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Attitudes toward Gay and Lesbian Rights among Catholic Educated University Graduates

by

Jonathan Callegher

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research  
through Sociology  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Arts at the  
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

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## ABSTRACT

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

## DEDICATION

To Mom, Dad and Mary for your ongoing love and support.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### INTRODUCTION

In a 2000 survey section on select social attitudes of young people across Canada, Bibby (2001) reported that 74% of Canadian youth felt that gays and lesbians should be given the same rights as other Canadians. However, Bibby did not elaborate on the particulars of those rights. As such, one might assume that the youths' affirmative responses could have come from a general position of 'equal rights for all'. In an article comparing the success of same-sex marriage

proponents in Canada and the U.S., Smith (2005: 226) sums up a key difference in cultural ethos between the two countries in that, in the U.S., "the discursive field of public policy and political debate defines the 'gay marriage' debate as a question of moral values while, in the Canadian debate, by contrast, same-sex marriage is treated as a question of human rights." Thus, it may be that the Canadian pro-human rights ethos explains the high percentage of Canadian youth in favour of equal rights for gays and lesbians. However, a comparative glimpse of attitudes in Bibby's report shows that, of youth who attend religious services less than weekly, 79% support equal rights for gay and lesbians compared to 59% of those who attend services once a week, which is a significant drop in supportive majority. Thus, with only a few exceptions, given most religions' tendency to place restrictions on sexual activity, it may be that religious doctrine has a negative influence on the attitudes that young members have toward the rights of people in same-sex relationships. According to Herek (2004: 272), "for some heterosexuals, negative attitudes toward bisexuals are probably part of a general belief



system that includes a high level of religiosity and traditionalism regarding gender and sexuality.”

Nonetheless, the focus here is to explore just how influential religious authority is on the sexual attitudes of youth in a postmodern society. In a study of attitudes toward fertility, Blake (1984: 338) remarks that “individuals who are born into a Catholic family will normally be baptized as Catholics and, unless they are totally alienated from the Church, appear to count themselves as ‘Catholics,’ regardless of whether their actual practice of the faith falls short of the Church’s prescriptions.” Further, depending on the area of academic concentration, formal education beyond the secondary school level may present individuals who have been schooled up to that point in Catholic institutions with a steady stream of alternative perspectives, theories and worldviews on a variety of socio-cultural issues, including sexuality. Exposure to such diverse perspectives may challenge young Catholics to question the belief systems around which they were educated and place greater emphasis on individual choice than on doctrine. Thus, the change in attitudes toward sexual ethics, specifically gay and lesbian issues, is herein explored in relation to a student’s departure from a Catholic education system (held together in great part by fundamental sexual ethics) and subsequent completion of a university social science program - a liberal learning environment characterized in part by greater exposure to and acceptance of alternative approaches to sexuality.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### Liquid Modernity: A Postmodern Framework

In *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (1982), Berman theorizes the dynamic evolution of modernity as opposed to an abrupt severance from and subsequent immediate entrance into the postmodern era. To Berman, the dawn of postmodernity represents a time in which modernity, a long-standing social order, gave way to a new one. Such a switch transfigures many aspects of society in radical ways. As Berman (1988: 16) states:

Great discoveries in the physical sciences, changing our images of the universe and our place in it; the industrialization of production, which transforms scientific knowledge into technology, creates new human environments and destroys old ones, speeds up the whole tempo of life, generates new forms of corporate power and class struggle; immense demographic upheavals, severing millions of people from their ancestral habits, hurtling them halfway across the world into new lives; rapid and often cataclysmic development, enveloping and binding together the most diverse people and societies; increasingly powerful national states, bureaucratically structured and operated, constantly striving to expand their powers; mass social movements of people, and peoples, challenging their political and economic rulers, striving to gain some control over their lives; finally, bearing and driving all these people and institutions along, an ever-expanding, drastically fluctuating capitalist world market.

Thus, Berman perceives modernity as a linear process of constant expansion that keeps on reproducing itself: “Modernity... is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity: it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration, and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish...” (Berman, 1982: 15).

In addition, as Berman emphasizes the process of ongoing change during modernity, Bauman (2000) examines the eclipsing of modernity by the postmodern age. This new era is characterized by a rejection of absolute truths that explain the

development of society and an appreciation of diverse ways of understanding the world. In *Liquid Modernity* (2000), Bauman writes about the fluid nature of historical events as they relate to time and space. Adherence to solid institutions and rigid, traditional frameworks has been melting away or breaking down. Today, the solid being melted is that of human conformity or the “bonds which interlock individual choices in collective projects and actions” (Bauman, 2000: 6). Evidence of such melting can be seen in our society where individual human desires and freedom of choice are exercised; one in which the “codes and rules to which one could conform... and by which one could subsequently let oneself be guided... are nowadays in increasingly short supply” (Bauman, 2000: 7). In other words, patterns of dependency are being liquefied and are increasingly diffusing. The liquefaction of adherence to Church doctrine will be examined in the context of an increasingly liberal-minded generation of Catholic educated young adults, a generation that may be placing greater emphasis on individual autonomy than on institutional religious teachings.

Postmodern society supports gay and lesbian couples’ attainment of rights and privileges that are enjoyed by heterosexual couples. Increasingly, it is no longer homosexuality that needs to be justified, but rather objection to it, as the public increasingly espouses aggressive pursuit of fair treatment of all persons, including gays and lesbians (Ellingson et al, 2001). This attitudinal climate, driven in part by an emerging consciousness that gays and lesbians share commonalities with the rest of humanity, fosters the advocacy of not only homosexuals but all minorities to be eligible without prejudice not only for common rights of citizenship but for positions of leadership within churches, schools and other institutions. The problem the Church

faces, then, is sustaining its influence in a postmodern social order that demands that all sectors of society treat homosexuals the same way as heterosexuals.

#### *Humanae Vitae* and the Melting of Church Authority

Historically, the Catholic Church has advanced a sexual ethic of control by which it attempted to channel the sexual behaviours and attitudes of clergy and laity toward celibacy or heterosexual marriage and prohibited all other forms of sexual expression. From the 14<sup>th</sup> century to the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the basis for Catholic morality rested on a very rigid interpretation of natural law (Boswell, 1980). According to natural law, God determined that certain ways of acting were acceptable, and others were not. Natural law assumed that rational people could understand God's plan and, therefore, could and would agree on what was intrinsically right and what was intrinsically wrong. From this teaching, normative frameworks about sexuality were formed to define which sexual behaviours and identities were 'natural' and thus moral, and which were marginalized and thus immoral. As such, Catholicism taught that it was natural for men and women to marry and for sexual relations to occur only within the context of marriage. In addition, premarital sex, homosexual practices, and same-sex marriages were morally wrong. Instead of seeing natural law as "right reason used flexibly for the individual and general welfare," (Bianchi, 1970: 38), it was understood in a very deterministic sense: not as possibilities for human development, but rather as permanent rules written in the biological and spiritual order of things.

