about the task of creation’, adding that marriage needed to be redefined. Fiachra was saddened that the Church chose not to embrace a legal development that reinforced fidelity, commitment and love, all values it claims to uphold and promote. This group also believed that legislators had no right to oppose or obstruct legislation solely on the grounds of what they believe, or are told to do by their Church. Jonathan remembered how the majority of elected representatives in Ireland during the 2015-IMR campaign had realised that the views of the electorate were now at odds with the Church’s position and campaigned accordingly. The Church and State ought to be completely separate in Dermot’s view, and this separation had until recently been lacking in Ireland. Henry dismissed the demand that politicians legislate according to doctrine as being ‘that old chestnut, harking back to the days of Irish politicians bowing before their bishop to get his imprimatur’.

8.10. LGBTQ+ Catholics: The non-admission of homosexual candidates to Holy Orders

8.10.1. Lorraine raised the contradiction of stating that homosexuals should live a celibate life of prayer, sacramental encounter, self-denial and disinterested friendship and then deny male homosexuals the very vocation in which this was most likely to occur. Like other participants, the majority of this group mentioned that priests often had an inability to relate to people but that this had nothing to do with their sexual orientation. Oistin recalled with some mirth the priest who had clumsily instructed him and his former wife on the ‘rhythm-method’ of family planning prior to their marriage. Dermot said that in his experience, most priests presented an ‘asexual’ aura, making it hard to relate to them, regardless of their sexual orientation. Felix queried the non-existent empirical basis for the claim that gay priests could not relate to people and wondered if, as a doctor working in the community, the Church also regarded him to be an unsuitable candidate for his profession. Fiachra knew many gay priests who were evidence to him of the falsity of the Instruction’s claim that they lacked the ability to relate to people.

8.10.2. For Oengus, *The 2005-Instruction* offended his incarnational theological position that God’s presence was to be found in all things and in all human beings. He spoke about the ‘arbitrariness’ of the assertion in *The 2005-Instruction* that a candidate with transitory, rather than deep-seated tendencies, must have overcome these at least three years before ordination to the diaconate. Oengus asked by whom and on what basis such an arbitrary criterion was concocted and what evidence would have to have been gathered to prove the overcoming of such tendencies. He added that ‘anyone paying attention to this document would see it and go, “oh my God, there isn’t even the pretence of any pastoral care here; it’s just a fucking lie”’. Coming in the midst of his own vocational

discernment, the document was a watershed for Oengus and came to symbolise and precipitate ‘a divorce from the Church for me’.

8.10.3. Dermot was uncomfortable with the insistence that a gay seminarian be honest about his sexual orientation, particularly under duress, and knowing that it would lead to his expulsion, surmising that such a policy could terminate genuine vocations and stifle the goodwill and generosity of men who felt they were being genuinely called by God. Henry saw this as a move that would clearly ‘drive homosexuality in priesthood further and further into the closet’, with Oengus saying that it had ‘created a closet within a closet’. He worried deeply that the document created a ‘situation of extraordinary power’ for bishops and formators over their priests and seminarians and warned that the instruction for confessors to ‘dissuade’ gay seminarians from proceeding towards ordination was loaded with ‘rage, aggression and threat’. There was an understandable reaction from some over the implied link made in *The 2005-Instruction* between homosexuality in the priesthood and the clerical abuse scandals. Henry condemned it as a ‘knee-jerk reaction’ to some instances of paedophilia and pederasty by both homosexual and heterosexual priests, the problem clearly being linked to these disorders rather than sexual orientation. Oistin concluded that the Church was eager to link the ‘filth and dirt’ of paedophilia with the filth and dirt it also and clearly associated with homosexuality. Karen claimed that *The 2005-Instruction* was not only ‘bigoted, but felt like there was actual hatred in the midst of it’. For Oengus, the entire document ‘showed malevolence’ and the clear ‘self-hatred by the gay men’ who either authored or commissioned it. He expressed concerns about the ‘power, threats, jealousies, primal drives, rage and destruction’ that seemed to characterise encounters between ecclesial authority and ‘otherness’. Using words from Rumi, he said of such displays of ecclesial cognitive dissonance, ‘you can’t extinguish fire by putting more fuel on it’.

8.11. LGBTQ+ Catholics: The tone and language used in the Church teachings about homosexuality

8.11.1. The views and reactions of those towards whom the language of the teaching is directed are important to hear. Jonathan remembered the phrases ‘intrinsic evil’ and ‘objective disorder’ being used when he was coming to terms with his homosexuality and had taken them to mean that ‘you were evil, and were afflicted with something’, that ‘you were lesser than straight people, not equivalent, and like a sub-human being’. Dermot echoed some of these points, saying that the term ‘objective disorder’ immediately implied that a LGBTQ+ person was ‘less than’ and that ‘your very existence is a sin’. He found the words to be ‘really upsetting’ and worried that people who respected the Church and its authority might really absorb these words to their detriment. Fiachra said the contentious phrases ‘make my blood boil’ and that he couldn’t ‘believe these words were within Church teaching’. Felix only realised now, in his early 50s, how much deep shame he had been carrying with him throughout his adulthood. This was a shame, the full responsibility for which he placed at the door of a Church that had taught him that his homosexuality and associated desires were

like ‘dark stains on his soul’. Being an active member of the Church, he said with sadness, was what had been holding him back from releasing this burden of shame. Karen was very angry and said, ‘we may as well put bells around our necks and shout “unclean”!’. These phrases, Lorraine said, ‘tell us, you’re not valued, you’re not as good, and there’s something wrong with you’. Equating the words with ‘hate speech’, she asked, ‘where’s God in any of that?’

8.11.2. Regarding the assertion in *The 1986-Letter* that same-sex acts and relations are self-indulgent, Antony, reflecting on his same-sex marriage, surmised that LGBTQ+ relationships may require and display even more commitment and mutual support. Jonathan agreed and said that with more obstacles to be overcome for LGBTQ+ couples, ‘more love was required’. Karen and Lorraine kept an open house for excluded and rejected young people, some of whom were LGBTQ+. They also worked in the community and cared for elderly relatives. The accusation of self-indulgence applied to their inclination was highly ‘insulting’, and Karen asked of the Church, ‘tell me more about that accusation; what does that mean to you, or look like? Because that doesn’t look the way my life looks or anything like it’. For her, it is the use of these terms by the Church, rather than the LGBTQ+ inclination or way of life, that had the potential to create lives of self-destruction. The participants found the assertion that the Church viewed them primarily as ‘children of God’, not as homosexuals, to be disingenuous. Oistin looked at the ‘starting point’ of complete negativity from which a LGBTQ+ person had to proceed, carrying with them the burden of an inclination condemned as objectively disordered and intrinsically evil. This defining negativity was delivered by the same Church, which then told them that they were simultaneously children of a loving God. Dermot worked closely with young LGBTQ+ people and was clear that he regarded the ‘absolutely harmful’ effects of such phrases and their tone to be real, be they heard directly or indirectly by implication or attitude. Hearing that you are objectively disordered or inclined towards acts of intrinsic evil, he said, ‘causes deep mental trauma’, for ‘there is absolutely no escape’. These words imply that ‘you are never good enough, because it *is* you’ and there can be no giving it up, like a bad habit, ‘because you can’t quit being who you are’. The impact of the teachings could be devastating, he claimed, ‘because it’s a big ass Church that’s saying it’. Dermot wondered if the authors or upholders of these phrases could imagine or realise the effects of their ‘diabolical’ language and tone and was personally grateful that a healthy circle of queer friends and allies had rescued him from taking such negative voices seriously.

8.11.3. Fiachra was certain that the language used could, for a devout Catholic, be ‘absolutely harmful’, including the possibility of it contributing to suicide. Felix recalled the trauma that surrounded his own coming to terms with his sexual orientation and admitted that given the wrong circumstances, it would have taken very little to push him over the edge towards self-harm. With authority, he said, comes a huge responsibility in watching one’s language and tone. From a GP’s perspective, such language could ‘absolutely and completely’ contribute to suicide or self-harm in a vulnerable or devout person. ‘The words are so clinically chosen as if they were trying to find a way

to make it as damaging as possible...if they'd called a gay person a fucking nutter, it might have been less damaging', as the words could immediately be dismissed as extreme. For Felix, the pedigree of the authors and their overall tone and language act to damage a person 'in the most cutting way possible'. LGBTQ+ people, Karen argued, with many fewer societal supports, have to 'work harder to keep themselves mentally and sexually well', and the language of these phrases was 'demeaning and very damaging', especially to the young. Karen said that these words and phrases 'need to be called out for actually doing harm and damage to people'.

8.12. LGBTQ+ Catholics: The teachings about gender-fluidity and transgender people

8.12.1. Antony reflected that the views of Irish society in general were becoming more accepting of transgender people and Jonathan suggested that the public discourse around these issues be science-led rather than based on religious-based ethical concerns. Fiachra and Oistin shared the admission that they had insufficient knowledge about the full complexities of this issue but that those uncomfortable with their gender identity should be fully supported and assisted with the best processes to help them make the appropriate decisions. Karen fully agreed with this approach and warned that the Church's simplification of the issue sometimes made the complex and sensitive conversations that the issue required much more difficult, and Henry warned against the simplistic binary morality of 'putting people into definitive boxes'. From his medical background, Felix's view was that much research about the complexities of these issues had yet to be undertaken and also warned against simplification. The majority of his professional encounters with people who had gender dysphoria were with well-adjusted, balanced men and women, many of whom went on to complete successful gender reassignment. He suggested that the difficulties in untangling the mind when it comes to gender confusion were significant, requiring patience and understanding, especially when children and younger adolescents were involved. Oengus raised the point that anthropology proved that the binary male-female approach to gender identity had never been the only human experience in any time or place. He cited the studies into the Fa'afafine peoples of Samoa, and the two-spirited people of the American indigenous peoples as just two examples of this. In contrast to what the Church teaches about accepting one's body as it was created, Oengus expressed the need for society to believe what people say when they articulate how they experience their own gender, bodies, and sexuality.

8.12.2. If there was a deviation from other participant groups around these issues, it seemed to come from the scepticism with which they viewed the Church's motivation for its teachings about gender identity. Dermot claimed that it was easy for the Church to say simplistically, 'accept your body as it was created' without the responsibility to look at 'the many variations when things didn't always happen the way they were meant to'. Fiachra believed that the Church, from the tone of *M&F-2019*, seemed to be moralising about the issue without wanting to help the individuals affected by it. As far as Karen was concerned, the Church's caution on this issue emerged from its need to control and have power over someone's personhood and that simplistic, binary warnings about gender identity 'shuts

down conversations' that explore how people experience gender. Henry also expressed cynicism about the Church's intervention, claiming that its instinct for 'self-preservation and self-justification', rather than any concern for the welfare of the person experiencing gender confusion, lay at the heart of its cautionary teachings. Oengus was also wary of the motivation around the Church's anxiety about this issue and urged the Church to look more deeply into some of the examples from scripture and tradition of non-gender conforming characters and instances when 'otherness in individuals became the site of God's salvific activity'. Dermot identified as 'queer' and was entirely comfortable with fluidity within sexuality and gender. For him, this offered the freedom to 'listen to yourself, who you are, who you might fancy, and be attracted to, or not'. Felix also embraced the term as a way of him establishing a connection with a very wide group of people who 'don't fit into a traditional identity', and for that reason, failed to see why the Church found the concept of queerness to be problematic.

8.13. LGBTQ+ Catholics: Change of tone on LGBTQ+ issues by Pope Francis and some Church leaders

8.13.1. The majority were warm or mildly positive about some of Pope Francis' softer language and gestures of outreach, although some were unimpressed, and most were deeply cautious about the likelihood of the more positive tone translating into any useful changes in doctrine. Henry found Francis' 'pronouncements to be very acceptable and very good', opening up the possibility for a less harsh atmosphere to emerge in the Church. Karen, too, appraised Francis's tenure as 'creating space for people to have softer conversations with family' about their sexual orientation, with her partner Lorraine saying that Francis had offered her 'a wee twinge of hope'. Felix had the warmest reaction to Francis of all the LGBTQ+ participants, remarking that he had sensed deep 'simplicity in his love' and been deeply moved by his words to the gay survivor of clerical abuse, 'it doesn't matter that you are gay'. He was glad to 'take any positive changes'. However, many of the participants spoke of how their high hopes of change from Pope Francis had yielded to disappointment when for them, it became apparent that the forces that resisted positive change for LGBTQ+ people were stronger than Francis' more welcoming approach. Lorraine doubted that any significant changes in approach to LGBTQ+ people would occur in her lifetime and that the slow process of change would be too late for the many Catholic LGBTQ+ people whose dignity and self-esteem would continue to be eroded by unchanging Church doctrine about them. Dermot, too, reflected that Francis' words were too little, too late and that meaningful overtures would require a preliminary apology from the Church to LGBTQ+ people. He now 'looks to other places for guaranteed love and support that isn't wishy-washy', and with the strong forces of conservatism in the Church, he doesn't ever envisage any meaningful change.

8.13.2. Fiachra feared that the positivity of Francis could be thwarted by any future popes, Francis' words being in the final instance, 'just words'. Henry expressed disappointment that the realpolitik which Francis had to negotiate with conservative elements in the Church would slow down or jeopardise any significant change of approach to LGBTQ+ Catholics. Felix also believed that the

papal responsibility of maintaining global ecclesial unity would probably ensure that any change towards LGBTQ+ Catholics would be very slow. More welcoming attitudes could easily be reversed or challenged by future leaders, and a backlash towards LGBTQ+ people might replace any previous softening of approach by the Church to them. Oengus didn't think that Pope Francis was as liberal as some people imagined he was. 'Are we on the eve of a Vatican spring?' he asked, replying with, 'no I wish!...for there's the Curia, the Magisterium and Cardinal Burke'. He said that seeing a homosexual person's orientation as extraneous to their personhood was an avoidance tactic that stopped the Church from engaging properly with the reality of LGBTQ+ people. He guessed that for this reason, any future change of approach would be very slow and that, ultimately, the Church would never 'lose face' by changing any previous teachings. His long-term view was curious, cautious, but ultimately pessimistic, believing that beyond Pope Francis, a militarism within Catholicism akin to that within some of the more evangelical Reformation Churches would occur. Meanwhile, most LGBTQ+ people will leave the Church, despite the gesturing, because 'you can't distract people into accepting that they are an intrinsic disorder'.

8.13.3. With regard to Francis and his words and gestures, Oistin thought they were 'piecemeal, and lacked genuine thought', while the basic 'teachings remain the same'. He found some of the words and overtures of Francis to be 'wild, fucking patronising', including his desire to 'meet and talk with gay people' and the obvious Christian imperative not to judge other people, gay or otherwise. People in Ireland, and in the West more generally, he claimed, had 'moved on' from the Church teachings on this and other areas of sexual morality. Like so many of the other LGBTQ+ participants, he did not believe that 'tweaks and softer words' were any substitute for a fundamental rewriting of the contentious teachings. And like many of his co-participants, he didn't believe that such substantive changes would occur in his lifetime and that future generations of both straight and LGBTQ+ people would simply leave the Church, 'for they have a script of their own'.

8.14. LGBTQ+ Catholics: On how attitudes to the Church had changed, particularly in Ireland

8.14.1. Antony claimed that the deference of his parents' and grandparents' generation towards the Church in relation to morality had now disappeared. Jonathan's recollection of the papal visit of John-Paul II in 1979 was of an Irish population in thrall to the Church and its leadership but out of convention rather than doctrinal conviction. The Church, for its part, turned a blind eye, he claimed, to some of the many societal and family-based evils, such as domestic abuse, that it could have challenged more robustly than it ever did. Karen also raised the same point, accusing the Church at the zenith of its ability to influence society in Ireland, of ignoring the plight of women in abusive relationships and experiencing domestic violence. Felix looked back with amazement at how rapid the changes had been since his childhood when the Catholic Church received almost complete adherence from its flock. Oistin also looked back on a childhood and adolescence in which his religious

background had brought to him and many people known to him a sense of shame, guilt and fear, which he was pleased had now disappeared.

8.14.2. Antony spoke of the silence surrounding the topic of homosexuality when he was growing up, with LGBTQ+ people living quiet, unfulfilled lives, largely ignored by society but spoken about with negativity or with pity and in whispers. During the 2015-IMR campaign, Irish people, Antony claimed, broke the silence and, for the first time, did speak about homosexuality publicly. The population shared their stories about gay family, friends, neighbours and colleagues and ultimately gave a powerful voice to their opinions by voting in huge numbers for marriage equality. Henry, by contrast, spoke of an anomalous encounter with episcopal receptivity when he and some members of an ecumenical ‘Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual’ group wrote to all members of the Irish Episcopal Conference in 1980, requesting meetings. All requests were ignored, other than one from a bishop who Henry called ‘the last of the true Vatican II bishops’. Influenced, Henry claimed, by years spent in Latin America, this bishop met Henry and other members of the group in an amicable and open encounter. As a one-off anomaly, Henry remembered it fondly as being, for him, a small chink of hope in an otherwise non-receptive Catholic milieu.

8.14.3. Karen spoke about how the knowledge of and love shown to LGBTQ+ family members had helped Irish people to realise that the Church was wrong about homosexuality, but in response to this, the Church continues to fear its loss of control, without realising ‘they’ve already lost it’. Jonathan claimed that the education of Irish people has enabled them to gradually question and challenge ecclesial authority, with even elderly people questioning long-held beliefs and the young receiving all their formative opinions from non-Church sources. He recalled how his mother had walked out of Mass in protest while the priest read a letter from the Irish bishops stating their opposition to marriage equality. She had done so, she said, not only on behalf of her gay son and partner but for all the many other LGBTQ+ people she knew. Lorraine was saddened that the Church had seemed to be adapting to its loss of authority by advocating for a ‘smaller, leaner Church, that was better off without them’. Oengus also said, with no apparent pleasure, that as the Church ‘scrambled to keep up’, it was simply losing its LGBTQ+ members.

