
MADE IN THE

Image of God

**Catholic Perspectives on the Dangers of
Conversion Therapy**



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS & SPECIAL THANKS

This booklet was produced with the assistance of many individuals committed to ensuring that LGBTQ+ people are no longer subjected to any form of conversion therapy, whether by licensed or unlicensed practitioners. We are deeply grateful for the [Alana Faith Chen Foundation](#) and [Dignity/Denver](#) for their valuable guidance and support.

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IN MEMORY OF ALANA FAITH CHEN

AND ALL VICTIMS AND SURVIVORS OF CONVERSION THERAPY

Alana was a daughter, sister, cousin, niece, and friend to many. She enjoyed spending time in nature hiking, rock climbing, and camping. She loved playing ultimate frisbee in high school and college.

Alana was also an artist in every sense of the word: a painter, writer, poet, singer, dancer, and actress. She knew she wanted to study fashion design from a young age and enrolled at Prescott College. For her senior project, Alana started a line of sustainable fashion, repurposing clothing from thrift stores.

As a child, Alana fell in love with Jesus, Mother Mary, and the teachings of the Catholic Church. She dedicated many years as a youth group retreat leader and spent hours volunteering at Catholic churches, serving those experiencing homelessness in the Denver and Boulder areas. Devout and sincere in her Catholic faith, Alana was told she would become a saint.

When she was 13 years old, Alana confided in a priest at her parish: She thought she was attracted to women. That priest told Alana that being Gay, having “impure thoughts,” and acting out on those desires was a “mortal sin” and that she would go to hell if she lived authentically as a Lesbian. The priest also warned Alana not to tell her family because they wouldn’t accept her unconditionally. From the age of 13 to 21, she listened to that priest.

Alana endured eight years of damaging conversion therapy and religious abuse. She took into her heart the message that God didn’t create her as Gay, and that she was broken. She wanted to be accepted by the faith

community who said they “loved her,” yet this community also expected her to change who she was. These teachings and ideas were so deeply ingrained in Alana’s mind that in her self-harming moments, she cut the word “DEFILED” into her arm. When Alana’s parents found out, they sought professional help so she could recover from years of trauma; they also surrounded her with love and support.

Unfortunately, none of these efforts could reach and heal Alana’s deep wounds of rejection and abandonment—wounds inflicted by the clergy and her friends at church. Alana desperately wanted these friends, who she loved, to fully accept her as created in the image of God.

After years of inpatient and outpatient therapies, as well as her own efforts to heal herself, Alana died by suicide on December 8, 2019. We—her parents, sisters, and brother—are heartbroken. We miss her joyful

laughter, artistry, and embrace. Our hope is that Alana’s story may save others from spiritual and religious abuse, including conversion therapy.



The Chen Family

Visit the Alana Faith Chen Foundation:

www.alanafaitchen.org

FIND YOUR PATH

You're a good person striving to live a moral and happy life. You also know life can be difficult for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer people, and that many still consider LGBTQ+ people immoral, sick, or disordered. We can help.

You are a Catholic.

You are also a person who identifies as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Nonbinary, or Queer (LGBTQ+), or the family member or friend of an LGBTQ+ person. Your faith is enormously important to you—and so is the person who has come out to you. They may have told you they are LGBTQ+. Or maybe your own observations of this person have led you to conclude they probably identify in one of these ways.

Perhaps you're acknowledging feelings within yourself that are raising questions about your own identity. Or, you're secure in your sexual orientation or gender identity but struggle with how to integrate that aspect of yourself with your faith. We hope this booklet will help you resolve some of these questions.

Perhaps you know other “out” LGBTQ+ people, and know they are kind, loving, moral people.

You're likely experiencing some conflict between what the institutional Catholic Church teaches and your self-identity, or your love for your family member, friend, or colleague. You know that Catholic teaching stipulates that same-gender sexual activity is wrong, and that a person's biological sex is God-given and can't be changed.

