



Just Don't Tell the Bishop

Ways in which Roman Catholic clergy and religious create space for LGBTQ+ people within the church

Abstract

As the Roman Catholic church slowly seems to become more welcoming to the LGBTQ+ people within their ranks, there still remains a lot of prejudice within the official teachings of the church. Through a mixed-methods approach of literature analysis and interviews with clergy and religious, this research reveals a complex relationship between the church and its LGBTQ+ and queer seminarians, clergy, religious and lay people. As church teachings still describe LGBTQ+ people as “disordered” and their sex as sinful, this has created a culture of institutional secrecy used to self-censure people into concealing their identities to avoid rejection. It also shows that, while some progressive clergy and religious try to bend the rules and look for possibilities to affirm and embrace LGBTQ+ lay people, fear of backlash still shapes how open or discretely their support is shown. Ultimately, the presence of LGBTQ+ people within the church remains largely dependent on subtle forms of support and the choices of individuals.

Keywords: LGBTQ+, Queer space, Roman Catholic church, Catholic clergy, Catholic religious

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Introduction

For as long as I can remember being aware of my queerness, I have thought that, if I had lived about a hundred years ago, I would probably have become a nun and joined a convent. To me, convents had an air and an aesthetic around them that made me feel a sense of safety and security which I had not found anywhere else. Although, over the years I have become increasingly aware of the Western Roman Catholic church's stance on sexual and gender diversity and some of the issues with consecrated life, the idea of a convent being a kind of 'safe space' has always remained very compelling to me. From the fact that they are almost exclusively single-sex spaces comprised of unmarried people that — depending on their function and the religious order or denomination they belong to — are often at least somewhat separated from the rest of society, to the calm atmosphere of silence and peacefulness by which they are characterized. However, recently I have begun to re-examine this likely highly romanticised view of religious life, which has led me to question how realistic this idea of queer people joining convents to avoid being persecuted for their queerness really is.

Yet, it still makes sense to me that, for people who live in a time or place where homosexuality is taboo or even illegal, a life within the church could be a socially acceptable way of living a — to current western standards — unconventional, 'queer' life. This is also suggested by various other researchers (Oosterhuis, 1992; Stuart, 1993; Tricou, 2018; Wolf, 1989). However, in these works, it also becomes apparent that there is not one universal reason why LGBTQ+ and queer people would choose a life as a member of the clergy or Catholic religious brothers and sisters (hereafter collectively referred to as "religious¹"). Where some people might view their queerness as part of their calling and as a sign that they were not meant to live a heterosexual life, for others, it can feel as a cross they have to bear, leading them to become extremely rule-abiding and pious in an attempt to compensate for their sexuality (Stuart, 1993; Wolf, 1989).

Therefore, it quickly becomes clear that, just because Roman Catholic clergy and religious have to stay celibate and do not marry, this does not mean that the church is necessarily a safe and welcoming space for LGBTQ+ and queer people. In fact, the Roman Catholic church itself has in its teachings over the past millennium almost exclusively been in opposition to any type of sexuality and sexual behaviour that is not solely meant for procreation and/or takes place outside of a traditional heterosexual marriage (Boswell, 1980; Catholic Church, 1993; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1975; Morales, 2023; Rolies & van Vugt, 1986). This also shows itself in the little amount of scientific research that has been done on topics of sexual and gender diversity among church representatives (Hermosa, 2023; Kappler, Hancock, & Plante, 2013; Wagner, 1980; Wolf, 1989) — which can largely be attributed to the hesitancy of those representatives to speak up about their experiences, often out of fear for their position within the church or even their livelihoods (Dias, 2019; Stuart, 1993; Tricou, 2018). There is therefore no reliable estimate of how many Catholic religious and members of the clergy are LGBTQ+ or queer. Meanwhile, the approximations that are shared via popular media often come from individual priests, and can range from as low as 15%, to as high as 80% (Dias, 2019; Lisi, 2019). However, it is not the amount of LGBTQ+ and queer clergy and religious that is most important here, but rather the ways they are perceived by both other religious and non-religious, how the church deals with them, and how they

¹ In this thesis, "religious" will be used to describe brothers and sisters who are members of Catholic religious orders. To describe Catholics who are neither clergy nor vowed to life in a religious order or congregation, the terms "lay people" and "laity" will be used.

themselves manage their lives within and as representatives of an institution whose policies are often hostile towards LGBTQ+ people.

Yet this does not only apply to LGBTQ+ and queer religious and members of the clergy themselves, it also goes for LGBTQ+ Catholics in general. Although the church has not really updated its overall views and policies regarding sexual and gender diversity, LGBTQ+ and queer people are still part of the church, which means their parishes need to decide what to do about, and how to treat them. Where for conservative church leaders this might be pretty straightforward, as their own opinions and official church policy are unlikely to be in conflict with one another, more progressive members of the clergy might have a harder time navigating their own thoughts and feelings on the topic in relation to their work (Dewey, Schlosser, Kinney, & Burkard, 2014). How, then, can people that represent an institution with such outwardly hostile views of LGBTQ+ and queer people simultaneously create a safe and welcoming place from within? In this thesis, I have looked at this seemingly antithetical relationship LGBTQ+ and queer people have with the Roman Catholic church and its orders and how its representatives go about taking up and creating space within these institutions, for themselves as well as for others. This leads to this thesis' main question: *How do Roman Catholic clergy and religious create space for LGBTQ+ and queer people in an institution that often excludes them?*

