

**DIGITAL DEVOTIONS:
CONSTRUCTING SEXUAL AND SPIRITUAL IDENTITIES THROUGH QUEER
SAINT NARRATIVES ONLINE**

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This dissertation is a digitally-based ethnographic study examining narratives by and about sexual and gender minorities (SGM) around saint veneration and discourse. Online forums and blogs are an easily accessible and safe space that both SGM and their detractors are increasingly utilizing. The current study, a 2016 to 2018 assessment of websites, blogs, forums, and an online Roman Catholic support group, demonstrates that within online platforms, various authors and communities are using Christian saints to interpret and construct components of SGM religious and sexual identities and their intersections with theological, cultural, and socio-political concerns. Couched within the context of the intersecting histories of sexual and gender minorities experience and religious venerative traditions in America, this work highlights English-speaking online communities and assesses common themes and uses of saints among these sites, unpacking the ways in which they contribute to specific narratives and subjective, relational experiences. Specifically, *Digital Devotions* finds that communities are using saint symbolism to express their spirituality, model ideas or behaviors, or experience components of both individual subjectivity and group identity. These demarcations range from queer subjectivity and/or gender identity to religious expression and other political or cultural affiliations. Historically, hagiographies have never been written with historical accuracy or empirical plausibility as their primary concern. Now, contested saint narratives are found among

communities who use them to promote heteronormative relationships and denounce queer lives but even more frequently in communities promoting queer and affirming interpretations of saints and legitimizing diverse sexual and gender identities. Examining these parallel efforts through lenses of queer studies, camp, and rhetorical and cultural analysis, the dissertation primarily contributes to the academic fields of queer studies and lived religion. Within these disciplines, new roles imagined for saints speak to the ongoing salience of subjectivity as a queer way of relating to experience and culture as well as the ongoing innovation occurring in and with Catholic traditions. These findings have speak to subversive saint narratives' potential to reduce or perpetuate social and ecclesiastic stigma and contribute to larger social narratives in American society.

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PREFACE

This dissertation is the product of many years and writing over long nights, but it is also the result of the support I have received from a great many people. I am extremely grateful for the years of advice, feedback, and encouragement I received from Dr. Paula Kane and each of the members of my committee; Drs. Kranson, Reeser and Chilson each inspired and informed parts of this dissertation through their expertise, teaching, feedback and personal encouragement. Our department Chairs, the late Dr. Linda Penkower and Dr. Adam Shear, have championed our graduate education throughout my time in the department, and the encouragement and collaborative work with my cohort and past graduate students, especially Drs. Emily Bailey, Patrick Hughes, Margarita Delgado, Susie Meister, Kelsy Burke and the Rev. Dr. Bhante Pematana, have been invaluable intellectual and social fabric that has bound our time and research together.

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I am so appreciative for the many ways my parents and family have supported and believed in me over the course of my academic career. Above all, I'd like to thank my wife, Joy, whose many sacrifices, encouragement, advice, and immeasurable extra support with our family and young children have made completion of this work possible.

Finally, I'd like to recognize the many individuals who either messaged and emailed with me about their experiences and beliefs or who have written and posted publicly in the online communities that comprise this study. *Digital Devotions* relies on extensive observation and site cataloguing, and I have endeavored throughout this work to accurately convey their thoughts and beliefs as they have been presented through our online medium. I hope that my efforts in this study convey my deep respect for all those striving to live authentically, especially in the face of stigma or the threat of violence, and for all those trying to help or inspire others to do the same.

1.0 SAINTS IN CONTEXT

None of these Saints have [*sic*] been tempted to suicide because they knew there was something irreparably wrong with them. None of these Saints faced rejection from BOTH sides—from the secular for pursuing chastity and from the religious for even being tempted the way they are... I am often tempted to think that maybe struggling with SSA [same-sex attraction] means that I am already condemned and irredeemable. Otherwise, wouldn't there be someone already sanctified—already in heaven—who DID struggle with SSA? Surely others DID struggle with SSA in the past, so either some made it to heaven... OR maybe it is impossible for someone with SSA... someone like me... to get there. “Wayward,” self-identified as a young woman attracted to other women, on Catholic Answers Forums¹

In several Christian traditions today, the ways that people think about and relate to saints play important roles. Theologically, churches that recognize saints hold them up as models who “lead godly lives” and glorify attributes of God (God’s power, forgiveness, etc.). Rhetorically, the lives and virtues of saints are used to highlight certain behaviors and to warn against others. For individual supplicants, stories of and prayers to saints can inspire and help express hopeful resilience or despair and stigma. As “Wayward’s” lament above demonstrates, the roles that saints continue to play in contemporary society—reaching out from rich, complex histories and through (or sometimes despite) religious traditions—both reflect and shape crucial intersections of identity, ecclesiology, and society. Some historical and cultural narratives attempt to paint the relationships between sexual and gender minorities (SGM) and Christianity as solely antithetical

¹ “Patron Saint For Those With Same Sex Attraction,” *Catholic Answers Forums*, (July 18, 2011), <https://forums.catholic.com/t/patron-saint-for-those-with-same-sex-attraction/119512>

and antagonistic.² However, the full spectrum of relationships among Christians, saints, and understandings of sexuality is much broader and more nuanced.

Queer religious encounters, discourses and communities do not arise from or exist within a cultural vacuum. As such, the analyses in *Digital Devotions* are grounded the history of both American Catholic devotionism and American SGM history and lived religion, as well as how these historical threads intersect in contemporary dialogue and socio-religious understanding. This work opens with examinations and contextualization of the history of Roman Catholic, independent Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox devotionism in the United States, the historical relationship between the gay rights movement and Christian groups in the United States. To appropriately historicize such momentous movements and events, the study has relied on the scholarship of Heather White, Anthony Petro, Robert Orsi, and queer historians like John Boswell and Jim Downs, among others. Theoretically, the many facets of online experience and the diversity of the communities and sites engaged—with their various narratives and agendas—have necessitated a wide-ranging exploration of the underlying influences and mechanisms at work within these groups. To that end, Melissa Wilcox’s work and sociological case studies in *Queer Women and Religious Individualism*, Mark D. Jordan’s rhetorical and cultural analysis in *Recruiting Young Love* and *The Silence of Sodom* (respectively), and Kelsy Burke’s sociological treatment of Christian websites about sex in *Christians Under Covers* are foundational texts cited throughout the current study. Queer studies and cultural theorists like David Halperin and Donald Boisvert have also been extremely useful in connecting theory to application in these communities, especially Halperin’s *Saint Foucault* and *How to be Gay* and Boisvert’s *Sanctity and Male Desire*.

² Heather White, *Reforming Sodom: Protestantism and the Rise of Gay Rights* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 3-4.

Guided by the above scholarship, the current work demonstrates that some Christians are interacting with SGM narratives and communities in novel ways through a medium particularly suited to facilitating interaction: the Internet. Unfettered by distance and often offering greater protection against both social ostracism and religious stigma, websites and online forums have allowed new digital communities to form around discussions of saints and contemporary understandings of “real life” values and experiences that include sexuality and gender identity.³ Due to the increasingly accessible and immersive nature of these environments and interactions, online groups can productively be thought of as “existing somewhere between ‘fantasy and action’” and “desire and interest.” However, online communities cannot fully escape or transcend social parameters; “regulations on the body and marginalization [of] minority groups” are also perpetuated in many of these spaces.⁴ The present study examines online communities engaged in narrative creation around saints and their significance. It demonstrates that the act of “queering”—which throughout this work means re-appropriating, re-imagining, or claiming—narratives and interpretations of saints (or reaffirming traditional roles or values) facilitate expressions of multiple components of subjective experience and identity. Chief among them are the religious and sexual or gender identities of their authors and audiences.

Queer interpretations and lived religious experiences are documented throughout American sexual and gender minority and religious histories.⁵ But less well understood are other interests and sociological forces that also contribute to queer saint narratives and experiences of religious expression. *Digital Devotions* builds on this chapter’s historical contextualization, employing digital ethnography in Chapter [2](#) to assess specific websites, comment sections, email

³ Kelsy Burke, *Christians Under Covers: Evangelicals and Sexual Pleasure on the Internet* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 9.

⁴ Ibid, 11.

⁵ As discussed in detail in section [1.3](#).

chains and message boards that discuss both saints and sexual and gender minorities. This dissertation plays a role in documenting the spiritual components of queer (as well as heteronormative) narratives about saints as previously undocumented components of lived religion for many sexual and gender minorities. Its descriptive findings include the creation of narratives and interpreting saints that: 1) affirm and celebrate SGM lives and experiences; 2) affirm both all individuals' worth while maintaining conservative Christian sexual ethics; 3) rhetorically attack and morally condemn those whom the authors perceive to be morally inferior, particularly SGM.

However, *Digital Devotions* is more than simply descriptive. After the first two chapters, it moves from descriptive observation of critical narratives around saints—as useful as that is in understanding lived religion, especially queer religious expression—to analyzing some of the underlying sociological mechanisms and processes at play in these online environments. Employing the academic lenses of queer studies, social identity theory, camp, and rhetorical analysis, this work interrogates some of the underlying mechanisms at play in various types of saint narratives. Interpreting ways that actors in digital settings use saint images, personal connections and prayers, and interpretations of hagiographies reveals that actors and audiences create and maintain narrative spaces that develop, meld, and even reify aspects of their social, spiritual, and sexual selves.

Chapter [3](#) accomplishes this task, first and foremost, through rhetorical and sociological analysis of the massive amount of observational data these websites and communities generate. Through discussion of the spiritual components of some of community narratives, the study highlights the roles that grieving and remembrance play in members' discussions. In sections [3.2](#) and [3.3](#), it examines the subtle roles that narratives about saints and their bodies play in

informing and reinforcing audience's perceptions of allowable gender norms and sexuality. But because of the widely intersectional nature of components of identity interacting with other fields, section [3.4](#) also touches on other theories in order to acknowledge—for example—the roles that Bourdieu's symbolic power, Weber's theory of charismatic leaders, and Anderson's constructions of imagined community apply to these complex narrative phenomena.

The current study finds that the ways in which authors and audiences construct and maintain narratives about saints and sexuality online both shape and reify personal and community views, interactions, and motivations. That such complex social mechanisms can be influenced through online appeals to saints is an important advancement of the academic understanding of contemporary, queer lived religion. Altogether, the work contributes to scholarly understanding of queer studies through its assessment of novel religious and cultural discourse, analyzing the underlying mechanisms surrounding narratives and images of saints that are contributing to facets of both queer and normative social identity. Additionally, this dissertation contributes to scholarly understandings of queer subjectivity, highlighting new and surprising ways that sexual and gender minorities relate to both queer and heteronormative religious traditions and systems of social power. Finally, it provides a critical expansion for American Catholic studies as well, offering a queer lens through which to view the ongoing evolution of religious subjectivity and Catholic experience. *Digital Devotions* concludes with additional academic avenues where this research could be usefully applied, including the possibility of using sexual and gender minority experiences and identification with saints to further analyze how the ways that people reproduce and “do” gender may be similar to, and correlated with, how religious affiliates might unintentionally “do” aspects of religion.