Perhaps you know other “out” LGBTQ+ people, and know they are kind, loving, moral people. You know that you are, or the person you love is, a good person striving to live a moral and happy life. But you've heard that life can be difficult for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer people, that they face a lot of challenges, and that many still consider them immoral or sick in some way. You've heard about programs or techniques that claim LGBTQ+ people can change and live a “normal” life. You might think: *Would something like that be helpful?*

This booklet was developed by people who understand and respect those with a deep faith who want to do the right thing. Many of us are Catholic, many identify as LGBTQ+, and some of us are family members of LGBTQ+ people. We know you are motivated by what you've been taught to believe, and that sometimes beliefs can conflict with each other.

We're here to help you through these conflicts.

WHAT IS CONVERSION THERAPY?

Coercive efforts to change or alter one's sexual orientation or gender identity are known as “conversion therapy.” Unlike legitimate medical practices, conversion therapy is not evidence-based.

Efforts to coerce people to conform their sexual and/or gender identities to heterosexual and binary norms come in many forms. They are also known by many names, including “conversion therapy,” “reparative therapy,” “ex-gay ministries,” “chastity support,” and more. We will use the term “conversion therapy” throughout this booklet.

Conversion therapy includes any treatments or practices intended to attempt to change a person's sexual orientation or gender identity (for example, from Gay to straight, or from Transgender to cisgender). They also include any efforts to change a person's gender expression (to act more masculine or feminine), or to suppress or eliminate sexual or romantic attraction or feelings toward a person of the same gender.

While some conversion therapists continue to use physical methods, including painful aversive conditioning, the most common techniques in the United States today include “talk therapies.” During these therapy sessions, practitioners address a person's sexual orientation or gender identity as an addiction or another kind of problem that is wrongly attributed to abuse or childhood trauma. Programs developed from religious texts and prayers, spiritual discipline, and Twelve Step ideas and practices targeting “sexual brokenness,” “unwanted same-sex attractions,” or “gender confusion” are especially common among faith-based providers.

Unlike legitimate professional therapy, conversion therapy is not evidence-based, and most formal conversion therapy programs in the U.S. have shut down in recent years. Scientific evidence has found conversion therapy to be both [ineffective and psychologically harmful](#).¹ Conversion therapy inhibits coping, social support, and identity exploration, encourages isolation and distrust of family and friends, and can lead to bursts of compulsive and unhealthy activity followed by shame and reduced self-esteem. It can

Conversion therapy programs block social support and often encourage isolation and distrust of family and friends.

also lead to depression and suicidality when individuals realize that these efforts, including faith-based efforts, are ineffective. Many victims of conversion therapy wonder what is so wrong with them that God doesn't answer their prayers.

¹ “Report of the American Psychological Association Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation,” American Psychological Association, 2009.

CONVERSION THERAPY IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

Catholic conversion therapy relies on Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, especially natural law theory.

Catholic conversion therapy is based on doctrine that stipulates that God created humans as either male or female; sexual intimacy is permissible only within the context of a life-long marriage between a man and a woman; and all sexual acts must be open to the possibility of procreating children. While the 1992 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* acknowledges that “the psychological genesis (of homosexuality) remains largely unexplained,” [it still insists](#) that “homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered. They are contrary to natural law.”¹ At the time of this writing, gender dysphoria (the discomfort experienced by people whose gender identity doesn’t match the gender assigned to them at birth) is not directly addressed in the Catholic Catechism. However, recent pronouncements by Pope Francis, as well as statements from Saint Pope John Paul II, and other Vatican officials, indicate that gender cannot be changed from the sex recognized at birth.

Traditional theologians derive church teaching from natural law, an intellectual framework developed by medieval theologians such as St. Thomas Aquinas and based on Greek philosophy. Natural law’s reasoning and conclusions (like the unnaturalness of homosexuality, fixed gender identity, or the pointlessness of any non-procreative sex) have been displaced by centuries of scientific findings and philosophical development since the Middle Ages. Meanwhile, theologians from

many religious traditions, including Catholicism, have laboriously and prayerfully developed sound theology affirming the wholeness and holiness of LGBTQ+ gender identity and sexuality, which in turn exposes the limitations of natural law theory.

