

March 9, 2015

Dear Archbishop Cupich,

Late last summer our parish community, Holy Family of Inverness, IL, suffered an experience that caused disruption and division when our Director of Liturgy and Music, Colin Collette, was fired after making public his engagement to his same-sex partner.

“Why?” “How can this be?” “Is that really the teachings of our Church?”

These were just some of the many questions raised by our community. After much discussion and discernment, a group of parishioners felt called to fully explore all aspects of the Catholic Church’s teachings regarding LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) individuals. We sought to educate ourselves regarding the church’s position on LGBT individuals and explore how Catholic theology on homosexuality affects the faith and lives of these individuals, their immediate and extended families, their friends, and the broader faith community to which they belong. The process also included listening to the experiences of our own community members whose faith lives have been affected as a result of church policies regarding LGBT brothers and sisters. Our study and reflection has resulted in the attached document.

Our intent is to support our Catholic Church in becoming a more welcoming and inclusive community. Many LGBT individuals long to remain fully active members of the Church while being able to, if they so choose, enter into a loving, supportive relationship with a partner of the same sex.

We have felt strongly directed by the Holy Spirit as we engaged in this work of love, not only for our community of faith, but also for the greater Church of Christ to which we all belong. We respectfully ask that you prayerfully consider our efforts and findings as you prepare for the Synod this October in Rome, and as you lead the people God has entrusted to you. We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you personally if a face-to-face session would provide deeper insight into our thinking.

Yours in Christ,

The following reflects our exploration of and reflection on scripture, sacred tradition, and writings of the Magisterium of the church, along with scientific research and testimony of lived experience from LGBT¹ individuals, their families and others within our faith community.

The Divine Image

As we began our study, we were inspired by the Catholic teaching that the Divine Image is present in all people, and from conception, we are destined for eternal beatitude (*Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraphs 1702-3*). We are to do what is good and avoid what is evil. Everyone is obliged to follow God's law, which makes itself heard in conscience and is fulfilled in the love of God and of neighbor. Living a moral life bears witness to the dignity of the person.

The Catholic Church proclaims that human life is sacred and that the dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society. This belief is the foundation of all the principles of our social teachings. Catholic teaching also calls on us to find effective ways to prevent conflicts and resolve them. Every person is precious; people are more important than things; and the measure of every institution is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of individuals.

These teachings are the cornerstone of our group's belief that LGBT individuals, without qualification, should be embraced by the Church to both fully and freely participate. As Catholic Christians we have been taught to look to Jesus' example and the sacred tradition and teachings of the Church and regularly examine how our actions are consistent with our faith. We humbly present our findings.

An Appeal for Inclusiveness

Jesus challenged the customs of his times that were at odds with His message of invitation to the Kingdom of God.

Jesus joined his contemporaries in opposing Roman oppression of the Jewish people. However, in Jesus' encounter with the tax collector Zacchaeus, we learn that Jesus chose compassion and invitation over rejection and isolation even at the risk of appearing supportive of Roman oppression. When Jesus saw that short Zacchaeus was so eager to see him that Zacchaeus climbed a tree, Jesus called to him, "Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for today I must

¹ For consistency, throughout the paper we use the commonly understood acronym LGBT to refer to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender individuals. While this paper focuses mainly on homosexuality and our Church's teachings on homosexuality and same sex unions, our belief is that our general call for inclusiveness is relevant to all members of this community.

stay at your house.” (*Luke 19:5 NABRE*). Others around him grumbled because Jesus appeared to support an ally of Roman oppression. Unfazed and fearless, Jesus dined with Zacchaeus, and this interaction bore fruit in Zacchaeus’ conversion. When presented with a choice between conforming to custom and loving an individual, Jesus chose loving the individual.

In Jesus’ encounter with the woman at the well (*John 4:4-30*), Jesus reached out to a Samaritan woman, asking her for a drink. Samaritan women were regarded by Jews as ritually impure, and therefore, Jews were forbidden to drink from any vessel they had handled. Jesus not only shared a drink with her, but he also addressed her as an equal and answered her questions. He even invited her to be part of God’s kingdom in defiance of Jewish law, which dictated that Samaritan women were excluded. Once again, Jesus chose love and inclusiveness over the acknowledged practice of the time.

When in the Gospels, Jesus touched the leper (*Mark 1:40 and Mathew 8:3*), he shocked the sensibilities of the time when tradition was to separate lepers from the community. In the modern context, the “touch” of Jesus would move the discussion from language denoting homosexual differences, which separates them from the church community, to referring to them simply as baptized followers, brothers and sisters, one with us in Christ.

