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Ministry to Catholic LGBTQ Youth: A Call for Openness and Affirmation

by Arthur David Canales

How can we proclaim Christ to a generation that is changing? We must be careful not to administer a vaccine against faith to them. . . . If someone is gay and seeks the Lord with good will, who am I to judge? . . . I remember the case of a very sad little girl who finally confided to her teacher the reason for her state of mind: ‘My mother’s girlfriend doesn’t like me.’

—Pope Francis, conversation en route to World Youth Day, July 29, 2013, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Pope Francis’s remarks above direct attention to some difficult and virtually undiscussed concerns about the way the Catholic Church is to minister to LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning) youth. Concerns regarding LGBTQ youth range from serious theological disagreements about ecclesial teachings to ignorance among youth ministers about the situations that these adolescents face. LGBTQ youth often experience fear, shame, and the hostility of peers and parents.¹

At a recent national ministry conference, I presented a paper on LGBTQ youth and it seemed that nothing was more controversial and potentially divisive than the issue of homosexuality. Ministers from various denominations stated that “this is the most pressing and continuous issue” in their churches. This article contends that Catholic LGBTQ youth deserve, and should expect, proper and competent pastoral care from their parish youth ministry. The purpose of this article is twofold: (1) to elaborate on the ministry to Catholic LGBTQ youth in the United States and (2) to propose a more open and affirming Catholic youth ministry that addresses LGBTQ issues and concerns. The question of ministering to Catholic LGBTQ youth is both a practical theological matter and a youth ministry dilemma that merits serious attention.

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The methodology of this article is (1) descriptive, which is theological and theoretical in nature; and (2) prescriptive, which is pastoral in scope. The essay begins with a brief discussion of the terminology, then moves to a discussion of the theological and moral conundrum facing ministry to LGBTQ youth. Next, it examines the failures of ecclesial documents to address the quandary, and finally, it addresses the need to become more open and affirming in the ways of ministering to LGBTQ youth.

¹ L. E. Durso and G. J. Gates, “Serving Our Youth: Findings from a National Survey of Service Providers Working with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth Who Are Homeless or At Risk of Becoming Homeless” (Los Angeles, CA: The Williams Institute with True Colors Fund and The Palette Fund, 2012), 4.

Situating the Discussion

Research suggests that views on same-sex relationships vary by Christian denomination and by religious practices.² Currently, mainline Catholicism ministers to LGBTQ youth as teenagers with eyes wide shut. The ministerial presence currently available to the *young church* (a phrase used in youth ministry that refers to high school adolescents ages fourteen through eighteen), particularly to Catholic LGBTQ youth, is almost non-existent.³ The overwhelming majority of Catholic youth ministries in the United States do not cater to, actively attract, or tolerate LGBTQ youth. The Catholic Church in general, and youth ministry specifically, could be and should be doing more to reach out and minister to LGBTQ youth. Catholic LGBTQ youth need a place in the church where they can be accepted, their gifts empowered, their faith and spirituality nurtured, and their sexuality supported.

Therefore, this essay is an invitation for US Catholic Bishops, Catholic pastors, and Catholic youth ministers (1) to be more hospitable, gracious, and open-minded with the LGBTQ youth community and (2) to have LGBTQ Catholics present at the table for dialogue and critique about the lack of advocacy and pastoral care in Catholic youth ministry. This essay hopes to encourage youth ministers and adolescent catechists “to minister *to, with, by, and for*” LGBTQ young people, as is so beautifully articulated in the original Catholic youth ministry document, *A Vision of Youth Ministry*.⁴

Typically, the topic, discussion, and rhetoric surrounding sexual minorities and the Catholic Church centers around three camps of theological thought: (1) *traditional/conservative*, who are those theologians who adhere to the Magisterium’s⁵ position on homosexual acts with little or no pastoral concern for the LGBTQ person; (2) *mediating/moderate*, who are those theologians who do not challenge magisterial teaching on homosexual acts, but place a greater emphasis on the pastoral ramifications for the LGBTQ person; and (3) *revisionist/progressive*, who are those theologians who openly challenge the magisterial teaching on LGBTQ persons.⁶ Perhaps a revisionist perspective is needed concerning this delicate issue, in order to allow an open-minded approach toward LGBTQ youth. All Catholic people--LGBTQ youth included--share in the same Catholic identity and dignity as heterosexual Catholics, which is shared by virtue of baptism, sealed at confirmation, and nourished at the Eucharistic table.⁷

Defining the Terminology

It is beneficial for the readers to learn the basic terminology for this study. The language will also give a general Catholic audience common ground and a common vocabulary to speak from, as well as the proper understanding of the terminology, such that it can be incorporated into future Catholic documents.