Nonetheless, following reforms in liturgy, policy and the role of clergy and laity inspired by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), moral concerns based on reason were given nearly as much consideration as those based on natural order (Gula, 1989). In

his book, *Reason Informed By Faith: Foundations of Catholic Morality*, Gula (1989) suggests that the Second Vatican Council recognized the interdependent relationship between reason and faith, with one helping to shape the other. Thus, reason and faith became two sources of moral understanding, both of which could be used to explain the unknown. For Gula, the human conscience is divided into three parts: the individual characteristic of being oriented toward “the good”; the process in which an individual makes a decision about the morality of an act; and the judgment itself and its overall effect on the individual. Gula (1989: 135) calls this third aspect of the conscience “the only sure guide for action by a free and knowing person.”

Furthermore, the emphasis on faith grounded in reason made way for the widening of Catholic circles in support of outright dissent among clergy and laity. In his article, *Criteria for Dissent in the Church*, Arzube (1982: 204) highlights three conditions for legitimate dissent from Church doctrine:

1. that those who dissent are competent to have an informed opinion in the matter;
2. that they have made a sincere and prayerful effort to assent to the teaching;
3. that, despite such a sincere and sustained effort, the reasons for a contrary opinion remain so convincing as to make it truly impossible to assent.

Thus, when individual conscience becomes a valid consideration in moral decision-making, the Church’s authority gradually erodes. An example of large-scale dissent among clergy and laity occurred in 1968 when Pope Paul VI issued the encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, which reaffirmed the Church’s position against contraception. “Excluded is any action which either before, at the moment of, or after sexual intercourse, is specifically intended to prevent procreation whether as an end or as a

means” (No. 14 in *Humanae Vitae*). In contrast to Vatican II, which seemed to make way for changes in doctrine, this newly revisited conservatism presented liberal-minded Catholics with a new challenge. They were faced with making a decision that would be of significant immediate and distant consequence: they could defer to the Church by complying with the encyclical; they could oppose Church teaching and leave the Church altogether; or they could contravene the Church teaching by using contraception and remain Catholic. While some took the second option and left the Church, the majority chose the third as a matter of conscience (Davidson & Williams, 1997).

As a consequence, a great polarity still exists between a secular society that welcomes contraception as an essential invention and a rigid Church that denounces it. The revolutionary aspect of the contraceptive pill in particular, from the perspective of many clergy and laity was that it did not seem to be contrary to nature (Callahan, 1970). Rather, the pill was quite natural in that it allowed for individual reason and freedom to shape nature as it had been doing with other forms of technology or medicine for centuries. Moreover, the medical function of the pill as a safeguard against unwanted pregnancy has radically changed the social function of the sexual act. According to Bauman (2001: 231), in his chapter, *On Postmodern Uses of Sex*, “Sex free from reproductive consequences and stubborn, lingering love attachments can be securely enclosed within the frame of an episode.” In an era of instantaneity, contraceptives help assuage the fear of life-altering pregnancy in favour of tension-free, pleasurable and relatively inconsequential sex. Postmodern culture advanced the separation of having sex and having babies; the two are considered to be distantly related actions rather than inherently connected.

## Fluid Sexuality and the Church

While the Church was reaffirming its conservative position, a movement was underway that would challenge Catholic morality far beyond the issue of contraception. Over the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Western attitudes toward gays and lesbians have evolved toward greater acceptance, integration and consideration of homosexuality in modern society (Adam, 1995, 2004; Warner, 2002). In an article that explores the effect of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms on the gay and lesbian rights movement, Smith (1998: 292) explains that the goals of gay liberation in the 1970s were “to bring lesbians and gays out of the closet, to build gay community, to gain social acceptance for homosexuality and generally to liberate sexuality from the rigid constraints of a patriarchal and heterosexist social system.” Smith also emphasizes the significance of the “potential validation” (Smith, 1998: 290) of gay and lesbian rights during that decade in mobilizing supporters and generating hope and cooperation toward achieving the movement’s goals. Many religious institutions such as the Anglican Church and the United Church changed their position on homosexuality during this era of public enlightenment (Bibby, 1993). The Roman Catholic Church, however, remained resolute in its entrenched doctrine. Among the Church’s statements on homosexuality, perhaps the most well known are found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which teaches about the unacceptability of homosexual acts but urges compassion toward homosexuals:

Homosexuality refers to relations between men or between women who experience an exclusive or predominant sexual attraction toward persons of the same sex... Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity, tradition has always declared that ‘homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered.’ They are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved (No 2358 in Catechism).

The *Catechism* stipulates the means by which homosexuals may attain Christian perfection, that is, a spiritual union with God in this life:

Homosexual persons are called to chastity. By the virtues of self-mastery that teach them inner freedom, at times by the support of disinterested friendship, by prayer and sacramental grace, they can and should gradually and resolutely approach Christian perfection (No. 2359 in Catechism).

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

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

In addition, a 1995 publication by the Pontifical Council for the Family titled, *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*, advised that “a distinction must be made between a tendency that can be innate and acts of homosexuality that ‘are intrinsically disordered’ and contrary to Natural Law.” It further advised that “if parents notice the appearance of this tendency or of related behaviour in their children, during childhood or adolescence, they should seek help from expert qualified persons in order to obtain all possible



assistance” (Section 104). In 2002, the same council commented on the same-sex union debate in the document, *Conclusions of the 15<sup>th</sup> Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Family*: “Worse still are the homosexual or lesbian unions, whose members also demand the right to adopt children. By so doing, they render marriage precarious in public opinion and contribute to creating problems that they are incapable of solving.”

### Secularization and the Melting of Church Authority

Secularization is a shift in the beliefs of society as cultural myths and superstitions are replaced by the coupled development of science and rationality. Bruce (2002: 3) defines secularization as follows:

a social condition manifest in (a) the declining importance of religion for the operation of non-religious roles and the institutions such as those of the state and the economy; (b) a decline in the social standing of religious roles and institutions; and (c) a decline in the extent to which people engage in religious practices, display beliefs of a religious kind, and conduct other aspects of their lives in a manner informed by such beliefs.