8.15. LGBTQ+ Catholics: Overall levels of agreement or disagreement with the teachings about homosexuality

8.15.1. These were the participants best placed to decide to what extent any of these teachings, their arguments and justifications, reflected the experience and reality of their lives as LGBTQ+ Catholics. With regard to the sources of authority used by the Church to underpin these teachings, this group rejected them all or the way they were utilised by the Church. The selective misuse of scripture in the teachings was especially painful for these men and women, but their disappointment, anger and hurt had been replaced by a defiance and an unwillingness to be wounded any further by these destructive and contradictory words. None of them believed that there could be any justification for the Church to

insist that every sexual act needed to be open to procreation. There was particular offence and anger expressed with the labelling of their sexual activity and, by extension, their relationships as self-indulgent and their way of life as being inherently self-destructive. They, after all, knew a good deal more about their own lives, sacrifices, struggles, and the usual mixture of selflessness and selfishness contained therein, than a Church who judged and condemned them with no attempt to learn who they really were.

8.15.2. It was no surprise, therefore, that the fact-based claims of science, whilst not being flawless, were for them a source of validation. To realise that there was a possible explanation as to why they were as they were, gave them permission to live fulfilling lives at peace with themselves and without the shame and judgement that they believed the Church offered. They accepted that the Church had the ability to offer them and all people a wider and deeper vision or template for life, but that, in their case, it did not do so. Essentially, the Church's vision for them was as Christians disembodied from a sexual orientation, which could only be seen as a problematic and evil burden to be remedied with spiritual practices, and was a vision they could not accept. With few, if any, of the normal supporting structures available to heterosexual people from family, society and Church, this group of LGBTQ+ Catholics had learned to trust their own authority drawn from their experience of being LGBTQ+. They also noted how their families, friends, colleagues and communities have now begun to listen and learn from them in a way that the Church doesn't seem to want to emulate. Several of these participants observed that the Church, with a large number of closeted gay clergy in its ranks, energetically upholds its own view of homosexuality while ignoring the experience of integrated LGBTQ+ people whose lives contradict the Church's homosexual stereotypes. Above all, these men and women rejected the authority of the Church to teach and instruct them because they do not consider themselves to be welcome within a Church that frames their orientation, relationships, and lives with such destructive negativity.

8.15.3. This group were scathing in their absolute rejection of what they considered to be a joyless, life-sapping, punitive prescription for their lives. The call to a celibate, solitary life, sustained by self-denial and prayer, was seen to be one that emanated from the minds of men ensnared by their own cognitive dissonance surrounding their own sexual orientation. Many of these participants had dealt with these unhelpful advisories from their Church by letting go and separating themselves from a community they had all once regarded as a spiritual home. These participants, as the potential victims, were united in their condemnation of the contradictory and qualified teaching about violence and discrimination from their Church. At best, the Church was seen here as turning a blind eye to violence or excusing its instigators; at worst, it was seen as condoning or even inciting a violent reaction to the various civil legislations they had come to see as guarantors of their freedom and dignity. The condemnation of violence and discrimination by the Church was thereby seen as insincere. All of this group, regardless of their current relationship status, rejected the arguments made by the Church as to

why they or other LGBTQ+ people should not be permitted to contract a legal civil marriage if that was their desire. Notably for them, the Church produced no evidence that their being given the right to marry and adopt children by their civil legislature would bring harm to society or violence to the children in their care. The participants in this group viewed *The 2005-Instruction* that prohibited gay men from pursuing Holy Orders as wrong. For them, the prohibition indicated that the Church viewed homosexuals as possessing sub-human qualities rendering them unable to relate correctly to their fellow humans and predisposed to bring shame and scandal to the Church. The participants saw this Instruction as ‘malevolent’ and ‘indicative of the self-hatred’, and ‘internalised homophobia’ of its authors.

8.15.4. As it was directed squarely at them, these LGBTQ+ participants received the tone and vocabulary of the teachings with an added measure of personal offence and rage. The participants saw the language and tone of these documents as ‘offensive’, ‘insulting’, ‘diabolical’, ‘exclusionary’, ‘disgusting’, ‘diminishing’, ‘devaluing’, ‘cutting’, ‘indefensible’, ‘patronising’, and ‘untrue’. It was akin to ‘hate speech’ in the words of one participant and utterly without any evidence to uphold its negative framing of them, their lives, relationships, and sexual orientation. There was common agreement that these words and the tone within which they were inserted could absolutely cause mental harm and trauma to LGBTQ+ people, particularly the young and vulnerable, and to the point of causing self-harm or suicide. With regard to gender fluidity, there was a common acknowledgement that this was a deeply complex issue, best guided by scientific insight rather than theology or its morality, and one that required the utmost levels of support, care, guidance, and accompaniment for any person experiencing gender confusion issues. There was general mistrust of the Church’s teaching on this issue as simply being another attempt to control and corral another group who were defined by their difference and otherness. There was a modicum of warmth expressed towards the person of Pope Francis and his limited attempts to frame the conversation about LGBTQ+ people (such as there was one) less negatively. More than any other group, however, these LGBTQ+ Catholics had been let down and disappointed by the slow speed with which these limited and sometimes contradictory words and gestures had advanced the debate. Most were not optimistic that the teachings themselves would change, but most agreed that change they must. In the undoubted absence of such an outcome, most of this group had also decided to leave a Church in which they had once been at home but which now offered them no useful support, welcome or love. More than any other sub-group, these participants rejected the authority of a Church they perceived as having rejected them. They could not accept or receive teachings which contradicted their own experience of who they knew themselves to be and which described them with disordered terminology as the kind of people they knew they were not.

Chapter 9. Conclusion

9.1 Overview: 'On holy ground'

9.1.1. The extent to which this project emerged from and was influenced by my background, values, beliefs, and experience is indisputable. This has, in my assessment, been a strength rather than a weakness, generating a passion for the project as it developed and unfolded. The awareness of the potential for bias has been at the forefront of the reflexive approach embraced and was the filter through which I have attempted to pass each component of the research project. This has been, in many respects, a sacred encounter with knowledge and insight, a treading upon holy ground. The project has given me permission to engage with issues that have profoundly affected the circumstances of my life. It has brought me to the threshold of the central beliefs and values that have informed and influenced me. It has privileged me with the encounters that were at the heart of the project, with the men and women who shared their opinions, views, emotions and beliefs with me in a spirit of open generosity. Above all, it was an encounter with people from a particular Church community, the one with which I am most familiar and in which I have been most invested. As such, it was, for me, a homecoming that reinforced, unsettled and challenged the various personal identities that have evolved during my lifetime.

9.1.2. The Research Question focused on two components, the teachings of a Church and the people who themselves *are* that Church. By faith in Christ and baptism (*CCC-1992: 782*), Catholics become part of the Church or the People of God. Tom Inglis (2017: 22) argues that the majority of Irish Catholics have moved from a traditional and legalistic concept of 'being Catholic' and have now largely become 'Cultural Catholics', with more individualised and liberal attitudes to Church-belonging. Nevertheless, the participants in this research, influenced inevitably by societal-cultural trends, were more than simply cultural Catholics. The participants in three of these sub-groups, the clergy, religious and educators, were linked formally to their Church by ordination, vocation or profession. All of the laity participants were practising Catholics, many of whom had active involvement in their faith communities or formal lay-ministerial roles. The LGBTQ+ Catholic participants were mostly Catholics who had been deeply involved in their Church until a process of disillusionment severed that link. These participants were or had been active rather than passive members of the Church, and as such, what their Church formally taught in doctrine was something to which they had some kind of connection as stakeholders.

With the help of the Holy Spirit, it is the task of the entire People of God...to hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our age, and to judge them in the light of the divine word, so that revealed truth can always be more deeply penetrated, better understood and set forth to greater advantage. (*G&S-1965: 44*)

In the light of these words of *G&S-1965*, this was an encounter with an active group of Irish Catholics who cared about what being a Catholic meant and who navigated with discernment and faith the distinction between their own belonging to the Church, the doctrines their Church taught, and the authorities who issued these teachings.

9.1.3. I initiated this project, aware that my journey had been influenced by both the teachings and the Irish Church community in a unique way, and that I could only ever approach the research from this subjective perspective. I was aware implicitly or directly that these teaching documents have been constructed to remind LGBTQ+ people like me and the wider Church that the givenness of our sexual orientation is gravely problematic. The teachings may centre around acts that are deemed by the Church to be self-indulgent and intrinsically disordered, but these, we are told, confirm something that is essential to, and already present in the homosexual person's inclination, a disordered leaning or disposition towards self-indulgence. This is different to the everyday temptations to self-indulgent acts of which all people are capable because LGBTQ+ people carry within themselves an additional inclination that has self-indulgence as its essence. The teachings indicate that the LGBTQ+ person is existentially more inclined to self-indulgence than any heterosexual person could ever be. As reflexively self-aware as it was possible to be, the careful preparations for, execution and analysis of this project have generated knowledge that is not merely private or personally significant for this researcher. This encounter with the Irish Church community has generated more significant knowledge. In the form of a piece of contextual theology, this knowledge calls into question how well the Church has addressed and taught on the issue of homosexuality and how it has cared for its LGBTQ+ sons and daughters.

9.2. Research Question findings

9.2.1. The Research Question for this project was, 'how do different groups within the Irish Roman Catholic community understand, accept and receive the official teachings of their Church on the issue of homosexuality?' To investigate and answer this question, the teachings, literature and additional source material surrounding the teachings were appraised in Chapters 1 and 2. A method for collecting data that would assist in answering the Research Question was carefully constructed and carried out methodically, with the data collected and analysed thematically, as explained in Chapter 3. The analysis was then presented in the subsequent five chapters, offering a thick description of how the participants had understood, accepted and received their Church's teachings about homosexuality. Reflexive practice was embedded into each aspect of the quest to answer the Research Question, and high standards of ethical research practice were followed. As outlined in Chapter 3, the 45 participants in this project were from five sub-groups, pre-identified by the researcher to be representative of the Irish Catholic community in all its complexity, gathering data from individuals who were stakeholders rather than random members of the Irish Catholic faith community. The nature of this sample means that despite the small numbers involved, the data gathered from these participants, although particular

to this project, can be taken to offer some wider and representative insight into how the stakeholders of the Irish Catholic community may understand, accept and receive these teachings about homosexuality.

9.2.2. The sources used by the Church to underpin its teachings did not convince the majority of these participants. Scriptural passages offered by the Church to add weight to their arguments about homosexuality were not found to be persuasive, as they were used without socio-historical context or the insights of modern scholarship. The intrinsic link between sexual acts and procreation insisted upon by the Church and forming the bedrock of its teaching about homosexuality was not widely accepted. With few exceptions, these participants confirmed the view that the teachings contained within *HV-1968* were no longer regarded as persuasive or authoritative by them. Sexual intercourse for unitive bonding, which can bring joy, deepen love and enhance a relationship with pleasure, was, for many of these participants, sufficiently good in itself to morally justify such acts, even when there was no possibility of procreation. If this is licit for heterosexual married couples, then it is similarly so for committed, free and equal same-sex relationships. Most of the participants were dismayed that little attention was given by the Church to the insights that the human sciences may bring to the debate surrounding the ethics of same-sex acts and relationships.

9.2.3. The teachings about violence and discrimination towards LGBTQ+ people were considered problematic, contradictory and flawed. For participants living in a country that has known much political violence and institutional discrimination, the ambiguity about violence and discrimination towards homosexuals drew much sharp criticism. The unanimous perception was that the condemnation of violence towards homosexual people was ambiguous and devalued by attempts in the same teachings to explain or even justify violence when homosexual people overreach themselves with demands for excessive legal recognition or rights. There was unanimity that this teaching was deeply flawed.

9.2.4. The charge in the teachings that same-sex acts, LGBTQ+ relationships and lifestyles were self-indulgent and self-destructive were dismissed as being baseless and without any evidence to justify the contention. The vision and lifestyle envisaged by the Church for its LGBTQ+ sons and daughters was regarded by many as callous. The prohibitions on legalised same-sex unions, the alleged incapacity of same-sex couples to adequately rear children, and the alleged inability of homosexual priests to relate properly to people were widely rejected as being bereft of any supporting empirical evidence. The association of homosexual priests with the ‘negative consequences’ of abuse that have so damaged the Church’s credibility was comprehensively rejected as being without evidence or justification.

9.2.5. The strongest and most emotional contributions from all participants in every sub-group were about the tone and language used within the teachings, especially with regard to the phrases ‘objective

disorder' and 'intrinsic evil' (*The 1986-Letter*: 3) and their derivatives used variously in the documents. There was a general consensus that the language and tone of these teachings had real and damaging effects, particularly on more vulnerable LGBTQ+ people, who would be more susceptible to the direct or indirect influence of such teachings. Some were convinced that the damaging effects of the language and tone employed in the teachings, in some cases, has led or could lead to self-harm and suicide. The LGBTQ+ Catholics were deeply aware of the deep disconnect between what and who the Church tells them they are, and how they perceive or indeed know themselves to be.

9.2.6. The issues surrounding gender identity, gender theory and gender dysphoria were those that drew out concerns from the participants that occasionally overlapped with the concerns expressed by the Church in its limited teachings about these matters. Few of the participants had ever met a transgender person, and the majority claimed to have limited knowledge about this complex area and, as a result, were reluctant to offer definitive views. The main area of concern was the age at which someone experiencing gender dysphoria might seek irreversible surgical and hormonal gender reassignment. Few agreed with the Church's argument that people should be encouraged to accept their bodies as they were created. There was notable compassion expressed for any person undergoing gender dysphoria and a consensus that the societal debate should first and foremost be informed by medical and scientific knowledge. The LGBTQ+ sub-group was deeply suspicious of the rationale behind the limited teachings from the Church about this issue.

9.2.7. There was warmth expressed for the words of Pope Francis about LGBTQ+ people, accompanied by gestures of outreach and welcome to them. The majority expressed high praise for the 2013 'who am I to judge?' comments. Many saw signs that from this change of tone, a more sensitive and welcoming pastoral approach by the Church to its LGBTQ+ members could become more likely a result. By the same token, many participants from all the sub-groups, but particularly the LGBTQ+ participants, were pessimistic that any changes in outreach would be significant or sufficient. The majority did not think that the teachings about homosexuality would change, even though most participants believed they ought to.

9.2.8. Alternative viewpoints from a minority of participants were often sincerely held and defended, indicating that within four of the sub-groups, there were some views that did harmonise with or which attempted to understand or accommodate the Church's position on some or all of the issues. It was notable how some of those who defended the teachings were often dismayed or conflicted, when certain aspects of the teachings seemed to be at odds with the higher ideals or values that they regarded as being essential for Christians to uphold, e.g., the unequivocal condemnation of violence. A very small minority admitted that to some extent, their own personal distaste for homosexual acts found some refuge in teachings that supported their own point of view.

9.2.9. The moral credibility of the Catholic Church in Ireland has been damaged, perhaps irreparably. Participants in all of the sub-groups mentioned the effects of the abuse-scandals in undermining the Church's moral authority. One of the lay participants was a survivor of clerical abuse, and it is undoubtedly the case that this was a contributory factor in some of the respondents' rejection of the Church's authoritative teachings about homosexuality. However, these were Catholics who have largely remained supportive of the Church through active participation, and the rejection of these particular teachings was rooted more definitively in the authority of their own personal experience and discernment, than it was in disillusionment.

9.2.10. The key and most significant finding is undoubtedly the repeated assertion from participants in four of the project's sub-groups, that the lived experience of LGBTQ+ parishioners, colleagues, friends, family, wider community figures and gay clergy had given them a new experiential knowledge about LGBTQ+ people. This experiential knowledge was at odds with the negative and problematic manner in which the Church magisterium claims to know about LGBTQ+ people, their orientation, relationships and sexual actions. The people from the fifth sub-group of LGBTQ+ Catholics already knew this to be the case, as this was knowledge about themselves and their sexuality they had come to know as being contrary to the disordered orientation the Church had told them they possessed.

9.3. The significance of the findings

9.3.1. This account began by reflecting on how the decades between Sinéad O'Connor's appearance on *Saturday Night Live* in the autumn of 1992 and her death in the summer of 2023 have witnessed significant, swift and traumatic upheavals in Irish society and the decline in the authority of the Irish Catholic Church to influence that society. The contrast between the public's treatment of Sinéad O'Connor as a renegade in 1992, and her secular 'canonisation' in 2023 was, I suggested, symbolic of the profound changes that have occurred in the relationship of Irish people with the authority of the Catholic Church, which continues to claim the majority of them as its members. Although this research focused on a limited and small body of teachings by the Catholic Church, about issues directly relevant to a group of men and women who only form approximately 4-5% of any society, it was a project that raised important questions about the authority of the Church to teach and guide when certain teachings are considered to be flawed or untrue.

9.3.2. I recall from my experience of growing up in a rural Irish Catholic parish in the 1970s-80s the influential role and authority of the Church. The moral injunctions of our Parish Priest were the normal subject of Sunday dinner conversations. I recall how he frequently told his congregation that 'not only am I responsible for my own salvation, I'm also responsible for all of yours'. There was a huge authoritative weight carried on his shoulders as a representative of the Church. As we saw, Tom Inglis (2017: 22) has suggested that the majority of Irish Catholics are now 'cultural Catholics', and

will now approach the authority of their Church to teach and instruct with the attitudes of the liberalised and individualised secular society to which they belong. My contention was that the research participants in this project, while certainly influenced by such societal values, were nevertheless more than cultural Catholics with a superficial attachment to their Church, and a societal readiness to disregard Church teachings as non-authoritative. These were Catholics for whom the Church was more than a cultural identity tag and would, therefore, have to have other reasons to question Church teachings.

