



2023

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Recommended Citation

de Jong, D. (2023). Exploring the status of transgender students in Catholic high schools. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 26(2), 37–84. <http://doi.org/10.15365/joce.2602042023>

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Exploring the Status of Transgender Students in Catholic High Schools

Cover Page Footnote

The author wishes to thank the reviewers of the manuscript for their valuable feedback.

Exploring the Status of Transgender Students in Catholic High Schools

*Dirk de Jong*¹

Abstract: This paper reports on a recent survey of principals of Catholic high schools across the country regarding the existence of formal gender identity policies or informal practices with respect to the behavior and treatment of transgender students in their schools. The survey's findings are discussed in the context of recent developments with respect to the science, clinical interventions, and legal accommodations surrounding gender variance. The paper also describes the political developments with respect to this issue and some of the pushback in communities of faith. It concludes by suggesting the need for receptivity to scientific findings as part of a broad-based discussion of gender identity policies in Catholic secondary education.

Keywords: transgender, Catholic, high school

It has only been about a decade since personnel in the country's public schools started paying attention to the needs of transgender students (de Jong, 2015). It seemed like the internet had begun to facilitate the building of a transgender community and had inspired the desire for transgender people of all ages to be out, visible and acknowledged. By 2022, the Williams Institute of UCLA's School of Law estimated that 1.6 million people ages 13 and older in the United States identified as transgender (38.5% of them identified as transgender women, 35.9% as transgender men, and 25.6% as nonbinary). The total number was thought to include 300,100 teens between the ages of 13 and 17, or 1.43% of all youth in that age group. This percentage was the highest of any age group; for adults 18 and older the percentage was 0.52%

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([Herman et al., 2022](#)). Earlier, a report by the CDC had estimated that 1.8% of high school students identified as transgender ([Johns et al., 2019](#)). The estimated number of self-identified transgender youth has increased from 10% of the entire transgender population in 2016–2017 to 18% in the most recent analysis ([Herman et al., 2022](#)).

In the meantime, scientists and mental health professionals have gained a better understanding of the issues of gender identity and gender variance, including gender-related distress and gender dysphoria, and the general population is becoming more accepting of the idea that gender identity occurs on a spectrum. Thus, according to a poll by the Public Religion Research Institute, 40% of all Americans agreed with the statement that there exists a range of gender identities, as opposed to the binary view of gender ([Jones et al., 2019](#)). These developments have been accompanied by changes in treatment ([World Professional Association for Transgender Health, 2012](#)), as well as legal accommodations required in educational settings under Title IX. Consequently, the National Association of Secondary School Principals has taken a strong stand in support of transgender students in public schools ([National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2022](#)).

Among those sampled, 34.6% of transgender high school students self-reported attempting suicide in the twelve months preceding the 2017 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, reported by the Centers for Disease Control ([Johns et al., 2019](#)). The 2022 annual survey of LGBT youth (ages 13–24; recruited via social media ads) published by the Trevor Project reported that—in the prior year—22% of transgender boys/men and 12% of transgender girls/women attempted suicide; the percentages for nonbinary/genderqueer and gender questioning youth were 19 and 14, respectively. The survey also showed that the rate of attempted suicide was higher in schools that are *not* gender-affirming compared to those that *are* gender-affirming ([Trevor Project, 2022](#)).

The statistics published by the CDC and cited above largely concern public high schools. The situation around gender variance is less clear with respect to Catholic secondary schools. However, some Catholic church leaders have required schools to impose very restrictive policies in terms of gender identity and gender expression. For example, in August of 2022, the Archdiocese of Omaha, Nebraska, issued a new policy for its Catholic schools according to which all students would need to act and be treated according to their sex assigned at birth ([Migdon, 2022](#)). The policy included the following language:

A child cannot be enrolled in, and may be dismissed from, [INSERT NAME OF SCHOOL] in the event the child's parent(s) resists the school's instruction to the child in the Catholic tenets respecting the human person and human sexuality. A child whose parent(s) permits gender-affirming psychotherapy or administration of puberty-blocking or cross-sex hormone medications to such child or authorizes sex procedures or surgery cannot

be enrolled in [INSERT NAME OF SCHOOL]. In this event, the parent(s) will be given the opportunity to withdraw the child from [INSERT NAME OF SCHOOL]. Should the parent choose not to withdraw, [INSERT NAME OF SCHOOL] will dismiss the student ([Archdiocese of Omaha, 2022a](#)).