With secularization, religion surrendered much of its authority to ascertain the meaning of life to theories in science, politics, philosophy and other disciplines, in addition to general life experiences. Bruce (2002: 36) explains this phenomenon as resulting from “a series of social changes – the fragmentation of the lifeworld, the decline of the community, the rise of bureaucracy, technological consciousness – that together made religion less arresting and less plausible than it had been in pre-modern societies.” For instance, the revaluation of homosexuality through the lens of modern science contributes to the decline of religious influence. This has made it possible for more and more laity to embrace that which was traditionally rejected. Indeed, advancements in science have led to a greater dependence on disciplines such as biology and psychology when assessing

human characteristics. Accordingly, the scientific approach has exposed domains previously dominated by Church doctrine and religious morality to individual assessment and methodical scrutiny. It is this conscious decision-making of whether to accept, reject or modify one's beliefs against the messages inspired by prevailing and emerging technologies and ideologies that places the significance of individual choice at the centre of this study. The Church must now contend with a young laity that is exposed to a myriad of alternative worldviews by way of modern communications and postmodern culture and which approaches Church doctrine in a social context filled with science and individual choice.

Moreover, concerned with individual, subjective experience in a socially constructed world, Weber (1946: 139) argued the human being's "disenchantment of the world" at the personal and social level:

The increasing intellectualization and rationalization do not... indicate an increased general knowledge of the conditions under which one lives. It means something else namely, the knowledge, or the belief, that if one but wished one *could* learn it at any time. Hence, it means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted. One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed. Technical means and calculations perform the service.

Thus, perhaps it is disenchantment with the Church's resistance to balance adherence to its formal doctrine with new approaches to the world that may be limiting the reach and authority of so-called doctrinal imperatives over young people. In accord with Yamane (1997: 115), one might identify secularization "not as the decline of religion, but as the declining scope of religious authority and, more specially, the declining sphere of influence of *religious authority structures*." For, from Weber's perspective, although

rationalization may have first taken place in human societies as a characteristic of religion, such rationalizations have been relegated to the expression of solely inward experiences whereby decisions are made on the basis of individual desires alone. For example, the negation of conception as the sole function of intercourse might lead to an attitude that is self-focused as opposed to outwardly-focused in terms of sexual mores. According to Yip (2002: 209), “religious believers in the current era are in general more likely to be internally-referential in the construction of Christian faith, identity, and practice. Religious authority figures, on the other hand, are weak and insignificant in this process.” Thus, by separating sexual intercourse from its “natural” outcome – conception – it is not only the focus of the nature of the sexual act that changes but also the focus of the individual. Consequently, a change in collective attitudes towards sexuality at the individual level makes way for the change in sexual mores at the societal level as more and more people view sexuality in a non-traditional way.

#### Secular Global Media

Young people today are steadily inundated with messages from the mass media, entertainment and advertising industries that sexual activity is equated with acceptance and carries little moral significance. These pervasive industries bombard youth with sexual stimuli to sell products and secure brand loyalty. Hawkes (2004) discusses television and film’s dissemination of images of sex with several partners before marriage with whom one does not have a committed relationship and has no plans to marry. “The new version of heterosexuality presented sex as a confection, to be enjoyed at a very superficial level and usually once removed by humour, fantasy or fiction” (Hawkes, 2004: 161). Hawkes’s observation can also be applied to homosexuality as

evidenced by the global popularity of situation comedies and reality television programs with a focus on gay and, to a lesser extent, lesbian culture and its sexual overtones. Even Pope John Paul II in his message to the 38<sup>th</sup> World Communications Day in 2004, themed *The Media and the Family: A Risk and Richness*, acknowledged the media as a blessing and a threat to traditional family values:

On the one hand, marriage and family life are frequently depicted in a sensitive manner... that celebrates virtues like love, fidelity, forgiveness, and generous self-giving for others... On the other hand, the family and family life are all too often inadequately portrayed in the media. Infidelity, sexual activity outside of marriage, and the absence of a moral and spiritual vision of the marriage covenant are depicted uncritically, while positive support is at times given to divorce, contraception, abortion and homosexuality. Such portrayals, by promoting causes inimical to marriage and the family, are detrimental to the common good of society (section 3 in letter).

Indeed, media corporations have a tremendous impact on the shaping of cultural attitudes. The manner in which the media influences groups and individuals has a much less immediate or straightforward effect than a slow, cumulative one (Demers, 2002). It creates a certain environment of images that citizens grow up with and become used to. After a while, these images begin to shape what one knows and understands about the world. Overall, then, relatively new media corporations have an advantage over a 2000-year old Church in the astounding volume of outputted messages via their communication networks. However, what really gives media the upper hand is its cultural legitimacy. Since media function as purveyors of shared viewpoints, they serve to produce and reproduce the ‘common sense’ of society that the public believes it has created. Media’s ubiquity allows it to be legitimized without criticism, whereas the Church must struggle to maintain its moral authority. For, contrary to the “confectionization” of sex as described earlier by Hawkes (2004), sexuality “heightens routine problems of

environmental adaptation and internal agreement among laity” (Ellingson et al, 2001: 8). Since the very media (i.e. television, movies) that introduced liberal sexual ethics into the culture are likely to perpetuate it, the Church may feel pressure to adapt to the external environment and promote internal integration by negotiating between societal concerns about sexuality and its own structural controls.

#### Morality and the Postmodern Individual

According to Adam (1998: 400), “‘homosexuality’ has been freighted with a world of meanings that are not intrinsic to same-sex bonding but give it meaning and form inside societies of which it is a part.” Questions of homosexuality have become heated because they point toward the central questions of human nature and morality previously discussed: How is life and humanity understood? By what authority is right and wrong decided? Is homosexuality a condition or a choice? Indeed, whether morality is relative or absolute is an issue of sexual morality - whether morality transcends all rationalization; whether such morality should be sought with unyielding passion or not; and whether such morality can be linked with God. In a postmodern society, however, the question of morality becomes complicated in light of postmodernism’s fleeting and relative nature. Bauman (2003: 47) describes this era of rationalization as one that “recommends light cloaks and condemns steel casings.” For example, the postmodern individual may do what is traditionally morally questionable and then justify the action by referring to individual idiosyncrasies, subjective intentions, or changing cultural expectations. This postmodern view was founded upon a particular view of pluralism. As Markham (1994: 135) asks, in his book, *Plurality and Christian Ethics*, “How can one decide between different positions? How can one discover the truth? Isn’t it the case that

each cultural narrative will have its own criteria of rationality? Even the laws of logic have a cultural history, so even they cannot be used as definitive criteria.” Furthermore, Yip (2002), in a study of the enduring faith of 565 nonheterosexual Christians, notes that religious authority had the least influence on the construction of personal and civic morality, including sexual ethics, notably because nonheterosexuality is doctrinally denounced. Yip (2002: 208) further states:

Many respondents therefore held the view that they had to resort to their own personal experiences, assessed within a Christian framework, in the construction of their personal and public morality. Elsewhere, I have called this ‘the politics of counter-rejection’ (Yip 1999b), where nonheterosexual Christians, having felt that they were rejected by the churches, counter-rejected the churches’ official teachings and, indeed, moral authority in the area of sexuality. In its place, they reinterpreted Christian doctrines and principles to formulate inclusive sexual ethics that reflect their lived experiences.