9.3.3. It is important to note how the experience of the Irish Catholic Church's authority has been shaped by the revelations about abuse by Irish clergy and religious since the early 1990s, the attempts to cover these up by Church authorities, and the hard-hitting official reports into abuse that have been published. Time and time again, the participants of this research raised the extent to which the Church and its moral authority have evaporated from the lives of many Irish Catholics. Frequently participants used examples of such abuse to illustrate that for Irish society, its families and politicians, the influence of the Church's moral teachings had been such that society was prepared to facilitate or turn a blind eye to the actual violence and abuse that was often carried out by Catholic clergy and religious in institutional settings. The other abuses, so long concealed and covered up, unlocked a wave of angry disillusionment from which the moral authority of the Irish Catholic hierarchy may never recover. Mathew Guest (2022: 170) notes that '[r]eligion' as a generic category has, for many sceptics, become a pathological phenomenon, a catch-all word for strange, nonsensical and liable to abuses of power'. In many respects, this is certainly the case in modern-day Ireland. Inglis (2017: 22-3) blames these abuses of power for a loss of the Irish Church's institutional power in Ireland. The media brought the reality of these scandals into the nation's homes, through their TVs, radios, newspapers and smartphones to ensure that the 'clean white starched line of the Church has not only been dirtied but is being washed out in public view'. Many participants in all of the sub-groups mentioned the effect of the abuse-scandals in undermining the Church's moral authority for them and others. However, as previously indicated, these were Catholics who have largely remained supportive of the Church through their ongoing ministries, professions and active participation, and the rejection of these particular teachings was, I believe, rooted in more than their disillusionment about the abuse scandals. It was something that arose directly out of the authority of their own experience.

9.3.4. One way to ascertain the nature of the experiential authority that may have replaced that of the Church for some Catholics is to look at a separate but connected teaching that has largely been rejected by Catholics in general and by many of the Catholic participants in this research. The fairly widespread rejection by Catholics in the developed world of the papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, (1968), prohibiting the use of artificial contraception is well-known (Pew Research Centre 2015: 78), with the American theologian, Robert Batule (2020: 156) estimating that barely 2-3% of Catholics heed it. Scottish theologian Fergus Kerr (2007: 215) queries how the great responsibility and dignity

of the laity celebrated by the Second Vatican Council did not seem to extend into one area that the laity might be considered expert, namely the sexual dimension of marriage. Kerr also highlights the implausibility for Catholics, that contraceptive intercourse is intrinsically immoral, and how the ‘longstanding assumption that every marriage act should be open to the transmission of life has become unbelievable’ (2007: 215-16). With few exceptions, participants from every sub-group confirmed the view that the teachings contained within *HV-1968* are no longer regarded as persuasive or authoritative by them. Persuasiveness does indicate the extent to which a teaching resonates with the experiences of thinking, believing Catholics, and persuasiveness does need to be present for a teaching to carry an authority that will lead to its absorption and practice. To heed decades of conscientious objection to *HV-1968* is not a capitulation to popular opinion, but an exercise in listening to the voice of marital experience articulated by many millions of faithful Catholic heterosexual people over more than half a century. Lived human experience, discernment and the wisdom that accrues from these have become important filters through which believing Catholics will pass certain moral teachings to determine how authoritative these teachings are for them.

9.3.5. Lived experience is an authoritative teacher and cannot be dismissed as leading Catholics into faulty moral reasoning when they adopt conclusions drawn from experience that are in conflict with the Church’s magisterial teachings. Pope Francis has spoken about the manner in which the understanding of the truth can grow, and how in conjunction with this, the Church must also attempt a more sufficient understanding of how people understand themselves, so as to deepen the authenticity of its own teachings.³⁹ Salzman and Lawler (2020: 128-9) and Moore (2003: 188-9) indicated how such experience and understanding have been verified through empirical observation. Margaret Farley (2006: 286-8) considered that this experience was sufficient to demand a new reflective approach to how Christian communities like the Church morally assess homosexual love. James Alison (2009: 13) rejoiced that this observed and empirically-based knowledge about same-sex attraction is objective and so, logically cannot be rejected by the Church as being relativist. Alison (2009: 14) contended that faith dares people of faith to use their reason to trust that God will reveal the goodness of truth. One of the key findings of this project was that these Irish Catholics, as people of faith, had dared to use their reason, based on experience, to reveal truths about LGBTQ+ people that were characterised by their goodness, rather than their evil. On that basis, many of them rejected what the Church taught because as Gareth Moore (2003: 282) correctly assessed, ‘[r]egrettably, in this area, the church teaches badly’.

9.3.6. The authority of experience has successfully replaced the authority of the Church to teach about LGBTQ+ people and to influence the ways in which LGBTQ+ people regard themselves. If teaching

³⁹ ‘Human Self-Understanding (19)’ *Interview with Pope Francis by Fr Antonio Spadaro*. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-francesco_20130921_intervista-spadaro.html [accessed 8th July 2024].

is to be effective, instructive, and truthful, it ought to resonate at some level with the hearts, intellect, and experiences of those it seeks to instruct. It certainly ought to capture the imagination and zeal of those charged with re-presenting, upholding or explaining the teaching with some enthusiasm and conviction. The majority of participants in every sub-group lacked such conviction when it came to the teachings about homosexuality. The authoritative sources used by their Church did not seem to be authoritative for them. The theologian Julie Clague is hopeful that Christians will recognize the counter-witness exhibited by the open, committed love of same-sex couples. The witness of LGBTQ+ lives manifest patterns of living that people can see as being ‘valuable, and to be celebrated—along with other humanizing expressions of community’, and view LGBTQ+ lives as also being, ‘positive features of the human family and an anticipation of God’s Holy Polity’.⁴⁰ It would seem that a majority of people from this sample of God’s Irish ‘Holy Polity’ were roundly convinced that on this issue, the Church has little authority to instruct them when their own experience has taught them differently and in a more convincing fashion.

9.3.7. The *sensus fidei* is defined in the *CCC-1992*: 92 as being a ‘supernatural appreciation of faith on the part of the whole people, when, from the bishops to the last of the faithful, they manifest a universal consent in matters of faith and morals’. However, the *sensus fidelium* may never contradict teachings that have always and everywhere been taught and upheld by the entire faithful. Pope Benedict XVI was clear that the *sensus fidelium* is:

certainly not a kind of public ecclesial opinion and invoking it in order to contest the teachings of the Magisterium would be unthinkable, since the *sensus fidei* cannot be authentically developed in believers, except to the extent in which they fully participate in the life of the Church, and this demands responsible adherence to the Magisterium, to the deposit of faith.⁴¹

The *sensus fidelium* is clearly not an ecclesial referendum, however, a secular referendum held in Ireland in 2015 did afford a relatively small number of its citizens the legal right to marry a person of their own gender. For this to come about, the majority of the electorate had to feel strongly enough about this issue to come out in large enough numbers that their country’s Constitution could be changed to bring about legislation that would only affect a small number of people. This was much more than an exercise in polling public opinion. Opinion had to be matched with a conviction that such a change was either a good or a bad thing for Irish society and a commitment to come out and vote accordingly. 1.2 million people, 62% of those who voted in May 2015, came out to vote in

⁴⁰ Julia Clague, ‘Homosexualities’, in *The Moral Values of Europe: Marks or Wounds of Civilization?* ed. by Marcella Althaus-Reid, Regina Ammicht Quinn, Erik Borgmann and Norbert Reck (2008), p.37.

⁴¹ Pope Benedict XVI, ‘Address of Benedict XVI to the International Theological Commission’ (Vatican 2012). https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2012/december/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20121207_cti.html [accessed 28th October 2024].

favour of same-sex marriage. The act of doing so was more than an act of expressing an opinion, but an act of solidarity arising from a new understanding that was expressed in a concrete desire to change the lives of LGBTQ+ people in Ireland. This solidarity and understanding arose from heterosexual Irish people, or approximately 95% of the population, realising from their own direct or indirect lived experience of the LGBTQ+ people in their families and communities, that these people required a legal and constitutional change that only they, their heterosexual fellow-citizens could act to bring about. The secular *sensus* of the Irish electorate arose from new knowledge-based experience that had a very concrete legal effect in May 2015 that, in the words of one of Ireland's former Presidents, Mary McAleese, would help to remove the architecture of homophobia in Ireland.⁴²

9.3.8. New objective evidence and a knowledge-based understanding of the lives and relationships of LGBTQ+ people could and perhaps already have led to the beginnings of a development in the *sensus fidelium*. This, it seems, is one of the most striking aspects of the data discussed within the analysis chapters. An experiential understanding of LGBTQ+ people, by clergy, laity, religious and educators, of their LGBTQ+ family members, friends, colleagues, students and people within the wider community, has given non-LGBTQ+ Catholics new knowledge. This knowledge arose from the unique ways that the non-LGBTQ+ Catholics in this research project were able to interact with, befriend, minister to, teach, know and love LGBTQ+ people. This is knowledge about themselves that LGBTQ+ Catholics have always possessed, and knowledge that now resonates much more widely with the Catholic community in Ireland. New knowledge and understanding cannot be discounted as irrelevant when assessing whether or not the criteria for the development of the *sensus fidelium* have been met.

Understandably, without access to such knowledge, what the Church taught about the sexual acts between people of the same gender down through the centuries was largely unchallenged, with no significant development in teachings or the *sensus fidelium* being either desired or possible. This consistency of doctrine or the lack of previous challenge to it cannot be used as an obstacle to asking questions about how new experiential, scientific, theological and sociological knowledge arising largely during the past six decades may have created the possibility for doctrine to develop in line with a development in the *sensus fidelium*. It is not sufficient or just to shut down a discussion about conscience or the *sensus fidelium* by suggesting that those who cannot accept a doctrine display an ignorance of conscience or have capitulated to popular opinion. The views of these Irish Catholics would appear to suggest that some Catholics who are *not* ignorant of Christ and the gospels, *not* enslaved to their passions, *not* opposed to personal conversion, *not* habitual sinners, or *not* lacking in charity (*CCC-1992*: 1792) have made an unflawed, conscience-based decision to reject the authority

⁴² Margaret Spillane, 'How the Irish Became the World's Leading Gay Activists', *The Nation* (May 2015). <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/how-irish-became-worlds-leading-gay-activists/> [accessed 30th October 2024].

of the Church to instruct or teach them in a way that contradicts their own knowledge about LGBTQ+ people. For the majority of the Irish Catholics interviewed in this project, the various teachings about homosexuality and the morality of homosexual acts appear to be generally unaccepted and unreceived. If such were the case more widely among Catholics in other parts of the world, it would not be unreasonable to propose that the teachings about homosexuality might at the very least be examined afresh, or reviewed by the magisterium of the Church in light of knowledge that could have the capacity to change the parameters of the discussion. This re-examination should not be postponed until a time when a global Catholic consensus on the morality of homosexual acts emerges. The societal, political and historical forces that perpetuate homophobia, particularly in many non-Western nations, are complex, but the maintenance of socially conservative values in some parts of the Catholic world should not be confused with the belief that these represent a more orthodox understanding or authentic *sensus fidelium* around the issue of homosexuality. To do so would be a deliberate avoidance by the magisterium of new knowledge, as well as being profoundly unjust to LGBTQ+ people, particularly those who suffer from violence and discrimination.

9.4. Conclusion

9.4.1. These are the teachings of the Catholic Church. These are the teachings that reveal to LGBTQ+ people how they are viewed by their Church. The Church claims to see them only as children of God (*The 1986-Letter*: 16). This is only partly the case, as unlike other children of God, these sons and daughters of the Church are deemed to be disordered in a particularly unique manner, tending them towards intrinsic moral evil (*The 1986-Letter*: 3). An inclination that many of them will regard as being a constituent and positive aspect of their core identity, is condemned by their Church as being an ‘objective disorder’. There can be no easy or acceptable way to receive or understand this message. The Church, after all, offers no indication of its wider views about the debate between biological essentialism and social constructionism regarding the causes of homosexuality, with *CCC-1992*: 2357 observing that the psychological genesis of homosexuality remains unexplained. The framing of same-sex tendencies and the homosexual condition as being objectively disordered and uniquely ordering the homosexual person towards acts of intrinsic moral evil indicates that there is a type of selective essentialism being introduced into the core doctrines about homosexuality. This appears to be an essentialism inexplicably rooted in the very nature of a homosexual person and one that surely demands a more convincing theological and doctrinal explanation than that which the Church currently offers. Susannah Cornwall (2013: 123) posed the following question as to why:

so many Christians continue to believe that homosexuality is *more* broken, *more* damaged and *more* imperfect than heterosexuality – and why church statements on sexuality can hold that, while imperfect heterosexuality at least ‘gestures toward’ God’s plan, imperfect homosexuality is ‘objectively disordered’ (italics in original).

The majority of the Irish Catholic Christians who participated in this research, it would appear, no longer believe in the unique brokenness of homosexual people. The Church's magisterium continues to do so, but with unsuccessful arguments that did not resonate with these Catholics, regardless of their sexual orientation.

9.4.2. Key flawed aspects of the teachings about homosexuality are not ameliorated whenever a softer tone or a more generous pastoral outreach accompanies them. The recent 2023 Declaration, *Fiducia Supplicans (On the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings)* highlights the clear reality of these teachings and their continuing claims to authoritative truth. The gesture of permitting conditional and limited blessings upon the individuals within a same-sex union, but not *upon* their union, has been justified precisely because it does *not* overturn or contradict the existent teachings about homosexuality. The opponents of this development are similarly clear in their opposition, claiming that the current teachings about homosexuality, unaltered and unchangeable as they are, contradict the permission given for these limited and conditional blessings. *Fiducia Supplicans* may be a welcome development for some LGBTQ+ Catholics, and may well represent some attempt to change the mood-music of the debate and to facilitate future dialogue on this issue. It has also highlighted the continuing and abiding presence of teachings which have not changed and yet remain deeply problematic for the men and women, sons and daughters of the Church, who continue to be the subjects of teachings that many regard as seriously flawed, to the point of being themselves intrinsically disordered. Karen, one of the LGBTQ+ participants, commented that the presence of these teachings was like a fading photograph, still present, but with a declining ability to convince, instruct, or be heeded. Fading photographs are usually replaced in time, and with regard to the teachings about homosexuality, most of the Irish Catholics who engaged in this project have replaced authoritative Church teaching with an understanding of LGBTQ+ people that is clearer and more believable to them; having been developed from the authority of both their faith and their lived experience.

Appendices

Appendix 1. Consent form

March 2022

Consent Form

Project Title: Learning how different groups of Irish Roman Catholics understand, accept and receive the official teachings of their Church on the issue of homosexuality.

Researcher: Brendan McMullan

Department: Theology and Religion, Durham University

Researcher Contact details: _____

Supervisors: Prof. Gerard Loughlin and Prof. Mathew Guest

Supervisors' contact details: _____

This form is to confirm that you understand what the purposes of this project are, what will be involved, and that you are happy to take part. Please write your initials on each box to indicate your agreement:

Statement	Initial
I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated and the privacy notice for the above project.	
I have had sufficient time to consider the information and ask any questions I might have, and I am satisfied with the answers I have been given.	
I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.	
I am satisfied with how the data will be stored, anonymised and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.	
I understand that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, and other research outputs. I give permission for this, with the condition that my real name is not used.	
I consent to be audio recorded and understand how these recordings will be used in research outputs.	
I agree to take part in the above project.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.	

Participant's Signature _____ Date _____

(NAME IN BLOCK
LETTERS) _____

Researcher's Signature _____ Date _____

(NAME IN BLOCK
LETTERS) _____

Appendix 2. Debriefing sheet

Debriefing Sheet

Project title:

Learning how different groups of Irish Roman Catholics understand, accept and receive the official teachings of their Church on the issue of homosexuality.

Thank you for taking part in this study. I very much appreciate you giving your time and expertise to assist me in my research. What I want to find out from this research are the views, attitudes, and acceptance/non-acceptance of Roman Catholics and former Roman Catholics of their Church's teachings on the issue of homosexuality. I will consider how your views, ideas and input can inform my analysis of what the Church teaches on this issue. I will reflect theologically on what you say and use the views collected to look at how useful and relevant current Church teachings on the issue of homosexuality are.

I would like to remind you that while the interviews were recorded, this data has now been transcribed and anonymized. In writing up my notes and thesis, all the collected data you have given will be anonymized, and your individual data will not be available to anyone outside the research team.

If you would like further information about the study or would like to know what my findings are when I have completed my research, please contact me at:

_____ or at _____

If taking part in this study has raised any specific concerns about the issue of sexual orientation and faith, I am happy to refer you to someone who would be able to assist you.

Thank you again,

Brendan

Appendix 3. Cover letter

Project title: Learning how different groups of Irish Roman Catholics understand, accept and receive the official teachings of their Church on the issue of homosexuality.

Researcher: Brendan McMullan

Department: Theology and Religion at Durham University

Contact details: _____

Supervisors: Prof. Gerard Loughlin and Prof. Mathew Guest

Supervisors' contact details: _____ and _____

You are invited to take part in a study that I am conducting as part of my PhD at Durham University. This study has received ethical approval from Theology and Religion Ethics Committee of Durham University.

I am a former Roman Catholic priest, having ministered in the Diocese of Down and Connor for 13 years before leaving ministry amicably in 2008, after which I worked in education, teaching religion, ethics and philosophy in secondary schools and sixth-form colleges in England. As a committed Catholic, I have an active interest in discovering how my Catholic community perceives and views its LGBTQ+ members.

Before you decide whether to agree to take part, it is important for you to understand the purpose of the research and what is involved as a participant. Please read the following information carefully. Please get in contact if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this research project will be to find out from distinctive groups of Irish Roman Catholics, how they view, understand and accept official Roman Catholic teachings on the issue of homosexuality. These groups will represent a cross-section of the Irish Roman Catholic community. The groups will include the following if the response rate is sufficient, or potentially fewer groups after responses have been collated.

1. Parishioners from selected parishes within one or two Irish dioceses.
2. Teachers and students from schools selected from one or two Irish dioceses.
3. Clergy selected from within one or two Irish dioceses.
4. Members of Religious communities selected from within one or two Irish dioceses.
5. Seminarians selected from the National Seminary, Maynooth and other places of formation*.
6. LGBTQ+ Catholics and former Catholics*.