Following criticism and the refusal of three schools in the archdiocese to include the new policy in their student handbook ([Shine, 2022a](#)), Archbishop Lucas announced a revised policy which omitted the automatic dismissal clause, but reiterated that students would continue to be treated based on sex at birth, as the text of the document makes clear:

1. In the Archdiocese of Omaha, all Catholic schools shall respect the biological sex of each student and shall apply all policies and procedures in relation to that student according to each student's God-given biological sex.
2. All students shall conduct themselves in accord with their God-given biological sex as it relates to the use of personal pronouns, dress code, use of public bathrooms, and participation in school-sponsored activities. All official school documents shall likewise reflect the student's biological sex ([Archdiocese of Omaha, 2022b](#)).

In November of 2022, a policy from the Archdiocese of Denver, Colorado, that apparently had been in place for some time, was disclosed to the public. Similar to the original Omaha policy, it banned transgender students from attending Catholic schools ([Shine, 2022b](#)). Restrictive policies have also been formulated in dioceses in South Dakota, Wisconsin, Louisiana, and elsewhere ([Lavenburg, 2022](#)), sometimes accompanied by pejorative rhetoric. For example, Bishop Joensen of the Diocese of Des Moines, Iowa, called gender-affirming health care a form of "mutilation" ([Shine, 2023](#)). In describing the latest publication of a policy issued by the Archdiocese of Portland, Oregon that requires Catholic schools to only acknowledge students' sex identity determined at birth, the National Catholic Reporter noted the existence of gender policies in at least 34 dioceses across the country ([Collins Scott, 2023a](#)). The same outlet also reported on the grassroots opposition to these policies, especially how they are typically formulated without input from transgender persons or experts in the field of gender dysphoria ([Collins Scott, 2023b](#)).

The Gender Binary, For and Against

Conservative Christianity professes a belief in a gender binary made up of women and men, categories which are considered essentialist and complementary. This view is promulgated by the Vatican, as well as by Protestant evangelicals. The Congregation for Catholic Education (the Vatican's office that provides guidelines for Catholic education worldwide) published "Male and

Female He Created Them” (2019), which criticized the idea of gender variance as “gender theory” (Campoy, 2016), providing the following biblical explanation for a Christian anthropology:

Christian anthropology has its roots in the narrative of human origins that appears in the Book of Genesis, where we read that, “God created man in his own image [. . .] male and female he created them (Gen. 1. 27). These words capture not only the essence of the story of creation but also that of the life-giving relationship between men and women, which brings them into intimate union with God (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2019, p. 17).

The document, written without direct input from members of the transgender community (Altieri, 2019), was praised by Bishop Michael Barber of the Diocese of Oakland, California, the chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee for Catholic Education (Keane, 2019). Similar to “Male and Female He Created Them”, the “Nashville Statement”, adopted by the evangelical (Protestant) Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (2017), rejected a transgender (as well as a homosexual) self-conception, arguing it is inconsistent with Scripture.

There are subtleties in these biblical perspectives on gender. For example, a gender identity different from the one assigned at birth may be acceptable as something one experiences internally, as long as it is not acted upon by actually transitioning to that different gender identity. Along the same lines, differences in gender expression may be alright, but only if they stay within the confines of a gender binary. These are views that have been described by the evangelical Protestant theologian Preston Sprinkle (Sprinkle, n.d.), but they also reflect some of Pope Francis’s conciliatory moves toward gender and sexual minorities, even while staunchly criticizing “gender theory” (Associated Press, 2022; Mares, 2023). The advocacy by Sister Mary Angela Shaughnessy, an attorney and an expert with respect to legal issues in Catholic education, is particularly noteworthy, as she stated the need for those in Catholic school communities to gain a greater understanding of gender diversity (Shaughnessy & Huggins, 2016). More radically, there have been voices which, from an explicit biblical point of view, have argued that Scripture actually affirms gender diversity (Hartke, 2018; Tanis, 2003/2018). Similarly, the work of the Reformation Project has focused on advocating for the inclusion of the LGBTQ community, with specific reference to the Bible, such as in Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Reformation Project, n.d.).