LGBT refers to individuals who consider themselves as either lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. Adolescents who claim the LGBT sexual status are considered minorities— more specifically, “sexual minority teenagers”—by the American Academy of Pediatrics.⁸ In recent literature surrounding LGBT youth, the letter Q has been added,

2 L. J. Francis, B. G. Fawcett, and J. Linkletter, “The Sexual Attitudes of Religiosity Committed Canadian Youth within the Convention of Atlantic Baptist Churches,” *Journal of Youth & Theology* 12, no. 1 (2013): 11. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/24055093-90000057>.

3 Samuel Sanabria and Joffrey S. Suprina, “Addressing Spirituality when Counseling Gay Boys, Adolescents, and Men,” in *Counseling Gay Men, Adolescents, and Boys: A Strength-Based Guide for Helping Professionals and Educators*, ed. Michael M. Kocet (New York: Routledge Group, 2014), 54–55.

4 Department of [Catholic] Education, *A Vision of Youth Ministry* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1976), 6–7.

5 The Magisterium (Latin for “office of the teacher”), in the Catholic Church, refers to the authoritative teaching of the universal church, which belongs to the whole college of bishops (Catholic bishops around the world) who are united with the bishop of Rome—the presiding pope.

6 M. J. Maher and L. M. Sever, “What Educators in Catholic Schools Might Expect When Addressing Gay and Lesbian Issues: A Study of Needs and Barriers,” *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Issues in Education* 4, no. 3 (2007): 82. http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J367v04n03_06.

7 Gerald D. Coleman, *Homosexuality: Catholic Teaching and Pastoral Practice* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1996), 110.

8 D. A. Levine, “Office-Based Care for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning Youth,” *Pediatrics* 132, no. 1 (2013): 198–99. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1542/peds.2013-1282>.

referring to the word “questioning,” and can be appended at times to the acronym LGBT to read LGBTQ. “Questioning” refers to adolescents who are still discerning their sexual orientation and/or struggling with their sexual identity. The letter Q can also represent the word “queer,” which has become more popular in homosexual literature and in queer theory (explained below). Therefore, it is not uncommon to see the acronym LGBTQQ, which includes a second Q-letter to represent queer understanding. The second Q-letter will *not* be part of the parameters of this work.

Understanding sexual orientation is an extremely important part of human development. According to the American Psychological Association, the sexual orientation of a person is an enduring, individual pattern of emotional, romantic, and physical (sexual) arousal and attraction to persons of the opposite gender or sex, the same gender or sex, or to either genders or more than one sex.⁹ These sexual attractions toward other human beings are generally categorized under heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality, although the category asexuality does exist, which is the lack of romantic or physical attraction toward others.

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth. A lesbian youth is an adolescent female who self-identifies as a person who has sexual tendencies, overtures, and attraction toward other females and women.¹⁰ A gay youth is an adolescent male who categorizes himself as a person who has sexual tendencies, overtures, and attraction toward other males and men.¹¹ Conversely, bisexual youth are teenagers who self-identify their romantic and physical attraction, and their emotional and/or spiritual intimacy, toward people of both sexes and genders.¹²

Transgender and queer youth. The term *transgender* is a broad term that covers various groups. It can include transsexuals, cross-dressers, drag queens, people who are intersex (people born with both male and female genitals), and straight people. Being transgender is not necessarily a reflection of sexual orientation. All transsexuals are transgender, but not all transgender people are transsexual.¹³ Young people who describe themselves as transgender are those persons who exhibit “gender-nonconforming” characteristics and actions—that is, those individuals who transcend their typical gender paradigms.¹⁴ Many transsexual persons are in transition—either from hormone therapy and/or cosmetic surgery—to live in a gender role of choice, but have not undergone sexual reassignment surgery.¹⁵ The term *queer* was once a derogatory term used by heterosexuals; today, the term has become increasingly popular with LGBTQ youth as an empowering term that is consciously used as a way of reclaiming their uniqueness and power as outsiders and as sexual minorities. In past decades, and sometimes today, the term *queer* is associated with transgender persons.¹⁶ In academic homosexual literature the word *queer* is used to frame

9 American Psychological Association, *Answers to Your Questions: For a Better Understanding of Sexual Orientation and Homosexuality* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2008), 1–2.