His Holiness Pope Francis in his message to the new Cardinals on February 15, 2015, said, “Dear brothers, as we look to Jesus and our Mother Mary, I urge you to serve the Church in such a way that Christians -- edified by our witness -- will not be tempted to turn to Jesus without turning to the outcast, to become a closed caste with nothing authentically ecclesial about it. I urge you to serve Jesus crucified in every person who is emarginated, for whatever reason; to see the Lord in every excluded person who is hungry, thirsty, naked; to see the Lord present even in those who have lost their faith, or turned away from the practice of their faith; to see the Lord who is imprisoned, sick, unemployed, persecuted; to see the Lord in the leper – whether in body or soul - who encounters discrimination! We will not find the Lord unless we truly accept the marginalized!”

The New Testament also teaches us what fruitful faith truly looks like. It is not enough to have “correct” doctrine on paper. The letter of James states, “So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (*James 2:17 NABRE*), which implies that adherence to doctrinal teachings unaccompanied by loving actions is not enough. John’s Gospel states, “He takes away every branch in me that does not bear fruit, and every one that does he prunes so that it bears more fruit.” (*John 15:2 NABRE*). It is not enough for a doctrine to be ideologically consistent or logically sound. If a doctrine is bearing bad fruit, or no fruit, then it must be pruned.

Our reading of sacred scripture leads us to conclude that any thorough examination of our Church’s policies regarding LGBT people requires an examination of how those policies reflect the Gospel and further our mission of evangelization, consistent with Christ’s example of inclusion and acceptance. Our study further suggests that efforts to understand how current policies further our mission requires active engagement with LGBT people, their families and the faith communities to which they belong.

Hope vs. Reality: Conflicting Messages

We’ve shown how Jesus reached out to the marginalized individual without condition, and Pope Francis recently echoed Jesus’ examples of inclusion and acceptance. We then reviewed our Church’s teaching on how LGBT individuals are recognized in the Catholic Church. Our findings show that current Catholic Church teaching encourages respect, sensitivity, and acceptance of LGBT individuals. Our findings further reveal that without the addition of full inclusion and acceptance, the reality too often manifests itself in exclusion and discrimination.

Church Teachings	The Reality
<p><i>Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith-</i> Men and women with a homosexual tendency ought to be received as brothers and sisters in Christ with respect and sensitivity.</p>	<p>People who are LGBT are often not received with respect and sensitivity as brothers and sisters in Christ within the Catholic Church. In the news of late, we read stories of Catholic people who have been denied by their church: Pastors refusing to baptize children of gay parents; Loved ones of a gay family member denied a Catholic funeral mass; Faithful, dedicated employees fired because they feel the call to be in a committed relationship; Long-time parishioners denied communion for making the commitment to legally wed; Parents and families of LGBT individuals feeling that they have to choose between their child and their church.</p> <p>Whether intended or unintended, these are the consequences of the lack of inclusion without qualification of LGBT individuals in our Church.</p>
<p>USCCB Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination- All people are created in the image and likeness of God and thus possess an innate human dignity that must be acknowledged and respected. In keeping with this</p>	<p>There is clearly a masked and more disguised form of animosity and scorn that is evident and perpetuated by some within the Church toward members of the LGBT community.</p> <p>The Church discriminates by not</p>

<p>conviction, the Church teaches that persons with a homosexual inclination “must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity.” We recognize that these persons have been, and often continue to be, objects of scorn, hatred, and even violence in some sectors of our society. Sometimes this hatred is manifested clearly; other times, it is masked and gives rise to more disguised forms of hatred</p>	<p>acknowledging the same rights to LGBT individuals as other lay members of the Church, including not having the right to be in a loving committed relationship. We believe these actions are contrary to the “acceptance language” of the USCCB, and more importantly, contrary to the message of the Gospels. What message do these actions send to our young people and LGBT brothers and sisters? Many are afraid to come out because they feel they may be rejected by their Catholic community, and most importantly, by their own family. Research results generally confirm that LGBT youth have much higher levels of suicidal thoughts than their heterosexual peers. Family connectedness—including the ability of youth to talk with parents; youth feeling cared about and understood; and the family dynamic being compromised—has been shown to reduce the risk of suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts for some LGBT groups by half.</p> <p><i>(Suicide Prevention Resource Center. (2008). Suicide risk and prevention for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth. Newton, MA: Education Development Center, Inc.)</i></p> <p>According to the San Francisco State University’s Family Acceptance Project, highly religious parents are significantly more likely than their less-religious counterparts to reject their children for being gay. According to the National Coalition of Homeless, 40% of homeless youth identify as LGBT. The most frequently cited factor contributing to LGBT homelessness was family rejection based on sexual orientation and gender identity <i>(Williams Institute, 2012).</i></p>
<p>Caritas in Veritate-Introduction, Pope Benedict XVI All people feel the interior impulse to love authentically; love and truth never abandon them completely, because these</p>	<p>Heterosexuals and LGBT individuals are leaving the church because they are hearing the inclusive teachings of Jesus and then messages/actions that are contrary to the teachings of Christ from Church leadership. In</p>