1.1 TERMINOLOGY

It has become an academic truism to point out that the language used to present and describe (or, unintentionally, proscribe) human subjects matters, yet it bears repeating that labels and arguments can exist solely in culturally defined settings, and that the use of moral reasoning—even unintentionally—more easily confers social power and argumentative persuasion.⁶ This is particularly important when dealing with marginalized populations past or present, and with contexts in which completing terminology can carry social connotations and sometimes painful histories far beyond the explicit meaning of any particular label.⁷ As such, a balancing act is on display throughout the dissertation; in blogs, in comments, and on websites, subjects use a wide range of terminology to talk about themselves or others who identify as sexual and gender minorities. Nearly all of the terms the communities in this study use are associated with additional cultural assumptions, specific disciplines, or socio-political ideologies. The current section explores the many terms that are present in the chapters ahead, and explains why specific ones have been selected for use in specific contexts. As queer British historian and scholar Dominic Janes notes, “no term for same-sex erotic attraction is unproblematic,” so great care must be employed to accurately and respectfully reflect both individuals’ and communities’ lives, desires, and experiences with as much diversity and sensitivity as possible.⁸

Some terms, like same-sex attraction (or “SSA,” as seen in “Wayward’s” comment at the beginning of this chapter) are historically situated expressions derived from American “culture

⁶ Anthony Petro, *After the Wrath of God: AIDS, Sexuality, and American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 4.

⁷ Mark D. Jordan, *The Silence of Sodom: Homosexuality in Modern Catholicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 108-9.

⁸ Dominic Janes, *Visions of Queer Martyrdom from John Henry Newman to Derek Jarman* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2015), 9.

war” debates in the 1980s and 1990s over whether one’s sexuality is chosen or innate. Currently, use of the term “same-sex attraction” is a type of conservative cultural code or “dog whistle.” Dog whistle cultural politics have seen a dramatic increase in the last two decades, and is a tactic that uses terms that seems innocuous to the general public but convey deeper, non-obvious messages to specific groups or subcultures. It is most commonly employed by politically and culturally conservative religious and political leaders.⁹ In the case of SSA, it signifies that the individual using it believes (or intends to imply) that the delineation between *having* an “attraction” and *acting* on it is significant because the latter is a choice. According to this (widely panned) construction of sexuality, if people are actively making choices related to expressing their sexual identity, then they are essentially “*choosing* to be gay...” and thus can be blamed for that “choice” and any consequences they ostensibly “deserve” for said choice.¹⁰

Other terms in more widespread use today are also not without pitfalls or limitations. The evolution of the term LGBTQIA+ is a fascinating example. Earlier—some might say dated—iterations of it exist throughout the internet and within many of the sources that will be analyzed here. While the terms “gay” and “lesbian” have existed in English parlance for decades and will be discussed in greater detail at the end of this section, the earliest acronym was GLB (Gay Lesbian, Bisexual). The GLB characterization reflected and perpetuated the privileged positions held by gay (often white, upper middle class) men within the 1970s civil rights movements, to the diminution or outright erasure of the contributions of trans, queer, and lesbian activists—including people of color—and their allies. As such, the term grew into LGBT (adding the word “transgender” to the acronym), then LGBTQ (queer or questioning),

⁹ Amanda Lohrey, *Voting for Jesus: Christianity and Politics in Australia* (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2006), 48–49.

¹⁰ Mark D. Jordan, *Recruiting Young Love: How Christians Talk about Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 195.

LGBTQIA (intersex, asexual or ally), LGBTQIA+, and so on. One criticism with this configuration is that it takes an “alphabet soup” or Balkanizing approach to inclusion, becoming unwieldy at best and divisive at worst. Further, these terms are highly associated with American (or at best English-speaking or “Western”) identity and have no appropriate historical correlations to people’s relationships in the distant past—a point highly relevant in a study about the perceived sexuality of ancient saints.¹¹

Other configurations include more sociologically focused or descriptive terms frequently used in public health and research settings, such as MSM (men who have sex with men) and GMT (gay men, MSM, and trans women). While these terms are too narrowly focused for use here, the term SGM—sexual and gender minorities—has recently emerged as a neutral, respectful and far-reaching descriptor that is understood to incorporate the full spectrum of sexual and gender possibilities.¹² SGM has accordingly become the standard accepted term in many disciplines, but not all scholars agree with this development.¹³ Mark Jordan’s early work is addressing academic objections to universal terms for sexual and gender minorities, arguing that “we need to think of Catholic lesbianism and Catholic gayness separately. Categories that combine gay men with lesbians are categories created to persecute both. The false sameness implied... is useful for dehumanizing condemnation, but not careful analysis.”¹⁴

¹¹ Petro, *After the Wrath of God*, 16.

¹² The term SGM “encompasses lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender populations, as well as all those whose sexual orientation, gender identity and expressions, or reproductive development varies from traditional, societal, cultural, or physiological norms.” Eliseo J. Pérez-Stable “Director’s Message: Sexual and Gender Minorities Formally Designated as a Health Disparity Population for Research Purposes” *National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities* (National Institutes of Health, October 6, 2016). <https://www.nimhd.nih.gov/about/directors-corner/message.html>

¹³ “Sexual and Gender Minorities” *Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion* (online: National Institutes of Health). <https://www.edi.nih.gov/people/sep/lgbti/about> Accessed January 12, 2018. Also note that, like LGBTQIA, SGM can be both a singular adjective (i.e., someone who identifies as SGM) and as a plural noun (e.g., SGM: sexual and gender minorities).

¹⁴ Jordan, *Silence*, 9.

However, there are several important caveats to the critique that universal terminology is unacceptable for studying aspects of SGM lived experience. First, Jordan was writing nearly twenty years before the present study. Scholars, including Jordan himself, correctly no longer view sexual preferences or gender identity as limited to gay or lesbian identity, diluting the premise of the objection. Second, this view relies in part on “*theological* categories.” Such a specific formulation is not the focus of the present work; it does not seek to validate or assess belief, but rather the rhetoric and symbolism used around saints. Finally, it is important to note that “similar difficulties afflict all categories” of sexual and gender minorities, addressing “the range of [subjects’] identities or behaviors.” I encourage readers to acknowledge this ambiguity and inconstancy, and “read on to see how I try to reflect the diversity of [peoples’] lives” respectfully.¹⁵ For these reasons, whenever possible, SGM is the standard acronym that will be employed in discussing contemporary communities and issues in this work.

Two important exceptions will be given regarding the standard phrasing above. At points during my research, individuals frequently and explicitly claim very specific labels and identities, and such acts or descriptors are key components of the dissertation. In order to respect and represent these individuals, any person-specific identities and associated terms will be referenced as the authors present themselves. In other words, when non-SGM language is used, it is an intentional reflection of a specific identity a respondent disclosed or presented online. This linguistic and representational choice has the additional effect of reflecting the complex and contested state of concepts such as sainthood, denominational affinity, and sexual identity. In that sense, the identity markers that subjects choose for themselves take on—to a small degree—the fluidity inherent in the medium in which they reside. In such cases, definitional fluidity or

¹⁵ Ibid.

ambiguity is apparent in such descriptions and definitions, especially around language discussing crossdressing or transgender and genderfluid saints, so accurately reflecting them in this analysis is necessary to properly explore the multiple possibilities for representation and interpretation inherent in the text. On the other hand, problematic terms like SSA are also crucial for contextualization of the data, and their inclusion and analysis here should not be conflated with legitimization.

Following poststructuralist critique, social categories that seem naturalized, even ones as seemingly concrete as individual identity, can be viewed as “persistent cultural fantasies or myths”; the socio-psychological components or cultural “signs” that conceptually bind people into unified or coherent categories are the results of representational codes used to describe the self *to* the self (and by extension others) continuously.¹⁶ This ongoing process of performativity and style allow for multiple readings and contexts to exist in these categories or labels that, at first glance, may seem inherent or self-evident. Yet, Reeser notes that while the term “identity” is typically associated with relative permanence or stability, “subjectivity suggests complications and a closer relation to cultural and psychological influences.”¹⁷ The present analysis will leverage rhetorical, gender, and queer theory to explore these possible—even simultaneous—meanings in online posts and interactions among users. In fact, in online settings, representation and self-presentation are often best described as “flickering signifiers,” meaning their

¹⁶ Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 78. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 139. See also Todd Reeser, *Masculinities in Theory* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 83-84 and Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 48.

¹⁷ Reeser, *Masculinities in Theory*, 13.

impermanence and ambiguous intentionality are key factors in how they are perceived as both texts and actors in an ever-changing digital environment.¹⁸

The second exception to the methodological and stylistic choice of using SGM is thus found in the use of the term “queer.” Use of the term here not only reflects a common usage in the online source material (as described above), but it is also a deliberate decision meant to engage in a historically conscious usage that can, to a degree, simultaneously include somewhat less problematically the lives and loves of historical, imagined, and contemporary individuals.¹⁹ Theorist Annamarie Jagose observes that “queer” is the latest in a litany of reclaimed words, evolving discourse, and slang that strategically pushes back against stigma and “binarised [sic] and hierarchized sexual categorization” that has been attached to labels over time.²⁰ At first “a provocative and proactive term,” “queer” has since become a standard expression used to recognize and represent the “destabilizing [of] static identities” regardless of historical time or place.²¹ As demonstrated in Chapter 2, many participants in these online settings deliberately, explicitly, and sometimes creatively engage with historical or hagiographic individuals through distinctly contemporary lenses and their own lived experiences; the term “queer” is the best proxy language to attempt to bridge actual historical and cultural divides. Theologian and scholar of queer religion Jay Emerson Johnson concurs, quoting Lee Edelman to argue that “queerness carves out a “zone of possibilities” in an otherwise static or closed system [of identity]” in history. Jagose notes dryly that, as a critical term, “queer” has “proved to have a highly elastic sense of history.”²² In this larger sense, queer studies offers “ways of analyzing

¹⁸ Claudia Schippert, “Saint Mychal: A Virtual Saint,” *Journal of Media and Religion* 6(2), 2007, 119.

¹⁹ Janes, *Visions of Queer Martyrdom*, 10.

²⁰ Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 72.

²¹ Jay Emerson Johnson, “Introduction to Volume II,” *Queer Religion volume II: LGBT Movements and Queering Religion*, eds. Donald Boisvert and Jay Emerson Johnson (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2012), x.

²² Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 75.

both civic and religious discourse... while still resisting normalizing standards of sexual behavior and gender performance.”²³ Indeed, queer lenses can disrupt heteronormative concepts and systems, including (for example) supposed dichotomies between male and female or human and divine.²⁴ In that sense, this work uses queer studies to “prompt a critical retrieval of traditional religious discourse as a culturally destabilizing [and thus queer] force.”²⁵ As such, the term “queer” is perfectly suited for use in a study where subjects themselves are often *already* conceiving of it elastically in various time periods (i.e., in the lives of saints).

It is also the case that the act of queering religious texts or figures can be both rhetorical and novel historical approaches to reclaim and celebrate LGBTQ people in historical or religious narratives where they have been erased or hidden. Both rigorously researched historiography that uncovers and queers previously hidden or erased lives and experiences *and* new, creative descriptions of saints’ imagined lives, attractions, or actions empower readers to discover or imagine new role models or historical trailblazers. Many of the saints mentioned in the pages that follow engaged—or are imagined to have engaged—in behaviors or attractions not condoned by their contemporaneous societies. Given these sometimes-unbridgeable gaps in time and circumstance, Mona West and others advocate using “queer” as an inclusive form of terminology because it carries the advantage of avoiding problematic and distinctly modern labels such as “gay” or “lesbian”. At the same time, such language recognizes the historically “antecedent” spaces such figures can occupy conceptually in current discourse.²⁶ Indeed, historians ranging from George Chauncey and John Boswell to D. Michael Quinn and Janet

²³ Ibid, x.

²⁴ Donald Boisvert and Carly Daniel-Hughes, “Introduction to the Volume,” *Bloomsbury Reader in Sexuality, Gender, and Religion* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 1.

²⁵ Johnson, “Introduction to Volume II,” xi.

²⁶ Mona West, “Daniel” *The Queer Bible Commentary*, eds. Deryn Guest, Robert Goss, Mona West, Thomas Bohache, (London: SCM Press, 2006), 430.