In addition to natural law, Catholic theology also derives from Sacred Scripture. A handful of passages have historically been used to condemn homosexuality and Transgender identity. However, modern scripture scholars question the meaning or intent of these so-called “clobber passages.” Scholars agree that [the story of Sodom and Gomorrah](#) condemns rape, not consensual same-gender relationships, and that the real sin committed by the people of the towns is the failure to provide appropriate hospitality to strangers.² They see the [Levitical injunctions against sexual behavior with the same gender](#) and cross-dressing as part of a purity code written by a young nation eager to procreate and to distinguish itself from other tribes.³ Since the earliest days of the church, most ancient Hebrew laws have been rejected by Christians. As for the Greek word Paul used in three of his epistles, on which many prohibitions on homosexuality have been based, its true meaning is unclear. There are a variety of interpretations for the meaning of this word, including same-gender temple prostitution, the exploitation of boys by older men, pedophilia, or same-gender lust,

² Gen. 19 (*New American Bible Revised Edition*)

³ Lev. 18:22 (NABRE)

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Part Three, Section Two, Paragraph 2357.

the latter of which is sometimes treated the same as heterosexual lust.

Condemnation of homosexuality and Transgender identity in both the Hebrew Bible and Paul’s writings may be inconclusive, but we do know that Jesus never condemned either. Some Catholics and other people of faith believe that David and Jonathan and Ruth and Naomi were loving couples; that Jesus endorsed a same-gender couple in healing the centurion’s beloved servant; and that the word “eunuch” describing the Ethiopian baptized by Philip may have referred to

So, how do you separate the self from identity? It’s impossible. Any denunciation of a person living fully as who they know themselves to be, after months or years of work to understand their identity, disrespects and dehumanizes that person.

For some Catholics, the appeal of conversion therapy hinges on the idea that helping people to “leave the LGBTQ+ lifestyle” is the most loving thing you can do for a person. However, while some people still hold this view, the majority of U.S. Catholics do not believe that being LGBTQ+ is morally wrong.

There is only questionable and problematic support, in either Sacred Scripture or Sacred Tradition, to justify attempts to coerce a change in someone’s identity.

an identity that would be considered Queer in the contemporary world. Nowhere does scripture condemn or forbid the loving, consensual same-gender behavior and relationships we see today.

Another aspect that impacts many Catholics’ beliefs about being Gay or Transgender is the approach often described as “love the sinner, hate the sin.” This idea implies that it’s possible to love the person while still demonstrating disapproval or condemnation of their identity, behavior, or relationships. However, [the Catechism states](#) that “sexuality affects all aspects of the human person in the unity of his body and soul. It especially concerns affectivity, the capacity to love and to procreate, and in a more general way the aptitude for forming bonds of communion with others.”⁴ So what does it mean when people say “love the homosexual; hate the same-sex activity” or “love the Transgender person, but they must live in the sex assigned at birth?” According to the Catechism, identity and sexuality are intimately connected.

⁴ CCC, Paragraph 2332.

What we hear from survivors of conversion therapy reveals that, for almost all, it is a horrible, painful, and humiliating experience—one that rarely has the promised outcome. The most common theme in testimonials submitted to [Born Perfect](#), an organization that works with conversion therapy survivors, is the transformation that happens when LGBTQ+ people come to embrace their identity. Many survivors report that they subsequently experience the love of God and neighbor more fully.

It’s clear there is only questionable and problematic support, in either Sacred Scripture or Sacred Tradition, to justify attempts to coerce a change in someone’s identity. Unfortunately, efforts to change or influence sexual orientation and gender identity remain prevalent today, especially among faith-based practitioners. This is true despite growing evidence that conversion therapies do not achieve their stated goals, and in fact often lead to harmful outcomes like unsafe behaviors and increased depression, and an ever-growing community of religious conversion therapy survivors sharing their traumas.

As acceptance of civil marriage equality grows, and state legislators focus on laws that marginalize Transgender and Nonbinary people, an increasing number of Catholic bishops across the United States have established Courage and EnCourage as the official diocesan ministries to LGBTQ+ people and their families. Many Catholics welcome the announcement of such ministries, for they believe it is an effort on the part of the church to embrace its LGBTQ+ members. They may not realize that Courage and EnCourage demand strict adherence to official church teaching. These groups reject any possibility of same-gender intimacy or gender transition and ask that LGBTQ+ people commit to celibacy or to life in their assigned gender.