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

Thus, it is this phase of cultural pluralism and its ongoing individualism of beliefs and practices that poses a particular problem for the Catholic Church at the authoritative level in that self-identity becomes constructed individually. This is not simply because of sexuality emerging as a key aspect of self-definition but because self-identity itself becomes far more dependent on the countless life-changing choices that increasingly

must be made. Thus, according to Davidson & Williams (1997: 521), it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine what is morally wrong:

The rightness or wrongness of an action must be understood in relation to its context and its consequences. For example, sexual relations are moral if they take place in the context of a meaningful relationship between two loving persons, and if they further people's love for one another.... It doesn't matter whether the sexual partners are married or not, or whether they are heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual (Davidson & Williams).

This position also sheds light on what Giddens (1992: 34) refers to as the 'pure relationship', whereby "once sexuality has become an 'integral' component of social relations... heterosexuality is no longer a standard by which everything else is judged." Thus, in a postmodern society it becomes more and more obvious that knowledge itself is a cultural product shaped by circumstance and history. Consequently, an institution that aims to shape both the structure and content of knowledge finds itself competing with various social, cultural and political conditions that are presenting other forms of truth or knowledge, leading to a 'groupthink' that influences people's ways of thinking, social relations and ideologies. As Merton (1937: 499) wrote in his article, *The Sociology of Knowledge*, "The sociology of knowledge could itself arise only in a society where, with the emergence of new and the destruction of old basic values, the very foundations on which an opponent's beliefs rest are challenged." From this view, knowledge cannot be treated as an objective thing in itself but must be understood in the social context in which it originated. Indeed, the growing tendency of individuals toward making decisions based on conscience rather than on ideology, combined with the increasing awareness of the social grounding of knowledge, creates a laity with diverse social values attributed to, among other issues, sexuality.

## CHAPTER III

### DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

#### DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study aimed to examine whether the constant exposure of Catholic-educated students to alternative ways of creating meaning in the world plays a significant role in the formation of attitudes toward sexual issues, namely gay and lesbian rights. The arguments in this thesis are based on tape-recorded interviews conducted in the researcher's student office between June 20<sup>th</sup> and July 10<sup>th</sup>, 2006 with twelve young adults who had graduated from both a Catholic secondary school and a social science program at the University of Windsor, the latter within the past two years. This study is of particular interest to the researcher who, like most of the respondents, completed thirteen years of Catholic school and subsequently graduated from a social science program at the University of Windsor. The researcher's objective was to identify the overlapping themes in the respondents' process of negotiating morality and to describe such themes using data that were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews.

Six females and six males were recruited from the community of Windsor, Ontario through acquaintances of the researcher, graduate student 'listservs' and referrals from two local parish priests. Efforts were made to recruit respondents from a variety of socio-economic and ethnocultural backgrounds as well as varying family structures.

#### Sample Description

All the respondents were between the age of 22 and 26 at the time of interviewing. This particular generation provided particularly interesting perspectives on same-sex relationships because they had witnessed its acceptance in social policy by a Supreme Court ruling in 1999 and the Civil Marriage Act in 2005, only years after graduating from



educational systems that inherently, though perhaps not openly, condemned the extension of such rights. It is also worth noting that this group of respondents has less experience with religious institutions and formal belief systems than did previous generations (Davidson and Williams, 1997). While this may or may not be the case for every young adult, it is certainly the case for their peer group environments, in which context so much of religious identity shaping – or reshaping – occurs.

The respondents represented a spectrum of Catholic-educated youth from the self-described very religious to nominal and non-religious. Respondents who were very religious were characterized by weekly church attendance, regular prayer and the frequent consultation of Catholic doctrine when making moral decisions. Nominal Catholics were characterized by those that attended church once per month or less, prayed occasionally and seldom consulted their religion on select issues. Non-religious Catholics were those who neither attended church, nor prayed, nor demonstrated an understanding or appreciation of doctrine, and identified as Catholics in name only. The respondents' real names have been replaced by pseudonyms.

The researcher's familiarity with both a Catholic school education and a social science degree program was beneficial in designing questions to inspire thoughtful reflection about the respondents' experiences. Open-ended interviews conducted by the researcher covered such topics as the respondents' knowledge of Catholic teachings related to sexuality; their degree of loyalty to the Church; and their attitudes toward current issues of gay and lesbian rights such as the right to marry and to adopt children (see Appendix A for Interview Schedule). As well, respondents were asked to describe whether their opinion of gay and lesbian rights had changed over the last three to five

years and to identify factors that may have influenced their opinion. Interviews were completed in 60-75 minutes. Respondents were encouraged to speak freely about anything they felt was relevant to the topic of gay and lesbian rights, sexual ethics, Catholic teachings, Church influence and societal change. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed to uncover themes related to how the completion of a university social science program and corresponding exposure to alternative perspectives has influenced the individual's attitudes toward gay and lesbian rights.

