

What does the Catholic Church teach about LGBT Issues?

Since 1975, Catholic teaching about LGBT Issues has developed into six distinct areas: 1) homosexual orientation; 2) sexual ethics; 3) civil rights and human dignity; 4) prejudice, discrimination, and homophobia; 5) pastoral ministry; 6) gender identity. In 1975, the Vatican issued a document entitled “Declaration on Certain Questions About Sexual Ethics,” in which Church leaders acknowledged that for some people homosexual orientation was an inherent quality of a person: “. . . homosexuals who are definitively such because of some kind of innate instinct.”

Since that time the Vatican, individual bishops, and regional and national bishops’ conferences have developed and expanded the Church’s teaching. The following is a summary of those teachings with some representative quotations from official Church documents.

1) The Nature of Homosexual Orientation

The Church teaches that the homosexual orientation is not chosen, and, so, therefore it is not sinful. A homosexual orientation is permanent and irreversible, so people should not be directed to try to change their orientations. The orientation is not a phase and is not a block to spiritual growth, but in fact, it should be viewed as a path to spiritual growth.

“A distinction is drawn, and it seems with some reason, between homosexuals whose tendency...is transitory or at least not incurable; and homosexuals who are definitively such because of some kind of innate instinct...”

—*Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics*, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1975.

“Although the particular inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin, it is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil; and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder.”

—*Letter to the Bishops on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1986.

“Here two things must be noted. To speak of the homosexual *inclination* as ‘objectively disordered’ does not mean that the homosexual *person* as such is evil or bad. Furthermore, the homosexual person is not the only one who has disordered tendencies or inclinations. All human beings are subject to some disordered tendencies.”

—*Human Sexuality: A Catholic Perspective for Education and Lifelong Learning*, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1991. (Footnote commenting on the quote above.)

“...homosexuality is a permanent, seemingly irreversible sexual orientation. The medical and behavioral sciences do not yet know what causes a person to be homosexual...Such an orientation in itself, because not freely chosen, is not sinful.”

—*Human Sexuality: A Catholic Perspective for Education and Lifelong Learning*, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1991.

“Having a homosexual orientation does not necessarily mean a person will engage in homosexual activity.”

--*Always Our Children*, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Committee on Marriage and Family, 1997.

“...it seems appropriate to understand sexual orientation (heterosexual or homosexual) as a deep-seated dimension of one's personality and to recognize its relative stability in a person.”

—*Always Our Children*, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Committee on Marriage and Family, 1997.

“The homosexual inclination is objectively disordered, i.e., it is an inclination that predisposes one toward what is truly not good for the human person. Of course, heterosexual persons not uncommonly have disordered sexual inclinations as well. It is not enough for a sexual inclination to be heterosexual for it to be properly ordered. . . . It is crucially important to understand that saying a person has a particular inclination that is disordered is not to say that the person as a whole is disordered. Nor does it mean that one has been rejected by God or the Church.”

—*Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care*, US Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006.

2) Sexual Ethics

The Church teaches that the only moral sexual acts are those that are open to procreation, which bring two people closer together in loving intimacy, and which are performed in the context of Christian marriage. Because homosexual acts do not have a procreative element, they are not morally approved.

“Homosexual persons are called to chastity. By the virtues of self-mastery that teach them inner freedom, at times by the support of disinterested friendship, by prayer and sacramental grace, they can and should gradually and resolutely approach Christian perfection.”

—*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1994, #2359.

“Objectively speaking, it is morally wrong, and subjectively, one may be guilty of serious sin.”

—*Human Sexuality: A Catholic Perspective for Education and Lifelong Learning*, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1991.

“It is only in the marital relationship that the use of the sexual faculty can be morally good. A person engaging in homosexual [homogenital] activity therefore acts immorally.”

—*Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1986.

3) **Civil Rights and Human Dignity**

The Church teaches that each person's intrinsic dignity must be protected by law. This admonition applies to lesbian/gay people, too. The Church specifically states that they have a right to justice, to belong to and participate equally in the civil community, and to be respected. Catholic leaders have often supported civil rights legislation that assures equality in housing, employment, and public accommodation.

“They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity.”

—*The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1994, #2358.

“The intrinsic dignity of each person must always be respected in word, action and in law.”

—*Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1986.

“Homosexuals...should not suffer prejudice against their basic human rights. They have a right to respect, friendship and justice. They should have an active role in the Christian community.”

—*To Live in Christ Jesus*, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1976; *Human Sexuality: A Catholic Perspective for Education and Lifelong Learning*, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1991.

“They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided.”

—*The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1994, #2358.

4) **Prejudice, Discrimination, Homophobia**

The Church teaches that prejudice and discrimination against gay/lesbian people is sinful and should be avoided. People have a responsibility to examine their attitudes and behaviors about gay/lesbian people and adjust them so as to be free of hate. The Church deplors acts of violence against gay/lesbian people and encourages Church leaders to condemn it.

“...prejudice against homosexuals is a greater infringement of the norm of Christian morality than is homosexual...activity.”

—*Prejudice Against Homosexuals and the Ministry of the Church* Washington State Catholic Conference, 1983.

“It is deplorable that homosexual persons have been and are the object of violent malice in speech and action. Such treatment deserves condemnation from the Church's pastors wherever it occurs.”

—*Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1986.