*These groups do not naturally occur within the boundaries of any particular diocese and may be sampled from other locations and institutions on the island of Ireland.

The views of all participants will be gathered through the use of in-depth interviews with me and each participant, either face-to-face or through Zoom, FaceTime, Skype or another appropriate virtual method. These interviews will be completed (Covid restrictions allowing) by August 2022, and I hope to complete the PhD by the end of 2023.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You are a member of one of the groups of Catholics identified by me as being representative of the Irish Catholic community, and your views on, understanding of, and acceptance of Roman Catholic Church teaching on the issue of homosexuality are a crucial part of this research project.

Do I have to take part?

Your participation is voluntary, and you do not have to agree to take part. If you do agree to take part, you can withdraw at any time, without giving a reason. [Your rights in relation to withdrawing any data that is identifiable to you are explained in the accompanying Privacy Notice].

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you agree to take part in the study, you will be invited to take part in an interview at a designated venue which is accessible to you or elsewhere if you would prefer. The interviews will be around an hour, and no longer than an hour and 30 minutes, which can be continuous or broken down into smaller chunks. You don't have to answer any questions that you don't want to, and we can stop at any time. I will be learning from you about your views on, understanding, and acceptance/non-acceptance of Roman Catholic Church teaching on the issue of homosexuality. As some of the teachings may be more or less familiar to you, I will be offering you a short summary of the main points covered by the Church teaching on this issue during the interview and will clarify any points or questions you may have about the teachings in an objective way, so as not to influence your response in any way.

The interview will be recorded using a digital audio recorder, and after the interview, I will transcribe your words verbatim (word for word). I will use the transcripts from all of the collected interviews as data, which will be analysed and used in the writing of my PhD thesis.

Are there any potential risks involved?

Discussion of the issue of homosexuality may, for some people, be one that is unfamiliar or uncomfortable, but it is unlikely that anything we talk about will be upsetting or emotionally

traumatic. There is no need for you to share anything that you are not comfortable with and you are free to stop the conversation at any time.

Will my data be kept confidential?

All information obtained during the study will be kept confidential. If any identifiable data is published, such as direct quotes, they will be anonymised. When the data is published, it will be entirely anonymous and will not be identifiable as yours, unless you would like it to be.

Full details are included in the accompanying Privacy Notice.

What will happen to the results of the project?

The research will be used to complete my PhD, which may one day be published. I may also use it to give papers at academic research conferences and potentially in other spaces. No personal data will ever be shared, and any quotes from interviews will be fully anonymised.

Durham University is committed to sharing the results of its world-class research for public benefit. As part of this commitment, the University has established an online repository for all Durham University Higher Degree theses which provides access to the full text of freely available theses. The study in which you are invited to participate will be written up as a thesis. On successful submission of the thesis, it will be deposited both in print and online in the University archives, to facilitate its use in future research. The thesis will be published with open access.

Who do I contact if I have any questions or concerns about this study?

If you have any further questions or concerns about this study, please speak to me or my supervisor. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please submit a complaint via the University's [Complaints Process](#).

Thank you for reading this information and considering taking part in this study.

Brendan McMullan

Appendix 4. Privacy notice

Privacy Notice



PART 1 –PRIVACY NOTICE

Durham University has a responsibility under data protection legislation to provide individuals with information about how we process their personal data. We do this in a number of ways, one of which is the publication of privacy notices. Organisations variously call them a privacy statement, a fair processing notice or a privacy policy.

To ensure that we process your personal data fairly and lawfully, we are required to inform you:

- Why we collect your data
- How it will be used
- Who it will be shared with

We will also explain what rights you have to control how we use your information and how to inform us about your wishes. Durham University will make the Privacy Notice available via the website and at the point we request personal data.

Our privacy notices comprise two parts – a generic part (ie common to all of our privacy notices) and a part tailored to the specific processing activity being undertaken.

Data Controller

The Data Controller is Durham University. If you would like more information about how the University uses your personal data, please see the University's [Information Governance webpages](#) or contact Information Governance Unit:

Telephone: _____

E-mail: _____

Information Governance Unit also coordinate response to individuals asserting their rights under the legislation. Please contact the Unit in the first instance.

Data Protection Officer

The Data Protection Officer is responsible for advising the University on compliance with Data Protection legislation and monitoring its performance against it. If you have any concerns regarding the way in which the University is processing your personal data, please contact the Data Protection Officer:

University Secretary

Telephone: _____

E-mail: _____

Your rights in relation to your personal data

Privacy notices and/or consent

You have the right to be provided with information about how and why we process your personal data. Where you have the choice to determine how your personal data will be used, we will ask you for consent. Where you do not have a choice (for example, where we have a legal obligation to process the personal data), we will provide you with a privacy notice. A privacy notice is a verbal or written statement that explains how we use personal data.

Whenever you give your consent for the processing of your personal data, you receive the right to withdraw that consent at any time. Where withdrawal of consent will have an impact on the services we are able to provide, this will be explained to you, so that you can determine whether it is the right decision for you.

Accessing your personal data

You have the right to be told whether we are processing your personal data and, if so, to be given a copy of it. This is known as the right of subject access. You can find out more about this right on the University's [Subject Access Requests webpage](#).

Right to rectification

If you believe that personal data we hold about you is inaccurate, please contact us and we will investigate. You can also request that we complete any incomplete data.

Once we have determined what we are going to do, we will contact you to let you know.

Right to erasure

You can ask us to erase your personal data in any of the following circumstances:

- We no longer need the personal data for the purpose it was originally collected
- You withdraw your consent and there is no other legal basis for the processing
- You object to the processing and there are no overriding legitimate grounds for the processing
- The personal data have been unlawfully processed
- The personal data have to be erased for compliance with a legal obligation

- The personal data have been collected in relation to the offer of information society services (information society services are online services such as banking or social media sites).

Once we have determined whether we will erase the personal data, we will contact you to let you know.

Right to restriction of processing

You can ask us to restrict the processing of your personal data in the following circumstances:

- You believe that the data is inaccurate and you want us to restrict processing until we determine whether it is indeed inaccurate
- The processing is unlawful and you want us to restrict processing rather than erase it
- We no longer need the data for the purpose we originally collected it, but you need it in order to establish, exercise or defend a legal claim and
- You have objected to the processing and you want us to restrict processing until we determine whether our legitimate interests in processing the data override your objection.

Once we have determined how we propose to restrict processing of the data, we will contact you to discuss and, where possible, agree this with you.

Retention

The University keeps personal data for as long as it is needed for the purpose for which it was originally collected. Most of these time periods are set out in the [University Records Retention Schedule](#).

Making a complaint

If you are unsatisfied with the way in which we process your personal data, we ask that you let us know so that we can try and put things right. If we are not able to resolve issues to your satisfaction, you can refer the matter to the Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO). The ICO can be contacted at:

Information Commissioner's Office _____

Telephone: _____

Website: [Information Commissioner’s Office](#)

PART 2 – TAILORED PRIVACY NOTICE

This section of the Privacy Notice provides you with the privacy information that you need to know before you provide personal data to the University for the particular purpose(s) stated below.

Project Title:

Learning how different groups of Irish Roman Catholics understand, accept and receive the official teachings of their Church on the issue of homosexuality.

Type(s) of personal data collected and held by the researcher and method of collection:

Personal data will be collected mainly through interviews. In addition to this, the researcher may be present at certain events, meetings, lessons or liturgies at which you are also present before his interview with you, and he may make notes on the background given by these occasions. You will never be identified personally in such notes, or your presence/absence referred to. The interviews, when they occur, will be recorded through an audio recorder.

The personal data collected will include your name, address and telephone number (for contact purposes only). It will also include your views and attitudes to the Roman Catholic Church's teachings on homosexuality and the answers to other related questions posed by the researcher during the interview. As the research is about the issue of homosexuality, you can choose to reveal your sexual orientation to the researcher on a purely voluntary basis during the interview, but you will not be required to disclose this information.

Lawful Basis

Under data protection legislation, we need to tell you the lawful basis we are relying on to process your data. The lawful basis we are relying on is public task: the processing is necessary for an activity being carried out as part of the University's public task, which is defined as teaching, learning and research.

For further information, see

How personal data is stored:

All personal data will be held securely and strictly confidential to the research team. The data will also be anonymised through the use of a pseudonym. You will be assigned a pseudonym that is not connected to your name or identity, and signed consent forms will be stored separately from project data.

The interviews will be recorded and stored on an encrypted device until it has been transcribed by the researcher. No one else will have access to the recording, and it will be erased once the transcript has been completed.'

All personal data in electronic form will be stored on a password-protected computer, and any hardcopies will be stored in locked storage. Data will not be available to anyone apart from myself and my supervisor.

How personal data is processed:

The recorded conversations and workshops will be transcribed by me, at which point they will be anonymised. The original recording will later be deleted. The transcripts will be used in order to learn about your views, attitudes and acceptance of the Roman Catholic Church's official teachings on

homosexuality, and how this might inform Christian theological responses to the issue of homosexuality.

Withdrawal of data

You can request withdrawal of your data until it has been fully anonymised. Once this has happened, it will not be possible to identify you from any of the data we hold

Who the researcher shares personal data with:

Please be aware that if you disclose information which indicates the potential for serious and immediate harm to yourself or others, the research team may be obliged to breach confidentiality and report this to relevant authorities. This includes disclosure of child protection offences such as the physical or sexual abuse of minors, the physical abuse of vulnerable adults, money laundering, or other crimes covered by prevention of terrorism legislation. Where you disclose behaviour (by yourself or others) that is potentially illegal but does not present serious and immediate danger to others, the researcher will, where appropriate, signpost you to relevant services, but the information you provide will be kept confidential (unless you explicitly request otherwise).

How long personal data is held by the researcher:

I will hold your consent forms until the thesis is submitted. Otherwise, all other identifiable data will be anonymised after 12 months.

How to object to the processing of your personal data for this project:

If you have any concerns regarding the processing of your personal data or wish to withdraw your data from the project, contact Brendan McMullan or one of the named supervisors.

Further information: Brendan McMullan, _____

Appendix 5. Data plan

Provisional Research Title

A small-scale qualitative ethnographic autoethnographic study of different groups of Roman Catholics, assessing their views on official Roman Catholic teachings about homosexuality –

Data collection

What data will you collect or create?

I will primarily collect audio and written transcripts from interviews. I may make field notes on various events, liturgical occasions or meetings that I attend for background gathering purposes. I will use the content of a fieldwork journal during the period in which the fieldwork is undertaken and the data is being analysed. I will use as additional data, selected passages from the aforementioned fieldwork journal and possibly use my own personal journals kept during the past 34 years.

How will the data be collected or created?

The data from the interviews will be recorded on an audio recorder. I will then transcribe it by hand on my laptop.

Data from background-gathering occasions that I attend will be recorded by using handwritten notes that will be transcribed as a document on my PC.

The data from my fieldwork journal will be written up by hand regularly throughout the fieldwork period and transcribed as a document on my PC.

The data from relevant excerpts from previous personal journals will be examined, photographed and transcribed as a document on my PC.

How much data do you expect to produce?

I hope to interview approximately 45-55 people (although this total may become smaller). This will generate between 45 and 90 hours of audio recording and their transcriptions.

Field notes associated with attending events and relevant background-gathering occasions may generate up to 20 pages of hand-written notes, subsequently transcribed as a document on my PC.

A fieldwork journal should potentially generate and fill an 80-page A4 notebook, subsequently transcribed as a document on my PC.

Documentation and metadata

What documentation and metadata will accompany the data?

The data will be accompanied by the Data Management Plan and data access statements, noting any restrictions. Metadata will include:

Title, Description, Keywords, Creator, Creation Date, and Storage Location.

Ethics and legal compliance

How will you manage any ethical issues?

Prior to any empirical work beginning, the project will go through the Durham University's Ethical Committee and approval process. I have highlighted any risk areas - including data-related areas - and how these may be mitigated. It seems unlikely that further ethical issues would arise, but in the event of unforeseen ethical issues, I would seek advice from the Departmental Ethics Convenor.

How will you manage copyright and Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) issues?

Intellectual Property Rights Issues will be addressed largely ahead of the field-research beginning through the Project Information Sheets and Consent Forms.

Short-term storage and management of active research data

How will the data be stored and backed up during the research?

The data will be stored on my newly purchased personal laptop PC (protected by a strong anti-viral package) which is password protected, and using a strong password which is not used on any other device or account. It will be backed up to iCloud which is also password protected, with a different and similarly strong password. All field notes and journals will be stored securely in a locked cupboard in my study at home, and if necessary locked away during periods of travel or when using rented accommodation during field research.

How will you manage access and security?

The audio recordings taken during interviews will be transported from the interview

locations to my accommodation (usually my parental home or if necessary rented accommodation) where they will be stored in a secured and locked cupboard or hotel safe. The transcripts, when complete, will be stored securely on my password-protected laptop, and there should never be any requirement for this data to leave my personal laptop or be printed off as hard-copy documents. If the latter becomes necessary for any reason, they will be stored securely, used speedily and shredded once any reason for this (e.g. data analysis techniques) concludes.

Data deposit and long-term preservation

Which data are of long-term value and should be retained, shared, and/or preserved?

None

What is the long-term preservation plan for the dataset?

Interview transcripts and copies of any field research notes or fieldwork/personal journal extracts will be retained for validation-reuse purposes in line with the University's research data management policy for 10 years from the date of passing my PhD.

Anonymised or non-sensitive research data will be deposited in the University's Research Data Repository.

Data sharing

How will you share the data?

I expect that any data that will be shared during the writing up of my PhD thesis will be fully anonymised, with any identifying aspects of individuals, locations and so forth being removed.

Are any restrictions on data sharing required?

None required.

Responsibilities and resources

Who will be responsible for data management?

As the principal investigator, I will have the overall responsibility for all research data management.

What resources will you require to deliver your plan?

No additional resources are required beyond those already made available by the University and its Department of Theology and Religion.

Appendix 6. Interview information sheets

1. Arguments from scripture.

Church arguments about homosexuality refer to key Biblical passages. The Church views scripture as the Word of God which has authority for believers. Scripture can be interpreted and placed into its historical context with the approval of the Church's Official Teaching Office.

Here are the 5 passages most commonly used with a short explanation and comment.

1. **Genesis 19:1-29 (500-600 BCE)**. God destroys the city of Sodom—seen by some as a sign of God's disapproval of male homosexuality because the men of Sodom threaten God's messengers with male rape. Others argue that the whole story is mainly about the sin of inhospitality to strangers, a terrible crime in ancient culture.
2. **Leviticus 18:22 (350-550 BCE)**. 613 laws that governed the traditions and customs of the Jews and made their culture distinct. In this passage, men are forbidden from having sexual intercourse with other men. The Church argues that this divine law still stands. Like many other actions, such as idol worship and the eating of certain foods such intercourse is described as an abomination. Others point out that the attitudes to some of these other actions have changed, and are no longer considered to be wrong.
3. **Leviticus 20:13** repeats the above law about male-male sexual acts and adds the death penalty as a punishment.
4. **1 Corinthians 6:9-10** written by Paul (53-54 CE). In this passage nine types of wrong-doers are warned they will not inherit God's kingdom. The term 'sodomite' is listed as one of these. The Church argues that this is proof that the New Testament continues the Old Testament disapproval of male homosexual acts. Scholars are not clear about the exact translation of the Greek term 'sodomite' and whether this term can be linked to the modern term 'homosexual'. Paul makes a similar brief argument in another letter to Timothy (**1 Tim 1:10**).
5. **Romans 1:18-32 (56-57 CE)**. Paul argues that Gentiles behave in certain ways because of their unbelief. One example of this is men and women who indulge in unnatural sexual intercourse. This and 20 other types of behaviour, including envy, unreliability, and boastfulness, are condemned. The Church argues that by emphasising such unnatural sexual behaviour, Paul is making a strong argument against all same-sex acts. There is disagreement among scholars as to exactly what kind of unnatural sex and relationships Paul is referring to and whether it does include lesbian sexual acts. The modern terms 'homosexual' or 'lesbian' did not exist in Paul's society.

2. Arguments from natural law

*Natural law is like an inbuilt ability given to every rational human to help them to choose 'good over evil', and so fulfil their proper purpose as human beings. It was developed by several thinkers, including **Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 CE)**. The Church often uses natural law in teaching Catholics how to make good moral decisions.*

The Church argues that natural law is clear that homosexual people should remain chaste (celibate) and not have sexual relationships. This is repeated in all the main teaching documents.

- **The 1975 Declaration** states that all homosexual sexual acts are unarguably immoral because they do not contain the proper purpose needed for all sexual acts, which is an openness to the creation of new life.
- **The 1986 Letter** states that it is only within marriage that sexual acts can be morally good, and therefore homosexual sexual acts are always immoral.
- Homosexual acts cannot be complementary and are not open to the possibility of creating new life.
- Such acts prevent homosexual partners from giving themselves to one another selflessly.
- All homosexual acts confirm the homosexual person to have a disordered sexual inclination which is self-indulgent.

- **The Catechism of the Catholic Church (1992)** summarises the previous teaching as follows: *'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...sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved'.*

3. The use of arguments from the human sciences

The human sciences include psychology, sociology, history, biology and anthropology. Very occasionally the Church refers to these in its arguments about homosexuality. It is expected that any insights from the sciences, in order to be accepted by Catholics, should conform to Church tradition and sacred scripture.

- **The 1975 Declaration** refers to certain psychological observations which (at that time) may have encouraged the acceptance of homosexual relations and sexual acts and are opposed to the teaching of the Church and the moral sense of Christian people. (In 1973 the globally influential American Psychiatric Association declassified homosexuality as an abnormal disorder. It may be to this that the declaration refers).
- **The 1986 Letter** states that some arguments used to oppose Church teaching may use scientific studies as part of their opposition.
- It argues that the Church position on homosexuality will be supported by the ‘more secure findings of the natural sciences’, but the implication is that those scientific views which do not support the Church view are thereby not secure.
- The document adds that the Church view and its teachings about the human being do more justice to all people, including a homosexual person, than anything that the human sciences may currently reveal about the homosexual condition.
- The document encourages Bishops to heed the sciences as they seek to assist homosexual people in a pastoral way, ‘In a particular way, we would ask the Bishops to support, with the means at their disposal, the development of appropriate forms of pastoral care for homosexual persons. These would include the assistance of the psychological, sociological and medical sciences, in full accord with the teaching of the Church’.