In order to answer this question, a mixed-methods approach was used, consisting of an analysis of relevant literature and six in-depth open-ended interviews with Catholic (ex-)clergy and religious. This was done with the aim to shed a broad and nuanced light on the topic and show how different people find ways to deal with LGBTQ+ people in an institution where they are — at least formally — seen as disordered. To do this, I will start with a short overview of the Catholic church's stance in relation to LGBTQ+ and queer people, followed by existing theory on the position of LGBTQ+ and queer clergy and religious, as well as that of LGBTQ+ and queer lay people. After that, I will present my research methods and show the twofold analysis of LGBTQ+ and queer clergy and religious taking up space within the church, and the way religious and members of the clergy create space for LGBTQ+ and queer people in their parishes. I will end by discussing the findings from this research and the conclusions that can be drawn from them.

To avoid applying modern western ideas and labels regarding sex and sexuality to people that did or do not share those ideas, in this thesis, the term "LGBTQ+" will, unless otherwise specified or explained, be used for people who explicitly identified or identify themselves as being lesbian, gay or homosexual, bisexual, transgender, queer, and/or any other sexually and/or gender diverse identification. Correspondingly, the term "queer" will, unless otherwise specified or explained, be used to describe people who, for various reasons, did and/or do not fit into traditional heteronormative society, but would not have necessarily described or do not describe themselves as LGBTQ+.

Theoretical framework

The church's stance on (homo)sexuality

The idea of someone identifying themselves as *being* LGBTQ+ is relatively young. Before the end of the 19th century, people's sexuality was not actually centred around the thoughts or desires they had or who they felt

like they were on the inside, but about the things they did (Hekma, 2004; Kosofsky Sedgwick, 2008; Oosterhuis, 1992). In the western world, this is grounded in the (early) Christian idea that, in order to come closer to God, it is necessary for people to leave all earthly pleasures and impulses behind, and to focus on achieving a “pure” mind and body (Boswell, 1980; Foucault, 1978; Morales, 2023; Rolies & van Vugt, 1986). Christianity’s focus on the godly world and its subsequent disregard for many so-called ‘earthly’ pleasures meant that any negative perception of homosexual acts mostly deems them to be a moral failing, much like other kinds of situations in which people failed to control themselves (Foucault, 1978; Hekma, 2004; Oosterhuis, 1992). However, most of these laws were almost exclusively applied to clergy, and rarely required any serious punishments, if they were punished at all. Sodomy, the term that was used to describe all kinds of sexual acts ranging from any sex that was nonreproductive to anal sex between two men (Boswell, 1980; Hekma, 2004; Oosterhuis, 1992), was considered both a sin and a crime in most of Europe at different points throughout history; but it was difficult to prove, as not every person that was arrested chose to confess and witnesses could be hard to find. Besides, in times when homosexual acts were seen as something negative, people rarely spoke about it, as they generally regarded sodomy as a *crimen nefandum* — or an “unspeakable crime” — and therefore believed that even the mention of it could give people the wrong ideas. This led to situations where people knew so little about it that they were unaware that what they were doing was a crime in the first place. Hence, it can be assumed that there were individuals who almost exclusively had sex with people of the same sex or gender, while no one in their environment would think that they “were” queer; though their behaviour most definitely was (Hekma, 2004).

Within Christian societies, people's opinion on (homo)sexuality has thus historically not always been that negative. However, from the end of the 19th century onwards, with psychology starting to understand sex not only as something one *did*, but as something that was/is part of someone's identity, the Catholic church opted to adopt the by now medicalised, pathological view of homosexuality, which described it as a sexual dysfunction or a sexual “immaturity” which could potentially be ‘cured’ [...] (Oosterhuis, 1992). And although within Western society in general, throughout the 20th century, this idea slowly started making way for our current understandings of sexuality as something fluid and variable, and sexual orientation as an innate part of a person's identity, the church deviated only slightly from its earlier position on sodomy. The current teachings from the Roman Catholic catechism — which I will discuss in more detail later — state that, although the feelings of homosexuality themselves are not sinful, acting on those feelings is (Catholic Church, 1993; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1975). One notable exception to the teachings of the church, however, is the Dutch Catechism of 1966, which was the first catechism to be published after the Second Vatican Council (better known as Vatican II) and which became controversial because of its teachings on multiple topics, including homosexuality (De Nieuwe Katechismus, 1966). Although outdated by today's standards, it does show a more liberal stance towards lesbian and gay people than one might expect at that time, by quite explicitly stating that scriptures about same-sex sex “should be read in its context” and that they do not aim to shame the people who “experience this perversion inculpably,” but to instead “denounce a homosexuality which had become the prevalent fashion and had spread to many who were really quite capable of normal sexual sentiments (A New Catechism, 1967, pp. 384-385).” This again shows that the church’s stance regarding LGBTQ+ people and

queer sexuality has changed multiple times throughout history and, as with every larger institution, there have always been differences of opinion and practice within the church as a whole, as well as across countries, regions and individuals.

Rules and regulations regarding LGBTQ+ and queer clergy and religious

Although there is very little information about the private lives of the Catholic church's clergy and religious, it has long been speculated that many of them — especially those working and living in and around the Vatican — are LGBTQ+ or queer, and that a number of these clergy and religious regularly engage in sexual relations with other men (Dias, 2019). Unless all of them were simultaneously 'caught in the act,' however, this remains very difficult to prove. So how did these speculations become so prevalent, while so few people have been able to reliably confirm them?