“Homosexuals...should not suffer prejudice against their basic rights...We call on all Christians and citizens of good will to confront their own fears about homosexuality and to curb the humor and discrimination that offend homosexual persons. We understand that having a homosexual orientation brings with it enough anxiety, pain and issues related to self-acceptance without society bringing additional prejudicial treatment.”

—*Human Sexuality: A Catholic Perspective for Education and Lifelong Learning*, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1991.

“Nothing in the Bible or in Catholic teaching can be used to justify prejudicial or discriminatory attitudes and behaviors.”

—*Always Our Children*, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Committee on Marriage and Family, 1997.

“Church policies should explicitly reject unjust discrimination and harassment of any persons, including those with a homosexual inclination. Procedures should be in place to handle complaints.”

--*Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care*, US Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006.

5) Pastoral Ministry

The Church teaches that gay and lesbian people must be welcome into the faith community. Church leaders have called on pastoral ministers to develop programs for gay/lesbian people that are appropriate to their needs and gifts.

“...the Christian community should offer [homosexual people] a special degree of pastoral understanding and care.”

—*To Live in Christ Jesus*, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1976; *Human Sexuality: A Catholic Perspective for Education and Lifelong Learning*, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1991.

“...we would ask the Bishops to support with the means at their disposal, the development of appropriate forms of pastoral care for homosexual persons.”

—*Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1986.

“Welcome homosexual persons into the faith community, and seek out those on the margins. Avoid stereotyping and condemning. Strive first to listen. Do not presume that all homosexual persons are sexually active. Learn more about homosexuality and church teaching so your preaching, teaching, and counseling will be informed and effective.”

—*Always Our Children*, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Committee on Marriage and Family, 1997.

“Ministry to homosexual people must acknowledge, therefore, the sanctity of conscience, but must also assist persons toward a formation of conscience that is guided by the ‘objective norms of morality.’”

—*Ministry and Homosexuality in the Archdiocese of San Francisco*, 1983.

“The ministry of the Roman Catholic Church to gays and lesbians...is not content to merely to repeat the challenge Christ sets before each generation; it seeks to work with each individual, taking into account that person’s particular strengths and weaknesses, and helping that person make the fullest response at this moment in his or her life.”

—*A Ministry to Lesbian and Gay Catholic Persons*, Archdiocese of Baltimore, 1981

“What then are homosexual Catholics looking for from the Church’s ministry? As all Catholics, they look to the Church for a community in which the Gospel can be lived and their spiritual lives can be enriched. They look to the Church for support for their Christian faith and their Catholic heritage. They seek an understanding Church, a community where they can be accepted as men and women who are Catholic and who also happen to be homosexual. They look to the Church as a community of faith, a place where they may responsibly and sensitively understand the interplay between their religious faith and their human sexuality, and to live the sacramental life of the Church in all of its rich meanings.”

—*Ministry and Homosexuality in the Archdiocese of San Francisco*, 1983

“. . . [t]here is a need of a special effort to help persons with a homosexual inclination understand Church teaching. At the same time, it is important the Church ministers listen to the experiences, needs, and hopes of the persons with a homosexual inclination to whom and with whom they minister. Dialogue provides an exchange of information, and also communicates a respect for the innate dignity of other persons and a respect for their consciences.”

—*Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care*, US Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006.

6) Gender Identity

Little discussion of gender identity happened before the era of Pope Francis. This is an area still under development.

“The acceptance of our bodies as God’s gift is vital for welcoming and accepting the entire world as a gift from the Father and our common home, whereas thinking that we enjoy absolute power over our own bodies turns, often subtly, into thinking that we enjoy absolute power over creation. Learning to accept our body, to care for it and to respect its fullest meaning, is an essential element of any genuine human ecology. Also, valuing one’s own body in its femininity or masculinity is necessary if I am going to be able to recognize myself in an encounter with someone who is different. In this way we can joyfully accept the specific gifts of another man or woman, the work of God the Creator, and find mutual enrichment. It is not a healthy attitude which would seek ‘to cancel out sexual difference because it no longer knows how to confront it.’”

—*Laudato Si*, paragraph 115, Pope Francis, 2015.

56. Yet another challenge is posed by the various forms of an ideology of gender that ‘denies the difference and reciprocity in nature of a man and a woman and envisages a society without sexual differences, thereby eliminating the anthropological basis of the family. This ideology leads to educational programmes and legislative enactments that promote a personal identity and emotional intimacy radically separated from the biological difference between male and female. Consequently, human identity becomes the choice of the individual, one which can also change over time’. It is a source of concern that some ideologies of this sort, which seek to respond to what are at times understandable aspirations, manage to assert themselves as absolute and unquestionable, even dictating how children should be raised. It needs to be emphasized that ‘biological sex and the socio-cultural role of sex (gender) can be distinguished but not separated’. On the other hand, ‘the technological revolution in the field of human procreation has introduced the ability to manipulate the reproductive act, making it independent of the sexual relationship between a man and a woman. In this way, human life and parenthood have become modular and separable realities, subject mainly to the wishes of individuals or couples’. It is one thing to be understanding of human weakness and the complexities of life, and another to accept ideologies that attempt to sunder what are inseparable aspects of reality. Let us not fall into the sin of trying to replace the Creator. We are creatures, and not omnipotent. Creation is prior to us and must be received as a gift. At the same time, we are called to protect our humanity, and this means, in the first place, accepting it and respecting it as it was created.”

–*Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis, 2016

Quotations compiled by New Ways Ministry
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