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Male and Female He Created Them (2019) is an Instruction on gender identity issues which includes some more detailed references to the human sciences, as well as calling for dialogue on all the relevant issues about gender and gender identity.

4. The recommendations given to homosexual persons as to how they should live moral lives in order to be faithful to these official teachings.

The 1975 Declaration acknowledges that homosexuals who feel incapable of enduring a solitary life cannot form sexual relationships but should be ‘sustained in the hope’ that they can overcome these personal difficulties and their inability to ‘fit into society’

The 1986 Letter states that the abandonment of homosexual activity will require the homosexual person to collaborate with God’s grace.

Homosexual people should therefore:

- Join the sufferings of being homosexual to the sacrifice of Jesus’s Cross.
- Battle all ‘self-indulgent passions and desires’ (Galatians 5)
- Remember that their self-denial will be empowered by God.
- Remember that only such self-sacrifice will bring them salvation and save them from a way of life that ‘constantly threatens to destroy them’ (interpreted as a reference to the HIV AIDS pandemic).
- Faithfully celebrate the Sacrament of Penance in order to receive the grace to convert their lives.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (1992) states that homosexual people are called to chastity and that through the sacraments, practising self-mastery, prayer and having non-sexual friendships, they can move towards Christian perfection.

5. Discrimination and civil law

The 1986 Letter

- Pressure to change its teachings must be resisted by the Church, and this should not be seen as discrimination against homosexuals.
- Violence in act or word against homosexuals is deplored and their dignity must be respected ‘in word, in action and in law’.
- This does not mean that being homosexual is not disordered. If civil law claims that homosexuality is not disordered and brings about civil laws which protect homosexual behaviour, there should be no surprise that irrational violence against them may result.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (1992) states that:

- For many homosexual people, this objectively disordered inclination is a trial.
- They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity.
- Unjust discrimination should be avoided.

The 2016 Apostolic Exhortation Amoris Laetitia states that:

- ‘every person, regardless of sexual orientation, ought to be respected in his or her dignity and treated with consideration, while ‘every sign of unjust discrimination’ is to be carefully avoided, particularly any form of aggression and violence’.
- Families of people who are attracted to members of the same sex ‘should be given respectful pastoral guidance so that those who manifest a homosexual orientation can receive the assistance they need to understand and fully carry out God’s will in their lives’.

Almost all subsequent documents repeat the call against unjust discrimination.

6. The teachings and commentary offered by the Church on same-sex civil-partnerships and same-sex marriage.

Considerations Regarding Proposals to give Legal Recognition to Unions between Homosexual Persons 2003

- No grounds for considering homosexual unions to be in any way similar...to God's plan for marriage and family.
- Laws to legally recognise homosexual unions or homosexual marriage are strongly opposed for the following reasons:
 1. Traditional marriage is the only moral expression of sexual union, and legal same-sex unions **go against right reason**.
 2. Homosexual unions **cannot contribute to the continuation of the human species**. Allowing children to be adopted into such homosexual households 'would actually mean doing violence to these children'.
 3. Laws to legalise same-sex unions **would redefine marriage**, causing great harm to society.
 4. **Legal rights for the partners in such unions are not required**, and if such individuals need to preserve their personal interests, they may already do so by using existing legitimate laws.

Catholic politicians and lawmakers should actively oppose such legislation by voting against it. If it has already been adopted, they should make their opposition known, act to lessen its harmful effects or try to partially or completely repeal such unjust laws.

2016 Apostolic Exhortation Amoris Laetitia

- 'there are absolutely no grounds for considering homosexual unions to be in any way similar or even remotely analogous to God's plan for marriage and family'.
- Local Churches should not be placed under pressure to regard homosexual unions as equivalent in law to heterosexual marriage and international bodies should not make aid to poorer nations dependent on their adoption of such legal recognition.

2021 Responsum of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to a dubium regarding the blessing of the unions of persons of the same sex

The CDF, reiterating many of the reasons outlined in the 2003 Considerations, stated that 'the Church does not have, and cannot have, the power to bless unions of persons of the same-sex unions'.

7. The teachings and commentary offered by the Church on the suitability of homosexual men for reception into Roman Catholic Holy Orders.

**Instruction Concerning the Criteria for the Discernment of Vocations with regard to Persons with Homosexual Tendencies in view of their Admission to the Seminary and to Holy Orders
2005**

- ‘The Church cannot admit to the seminary or to Holy Orders those who practise homosexuality, present deep-seated homosexual tendencies or support the so-called "gay culture"’
- Having deep-seated homosexual tendencies ‘gravely hinders them from relating correctly to men and women. One must in no way overlook the negative consequences that can derive from the ordination of [such] persons’.
- The suitability of any candidate for ordination must be carefully discerned by Bishops and Superiors, seminary staff, spiritual directors and confessors. Each is responsible for prohibiting or dissuading homosexual men from going forward to ordination. For the candidates, it would be gravely dishonest to hide their own homosexuality in order to proceed towards ordination.

8. The particular language used within the main Church teaching documents on homosexuality about homosexual people and their orientation.

This is a selection to demonstrate the language and tone of the teachings about homosexuality.

The 1975 Declaration

- Homosexuals must certainly be treated with understanding and sustained in the hope of overcoming their personal difficulties and their inability to fit into society.
- Homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered and cannot be approved of.

The 1986 Letter to Bishops

- The inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin, but it is a strong tendency toward an intrinsic moral evil and so the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder.
- Homosexuals should not be led to believe that living out of this orientation in homosexual activity is a morally acceptable option.
- The view that homosexual activity is equivalent to heterosexual married love has a direct and harmful impact on society's understanding of the family.
- 'It is deplorable that homosexual persons have been the object of violent malice in speech or in action'. Such treatment deserves condemnation from the Church. The dignity of each person must always be respected in word, in action and in law.
- When civil legislation is introduced to protect homosexual behaviour (to which no one has any right), neither the Church nor society should be surprised when irrational and violent reactions occur.
- The Church...refuses to consider the person as a "heterosexual" or a "homosexual" and insists that every person is a child of God.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (1992)

- 'This inclination, which is objectively disordered, constitutes for most of them a trial. They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. These persons are called to...unite to the sacrifice of the Lord's Cross the difficulties they may encounter from their condition'.

9. Gender, transgender and queer

In Pope Francis' **Apostolic Exhortation, Amoris Laetitia, 2016**, he teaches that:

- It is concerning that there are ideas that attempt to dismiss the biological differences between a man and a woman or which suggest that gender identity is a personal choice which can change. It is especially concerning when such ideas influence how children are raised.
- The 'young need to be helped to accept their own body as it was created' as otherwise they can be misled into believing that they have power over creation.

In **2019**, the **Congregation for Catholic Education** released a document on gender entitled "**Male and Female He Created Them**". It is a complex and detailed document addressing a wide range of issues.

- Concern is expressed about 'gender theory' and those who believe that their gender is something they can choose or change.
- Concern is raised at the concept of being 'queer' which rejects any fixed sexual identity and assumes that a person's sexual identity can change.
- The family is upheld as the 'natural social unit'
- Ideas that undermine the family are harmful to society, especially the poorest and most vulnerable.
- Concern is expressed over attempts by LGBTQ+ people to become parents through modern reproductive technology, for it involves the manipulation of human embryos, the commercialization of the human body and the reduction of a baby to an object.

10. Tentative signs of changing attitudes?

The teaching of the Church on homosexuality has not changed, and Pope Francis has never indicated that it could or should change.

Nevertheless, since he became Pope in 2013, some comments, actions and writings could indicate a change in approach. (It should be noted that he has also affirmed traditional teachings and taken a strong stance against gender theory). But here are just a few examples:

1. 2013: ‘if someone is gay and he searches for the Lord and has good will, who am I to judge?’
He became the first pope to use the word “gay” in reference to sexuality.
2. 2013: In an interview, “A person once asked me if I approved of homosexuality. I replied with another question: ‘tell me: when God looks at a gay person, does he endorse the existence of this person with love, or reject and condemn this person?’ We must always consider the person”
3. 2015: As he presented the Pope with a film from LGBT Catholics in New York, Fr. Gil Martinez said the Pope told him, “I would love to visit and talk to gay and lesbian people and please tell the gays to pray for me and I shall pray for them.”
4. 2016: Referring to a transgender man whom he met at the Vatican, he said, “‘He that was her but is he.’” He also suggested Church ministers should accompany LGBT people, saying this is “what Jesus would do today.”
5. 2018: While meeting with a gay survivor of clergy sexual abuse, he told the man, “Juan Carlos, that you are gay does not matter. God made you like this and loves you like this and I don’t care. The pope loves you like this. You have to be happy with who you are.”
6. 2019: He meets with a group of English LGBT+ pilgrims after a morning audience and takes a photograph with them.
7. 2019: Fr. James Alison, a gay theologian who was suspended from priestly ministry writes about a 2017 phone call he received from Pope Francis, indicating his support.
8. 2019: Pope Francis meets with Fr. James Martin, SJ, author of ‘Building a Bridge’ on LGBT issues in the Church, in what is seen as an approval of Martin’s LGBTQ+ ministry. In 2021 he sends a handwritten note to him, affirming his ministry to LGBTQ+ people.
9. 2020: In an audience with the Italian parents of LGBT children, Pope Francis tells the parents, “The Church loves your children as they are.”
10. 2020: Comments from a previous interview, show him reiterating his support for civil unions and recognizing same-gender couples.

German Catholic Bishops have been debating greater inclusion of homosexual people for several years.

- In 2021, concern was expressed by the President of the German Bishops' Conference about the Church's attitude to *not* blessing same-sex unions.
- In 2021 the Bishops of Essen and Dresden called for major changes in the Church's teachings on sexual morality as part of contributions to a new book called '*Catholic and Queer*'.
- In 2022, The Archbishop of Munich, Cardinal Marx, apologised for the Church's discrimination against homosexuals at a Mass for LGBT+ Catholics.

Also

- In 2022, Cardinal Jean Claude Hollerich of Luxembourg voiced his belief that the Church's position on homosexual relationships is wrong and suggested the teachings should change.

Many of these quotations and gestures have been extracted from a Timeline of Pope Francis' record on LGBTQ issues compiled by New Ways Ministry.

<https://www.newwaysministry.org/resources/pope-francis-lgbtq-issues/>

The sources for this material can be viewed in the References Section under 'Sources with no author cited'

Appendix 7. The interview questions and format (principal questions in red)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction and Welcome • Consent Form • Explanation of Format <p><i>Before we look at the Church teaching about homosexuality in a bit more detail, would you say that you already know anything about this teaching or what it might contain?</i></p>	
Section	Questions
1. Scripture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do some or all of these biblical passages contain good arguments to support the Church’s teaching that homosexual people should not have sex or develop sexual relationships? • What are your thoughts about using such biblical passages to guide the sexual behaviour of homosexual people? • Are such biblical passages always relevant, or are they tied to the times in which they were written? • Did biblical societies understand homosexuality in the same way as modern societies do, and does this matter or not?
2. Natural law	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sex between two people of the same gender is not open to new life. Is this a strong argument for prohibiting same-sex acts and relationships?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sex outside marriage is immoral according to NML. The Church does not recognise same-sex marriage, so no homosexual person can ever have a sexual relationship with a person of their own gender. What are your thoughts? • Two people of the same gender cannot express their love in the complementary way that heterosexuals can. Is this a good argument for prohibiting same-sex acts and relationships? • Can same-sex relationships be self-giving/selfless?
<p>3. Human Sciences</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do the insights from the human sciences about homosexuality get sufficient attention in the Church teachings? • Is the Church correct to suggest that scientific views not in harmony with Church teachings are not secure? • Does the Church offer a better vision for how to view a homosexual person than the view given by the human sciences?
<p>4. How homosexual people should behave</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A life of self-sacrifice, prayer and the use of the sacraments to give them strength. What are your views on this vision of how homosexual Catholics should live their lives? • If all Catholics are called to self-sacrifice, prayer and the use of the

	<p>sacraments, why are homosexual Catholics required to do so through a life that can also never involve sexual expression?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The teaching suggests that a homosexual lifestyle is one of self-destruction. Do you agree with this?
<p>5. Discrimination and Civil Law</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Church has the right to fight what it regards as false homosexual propaganda, without being accused of discrimination. What are your thoughts? • The Church condemns violence in word and act against homosexuals and says that they should be accepted with sensitivity. Do you agree? • Is there a contradiction between accepting people with sensitivity, but rejecting their lifestyle? • Some argue that by mentioning how some might react violently to laws that promote homosexuality, the Church is in some way condoning such violence, even as it condemns it. What are your views?
<p>6. Civil unions and same-sex marriage</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Same-sex unions bear no similarity to heterosexual marriages and do not support God's plan. Do you agree? • There are four reasons given for opposing legal same-sex unions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>1. They go against reason,</i>

	<p>2. <i>They redefine marriage,</i></p> <p>3. <i>They are not open to new life and</i></p> <p>4. <i>Laws (medical, property, financial) already exist to protect homosexual individuals as individuals, without the need to extend these to a couple.</i></p> <p>Are any of these useful arguments in the Church's opposition to legal same-sex unions?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are the children of same-sex relationships having violence done to them because they are not being brought up in a traditional heterosexual family? • Should all Catholic politicians oppose and work against such laws when they are introduced?
<p>7. Homosexual candidates for Holy Orders</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Men who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies cannot relate properly to both men and women and, therefore, cannot be ordained. What are your views on this? • What, if any, are the negative consequences referred to, which might arise from a gay man being ordained as a deacon, priest or bishop? • Should a gay seminarian, knowing what the Church teaches, still be honest to the authorities about his sexual orientation?
<p>8. Language and tone</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having looked at some of the language used, are there any words or phrases that you consider to be unhelpful or offensive to homosexual people?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do the words the Church uses to describe people matter or not? • Many homosexual Catholics object to the term used to describe their sexual acts as being intrinsically evil and their orientation as objectively disordered. Are they right to feel this, or just being overly sensitive? • The Church says that it doesn't want to categorise people as being either homosexual or heterosexual. Should all Catholic people resist defining themselves as gay or straight? • Is this refusal to categorise people by sexual orientation an expression of concern for homosexual people?
<p>9. Transgender, Queer</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Church is concerned about ideas that play down or dismiss the differences between the genders. What are your thoughts? • The Church is concerned that people, especially the young, may consider their gender to be something that they can change. When a person transitions from one gender to another, is this concerning? Why/not? • Is our sexual identity something that is fixed, or as queer theory suggests, is it flexible?

10. Change in tone/approach

- Do any of these words or actions stand out for you as being significant, and if so why?
- Pope Francis seems to be aiming for a balance between upholding traditional teachings and adopting a more inclusive attitude to the LGBTQ+ community. Is it possible to do both?
- Can the current teachings about homosexuality continue as they currently stand, or does inclusion of LGBTQ+ Catholics require change in teaching along with a change in tone?

- As we move to the end of the interview, are there any further points you would like to raise?
- Having had a look at different aspects of the Church's official teaching about homosexuality, do you understand the teachings?
- (What areas do you not understand?)
- Having had a look at different aspects of the Church's official teaching about homosexuality, do you accept all of the teaching, some of it, or none of it?
- (Which aspects do you not accept and why?)
- Should the Church teaching on homosexuality change? Why/Why not?

Appendix 8. Coding themes and sub-themes identified and used for the Template Analysis of data, with the number of participants and references added for each.