Catholics may not know that these practices are occurring within (or with the blessing of) our Church; however, Catholics should feel empowered to question these practices and request that they be stopped. Catholics should also be aware that there are positive alternatives, such as Dignity or parish-based ministries affirming openly LGBTQ+ people, same-gender couples, Transgender, Nonbinary people, and allies. These ministries truly embody the theology of accompaniment that Pope Francis has called for so frequently, and are helping to support LGBTQ+ people and their families in maintaining their faith in a way that helps them to live the “abundant life” that Jesus said he came to provide for all.

To be clear, most professionally licensed Catholic counselors, even those who adhere to conservative theologies, don’t engage in conversion therapy. Most Catholics seeking care for mental health issues do so through community resources while some may ask pastors or other church staff for referrals. Unfortunately, several organizations that Catholics often turn to, including the Catholic Therapists Directory and the Catholic Medical Association, promote various conversion therapies in their policies or materials.

CONVERSION THERAPIES CATHOLICS MAY ENCOUNTER

- Catholic-identifying organizations that minister to people with “same-sex attraction disorder” or commit to “healing gender identity.” The most prevalent Catholic groups that take this approach are **Courage** (directed toward LGBTQ+ people) and **EnCourage** (for family members of LGBTQ+ people). Both groups uphold the Catholic Church’s teaching that procreation is “the goodness and inherent purpose of human sexuality.” Some chapters reportedly use conversion therapy techniques.
- Licensed counselors who emphasize their religious point-of-view and place it above the requirements of their professional ethics and the guidance of their professional organizations, such as the American Psychological Association, church counseling offices, or pastoral counselors, which may include pastors.
- Priests conducting exorcisms on those who identify as LGBTQ+ or Nonbinary.
- Catholic officials mandating conversion therapy as a condition for employment, leadership roles, religious school attendance, access to sacraments, or seminary enrollment.
- Organizations that are solely devoted to conversion therapy or “ex-gay” theology. These organizations are often part of national networks rooted in Evangelical Protestant traditions (i.e. **Restored Hope Network**, former **Exodus International** ministries, **Living Hope**, **Brothers Road**, **First Stone Ministries**, **CHANGED**, etc.).
- Broader ministries dealing with sexual issues, including sex addiction or pornography, that treat homosexuality or Transgender identity as mental illnesses.

ADDY SAKLER’S STORY

Addy has an eclectic religious history. She grew up with a Jewish father and a Presbyterian mother. From fifth through twelfth grade, Abby attended Catholic school, paid for by her Jewish grandparents. She describes her Catholic school experience positively; Catholic school provided great comfort and support following the losses of her dad, grandparents, and great grandma in quick succession.

The summer after her high school graduation, Addy went on a missionary trip to Africa. During college, she served as an adult leader for her church’s youth group. She then pursued a master’s degree in theology at Regent University, run by Pat Robertson and widely associated with conservative Evangelical Christian ideology.

Addy knew she was “different” from the age of five. She acknowledges having crushes on girlfriends. During her childhood and teenage years, homosexuality, or being attracted to someone of the same gender, was never addressed. It was virtually invisible, yet she still picked up the sense that it was a problem.

During her graduate program, Addy really began to struggle with her Queer identity. She felt excruciating emotional pain, torn between her sexual and romantic desires and her fear of going to Hell. She began to despise herself, to pray daily for these feelings to go away. She even cut herself. “I didn’t want to die,” Addy admits. “I just wanted the pain to end.”

Addy started attending Exodus Ministry meetings and sought healing through a program called Living Waters. She underwent an exorcism and even checked into a Christian hospital for suicidal ideation. Fitting in, being accepted, and preventing damnation were so important to Addy that she was willing to endure these various forms of conversion therapies.

Despite all these attempts, which lasted for years, Addy claims, “My feelings weren’t changing. I was still attracted to women.”