10 Levine, “Office-Based Care,” 199. Although an adolescent female may self-report being a lesbian, she will still occasionally have sex with males, because with teenagers sexual behavior does not necessarily equal sexual identity.

11 Levine, “Office-Based Care,” 199.

12 Michael J. Bayly, *Creating Environments for LGBT Students: A Catholic Schools Perspective* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2007), 18. Similar to lesbian youth, a gay adolescent male may self-recognize being gay, but he may sporadically engage in sex with females, for the reason that sexual conduct is not tantamount to sexual distinctiveness.

13 Kelley Huegel, *The Survival Guide for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning Teens* (Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing, 2011), 206.

14 A. H. Grossman, and A. R. D’Augelli, “Transgender Youth: Invisible and Vulnerable,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 51, no. 1 (2006): 112. http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J082v51n01_06.

15 Bayly, *Creating Environments*, 21.

16 Bayly, *Creating Environments*, 20.

and sustain *queer theory*.¹⁷ Knowing these terms and the ways they are expressed is helpful in guiding the conversation with LGBTQ youth, and it is important for Catholic ministers to learn and feel comfortable using these terms.

The Theological Quandary and Moral Conundrum

The theological quandary regarding LGBTQ youth is directly enmeshed in the rhetoric surrounding the doctrinal and theoretical aspects of Catholic teachings on homosexuality. Part of the quandary is the obfuscation and misunderstanding of a pastoral plan with and for Catholic LGBTQ youth. The Catholic Church has not directly written anything concerning LGBTQ youth in its documents on youth ministry, which is a particularly peculiar phenomenon in this day and age. The Catholic Church has written a few specific documents (addressed below) on the “pastoral care” of persons of homosexual inclination, and although written with empathy and compassion, they lack “teeth” and conviction, and offer precious little by way of advocacy and pastoral care for LGBTQ youth.¹⁸ Nevertheless, traditional Catholic teaching on homosexuality is warranted.

The Catholic Church teaching on the subject is clear. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (hereafter CCC) states:

- All human beings are created in the image and likeness of God, known as *imago Dei* (no. 299);
- Love is the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being (no. 2392);
- All human beings deserve to be treated with dignity and respect, which upholds their innate integrity (nos. 2284-2317);
- Sexuality is a gift that is ordered toward conjugal love (no. 2360);
- Sexuality affects all aspects of the human person in the unity of the body and the soul (nos. 2332, 2361);
- Every person should acknowledge and accept his or her sexual identity (no. 2333);
- Homosexuality refers to relations between men or women who experience an exclusive or predominant sexual attraction towards persons of the same sex (no. 2357); and
- All Christians are called to various forms of chastity and to remain chaste outside of matrimony (no. 2348).¹⁹

These points represent a rudimentary understanding of the church’s teaching on human sexuality and homosexuality.

17 Y. Taylor, S. Hines, and M. E. Casey, *Theorizing Intersectionality and Sexuality* (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2011), 3. “Queer theory attempts to avoid analysis of asymmetrical power relations with its focus on the destabilization of categories, often negating the privileges and (dis)advantages allowing and denying such inclinations.” Queer theory has been on the rise in academic literature, especially in the fields of psychology, sociology, and feminism.

18 Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1986); United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Always Our Children: A Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children and Suggestions for Pastoral Ministers* (Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing, 1997); United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care* (Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing, 2006). None of these documents is written to advocate a particular agenda or to endorse a homosexual lifestyle or way of life, which probably does not engender a warm reception from the homosexual community.

19 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), nos. 299, 2332, 2333, 2392, 2284–2317, 2360, 2361, 2357, 2348.

There is nothing unclear about these ecclesial doctrines. The theological quandary and the complexities for practical theology and pastoral ministry are statements such as this: “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.”²⁰ Wording such as “intrinsically disordered” tends to be divisive instead of binding, and it is offensive and alarming for homosexual persons. Besides being extremely un-pastoral, the phrase “intrinsically disordered,” which applies to the homosexual genital acts, can easily be misconstrued by thinking that the message is that all homosexual people are intrinsically disordered people, which is slippery slope.²¹ As Catholic moral theologian Stephen J. Pope notes, “The Magisterium’s message about gay sexual orientation is powerfully stigmatizing and dehumanizing.”²² The wording utilized by these ecclesial pronouncements presents a theological quandary for pastoral ministry because it is polarizing and defaming. Moreover, describing a person’s sexuality as “gravely disordered” would seem only to stimulate suspicion, provoke mistrust, and cause alienation among LGBTQ people. Pope further adds, “The Magisterium’s teaching about homosexuality stands in tension with its affirmation that each [LGBTQ] person is created in the *imago Dei*.”²³ This tension represents a moral conundrum for practitioners of pastoral care and youth ministry who are charged with ministering to the total person: mind, body, and spirit.