Jakobsen have traced the contours or antecedents of contemporary SGM communities within historical contexts.²⁷ One community commentator online described this process more directly as the act of identifying “our tr-ancestors.”²⁸ Such queer discursive elements form new examples—what religious historian Mark Jordan describes as the ways in which people and institutions “deploy religious powers for making alternate characters.”²⁹

Of course, there is no scholarly consensus on the use of distinctly contemporary terminology to describe historical lives and experiences vastly separated from our own. Opposing the view that there are instances or terms that can (however imperfectly) be used to signify the historical, lived experience of sexual difference in societies’ pasts, Jagose notes that caution is needed when dealing with the “vagaries” of historical terminologies, which “rarely match the altogether neater paradigms that purport to describe” contemporary terms like LGBTQ or queer.³⁰ On the other hand, Mark Jordan point out that *all* terms are in a sense subjective and malleable. “The scientifically charged term ‘homosexuality,’ the individual elements of the ever-expanding [LGBTQIA+] acronym, the person afflicted by ‘same-sex attractions,’” he writes, “are all characters as much as the sodomite. They are not transparent registers of facts... they are characters with pasts and futures, ready for a host of rhetorical deployments.”³¹ In this light, given the inherent shortcomings and multiple potentialities for all terms, choosing *and carefully defining* one, as has been done in this current study, seems acceptable.

²⁷ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 96. John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 42-50. D. Michael Quinn, *Same-Sex Dynamics among Nineteenth-Century Americans* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 33-35. Janet Jakobsen, “Queers are like Jews, Aren’t They? Analogy and Alliance Politics” *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question*, eds. Daniel Boyarin, Daniel Itzkovitz, Ann Pellegrini, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 65.

²⁸ Ephilei “Trans saints,” *TransChristians.org*. (online) www.transchristians.org Accessed March 2016.

²⁹ Jordan, *Recruiting*, 209.

³⁰ Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 73-74. See also Jordan, *Recruiting*, for example 29-31, 51-53, 150-154, 169-172.

³¹ *Ibid* 210.

Finally, some sensitive terminology used by the many actors and informants referenced in this research cannot always simply be reflected without comment. Specifically, the terms “homosexual” and “gay” have been used varying and a variety of contexts over the past few decades, and authors and individuals may often have different intent or even different concepts or connotations in mind when making these linguistic distinctions. Foucault’s assertion that sexual identity terminology like “homosexual” is a modern (medical) invention used to designate a condition of being—a type of person rather than a specific act or behavior—and thus exert power over them is still relevant today.³² Indeed, several of the digital research sites examined here explicitly do not view SGM individuals or relationships positively. Accordingly, both affirming and hostile uses of signifying language are identified and deconstructed in this study, fully cognizant of alternate uses of terms that are used as slurs, couched in difficult discussions of uses of power, symbolism, and heteronormative supremacy.³³

To summarize, there are three defining criteria guiding the terminology that is present in this work. The first is that the blanket term for *contemporary* sexual and gender minority communities is “SGM.” Individuals who have provided more specific language will have their preferred identities and genders represented as faithfully as possible, and the term “queer” will be used in situating some saints within historical context as well as in relation to subjects’ trans-historical discussions.

³² This will be discussed in more detail in section [1.3.2](#) in the context of Vatican officials’ use of the term “homosexual” in both written and oral statements. Being able to recognize intent—especially when pejorative or caustic—makes the understanding of labels and definitional choices described here all the more necessary. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, vol 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 42. See also Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 41-59.

³³ Of course, normative and reifying speech can adapt or coopt seemingly any term into a pejorative, including those positively referenced in the larger discussion above. See, for examples, Jim Downs, *Stand by Me: The Forgotten History of Gay Liberation* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 31.

1.2 SAINTS IN AMERICAN RELIGIOUS SETTINGS

Terminology surrounding personal labels and identities is not the only topic that requires careful consideration. Concepts of saints and sainthood have varied across time, through various subcultures, and among different denominations. Combined with the persistence and evolution of devotionism, diverse narratives of saints online are producing multiple, novel power dynamics and underlying constructions of identity. Clarifying the working definition of “saints” within this work parallel to their diverse definitions across various Christian groups throughout American cultural history is a crucial starting point for situating how current uses and understandings of saints in the communities in this study both expand and diverge from historical norms. Historian Simon Yarrow describes Christian saints, at their most basic, as heroic archetypes, wherein “heroes [are] people who embody qualities we would wish for ourselves, and who might champion our causes.”³⁴ Indeed, the human inclination to look for individuals to admire and imitate is largely universal among cultures and time periods—a phenomenon sociologist Max Weber broadly described as “an ethical systemization... [for] actor[s] possessing the charisma of ‘goodness.’”³⁵ Taking the above definitions together, the current work operationalizes the term “saint” as the collective product of religiously affiliated images and hagiographies surrounding an individual that function within religious and cultural systems of presentation to incite or retrench novel or normative moral positions. While the present study focuses on moral positions related to sexual attraction and gender expression, it also incorporates the historical fact that even traditional hagiography has never been written “for historical

³⁴ Simon Yarrow, *The Saints: A Short History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), vii.

³⁵ Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, Ephraim Fischhoff, trans. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 156. See also Yarrow’s discussion on this topic in pages 7-8.

accuracy or empirical plausibility.”³⁶ This definition allows for the study of the manners in which the frameworks of traditional saints continue to evolve in contemporary discussions and narratives for and by SGM saints and their devotees. *Digital Devotions* demonstrates how such practices are at once both novel and steeped in centuries of tradition and precedent.

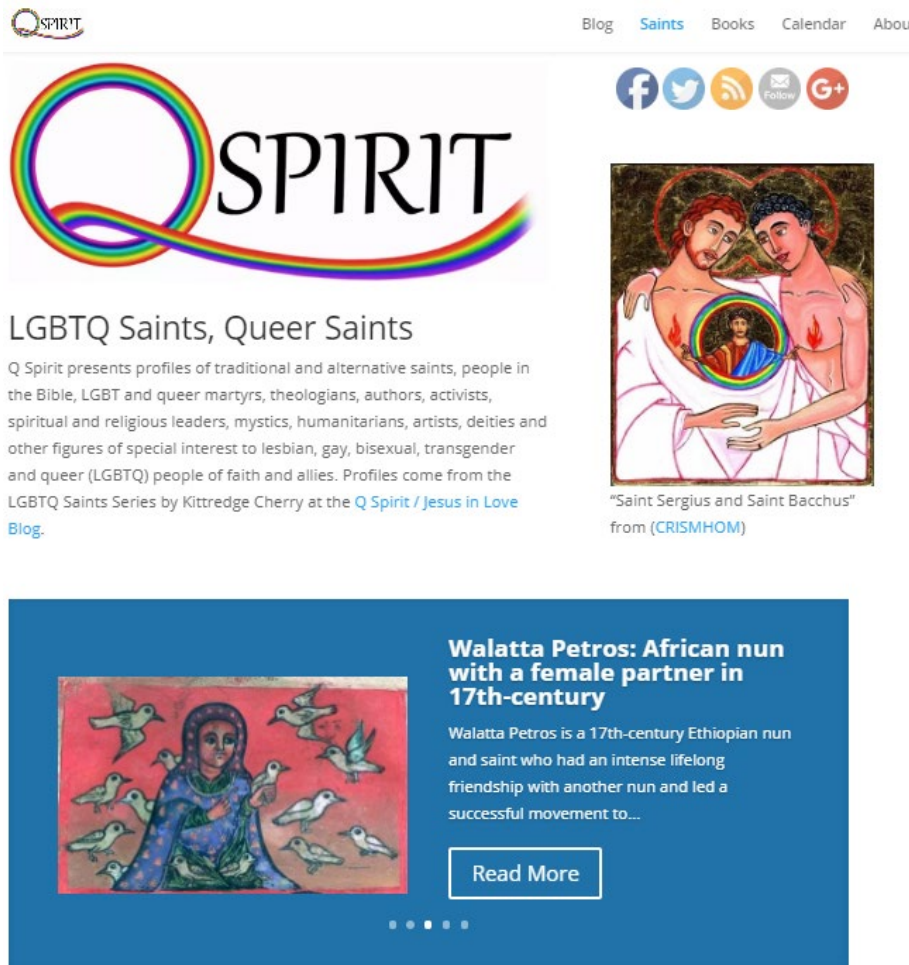


Figure 1. As one of the sites in this study, Q Spirit’s splash page for its Queer Saints Series ably demonstrates one way in which saints are both ancient and contemporary symbols for exploring contemporary concerns and issues.

³⁶ Yarrow, *The Saints*, 110.

This work highlights SGM Christians and their allies within venerative traditions who employ narratives and images of specific saints as tools that may help contextualize, define, or incorporate both religious and sexual identities. The historic and theological influences of American Christianity, which vary across denominations and locales, have contributed to some positive and many negative effects on SGM movements generally and SGM Christian movements specifically. It is this often-divisive history, however, that illuminates how the venerative phenomena under examination herein have come to be so significant for large numbers of people. Thus, the Christian traditions primarily (but not exclusively) associated with or referenced by these communities include Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox Catholic, and Independent Catholic traditions. As will become clear, the influential symbolism saints offer, along with the rhetorical and theological authority of saints, manifests in unique ways across specific communities. Finally, a specific historical example of SGM adoption of saint frameworks foregrounds the current work through the “cultural sainthood” of Judy Garland (1922-1969). As a clear example related to the narratives and queer subjectivity assessed in the present study, this pre-Stonewall historical parallel and transitional cultural symbol foreground the larger analysis and phenomena that are the central focus of this work.

1.2.1 The Modern History of Roman Catholic Devotionalism

The present research into specific, contemporary acts and adaptations of saint veneration is only a small part of a much larger and complex history. Within Roman Catholic ecclesiastic framework, saints emerge either through official canonization by church elites or through the emergence of sustained popular veneration over time. An excellent example of this system is the popular veneration of St. Jude. In American Roman Catholic culture during the early and mid-twentieth century, “clergy encouraged... popular piety for pastoral reasons, as a way for people

to cultivate and enjoy greater intimacy with the sacred,” and chief among saintly devotions was St. Jude, the patron saint of hopeless causes.³⁷ In the twentieth century Jude became so popular in certain American Catholic communities by the 1960’s that priests had to assure laity that the Vatican’s impending removal of “historically unverifiable saints” would not impact devotionality to Jude; the Roman Catholic Church, they assured devotees, “lacks the power to unmake any saint whom God has made.” Robert Orsi’s work explicating the complex devotionality of patrons of St. Jude demonstrates that “devotions were not [usually] imposed from [Roman Catholic leadership] down, and they were not simply improvised independently by laity in times of need; rather, devotionality was one way that... people shaped and shared a common Catholic culture together.”³⁸

Devotionality within Roman Catholicism has a number of underlying influences and motivations beyond the Church’s articulated goal, which is to recognize and honor a deceased individual for having lived a life that was sufficiently holy (as defined by adherence with Roman Catholic doctrine) as to merit immediate and indisputable closeness to God in heaven. A number of priests in twentieth century dioceses in the United States complained that Church leadership was more interested in using devotionality to support churches’ finances more than their ministries; some went so far as to describe themselves as “holy racketeers.”³⁹ Likewise, while reforms in the canonization process occurred in the thirteenth, seventeenth, and twentieth centuries, it is no secret among historians and scholars that the recognition of sainthood is “just as much a political, sociological, and diplomatic matter as it is a religious concern.”⁴⁰

³⁷ Robert Orsi, *Thank you, St. Jude: Women's Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 18.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 38 and 18.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 17-18.