Before discussing the attitudes of Catholic-educated university graduates toward gay and lesbian rights, it is important for the researcher to contextualize his assessment of the respondents' religious devotion. Although one cannot wholly measure the depth of an individual's faith or completely understand the individual-spiritual outcomes of church attendance and prayer, an assessment can be made of the means by which the respondents employed their knowledge of Church teachings. Nearly all of the respondents had attended a Catholic school for thirteen years and completed the Catholic sacraments of Baptism, Communion, Reconciliation and Confirmation. During their Catholic education, they had been immersed in an educational setting in which religious studies as a credited course, daily school prayer and special church attendance were required during each year of elementary and secondary school. At the same time, the Catholic-educated student would have been exposed to an array of competing institutions that promoted their own way of understanding and creating meaning in the world. It was thus fascinating to listen as respondents discussed the sometimes turbulent process of questioning their indoctrinated beliefs while trying not to lose their fundamental commitment to the Church. Indeed, it was reflected that, even in traditional religious

institutions such as the Catholic Church, the authority of the institution has less of a hold on the individuals who belong to that institution as they take more account of their own personal convictions and beliefs. As Fulton (1997: 123) states, “Youth culture is dominated by the rights of the individual subject and by the immediacy of experience and expression.” According to Berman (1982) and Bauman (2000), in our postmodern culture, there is no authority other than that which is freely chosen. Thus, the value of individual choice in forming one’s conscience may be so deeply embedded in today’s young people that the influence of restrictive doctrine lessens with each emerging substitute and alternative.

## CHAPTER IV

### ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

#### The Discussion of Sexuality in Catholic School

As the interviews sought, in part, to explore the respondents' initial exposure and response to the concept of homosexuality, the researcher found that none of the respondents were made aware of the concept of sexual orientation in a classroom setting. Rather, their first exposure occurred in the context of a ridiculing or condemning remark from a peer or parent. Amanda, a psychology master's student, recalled, "I don't think it was presented in school, um, formally, by a religion teacher. It was more through peers and name-calling. Like, they might have said, 'in the Catholic Church, if you're gay then you're going to hell or something.'" As the researcher anticipated being able to identify commonalities between his own experience and those of the respondents, he was surprised to discover that, contrary to his own initial response, the responses of most of the respondents could be described as ambiguous or accepting despite the negative presentations. Christine, also a psychology master's student, shared a sentiment held by all of the respondents: "I guess I always felt that a person's sexual orientation or who they're attracted to is their own business. It didn't affect me in any way."

As the discussion moved to how the topic of homosexuality was treated in Catholic school, the researcher learned that, throughout Catholic school education, social distancing from homosexuals and homosexuality had been reinforced by essentially overlooking the group's existence in society. In thirteen years of Catholic education, not a single respondent could recall ever discussing homosexuality in any class. It was also revealed that Church doctrine on such controversial sexual topics as abortion and

premarital sex were glossed over at best and that the Church's doctrinal position on homosexuality was never mentioned. Says Jodie, 25, whose father is a secondary school religion teacher and as such may speak as a relative insider compared to the other respondents, "We learned about natural, uh, natural family planning. Um, the teachers never discussed at length any controversial issues because there were certain topics that they just weren't allowed to talk about." According to Jodie, teachers were not allowed to toe the waters of controversial issues, especially issues of sexuality, as their personal opinions may have differed from that of the Church's positions. Thus, in a Catholic school setting, knowing that official Catholic doctrine must be imparted if there exists a tension between one's personal belief and Church teaching, some teachers may have opted to skip over homosexual issues. For some teachers, then, it is possible that by not teaching the Church's position, they were neither denouncing official doctrine nor endorsing their own personal convictions. As a consequence, however, most respondents were apt to point out that such absence in the classroom came at the expense of their own cultural awareness in that the formation of an educated position became impossible when they, as students, were not informed. Moreover, as sexual topics were brushed over, George, a graduate of communication studies, did detect an insinuated viewpoint that same-sex relationships were "bad": "No one ever came out directly and said, 'You know, homosexuality is bad. The Bible says it's bad so this is bad.' It was very subtly done and you just started to pick it up through the tone of things."

Indeed, in an exclusively heteronormative environment, homosexuality had been viewed as abnormal. There was an apparent awareness that the intentional removal of homosexuality from discussion had contributed to a sense of social removal from gay and

lesbian people, thereby fostering a view of homosexuals not as individuals but as an ephemeral concept far-removed from their Catholic school bubble. Andrew, who holds a sociology degree, described the effect of having the discussion of homosexuality so covertly suppressed:

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

For Andrew, students have the right to be educated about the Church's position on homosexuality. As Catholic schools keep young people culturally and socially removed from gays and lesbians, the humanity of homosexual people becomes overshadowed by uninformed stereotypes. That these generalizations can lead to prejudice had a few respondents reflecting on their emotional resistance to accepting homosexuals. As Andrew further stated, "Well, it had a stereotype, right? So getting around the stereotype was difficult because it was so engrained. That's all I knew and that's all I felt I needed to know."

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

### Considering Parental Attitudes

It may be said that parents desire that their child grow up to be the kind of person who, among other things, lives up to his or her parents' ideals. Moreover, it can be argued that sometimes parental desires can come at the expense of the child's interests, especially when those interests are deeply rooted in culture and tradition. The reflection of Cynthia, a sociology master's student, illustrates a common outcome when the desire for autonomy collides with religion and culture:

Because my family is so religious, there's always been an interplay with culture and religion so I can't really distinctly separate what was a Korean tradition. But Korean people are very big on manners and politeness, with women especially. It's a very hierarchical, sexist culture. Women should do these things for their husbands and their cousins and their brothers that are boys and all that crap. I do remember there's a saying called 'gi ji bae' [laughs] and my uncles call me that all the time because they think I'm a wild girl, because I don't listen and I'm a little too headstrong for their liking. But I think it means, 'farm girl' or 'slave girl' that hasn't grown up with manners and etiquette and doesn't speak with deference to elders and stuff. [laughs] Yeah, I apparently I don't speak with deference. I hear that a lot [laughs].

Indeed, parental indoctrination, particularly when coupled with an absence of exposure to alternative views, has the potential to limit in many ways the kind of adult whom the child will become. Janie, also a sociology master's student, is the daughter of Lebanese parents and had a childhood that mirrored the hierarchical nature of Cynthia's family:

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

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

Um, I'm not going to lie – at first I was like, 'What?!' [laughs] You know, we were brought up a certain way. You know, male-female – marriage. Um, especially in a Catholic home, you know, my parents are against it. No one in our family is homosexual that we know of yet. Um, you know, so I was pretty much against it.