The Christian custom regarding sex before marriage or outside committed marriage is seen as fornication and it is considered morally wrong and sinful (Gal 5:19–21). The parameters of this article do not allow for a full discussion on sexual morality. Nevertheless, it must be noted that the traditional or conservative view regarding sexual relations is abstinence and chastity. Abstinence is the avoidance of a particular pleasure (food, drink, sexual intercourse) for a determined length of time, usually on certain days.²⁴ Chastity is a virtue and a Christian lifestyle. Chastity is the successful integration of human sexuality within a person and thus the person’s interior life (spirituality) is in unity with the outer life (sexuality).²⁵ Hence all Christians are called to chastity; even married couples and spouses are chaste nonvirgins.²⁶ A Catholic moderate view of sex before marriage or outside of marriage would indicate that sex between two committed and consenting adults is ideally based on genuine mutual respect, companionship, and love.²⁷ A Catholic revisionist/progressive view of sex before or outside of marriage would maintain that sexual encounters cause no unjust harm, involve free consent, mutuality of sexual desire, and equality of personhood, power, and status.²⁸ Monogamy is still the gold standard! Even a Catholic revisionist perspective would disapprove of so-called “causal sex” or “one-night stands” between uncommitted couples. The rationale for bringing up these three views of sex before or outside of marriage is to demonstrate the theological and moral dilemma that pastoral practitioners such as youth ministers must face, especially with LGBTQ adolescents.

Despite charged emotions, personal opinions, troublesome psychological theories, and conservative theologies regarding homosexuality, the larger issue remains: LGBTQ youth deserve, and should expect, proper and competent

20 John Paul, CCC, no. 2357.

21 S. J. Pope, “The Magisterium’s Arguments Against ‘Same Sex Marriage’: An Ethical Analysis and Critique,” *Theological Studies* 65, no. 3 (2004): 549. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/004056390406500303>.

22 Pope, “Magisterium’s Arguments,” 550.

23 Pope, “Magisterium’s Arguments,” 550.

24 John Paul, CCC, no. 2337.

25 John Paul, CCC, no. 2337.

26 Vincent J. Genovesi, *In Pursuit of Love: Catholic Morality and Human Sexuality*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 136.

27 Genovesi, “*In Pursuit*,” 171–75.

28 Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 216–23.

pastoral care from their parish youth ministry. If the Catholic Church is not careful, it may be criticized as suffering from LGBTQ *ephebiphobia* (the fear of teenagers) towards sexual minority adolescents.²⁹

Official Ecclesiastical Documents that Address LGBTQ Youth

The three major Catholic Church documents concerning ministering to LGBTQ people are (1) the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith's document entitled *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*,³⁰ (2) the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' document entitled *Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care*,³¹ and (3) another USCCB document titled *Always my Children: A Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children and Suggestions for Pastoral Ministers*.³² All of these documents call for the church— institutions, organizations, and ministries—to have an empathetic heart and to provide pastoral care to the homosexual community. However, the three documents provide little by way of real pastoral care and seems out-of-touch with LGBTQ reality.

These three documents leave most LGBTQ people disappointed by their lack of pastoral concentration; the documents smack of institutional control as well as exacerbating cultural barriers.³³ It appears that neither the Magisterium nor the United States Catholic Bishops consulted critically or dialogued pastorally with anyone from the LGBTQ community.³⁴

The 1997 U.S. Catholic Bishops' document, *Always my Children: A Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children and Suggestions for Pastoral Ministers*, provides some reassurance for Catholic parents and recommends the following:

1. Accept and love yourselves as parents.
2. Do everything possible to continue demonstrating love for your child.
3. Urge your son or daughter to stay joined to the Catholic faith community.
4. Recommend that your son or daughter find a spiritual director/mentor.
5. Seek help for yourself, perhaps in the form of counseling, as you strive for understanding, acceptance, and inner peace.
6. Reach out in love and service to other parents struggling with a son or daughter's homosexuality.
7. Take advantage of opportunities for education and support.
8. Put your faith completely in God.³⁵

29 Andrew Root and Kendra Creasy Dean, *The Theological Turn in Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2011), 207. *Ephebiphobia* is the fear of teenagers and is very distinct from *ephebophilia*, the primary sexual desire and attraction of adolescents by adults. I am using the term in the context of the Church could be criticized as having *ephebiphobia* toward its homosexual teenagers.