Eventually, Addy discovered spiritual writings, including those of Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong, that gave her a different perspective. She also found some new companions. She joined an online ex-ex-gay support



group. She started to meditate, took up running, and began working with a therapist who helped her cope with what she calls “Post-Traumatic Spiritual Disorder.” The more people accepted her and the more she was exposed to religious thought that emphasized acceptance of LGBTQ+ people, Addy felt like a huge weight was lifted from her shoulders. After coming out and leaving Christianity, at the age of 37, Addy says, “I could speak my voice, my truth.”

Now, Addy is in a happier place in her life. She has a fiancée, a community of good friends, and meaningful work as a Paraeducator for high school students with learning disabilities. She paints, writes poetry, and loves to listen to music. She still participates in support programs for people who have survived conversion therapy to cope with the lasting effects of the efforts to change her sexual orientation.

She passionately believes that the stories of conversion therapy survivors need to be told. “I want my story out there,” she says. “People need to know just how bad these programs are, and how much they hurt people. We don’t need to hear any more from the former leaders of these programs. We need to hear from the people who suffered. Who still suffer.”

GUADALUPE PALOS' STORY

Lupe grew up in both Texas and California, a first-generation Mexican American in a conservative, charismatic Catholic family.

In middle school, Lupe sensed that she might be Bisexual. Believing she had invited these things into her life, she felt guilty and developed depression. When she told her parents about her feelings, her father began to pray over her. For the first few months, these prayer sessions were weekly. They decreased to monthly, and lasted until Lupe was in her twenties. Lupe's father had a whole series of prayers designed to expel demons, whether for anxiety, depression, homosexuality, or addictions; he used them all on her. Lupe's father had a difficult early life and credits the church for literally saving his life and getting him on a path to having and being able to care for his own family. Knowing how important the church was to him made it difficult for her to question any aspect of how he prayed or what he did. Lupe said, "I trusted my dad even though the prayer sessions made me feel bad." She believed everyone had to suffer to maintain their relationship with God.

Despite her love for her family, Lupe spent most of her high school years "feeling numb, shutting things out, being desensitized." She doesn't have great memories of that period. She was admitted to psychiatric hospitals twice: once voluntarily and once after a suicide attempt around the time of

her 16th birthday. She describes herself as full of shame and feeling "subhuman" during that time.

When Lupe went to college, the world opened up for her. She loved the education she was getting, felt close to God, and loved praying. She found an open and affirming church that "was not explicitly anti-Gay." She studied several religions and found truths to embrace in many of them. However, she closed herself off from dating or from getting deeply involved with anyone. She felt envious of others who seemed much freer than she was.

Lupe has worked in several jobs where she assisted people with special needs, both elders and children. She enjoyed her role as an instructional aide for young children so much that she is now studying to become a teacher for students with special needs. She still identifies as Christian, but she feels safer about expressing emotions. She's able to forgive her father and move past most of the intense anger she felt toward him for years. She believes herself to be worthy of love and care, yet she is still somewhat hesitant to enter into relationships. She appears both strong and fragile, clearly scarred but also open to life with a lovely generosity of spirit.

Lupe feels safer, now, about expressing emotions. She's able to forgive her father and move past most of the intense anger she felt toward him for years. She is both strong and fragile, clearly scarred but also open to life with a lovely generosity of spirit.



DAVID BELTRAN'S STORY

When David was six years old, his family moved from Colombia to the United States. They were "nominally Catholic," with occasional attendance at Mass. Debates about same-gender marriage occurred during his childhood, and he heard people frequently express their opinions about engaging in same-gender relationships. He heard someone at church say people could be anything they wanted—as long as they weren't Gay. At one point, his father said he would beat any son of his who came out as Gay.

David was not surprised by his mother's negative reaction when, after seeing his Internet searches, she discovered that he might be Gay. David was only 12 or 13 at the time. He later confessed to a priest that he was Gay, for he still believed that being Gay was a sin; the priest told David he could get over it. A member of his parish referred David and his family to a Catholic therapist. The therapist asked David to use the computer and show him images that he was attracted to. David felt sinful, dirty, ashamed, and guilty. He told his parents about this incident, and only saw this therapist three or four more times.