⁴⁰ Yarrow, *The Saints*, 84-86; see also Jordan, *The Silence of Sodom*, 3-4 and especially 226.

There are a number of excellent examples of this truism in the recognition—and revocation thereof—saints suspected of being patrons for SGM. Saint Aelred (1110–1167), a twelfth-century English abbot who was widely revered for his teachings on the potentials of human love, lived for decades in his abbey in Rievaulx in exceptionally close friendship with a fellow monk. His case for sainthood arose as grassroots devotionism from the community in Rievaulx and those familiar with his extensive historical and spiritual writings. He was maintained as a minor saint for hundreds of years by the Cistercians (and more specifically, English Trappist communities) of the Roman Catholic Church.⁴¹ During the Roman Catholic Church’s mid-twentieth-century reforms surrounding the recognition of saints, however, Aelred’s sainthood was “clarified” as having never been officially canonized in the 2001 update to the *Roman Martyrology*. The Church cited “a lack of evidence of sainthood” and “folklore origins” for Aelred’s beatifying miracles, but critics accused the church of “revoking” the title from certain early and mediaeval saints based on contemporary political concerns.⁴² In Aelred’s case, some historians and lay Catholics had referred to him as “the gay saint” because of his writing on human friendship and his intimate personal correspondence with another monk (with whom he was buried).⁴³ Critics argued that the contemporary perception of Aelred as essentially “gay” spurred the Church’s actual motivation in expunging his status as a saint.⁴⁴ The fact that after this criticism gained popularity Aelred reappeared in the *Martyrology* without comment in the 2004 edition does little to deflect detractors’ suspicions. This series of events mirrors a more

⁴¹ Brian McGuire, *Brother & Lover: Aelred of Rievaulx*, (New York: Crossroad Press, 1994), 15-18.

⁴² Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 233.

⁴³ It is notable that Aelred remains the patron saint of several LGBTQ religious organizations, including the Episcopal ministry Integrity and the religious Order of Saint Aelred in the (largely culturally conservative) Philippines.

⁴⁴ Jordan, *Silence*, 173-174. The fact that following this criticism Aelred reappeared without comment in the latest (2004) edition of the *Roman Martyrology* as an unofficial saint—i.e., a cult—does not help the Roman Catholic Church. This latest entry simply notes his “historical” role as a saint-like figure, “particularly among Western European Cistercians.” Roman Catholic Church and James Gibbons, *The Roman Martyrology* (Baltimore: J. Murphy Co, 1916).

explicit case during the same period: that of Sergius (also referred to as Serge or Sergios in Eastern Rites) and Bacchus.⁴⁵ Some Roman Catholic texts explicitly stated that the pair, who were removed during the update of the calendar in 1969, were “patrons of... (unofficially) gay men”; some English-language versions of their hagiography do include translations that describe them as “lovers,” after all. The 2001 Roman Catholic *Birthday Book of the Saints* (written by laity explicitly for a Roman Catholic audience) sums up the prevailing logic of the Roman Catholic Church’s 1969 deletion by stating, “The image of these two husky centurions sashaying around in drag started giving people the wrong idea, and accordingly their Feast Day has been removed from the Calendar of Saints.”⁴⁶ While some observers demur at the possibility that saints like Aelred or Sergius and Bacchus were simply victims of a larger and unbiased purge of “popular” saints who were never officially canonized in the early Christian church, the coincidence that such saints were removed raised concern and anger among other SGM laypeople who prayed to them for intercession.⁴⁷

It should be noted that beatifications and canonizations can also take political and cultural considerations into account without being inherently contentious. For example, a contemporary example that is often cited as evincing political calculus around sainthood is the dual canonizations of John Paul II and John XXIII in 2014. Pope Francis’ simultaneous elevation of *both* the most well-known modernizing *and* traditionalist popes (respectively) of the twentieth century was seen as a way to balance and placate the modernist and traditionalist camps within

⁴⁵ John Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 155.

⁴⁶ Dennis O’Neill *Passionate Holiness: Marginalized Christian Devotions for Distinctive People* (Victoria: Trafford Publishing, 2010), 49.

⁴⁷ Expressions of frustration over the removal of queer or potentially queer saints can be seen, for example, Terence Weldon, “Some Very Queer Saints and Martyrs,” *Quest*, (July 29, 2013), <http://questlgbti.uk/some-very-queer-saints-and-martyrs/>

the Church itself.⁴⁸ Similar cross-cultural currents also sweep through other churches that recognize saints. The Russian Orthodox Church has for years struggled to deal with “rightwing factions” within the Church that seek canonization for highly controversial historical Orthodox figures such as Rasputin and Ivan the Terrible.⁴⁹

While the politics and cultural associations around saints have shifted, the persistence—or perhaps more accurately, the visibility—of saint veneration in American Catholic religious life has also waxed and waned during the latter half of the twentieth century. It is well-documented that the decades leading into the 1950s were periods of substantial numerical and financial growth for many Catholic communities and organizations across America. In late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America, “Catholics formed their own monolithic entity—standing apart [and] living apart,” as if in a cultural “fortress designed to protect Catholics from a hostile society and socialize them into... Catholic faith and morals.”⁵⁰ Importantly, the many social and religious Catholic lay organizations during this time worked to support this closed-system community structure while also functioning to safeguard against Catholic assimilation into aspects of larger (Protestant) American culture. In the 1960s, during Vatican II the council reaffirmed the continued importance and relevance for Catholic life and devotion, highlighting “three areas in which the lives of remarkable persons could serve to enrich and empower the lives of ordinary individuals: example, fellowship, and aid.”⁵¹ Additionally,

⁴⁸ Yarrow, *The Saints*, 7. See also Alan Johnston, “Vatican declares Popes John Paul II and John XXIII saints,” BBC News (London: BBC News, 2014). <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-27172118>

⁴⁹ Karin Hyldal Christensen, *The Making of the New Martyrs of Russia: Soviet Repression in Orthodox Memory* (New York: Routledge Press, 2018), 40.

⁵⁰ Donald F. Crosby, *God, Church, and Flag: Senator Joseph R. McCarthy and the Catholic Church, 1950-1957*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), ix. James D. Davidson, “The Catholic Church in the United States, 1950 to the Present.” *The Church Confronts Modernity*. Leslie Woodcock Tentler, ed. (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 2002), 177-207.

⁵¹ John Hawley, “Introduction,” *Saints and Virtues* John Hawley, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), xiii

beginning in the late 1970s, American Catholics (particularly their bishops) experienced “new confidence” to speak publicly and increasingly politically about social and moral issues in American life.⁵² This new method of engagement and outlook was termed “public Catholicism.”⁵³

Despite this increase in outreach and ecclesiastic support, in the decades immediate following the Second Vatican Council saint devotionism did not appear robust to many within the church or to religious scholars.⁵⁴ From the 1960s to the 1980s, significant and well-documented decreases in devotionism at Roman Catholic shrines and within congregations occurred.⁵⁵ During this time, Catholic “authorities, far from launching [more] devotional practices, [were] traditionally unfavorable, or at best indifferent, to them. New devotions had to prove themselves before they [could be] sanctioned.”⁵⁶ Indeed, prior to the renewal of scholarly interest in devotionism as an enduring, living practice in the 1990s, the perception of American devotionism to saints was so poor that theologian John Coleman proposed in 1987 that “we have experienced a... loss in regard to saints,” and argued that most Americans are so far removed from the devotional aspect of Catholicism that they “lack the language tools necessary to speak of saints.”⁵⁷ British religious historian Simon Yarrow describes the majority of the twentieth century as comprising “understandably... demoralizing circumstances” for saints in the

⁵² Petro, *After the Wrath of God*, 98-100.

⁵³ Jose Cassanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1994), 193. See also David J. O'Brien *Public Catholicism* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996) for the origination of the term “public Catholicism.”

⁵⁴ For example, Donald Weinstein and Richard Bell, *Saints and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 161

⁵⁵ John A. Coleman, “Conclusion: After Sainthood?” *Saints and Virtues*, John Hawley, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 206. Lawrence Cunningham, *The Meaning of the Saints* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), 49. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 8 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 21.

⁵⁶ Paula Kane, “Marian Devotion since 1940: Continuity or Casualty?” *Habits of Devotion: Catholic Religious Practice in Twentieth Century America*, James O'Toole, ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 89–130, citing Ryan.

⁵⁷ Coleman, “Conclusion: After Sainthood,” 206.

Roman Catholic Church.⁵⁸ Scholars generally agreed during this time period that American Catholics steeped in “modernity” were left with “the absence of any vital ideal of sanctity in modern times.”⁵⁹

Such gloomy outlooks on the statuses of saints and Roman Catholic devotionism have proven to be overblown. From the end of the twentieth century into the twenty-first, numerous scholars of American Catholicism have been identifying new and continuing traditions of devotionism for both the Virgin Mary and a multitude of saints. The persistence of saint veneration in Catholic life roughly parallels (and has continued since) the activities of Pope John Paul II, who served as pope from 1978 to 2005 and who canonized more saints than all other Popes in the last five centuries combined.⁶⁰ To see the continued salience of saints for the faithful, one hardly needs to look further than Pope John Paul II’s *own* canonization with Pope John XXIII in 2014, or that of Pope Paul VI’s alongside Archbishop Oscar Romero in 2018. Pope John Paul II’s canonization was attended by 800,000 pilgrims in Rome and was broadcast live to several million viewers worldwide.⁶¹ In the past two decades, Hopgood, Orsi, Savastano, Tweed, Nabhan-Warren, Yarrow, and other scholars have documented numerous forms of devotionism within a variety of Catholic communities, demonstrating that such practices are still relevant variables in the study of Catholic life in America. In 1996, Robert Orsi published *Thank You, St. Jude*, a thorough examination of how the veneration of a virtually unknown saint

⁵⁸ Yarrow, *The Saints*, 145.

⁵⁹ Coleman, “Conclusion: After Sainthood?” 206-207.

⁶⁰ John Paul II celebrated 147 beatification ceremonies; he proclaimed 1,338 people to be Blessed and canonized 51 Blessed for a total of 482 saints. Such record-setting numbers could be interpreted as an effort to revive devotionism among the faithful. Holy See, *His Holiness John Paul II: Short Biography* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, no copyright date). http://www.vatican.va/news_services/press/documentazione/documents/santopadre_biografie/giovanni_paolo_ii_biografia_breve_en.html. Accessed April 2012.

⁶¹ Yarrow, *The Saints*, 3. It is also worth noting that John Paul II’s 2011 beatification drew even *larger* crowds; 1.5 million people in St. Peter’s Square.

became to one of the most important and widespread devotions in America in the early twentieth century. Less than a year later, the publication of Thomas Tweed's influential work on Cuban Catholics' devotionism to the virgin Mary, *Our Lady of the Exile*, demonstrated (along with contemporaneous and subsequent work by scholars such as Socorro Castaneda-Liles, Sally Cunneen, Paula Kane, and Kristy Nabhan-Warren) that Marian devotionism was alive and well in the United States (and particularly so in many immigrant churches). In 2005, Robert Orsi followed the success of *Thank you, Saint Jude* with *Between Heaven and Earth*, a wider survey of saint veneration in the United States in the twentieth century, while Tweed published *America's Church: the National Shrine and Catholic presence in the nation's capital* in 2011 to assess the continued importance of Catholicism in America. New directions and developments in Catholic studies continue to emerge, particularly around minority community experience, as Kristy Nabhan-Warren's work on the Catholic Cursillo movement in the United States demonstrates.⁶² Finally, scholars such as James Hopgood, Claudia Schippert, and Peter Savastano continue to add to this dialogue with new arguments about who can be considered a saint in contemporary society and how contemporary Catholics relate to specific Catholic saints, respectively.⁶³ This expanding topic of research demonstrates both the history and the continuance of saints and devotionism as salient and persistent practices in Catholic lives straddling "the break between the working class and rural immigrant church and the modern

⁶² Kristy Nabhan-Warren, *The Cursillo Movement in America: Catholics, Protestants, and Fourth-Day Spirituality* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

⁶³ *The Making of Saints: Contesting Sacred Ground* James Hopgood, ed. (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2005). Schippert, "Saint Mychal: A Virtual Saint," 118. Peter Savastano, "St. Gerard Teaches Him That Love Cancels Out": Devotion to St. Gerard Maiella among Italian American Gay Men in Newark, New Jersey" *Gay Religion* Scott Thumma and Edward Gray, eds. (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2005), 181-202. Peter Savastano, "Changing of St. Gerard's Clothes: An Exercise in Italian American Catholic Devotion and Material Culture," *Italian Folk: Vernacular Culture in Italian American Lives*, Joseph Sciorra, ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 171-188.

middle class culture.”⁶⁴ These authors and others demonstrate that Catholic saint veneration (and thus the fruitful study thereof) is neither as extinct nor as static as was previously thought.