Themes and sub-themes	No. of participants	No. of references
Top-Level Code 1. Sources of authority 1. Scripture.	45	344
1.1. Scriptural arguments not accepted.	42	329
1.1.1. Absence of context.	32	84
1.1.1.1. Knowledge about sexual orientation and same-sex attraction was limited during biblical times.	17	22
1.1.2. Unfamiliar passages or scriptural arguments rarely are heard by many Catholics in preaching.	8	15
1.1.3. Teachings of Jesus or the message of the Gospels supersede these passages.	22	49
1.1.3.1. Jesus' silence on the issue of homosexuality or his own sexuality.	7	9
1.1.4. Outdated, inadequate, or selective passages used and unclear arguments, if any, used.	31	82
1.1.5. Issues re translation and problematic language within the selected texts.	13	31
1.1.6. Frustration, disappointment or anger at the passages selected.	18	37
1.2. Scriptural arguments accepted.	3	15
1.2.1. Scripture is the word of God and is authoritative.	3	9
1.2.1.1. Changing scriptural arguments is problematic.	3	6

Themes and sub-themes	No. of participants	No. of references
Top Level Code 2 Sources of authority 2. Natural Law (NML)	45	399
2.1. NML arguments about homosexuality not accepted.	39	372
2.1.1. NML arguments are outdated or inadequate.	29	47
2.1.1.1. NML arguments about homosexuality are act-centred and ignore context of relationship.	16	46
2.1.1.1.1. The concept of 'natural' is queried.	19	46
2.1.1.1.2. Overpopulation and ecological concerns render the procreative imperative ethically unsound.	11	14
2.1.2. NML arguments about homosexuality are flawed or contradictory.	16	53
2.1.2.1. The Church acknowledges both unitive and procreative elements within a heterosexual marriage.	14	29
2.1.2.2. Some heterosexual couples cannot have children by nature or choice and may still be sexually active.	15	38
2.1.2.3. Inability to generate new life does not make same-sex acts self-centred or indulgent.	37	99
2.2. NML arguments about homosexuality accepted.	6	27
2.2.1. Some/all NML arguments about homosexuality are accepted as sound and authoritative.	5	9
2.2.1.1. NML arguments about homosexuality are vindicated because NML is correct about other ethical issues or societal trends.	4	7
2.2.1.2. Within the context of wider Church teachings on sexuality, these teachings are sound.	3	11

Themes and sub-themes	No. of participants	No. of references
Top-Level Code 3. Sources of authority 3. Human sciences.	45	205
3.1. The teachings are insufficiently guided by knowledge from the human sciences.	38	156
3.1.1. The Church's approach to the scientific knowledge about LGBTQ+ issues is selective, defensive and, or arrogant.	21	36
3.1.1.1. The Church seems to welcome scientific insights about other issues.	2	3
3.1.1.2. The teachings do not give any evidence for the scientific sources considered by the Church to be 'secure'.	8	9
3.1.2. The Church does not, in its practice, offer a more complete human vision for LGBTQ+ people than science.	26	41
3.1.2.1. The Church shows inconsistency between what it says and how it treats LGBTQ+ people.	10	13
3.1.3. Science, theology and spirituality all have complementary insights to offer on this issue.	13	22
3.1.4. The insights of the human sciences are autonomous and do not need to support any theological or ethical arguments.	10	12
3.1.5. Disappointment that the Church may not be open to human-scientific findings re sexual orientation and LGBTQ+ issues.	12	20
3.2. The teachings on homosexuality are sufficiently guided by knowledge from the human sciences.	7	49
3.2.1. The Church does offer a more complete vision for all people (including LGBTQ+) than science.	5	12
3.2.1.1. Curiosity expressed about the perception that the Church is anti-LGBTQ+ or homophobic.	1	3
3.2.2 The Church is (sometimes) correct to question science.	7	17
3.2.2.1. The Church should challenge relativism in all fields of ethics or human knowledge.	2	8
3.2.3. In a rapidly changing world, the relationship between theology and science is complex and the two disciplines work at different speeds.	6	9

Themes and sub-themes	No. of participants	No. of references
Integrative Code 4. General or additional issues raised about sources of authority in the teachings.	38	599
4.1. Some of the Church teaching on homosexuality is driven by fear.	20	53
4.1.1. A perception that the Church magisterium may have a particular issue with homosexuality.	7	41
4.2. The Church teaching on homosexuality focuses on the sexual act.	20	42
4.2.1. The Church should consider the full context and experience of LGBTQ+ lives and relationships.	28	82
4.2.1.1. There should be no fear of 'otherness'.	15	37
4.3. The Church should be open to development of human thought.	27	107
4.4. Perception that the Church does not welcome its LGBTQ+ members.	21	94
4.4.1. A disconnect between the hospitality extended by some Church communities to LGBTQ+ people and the tone of the teachings about them.	9	16
4.5. These teachings are unfamiliar because of no regular preaching about human sexuality.	4	8
4.6. Church is out of touch with a wide variety of issues about human sexuality and family issues.	19	50
4.6.1. The Church does not want to acknowledge views or insights at odds with its teachings.	17	44

4.7. Conscience is more authoritative than laws or dogma.	10	15
4.7.1. The teachings of Jesus especially the 'love commandment' are more authoritative than non-gospel scriptures, Church laws or dogma.	5	10

Themes and sub-themes	No. of participants	
Top-Level Code 5. Recommended lifestyle for faithful Catholic homosexual people.	45	248
5.1. Non-acceptance of the recommended lifestyle for faithful homosexual Catholics.	41	222
5.1.1. The call to universal chastity is unfairly applied to homosexuality.	21	41
5.1.1.1. Rejection of the suggestion that spiritual practices can be used to manage a homosexual orientation.	32	70
5.1.1.1.1. References made to conversion-therapy practices (even though the Catholic Church does not recommend these in its teachings).	13	20
5.1.2. Rejection of the teaching that homosexual acts are self-destructive or self-indulgent.	12	20
5.1.3. Reference made about the claim that their 'lifestyle' threatens to destroy homosexuals.	9	21
5.1.4. The Church vision for homosexual people is joyless and not life-giving.	25	50
5.2. Acceptance (partial or full) of the recommended lifestyle for homosexual Catholics.	4	26
5.2.1. Discomfort with the uncompromising vision, but also with changing authoritative teachings.	2	18
5.2.2. Homosexual people are being asked to live chaste lives, as are all Catholics regardless of sexual orientation.	3	8

Themes and sub-themes	No. of participants	No. of references
Top-Level Code 6. Discrimination and violence towards homosexual people.	45	324
6.1. The Church rightly condemns violence and discrimination.	9	9
6.1.1 Societal prejudice against LGBTQ+ people still occurs globally and to a lesser extent in Western countries.	14	18
6.2. Elements of the Church teaching on violence and discrimination towards LGBTQ+ people are contradictory, flawed or problematic.	44	210
6.2.1. The distinction made between just and unjust discrimination within the teachings is queried.	16	43
6.2.2. Violence is wrong in every circumstance and should always be condemned without qualification.	21	33
6.3. The Church teaching on violence and discrimination against LGBT+ people is pragmatic.	4	11

Themes and sub-themes	No. of participants	No. of references
Top-level Code 7. Marriage and civil unions for same-sex couples.	45	321
7.1. Non-acceptance of some or all of the Church teaching on legal same-sex unions.	35	227
7.1.1. There are significant parallels between same-sex unions and heterosexual marriage.	7	11
7.1.1.1. Separate legal rights are required for same-sex couples to enjoy the same joint legal rights as heterosexual couples.	14	16

7.1.2. Redefinition of marriage and legal recognition for same-sex unions is not problematic for society or may be beneficial to society and LGBTQ+ people.	28	58
7.1.2.1. That the non-justification for legal same-sex unions should be apparent to right reason is questioned.	9	13
7.1.2.2. Children of same-sex unions are not disadvantaged.	22	42
7.1.2.2.1. Children of heterosexual unions or who were placed in the care of Church institutions or pastors have experienced abuse or violence.	13	17
7.1.3. Inability to procreate is not a legitimate barrier to legal same-sex unions.	10	14
7.1.4. Catholic politicians should not be required to uphold Catholic teaching in law-making.	26	45
7.1.5. The inability to know God's definitive plan for marriage and the family.	9	11
7.2. Acceptance or understanding of some or all of the Church teaching on legal same-sex unions.	10	30
7.2.1. There are no significant parallels between same-sex unions and heterosexual marriage.	2	2
7.2.2. Redefinition of marriage and legal recognition of same-sex unions is problematic for society.	4	6
7.2.2.1. Children of same-sex unions could be or are disadvantaged.	5	7
7.2.3. Catholic politicians should uphold Catholic teaching in law-making.	4	8
7.2.3.1 Catholic politicians should include their faith within a wider range of considerations when making law.	3	7
7.3. Church recognition of same-sex unions.	15	40
7.3.1. Church blessings or recognition for same-sex unions and or Church marriage would be welcomed.	13	23
7.3.2. Legal marriage or unions are just, but Church recognition or marriage is rejected or seen as unnecessary.	3	12
7.3.3. Unclear as to why LGBTQ+ people want marriage acknowledged by a Church that doesn't agree with their unions.	4	5
7.4. Undecided with conflicting feelings and views around the issue of same-sex marriage expressed.	7	24

Themes and sub-themes	No. of participants	No. of references
Top-Level code 8. Holy Orders for homosexual Catholic men.	45	321
8.1. Non-acceptance of the Church teaching on the non-admission of homosexual men to Holy Orders.	45	281
8.1.1. Homosexual priests can relate pastorally and properly to both genders. Celibacy is a bigger barrier to relating to others.	35	68
8.1.2. The term 'deep-seated homosexual tendencies' is ambiguous.	11	20
8.1.3. The inferred but unspecified link between homosexuality and the problem of paedophilia or pederasty is unfounded and unjust.	18	35
8.1.3.1. This teaching may reflect an unwillingness of the Church to acknowledge the disproportionately high numbers of homosexual priests or indicate internalised homophobia in the magisterium.	19	50
8.1.4. Both heterosexual and homosexual priests are called to celibacy, so there is no issue here.	16	19
8.1.5. Homosexual candidates for Holy Orders should be open about their sexuality, but this teaching may encourage secrecy.	28	49
8.1.5.1. Institutions that form candidates for priesthood or their dioceses probably apply these teachings with some discretion.	8	16

8.1.6. Rejection of the assertion that negative consequences follow the ordination of homosexual men and affirmation that homosexual men are often good priests.	14	24
8.2. Acceptance of <i>some</i> , but not all, aspects of the Church teaching on the non-admission of homosexual men to Holy Orders, alongside disagreement that they should be excluded.	2	3
8.2.1. Homosexual priests may create problematic issues.	2	3
8.3. Affective and sexual maturity for any candidate is important regardless of sexual orientation.	14	33
8.4. Some men became priests to evade or cope with the negativity of being Catholic and homosexual.	2	4

Themes and sub-themes	No. of participants	No. of references
Integrative Code 9. Tone and language used within the Church teachings on homosexuality.	45	424
9.1. Non-acceptance of, or disagreement with the tone and or language used within the Church teachings about homosexuality.	42	404
9.1.1. Non-acceptance of the description of same-sex orientation as an 'objective disorder' and/or homosexual acts as 'intrinsically evil'	39	111
9.1.2. Non-acceptance of other phrases, language or tone within the teachings about homosexuality.	32	119
9.1.3. Comments or reactions on the view expressed in the teachings that the 'person is viewed by Church as being neither heterosexual or homosexual but a child of God'.	21	25
9.1.4. Comments or reactions that link the teachings on homosexuality to the mental health, well-being or affective lives of LGBTQ people.	31	94
9.1.4.1. Comments or reactions that suggest the language and tone of these teachings could indirectly lead to attempted or actual suicide among some LGBTQ+ people.	15	23
9.1.5. The tone and language of the Church teaching on homosexuality needs to be addressed.	13	32
9.2. Agreement with, or acceptance/understanding of limited aspects of the language and tone used within the Church teachings about homosexuality.	3	8
9.3. Not supportive of the language or tone, but understanding expressed about its origins, or minimising its overall significance.	5	12

Themes and sub-themes	No. of participants	No. of references
Top-Level Code 10. Issues connected to gender theory, gender fluidity and transgender people.	44*	277
10.1. Disagreement with, or non-acceptance of some or all of the concerns of the Church expressed in its teachings on this issue.	22	54
10.1.1. A contrast is noted between the tone of these teachings on transgender issues and earlier teachings on homosexuality.	10	12
10.1.2. The sincerity, motivation or competency of the Church teaching on gender and transgender people is queried.	12	15
10.1.3. Positivity expressed towards people being free to make such decisions about gender reassignment free from judgement or stigma.	6	9
10.1.3.1. Positivity expressed about how Catholic settings (schools) deal with the issues of sexuality and gender fluidity.	6	18
10.2. The complexity of gender and transgender issues acknowledged.	39	146
10.2.1. No personal interaction with any transgender people or an unfamiliarity with the issues acknowledged or expressed.	12	16

10.2.2. More knowledge is required by society on transgender issues and the human sciences should be the primary source for this.	18	35
10.2.2.1. Acceptance within society for gender fluidity and transgender people is evolving.	6	7
10.2.3. Compassion or understanding expressed towards people who come to a realisation that they are non-binary, transgender and or want to undergo gender reassignment.	33	59
10.2.4. The issues raised by children being adopted or born through surrogacy to people in non-heterosexual unions (Clearly this is not specifically connected to transgender people or gender theory, but the issue is raised in these teaching documents).	11	29
10.3. Agreement, acceptance or understanding of some or all of the Church teaching on gender issues, and transgender people.	29	77
10.3.1. Concerns about the motivation and well-being of younger people contemplating premature decisions to undergo gender reassignment.	26	55
10.3.2. Concerns about the influence of gender neutrality on younger people.	3	22

* One participant was called away and did not answer questions on this section.

Themes and sub-themes	No. of participants	No. of references
Top-Level Code 11. Reactions to a change in tone under Pope Francis.	45	406
11.1. Positive.	42	288
11.1.1. Comments on 'Who am I to judge?'	24	34
11.1.2. The words, gestures or change of tone by Pope Francis are welcome but in themselves are insufficient.	20	40
11.1.2.1. Curial and or reactionary opposition to Pope Francis from within the Church is a cause for concern in this issue.	17	29
11.1.2.1.1 Pope Francis is cautious or wary of his detractors but sees the bigger picture and has a vision for longer-term renewal or change.	18	38
11.2.1.2. A wider structural change in the Church is required for this and other issues to be addressed.	15	29
11.2.1.2.1. Comments that link to or reference the Synod.	12	15
11.1.3. Indication expressed that the teachings should change or adapt in time.	27	55
11.1.3.1. Opening up avenues for future dialogue about these issues is significant or welcome.	20	48
11.2. Negative.	22	114
11.2.1. Indication expressed that the teachings should remain unchanged or unadapted.	9	16
11.2.1.1. Changing the teaching would be difficult for the Church.	5	10
11.2.1.2. Caution expressed about changing teachings or changing them too quickly.	2	4
11.2.2. Negative or critical opinions that suggest the words or gestures are trivial or patronising to LGBTQ people.	13	38
11.2.2.1. Not hopeful that the Church will change its teachings.	8	22
11.2.2.2. Church teaching on this issue is perceived as irrelevant and disregarded by many.	5	17
11.2.3. Words or gestures of Pope Francis that were misunderstood or seen as confusing or misleading or contradictory.	5	7
11.3. Neutral opinion re the Pope's pastoral response, but feels it is probably insignificant in a wider way.	2	4

Themes and sub-themes	No. of participants	No. of references
Integrative Code 12. Comments that reflect a changing attitude to the Catholic Church, particularly in Ireland.	37	265
12.1. Comments that reflect on how Church-linked scandals have damaged the credibility of the Church as a moral guide.	12	26
12.2. Comments that reflect on the Church losing its ability to influence people, particularly its younger members.	21	57
12.3. Comments that uphold the enduring importance of the Church as a moral guide or prophetic witness within modern society.	1	15
12.4. Comments on how the Church (in Ireland) had been experienced in the past.	23	68
12.4.1. Comments on how homosexuality had been perceived (in Ireland) in the past.	6	17
12.5. Comments on societal changes (in Ireland) that have altered perceptions of LGBTQ+ people.	35	77
12.5.1. Comments which indicate that personal experience and interactions with LGBTQ+ people have shaped a change in attitudes.	31	49
12.5.2. Comments that referenced the Irish Marriage Referendum of 2015.	10	22

Themes and sub-themes	No. of participants	No. of references
Integrative Theme 13. Comments that draw links between the issues associated with teachings about LGBTQ+ people and other significant issues for the Church.	32	115
13.1. Comments that make a link between the treatment of women and LGBTQ+ people by the Church.	22	58
13.2. Comments that draw a link between Church teaching on homosexuality and other Church teachings about sexual ethics like contraception, divorce, cohabitation or abortion.	23	45
13.3. Comments that draw a link between Church teachings on homosexuality and its rule on clerical celibacy.	8	12

Themes and sub-themes	No. of participants	No. of references
Integrative Code 14. Overall expressions of agreement or disagreement with teachings. Acceptance, understanding and reception of teachings. Other issues of note from the dataset.	45	1071
14.1. Comments or reactions that express disagreement or non-acceptance of teachings, or indicate their non-reception.	43	650
14.1.1. The Church is the people of God and the sensus fidelium is more significant than Church dogma on this issue.	2	5
14.1.2. Comments or reactions that indicate the teaching is understood but not received.	28	150
14.1.3. Comments or reactions that indicate the teaching may be inadequate, insufficient, or contradictory.	35	108
14.1.4. Comments or reactions that indicate the teaching may be unfair, unjust or offensive to LGBTQ+ people.	35	131
14.1.4.1. Comments that express anger or concern at the Church's attitude and treatment of LGBTQ+ people.	19	88

14.1.4.2. Views expressed that the enforcement of teachings in Catholic institutions have encouraged lay, religious and clergy to remain closeted or secretive within their Catholic communities.	7	13
14.1.5. Comments or reactions that indicate the Church should change amend or develop this teaching.	26	59
14.1.5.1. Comments that suggest dialogue would be a useful way forward.	8	23
14.1.6. Comments that express the need for a more pastoral approach and welcome for LGBT+ Catholics from the Church.	17	36
14.1.7. LGBT+ relationships may actually be stronger or include a deeper love because they exist without the support of community or despite discrimination.	3	4
14.1.8. Expressions of a 'live and let live' approach to this issue.	4	7
14.1.9. LGBTQ+ Catholics, lay, religious or clerical have many gifts that should be celebrated and used to enhance the Church community.	7	26
14.2. Comments that indicate that the participant's views on some or all these teachings have changed over the years.	4	9
14.3. Comments or reactions that express acceptance of aspects of the teachings, or indicate their full or partial reception.	32	86
14.3.1. Comments that indicate the Church should not change or amend these teachings.	3	3
14.3.2. Comments that indicate society's unwillingness to hear more traditional arguments and to label any alternative viewpoints as being homophobic.	2	5
14.3.3. Comments that indicate the absence of good or regular teaching about these issues from pastors is a reason for a lack of understanding or acceptance by the faithful.	2	5
14.3.4. Comments that agree with some of the Church teaching about gender theory, fluidity or reassignment.	29	73
14.4. Comments that indicate some personal reservations about the overt or public expression of gay culture and gay rights.	4	5
14.5. Personal negative attitudes about homosexuality expressed, but these are largely uninfluenced by Church teaching.	2	7
14.6. Personal discomfort with homosexuality aside, a 'live and let live' judgement is applied to the issue of homosexuality and its sexual expression.	2	19
14.7. Neither acceptance or rejection of the Church teaching, but a recognition of the need to face the reality of LGBTQ+ people's circumstances and provide legal accommodation and protection.	4	18
14.8. A particularly interesting or memorable anecdote, astute phrase or pertinent comment or reaction.	40	277

Appendix 9. The final coding template

Appendix 9. The Final Coding Template

Top-Level Code 1. Sources of Authority 1. Scripture.