The first and main reason has to do with the fact that for most clergy and religious, celibacy and chastity have been an integral part of respectively their ordination and profession since at least the Second Lateran Council of 1139, when the Catholic church instated full clerical celibacy (Boswell, 1980; Catholic church, 1993; Doyle, Sipe, & Wall, 2006; Oosterhuis, 1992; Rolies & van Vugt, 1986; Tricou, 2018).² For them, taking a vow or promise of chastity or celibacy generally means they agree not to have sex, either on their own or with a partner.³ They do this as way to show that they are giving their whole selves to the church, which is also related to the previously mentioned idea that earthly pleasures where to be discarded in order to get into heaven. Therefore, the holiest people — in this case the people employed by and representing the church — should lead by example (Boswell, 1980; Morales, 2023; Rolies & van Vugt, 1986). Consequently, this also means that, if a member of the Catholic clergy or religious were to break their promise of celibacy, it does not only discredit their personal holiness and closeness to God, but it causes a loss of credibility for the church as a whole as well (Morales, 2023; Tricou, 2018). This does of course also apply to clerical transgressions other than sex, but as Western society — and the church itself — currently place less emphasis on most of the other promises a priest makes at his ordination, such as obeying his bishop, they generate less of a loss of credibility for the individual clergyperson as well as for the church in general. As a powerful religious institution whose existence relies on people's belief in it and in the things it proclaims, the kind of negative publicity that comes with a priest breaking their promise of celibacy can be incredibly damaging for the Catholic church. To avoid this the Vatican tries to keep its representatives in line by strictly enforcing the rule of celibacy among its clergy and religious, while simultaneously covering up the stories of those that do transgress (Doyle et al., 2006; Tricou, 2018).

The second reason why people of the church would choose to stay silent on the topic of their sexuality — and the one which is central to this research — can be found in the Vatican's teachings regarding LGBTQ+ and queer clergy and religious. Since 2005, official policy states that the church "cannot admit to the seminary or to holy orders those who practise homosexuality, present deep-seated homosexual tendencies or support the so-called "gay culture,"" arguing that "such persons find themselves in a situation that gravely hinders them

² This excludes permanent deacons, who are allowed to be married at the time of ordination and are permitted sexual relations within their marriage like all other Catholic married couples.

³ Although often confused with asexuality, it is important to note that, while celibacy and chastity refer to the respective promise and vow not to have sex, asexuality generally refers to a sexual orientation characterised by a lack of sexual attraction towards people of any sex or gender.

from relating correctly to men and women (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2005, §2.4-2.5).” This policy stems from the church’s current ideas regarding homosexuality as stated earlier in this chapter, including its perception of “deep-seated homosexual tendencies” as “objectively disordered” (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2005, §2.3) and that of homosexual sex as “intrinsically disordered [acts that] can in no case be approved of” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1975, VIII §4). These policies, especially those that directly relate to the idea that LGBTQ+ and queer people should not be admitted to the seminary, instil many LGBTQ+ people wanting to become priests with fear, and with the feeling that they would have to hide a part of themselves if they want to get a chance at fulfilling that wish (Stuart, 1993; Wolf, 1989). Consequently, as Heermann, Wiggins, and Rutter (2007) argue: “attempts at reconciling these [religious and sexual] identities are associated with depression, guilt, shame, suicidal ideation and difficulty accepting homosexuality (p. 713).”

However, living a celibate life is not necessarily attainable for everyone. There have been enough priests, bishops and cardinals, both queer and not queer, who have been found guilty of living a double life to know that it is not just a few people within the church that struggle to remain celibate. In fact, as found by Hoge (2002) as well as in other studies, for many, their feelings of loneliness and issues relating to the requirement of celibacy get bad enough for them to have become two of the most commonly stated reasons for leaving the priesthood altogether (Hamm & Eagle, 2021; Stuart, 1993). For those who choose not to leave the priesthood or their religious order, but feel they cannot stay celibate either, it can be stressful to try and keep their romantic and sexual life hidden from view. After all, being ‘found out’ can in some cases have far-reaching consequences. This can include ‘suspension *a divinis*,’ meaning a clergyperson is “barred from performing functions connected with priesthood or presenting himself as a priest (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, n.d., §21),” or dismissal from the clerical state altogether, which is more commonly known as defrocking or laicization and means the clergyperson will be returned to the juridic status of a layperson. However, the latter has in recent years mostly been used for priests who have been convicted of the sexual abuse of minors.

Secrecy and private lives

Whether celibate or not, for many LGBTQ+ and queer clergy and religious, it is clear that secrecy is paramount. In Hardon and Posel (2012), secrecy is defined as “the act of withholding information from others, which may also include elements of self-deception (p. 53).” Additionally, Simmel (1950, 2009) separates secrets into two categories, namely: “secrets about the self that are privately constructed and held and secrets about a social unit that are socially constructed and held (Richardson, 1988, p. 209).” Yet, through the way the fate of the church and that of its representatives are intertwined, matters regarding the secrecy of clergy and religious’ sexualities are both privately and socially constructed and held. They are not just the property of singular individuals, but also involve the Catholic church as a whole. Similarly to many other institutions and organisations, for the church, keeping certain things secret or hidden from outside view is an important part of maintaining itself and its reputation (Simmel, 1950, 2009; Tricou, 2018). Furthermore, Foucault (1982) argues that secrecy is part of a technique of conduct or government of individuals and a way to maintain existing power relations, by keeping potentially damaging information hidden from view. One example which has made this evident, is the scandal that erupted over the church’s management of cases of child sexual abuse, and the way

people within the church used its power and influence over people to cover up its existence and keep victims and their families quiet (Boisvert & Goss, 2005; Doyle et al., 2006; Kappler et al., 2013; Morales, 2023).