His family found a different therapist, a Protestant one. This therapist created a genealogical chart to identify what he called a "generational cause" for David's homosexuality. David says that this made his parents feel very guilty, like they had done something wrong that caused him to be Gay.

As a teenager, David attended an Evangelical church, where he became deeply involved in the youth group; he refers to himself as a "Church Kid." But he continued to be attracted to men. He looked for ways to combat these attractions, including an online course popular in Latin American circles called "Setting the Captives Free" and immersing himself in Bible study for months at a time. Nothing worked. He remembers

himself as "bankrupt" in his capacity to relate to other people.

By 18, David realized that his sexual orientation was not going to change; he believed he must live a celibate life. He also experienced deep depression and was diagnosed as bipolar, which he attributes to the impact of hiding his true self for so long as well as to the pressure of trying to live up to the beliefs of his conservative faith. Eventually, he stumbled upon a YouTube video of Oprah Winfrey interviewing the former head of the



Exodus International, acknowledging that the beliefs he had advocated were false, and apologizing to survivors of their program. Viewing that video was the first step in David being able to embrace himself.

At 28, David has come a long way. He loves his work as a teacher. He is out as a Gay man, though he acknowledges he still faces homophobia in his family and in society at large. He lives in a city he feels is "an oasis" for LGBTQ+ people yet he still encounters anti-LGBTQ+ statements and sentiments.

He would like to start a Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA) at his school, but the political climate in his state makes that goal a challenge.

David has strong words about how damaging conversion therapy is. Most children do not have a choice about growing up in a certain faith—it's a decision made by the adults in their lives. He believes faith leaders need to be aware of that. Religion is often a very important factor in young lives; if someone is taught to believe their identity is invalid, it can lead to internal hatred and even self-harm. David warns that having minors undergo conversion therapy often impacts the entire family. It can cause parents or other family members to carry unnecessary and unrealistic guilt. Harm extends far beyond Queer people in ways that are often not considered.

WHERE DO SPIRITUAL CRISES ORIGINATE?

Catholic rhetoric and ministry often conflate same-gender attraction, gender dysphoria, and LGBTQ+ identity with a lifestyle of reckless and damaging behavior such as substance abuse, sexual risk-taking, and suicidality. Individuals are told that their mental health struggles, risky behavior, and regrets in life stem from being LGBTQ+, and that their identity stems from an experience of molestation, other abuse or trauma, or bad parenting. The reality is that many of those issues only manifest when LGBTQ+ people have been shamed for their identity. Homophobia and transphobia cause them to feel worse about themselves and more socially isolated – which in turn results in psychological and behavioral problems. Sexual abuse does not cause someone to be Gay or Transgender. In fact, sexual abusers often target LGBTQ+ children or adolescents due to their social isolation, gender non-conformity, and latent same-gender attraction.

Catholics across the country and around the world have struggled for decades with how to balance their love for LGBTQ+ family members, friends, coworkers, neighbors, and parishioners with the Church's official teachings based on Scriptural interpretations and natural law. Growing numbers have come to realize that LGBTQ+ people can and do live in ways that demonstrate them to be just as good, holy, and faithful as others. They realize that Church officials are bound by traditions dating back centuries, and that this enormous institution is often slow to change. They take guidance from the Church's emphasis on the need to love and respect the dignity of every human being, which, as [the Catechism states](#), "is rooted in [their] creation in the image and likeness of God."¹ This has led to significant majorities of Catholics in the US and around the world to affirm the belief that being LGBTQ+ is moral, that same-gender relationships deserve

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Part Three, Section One, Paragraph 1700.

respect and support, and that Transgender and Nonbinary people can live rich and full lives in their identities. Recognizing the harm that has been caused, many Catholics are calling for Church teachings on sexuality, gender, and family relationships to be changed. In the meantime, Catholics are embracing their LGBTQ+ friends and family members and working for greater civil protections for these communities.

How Should I Respond?

Coming to terms that you or a loved one may identify as LGBTQ+ can be a challenge for any Catholic. Your faith, along with other aspects of your upbringing and experiences, may shape your initial reaction. That is understandable.