are the vocations planted by God in the heart and mind of every human person	the case of LGBT people, they are asked to deny this interior impulse to love authentically. They are asked to deny their feelings of wanting to have a lifelong committed relationship.
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Testimonial we received from a LGBT woman: *“I was told I would go to hell, people said there was something wrong with me, that I was a sinner. But there was an inner voice, an inner spirit that kept telling me I was good. I was loved. And that who I was should be honored, not hidden.”*

“Love never fails. If there are prophecies, they will be brought to nothing; if tongues, they will cease; if knowledge, it will be brought to nothing.” (1 Corinthians 13:8 NABRE)

We have seen from Jesus’ example that traditions and temporal laws should not prevail when it limits who we love. Did not Jesus strive for inclusiveness of individuals on the fringe? As Disciples of Christ called to live out Jesus’ example, shouldn’t the Catholic Church engage with those who are transgender to understand their pain and isolation? Shouldn’t the Church break bread with families who have LGBT children raised in the church, but who are now pushed to the outside because of their desire to love authentically and seek committed relationships? Shouldn't the Church seek to understand why other Christian churches are open and accepting of LGBT individuals as equal partners in both gospel and blessed unions, while we as Roman Catholics continue to teach acceptance with qualification, causing separation in Jesus' name? We believe that the lack of full acceptance confers an "other" status for our LGBT brothers and sisters, and fosters fearful and negative attitudes toward the LGBT community, It does not reflect the Church's teachings on the sacredness and dignity of the person.

Research on Determinants of Sexual Orientation

As noted by Pope Francis, “The Church is herself a missionary disciple; she needs to grow in her interpretation of the revealed word and in her understanding of truth. It is the task of exegetes and theologians to help ‘the judgment of the Church to mature.’ The other sciences also help to accomplish this, each in its own way. With reference to the social sciences, for example, John Paul II said that the Church values their research, which helps her ‘to derive concrete indications helpful for her magisterial mission.’ Within the Church, countless issues are being studied and reflected upon with great freedom. Differing currents of thought in philosophy, theology, and pastoral practice, if open to being reconciled by the Spirit in respect and love, can enable the Church to grow, since all of them help to express more clearly the

immense riches of God’s word.”(*EVANGELII GAUDIUM – Chap 1. Section IV:40-44 Pope Francis, 2013*)

At the Extraordinary Synod in 2014, there was discussion on the topic and application of “gradualism” with regard to moving sinners toward virtues like honesty and courage. The same thought and consideration needs to be given toward mounting scientific evidence and studies that indicate homosexuality is not a tendency nor is it “disordered”; rather it is the way a person is born, putting it in the space of natural law or simply “a law of nature.”

The Catholic Church currently takes a “hate the sin, but love the sinner” approach to homosexuality by simultaneously stating that individuals with homosexual orientation should be treated with dignity and respect, but at the same time that homosexual tendencies and acts are “disordered.” Specifically, the church teaches in the catechism that homosexual acts, because they are not procreative, are disordered in that they are not ordered toward or not aligned with natural law. The catechism further states that the “psychological genesis remains largely unexplained” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraphs 2357-58, 1993*).

While this statement regarding the genesis of sexual orientation may have been understood to be true in 1993 when the Catechism was published, continued adherence to this claim is untenable today as mounting evidence within the scientific and medical communities delineates the genesis of homosexuality. Although research is ongoing and continues to improve, there are three main lines of evidence that biological (i.e. natural) factors contribute to one’s sexual orientation, whether hetero- or homosexual. The first line of research compares identical and fraternal twins (e.g. Burri et al, 2001; Hershberger et al. 2001; Långström et al., 2010). This research demonstrates that when twins are identical (e.g. have the same genes), they are also more likely to share the same sexual orientation as compared to fraternal twins who have less genetic material in common. Additional support for the role of genes in determining sexual orientation comes from recent genetic mapping studies (e.g. Sanders et al, 2014) that find variations on chromosome 8 and the X chromosome to be associated with sexual orientation.