Queer Space

As Betsky (1997) argues, "[b]y its very nature, queer space is something that is not built, only implied, and usually invisible (p. 18)." It is above all a fluid space. One that rejects any notion of a fixed order and instead allows for boundless fantasy. But if it does not exist in the form of a physical structure and cannot be seen, how can it be defined, and even more so, how can it be identified? Betsky (1997) continues:

"[Queer space] becomes an invisible network, a code of behaviour or ritualized language of gestures that traces the activities and places of everyday life, creating only momentary spaces of union that disappear almost as soon as the act is consummated (p. 43)."

Queer space is, by nature of its existence — by nature of its queerness — a challenge to the status quo. It is created where people defy the ideas of what is and is not normal, of what is male and female, and of what is allowed to be seen and what is supposed to remain hidden (Betsky, 1997; Foucault, 1978; Kosofsky Sedgwick, 2008). However, because it is invisible and unbound to any particular kind of structure, queer space can technically be created everywhere and at every time, as long as the right kind of circumstances are present. One of the examples Betsky (1997) gives is that of single-sex (British) boarding schools, where children and adolescents live with their fellow students, often quite far away from their families. This creates a situation in which the premises become both home and school, their residents are both each other's house- and classmates, and the institutions as a whole are part of, yet slightly removed from society. Because of this slight detachment, they are often deeply shaped by their own structures of hierarchy, surveillance and power, which remain largely hidden from the outside world. These are all characteristics they share with other places Betsky (1997) mentions as being "notoriously queer", including prisons, ships, and Christian convents.

However, next to being notoriously queer, most of the places mentioned here are also notoriously homophobic. So how, if queer space is in large part defined by its opposition to heterosexism and the status quo, could they be both? According to Kosofsky-Sedgwick (2008), it is the "relation of homosexuality to wider mappings of secrecy and disclosure, and of the private and the public, that were and are critically problematical for the gender, sexual, and economic structures of the heterosexist culture at large (p. 129)." Therefore, the things that allow for the creation of queer space within the Catholic church are not so much the rigid gender norms it places on its followers, but the relative freedom from them that celibacy and chastity grant its clergy and religious. As Krzysztof Charamsa, a former high-ranking Catholic priest who came out in 2015, stated in an interview: "[the closet] was an undercover way for gay men to flourish; it was a way of constructing a world for themselves within a world in which they could not exist (Tricou, 2018, p. II)."

Methodology

For this thesis, I have used a mixed-methods approach, consisting of a literature analysis paired with a number of interviews with Roman Catholic religious, members of the clergy and those who have spent time studying at a seminary. This approach was chosen because, during the early stages of this research, it became clear that it would be almost impossible to interview a sufficient number of “out” LGBTQ+ Roman Catholic religious and members of the clergy. Therefore, I initially settled on doing a literature analysis paired with two or three unstructured interviews with Catholic religious and members of the clergy in my network to get a deeper understanding of the sources. However, as my research progressed, it became clear that these interviews were more valuable than I had expected and contained a lot of information, which led to the decision to conduct more interviews and to give them a more prominent place in this thesis.

The literature analysis was focused on sources which discussed the Roman Catholic church’s stance on sex and sexuality, with a focus on non-heterosexual sexuality, and on literature about and from queer and LGBTQ+ Catholic religious and members of the clergy. This literature was mostly found via Google Scholar, and Scopus with a mix of keywords like “homosexuality,” “gay,” “queer,” “LGBTQ+,” “Catholicism,” “Catholic clergy,” “Catholic church,” “queer space” and other keywords related to the topic. Further literature was also found by searching through the bibliographies of relevant articles. When it comes to the origin and content of the literature, most of the sources used are European or North American, written in English or Dutch, and centred in and around the 20th and 21st century. The decision to focus on this time period and this area is based in large part on the availability and accessibility of sources and the fact that the interviews were conducted with Dutch religious and members of the clergy. Furthermore, because this thesis bases itself in the idea of sexuality as a part of a person's identity, which started to be developed from 1870 onwards, sources from before that time are not used except for the purpose of background information.

As stated above, next to an analysis of relevant literature, I have also conducted six open-ended interviews with a range of Catholic religious and members of the clergy in the Netherlands, which included: two priests currently working in Dutch parishes (Fr. Henri and Fr. Jos), one former priest (Ivo), a pastoral worker (Joep), a Franciscan sister (Sr. Boa), and an ex-seminarian (Tridentijn). Most of these people were recruited from within my own network via *purposeful* and *convenience sampling* or via *snowball sampling* with the help of other interviewees (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Creswell & Poth, 2017). As many Roman Catholic clergy and religious have become wary to speak openly about the topic of homosexuality in relation to the church, gaining access to this particular group of people can be particularly difficult (Tricou, 2018). Therefore, to increase the likelihood of being able to interview the people I wanted to speak to, I mainly approached Catholic clergy and religious I had met or been in contact with before. Because of the sensitive nature of the topics discussed, any personal details that could be used to identify the participants have been removed, and their names have been replaced by pseudonyms that they chose themselves. This was done to give them a sense of agency over the way they were represented in this thesis, as well as to make them able to recognize themselves if they were to read it (Allen & Wiles, 2015; Lahman et al., 2015).