30 Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1986).

31 USCCB, *Ministry to Persons*.

32 USCCB, *Always Our Children*.

33 Maher and Sever, "Educators in Catholic Schools," 83.

34 Bayly, *Creating Environments*, 85.

35 USCCB, *Always Our Children*, 6.

These are fine words of wisdom, but they can also be applied to practically all Catholic parents, not only parents of LGBTQ youth.

The 2006 U.S. Catholic Bishops' document does not offer anything directly pertaining to LGBTQ youth except for this passing comment:

Young people, in particular, need special encouragement and guidance, since the best way of helping young people is to aid them in *not* getting involved in homosexual relations or in the *subculture* in the first place, since these experiences create further obstacles.³⁶ (Italics added.)

Such a statement hardly constitutes pastoral care and offers no pastoral plan. The language of the document only creates further alienation and ostracization, which the majority of LGBTQ youth already experience. Questions loom large: Are we providing the best pastoral care to LGBTQ youth in our parishes/congregations? Are we—the church—doing enough to support, advocate, and minister “to, with, by, and for” LGBTQ adolescents? What are the best ways to minister with LGBTQ teenagers? The Catholic Church is merely conflating a pastoral plan with authentic ministry to the LGBTQ community. Moreover, Catholic youth ministry seems to be *avoiding* LGBTQ youth instead of *advocating* on their behalf, which is a substantial critique of Catholic youth ministry.

Assessing Catholic Youth Ministry Documents

Neither the original 1976 *Vision of Youth Ministry* (out of print and virtually out of use) nor the updated version, *Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry* (hereafter *RTV*),³⁷ mentions ministering to LGBTQ youth. The exclusion of addressing LGBTQ youth in these two youth ministry documents is a glaring oversight. *RTV* is the current benchmark and definitive standard for Catholic youth ministry in the United States. All Catholic youth ministries are strongly encouraged to adhere to its content and follow *RTV*'s framework. *RTV* establishes the criteria and goals for youth ministry, which are expected to be integrated and implemented in Catholic parish youth ministries and Catholic school campus ministries in the United States. *RTV* is the principal pastoral tool that Catholic youth ministers utilize in their pastoral work with young people; unfortunately, there is absolutely nothing written in the document that addresses LGBTQ youth sexuality, issues, dilemmas, or situations.

RTV provides Catholic youth ministers with eight components that are to help shape the youth curriculum and are to be integrated within the youth ministry. The components consist of the following: advocacy, catechesis, community life, evangelization, justice and service, leadership development, pastoral care, and prayer and worship. There are two possible sections in the *RTV* document where ministering to LGBTQ adolescents could have been integrated: the Component of Advocacy and the Component of Pastoral Care.³⁸ *RTV* has beautifully written pages on advocacy with adolescents and pastoral care with teenagers, but nothing in those sections that specifically address the needs, issues, and dilemmas that LGBTQ youth encounter. *RTV* really misses a marvelous opportunity to address the concerns that LGBTQ youth experience on a daily basis. It will be valuable to examine these two ministry components regarding LGBTQ youth more closely.

³⁶ USCCB, *Ministry to Persons*, 21–22.

³⁷ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry* (Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing, 1997).

³⁸ For more detailed information of the Ministry Components of Advocacy and of Pastoral Care, see *RTV*, 26–28 and 42–44.

The Ministry of Advocacy for Catholic Teenagers

Advocacy for juveniles is an important part of youth ministry that aids in the fight against economic and social forces that threaten adolescents and their families.³⁹ The section on advocacy offers four points regarding the rights of Catholic teenagers:

1. Affirming and protecting the sanctity of human life as a gift from God and building societal respect for those who most need protection and support—the unborn, the poor, the disadvantaged, the sick, and the elderly
2. Standing with and speaking on behalf of young people and their families on public issues that affect their lives, such as support for education, quality housing, employment opportunities, access to health care, safe neighborhoods, and availability of meaningful community activities and services
3. Empowering young people by giving them a voice and calling them to responsibility and accountability around the issues that affect them and their future
4. Developing partnerships and initiatives with leaders and concerned citizens from all sectors of the community to develop a shared vision and practical strategies for building a healthy community.⁴⁰