- 1.1. Scriptural arguments not accepted.
- 1.1.1. Absence of context.
- 1.1.1.1. Knowledge about sexual orientation and same-sex attraction was limited during biblical times.
- 1.1.2. Unfamiliar passages or scriptural arguments rarely are heard by many Catholics in preaching.
- 1.1.3. Teachings of Jesus or the message of the Gospels supersede these passages.
- 1.1.3.1. Jesus' silence on issue of homosexuality or his own sexuality.
- 1.1.4. Outdated inadequate or selective passages used and unclear arguments, if any, used.
- 1.1.5. Issues re translation and problematic language within the selected texts.
- 1.1.6. Frustration, disappointment or anger at the passages selected .
- 1.2. Scriptural arguments accepted.
- 1.2.1. Scripture is the word of God and is authoritative.
- 1.2.1.1. Changing scriptural arguments is problematic.

Top Level Code 2 Sources of Authority 2. Natural Law.

- 2.1. NML arguments about homosexuality not accepted.
- 2.1.1. NML arguments are outdated or inadequate.
- 2.1.1.1. NML arguments about homosexuality are act-centred and ignore context of relationship .
- 2.1.1.1.1. The concept of 'natural' is queried.
- 2.1.1.1.2. Overpopulation and ecological concerns render the procreative imperative ethically unsound.
- 2.1.2. NML arguments about homosexuality are flawed or contradictory.
- 2.1.2.1. The Church acknowledges both unitive and procreative elements within a heterosexual marriage.
- 2.1.2.2. Some heterosexual couples cannot have children by nature or choice and may still be sexually active.

2.1.2.3. Inability to generate new life does not make same-sex acts self-centred or indulgent.

2.2. NML arguments about homosexuality accepted.

2.2.1. Some/all NML arguments about homosexuality are accepted as sound and authoritative.

2.2.1.1. NML arguments about homosexuality are vindicated because NML is correct about other ethical issues or societal trends.

2.2.1.2. Within the context of wider Church teachings on sexuality, these teachings are sound.

Top-Level Code 3. Sources of Authority 3. Human Sciences.

- 3.1. The teachings are insufficiently guided by knowledge from the human sciences.
- 3.1.1. The Church's approach to the scientific knowledge about LGBTQ+ issues is selective, defensive and, or arrogant.
- 3.1.1.1. The Church seems to welcome scientific insights about other issues.
- 3.1.1.2. The teachings do not give any evidence for the scientific sources considered by the Church to be 'secure'.
- 3.1.2. The Church does not in its practice offer a more complete human vision for LGBTQ+ people than science.
- 3.1.2.1. The Church shows inconsistency between what it says and how it treats LGBTQ+ people.
- 3.1.3. Science, theology and spirituality all have complementary insights to offer on this issue.
- 3.1.4. The insights of the human sciences are autonomous and do not need to support any theological or ethical arguments.
- 3.1.5. Disappointment that the Church may not be open to human-scientific findings re sexual orientation and LGBTQ+ issues.
- 3.2. The teachings on homosexuality are sufficiently guided by knowledge from the human sciences.
- 3.2.1. The Church does offer a more complete vision for all people (including LGBTQ+) than science.
- 3.2.1.1. Curiosity expressed about the perception that the Church is anti-LGBTQ+ or homophobic.
- 3.2.2 The Church is (sometimes) correct to question science.

3.2.2.1. The Church should challenge relativism in all fields of ethics or human knowledge.

3.2.3. In a rapidly changing world, the relationship between theology and science is complex and the two disciplines work at different speeds.

Integrative Code 4. General or additional issues raised about sources of authority in the teachings.

- 4.1. Some of the Church teaching on homosexuality is driven by fear.
- 4.1.1. A perception that the Church magisterium may have a particular issue with homosexuality.
- 4.2. The Church teaching on homosexuality focuses on the sexual act.
- 4.2.1. The Church should consider the full context and experience of LGBTQ+ lives and relationships.
- 4.2.1.1. There should be no fear of 'otherness'.
- 4.3. The Church should be open to development of human thought.
- 4.4. Perception that the Church does not welcome its LGBTQ+ members.
- 4.4.1. A disconnect between the hospitality extended by some Church communities to LGBTQ+ people and the tone of the teachings about them.
- 4.5. These teachings are unfamiliar because no regular preaching about human sexuality.
- 4.6. Church is out of touch with a wide variety of issues about human sexuality and family issues.
- 4.6.1. The Church does not want to acknowledge views or insights at odds with its teachings.
- 4.7. Conscience is more authoritative than laws or dogma.
- 4.7.1. The teachings of Jesus especially the 'love commandment' are more authoritative than non-gospel scriptures, Church laws or dogma.

Top-Level Code 5. Recommended lifestyle for faithful Catholic homosexual* people.

- 5.1. Non-acceptance of the recommended lifestyle for faithful homosexual Catholics.
- 5.1.1. The call to universal chastity is unfairly applied to homosexuality.

5.1.1.1. Rejection of the suggestion that spiritual practices can be used to manage a homosexual orientation.

5.1.1.1.1. References made to conversion-therapy practices, (even though the Catholic Church does recommend these in its teachings).

5.1.2. Rejection of the teaching that homosexual acts are self-destructive or self-indulgent.

5.1.3. Reference made about the claim that their 'lifestyle' threatens to destroy homosexuals.

5.1.4. The Church vision for homosexual people is joyless and not life-giving.

5.2. Acceptance (partial or full) of the recommended lifestyle for homosexual Catholics.

5.2.1. Discomfort at the uncompromising vision, but also at changing authoritative teachings.

5.2.2. Homosexual people are being asked to live chaste lives, as are all Catholics regardless of sexual orientation.

** the documents only refer to 'homosexual' people and cannot necessarily be extended to transsexual, queer or other identities in the LGBTQ+ acronym*

Top-Level Code 6. Discrimination and Violence towards homosexual* people.

- 6.1. The Church rightly condemns violence and discrimination.
- 6.1.1. Societal prejudice against LGBTQ+ people still occurs globally and to a lesser extent in western countries.
- 6.2. Elements of the Church teaching on violence and discrimination towards LGBTQ+ people are contradictory, flawed or problematic.
- 6.2.1. The distinction made between just and unjust discrimination within the teachings is queried.
- 6.2.2. Violence is wrong in every circumstance and should always be condemned without qualification.
- 6.3. The Church teaching on violence and discrimination against LGBT+ people is pragmatic.

Top-level Code 7. Marriage and civil unions for same-sex couples.

- 7.1. Non-acceptance of some or all of the Church teaching on legal same-sex unions.

7.1.1. There are significant parallels between same-sex unions and heterosexual marriage.

7.1.1.1. Separate legal rights are required for same-sex couples to enjoy the same joint legal rights as heterosexual couples.

7.1.2. Redefinition of marriage and legal recognition for same-sex unions is not problematic for society or may be beneficial to society and LGBTQ+ people.

7.1.2.1. That the non-justification for legal same-sex unions should be apparent to right reason is questioned.

7.1.2.2. Children of same-sex unions are not disadvantaged.

7.1.2.2.1. Children of heterosexual unions or who were placed in the care of Church institutions or pastors have experienced abuse or violence.

7.1.3. Inability to procreate is not a legitimate barrier to legal same-sex unions.

7.1.4. Catholic politicians should not be required to uphold Catholic teaching in law making.

7.1.5. The inability to know God's definitive plan for marriage and the family.

7.2. Acceptance or understanding of some or all of the Church teaching on legal same sex unions.

7.2.1. There are no significant parallels between same-sex unions and heterosexual marriage.

7.2.2. Redefinition of marriage and legal recognition of same-sex unions is problematic for society.

7.2.2.1. Children of same-sex unions could be or are disadvantaged.

7.2.3. Catholic politicians should uphold Catholic teaching in law-making.

7.2.3.1 Catholic politicians should include their faith within a wider range of considerations when making law.

7.3. Church recognition of same-sex unions.

7.3.1. Church blessings or recognition for same-sex unions and or Church marriage would be welcomed.

7.3.2. Legal marriage or unions are just, but Church recognition or marriage is rejected or seen as unnecessary.

7.3.3. Unclear as to why LGBTQ+ people want marriage acknowledged by a Church that doesn't agree with their unions.

7.4. Undecided with conflicting feelings and views around the issue of same-sex marriage expressed.

Top-Level code 8. Holy Orders for homosexual Catholic men.

8.1. Non-acceptance of the Church teaching on the non-admission of homosexual men to Holy Orders.

8.1.1. Homosexual priests can relate pastorally and properly to both genders. Celibacy is a bigger barrier to relating to others.

8.1.2. The term 'deep seated homosexual tendencies' is ambiguous.

8.1.3. The inferred but unspecified link between homosexuality and the problem of paedophilia or pederasty is unfounded and unjust.

8.1.3.1. This teaching may reflect an unwillingness of the Church to acknowledge the disproportionately high numbers of homosexual priests, or indicate internalised homophobia in the magisterium.

8.1.4. Both heterosexual and homosexual priests are called to celibacy, so there is no issue here.

8.1.5. Homosexual candidates for Holy Orders should be open about their sexuality, but this teaching may encourage secrecy.

8.1.5.1. Institutions that form candidates for priesthood or their dioceses probably apply these teachings with some discretion.

8.1.6. Rejection of the assertion that negative consequences follow the ordination of homosexual men, and affirmation that homosexual men are often good priests.

8.2. Acceptance of some aspects of the Church teaching on the non-admission of homosexual men to Holy Orders, alongside disagreement that they should be excluded .

8.2.1. Homosexual priests may create problematic issues.

8.3. Affective and sexual maturity for any candidate is important regardless of sexual orientation.

8.4. Some men became priests to evade or cope with the negativity of being Catholic and homosexual

Integrative Code 9. Tone and Language used within the Church teachings on homosexuality.

9.1. Non-acceptance of, or disagreement with the tone and or language used within the Church teachings about homosexuality.

9.1.1. Non-acceptance of the description of same-sex orientation as an 'intrinsic, objective disorder'.

9.1.2. Non-acceptance of other phrases, language or tone within the teachings about homosexuality.

9.1.3. Comments or reactions on the view expressed in the teachings that the 'person is viewed by Church as being neither heterosexual or homosexual but a child of God'.

9.1.4. Comments or reactions that link the teachings on homosexuality to the mental health, well-being or affective lives of LGBTQ people.

9.1.4.1. Comments or reactions that suggest the language and tone of these teachings could indirectly lead to attempted or actual suicide among some LGBTQ+ people.

9.1.5. The tone and language of the Church teaching on homosexuality needs to be addressed.

9.2. Agreement with, or acceptance/understanding of limited aspects of the language and tone used within the Church teachings about homosexuality.

9.2.1. Not supportive of the language or tone, but understanding expressed about its origins, or minimising its overall significance.

Top-Level Code 10. Issues connected to gender theory, gender fluidity and transgender people.

10.1. Disagreement with, or non-acceptance of some or all of the concerns of the Church expressed in its teachings on this issue.

10.1.1. A contrast is noted between the tone of these teachings on transgender issues and earlier teachings on homosexuality.

10.1.2. The sincerity, motivation or competency of the Church teaching on gender and transgender people is queried.

10.1.3. Positivity expressed towards people being free to make such decisions about gender reassignment free from judgement or stigma.

10.1.3.1. Positivity expressed about how Catholic settings (schools) deal with the issues of sexuality and gender fluidity.

10.2. The complexity of gender and transgender issues acknowledged.

10.2.1. No personal interaction with any transgender people or an unfamiliarity with the issues acknowledged or expressed.

10.2.2. More knowledge is required by society on transgender issues and the human sciences should be the primary source for this.

10.2.2.1. Acceptance within society for gender fluidity and transgender people is evolving.

10.2.3. Compassion or understanding expressed towards people who come to a realisation that they are non-binary, transgender and or want to undergo gender reassignment.

10.2.4. The issues raised by children being adopted or born through surrogacy to people in non-heterosexual unions (Clearly this is not specifically connected to transgender people or gender theory, but the issue is raised in these teaching documents).

10.3. Agreement with, acceptance or understanding of some or all of the Church teaching on gender issues, and transgender people.

10.3.1. Concerns about the motivation and well-being of younger people contemplating premature decisions to undergo gender reassignment.

Top-Level Code 11. Reactions to a change in tone under Pope Francis.

11.1. Positive.

11.1.1. Comments on 'Who am I to judge?'

11.1.2. The words, gestures or change of tone by Pope Francis are welcome but in themselves are insufficient.

11.1.2.1. Curial and or reactionary opposition to Pope Francis from within the Church is a cause for concern in this issue.

11.1.2.1.1 Pope Francis is cautious, or wary of his detractors, but sees the bigger picture and has a vision for longer term renewal or change.

11.2.1.2. A wider structural change in the Church is required for this and other issues to be addressed.

11.2.1.2.1. Comments that link to or reference the Synod.

11.1.3. Indication expressed that the teachings should change or adapt in time.

11.1.3.1. Opening up avenues for future dialogue about these issues is significant or welcome.

11.2. Negative.

11.2.1. Indication expressed that the teachings should remain unchanged or unadapted.

11.2.1.1. Changing the teaching would be difficult for the Church.

11.2.1.2. Caution expressed about changing teachings or changing them too quickly.

11.2.2. Negative or critical opinions that suggest the words or gestures are trivial or patronising to LGBTQ+ people.

11.2.2.1. Not hopeful that the Church will change its teachings.

11.2.2.2. Church teaching on this issue is perceived as irrelevant and disregarded by many.

11.2.3. Words or gestures of Pope Francis that were misunderstood or seen as confusing or misleading or contradictory.

11.3. Neutral opinion re the Pope's pastoral response, but feels it is probably insignificant in a wider way.

Integrative Code 12. Comments that reflect a changing attitude to the Catholic Church, particularly in Ireland

12.1. Comments that reflect on how Church-linked scandals have damaged the credibility of the Church as a moral guide.

12.2. Comments that reflect on the Church losing its ability to influence people, particularly its younger members.

12.3. Comments that uphold the enduring importance of the Church as a moral guide or prophetic witness within modern society.

12.4. Comments on how the Church (in Ireland) had been experienced in the past.

12.4.1. Comments on how homosexuality had been perceived (in Ireland) in the past.

12.5. Comments on societal changes (in Ireland) that have altered perceptions of LGBTQ+ people.

12.5.1. Comments which indicate that personal experience and interactions with LGBTQ+ people has shaped a change in attitudes.

12.5.2. Comments that referenced the Irish Marriage Referendum of 2015.

Integrative Theme 13. Comments that draw links between the issues associated with teachings about LGBTQ+ people and other significant issues for the Church.

13.1. Comments that make a link between the treatment of women and LGBTQ+ people by the Church.

13.2. Comments that draw a link between Church teaching on homosexuality and other Church teachings about sexual ethics like contraception, divorce cohabitation or abortion.

13.3. Comments that draw a link between Church teachings on homosexuality and its rule on clerical celibacy.

Integrative Code 14. Overall expressions of agreement or disagreement with teachings. Acceptance, understanding and reception of teachings. Other issues of note from the dataset.

14.1. Comments or reactions that express disagreement or non-acceptance of teachings, or indicate their non-reception.

14.1.1. The Church is the people of God and the sensus fidelium is more significant than Church dogma on this issue.

14.1.2. Comments or reactions that indicate the teaching is understood but not received.

14.1.3. Comments or reactions that indicate the teaching may be inadequate, insufficient, or contradictory.

14.1.4. Comments or reactions that indicate the teaching may be unfair, unjust or offensive to LGBTQ+ people.

14.1.4.1. Comments that express anger or concern at the Church's attitude and treatment of LGBTQ+ people.

14.1.4.2. Views expressed that the enforcement of teachings in Catholic institutions, have encouraged lay, religious and clergy to remain closeted or secretive within their Catholic communities.

14.1.5. Comments or reactions that indicate the Church should change amend or develop this teaching.

14.1.5.1. Comments that suggest dialogue would be a useful way forward.

14.1.6. Comments that express the need for a more pastoral approach and welcome for LGBTQ+ Catholics from the Church.

14.1.7. LGBTQ+ relationships may actually be stronger or include a deeper love because they exist without the support of community or despite discrimination.

14.1.8. Expressions of a 'live and let live' approach to this issue.

14.1.9. LGBTQ+ Catholics, lay, religious or clerical have many gifts that should be celebrated and used to enhance the Church community.

14.2. Comments that indicate that the participant's views on some or all these teachings have changed over the years.

14.3. Comments or reactions that express acceptance of teachings, or indicate their reception.

14.3.1. Comments that indicate the Church should not change or amend these teachings.

14.3.2. Comments that indicate society's unwillingness to hear more traditional arguments and to label any alternative viewpoints as being homophobic.

14.3.3. Comments that indicate the absence of good or regular teaching about these issues from pastors is a reason for a lack of understanding or acceptance by the faithful.

14.3.4. Comments that agree with some of the Church teaching about gender theory, fluidity or reassignment.

14.4. Comments that indicate some personal reservations about the overt or public expression of gay culture, gay rights.

14.5. Personal negative attitudes about homosexuality expressed, but these are largely uninfluenced by Church teaching.

14.6. Personal discomfort with homosexuality aside, a 'live and let live' judgement is applied to the issue of homosexuality and its sexual expression.

14.7. Neither acceptance or rejection of the Church teaching, but a recognition of the need to face the reality of LGBTQ+ people's circumstances and provide legal accommodation and protection.