Additionally, I did not record any audio of the interviews I conducted and have instead relied on the handwritten field notes I took during and directly after having these conversations. The decision to have the

interviews be open-ended was in equal parts guided by the need to ask different questions based on each individual's position within the church — i.e. some questions that are relevant to ask a priest are not applicable to the life of a sister and vice versa — and the idea that a more free-flowing and natural conversation might result in respondents feeling more comfortable to share their ideas and opinions regarding the topics as they came up. Because of this diversity in questions, the interview data was coded using thematic analysis.

The aim of this thesis is to not only look at these sources and interviews, but to provide a sociological interpretation of them and view them as part of an ongoing internal debate within the Roman Catholic church about sexuality and the celibacy it demands from its clergy and religious.

Analysis

LGBTQ+ clergy and religious taking up space within the church

As established by now, the Catholic church does not always treat its LGBTQ+ and queer members all that kindly, and for those who feel called to become a member of the Catholic clergy or religious, their attempts are often met with resistance. With both homosexuality and homosexual sex being viewed as disordered, and the latter being considered sinful, for someone to identify themselves as being part of or openly supporting the LGBTQ+ community could, according to church policy, be a valid basis for being denied from studying at a Catholic seminary or becoming ordained as a deacon, priest, or holding any other position within the Holy Order (Stuart, 1993; Wolf, 1989). While it is unknown how many people have actually been rejected on the basis of these criteria and recent changes in guidelines now determine that celibate gay men should not be downright rejected from entering the seminary solely because of their sexual orientation, this does not necessarily change the church and its policy as a whole (McElwee, 2025). However, taking the church's general disapproval of LGBTQ+ and queer people to mean that there must not be any, either in seminaries or the priesthood, is equally incorrect.

While things might slowly be improving for LGBTQ+ and queer people, in many cases, those who are entering the seminary or become ordained still fear rejection, leading a number of them to lie about their sexual orientation and/or sexual history when being asked about it by those in charge (Stuart, 1993; Tricou, 2018; Wolf, 1989). As one priest states:

"The cynical bit of me would advise a gay student to keep it dark before ordination, otherwise there is a definite possibility of being 'thrown out'. It is a brave man who owns his homosexuality in seminary and I would admire his courage. Whether the seminary staff or his bishop would leave it at that is another matter (Stuart, 1993, p. 105)."

Yet, According to the church:

"It would be gravely dishonest for a candidate to hide his own homosexuality in order to proceed, despite everything, towards ordination. Such a deceitful attitude does not correspond to the spirit of truth, loyalty

and openness that must characterize the personality of him who believes he is called to serve Christ and his Church in the ministerial priesthood. (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2005, §3.6)”

As Boisvert and Goss (2005) note, this leaves LGBTQ+ and queer seminarians — and priests — with a dilemma: hiding their sexuality but keeping their chance of becoming an ordained priest, or opening up and risking rejection? Whatever their decision, the fact that they are forced into this double bind can on its own already be very stressful for many seminarians. For some, this has even led to the unconscious repressing or conscious suppressing of their sexualities, convincing themselves of the idea that what they are feeling is not real and refusing to admit to themselves that they might be LGBTQ+ (Stuart, 1993).

“(…) few of those in positions of authority over priests and religious would dare to make known a positive theological and moral position on homosexuality and few seminarians or clergy would dare to admit their homosexuality for fear of being of being ejected or disciplined. The result is that gay seminarians and clergy suffer in silence, dreading discovery and exposure of their sexuality and are forced to lie to themselves or live a public lie. They carry this heavy burden on top of what is for many priests, including heterosexuals, a crushing burden, the discipline of celibacy (Stuart, 1993, p. 22).”

Yet, if they have managed to enter the seminary, whether or not they decide to share it with someone, word does often seem to get around anyway. For instance, Fr. Jos recalled that when he was a resident seminarian, there was another young man there who would often go out on Friday nights; and although he never told him where he went, “after some time it became more or less common knowledge among the seminarians that he went out on the gay scene.” So, although this man did not disclose his identity, his behaviour ‘outed’ him among his fellow students anyway. At the same time, for priests who do decide to confide in someone, their sexuality often becomes a ‘segmented secret’ (Hoover, 2022). This refers to personal information that has become well-known among one social network, while remaining completely hidden from another. While allowing for slightly more openness on the part of the seminarian, priest or religious themselves (Dias, 2019; Stuart, 1993; Wolf, 1989), as Simmel (1950, 2009) points out, even entrusting a secret to one other person also introduces a risk of betrayal.