Scholars and theologians have also detailed numerous ways in which Catholic devotionalism and sexual and gender minority spirituality have experienced both continuity and evolution during roughly the last century. For example, it is now understood that devotional practices can impact, rather than simply reflect, larger perceptions and worldviews. Robert Orsi argues that parishioners both shape and react to their Catholic faith traditions, noting that “these women created and sustained [their] world in relation to Jude... [they] imagined reality and its alternatives, and how they lived in this imagined and reimagined world through their devotions.”⁶⁵ In other words, Orsi demonstrated that his subjects have agency around their interactions with saints, taking in Catholic perspectives, practices, and teachings and then “re-imagining” them in ways that fit their lives and experiences. *Thank You, Saint Jude* also demonstrates the significance that gendered cultural expectations and social systems play in shaping devotionalism among women. One example Orsi cites is the ways that both narratives of petition and redemption allowed women to talk about otherwise taboo domestic and family concerns and issues like domestic unrest or recent financial trouble.⁶⁶ Gendered expectations of religious narratives—and the ways that communities exercise agency through their engagement with saint narratives and veneration, using devotionalism to both limit and subvert gender and sexual norms—are critical assumptions and components explored in *Digital Devotions* as well.

Contemporary theologians have also identified this phenomenon, and some argue that it can be conceptually situated within the Catholic framework of “emergence.” Discussing how

⁶⁴ Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 107.

⁶⁵ Orsi, *Thank you, St. Jude*, 186.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 131-2.

SGM communities have cultivated and advocated for change through Roman Catholic traditions, influential queer theologian John Falcone describes both *parrhesia* (the early Christian ethic of empowered public speech) and the theological concept of emergence as essential spiritual and ecumenical tools. Emergence occurs in moments or “gaps” of uncertainty, Falcone writes, in which “the Holy Spirit nudges forth insight and wisdom; She brings unity while maintaining diversity...; She makes power blossom from weakness, at the margins and up through the cracks. She works at points of dynamic emergence” to inspire positive change regarding inclusion for SGM both in and outside the Roman Catholic Church, in keeping with the larger will and vision of God.⁶⁷ Through “gaps” in ritual and in the uncertainty of prayer, in other words, SGM can (through the Spirit) be particularly empowered or inspired to reimagine or reexamine traditional Catholic teachings and assumptions that are harmful to marginalized members.

Devotionalism among sexual and gender minorities is also important because of the unidirectional power dynamics inherently implied (though ultimately disproved) within the construct of Roman Catholic sainthood. Saint veneration is still a part of the religious lives and worldviews of many American Roman Catholics (as has been demonstrated above), and effectively queering or re-imagining the very category of sainthood speaks directly to—and some would say, against—issues of authority and influence of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States. As noted previously, the Catholic Church remains among the most powerful Christian groups in many areas of the world, and has frequently used its cultural and political power in multiple countries to impact perceptions of and government policies concerning SGM communities. Moreover, it has often (though, importantly, not always) espoused normative and

⁶⁷ John P. Falcone, “Do not Quench the Spirit: Rainbow Ministry and Queer Ritual Practice in Catholic Education and Life” *More than a Monologue: Sexual Diversity and the Catholic Church, vol. 1* Christine Firer Hinze and J. Patrick Hornbeck II, eds. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 114-123. The appeal to the Spirit rather than Mary, Jesus or God is a rhetorical strategy Falcone discusses elsewhere in the text as a way to appeal to a version of Catholic spiritual authority that is less bounded and defined by Roman Catholic teaching and tradition.

patriarchal social and policy positions that have resulted in deep and frequent pain or ultimately death for members of these communities.⁶⁸ Historian Richard Giannone’s experience that “the [internal] battle for a gay man is against taking on the pathologized interpretation of homosexuality that is intertwined with religious bigotry” and living “within the closet of the [Roman Catholic] Church” is not uncommon among SGM communities—particularly among those who grew up pre-Stonewall.⁶⁹ With such longstanding and one-sided power dynamics, the act of queering or reclaiming something so closely (though not exclusively) associated with Roman Catholics as saint veneration and iconography is inherently subversive and potentially powerful and transformative.⁷⁰

As a final example (one that will be discussed in more detail in section [1.3.3](#)), Peter Savastano’s ethnographic work in a Catholic parish in Newark, New Jersey also highlights SGM use saints for integrating religious and sexual identities. Savastano describes how some gay Catholic men in his study had become devotees to saints such as Sebastian and Gerard. By and large, the men began their devotionism because they were drawn to the way that these particular saints were portrayed in devotional imagery. However, their practice ultimately led them to feel validated and supported in their own experiences, sexuality, and spirituality.⁷¹ As their devotions continued—independently from one another, it should be noted—many of them “prayerfully” concluded that their sexual identity was welcomed and supported by Gerard or

⁶⁸ For examples of positive Catholic intervention for SGM communities, see White, *Reforming Sodom*, 141. For more frequent instances in which it has caused harm, see Jordan, *Silence of Sodom*, 7; Petro, *After the Wrath of God*, 149 & 152.

⁶⁹ Richard Giannone, *Hidden: Reflections on Gay Life, AIDS, and Spiritual Desire* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 41.

⁷⁰ Jakob Hero, “Toward a Queer Theology of Flourishing: Transsexual Embodiment, Subjectivity, and Moral Agency” *Queer Religion Volume II: LGBT Movements and Queer Religion* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2012), 143-165.

⁷¹ Savastano, “Changing of St. Gerard’s Clothes,” 184.

Sebastian and thus God.⁷² In other words, Catholic iconography and devotionism were adopted and transformed into an affirming validation of both faith and sexuality among some gay men within an urban New Jersey parish. This dissertation supports and expands Savastano's findings by indicating that sexual and gender minority devotional practices are not limited to small, closeted communities of gay Catholics in New Jersey. Rather, the present work demonstrates that they are integral components of queer iconography and devotionism that shape larger social aspects of queer communities online.

1.2.2 The Salience of Independent Catholic and Orthodox Catholic Denominations

The Roman Catholic Church in the United States has comprised the first part of this narrative due to its significant influence in US culture and its many influences on saint narratives and their ability to shape and influence and reify cultural norms and identities. It is the single largest denomination in the country—comprising between one-fourth and one-fifth of the US population—wields major political influence and is usually able to present a unified institutional voice via its tightly regulated and systematized structure and leadership.

However, a number of independent Catholic churches are also relevant to the present investigation of subversive devotionism and online communities due to their political and cultural affiliations with larger progressive and conservative movements. In fact, independent Catholic denominations have larger percentages of LGBTQ member participation than does the Roman Catholic Church in America and that LGBTQ advocacy is by far the most numerous type of social cause among members.⁷³ Several of the independent Catholic movements popular in America date back to Catholic reform movements in eighteenth century Europe; others are

⁷² Savastano, "St. Gerard Teaches Him That Love Cancels Out," 186.

⁷³ Julie Byrne, *The Other Catholics: Remaking America's Largest Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 270-274.

twentieth century creations and reactions to the reforms of Vatican II and modernity. Scholar Julie Byrne classifies these groups in terms of “liberal” and “conservative” branches typified in the American ideological dichotomies that have been increasingly dominating this socio-political landscape.⁷⁴ This observation is in line with other recent scholarship that notes that religious traditions in the United States in general—and among Christian denominations especially—are more aligned with specific liberal or conservative political affiliations now than at any other point in American history.⁷⁵ Byrne categorizes older independent Catholic Churches, like the Church of Antioch, the Ecumenical Catholic Communion, and the White-Robed Monks of St. Benedict as socio-politically and ecumenically liberal in outlook, but notes that most twentieth century Independent Catholic groups like the Society of Pope Pius X are more conservative than the Church in Rome.⁷⁶ For all their diversity, Byrne estimates there are roughly one million independent Catholics in the United States, which is a minute percentage of all people who claim to be affiliated with a religious tradition in the United States.⁷⁷

Independent Catholics are of particular interest for the present investigation, given their more activist-oriented viewpoints and activities. Most liberal Independent Catholic groups not only ordain women (including the Matriarch of the Church of Antioch) but also perform same-sex marriages, have open communion, and allow members to have multiple religious affiliations simultaneously.⁷⁸ Similar scholarship by historian Heather White reveals that some independent Catholic churches have been at the forefront of the gay liberation movement since the early 1970s. In fact, the independent Catholic Church of the Beloved Disciple participated in the very

⁷⁴ Ibid, 34.

⁷⁵ Robert Putnam and David Campbell, *Amazing Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 3.

⁷⁶ Byrne, *The Other Catholics*, 4.

⁷⁷ For comparison, Byrne notes that in 2016 there were about 87,000 Quakers, 2.8 million Episcopalians, 5.9 million Jews, and 64 million Roman Catholics in the United States.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 4-5; 225-227.

first Gay Freedom Day in New York City in 1970, while its Sunday Masses regularly attracted hundreds of congregants.⁷⁹ Byrne describes non-Roman Catholic churches as sites and communities that “harbor and test that which is elsewhere disallowed,” much like the online spaces of the present study. Byrne refers to these communities and traditions as a “research lab... arts incubator... [and] black sheep... that shows how modern Catholicism works.”⁸⁰ These types of creative liturgical, ecclesiastic, and theological experimentation are important not only for the impact that they have had, and continue to have, on members and communities of independent Catholic churches, but also for their potential to impact Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches and practices over time. Highlighting the subversive nature and narratives of independent Catholics allows one to better assess “the thoughts and unthinkableables [sic], centers and peripheries, flows and fault lines of Catholicism.”⁸¹ This dissertation applies that same assessment to the roles that SGM saint veneration plays in people’s lives and in larger religious frameworks as a means to better understand the intersection of SGM spirituality and Catholic tradition.

The ability to occupy novel spaces by liberal Independent Catholic Churches is to some degree juxtaposed by the staunch traditionalism of many Orthodox Catholic communities. Denominations of Orthodox Catholicism do have often vibrant, if usually small, communities throughout the United States; the total number of all orthodox denominations together in the US is estimated to be just over half that of Independent Catholics.⁸² Denominations such as Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, or Serbian Orthodox each recognize a different papal head and

⁷⁹ White, *Reforming Sodom*, 149.