Here are some tips to help you respond in ways consistent with our Catholic faith.

- **Place your desire to maintain a relationship in the forefront.** You are, or your loved one is, still the same person as before this new information was acknowledged. Now, just one more aspect of identity has been revealed. This doesn't change the essence of that person or your loving relationship with that person or yourself.
- **Give yourself time.** Pray, reflect on who you are, or who the person is and has been to you, and on how this information has impacted your hopes, expectations, and dreams. If thinking about a loved one, remember that they may have been struggling with this information for some time and shared it because they love and respect you.
- **Ask questions.** Be honest about what you don't understand. Acknowledge that you are working through things you've been taught or believed throughout your life. If you feel the need to consult a spiritual director, a priest, or a parish staffer, make sure that person is open-minded and respects your priorities, can affirm your values, and has experience working in affirming ways with LGBTQ+ people and families.
- **Avoid ultimatums.** It's not helpful to demand

that LGBTQ+ people behave in ways you would not ask a heterosexual cisgender person to behave. If you have rules that you can apply evenly, be clear that you ask everyone to follow them, so the LGBTQ+ person is not being held to a different standard.

- **Remain connected with yourself or your loved one.** Reassure your loved one that you are doing your best to understand and support them and ask the same of them.
- **Respect your loved one.** Use the language they do, such as their new name or pronouns, "Gay" instead of "homosexual" or "same-sex attracted," or "girlfriend" or "partner" instead of "friend".
- **Explore a LGBTQ+-affirming parish, intentional faith community, Dignity chapter, or other Catholic resource in your area.** There are also many national affirming groups for LGBTQ+ Catholics and for Catholic families. (See the resource list in the appendix.)
- **Connect with your local LGBTQ+ or PFLAG group.** Ask to speak with someone who understands the questions that come out of your faith.
- **Know you are not alone.** Tens of thousands of Catholic families have had LGBTQ+ loved ones come out. While some painful fractures have occurred, an overwhelming majority of Catholics have embraced the LGBTQ+ people in their lives. They see the goodness and grace in their loved ones and affirmed them as God created them to be.

The Good News: Openness, Education, and Acceptance Save Lives

Conservative Catholics and conversion therapists never discuss this, but LGBTQ+ people can and do thrive when they come to accept and celebrate their identity. Many LGBTQ+ people remain people of faith, serving in churches across the world. Reports from [The Trevor Project](#) have found that [being part of a loving and accepting religious community](#) is an important part of many LGBTQ+ people's lives.²

² "Religion and Spirituality among LGBTQ Youth," The Trevor Project, 2022.

DignityUSA members attest every day to the resilience of LGBTQ+ and ally Catholics. Mental health professionals agree: the LGBTQ+ community's higher rates of mental illness and suicidality should be attributed to social stigma and discrimination, not to anything inherently wrong with their sexual orientation or gender identity. Both psychological research and lived reality show that when LGBTQ+ people are embraced for who they are, they are fully capable of flourishing. In fact, it is very possible that in living their truth LGBTQ+ Catholics offer an important witness to the Church about God's unimaginable capacity for creativity and love, and that those who affirm them model a path forward.

Whole-hearted acceptance is vital to the health and well-being of all people, and especially of our LGBTQ+ neighbors. People of faith have an especially important role to play in that openness, education, and acceptance. In 2020, The Trevor Project released [a study exploring the effect of religious condemnation](#) on LGBTQ+ youth.³ LGBTQ+ youth who reported not hearing their parents use religion to express negative sentiments about being LGBTQ+ were at half the risk for attempting suicide in the past year. Unfortunately, the study found that, unlike for their straight and cisgender peers, religiosity did not protect LGBTQ+ youth from suicide.

Our faith communities can do better; ending efforts to change people's sexual orientation or gender expression is the first step. As Catholics, we may disagree with each other on matters of theology and morality. However, we're called to live in peace, love one another, and respect the consciences of our fellow humans. The statistics and testimonies presented here point to the damage that is being done to LGBTQ+ people through conversion therapy; it is time to turn away from such practices and discard harmful teachings.