One example of how choosing to open up to someone can in some cases come with a cost comes from Tridentijn, a gay ex-seminarian. During his interview he recalled an instance in which another student confided in him that he thought he might be gay. After sharing that he was gay himself and advising his fellow student to talk about it with his spiritual leader, Tridentijn initially did not think much of it. However, when his fellow student followed his advice and mentioned this *tête-à-tête* to his spiritual leader, both of them were outed, which eventually led to them being compelled to leave the seminary and give up their plans to become priests altogether. While Tridentijn shared this story, it was noticeable that it still frustrated him. Having described the general atmosphere of the seminary as “sultry” and “effeminate” earlier in the interview, he considered it unfair that he had to leave while there were many other gay, bisexual and queer men there, stating: “everyone is [gay], but for me it was out in the open and therefore a problem.” This story thus provides a clear example of

the double-edged sword life within the church can be for LGBTQ+ and queer people. Both the practice of segmented secrecy and Tricou's (2018) "don't tell policy" should therefore be seen as important aspects of the way secrecy works as a technique of government for the Catholic church, and the way it uses its "ability to silence [clergy and religious] through self-censorship in order to preserve the church's line and the consensus among the laity for whom they are responsible (p. IX)."

However, as LGBTQ+ people have become gradually more accepted within most of Western society, some LGBTQ+ clergy and religious have decided to break with this policy by coming out publicly, which has meant that the Vatican has had to rethink the way the church deals with its LGBTQ+ clergy and religious (Dias, 2019). While for some, like the generally well-known Dutch priest Antoine Bodar, this can turn out okay, it does often place them under a magnifying glass. As a result, most of them become even more desexualised than the general population of clergy and religious. Yet, for many, especially those who are more outspoken about their sexuality and sexual history, things can be a lot worse. In two other notable cases of priest who have come out — those of Krzysztof Charamsa and Pierre Valkering — their coming out and the publicity that followed it have led to both of them being suspended *a divinis*, with the church's reasoning stating that they had both broken their promise of celibacy (Jenkins, 2015; NOS Nieuws, 2019). As a then high-ranking priest, Charamsa's strategic decision to come out only two days before the start of an important bishop's synod even became international news, which some people in the church saw as an attempt to 'hijack' the synod (Tebano, 2015). Through generating a lot of attention from the media, these cases show a different side of the story than that of Bodar. And due to the media storm that surrounded them, Charamsa and Valkering's cases do serve as a reminder that breaking with the public script of secrecy by disclosing their sexual orientation can have a profound impact on the entire institution of the church (Tricou, 2018).

Nevertheless, this does not only apply to queer sexuality. Because of the church's complex relationship with sexuality and the importance it places on celibacy and chastity as discussed earlier, sex and sexuality in general can often be difficult topics among Catholic clergy and religious. As stated by Stuart (1993):

"Gay priests are a problem for the Vatican because gay and lesbian lay people are a problem: their existence is recognized but their relationships and sexual activity is not. The Church has a problem about what is acceptable sexual activity for anyone. Gay priests are also a problem because all priests take a vow of celibacy which rules out any sexual activity. Therefore, the naming of sexual orientation is felt to be at best irrelevant or bad form; at worst, a drawing of attention to a priest's sexuality which should be sublimated (p. 5)."

This also became apparent during my own interviews. When I then asked about the seminary curriculum, out of the six different seminaries the participants who had studied to become priests had attended, only one was mentioned to have had a specific course related to the topic of sexuality and celibacy. However, this does not only impact the clergy in question, it also has a profound impact on the lay people they serve. As a result of this, many seminarians and priests will remain ill-equipped to deal with the lives and possible problems of their future parishioners. For Ivo, a former priest, this expressed itself in feeling completely unprepared when he had

to guide a couple through marriage preparations for the first time, as he had never been taught about it or even attended one before. Furthermore, when it came to discussing topics of sexuality with people inside the church more generally, it became clear that most participants either never talked about sexuality with other priests or seminarians or did so only in a casual setting where no people in positions of power were present.

Within this context, it must therefore be considered that it is not necessarily homosexuality or homosexual sex in themselves that form the biggest obstacle when it comes to the acceptance of LGBTQ+ and queer people within the church. Through these accounts, it becomes clear that the church has a difficult relationship with sex and sexuality in general. This then leads to a culture of unconscious repression as well as conscious suppression, which are continually reinforced by the amount of rules the church has created that dictate what people are and are not allowed to do with their bodies (Kappler et al., 2013; Morales, 2023; Rolies & van Vugt, 1986). Yet, for these rules to be correctly applied according to the church's wishes, they first need to be thoroughly understood and be able to be placed in their right contexts by the people who are supposed to teach them. Thus, seminaries that do not include sex, sexuality and celibacy in their curricula are leaving their students to their own devices, causing them to either form their own interpretations and meanings — which can greatly differ from the ones the church wants them to have — or remain altogether uneducated. This can in turn have a negative effect on the congregations they become part of after ordination.

However, as has been shown, complete silence is not the only way in which people of the church deal with celibacy, sex, and sexuality. For some, using segmented secrecy as a way to open up to certain people without having to give up their vocation can be a useful way of combining a to them essential part of their identity with their love and devotion to the church. Others who have decided to be more open about their sexuality have often faced negative consequences as a result of their decision, such as having to exit the seminary or even being suspended *a divinis*.

Creating space for LGBTQ+ and queer lay people⁴

When it comes to creating space for LGBTQ+ and queer lay people within the Catholic church, there are a lot of things members of the clergy need to consider. This involves similar things to those discussed before, such as church policy and a clergy person's personal judgement and interpretations of their faith, but also things that have not yet been considered, like knowledge on the position of LGBTQ+ and queer lay people and the things they need, and, not unimportantly, the opinions of their parishioners. All of these aspects combined mean that, even though priests themselves might like to openly voice or otherwise show their support for the LGBTQ+ and queer people within their parishes, they might hesitate to do so because of a perceived lack of knowledge on LGBTQ+ and queer issues, out of fear of repercussions from the church, or because of how more conservative people in their parish might react.