⁸⁰ Byrne, *The Other Catholics*, 5.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² The largest denominations in the US are: Greek Orthodox (476,900), Orthodox Church in America (84,900), Serbian Orthodox (68,800) and Russian Orthodox (27,700). Justin Cannon, *Homosexuality in the Orthodox Church* (Berkeley: Fotolia, 2011), 76.

observe different traditions and beliefs (such as those around Christology), but also recognize the common historical threads of their beliefs leading back to the early Christian church.⁸³ More importantly for the concerns of the current study, saint veneration has prominent roles in Orthodox religious life regardless of denomination, and as such requires some explication here to inform the analyses in Chapter 3.

Very little has been published on the history and experiences of SGM in Orthodox Christian communities either in the US or internationally. What research does exist reflects narratives common in the larger history of SGM and Christian communities. Frequently, individuals who identify as sexual or gender minorities face being ostracized or having to endure “don’t ask, don’t tell” mentalities from Orthodox Christian communities and leaders. Many face exclusions from parish life, and some face physical violence. For example, Justin Cannon recounts the stories of four Orthodox families (including Greek and Russian Orthodox) who experienced family trauma, separation, and rejection from both their home congregations and some family members. This history has also played out within the Axios organization, an affirming Orthodox Church of America (OCA) organization in communion with Eastern-Rite Orthodox members. In the early 1980s, the private mailing lists of the chapters were leaked to the OCA bishop, who excommunicated every member on the list and contacted all of their individual churches to ban them from confession. After nearly thirty years, Axios now claims three chapters in the United States, but has never fully recovered from this devastating organizational blow.⁸⁴ Finally, Orthodox Catholic sexual and gender minorities (particularly Greek and Russian Orthodox) report that a common rationale for rejection or discrimination is

⁸³ Angie Heo, “Racialized Crossings: Coptic Orthodoxy and Global Christianities,” *Sainthood and Race: Marked Flesh, Holy Flesh* Molly Bassett and Vincent Lloyd, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 150-163.

⁸⁴ Cannon, *Homosexuality in the Orthodox Church*, 76-88.

that “it is simply tradition.” Historian Stephen Morris observes that “many Orthodox, when faced with acceptance of gay and lesbian people by larger society, simply assert, ‘It is forbidden!’ without examining the previous practices of the Church. For many people, ‘Holy Tradition’ is simply what they have experienced or what has become typical practice in the last fifty years rather than... [an accurate] description of the Church over the millennia of its existence.”⁸⁵

As in other denominations, however, there are priests who deviate from the official positions of condemnation espoused by the larger church. Some Orthodox theologians stridently put forth alternative theological reasoning to support and welcome SGM laity, and others have found welcoming orthodox communities or church homes in Independent Catholic or other Christian (including Metropolitan Community Church) communities.⁸⁶ A frequent question of Orthodox members when facing acceptance of SGM members or loved ones is reportedly, “*Ti tha pi o kosmos?* What will the world say?” Increasingly, progressive Orthodox members respond with, “What will *God* say if you reject those made in His image?”⁸⁷

One final observation key to some Orthodox communities is that systemic and complex issues of race often intersect with the perceptions of sexual and gender identity and religious concerns. In particular, SGM members of the African Orthodox Church in America (which at its

⁸⁵ Stephen Morris, *When Brothers Dwell in Unity: Byzantine Christianity and Homosexuality* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2016), 2.

⁸⁶ Bryce Rich, “Tradition or Traditions? The case of sex and gender” *For I am Wonderfully Made: Texts on Eastern Orthodoxy and LGBT Inclusion* Misha Cherniak, Olga Gerassimenko, Michel Brinkshroder, eds. (European Forum of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Christian Groups, 2016), 88-107. All of the 27 articles in this volume are examples of the diversity and inclusion being promoted by some Orthodox clergy members, former clergy, and lay leaders.

⁸⁷ Cannon, *Homosexuality in the Orthodox Church*, 3. “Open Letter from the European Forum of LGBT Christian Groups to the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Catholic Church, gathered in Crete 2016” *For I am Wonderfully Made: Texts on Eastern Orthodoxy and LGBT Inclusion* Misha Cherniak, Olga Gerassimenko, Michel Brinkshroder, eds. (European Forum of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Christian Groups, 2016). p 324-328.

height boasted just over 30,000 members) frequently have the added trauma of experiencing systemic racism added to the risks of rejection already present in many Orthodox settings.⁸⁸ Although thorough qualitative research is slim, evidence of rejection among African American Orthodox churches indicates such experiences are not uncommon; a “marginalization within an already marginalized group.”⁸⁹ Additionally, black SGM Americans often find it particularly difficult to extricate themselves from potentially detrimental situations within their faith communities, as “the heavy emphasis on church and family in African American culture makes it extremely difficult to leave,” despite “the black church [having] been a leader in the oppression of black gays.”⁹⁰ This is paralleled by experiences among SGM members of Syrian and Coptic Orthodox Churches. Their often-precarious situations as “minorities within a minority” who value (and are often dependent on) family ties have only been compounded in recent years as more and more become immigrants or refugees in the US or Europe, fleeing violence in Egypt, Syria, or elsewhere in the Middle East.⁹¹

1.2.3 Contemporary Saints in American Culture

Some scholarly attention has focused on the ways in which a (usually deceased) popular social icon or star can be understood or come to function similarly to a traditional holy person or saint in a given society. However, there is little research suggesting if or how these types of popular or cultural saints might develop in SGM communities. In what ways could people most likely to have been impacted by the often acrimonious history between sexual and gender

⁸⁸ Heo, “Racialized Crossings,” 158.

⁸⁹ Horace Griffin, *Their Own Receive Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches* (Eugene: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 187.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 10.

⁹¹ Heo, “Racialized Crossings,” 152, 154.

minorities and many of the most powerful denominations of American Christianity adopt aspects of Christian sainthood for their own icons?

Defining a popular figure in a society as a type of cultural saint—that is, defining saints broadly as venerated, iconic, or highly respected (i.e., “holy”) people—allows for a wider and more comprehensive assessment of how this type of cultural and religious phenomenon develops across time and place.⁹² Most notable within this line of scholarship is James Hopgood and his 2005 edited volume, *The Making of Saints*, as well as Bassett and Lloyd’s edited work *Sainthood and Race*.⁹³ Their broader definition of the concept has additional relevance here because it closely mirrors the interpretations and common understanding of many mainline protestant denominations. Accordingly, popular or cultural constructions of sainthood provide a common theological context in which contemporary actors may engage with “saints” in contexts that vary significantly from most of the Catholic teachings described above. An imprint of one popular Lutheran periodical summarizes a common mainline Protestant view of saints, reminding readers that “any member of the body of Christ can be a saint... *You* are a saint, together with others in the church community” (emphasis added).⁹⁴ Such language around the communion of the faithful-as-saints has been observed in some of the online communities discussed in greater detail in the following chapters.

While this work will offer one possible answer to this question through examining the late-twentieth century associations and iconography of Judy Garland in the following subsection, it

⁹² This is the basic definition most commonly used across historical and cultural methodologies; see Yarrow, *The Saints*, throughout. Molly Bassett and Vincent Lloyd, “Introduction” *Sainthood and Race: Marked Flesh, Holy Flesh*, Molly Bassett and Vincent Lloyd, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 2. James Hopgood, “Introduction: Saints and Saints in the Making” *The Making of Saints: Contesting Sacred Ground*. James Hopgood, ed. (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2005), xi-xxi. Byrne, *The Other Catholics*, 210.

⁹³ *Sainthood and Race: Marked Flesh, Holy Flesh*, Molly Bassett and Vincent Lloyd, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2016). See in particular Jared Hickman, “The Recanonization of St. Cyprian: The Deep History of Black Religion and Racialism” 66-81, and Heo, “Racialized Crossings,” 150-163.

⁹⁴ Elizabeth Hunter, “All Saints Day” *The Little Lutheran*, vol. 9, 4 (Chicago: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2015), 1.

also speaks to the growing field of queer studies and its intersection with SGM spirituality in America.⁹⁵ The present study joins a growing range of contemporary scholarship disputing pioneering sociologist Max Weber's famous observation "that secularizing societies no longer need saintly intervention."⁹⁶ Rather, it builds on Hopgood's more recent observation that contemporary saints continue to represent an understudied aspect of religious life in America.⁹⁷

Given both the historical and continued influence of Catholicism in shaping the discourse surrounding the morality and very nature of homosexuality, examining ways in which popular cultural generally, and SGM communities specifically, are interacting with aspects of Catholic tradition and saint veneration provides needed context for studying queer narratives of saints.⁹⁸ In *The Making of Saints*, a number of scholars argue that the perception and classification of saints in contemporary America has expanded greatly beyond the traditional purview of Catholic hierarchy and authority. As historian Simon Yarrow notes, even traditional hagiography was not written "for historical accuracy or empirical plausibility," so it should come as no surprise that the bounds of this category are expanding within contemporary societies.⁹⁹ Instead, they propose that near-saint status is commonly bestowed by a wide range of subgroups throughout the Americas and beyond onto individuals that acquire a kind of cultural veneration in their own right. These authors highlight figures such as Evita Peron, Che Guevara, James Dean, Elvis Presley, and a host of other stars/performers, folk saints, and popular icons as people who are

⁹⁵ Thumma and Gray's *Gay Religion*, Richard Hardy's *Loving Men: Gay Partners, Spirituality, and AIDS*, and Mark Jordan's *The Silence of Sodom: Homosexuality in Modern Catholicism* are three excellent but very different methodological approaches to the study of religion, homosexuality, and American Christianity specifically. These authors approach the similar subject of gay religion from (roughly) the perspectives of queer theory, anthropology and theology, and historiography, respectively.

⁹⁶ June Macklin, "Saints and Near-Saints in Transition: The Sacred, the Secular, and the Popular." *The Making of Saints: Contesting Sacred Ground*. James Hopgood, ed. (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2005), 1-22.

⁹⁷ Hopgood, "Introduction," xvi.

⁹⁸ It is well documented that Catholic perceptions and rhetoric of "same-sex desires have been decisive in [shaping] European and American histories of what we now call 'homosexuality.'" See Jordan, *The Silence of Sodom*, 7-8.

⁹⁹ Yarrow, *The Saints*, 110.

venerated with authoritative “texts,” disciples, relics, and pilgrimages.¹⁰⁰ Beyond such perfunctory identifiers delineating near-saint status, though, Hopgood and Macklin also delve into the underlying anthropological and religious mechanisms through which figures come to hold an essentially sainted status for groups of people. Hopgood claims that such figures must fit (or be made to fit) into a “holy” category within which saints and near-saints share common popular impetuses leading to their designation and recognition, expressions of admirers’ devotion, and the creation of narrative structure that explains and encapsulates their actions and lives.¹⁰¹ Similarly, Macklin notes in her work on saints and near-saints that admirers create holy biographies that convey sentimentality, meanings for the person’s acts and objects, and rituals through which the person may be approached and venerated.¹⁰²

Chapter 3 discusses in great detail different types of saints SGM communities identify or relate to, and the way that most of these figures or couples are (like all saints) largely unmoored from the constraints of historical veracity or provability. Because of the largely ahistorical nature of that analysis, an example that delves more deeply into the historical social construction of a non-religious SGM saint is both salient and instructive; its contextual historiography demonstrates likely cultural antecedents to the saint narratives in the communities included in this study. A prime example that foregrounds the cultural phenomenon of creating or reimagining saints among SGM communities is the example of Judy Garland. The creative activity around Garland’s life and mystique, particularly for white gay men from the 1950s through roughly 1970, is indicative of a specific “in-between” generation and possible historical antecedent not otherwise widely represented in this study. Historians such as Robert Orsi and

¹⁰⁰ Macklin, “Saints and Near-Saints in Transition,” 16.

¹⁰¹ Hopgood, “Introduction,” xvi.

¹⁰² Macklin, “Saints and Near-Saints in Transition,” 2.