14.8. A particularly interesting or memorable anecdote, astute phrase or pertinent comment or reaction.

Appendix 10. Extract from my reflexive research journal

Monday 4th April 2022

The day began with a sense of anticipation about the day to come. I travelled to my destination, parked successfully and went to my first interview. This interview was with a female religious with a vast amount of experience and leadership responsibility within her Order. I was received warmly, and the atmosphere was conducive to a full and detailed discussion about her attitudes to the Church teaching on homosexuality. The care and thoughtfulness with which Sr. _ reflected upon and answered my questions was impressive and noteworthy, and I realised that her intelligent, considered opinions, in the light of the wisdom she has accrued in her many roles, would be very valuable in the subsequent data analysis. I reflected on the amount of wisdom such women have within the body of the Church community, the depth of knowledge, awareness, insight and experience, that often remains concentrated within their own communities, with some pastoral outlets. As a related issue to that of homosexuality, the exclusion of women from the decision-making processes in the Church is an ongoing issue of concern. The input of women like Sr._ would be welcome in considering many areas within Church life.

My second interview came after a lunchtime in the centre of a large urban area at the heart of this diocese in which I was conducting much of my research. It gave me the chance to reflect on the history and issues that this urban area has had to deal with during the tumultuous decades of Irish history, and I was able from a vantage point to (despite the rain) view the parishes, churches and urban landscape of the urban area I was in. I could see the large Cathedral, in addition to the destination for my next interview.

That interview was with a senior cleric within this diocese. He put me immediately at ease and was keen to get straight into the interviewing process. Each question was carefully and reflectively considered by him. He gave considered, intelligent and thoughtful responses, often revealing a willingness to go beyond standard responses. He clearly and conscientiously supported what he perceived to be the underlying wisdom behind some of the Church teaching. By the same token, it was clear from his responses that on other aspects of the Church teaching, he was more circumspect and had the ability to be pragmatic or even critical of certain aspects of the teaching, even though careful not to be perceived as overtly critical. Supportive of the broader ideas that underpin the teaching, particularly where it represents a challenge to what he may perceive as relativist tendencies in society, but knowledgeable and reflective enough to realise that other aspects do not bear up to scrutiny. It was gratifying to hear the honesty, sensitivity, integrity and thoughtfulness with which this senior cleric approached the issue of homosexuality. His broad acceptance of the principles of Christian teaching was well-considered and intelligently applied to the pastoral concerns about which

he was clearly and substantially well-informed. His self-awareness was clearly extended to those he served as pastor and his leadership roles, and whilst not entirely singing from his particular hymn-sheet, it was easy to recognise in him the kind of clerical figure with whom a constructive dialogue could be initiated along the lines of that put forward by James Martin SJ. It was an uplifting encounter and I was fully at ease, relaxed and confident to explore the issues with him. It made me more hopeful that a type of dialogue between LGBTQ+ Catholics and their pastors may not be an entirely lost cause and may, on the contrary, bear some fruit. Grateful for today and both of these privileged encounters with wise, wholesome individuals.

As I left this interview, and by coincidence, I met a former friend and colleague who was still a diocesan priest. We had a lively, engaging and happy conversation, as we attempted to catch up on the lost territory of the 25+ years since we had last met. His presence in my life in the formative seminary years was a reminder of who and 'where' I was during those intense, energetic, tempestuous days of seminary formation during which the intense personal struggles with Church teachings were played out in my mind, psyche, spirit, body and soul. Not seeing him or engaging with him since this time, was certainly a vivid reminder of how my life had unfolded and taken me on an entirely alternative journey of liberation out of that which he and I had committed ourselves to in the Ireland of the 1990s, at the very start of a society and nation's new outlook and relationship with its Church. He would have been unaware of my struggles in this particular area, and I realised that the nature of my research of which he was aware, had 'outed' me, albeit that it was very likely that he already intuited this. I was most comfortable and at home with this forced outing, and saw it as confidence in the man I had become, from those angst-ridden days of concealing, bargaining and resigning myself to what the Church taught me to be and what and who it wanted me to be as its priest, spokesperson and ordained foot soldier. The encounter was most pleasant, but all the more so as I returned to my accommodation for being a reminder of how my life's journey has steered me away from and weaned me off the restrictive diet of teachings and prohibitions that so influenced and marked me in these defining years of my life.

Appendix 11. Extract from the interview transcript in which a researcher colleague interviewed me as the researcher using the same questions and format I had used with the 54 participants.

Colleague. I think you've kind of covered this, but, do you think that biblical societies understood homosexuality in the same way as modern societies do, in a different way? Is that relevant?

Brendan McMullan (BMM). I think it has to be in a different way. I mean, yes, of course, they probably acknowledged that same-sex activity happened; it's bound to have done because the same percentage of the population had same-sex attraction then as now, so it happened, but it obviously happened in a much less open environment. It happened in the context of a lot of shame. It probably happened in the context of people not understanding what homosexuality actually was. They believed perhaps that everybody was heterosexual, but there were these perverted people who wanted to also have sex with somebody, a same-sex partner. It was an aberration, rather than something that was given, whereas now we understand that not to be the case. We know that there is a certain percentage of the human population who will always be predominantly same-sex attracted, and there will be people in between, you know, so, it's this whole idea of the spectrum of sexual attraction. So, no, I don't think there's any way that biblical societies could have understood homosexuality the way we currently do. And it was only as late as the early 70s that the psychiatric associations of the world generally declared it not to be a mental illness. So, we're only talking about in the last 50, 60 years that people have had a proper understanding of homosexuality. So no, I don't think that biblical societies...it does matter. I think it matters a great deal, that context of them not fully understanding homosexuality. We can't, therefore, use those passages in any effective way if they didn't understand what they were talking about.

Colleague. So, the Church teaches that sex should be life-giving, or open to life, so sex between two people of the same gender is not open to new life. Is that a strong argument, do you think, for prohibiting same-sex acts and relationships?

BMM. No. And the reason why I say that is because it's such a very narrow definition of what openness to life actually is. It's quite obvious that two men or two women in normal, or in any circumstance, could not produce a child through sexual intercourse. That can never be the end, the telos of the of the sexual act, for two homosexual people, it can't be, it's not possible for it to be. Therefore, the end, you know, if you were using natural law, is something different for a homosexual couple. You know, and that's probably largely unitive, you know, the idea that... and for most heterosexual couples, it's also nearly always unitive. There will be certain, very select occasions during a couple's relationship whereby their lovemaking will result in a child intentionally. But 95 percent of the time, most heterosexual couples are not intentionally open to life during sex.

Colleague. I'd say more...[laughter].

Colleague. I think if we're thinking about intention and the Church condones natural family planning, there is a deliberate intention to not get pregnant through natural family planning. And even though you're not using any kind of barrier or hormone, there is an intention to not be open to life through that. So, that seems to conflict with the idea of the act of always having to be open to life.

BMM. That's right. That's right. And I know the Church argues as only celibate men, I suppose can argue, 'but there is still that openness, that deep down openness', but, as you said, that contradicts the intent, which is not to have a child...[Colleague laughter]. 'I'm intending not to have a child, but deep down, I'm still open to the idea'. Well, I don't really know that you are, in as much as any couple are thinking these things anyway in the throes of passion.

Colleague. Not in that moment...no...[laughter]

BMM. You know, I don't think that's happening there, you know? And then there's this other ridiculous argument. For example, an elderly couple, you know, who make love, again, this idea that it's permitted because, you know, in some bizarre alternative universe, they would still be open to having children, if they could...well, no, they actually wouldn't be, not at their age... [much mutual laughter].

Colleague...[laughter], not at 80...

BMM. It just isn't going to happen. So, I think there's a sort of a dishonesty and it does come from the rigidity around Natural Law. I do think Thomas Aquinas and Natural Law have a lot of strengths as an ethical theory, but it's not without its criticisms. And I think the unfortunate thing for the Catholic Church is that it has taken Natural Law...and a very progressive, forward-thinking person like Thomas Aquinas and poured concrete over the entire thing and sort of said, 'this cannot change now and our version of it cannot change', We both know that there are alternative versions of Natural Law Theory, and other ethical ideas and theories as well. And I don't know; I'm not sure why we need to be so tied to a particular way of seeing things, especially since I think if Thomas Aquinas was here today, as the kind of forward-thinking progressive person I imagine that he was, he would be delighted with all the new insights that we have about human sexuality. And I don't think that he would be wanting his ethical theory, to be kind of turned into a museum piece. I think he would want it to develop and grow and change with new empirically based knowledge.

Colleague. And also, if Natural Law is about reflecting on nature, you know, human nature, it's like we've based natural law on a misunderstanding of human nature and kept that understanding when actually it needs to evolve.

BMM. That's right. Yeah, yeah absolutely. We now understand more about human nature than Thomas Aquinas could have done in the in the 13th century.

Colleague. Good. Do you think that same-sex relationships can be self-giving and selfless?

BMM. Yes, absolutely. You know, obviously, I'm in a same-sex relationship. And just as I imagine in a heterosexual relationship, the opportunities to be both selfless and self-giving are endless. And as frail human beings, there are many opportunities when we're not selfless and we're quite selfish. But it's those particular moments that make you realize that the nature of a relationship needs to be based on a fair bit of selflessness, a lot of the time. And you know, you're being selfless in loads and loads of other ways, and it's simply not about the inability to produce biological offspring that makes you selfish. You know that there are many other ways you could be selfish, but there are also many ways you can be selfless and give yourself and be open to life. It's that sense of openness to life. You know, we're potentially open to life all the time. You and I are currently being open to life because we're interacting with each other honestly. We're sharing with one another. And I think we're always open to life in so many ways. And it does disturb me that the Church seems to have such a very narrow focus for its openness to life argument. And I think within the context of any straight or gay relationship, the opportunities to be selfless are enormous. And most couples, I think, try imperfectly, you know, to be selfless as often as they can be, you know, and repent of the times when they're not...

Colleague. Sometimes...[ironic laughter].

Appendix 12. Extract from a participant-interview transcript (Oengus).

BMM. Well, thank you for that. You've already mentioned the next follow-on, which is borrowing from tradition and, therefore, natural law. Again, you know, what is your take on the, you know, the very brief natural law argument, which is essentially that because a same-sex relationship is not open to life, biological life, therefore, the relationship, by definition, is self-serving and not capable of giving life. You know, what are your thoughts on that argument?

Oengus. Well, again, I think they're really, I think they're really flimsy because the question isn't about new life or new biological life. The question from Hebrew and then into Greek is 'fruitfulness', and what is an understanding of fruitfulness in the letters of Paul? There's no question whatsoever about urging people to have children. You know, fruitfulness is about the way you bear fruit in your life. The fruits of the spirit are not babies but joy, peace, patience, kindness. And so, to my mind, there's a really limited interpretation that the Catholic Church chooses to have in this area, not in Catholic Social teaching, cos I think, it has a brilliant and broad interpretation of fruitfulness when it comes to living a life of justice and living a life of being attentive to those around you. That's utterly present in Catholic social teaching and in many of the lives of the Saints and many of the...even in parts of the Catechism that we were speaking about, such matters are really clear.

But when it comes to sexual ethics, there's a real, I would say, narrowing idolatry of only interpreting this through the question of genitalia, which is such a biologist point of view. The Catholic Church would reject that it's biologist, but I think it's completely biologist. It's just looking at the bits, and do the bits fit? And then the whole argument of what if two people in their 60s got married, you know. I remember once asking that in class, somebody said, 'yes, but they would have had the capacity to have had children had they married earlier on in their life', and I was like, 'Oh my God, this is in the realms of metaphysics'. You know, we're suddenly bending time to get over the fact that we're talking about a penis and a vagina, and that's the obsession. And it's being defined primarily by people with penises, so therefore, we're talking about gender and masculinity here rather than scripture or its interpretation.

BMM. That's interesting. Yeah.

Oengus. I mean, I like Thomas. No, I don't really... [laughter]. But I find Thomas Aquinas interesting. I think he was a very secular person. He was trying to engage with philosophy. It doesn't seem secular when you read it now, but in his Summa, he really is trying to think things through and ask serious questions. And I think in light of Thomas Aquinas, I think, and like scholasticism, didn't end when Scholasticism ended. You know, the capacity to use your brain should be evolving rather than being turned back to what Thomas Aquinas asked. And I think were he to sit in a room today and to talk with people, he'd have a lot of interesting things to say. But I do think that he would acquiesce

with many of the things that Catholic gay theologians are saying about. I think he'd like to use his brain and he believes in the capacity to use his brain. And he believed in evidence. And I think the Catholic Church is profoundly lacking in intellectual and scientific integrity by asserting these moral viewpoints that are not open to the evidence of fruitfulness and love in the lives of LGBT people.

BMM. So that's a useful dovetailing with the use of the human sciences. And given that that teaching has come within the last 50 years, during which time people have paid a lot more attention to the human sciences, it's interesting that the Church critiques the view of the human sciences that may be in opposition to its own take on homosexuality.

Oengus. Yeah, I mean, I remember reading the Catholic Church's declaration, not too long after Darwin's origin of the species, where one of the popes was saying, 'there is nothing in what he's saying that's antithetical to what we understand'. And I loved that because I mean, the first time I met people who thought that the world had been created in six days, I was like, 'You are joking', and I was from a very traditional Catholic family, you know? But I have a Catholic family where my dad worked as a technician in the physics department of the university. So, I had never in my life come across a science-religion tension from them. It just didn't occur to me. And I thought when I began at the age of 15 to meet literalist Protestants, I thought that they were mad, that they were taking these stories from Genesis 1 and 2 and thinking that they were literally real.

I also took them as poetry, and that didn't seem like a diminution of them; it felt like an elevation of them. And so, I do think that the Catholic Church has some fascinating engagements with science in practice. You know, like how many of the asteroids are named after Jesuits, you know? Especially when it comes to space exploration, so many extraordinary discoveries were from people who were ordained priests. You look at the Vatican Space Observatory and all of these things, they're just, they're amazing.

BMM. Yeah, that's true...

Oengus. And then when it comes to LGBT, I mean, I find that like one of the things that I find very interesting about Christianity is that, it, in its assertion, it is a religion of incarnation and a religion that believes that out of God's great curiosity about the human experiment, God wished to become a human and to experience that. I had to write an essay in my undergrad about arguing through emphasis, which saved us – the birth of the Christ, the life of the Christ and the crucifixion, the death and the resurrection, or the coming of the Holy Spirit. I mean, the understanding was that you weren't going to reject any of them, but you were going to make an argument by emphasising one of them. And I loved the question because I just thought, even in the midst of deeply conservative Catholic theology as it was there, I loved that around some things there was an understanding that Jesus of Nazareth is not only interpreted through the idea of atonement and torture and execution, which I, as the years went by, found more and more distasteful as an imagination. It's a horrible way to die; that's

as much as should be said, and he died with integrity. In the sense, that he continued to be himself until he died. So, I think that's fascinating. But in all of that, that essay convinced me about my inclinations towards the theology that was incarnational, and incarnational, therefore, means that you have to pay attention to the *carne*, the meat, the humanity that's around you.

BMM. Yes...

Oengus. And I kept on reading things even in that 2015 statement that said, you know, men with a homosexual tendency lasting longer than two years will be inadmissible to the priesthood. There was a line in that, that spoke about being psychologically incapable of healthy relationships with either men or women. I mean, I found the whole thing offensive, but I just thought specifically, 'that's measurable data you're putting across'. And yet you were failing on measurable data. And you should actually a) love the sciences in the way that you say you do, and b) pay attention to humanity because an incarnation of religion should not be making shit up about people who are standing in front of you saying, "this isn't true about our lives!" The evidence is there and the evidence of God is present in the lives of and between people. That, I think, is where the Church fails. I don't think this is a new-fangled interpretation, I feel like it's very old. I feel like I've been shaped by an old tradition to see in these readings that God is present in the world, you know. And you can't just choose the parts of God that are conveniently present in the world and then extradite the rest to hell. And that's what it's like... when you think.

BMM. Mm hmm. Yeah. Yeah...

You'd be very familiar, then, with the template that the Church offers for those who are homosexual, a life of self-sacrifice, prayer and use of the sacraments. As a vision for how someone should live their life, or ought to live their life, what's your take on it?

Oengus. I find the ways that we're being spoken about here. 'Join the sufferings of being homosexual to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ'. What on earth does that mean? You know, as if torture and execution by an empire has anything redemptive to say, you know, 'battle all self-indulgent passions and desires'? It is such a limited imagination about what the place of pleasure is in the body, with yourself, never mind with somebody else. But also, it removes the possibility that there's love happening between people, you know, and that it defines it as self-indulgent. And it seems to imply that if you're heterosexual, then therefore, because the order of things is inclined to what they'd say is the natural law, that, therefore, that isn't self-indulgent. I just think that that's so...again, all of these things are terrible, you know?

And like I, I just find it all to be that I don't recognize what a life of a sexually healthy and sexually mature LGBT person is in the depictions being put across here. And the only way I've survived with

theological interest has been to separate myself from the voice that says, 'Our interpretation of your lives is authoritative' because it's not; it's a lie, even on the basis of evidence, you know, it's just a lie.

BM. Thank you.

The Church seems to be quite strong in its opposition to violence and discrimination, but as you'll notice as you go further down, there is a sort of a caveat.

Oengus. You know who gets to define where violence begins? That's the question here. And again, this is the Church saying that it's going to engage in questions of civic life, and they don't get to define where violence starts. I was put through exorcisms and reparative therapies. That was, you know...I didn't have any bruises from those, no physical bruises, but fuck, [said with emotion] the shame that was ingrained as a result of that. It's pretty violent. Theologically violent, too, in its imagination of God or the devil or demons and all of these kinds of things. So, I think it's interesting that you can hear in a certain sense that this is an admission, but the admission hasn't come with what I would consider to be the fruits of serious searching of conscience. Because, like when I was taught about how you should prepare for going to confession; it is a serious, serious searching of your conscience. And I think that this, for the Church, is a serious protection of itself, with no evidence for the possibility of asking its conscience any searching questions because it keeps on protecting itself. You know, and then blaming others, you know, 'there should be no surprise that irrational violence may result', fucking hell [said with anger], that makes no sense. And so, I am not looking for the Catholic Church to become less Catholic. I'm looking for it to become more Catholic and pay attention to the very documents, i.e. the Gospels that it says it centres around.

BM. Mm-Hmm. Yeah. Yeah. Mm-Hmm. Thank you.

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