However, one of the first things clergy have to consider, is whether or not they *want* to create space for LGBTQ+ and queer lay people. For those who completely agree with church teaching, unless something happens or someone specifically asks them about their opinion, there is often no immediate reason to go out of their way to creating space for LGBTQ+ and queer lay people. Therefore, one of the first things I will consider

⁴ Unlike creating space for themselves and other religious brothers or sisters, creating space for LGBTQ+ and queer lay people is usually not something concerning Catholic religious, which is why this part will mainly focus on the efforts and concerns of the clergy.

here, is the personal opinions Catholic clergy and religious hold on the topic of LGBTQ+ and queer Catholics. As pastoral worker Joep told me:

“My main message when it comes to LGBTQ+ people, in short, is this: if we believe that God is love (how often do we not sing or say, that, where there is love, God is with us), then God happens everywhere where there is love and everywhere where people love each other, including between people of the same sex. For me it is important to not only let the parishioners that are part of the LGBTQ+ community, but also their parents know that as far as I'm concerned, everyone belongs, everyone is welcome, and everyone is a child of God.”

The concept of love, and especially that of God being love also came up in conversation with Fr. Henri, who told me that, during mass, he regularly talks about how God loves everybody, and that his love is unconditional, regardless of the choices people might make in their lives.

This directly ties into another aspect that plays an important part in a clergyperson's decision whether or not to openly voice their support for LGBTQ+ and queer (lay) people, which has to do with church policy and how members of the clergy feel it should be applied (Dewey et al., 2014). For some, like Ivo — who was raised more conservatively — it could be difficult to go against what the church prescribed him to do. After all, members of the clergy are still employees of the church, and are, in that role, required to follow its rules and guidelines. Nevertheless, as within every organisation, not all employees necessarily agree with every company policy. For example, Joep shared that, in his work, he often finds that pastoral attitude can be “diametrically opposed to church policy,” which means that, sometimes, to provide someone with the best pastoral care, he feels obliged to make a decision that goes against church policy.

At the same time, not every show of support for LGBTQ+ people has to involve consciously breaking the rules. Similar to queer space itself, LGBTQ+-affirming messages can also be spread through codes or other ways of messaging, like using specific words attributed to the LGBTQ+ community, putting an LGBTQ+ pin on your bag, wearing a rainbow bracelet, etc. As Heermann (2007) argued, sometimes, the best thing members of the clergy can do is to take a stance of “informed not knowing,” meaning that they approach interactions with LGBTQ+ lay people with an open mind, in order to try and better understand that person's experience. Efforts like these may seem small, but if LGBTQ+ people can pick up on them, this already creates a greater sense of safety. Besides, where religious judgement regarding a person's LGBTQ+ identity can often be harmful and make it more difficult for LGBTQ+ people to accept themselves, research has also shown that positive faith experiences, especially when facilitated by a member of the clergy, can have a significant positive and potentially even healing effect on LGBTQ+ parishioners (Dewey et al., 2014; Heerman, 2007). Furthermore, as shown by an earlier statement from Joep, family and loved ones of LGBTQ+ people can also benefit from this. For example, during my interviews, Fr. Henri shared his recollection of a conversation he had had with two parents about their transgender child, stating that, although one of the parents still finds it difficult to accept their child for who they are, he could sense that hearing a member of the clergy speak positively of their child also made this parent see their child in a more positive light. Still, it is possible to make bigger gestures as well. For

instance, Fr. Jos shared that, every year, a local group organises a week of LGBTQ+-themed activities, and that he organises a church service for it. And after another interview, one of the participants sent me an email in which he had attached something he had recently written in a parish paper about inclusion. Besides, most of the religious and members of the clergy I spoke to did not tell me stories about wild sex parties, but about acknowledging the existence, equality and worth of LGBTQ+ and queer people within their parish.

Another way in which some of the clergy I interviewed try to combine their position as church representatives with their personal opinions on certain matters, is by simply not telling or asking their bishop. Although this approach is not mentioned anywhere in the literature, the way it works is quite self-explanatory. As Fr. Henri stated: "If I ask the bishop, he will have to follow church policy and say no. Therefore, in these cases, I know not to ask him for permission." Interestingly, two of the other participants distinctly remembered even hearing their bishop say this themselves, requesting them not to ask him everything, because then he would have to have an opinion about it. On its own this might not have been important to mention, however, because of the way being a clergyperson works, they often have a wide range of tasks they can be asked to perform, but lack the work schedule and supervision most office workers have to follow. Therefore, most clergy actually have quite a lot of freedom when it comes to how they do their work; a kind of freedom that can be compared to the discretionary space of street-level bureaucrats as defined by Lipsky (1980). One example of this can be found in the pastoral care of parishioners. As parishioners can ask for guidance on a range of situations, including ones that are complex, clergypersons often have to rely on their own interpretations to determine what to do or say. This relative freedom to make discretionary judgement in their work, combined with the bishop's show of trust in the moral judgement of the clergy in his diocese, greatly increases the possibilities for, among other things, creating space for LGBTQ+ people within the church.