The debate about gender identity in the Church was preceded by new theoretical conceptualizations of gender, buoyed by scientific findings, which are at odds with the traditional view of gender as being a binary proposition. As part of third-wave feminism in the 1980s, gender

was conceptualized as a social construction, illustrated by the phrase “doing gender” (West & Zimmerman, 1987), ultimately leading to Judith Butler’s (1999) writings about gender as “performative” (pp. xv–xvi). Butler became one of the founders of Queer Theory, which allows for gender identities that are flexible and on a spectrum (Jagose, 1996). Since then, research has shown that gender identity is not determined by genital anatomy but is at least partially housed in the brain (Saraswat et al., 2015), and that human brains are not just male or female, but instead resemble “mosaics” (Joel et al., 2015). Research with twins has also shown a significant genetic influence on gender identity (Diamond, 2013). Furthermore, clinical studies of adolescents and adults who received a medical intervention to treat their gender dysphoria have shown to be quite successful. For example, a Dutch study showed that puberty blockers during adolescence (which is a reversible intervention) relieved the distress of gender dysphoria (de Vries et al., 2011). Similarly, researchers in Belgium found that hormone therapy for people with gender dysphoria significantly reduced symptoms of anxiety and depression (Heylens et al., 2014). Furthermore, Murad et al. (2010) conducted a meta-analysis that indicated social and psychological benefits of hormone therapy for transgender individuals, although the studies included varied in evidence quality. A comprehensive review of studies published up until mid-2017 by researchers at Cornell University also found positive mental health outcomes following gender transitions. (Center for the Study of Inequality, n.d.). In this context, the psychiatric profession’s move to change the old diagnosis of “gender identity disorder” to “gender dysphoria” was significant, indicating that the mental health symptoms of transgender persons are not due to inherent pathology, but are the result of being marginalized and discriminated against (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). One notable critic of gender transitions is Paul McHugh, who was chief psychiatrist at John Hopkins Hospital through 2001 (McHugh, 2015). His arguments were in part based on a longitudinal Swedish study that found a higher risk of suicide among persons who underwent sex reassignment surgery compared to controls matched by age and sex assigned at birth (Dhejne et al., 2011). However, the authors of that study cautioned that their research did not establish a causal link between the surgical intervention and the risk of suicide. They also did not discourage the use of sex reassignment surgery or hormonal therapy but suggested additional psycho-social care. Furthermore, the study’s sample included individuals who underwent sex-reassignment surgery in the 70s, 80s, and 90s. Interestingly, in the later cohort of the study’s transgender sample (persons undergoing surgery after 1989), the mortality rate was not significantly higher than in the control group. As acknowledged by the researchers, improved surgical techniques, better health care, and changing societal attitudes might explain that outcome (Dhejne et al., 2011).

Gender Identity, Religious Freedom, and Politics

Contemporary perspectives on gender and gender identity have clashed not only with traditional views on gender as binary, but also with certain interpretations of religious freedom,

legislated in the United States as part of the First Amendment of the Constitution ([U.S. Const. amend I-X](#)) and under the [Religious Freedom Restoration Act \(RFRA; 1993\)](#). A 2016 report by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights questioned the broad interpretation of religious liberty thought to be guaranteed under the RFRA in cases where it would lead to discrimination, endorsing instead a narrow interpretation limited to the freedom to worship ([U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2016](#)). Both the Southern Baptist Church and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops condemned this position, arguing that religious freedom extends to everyday behavior that is guided by one's religious values ([Walker & Wester, 2016](#); [U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2016](#)). In recent years, the Supreme Court has mostly shied away from major decisions about religious liberty, with the exception of [*Burwell v. Hobby Lobby* \(2014\)](#) in which it ruled that, on religious grounds, employers could refuse to cover contraception as part of their health insurance benefits.