On the other hand, Cynthia, whose Korean upbringing can be said to be as culturally-focused as Janie's, had a much less authoritarian rearing. Cynthia's parents had divorced during her early adolescent years and, according to her, her relationship with her mother as sole caregiver was relatively relaxed compared to other Korean-Canadian households. Even-temperedness notwithstanding, however, Cynthia was more than surprised to get a glimpse of how her Catholic mother prioritized her value system. She recalled lightheartedly:

[Laughing] It was when I was visiting her in London. I'm never going to forget this because I thought it was the funniest thing ever. She's a very quiet woman and doesn't really yell – only if I've been really bad... Me and my boyfriend had gone to visit her... So as we're leaving I'm like, 'Oh mom, maybe one day I'll be a lesbian' [laughs]. And she was furious! I've never seen her actually have a reaction like that. Because I joke around all the time and I'm always teasing her and we have that kind of, like, laughing rapport. And she just got straight-faced and said, 'No you can't do that. That's against what God wants!' And she made a joke about Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve. Anyway, she got really angry and started saying that God wanted man and woman to get together, not woman and woman, man and man. And I'm like, 'Whoa!' Because my mom's been cool about most things. Like, I'm dating a non-Korean boy which is against tradition, and I moved out on my own as a girl. Like, she's never really been strict in that way. She's been pretty open-minded. I hang around a variety of people with a variety of religious backgrounds. So it was really, really a surprise to me [laughs]. I was shocked.

It may be implied that Cynthia's mother, as with many parents with strong religious convictions, believed that she knew the "truth" about how her daughter should live. Convinced that there was only one path to heaven or salvation, her instinct was to block out any homosexual (or corruptible) thoughts from Cynthia's mind. However, the



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

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

As Heather continued, it became clear that Church was presented to her from a very young age as an authoritarian structure that was fearful of both modernity and of what people might do once they learn to think for themselves. Further, Heather noted that her third grade teacher did something more serious than infusing trepidation. She was intensifying the sense of insecurity and fear of every student in her classroom by reinforcing their sense of isolation from the rest of humanity and infusing a doctrine of conditional acceptance over absolute belonging. Her reaction from that point onward was one that may raise the eyebrows of anyone involved in Catholic education: "It, like, traumatized me. I'm almost anti-religion based on the fact that I was raised Catholic...I think there are probably religions out there that are very good, but I think the Catholic religion is a joke."

Although Heather's account provided the most abrupt example of a respondent's conscious decision to flat-out reject the Church, a more gradual decline in Church attendance throughout Catholic school was described by the others. Beginning with childhood, it was no surprise that most of the respondents regularly accompanied their parents to Church Mass two to four times per month during their early Catholic school years. The willingness of some of the respondents to please their parents by feigning enthusiasm on a weekly basis despite it feeling "like a chore", as Andrew expressed it, is indicative of a time in a child's life when a parent's way of viewing the world seemed like the only required lens through which to observe. As Amanda recalled, "It seems, like, when I was younger, the way my parents thought about everything was the way everyone thought about everything." Indeed, the very awareness that it was not typically their choice to attend Mass contributed to a lack of fulfillment for a few of the respondents, not shared by their parents. Andrew's humorous recollection demonstrates when the interests of one generation run parallel rather than intersecting with those of another:

And, like, one time my dad came out of Church and he said something like, "Doesn't it feel good to come out of Church?" or whatever. And I was like, "yeah." But it was for a different reason. He was glad because he got something out of it. I was glad because it was over (laughs).

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

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

For most of the respondents, "holy days of obligation" such as Easter and Christmas, in addition to the occasional wedding or funeral, were the sole grounds for attending Catholic Mass by the time they reached university.

#### From Linearity to Diversity: The University Experience

For many of these Catholic-schooled respondents, it was in a university class that they first knowingly shared a room with a gay or lesbian person. As Adrian, a graduate of sociology, recalled, "As far as I knew there was one guy in our high school who was openly gay out of nineteen hundred students. When you get to university, it's so diverse. There's people of all different backgrounds. You become more accepting of it." Further, the post-secondary arena marked the first time most of the respondents found themselves in subordinate relation to an openly gay or lesbian professor. As Jodie, psychology master's student, observed:

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

One also wonders whether the social status ascribed to having a university education is related to the noticeably open integration of gays and lesbians into the major aspects of university life. Thus, becoming more open-minded as a result of a social science education may be seen not only as an academic by-product but also as an attitudinal trait of which to be very proud. After all, the respondents appeared aware of their

participation in a post-secondary education system in which multifaceted opinion was encouraged. Moreover, despite the deluge of alternative ways of looking at the world, the respondents recognized that one could not wholly understand the situation of another person without sharing direct or similar circumstances. Cognizant of the reality that they may not always have the essential information or experience to form definitive conclusions, they learned to withhold judgment. Perhaps this illustrated a leaning toward independent thinking, whereby reason showed something to be true in their eyes, or perhaps it was a deliberate holding back of assent to scriptural assertions against the backdrop of ongoing dissent that is characteristic of liberal social science programs. With an exposure to alternative worldviews came the realization that there existed more than one religion, that within each religion lived a number of diverse ideologies, and that within every ideology lived an infinite number of different viewpoints. For Amanda, this was a sharp turning point:

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

Indeed, for many of the respondents, Catholicism became merely one strand of potential influence among countless others or, at most, an initial and relative framework with which to develop one's spirituality and moral compass. Moreover, from Adrian's perspective, after having been told what to believe throughout Catholic school, university stirred him to "question everything." The knowledge of competing ideologies prompted him to reserve judgment until an issue was weighed against his own personal ethics. Said

Adrian, “University made me see that everything that I ever accepted, I didn’t accept with anything behind it. I just accepted it blindly.”

#### Media Influence on Attitudes

Although George was the only respondent who had graduated from a communications program in which media literacy was an integral component, all of the respondents demonstrated a keen awareness of the power of the mass media to influence public opinion. They recognized that today’s media-driven world that incorporates television, music, the Internet, instant messaging and an increasing number of portable media devices into daily life has young people spending more hours connecting with the media than with any element of the classroom. As Cynthia remarked, “I would think the news media would have had more of an influence than classes.” As for the portrayal of gays and lesbians in the media, Janie’s reflection summarized that of the majority of respondents:

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

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

accurately represent real-life people as much as they do cartoon characters. Michelle's observation is intuitive:

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

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

#### Expectation vs. Experience: Negotiating Morality

Before postmodernism, it was society and not the individual that determined whether homosexuality would be widely accepted. It was collective values, much more than individual inclinations, that determined the fate of homosexuality in that society (Giddens, 1992). Thus, one could have great sympathy for gays and lesbians while still adhering to societal norms that strongly opposed social acceptance of homosexuality. A postmodern society, however, sees both an increase in the number of citizens determining questions of right and wrong in the seclusion of their own reflections and a decline in the consultation of moral authority on the issues. Thus, as the Church aims conclusively to decide the debate over homosexuality on moral grounds, perhaps the phenomenon of

social norms determining morality becomes moot as social norms are no longer measured in absolutes (Giddens, 1992). In fact, all but one respondent had no difficulty with this crossroad. Only George had trouble reconciling his personal human rights ethos with that of the Church's official position. The dialogue between the researcher and the respondent gives context to the dilemma and is worth quoting:

Jon: [Probing] Are homosexual *acts* a sin?