This would have been an excellent place for the U.S. Catholic Bishops to provide three additional points: a fifth point about focusing on sexual development to all adolescents, a sixth point on practices and policies that will help young people avoid sexual discrimination, and a seventh point that reminds youth ministers that all people—homosexual or heterosexual—are created in God’s image and likeness. It would have been pastorally prophetic if RTV would have added a few bullet points along these lines in this section of the document:

- *Advocacy includes educating all adolescents on psychological development and sexual development, especially those teenagers who are thinking about engaging in sexual relations and those who are already engaged in sexual intimacy.*
- *Advocacy includes standing up for LGBTQ youth and engaging in policies and practices that eradicate discrimination of sexual minority young people and examine and analyze the practices that alienate LGBTQ youth.*
- *LGBTQ youth are created in imago Dei and deserve to be treated with dignity and respect and have a right to find a safe place to learn and thrive in their parish’s youth ministry.*

Unfortunately, RTV fails to advocate for LGBTQ youth in the Component of Advocacy.

The Ministry of Pastoral Care to Catholic Teenagers

Pastoral care with teenagers is *sine qua non* for Catholic youth ministry! Without proper pastoral care healing and growth would not take place within adolescents, their peer relationships, and their families.⁴¹ The section on pastoral care is more developed than the section on advocacy, but it still lacks direct mention of ministering to LGBTQ youth. According to RTV,

³⁹ USCCB, RTV, 27.

⁴⁰ USCCB, RTV, 27–28.

⁴¹ USCCB, RTV, 42.

The ministry of pastoral care to adolescents involves promoting positive adolescent and family development through a variety of positive (preventative) strategies; caring for adolescents and families in crisis through support, counseling, and referral to appropriate community agencies; providing guidance as young people face life decisions and make moral choices; and challenging systems that are obstacles to positive development (advocacy). Pastoral care is most fundamentally a relationship—a ministry of compassionate presence.⁴²

Again, these are caring words, but there is nothing that is ministry-specific to the needs of LGBTQ youth. In this section *RTV* lists nine points regarding pastoral care with youth, but one point in particular could have dealt specifically with LGBTQ youth, yet does not: “Pastoral care fosters the spiritual development of young people, and the healthy integration of their sexuality and spirituality.”⁴³ This would have been a perfect location to address the sexual orientation of teenagers as well as connecting the sexuality of LGBTQ youth to their spirituality. It is certainly not unreasonable to connect sexuality to spirituality. This would have been an excellent place to add something along these lines in this section of the document:

- *Pastoral Care is concerned about the total person; about the full expression of young people’s spirituality and sexuality.*
- *Integrating our sexuality—whether heterosexual or homosexual—into genuine loving relationships is a matter of greatest importance for identity formation.*
- *LGBTQ youth deserve and should expect competent and genuine pastoral care.*

Unfortunately, *RTV* fails to offer quality pastoral care to LGBTQ youth in the Component of Pastoral Care.

Of course, hindsight is 20/20 vision, but perhaps it is time for a revised and updated version of *RTV*: a new version with a fresh perspective that meets the needs of *all* adolescents today.⁴⁴ The reality is that the typical mainstream model of parish youth ministry does not reach LGBTQ youth because of social, cultural, religious, and sexual differences.⁴⁵ This is one of the many reasons *RTV* needs updating—knowing full well, of course, that Catholic hierarchy and ecclesial documents are more likely to follow the pioneering ministry or groundbreaking theology rather than setting ministry policy outright. Nevertheless, a new and improved ecclesial youth ministry document is in the best interest of Catholic ministry—a version that clearly advocates for LGBTQ youth and one that clearly states the pastoral care needs of sexual minority adolescents. The Magisterium’s document and the three U.S. Catholic Bishops’ documents mentioned above fail to provide an authentic fundamental option to LGBTQ youth like that which other vulnerable and marginalized groups receive. Therefore, in a real way, the Catholic Church obfuscates a pastoral plan for LGBTQ young Catholics and offers generic platitudes, which are neither pastorally fruitful nor practically fulfilling. It is important that teenagers who are sexual minorities receive proper and competent pastoral care and feel that they have a voice and a place within the church. It is the role and responsibility of Catholic youth ministry to reach out and accept LGBTQ youth who can contribute to the vitality of the ministry, the church, and society.

42 USCCB, *RTV*, 42.

43 USCCB, *RTV*, 43.

44 Arthur David Canales, “The Ten-Year Anniversary of *Renewing the Vision*: Reflection on Its Impact for Catholic Youth Ministry,” *New Theology Review* 20, no. 2 (2007): 58–69.

