Opinion
Guest Voices



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***Editor's note**: Some names have been changed, as requested, for privacy.*

In the weeks leading to Pride month, I had the privilege of speaking candidly with several of my LBGTQ+ Catholic women peers about their experience of faith, community and the church. While their perspectives differ dramatically, they all share a singular ache: to love God and to be accepted wholly into the body of Christ.

Cecilia, a Filipina immigrant living in New York, loves marching openly in the Pride parade with her "Catholic Lesbians" group. Meanwhile, Becca must keep her romantic partnership a secret or lose her job teaching at a midwestern Catholic school. Ana, a Catholic school teacher in Mexico, finds great joy in a life of celibacy. Tamara, a bisexual woman, wrestled with claiming a faith where she could marry and others could not. Angela sees grace and God's providence in her mixed-orientation marriage, while Steff is deeply unhappy in her mixed-orientation marriage and hanging onto her faith by a thread. Sarah has found a thriving Catholic LGBTQ+ community, but avoids talking about faith in queer circles. Grace yearns to come out to her Catholic friends and family.

As for me? I waited until I was married to tell my parents I was attracted to women as well as to men.

When I came out to my parents, one of their first questions was simply, "Why?" Why call myself a bisexual if I was in a monogamous relationship with a man? For me, sexual orientation is about much more than a subjective experience of attraction. It has shaped my personal interactions and increased my instincts for empathy and solidarity. If I wasn't bisexual, I might have the same life externally, but I would be a different person internally.

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"The church overall is very reductive when it comes to sexual orientation," Steff observed during our video call, pointing to the terminology of Courage International , the only LGBTQ+ support group officially sanctioned by the church. "It's: 'Don't call yourself gay, call yourself same-sex attracted. Don’t define yourself by your sinful temptations.' Do they really think gay people are just all about sex?"

Some, however, find freedom in this approach. "I am a beloved woman, a daughter of God," Ana said proudly in a conversation that flipped between Spanish and English. "I like to say that I experience same-sex attraction. If someone else hasn't heard this I can say that I am gay, but I want to live in celibacy. I have a lot of joy."

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Through my interviews, I found that LGBTQ+ Catholic women have a thorough understanding of the church's teaching on sexuality. Without exception, every woman I spoke with had read the catechism — as well as additional church documents on the subject — and understood that the church does not view sex-same desire as inherently sinful, but considers same-sex acts sinful. However, the women differed on whether or not they accepted this teaching.

"Unfortunately, I do view the church as a very outdated, very rigid monolith," Cecilia said. "And that's one of the reasons why I think [LGBTQ+ Catholics] are being left behind."

Organizations like New Ways Ministry — which is not church-sanctioned, but has been praised for its work by Pope Francis — share Cecilia's love for the Catholic Church while advocating for a change in the teaching on same-sex relationships and gender identity. Meanwhile, other organizations, such as Eden Invitation, accept church teaching on sexuality while embracing and celebrating LGBTQ+ identity as part of the dignity of the whole person.

Angela finds beauty and truth in John Paul II's "Theology of the Body," his analysis of human sexuality. "The church isn't out to stop me from being happy in a relationship because of bigotry and control," she said. But other women find John Paul II's concepts less convincing.

Once Becca started coming to terms with her sexuality, she found that the doctrines she once embraced stopped making sense. "On a Sunday, I could spend three hours on my phone reading church documents that I'd already read a hundred times before trying to see if there was anything that could give me some sign that the church says I'm not going to hell … I just suffered inside for many months," Becca recalls. "The anxiety of hell, the deconstruction, was an all-consuming thing in my

head for a very long time."

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Some women I spoke with have received more grace and empathy from their secular queer community than their Catholic community.

"Some of my (nonreligious) LGBTQ friends have believed me more than my Catholic friends about the ways that I've felt hurt by the church, not believed or welcomed," said Grace, who works as a special needs instructional aid. Sarah agreed, citing a lack of mental health support growing up in a Catholic community. But both Sarah and Grace said they sometimes hide their faith in LGBTQ+ circles, aware of the wounds their peers may have suffered at the hands of Christians.

For many women, myself included, the decision to remain Catholic begins and ends with the sacraments. "I had this deep desire to receive the Eucharist again," Angela recalls. "I didn't know if I believed in the Eucharist or not, but the desire was there."

Tamara describes taking a similar leap of faith as a teenager, when she was deciding whether or not to get confirmed. "I was sitting in the pew debating 'Am I going to go up and write my name in the book?'... I remember making an act of faith at that moment," she recalled. "I said "You know what? God I trust you, I believe that you're real. I trust that I will find answers."

For women who feel a sincere emotional pull toward the divine, the theology of the church is rarely a barrier. Whether they accept or reject official Catholic teaching, they seem to find a way to integrate their faith practice into their lives. For some, like Becca, finding peace has necessitated distancing themselves from the institution. "I think that my heart is Catholic and my values continue to reflect the life of Christ," Becca told me, "but I am not trying to be a member of the Catholic institution when institutionally, it does not want me."

The LGBTQ+ women I interviewed who do abide by church teaching expressed a wide range of attitudes toward its impact on their lived experience, including joy and pain.

"Celibacy has always been viewed as a calling," Steff explained, "but for gay people, it's just forced on them that everybody has to be celibate or you can be in a mixed-orientation marriage, which is what I am. Just based on my own experience, I don't

recommend it." Steff describes entering into marriage initially out of a desire to have children and hoping that her attraction to her husband would grow. While she adores her children, her marriage is a struggle, she said.

Tamara discerned religious life for a short time before determining it wasn't right for her. The experience cemented her belief that religious life should not be an automatic assumption for LGBTQ+ people. Like Steff, she believes that celibacy, like marriage, must be freely chosen.

"If you don't see sexuality in the right light, you can't choose marriage healthily and you can't choose celibacy healthily. Marriage won't cure your porn addiction or your lust," Tamara said. "You need to have a healthy view of your sexuality in order to freely and lovingly choose … and if you can't do that, don't use the priesthood or convent as a way to choose that for yourself."

Angela describes feeling empowered to choose her marriage because she knew her family would accept her no matter what. Her family's love and support, combined with her faith and a genuine connection to her partner, allowed her to take that step. "My marriage is so full of grace," she said "We just felt called at each little step along the way and discerned it a lot and prayed a lot. I really truly believe in providence and that God brought us here." Angela added that her choice is not necessarily right for everyone.

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Some LGBTQ+ Catholics enter into same-sex relationships and marriages in violation of church teaching. Becca stresses that, contrary to the views of some of her more conservative peers (and the views she herself once held), this decision is not based on lust or selfishness.

"The number one thing that I would love to tell every single Catholic ever is it is not about 'doing whatever you want,' " she said. "In the same way that people can understand in their own heterosexual relationships, you want to love and sacrifice." For Becca and others like her, the romantic partnership is an expression of God's love, based on mutual sacrifice and affection.

"June is the month of the Sacred Heart," reflects Grace. "I know there's a lot of controversy about 'Take back June for the Sacred Heart.' How about we focus on the

love and mercy part? … That’s what people need. Love and mercy."

Angela finds inspiration and hope in the undeterred zeal of the LGBTQ+ Catholic community. "I'm surrounded by the church's future saints," she said. "Every voice around them in the church and outside of the church tells them that they don't really belong … to be able to ignore that and stay focused on Christ is saintly, I think."

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