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

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

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

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

I disagree with the authority of the Church on it. But I don't devalue the authority of the Church a whole lot because of it. I just have an understanding that that is their stance. It has been their stance for a long

time. Do I agree with it? No. Am I going to abandon the religion altogether? No.

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

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

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

However, there was once a time for some of the respondents in which the desire for change was inspired by naiveté. Michelle, a graduate of sociology, recalled the first time that the reality of Church hierarchy and patriarchy sunk in: "When I was a kid I actually did want to become a priest [laughs]. I did! And when I realized that probably wasn't going to happen, I was very disappointed for some reason [laughs]. I was! I was



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

It [the Catholic Church] needs to understand that, you know... there's biological evolution, there's moral evolution, there's spiritual evolution. We're supposed to be more enlightened and I feel like the Church is refusing to even discuss, you know, homosexuality, females being priests, um, marriage for priests, contraceptives, issues like that.

The lack of confidence in Church leadership had clearly weakened the respondents' optimism for the future of the Church unless an institutional overhaul bridged the chasm between rigid doctrine and individual decision-making. Moreover, this raises another question that speaks to the state of the Church in which sex scandals are still fresh in the minds of Catholics and non-Catholics alike: How does a damaged Church re-build its foundation in order to stand tall again? With disappointment in their voices, most of the respondents pointed to the media's exposure of pedophilic priests as having disgraced them and the credibility of the Church. They were quick to point out what was, for some of the respondents, one of the greatest acts of hypocrisy conceivable. As Christine stated with frustration:

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

Further, the respondents noted that the media's justifiable attention to the harm caused by sex abuse scandal had inflated into a constant torrent of suspicion and ridicule

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

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

Indeed, the respondents viewed Catholicism as a belief system characterized by rigidity, ritual, and dogma, whereas their attitudes toward spirituality had been that of openness and respect for both personal experience and alternative ways of understanding the world. Perhaps they no longer wished to belong to the Church in the way the Church currently insists upon. Although they still have faith, their demonstration of membership has become separated from active participation. This observation was brought to light by many of the respondents' post-secondary weaning away from religion in favour of a broad-based spirituality. As Amanda reflects:

I do consider myself a practicing Catholic because although I do not attend church on a regular basis, I still involve spirituality in my daily life. So I don't think you necessarily have to practice, um, in the fact that you're going to church on a regular basis as long as you're practicing within in your life, like praying by yourself.

Thus, the relationship between Catholicism and spirituality has become disconnected as these young people increasingly embrace ways of spirituality that are not formally connected with the Church. By contextualizing the Catholic faith into our fluid culture,

the actual practice of Catholicism of today's young laity is noticeably different from the ostensibly solid cultures of the past. The emphasis on personal experience revealed a group of respondents with distinctively un-intimidated attitudes toward the Church and who felt more secure in their dissent and less compelled to claim confidence in the Church's teachings.

#### Same-Sex Marriage and the Postmodern, Human Rights Ethos

The question of whether or not same-sex marriage will undermine the institution of marriage can be debated at length though it may suffice to identify a few key issues in the same-sex marriage dispute. During the 1960s counterculture, gay and lesbian goals focused on building the gay community, gaining social acceptance and freeing sexuality from the rigid constraints of a patriarchal system (Adam, 1995). Today, the cultural, economical, legal and religious climate has changed. The movement has grown to foster a much greater acceptance of gays and lesbians in our culture in addition to greater social and economic freedoms. More recently, gays and lesbians have sought the right to marry not only because of the legal and economic rights that marriage provides, but because marriage symbolizes a bond of commitment (Kelly, 2004). They also maintain that marriage carries with it the intangible benefits of societal acceptance and conveys a meaning of love and permanence.

For the most part, the respondents believed that society will continue to follow suit with the movement. Most of the respondents appeared to approach the issue of same-sex marriage primarily from a human rights perspective, expressing that gay couples deserve the same right as heterosexual couples to join their love for each other officially. Anything less, according to Adrian, would be "un-Canadian." Moreover,

Amanda stated, “I think that it should be legalized. I think that, um, that you shouldn’t put barriers or boundaries on who someone can love.” From a Catholic perspective, Amanda suggested that the sanctity of marriage should apply to all and not be dependent on the gender of the individuals: “And I think that if two people want to recognize their marriage as a holy, legal bond, then they should be able to.” As well, Jodie’s commentary touched on what she believes to be the sense of sexual insecurity forwarded by the Church:

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

Furthermore, from a postmodern perspective, whereas the Church sees the bond of marriage as a vow before God, the postmodern society views marriage as a legal event conducted by a civil authority; it is a change in status. In this sense, marriage in a postmodern society is less a sacramental union than a contract that takes on the temporary nature of secular arrangements (Bauman, 2003). It is this contract perspective that allows for the growing support for same-sex marriage. By observing marriage as a pact between cohabiters with the added legal and fiscal benefits and responsibilities, marriage between a man and a woman is considered just one possible form. As well, by calling into question the legitimacy of certain moral boundaries, the majority of respondents have, by association, called into question the legitimacy of the Church authority striving to enforce them. Michelle explained her approach to what she believes to be responsible dissent:

I suppose I think of the Church as sort of a father figure. You know, they try and tell you, and teach you, and raise you right, I suppose. But in the

end, it's sort of your own life decision that they will either have to live with or not.

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

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

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The changing relationships between Church and society and the changes in Catholic teachings have produced trends in the way Catholics think about faith and moral values. Some of these changes are in accordance with official Church teachings; others are not. As Wyn & White (2000: 171) state, “the challenge for the sociology of youth is to understand how young people are responding to external conditions and changing the meaning of adulthood.” Indeed, advancements in science and the inundation of alternative opinions and beliefs via a pervasive mainstream media will continue to stimulate young Catholics to weigh an array of viewpoints when making life decisions as opposed to immediately deferring to what the Church has to say. With an exposure to alternative worldviews comes the realization that there exists more than one religion, that within each religion lives a number of diverse ideologies, and that within each ideology lives an infinite number of personal viewpoints.