45 Matthew Vines, *God and the Gay Christian* (New YorkNY: Convergent Books, 2014), 22–23.

Becoming More Open and Affirming of Catholic LGBTQ Youth

It would seem wise if Catholic youth ministry would become more deliberate and inclusive toward LGBTQ youth. Since the U.S. Catholic Bishops have called for Catholic youth ministry to be comprehensive,⁴⁶ then Catholic youth ministries across the country are going to have to be a lot more systematic and intentional about ministering directly and becoming more open and affirming with LGBTQ youth.

In an unpublished investigation surveying one hundred Catholic youth ministers in April 2014, the following data was revealed:

1. Many gifted youth ministers often feel helpless to truly advocate for LGBTQ youth.
2. Many youth ministers are in fear of losing their job if they came out and supported LGBTQ youth openly.
3. Some youth ministers feel that there would be repercussions for “not following” the letter of the law in the *Catholic Catechism*,
4. Other youth ministers are fearful of being fired by a conservative bishop because they are misperceived as “pushing” a ministry agenda too far by advocating for LGBTQ equality in Catholic youth ministry.
5. A few youth ministers simply do not feel comfortable approaching the issue due to a lack of understanding with regard to all the subtleties and nuances of LGBTQ youth.⁴⁷

It is not uncommon for youth ministers to hear that Catholic parents say hurtful and emotionally damaging phrases to their homosexual teenage sons and daughters, such as, “No son or daughter of mine will be a queer,” or, “You cannot live under my roof if you are gay,” or something much worse. Exacerbating this are the horrifying stories about Catholic parents who disown their own daughter or son and “kicks them out of the house” when she or he discloses (reveals that they are LGBT) to their parents.⁴⁸ It is shameful that approximately 43 percent of LGBTQ adolescents are forced out of the house altogether by their parents, who are thus disowning their own children because they have a unique sexual orientation.⁴⁹ Another “black eye” for Catholic parents is that it is not uncommon for LGBTQ youth to find solace on the streets; approximately 46 percent of LGBTQ teenagers run away from home because of family rejection of sexual orientation.⁵⁰

The reality of the situation is that LGBTQ youth need authentic advocacy by Catholic parishes, from parish youth ministries, and from parents. Authentic advocacy and genuine pastoral care cannot be in the form of (1) trying to change a young person’s sexual orientation, (2) pressuring adolescents to conform to societal standards of “normal” sexuality, or (3) thinking that God does not love them or does not listen to them because of their sexual orientation. Fernando Arzola astutely points out, “If the church does not provide a safe, nonjudgmental environment to help them [LGBTQ youth] process issues and questions, they will undoubtedly go somewhere else for help.

46 USCCB, *RTV*, 19–20.

47 Arthur David Canales, “A Qualitative Study of the Attitudes of Catholic Youth Ministers toward LGBTQ Youth,” (unpublished findings). The survey was sent out to over one hundred Catholic youth ministers, via email, on April 1, 2014 and was closed and compiled on May 27, 2014. The survey was titled “Questionnaire on LGBTQ Youth & Catholic Youth Ministry” and it asked fifteen questions. The final data and results of the study are to be published in the future.

48 Ritch C. Savin-Williams, *The New Gay Teenager* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 35–37.

49 Durso and Gates, “Serving Our Youth,” 4.

50 Durso and Gates, “Serving Our Youth,” 5.

Unfortunately, these persons or places—gangs, nightclubs, and the streets—may not necessarily share the values of the church.⁵¹ It is in the best interest of pastors, youth ministers, and parents to collaborate on the best practices for integrating LGBTQ youth awareness into the youth ministry.

Catholic youth ministry would be wise to focus its efforts on being more open and affirming of LGBTQ youth: (1) teaching adolescents the ways to cope as a teenage sexual minority in the family, school, and church; (2) helping young people find positive heterosexual and homosexual role models in the community; (3) providing LGBTQ youth with a safe place to meet and grow in their faith as part of the parish community and the sub-community of youth ministry; (4) catechizing juvenile sexual minorities about human sexuality and theology of the body without stigmatizing and shaming; (5) loving LGBTQ adolescents for who they are, and not for who they are not; and (6) developing ways to embrace an LGBTQ young person's sexuality and his or her Christian discipleship. Catholic catechesis plays an enormous role in helping for justification in schools and parishes to develop programs that help to bolster Catholic identity in LGBTQ youth.⁵²