An additional line of research explores the role of prenatal hormones in determining one’s sexual orientation. This line of research (e.g. *Garcia-Falgueras & Swaab, 2010*) demonstrates that differences in the preponderance of male and female hormones in the intrauterine environment shape the development of sexual orientation. While not a genetic determinant, it *is* biological and supports the claim that homosexuality is predetermined at birth. An understanding of this distinction can help to account for the fact that genetic research does not find perfect concordance in identical twins.

We understand the core principle of Catholic teaching is that Scripture and tradition inform our pursuit and understanding of truth. Scientific inquiry has continued to reveal the

nature of homosexuality, as detailed above. As the Church has always held, discoveries and evolution of this kind does not contradict or cause us to dismiss Scripture, but to understand it more fully in the light of intellectual advancement and learned experience.

LGBT unions are a natural way of expressing the gift of love

Verses from the Old and New Testament referring specifically to homosexuality² condemn homosexual acts as “unnatural” or “an abomination”. It is important to note that these references are often in the context of violence or rape, prostitution or pederasty, and idolatry, and that some passages call for stoning and death as punishment for homosexual acts. Doctors of the Church have helped us recognize that Scripture, divinely inspired, must be understood in its various forms – history, poetry, allegory, etc. – and in some cases recognized as reflecting cultural norms (such as slavery), which evolve over time.

The idea of a loving, committed same sex relationship was likely a foreign notion in biblical times, as was the idea of biologically determined sexual orientation. As we come to understand that same-sex attraction is a natural phenomenon, we also see LGBT persons in the context of mature, loving relationships, and not defined simply by their sexual drive. Relationships are about intimacy and self-giving love. We see the message of Scripture, and that of tradition, to rightly call for behavior consistent with Christ’s radical message of love, and the consistent message of the Old and New Testaments putting God at the center of our lives, that human beings are made in the image of God and intended for committed relationships.

“All people feel the interior impulse to love authentically: love and truth never abandon them completely, because these are the vocation planted by God in the heart and mind of every human person”. (*Caritas in Veritate, Introduction, Pope Benedict XVI, 2009*)

Notably, Jesus makes no mention of homosexuality in the gospels, but does mention sexual immorality. (Mark 7:20-23) The wider culture has contributed to ignorance and confusion about the nature of sexuality, intimacy, and love, and the Church is called to answer with examples of true committed relationships with Christ at their center.

In the present period, the corruption of morals has increased, and one of the most serious indications of this corruption is the unbridled exaltation of sex. Moreover,

² Genesis 19:5, Judges 19:22, Leviticus 18:22, Leviticus 20:13, Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, 1 Timothy 1:8-10

through the means of social communication and through public entertainment this corruption has reached the point of invading the field of education and of infecting the general mentality. In this context certain educators, teachers and moralists have been able to contribute to a better understanding and integration into life of the values proper to each of the sexes; on the other hand there are those who have put forward concepts and modes of behavior which are contrary to the true moral exigencies of the human person. Some members of the latter group have even gone so far as to favor a licentious hedonism. (*SACRED CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, PERSONA HUMANA, 1975*)

As passionate supporters of the rights of LGBT persons to genuine committed relationships built on love of God and each other, our group also shares the concerns of those who lament cultural messages of sexuality without intimacy, and intimacy without commitment. We know from our research on the teachings of the Church that human nature is drawn to true intimacy and true commitment. Our research supports our belief that we are called as a Church and as individuals to evangelize others through examples of the joy and freedom that true intimacy and true commitment promise.

In a world in which sexuality is all too often detached from love and all too often portrayed as a tool for selfish pleasure, manipulation, power or violence, the Church rightly preaches a message of love that puts God at its center, is other-focused and celebrates true intimacy and commitment. For much of human history, LGBT persons were marginalized at best and persecuted at worst, undermining the development of emotional maturity and healthy relationships. And yet, God's design would not be denied. Committed, lifelong same-sex relationships have developed despite the absence of the support enjoyed by their heterosexual counterparts.

Perhaps the insight that we heard from a woman in a relationship with a same-sex partner best sums this up: *"People accepted and loved us not in spite of who we were, but because of who we were!! My partner's relationship with God grew stronger, and my relationship with God grew stronger. Love was moving us to places we would never have gone. This is the miracle of Love. This should NEVER be taken from anyone, for any reason."*

The Learning Continues

There remain difficult questions to be faced which spring from our growing understanding of our world and our biological nature.