Appeals to freedom of religion have impacted transgender students enrolled or attempting to enroll in religiously affiliated (primarily evangelical Protestant) colleges and universities. While Title IX, a 1972 amendment to the 1964 Civil Rights Act, prohibits discrimination based on sex in educational settings, it has—unlike other civil rights legislation—a religious exemption clause ([U.S. Department of Education, 2021; 2023](#)). During the Obama administration, the interpretation of sex was expanded to include gender identity ([U.S. Departments of Justice and Education, 2016](#)), resulting in a sudden increase in applications for religious exemptions under Title IX, which allowed colleges to continue practices that may deny admission, financial aid, housing, use of facilities, or participation in sports to transgender (and, in some cases, gay) students. During President Trump's tenure in the White House, protections under Title IX were again limited to sex as determined at birth, while it was also ruled that the exemptions for religious reasons are automatic under Title IX and that schools do not need to apply for them. Since then, many schools, primarily evangelical Protestant institutions, but some Catholic colleges as well, have claimed the religious exemption ([Campus Pride, 2022](#); [Pelletier, 2016](#); [U. S. Department of Education, 2016; n.d.](#)). President Biden's Education Department once more reversed policy and indicated that it would legally pursue any complaints of discrimination based on gender identity ([U.S. Department of Education, 2021](#)). There is concern about this latest change among some in the Catholic education community (including the National Catholic Educational Association), not just because of Title IX, but also because of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex by any organization receiving federal funds and which does not provide for religious waivers (see this blog post on the website of the Cardinal Newman Society regarding suggested legal defenses against possible discrimination litigation: [McClain, 2023](#)). It should be noted that Catholic K–12 schools are among the many organizations that get federal dollars, although in their case these typically flow indirectly via local school districts (such as Title I monies for students from disadvantaged backgrounds) and state agencies (lunch program funds).

It has also been argued that an organization's tax-exempt status qualifies as federal aid (Asher, 2022). Moreover, some Catholic elementary and secondary schools received direct federal relief through the Paycheck Protection Program initiated during the COVID pandemic (Sokol et al., n.d.). In addition to Title VI, many conservative Christian organizations are concerned about the Equality Act, passed by the House of Representatives in 2021, which would broadly expand the rights of transgender people (Edmondson, 2019). President Biden has promised to sign the act into law, but it is currently languishing in the Senate.

The larger context in which Catholic K–12 schools must formulate policies regarding transgender students includes a backlash against transgender rights at the state level by way of proposed and/or passed legislation banning transgender health care for teens and participation in sports by transgender secondary school students (American Civil Liberties Union, 2023). In January of 2023, the New York Times reported that more than 150 of these kinds of bills had been introduced in at least 25 states (Astor, 2023). Some of these draconian measures include criminal penalties for parents and service providers. Furthermore, they go against the recommendations regarding affirming care for transgender youth by medical and psychological associations (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2018; American College of Physicians, 2023; American Psychological Association, 2020) and ignore the science (Ermyas & Wakeam, 2021). Meanwhile, they put transgender youth at further risk of isolation.

Methods

Within this context, what exactly is the status of transgender students in Catholic schools, high schools in particular? Do faculty members, staff, or administrators know of transgender students? Are there discussions in school communities about the needs of transgender students? Are there any formal policies or unwritten practices related to the treatment of transgender students? In an attempt to answer these exploratory research questions, an online survey, approved by the IRB of the author's institution, was developed to learn more. School principals were the target population for the study since they would have first-hand knowledge of the topic of interest and because their contact information would most likely be available online.

The initial random sample, consisting of about 10% of all—about 1200—Catholic high schools in the United States, was selected using a random number generator and an alphabetical listing of schools by state (Wikimedia, n.d.). Schools in the initial sample that were closed or had no publicly available email contact information were dropped and replaced by the same method. From the first batch of recruitment messages, five were returned as undeliverable. After the second (reminder) email, two more came back as undeliverable, resulting in a final sample of $n = 113$ principals. To maximize anonymity within the sample, no distinction was made between schools under diocesan control or those affiliated with a religious order, or between “single-gender” and “co-ed” schools.

The anonymity of the responses also intentionally precluded analysis by geographic region. All data were collected during January of 2023.

Ultimately, 20 responses were received, resulting in a 17.6% return rate. While this response rate seems relatively low, it is not unusual for online surveys. For example, the online platform SurveyMonkey notes:

For online surveys in which there is no prior relationship with recipients, a response rate of between 20–30% is considered to be highly successful. A response rate of 10–15% is a more conservative and a safer guess if you haven't surveyed your population before. (SurveyMonkey, 2023).