Paula Kane have shown the usefulness of conceptualizing “in-between” generations of Catholics. Their work demonstrates that Catholics innovate with socio-religious mechanisms like saints or Catholic mysticism in order to navigate rapidly or dramatically changing social and cultural landscapes.¹⁰³ This phenomenon is precisely what occurred among a subsection of SGM from the 1950s until about 1970.¹⁰⁴ While the available personal information, interests, and manners of speech (i.e., text shorthand and slang) suggest that online users and contributors observed in this study are predominantly middle aged or younger, the generation immediately preceding them was neither deeply excluded from American public life as was the case in the 1930s, nor yet engaged in the first wave of active liberation in the 1970s and early 80s.¹⁰⁵ Women caught between changing social norms in Orsi’s landmark study turned to Saint Jude, the patron saint of lost causes; by many accounts, a subsection of gay (mostly white) men during *this* “in-between” period frequently turned to Judy Garland.¹⁰⁶

Whether through hagiographic art, the explicit declaration of her sainthood—complete with astrological sign and feast date—or through the enduring beliefs of “the older [gay] generation... [who] practiced Judyism,” Judy Garland was often spoken of as a patron saint.¹⁰⁷ Such creative, informal devotionism to Garland mirrors what Kevin Mumford describes as the “first wave” of queer historiography exemplified by John D’Emilio, George Chauncey, John

¹⁰³ Robert Orsi, *Thank you, Saint Jude*; Paula Kane, *Sister Thorn and Catholic Mysticism in Modern America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 12 (for example).

¹⁰⁴ The late 1960s through early 1970s marked a critical acceleration of open and “out” SGM activism and cultural identity movement; at the national level, the inspiration for—or “symbolic moment” attributed to—these shifts is often said (perhaps inaccurately) to be the 1969 Stonewall Riots in New York. See White, *Reforming Sodom*, 13 and 141-2.

¹⁰⁵ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 335-345.

¹⁰⁶ David Halperin, *How to be Gay*, (Cambridge: Belknap Books, 2012), 65.

¹⁰⁷ Sophie Iremonger, *Saint Judy Garland: Saint Judy Damning the Monster to the Depths of Hell* (mixed media, 2007), <https://www.saatchiart.com/art/Photography-Saint-Judy-Galand-Damning-the/149071/65950/view>; Michael Yawney, *Gay Astrology: The Complete Relationship Guide for Gay Men* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2001), 25; Antonyus Subia, “Judy Garland Is Proclaimed a Saint,” (2009), <http://www.antinopolis.org/hernestus/newsrelease.html>; Robert Leleux, “The Road Gets Rougher for Judyism’s Faithful,” *New York Times*, (April 5, 2012), 2.

Boswell, and others—identifying and investigating a specific organization, locale, or identity construction.¹⁰⁸ The history and socio-religious mechanisms that combine to create this remarkable synthesis of culture, subjectivity, and faith around Garland provides important context foregrounding contemporary examples of queer saints. As an exceptionally popular precursor to a plethora of queer icons during the queer liberation movement of the 1970s and beyond (who themselves serve similar functions to many of the saints in the current study), Garland-as-saint creates a salient cultural reference—in some ways, a starting point—that, with the rise of the internet, shares a similar queer subjectivity with the massive diversity of saints from both ancient and modern origin in contemporary discourses online.



Figure 2. Works such as Sophie Iremonger’s consciously combine classical poses and iconography representative of saints (in this case, St. George and the dragon) with contemporary materials and subject matter. *Saint Judy Garland Damning the Monster to the Depths of Hell* (2007).

¹⁰⁸ Kevin Mumford, *Not Straight, Not White: Black Gay Men from the March on Washington to the AIDS Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 2.

The “holy biography” of Judy Garland—that is, the meanings and connections that fans and devotees see or read into her life—is fairly well documented. Macklin, Doss, and Hopgood all note that in order to rise above fame or stardom and become a larger reverential symbol, admirers must be able to read deeper and personal meaning into the biographical (or semi-biographical) stories that they tell about a popular saint’s life.¹⁰⁹ So, while Judy Garland is already widely considered to be a “gay icon” in a general sense, many specifics of the actress’s life are interpreted as being reflective of, or resonating with, many SGM, especially before the advent of the gay liberation movement in 1969. However, the present examination demonstrates that Garland’s status exceeds that of mere icon in a number of ways. While a growing number of iconic figures exist for SGM communities, many (particularly older, white gay men) earnestly insist that Garland “is not a gay icon, she is a gay saint.”¹¹⁰ Specifically, many cite her often well-known or public struggles for acceptance, self-determination, perseverance, and love and friendship as personal and interpersonal issues that many had experienced themselves.¹¹¹ Entertainer Rufus Wainwright sums up this perspective:

Judy is not a gay icon at all. She is somewhere far beyond that. She is a gay beacon. A gay saint. She has led the way through the darkness for some 50 years. Whether it's the Wizard of Oz or the Judy at Carnegie Hall LP - these are brilliant touchstones for the gay experience. A kind of communion takes place between a gay listener and Judy. ... There is no level on which Judy Garland doesn't connect with gay men.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Macklin, “Saints and Near-Saints in Transition,” 14. Hopgood, “Introduction,” xx. Erika Doss, “Popular Culture Canonization: Elvis Presley as Saint and Savior.” *The Making of Saints: Contesting Sacred Ground*. James Hopgood, ed. (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2005), 152-168.

¹¹⁰ Susie Boyt, *My Judy Garland Life: A Memoir* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009), 210.

¹¹¹ Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*, (Oxford: British Film Institute, 1986), 156.

¹¹² Rufus Wainwright, “Gay icons” *The Guardian Press* (Nov. 11, 2006).

Mapping such similarities onto SGM experiences and desires propels this narrative into the realm of “holy biography” outlined above. *The Advocate*, a national gay rights magazine, once deemed Garland to be so popular in the 1960s that it declared her to be “the Elvis of homosexuals [sic].”¹¹³ Research about the popular veneration of Elvis suggests that Elvis is a quintessential example of a popular icon-turned-saint figure by and for his fans.¹¹⁴ The comparison between Elvis and Garland has been made explicitly by a number of commentators; in *Growing Up Gay*, for example, Bob Smith references “King Elvis” and “Queen Judy” as quintessential drag typologies that can easily identified.¹¹⁵

Beyond mere identification with an individual, Hopgood writes that one of the essential elements in a reverential biography is attenuation to and identification with the aspects of suffering highlighted in the figure’s life.¹¹⁶ The tragic aspects of Garland’s life, and SGM identification therewith, were being discussed publicly as early as 1967. Richard Dyer, in his thorough study of the legacy of Judy Garland specifically among gay men, notes that suffering is chief among the many possible reasons that some men so identify with Judy Garland. This phenomenon seemed most heavily concentrated, he notes, among white, male, urban gay groups who would have had exposure to her work and life story after 1950 but prior to her death and the advent of gay liberation after 1969.¹¹⁷ As a case in point, Garland biographer David Shipman noted that for Garland’s 1960 performance in Amsterdam’s Tuskinski Theater, there wasn’t a member of “any of Amsterdam’s numerous gay clubs who *wasn’t* at that performance.”¹¹⁸

¹¹³ Jeff Weinstein “Judy and Stonewall, Together Wherever They Go” *Obit Magazine*. (June 22, 2009.)

¹¹⁴ Doss, “Popular Culture Canonization,” 152-3.

¹¹⁵ Bob Smith, *Growing Up Gay: From Left Out to Coming Out* (Boston: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995), 68.

¹¹⁶ Hopgood, “Introduction,” 15-16.

¹¹⁷ Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, 142.

¹¹⁸ David Shipman, *Judy Garland: The Secret Life of an American Legend* (Westport: Hyperion Books, 1994), 400.

The suffering, tragic icon theory is not without its issues, however. For example, one of the earliest examples of this theory, expounded in a 1967 *Time Magazine* article about Garland, noted that “the attraction among gay men [to Garland] might be made considerably stronger by the fact that she has survived so many problems; homosexuals identify with that...” and that “Judy was also beaten up by life [and] embattled...”¹¹⁹ After all, Garland’s problems with alcohol, pill addictions, and dominating spouses were widely known during her lifetime. A contemporaneous commentator, William Goldman, concluded that the tragic figure Garland cut explained gay men’s affinity for her. He wrote that “homosexuals tend to identify with suffering. They are a persecuted group and they understand suffering. And so does Garland. She’s been through the fire and lived—all the drinking and divorcing, all the pills and all the men, all the poundage come and gone—brothers and sisters, she knows.”¹²⁰ Clearly, such readings are subtly but largely negative, and reflect pre-liberationist readings of these relationships. They are necessarily entangled with homophobic and heteronormative perceptions of gay men in the 1960s.¹²¹ While highlighting this theoretical baggage, Dyer does not totally discount it as a possible component of some SGM attraction to Garland. Rather, historians’ nuanced reading of this time period recognizes that internalized homophobia and oppressive cultural norms and pressures could still hold significant power among gay subcultures, particularly in public spaces.¹²² Contreras elaborates on this complex historical relationship specifically. “The icon of Judy Garland as a representation,” he writes, “has become somewhat of an embarrassment to gay men, a hysterical reminder of the dark days before Stonewall, when loving Judy functioned not only as a code for other gays... but also when the kind of pathos that

¹¹⁹ “Singers: Séance at the Palace” *Time Magazine* (August 1967).

¹²⁰ William Goldman “Judy Floats” *Esquire* (January 1969), 1.

¹²¹ Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, 146.

¹²² Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 275-280, 335-340.

Judy represented through her life and music seemed the most apt description of life in the closet.”¹²³ Thus, perhaps the most accurate conclusion mitigating these positions is that it “would be wrong to assume that only the more ‘positive’ readings or possibilities [of gay identification with Garland] accurately express” what are in fact a range of ways some gay men might have related to Garland’s image.¹²⁴

By examining other correspondence and recollections of Garland and gay (male) community interaction in the pre-Stonewall era, it is clear that there are multiple aspects or interpretations of Garland’s life that could have spoken to SGM. Specifically, Dyer argues that the narratives of suffering, an outgoing nature or passion for life, and themes of ordinariness, “passing,” and normality were read into the events and actions of Garland’s life and art in ways that spoke directly to some gay men during this time period.¹²⁵ Perhaps most importantly, this confluence of symbolism (and especially symbolic suffering) converged during a time period when few other possibilities or options for such models existed. This led to a concentration of interest on and about Garland by otherwise “isolated” or closeted men. “Gays in isolated places had worshipped Judy Garland at the movies or on LP and tape,” one blogger wrote, likening her to the “only lamp in a dark forest” during that time period.¹²⁶ Historian George Chauncey noted that events like Judy Garland concerts without fail allowed the creation and visibility of “gay subcultural codes to place themselves and see themselves in the dominant culture, to read the culture against the grain in a way that made them more visible than they were supposed to be, and to turn ‘straight’ spaces into gay spaces.” In this way, Judy Garland was one way that these

¹²³ Daniel Contreras *Unrequited Love and Gay Latino Subculture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 86.

¹²⁴ Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, 147.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, 143-47, 155.