In our time humanity is experiencing a turning point in its history, as we can see from the advances being made in so many fields. We can only praise the steps being taken to improve people's welfare in areas such as health care, education, and communications. At the same time we have to remember that the majority of our contemporaries are barely living from day to day, with dire consequences. A number of diseases are spreading. The hearts of many people are gripped by fear and desperation, even in the so-called rich countries. The joy of living frequently fades, lack of respect for others and violence are on the rise, and inequality is increasingly evident. It is a struggle to live and, often, to live with precious little dignity. This epochal change has been set in motion by the enormous qualitative, quantitative, rapid and cumulative advances occurring in the sciences and in technology, and by their instant application in different areas of nature and of life. We are in an age of knowledge and information, which has led to new and often anonymous kinds of power. (*EVANGELII GAUDIUM – Chap 2. Section 1: 52 Pope Francis*)

We do not contend that men and women are interchangeable, only that our understanding of what it is to be a follower of Christ becomes better understood as we grow in knowledge of God's design. We do not contend that marriage between a man and a woman is of the same NATURE as a same-sex relationship, only that both are part of God's design, both should be grounded in doing the will of God and supporting the spiritual growth of the other, and both should be honored as they honor God.

In order to be more inclusive of LGBT individuals and their desire to be in lifelong committed relationships, Jesus would likely applaud the courage of Bishop Johan Bonny of Antwerp, Belgium who talked about a diversity of form in relationships rather than restating a rigid view of marriage.

"There should be recognition of a diversity of forms. We have to look inside the church for a formal recognition of the kind of interpersonal relationship that is also present in many gay couples. Just as there are a variety of legal frameworks for partners in civil society, one must arrive at a diversity of forms in the church ... The intrinsic values are more important to me than the institutional question. The Christian ethic is based on lasting relationships where exclusivity, loyalty, and care are central to each other."

Do not the non-physical nurturing traits associated with men and women which presumably contribute to the raising of children exist on a spectrum within all men and women, both heterosexual and homosexual? If so, as we acknowledge the importance of these traits in assessing heterosexual unions so, too, should we acknowledge the contributions of same-sex unions to the social cohesion of the homosexual community and the entire culture.

We heard from a man whose wife's cousin and his same-sex partner had adopted two abused children who had spent time in multiple foster homes. After discovering that their two adopted children had two other siblings, they moved so they could afford to adopt the other two children. *"The children feel parented for the first time in their lives, see first-hand the value of self-sacrifice and the impact it can have on the world, and they're growing into wonderful people. Yet many would rather see these children raised in an abusive foster home than with a loving, supportive gay man."*

The sanctity of heterosexual marriage is celebrated; the beauty of the sacrifice and love and commitment of those couples is admired even as we know no marriage is perfect. Yet we don't police those marriages. As imitators of Christ, we "meet people where they are," encourage and nurture them to understand their faith and the Gospels, and grow toward truth even as we fail and try again. Knowing we are all on a spectrum of understanding these truths, we seek to instruct and encourage others as our loving Father does us.

In Summary

We have cited examples of how Christ both lived and preached a Church that included members from all walks of society, going against many of the common beliefs and teachings of the time. We also have seen growing evidence, most of which was completed after the Catechism of the Catholic Church was updated in 1993, pointing to homosexuality as being pre-determined at birth, and therefore, it is as natural as being born heterosexual.

Our Church teaches respect, sensitivity and acceptance of LGBT individuals, but denies full access, conferring an "other" status that often contributes to the fear, scorn and hatred we seek to eliminate. This contradictory message is driving some committed Catholics away from the Church, and the effect on them and their families can be devastating. It can also have a wider impact on the broader faith community as we have witnessed here at Holy Family. First and foremost, we should follow Jesus' example of inclusion, acceptance, and respecting the sacredness and dignity of every human being.

Loving, Christ-centered relationships should be viewed as grace from God. Relationships are about commitment, honesty, sharing, respect, intimacy and self-giving love, regardless of the sexual orientation of the individuals involved. We pray that as both a teaching and learning institution, our Church comes to view LGBT individuals and same sex relationships as a sacred part of God's plan.

We believe that in following Jesus' example of inclusion and acceptance of LGBT individuals as full participants in all our Church offers, we bear witness to the Church's long

tradition of upholding the sanctity and dignity of every human being from conception to natural death, and advance the divine purpose of our beloved Church.

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