Although this kind of secret keeping does show a lot of similarities with Tricou's (2018) 'don't tell' policy discussed earlier, there is one slight difference. Because in this case, it is not so much about trying to hide any personal information, as it is about keeping certain activities from church representatives out of official church records, it creates a whole new level of potential for LGBTQ+-affirming clergy. However, because it exists on the boundary of public and private, as well as on the boundary of what is permitted and what is not, it can just as easily be used as a way to cover up potential abuses of power or otherwise.

Discussion and conclusion

In this thesis, I have aimed to show the ways in which Roman Catholic clergy and religious create space for LGBTQ+ and queer people in an institution that often excludes them. Through both an analysis of relevant literature and interviews with a number of people in the field, this research provides insights on the stance of the Catholic church regarding LGBTQ+ people, and the way its clergy and religious aim to create space both for themselves and for LGBTQ+ and queer lay people within the church.

This research' findings reveal that the relationship between the Catholic church and its LGBTQ+ and queer clergy, religious and lay people is often difficult and complex. As clergy and religious' views are often based on or heavily influenced by official church teaching — which views LGBTQ+ and queer people as disordered and their sex as sinful — it has created a culture of institutional secrecy which at best ignores the presence

of LGBTQ+ and queer people within its ranks, and at worst actively aims to remove and eject them. Within seminaries, these tensions are often already experienced from the earliest stages of formation, with seminary students being stuck in a double bind, having to choose between being honest about their sexuality and risk rejection or being concealing it, but then having to live in the knowledge that they are living a lie. Besides leading to both repression and suppression of their feelings, which can cause all kinds of mental problems, such as feelings of shame, depression, and even suicidal thoughts, the church's culture of institutional secrecy regarding its LGBTQ+ and queer people has also created a situation in which self-censorship and a so-called 'don't tell policy' have become completely normalised and even expected of most Catholic clergy and religious. Therefore, it becomes a question of who this secrecy is actually serving and protecting.

While certainly being beneficial to many individual members of the clergy and religious — not in the first place because it enables them to keep their jobs and positions within the church — the church's institutional secrecy also operates as a wider mechanism to preserve its public image of holiness and consistency. Yet, it is precisely within such structures that forms of queer space can emerge — which are characterised by their often subtle or 'underground' ways of establishing mutual recognition through coded gestures — and through which LGBTQ+ and queer people can create systems of solidarity that allow them to exist within the church's otherwise heteronormative and heterosexist framework. Conversely, there are also people within the church who choose to combat or replace this culture of secrecy, by attempting to create more openness and acceptance from within the church. For some, this means being an 'ally' through voicing their support for church reform regarding the acceptance of openly LGBTQ+ people into the seminary, while for others, it can involve becoming more open about their own sexual orientation and experiences. It must also be noted, however, that secrecy and openness do not have to be mutually exclusive, and that many LGBTQ+ and queer seminarians, clergy, and religious have tried and continue to try to find a midway between the two, by using segmented secrecy to allow them to discuss matters of sex and sexual identity with some people, while not having to acknowledge them in any official capacity.

When it comes to creating space for LGBTQ+ and queer lay people, clergy often have to carefully navigate the different aspects that could potentially come into play, balancing personal beliefs, pastoral care, church policy, and the expectations of their parishioners to the best of their ability. From the interviews conducted for this research, it becomes clear that, while some choose to openly affirm LGBTQ+ parishioners through public statements, inclusive language or pastoral writings, others feel more comfortable adopting more quiet or covert forms of support. This can be done through personal conversations with parishioners, or through coded language or gestures, or symbolic displays of support like a bracelets or pins. One way of support that was not mentioned in the literature but did come up in the interviews, is the conscious decision of priests and pastoral workers to not inform their bishop of certain things they are doing, which was sometimes even encouraged by bishops themselves. This kind of 'discretionary space' for clergy shows close resemblance to that of street-level bureaucrats and allows the clergy interviewed for this research to interpret and apply the church's teaching in ways that they feel are most in line with their own beliefs and/or best suited to the needs of their parishioners.

Ultimately, this study reveals that “creating space” within the Catholic Church is rarely about large institutional changes. Instead, it is often about the creation of small spaces or instances of acceptance, recognition, and safety within an otherwise restrictive framework. At the same time, the ways in which many Catholic clergy and religious use their position and resources to create a more accepting church also highlight how fragile this acceptance can be, and how the livelihoods of LGBTQ+ and queer lay Catholics often depends on the willingness of individuals to subvert or break with patterns of secrecy. Simply stated, there might be a lot of priests who might support the idea of blessing a same-sex relationship, however, not all of them would also be willing to do so themselves, let alone to potentially put their position on the line for it.

Research limitations

Although the terms LGBTQ+ and queer were used during this research, there exists a lack of information on certain groups belonging to this community, most notably transgender, non-binary, and other gender diverse people. Because for many of them, it remains even more difficult to come out or otherwise make themselves heard, their roles as representatives of the Catholic church and their contributions to the religion remain largely unknown. The same goes for the lives of many (cisgender) religious nuns and monks, who by the nature of their profession often live more closed-off lives than their non-contemplative religious brothers and sisters and members of the clergy. For those reasons, and due to a personal lack of access to people from the aforementioned groups, this research was focused primarily on the lives of bisexual and gay clergy.

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