Moreover, whether noted by the respondents as the moral maturity that comes with adolescent experience, the increased cultural awareness that comes with a social science education, or the unidentified social-psychological factors that inspired a sense of social justice over entrenched dogma, they all held to the perspective that when one group is denied its civil rights, the rights of other groups are also endangered. They are acknowledging that the Catholic Church, as with most organized religions, teaches some doctrines of exclusivity and they are recognizing that some of the social problems the world has experienced in recent decades are not the result of morals shifting, but of

morals not shifting. They have in a sense risen above some of the rigid standards that have been engrained from childhood, understanding that a refusal to even consider the possibility of transcending some beliefs may well lead to a morality without integrity. This is a group of respondents that seeks open, honest dialogue about various points of views. In their world, it is okay to dissent; it is okay to ask questions and to question the answers they get.

Perhaps the newest generation of young adults are changing the meaning of adulthood, welcoming alternative worldviews, adapting to the current state of cultural ambiguity and fostering a self-identity on the basis of self-reflexivity (Giddens, 1992); or perhaps young Catholics have taken seriously the Second Vatican Council's emphasis on greater freedom and responsibility and do not see a need for expressing their beliefs in absolute terms. For young Catholics, then, it would appear that they individually and collectively "cannot live lives of meaning, generally; and certain disciplines, specifically" (Johnson, 2001: 231). Given the results of this study, the researcher hesitates to describe the Catholic community as one in decline but rather as one that is changing. Young Catholics are creating a new way to experience their Catholicism by embracing spirituality while wishing to "work with" the Church. For the majority of respondents, they do not wish to replace Catholicism, but they want to refresh it. They do not wish to reduce Catholicism, but rather expand it. The future direction of this growth may very well be headed by a generation of Catholics who have reordered their priorities in favour of a less authoritarian and more personal, socially conscious, socially compassionate and personalized faith.

## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A

#### Interview Schedule

##### **Questions on Catholic School Experience:**

How many years did you attend a Catholic school? For which grades?

For you, what made Catholic schools unique from public schools?

Were the Catholic Church's positions on sexual issues presented to you in school? Who presented these positions? How did they present them? How often did they present them?

When did you become aware of homosexuality? How did you become aware of it? How did you feel about it?

Was the Church's position on homosexuality presented in school?

1) [If so] How was it presented? When was it presented?

2) [If not] Were you aware of the Church's position on homosexuality at that time? How did you become aware of the Church's position?

How did the Church's position, as it was conveyed to you, influence your attitude toward homosexuality?

During the course of your elementary and secondary education, were there any changes in your attitude toward Church doctrine?

1) [If so] What were they? What factors influenced the change in your attitude?

Approximately how times per month did you pray during school hours while you were in elementary school? Approximately how times per month did you pray during school hours while you were in secondary school?



**Questions on Catholic Church Attendance during Catholic School:**

While enrolled in elementary school, how often did you attend Catholic Mass? While enrolled in secondary school, how often did you attend Catholic Mass?

How often did your parents/guardians attend Catholic Mass when you were in elementary school? How often did your parents/guardians attend Catholic Mass when you were in secondary school?

To what extent did you consult your religion in your everyday decision making?

1) [If consulted] How did you consult your religion?

Describe to me your attitude toward the general authority of the Church while you were in secondary school?

What was your impression of your parents'/guardians' attitude toward the general authority of the Church while you were in secondary school?

Were you aware of Church doctrine on homosexuality while you were in secondary school?

1) [If so] What was your attitude toward the authority of Church doctrine on homosexuality at that time?

Did you ever discuss Church doctrine on homosexuality with your parents?

1) [If so] What did your parents have to say about Church doctrine on homosexuality?

Approximately how much time per month did you pray outside school hours when you were in elementary school? Approximately how much time per month did you pray outside school hours when you were in secondary school?

**Questions on University Experience:**

Where did you live during university?

What social science program did you graduate from?

What worldviews or ideologies were exposed to you during your enrollment in the program? Which ones struck you as the most interesting? Which ones were the least interesting?

Was there any worldview or ideology that was regularly repeated in your program (Specifically, which came up in at least 50% of your courses)?

1) [If so] How did you feel about that worldview or ideology?

Did your exposure to alternative worldviews and ideologies influence your attitude toward authority?

1) [If so] How?

2) Can you identify any other factors that may have influenced your change in attitude?

Did your exposure to alternative worldviews and ideologies influence your attitude toward general Church authority?

1) [If so] How?

2) Can you identify any other factors that may have influenced your change in attitude?

Did your exposure to alternative worldviews and ideologies influence your attitude toward homosexuality?

1) [If so] How?

2) Can you identify any other factors that may have influenced your change in attitude?

Did your exposure to alternative worldviews and ideologies influence your attitude toward the authority of the Church on homosexuality?

1) [If so] How?

2) Can you identify any other factors that may have influenced your change in attitude?

What were your general attitudes toward faith right before your graduation from university?

**Questions on Catholic Church Attendance during University:**

While enrolled at university, how often did you attend Catholic Mass? What accounts for any changes in your attendances from secondary school to university?

To what extent did you consult your religion in your everyday decision making?

1) [If consulted] How did you consult your religion?

Approximately how much time per month did you pray while on campus when you were in university? Approximately how much time per month did you pray while off campus when you were in university?

**Questions on the Influence of Secular Society**

Do you think the Catholic Church's position on sexual issues influences society?

1) [If so] How? To what extent?

2) [If not] Why not?

How would you describe how most Canadians view homosexuality and homosexual people?

How would you describe the portrayal of the Catholic Church in the mainstream media?

How would you describe the portrayal of homosexuals in the mainstream media?

What are your views on legalization of same-sex marriage? How about same-sex parenting?

Did your views change when parliament legalized same-sex marriage? If yes, how did they change?

How would you describe how most Canadians view same-sex marriage? Same-sex parenting?

What are the factors that you think are influencing the views of most Canadians on homosexual rights?

### **Questions on Morality**

What is your ethno-cultural background? Are there ways in which it has influenced your attitudes?

When faced with a moral dilemma, where do you turn for guidance? Can you give me a specific example of a moral dilemma in the area of sexuality and how you worked it out?

Probe: What do you take from your Catholic faith to guide you when facing moral dilemmas? What do you take from your own feelings about right and wrong?

Which do you rely on the most?

What are your beliefs about homosexuality and morality? Is homosexuality a sin? A gift?

How do you think the Catholic Church's position on sexual issues will affect its influence in society in the future?

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