The relatively low return rate may be explained by general survey fatigue, as well as by a possible perception of the topic as sensitive in spite of the complete anonymity offered to the respondents. For example, a couple of potential participants made it clear that they did not want to participate without giving a further explanation. In any case, nonresponse bias should be kept in mind when interpreting the results. Therefore, it may be that the findings from this exploratory study should be viewed as preliminary, though still worthy of discussion given the timeliness of the issues.

Survey Results

Seven of the respondents (35%) reported to be aware of transgender students in grades 9 through 12, with the number of transgender students in each school varying between two to eight. Five respondents indicated that the students were “out” to the school community. When asked about the existence of a formal policy related to students' gender identity, six of the study's participants (30%) reported that their school had such a policy articulated in a student handbook, while 14 (70%) answered in the negative. In cases of a formal policy, none allowed students to present based on their sense of gender identity (including use of preferred pronouns) with five of the six cases explicitly prohibiting this expression. When asked whether there existed an informal understanding or practice that allowed students to present based on their sense of gender identity (including use of preferred pronouns), five respondents (25%) answered in the affirmative, seven (35%) said “no”, and eight (40%) reported that there was neither a formal policy or informal understanding or practice related to students' gender identity. Moreover, six of the study's participants (30%) responded that the informal understanding or practice prohibited students to present based on their sense of gender identity (including use of preferred pronouns), while seven participants (35%) reported that a prohibition was not part of the informal understanding or practice; another seven (35%) indicated that there was no formal policy or informal understanding or practice that included the prohibition of such presentation by the students (see [Table 1](#)).

Table 1*Catholic High School Policies or Practices Related to Students' Gender Identity*

Survey Question	# Responses	Percentage
Does your school have a formal policy related to students' gender identity?		
yes	6	30
no	14	70
If you answered "yes", is this policy articulated in a student handbook?		
yes	6	30
no	0	0
there is no formal policy	10	50
no answer	4	20
If there is a formal policy, does it allow students to present based on their sense of gender identity, including use of preferred pronouns?		
yes	0	0
no	6	30
there is no formal policy	14	70
If there is a formal policy, does it prohibit students to present themselves in ways other than what would be considered congruent with their gender identity assigned at birth (including use of preferred pronouns)?		
yes	5	25
no	1	5
there is no formal policy	13	65
no answer	1	5
Is there an informal understanding/practice that allows students to present based on their sense of gender identity, including use of preferred pronouns?		
yes	5	25
no	7	35
there is no formal policy or informal understanding/practice	8	40
Is there an informal understanding/practice that prohibits students to present themselves in ways other than what would be considered congruent with their gender identity assigned at birth (including use of preferred pronouns)?		
yes	6	30
no	7	35
there is no formal policy or informal understanding/practice	7	35

The survey also included questions about the existence of a GSA (Gay-Straight Alliance) or Pride Club at the school: Eleven (45%) of respondents said "yes", 11 (55%) said "no". When asked about the availability of gender-neutral bathrooms for the students, 7 (35%) of the participants responded affirmatively, 13 (65%) said "no".

Finally, there were three questions about the discussion surrounding gender identity issues. The first one asked which constituencies have been part of such discussions (respondents could

indicate more than one constituency). Three responses (8%) indicated discussion with the student population, 12 (33%) with school staff, nine (25%) with the school's board, two (6%) with parents, and 10 (28%) with representatives of the parish or diocese. Two questions inquired about the perceived need for more discussion of gender identity issues. Fourteen respondents (70%) thought the issue deserved more discussion in their school community; four (20%) did not think so, one (5%) was not sure, and one (5%) did not answer. Asked about the need for more discussion of gender identity issues within the Catholic Church as a whole, the responses were as follows: Fifteen (75%) said "yes", three (15%) said "no", one (5%) was not sure, and one (5%) did not answer.