We hope you walk away from this document with the understanding that Catholic practices around LGBTQ+ inclusion and affirmation matter. Conversion therapy, as supported by the U.S. Catholic hierarchy and practiced by many Catholics, is both ineffective and extremely harmful. By transforming how we engage with LGBTQ+ Catholics and their families, we can save lives. Your own positive engagement with your journey or with your loved one is a part of that transformation.

³ "Religiosity and Suicidality among LGBTQ Youth," The Trevor Project, 2020.

GLOSSARY

Bisexual – an individual who is attracted equally or almost as strongly to people of female or male genders.

Cisgender – people whose gender identity correspond to their sex assigned at birth.

Gay – primarily refers to males attracted exclusively or primarily to other males; many younger people attracted to people of the same gender have adopted this term as an overarching name for those attracted to people of the same gender.

Gender – a term related to cultural and social characteristics generally associated with masculinity and femininity. Gender describes how an individual understands their relationship with the personal dimensions of body, identity, and social and cultural norms.

Gender Identity – an individual's sense of their own gender.

Gender Dysphoria – a sense of unease that a person may experience between their gender identity and biological sex.

Lesbian – a female individual attracted exclusively or primarily to other females.

Natural Law – a body of moral principles regarded as the basis of human conduct. In Catholic tradition, this perspective was promoted by noted theologians Augustine of Hippo, Albertus Magnus, and Thomas Aquinas.

Nonbinary – a term for people whose gender identity is not exclusively female or male. Nonbinary people may identify with some aspects of either female or male gender identity, or they may reject the gender binary entirely.

Queer – an umbrella term for people who are not heterosexual or cisgender. Adopted by some as a comprehensive term for members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Sexual Orientation – an enduring pattern of romantic or sexual attraction to persons of the same or opposite sex or gender; to persons of all genders, or to persons of both male and female genders.

Transgender – an individual whose gender identity or gender expression does not correspond to their sex assigned at birth.

RESOURCES

- **DignityUSA:** Celebrating the wholeness and wholeness of LGBTQIA+ Catholics and working for justice, equality and inclusion of this community in our Church and society. Open to all who support this mission. www.dignityusa.org
- **Dignity communities:** www.dignityusa.org/dignity-communities
- **Dignity online liturgies:** www.dignityusa.org/online-liturgies
- **Families with Dignity:** For Catholic families of LGBTQIA+ people. www.facebook.com/FamiliesWithDignity
- **Human Rights Campaign:** Largest advocacy group for LGBTQIA+ rights in the U.S. www.hrc.org
- **National LGBTQ Task Force:** Advances justice, freedom, and full equality for LGBTQIA+ people. www.thetaskforce.org
- **National Suicide and Mental Health Lifeline:** Dial 988 at any time.
- **New Ways Ministry:** LGBTQIA+-friendly parishes and faith communities. www.newwaysministry.org/resources/parishes
- **New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference Statement:** Supports a bill to ban conversion therapy in New Zealand. www.catholic.org.nz/assets/Uploads/NZCBC-submission-on-the-Conversion-Practices-Prohibition-Legislation-Bill.pdf
- **PFLAG:** Supports families and friends of LGBTQIA+ people. www.pflag.org
- **Rainbow Youth Project USA:** Promotes the health, safety, and wellness of LGBTQIA+ young people across the country. www.rainbowyouthproject.org

Further Reading

American Psychological Association. "Resolution on Appropriate Affirmative Responses to Sexual Orientation Distress and Change Efforts." American Psychological Association Council of Representatives, August 2009. Retrieved from <https://www.apa.org/about/policy/sexual-orientation>.

Blessed Parents: Experiences of Catholic Parents with Lesbian and Gay Children. Edited by Jeannine Gramick and Francis DeBernardo. New Ways Ministry, 2021.

Mary Ellen Lopata. *Fortunate Families: Catholic Parents of Lesbian Daughters and Gay Sons.* Trafford Publishing, 2006.

John J. McNeill. *Taking a Chance on God: Liberating Theology for Gays, Lesbians and Their Lovers Families and Friends.* Beacon Press, 1996.

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