Becoming more open and affirming with LGBTQ youth honestly addresses the fundamental human needs of sexual minority teenagers. All Christian youth ministry is a response to, and in light of, God's active presence for the life of the world—a presence that reflects and acts on behalf of all adolescents.⁵³ LGBTQ youth, like heterosexual adolescents, deserve a lived theological emphasis on a lived experience of soteriology as the natural extension of God's passionate engagement with the world.⁵⁴ In other words, those ministering to the young church may want to be more meta-reflective with the existential (human) and ontological (spiritual) needs of LGBTQ youth. Pastoral care in Catholic youth ministry is the hope of praxis—theology in action done well in the name of God—to, for, and with adolescents.⁵⁵ Therefore, adolescent pastoral care aims at catering and ministering to the needs of LGBTQ youth, a population that is currently being underserved in mainstream Catholic youth ministry. To provide competent and proficient advocacy and pastoral care to LGBTQ adolescents, development of appropriate pastoral strategies is paramount for Catholic youth ministers. In the footnote below are some concrete pastoral practices that could easily be incorporated into any Catholic youth ministry as part of its comprehensive curriculum.⁵⁶

51 Fernando Arzola, Jr., *Toward a Prophetic Youth Ministry: Theory and Praxis in Urban Context* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 47.

52 Maher and Sever, "Educators in Catholic Schools," 100.

53 Craig Dykstra and Dorothy C. Bass, "A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices," in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, eds. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 18.

54 Root and Dean, *Theological Turn*, 223.

55 Department of [Catholic] Education, *Vision of Youth Ministry*, 6–7.

56 A few pedagogical and pastoral strategies for implementation in a Catholic youth ministry to be more open and affirming with LGBTQ youth could be the following:

- Strategy 1: LGBTQ Youth Speaker Series. Bring in LGBTQ speakers within the community to address and discuss their personal struggles, issues, and concerns about growing up in the church. This could be a powerful conscious-raising series for all teenagers involved in the youth ministry.
- Strategy 2: LGBTQ Film Series. Develop a four-week film series on LGBTQ Issues and discuss the pertinent themes that a given movie addresses. Here are some movie options: *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), *Philadelphia* (1993), *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), *Weekend* (2001), *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), *Milk* (2008), *Circumstance* (2011), *Pariah* (2011), *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013), *The Normal Heart* (2014), and *First Girl I Ever Loved* (2016).
- Strategy 3: LGBTQ Youth Book Club. Read and discuss a different book each month with a group of interested teenagers. Here is list of potential books that will interest adolescents: *Giovanni's Room* (1956) by James Baldwin, *Rose of No Man's Land* (2005) by Michelle Tea, *Hero* (2007) by Perry Moore, *The Color Purple* (1982) by Alice Walker, *Fun House: A Family Tragicomic* (2006) by Alison Bechdel, *Boy Meets Boy* (2003) by David Levithan, and *The Difference Between You and Me* by Madeleine George (2012), but there are many more.
- Strategy 4: LGBTQ Youth Retreat. Offer a weekend retreat that highlights certain LGBTQ youth themes. The theme could be the "Dispelling Myths" retreat or the "Acceptance" retreat. The retreat could offer a variety of presentations on various topics of interest to LGBTQ youth, such as "Knowing Yourself, Loving Yourself," "Understanding LGBTQ Spirituality," "Loving God and Loving Neighbor," and/or "Living LGBTQ Christian Discipleship." The list of topics and talks for the retreat is limitless.

There are several more implementation approaches, but too many to recommend here. For more information please feel free to contact the author of this article at acanales@marian.edu.

Conclusion

Comprehensive Catholic youth ministry is not a theoretical exercise. Catholic youth ministry is a commitment to and participation in young people's joys, hopes, and struggles for a full adolescent life, and discernment of God's salvific action in teenagers' personal history.⁵⁷ Youth ministry is God's work-in-action, embodied and integrated pedagogically and holistically with critical thinking and theological reflection, and therefore cannot overlook ministering to, with, and for LGBTQ youth.

It is time for the Catholic Church to offer pastoral wisdom and insights on ministering to LGBTQ youth instead of offering insensitive platitudes such as "we love the sinner, but hate the sin." Simplistic answers and once-for-all explanations will not satisfy or pacify the LGBTQ community, and one-dimensional answers should not gratify Catholic youth ministers either. Catholic youth ministry would do well to perform emancipatory pastoral practices—be open and affirming to LGBTQ youth—that promote peace through justice, service, and love.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Pamela Copper-White, *Shared Wisdom: Use of Self in Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004), 186.

⁵⁸ Cooper-White, *Shared Wisdom*, 191.