Discussion

It is difficult to generalize from the findings of this survey given the possible bias associated with the low response rate. As noted, it could be speculated that the response rate of 17.6% may reflect a reluctance to engage with the topic of transgender students, despite the anonymity guaranteed by the survey. In fact, the actual survey data seem to confirm such speculation, since the issues in question do not appear to be discussed widely within Catholic school settings or by the faith community at large. Regardless of the study's limits, the following observations merit mentioning:

Presence of Transgender Students

There are transgender students in Catholic secondary schools. While that should not be surprising given the statistics cited in the relevant literature, it is noteworthy that at least some of these students are known to their school's administration and may even be "out" to the greater school community. It would merit further research to find out what conditions allow transgender students feel safe enough to disclose their identity in these schools.

School Policies

Most schools in the study's sample appear to have either a formal policy or some informal understanding related to the behavior and treatment of transgender students. Formal policies typically prohibit students to express a gender identity other than the identity assigned at birth, but informal practices appear to provide some leeway (although it is not clear to what extent).

Pride Club and Gender-Neutral Bathrooms

Almost half of the respondents in this sample indicated that their school has a Pride Club or Gay-Straight Alliance. While this may be somewhat surprising, it should be remembered that a gay or transgender identity is not necessarily rejected by religious conservatives, but that it is the acting on such an identity (such as actually transitioning) that is considered sinful. The percentage of schools with a gender-neutral bathroom (35%) could similarly be explained as tacit acceptance of the needs of gender dysphoric students. However, a more likely explanation may be that gender

neutral bathrooms are often located in a nurse's office and are therefore less controversial. The survey did not explore this issue further.

Need to Involve Students and Parents

With respect to the Catholic secondary schools in this survey, conversations about gender identity, to the extent that they happen, typically involve decision makers, not students or parents. This suggests that the discussion is primarily framed as a problem that needs fixing, rather than as an opportunity to learn about gender distress and dysphoria.

Need for Broader Discussion

Perhaps the most important finding of the study concerns the high percentages of respondents that believe transgender issues deserve more attention in Catholic schools (74%) and in the Catholic Church at large (79%). It seems important that further dialogue incorporates additional research about the manifestation of these issues.

Conclusions

Addressing gender diversity in communities of faith is important, first of all because the marginalization, discrimination, and violence directed at transgender persons ([Human Rights Campaign, 2018](#)) is irreconcilable with the tenets of those communities. As stated by Ray Dever, a deacon in the Catholic church and the parent of a transgender child: "For a church called to follow the way of Our Savior Jesus, the way of love and compassion, the way of inclusion not exclusion, this type of unjust discrimination is simply unacceptable." ([Dever, 2019, para. 6](#)). Addressing gender diversity is also important if the Church intends to remain relevant to young people. For example, a study by the Public Religion Research Institute revealed that, among young adults, the negative teaching about gay and lesbian issues was a primary reason for leaving the faith they had grown up with ([Jones et al., 2016](#)). Presumably, negative treatment of gender diversity will have a similar effect.

Transgender inclusion is a topic that calls for an approach based on moral pluralism ([de Jong, 2020](#)), including values that relate to a religious morality, like respect for human dignity and justice, as well as "scientific virtue" ([Shapin, 2015](#)), such as stemming from the research findings and treatment outcomes surrounding gender distress and dysphoria. There are promising signs of the possible integration of theology and science with respect to gender diversity, such as in the work by DeFranza, an evangelical theologian with a PhD from Catholic Marquette University, regarding intersex people (see [DeFranza, 2015](#)). However, as discussed in this paper, news items regarding transgender students in Catholic secondary schools usually concern the proposal or implementation of repressive policies, formulated and handed down by church officials,

often working in isolation from those most affected by those policies. Given the results of this exploratory study, broad-based discussion of transgender issues within the Church may be a more fruitful approach. Some of this is already happening through the work of such organizations as New Ways Ministry (<https://www.newwaysministry.org/>) and Dignity USA (<https://www.dignityusa.org/article/what-dignity>). Similarly, Fr. James Martin, a Jesuit priest, has helped create a dialogue between the Church and the LGBT community (Martin, 2017; also see the website outreach.faith, an LGBTQ Catholic resource, of which Fr. Martin is the editor). Hopefully, this work will continue and expand, along with future research about the attitudes and practices regarding gender diversity at the ground level, in parishes and religiously affiliated schools across the country.

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