¹²⁶ Hernestus, “The Death of Judy Garland and the Stonewall Riots,” *Temple of Antinous Blog*, (June 27, 2016), <http://antinougaygod.blogspot.com/2016/06/the-death-of-judy-garland-sparked.html>

men “appropriated [her] for the gay world and thus extended the boundaries of the gay world far beyond those officially tolerated.”¹²⁷

Overall, a number of facets of Garland’s life are important reasons behind the intense identification documented between Judy and SGM fans. Some recall that the emotionality evident in her singing was the kind of experiential “essence” in life that they identified with—a need to savor every moment and share it with others. Indeed, much correspondence from this period suggests that such identification is a common sentiment and that this “intense, authentic feeling” distinguished Garland from other stars.¹²⁸ Additionally, Dyer notes that Garland’s image of exterior normalcy hiding “difference” underneath can be immensely appealing. Garland’s life was able to be read as having both a normal, ordinary, “public” face and a different, secret personal life after her split with MGM in 1950. Such duality mirrored the experience of a large majority of gay men during the first half of the twentieth century, and Dyer argues that this element of “theatrically” “passing” set Garland apart from other stars.¹²⁹

A second important aspect that distinguishes fan adoration from the deeper kind of reverence that Hopgood assigns to popular saint icons is that sacrality is perceived around the performance and meaning of the acts, objects, and life of the figure. Queer depictions and uses of Judy Garland’s camp acting, memorabilia, name, and her life and death all attest to this pattern of reverential deference. In discussing Judy Garland's camp appeal, Dyer has defined the kind of camp that Judy Garland embodied as “a characteristically ‘gay’ way of handling the values, images and products of the dominant culture through irony, exaggeration, trivialization [sic], theatricalization [sic] and an ambivalent making fun of and out of the serious and

¹²⁷ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 288.

¹²⁸ Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, 149.

¹²⁹ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 276; Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, 143, 150-2, 154, 159.

respectable.” Garland embodies camp, he asserts, because she is “imitable, her appearance and gestures copiable [sic] in drag acts.” He argues that SGM audiences read (and now imitate) her “ordinariness” and “failed seriousness” in her early MGM films in light of her later “wonderfully over-the-top” style.¹³⁰ Even those who argue that Garland no longer represents an ideal model for SGM admit that Garland’s distinctive camp “remains an important representation in gay male self-styling, especially, but not exclusively, through drag performance.”¹³¹ Garland herself acknowledged her camp appeal during her lifetime; she once famously quipped that “when I die I have visions of [gay men] singing 'Over the Rainbow' and the flag at Fire Island being flown at half-mast.”¹³² Innumerable Judy Garland impersonators, artists, musicians, and fans continue to make reverential tributes to her life and songs, frequently performing everywhere from drag shows and nightclubs to concert halls and Carnegie Hall.¹³³

Additionally, objects once belonging to Judy Garland and Garland memorabilia are collected and produced in a decidedly devotional manner. Similar to memorabilia surrounding Elvis Presley, one can find all manner of kitsch, photographs, and albums disseminated widely both on the internet and in “holy places” that are given significance and meaning by fans and admirers. Of particular note is the status of her family home in Grand Rapids, Michigan, which has been turned into a popular museum showcasing her life, belongings, and a wide range of keepsakes and memorabilia. A Judy Garland festival has been held on the grounds every year since 1979, and the motto of the museum is “Judy: We will glorify your name!”¹³⁴ This slogan

¹³⁰ Ibid, 178.

¹³¹ Contreras, *Unrequited Love*, 86.

¹³² Fire Island was a resort community with a large LGBT presence during the 1950s and 60s and is referenced in Garland's final film, *I Could Go On Singing*. Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, 179. See also Travis Bone “Diva worship” *Gay & Lesbian Times* (July 17, 2003).

¹³³ See for example, Dan Barry, “The Boy Who Became Judy Garland,” *The New York Times*, (November 11, 2011), 3, and Rufus Wainwright “Rufus Does Judy at Carnegie Hall” *Allmusic* (Rovi Corporation, 2007).

¹³⁴ “Homepage” *The Judy Garland Museum* (online) <http://www.judygarlandmuseum.com/>. Accessed Jan 2014.

directly evokes Christian prayers, consciously inviting comparisons between these sacred figures and Judy Garland.

Historically, another way Garland devotees appropriated Garland for their own uses and identities was through the use of Garland's name. Michael Bronski, author of *Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility*, describes Garland as "the quintessential pre-Stonewall gay icon." She was so revered, in fact, as a gay icon that her best known film role, that of Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, became used as code among SGM, particularly gay men, in the 1950s. The expression, "Is he a friend of Dorothy?" was a discreet way of asking if someone was gay during this era.¹³⁵ On one level, this term developed in the context of the plot and symbolism of *The Wizard of Oz*; Garland's character Dorothy recruited an unusual group of friends during her journey through Oz—the Tin Man, the Cowardly Lion and the Scarecrow. Thus, referring to an individual as a "friend of Dorothy" meant that they were "unusual or odd" and thus "queer."¹³⁶ Others have argued that this phrase "mirrored many gay men's desires to escape the black-and-white limitations of small town life...for big, colorful cities filled with quirky, gender-bending characters who would welcome them."¹³⁷ Finally, such identification seemed to carry a meaning and a relationship much deeper than simply identifying with a particular film; to "use Garland's image" is to identify with her life in more personal ways: through her personal struggles, her move out of "ordinary" society into difference and androgyny, and her need to "pass" as herself or perform herself as a character in her later life.¹³⁸

¹³⁵ Michael Bronski *Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility* (Cambridge: South End Press, 1984), 104.

¹³⁶ Randy Eddy-McCain *And God Save Judy Garland: A Gay Christian's Journey* (Memoir, 2014), 2. Steven Frank, "What does it take to be a gay icon today?" *Logo* (online, September 25, 2007) <http://www.newnownext.com/what-does-it-take-to-be-a-gay-icon-today/9/2007/>

¹³⁷ Frank, "What does it take," 1. See also Contreras, *Unrequited Love*, 88.

¹³⁸ Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, 145, 156-168.

Finally, Hopgood, Malkin, and Doss identify ritual as the last element that demarcates the transition from a popular icon to a cultural saint. Doss in particular highlights the multitude of shrines, communal events, and special “Elvis rooms” that make ritual reflection and connection with the popular saint possible. Ritual recitation also includes the continued performance of Elvis’s songs, movies, and so on through professional performances.¹³⁹ There is similar evidence for enduring devotions to Judy Garland. As has been noted above, the reenactment of Judy Garland’s songs, acting, and campy style suggest a deep and abiding connection with the celebrity, with some performers even echoing Elvis’s (or Jesus’) followers’ insistence that Judy “has never left [us]... you have that ‘gotcha moment’ when Judy gets you, and then that’s just it for life.”¹⁴⁰ These creative expressions and rituals arguably serve as popular forms of consecration. Just like yearly pilgrimages to Graceland, one can read the persistence of Judy Garland festivals as a kind of group performance or pilgrimage to a sacred site. Many still recount stories of how “Judy got me through some of the darkest moments of my life,” or that they “loved Jesus and Judy Garland.”¹⁴¹ Perhaps most visible is the feast day set for Venerable Saint Judy by the Hollywood Temple of Antonius. As will be discussed in more detail in section [2.2.3](#), the self-described “Religion of Antonius, the Gay God” claims to be a “modern incarnation of the ancient cult of Antonius” with temples in Hollywood and Hamburg, Germany. June 27, the day of Judy Garland’s funeral in New York, is described as her Feast Day in their literature.¹⁴² Similarly, the *Gay Astrology* guide also lists Judy Garland in its constellation as “our gay patron saint.”¹⁴³

¹³⁹ Doss, “Popular Culture Canonization,” 154-6.

¹⁴⁰ Boyt, *My Judy Garland Life*, 204.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 205. Eddy-McCain, *And God Save Judy Garland*, 19.

¹⁴² Hernestus, “The Death of Judy Garland Sparked the Stonewall Riots,” 1.

¹⁴³¹⁴³ Yawney, *Gay Astrology*, 25.

Like many aspects of queer religion, the assignation of popular saint status to gay icon Judy Garland fits well with the many innovative forms of religious expression that both draw upon and depart from traditional modes of religious experience and veneration.¹⁴⁴ While the status of Judy Garland as both a film and gay icon is well established, the extent of the relationship fostered by some is clearly deeper. The argument that Judy Garland could be viewed as a saint in the lives and religious expressions of older members of some SGM communities is clearly cogent within the larger context of online communities creating and reimagining both religious and popular figures. Celebrated queer studies scholar David Halperin sums this up well. He argues that, while it is important to avoid the aspersion that all gay men or SGM have certain interests or tastes in common, it may well be that pre-Stonewall gay “culture... and the feelings, emotions, and complex combination of affect [were] epitomized by some gay men’s love of Judy Garland.”¹⁴⁵ This impetus reflects the “vast spiritual appeal” of icons in society as well as the fluidity and creativity of SGM spirituality in contemporary America.¹⁴⁶

1.3 AMERICAN RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS AND SGM COMMUNITIES

Feast days of saints are common occurrences in many types of Catholic, Orthodox, and Episcopalian religious traditions, yet, for some, the days set aside for saints like Sebastian in January, Perpetua and Felicity (sometimes referred to as Felicitas) in March, and Sergius and

¹⁴⁴ See for example, Elizabeth Stuart, *Gay and Lesbian Theologies* and Goss, *Queering Christ*.

¹⁴⁵ Halperin, *How to be Gay*, 66.

¹⁴⁶ Doss, “Popular Culture Canonization,” 163.

Bacchus in October have special significance. In private prayers and personal devotions, in online Christian forums, and in some churches, these examples and a growing number of others mark days of veneration or recognition for saints and martyrs who have special significance for SGM Christians. Saints have long been cited by adherents as a source of comfort and connection to the divine, by religious leaders as models for holy living and acting, and by scholars as a repository for symbolism and tradition.¹⁴⁷

The persistence and evolution of saint veneration in the United States is a key component in the argument that devotionism in online settings is producing unique environments with multiple, novel power dynamics and underlying constructions of identity. Yet, understanding the history, continuity, and ongoing evolution of devotionism in Catholic denominations is, on its own, insufficient. The other historical component necessary to foreground the current discussion is the history of, and interaction between, these established religious communities and leaders and SGM parishioners, activists, and theorists. As noted historian of Roman Catholicism Paula M. Kane observed in 2001, “the struggles of gay and lesbian Americans to reconcile their faith and sexual orientation have produced an outpouring of [creative artistic and religious expression] that may prove to be one of the enduring legacies of the recent *fin de siècle*.”¹⁴⁸ The intersection of the histories of devotionism *and* queer communities in Western Christianity together gives rise and meaning in the present to online spaces, which now harbor unique discussions and uses of saints.

¹⁴⁷ Yarrow, *The Saints*, 3.

¹⁴⁸ Paula Kane, “General Introduction,” *Gender Identities in American Catholicism* Paula Kane, James Kenneally, Karen Kennelly, eds. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001), *xix-xxxi*. See also page 235.

1.3.1 SGM Lived Religion in (and outside of) Catholic Communities

While Catholic devotionalism in general is recognized as a continuing aspect of Catholic religious practice and worldview, research surrounding the roles that religion plays in the lives and experiences of sexual and gender minority communities is also slowly expanding.¹⁴⁹ Together, this growing academic tapestry outlines the broad diversity of SGM religious experiences, theology, and spirituality, as well as traces the historical and experiential narratives that comprise dealings with religious institutions and various teachings. Yet, one aspect of this expanding field that has not been fully studied, as Mark Jordan notes in his 2011 work on the history of American religious rhetoric about homosexuality and adolescence, is the way in which both people and institutions “deploy religious powers for making alternate characters” or allowable constructions of personhood.¹⁵⁰ Thus, this research is well positioned to contribute to this growing field as more scholars and laypeople seek to understand the ways in which SGM persons encounter religious institutions, experiences, and theologies.

Several scholars of American religious history have compellingly argued that the rise of so-called “anti-gay” sentiment and activism within American religious communities has obscured historical narratives that include early roles and activities of “pro-gay” or homophile religious organizations and activists. Jim Downs, for example, documents how early antigay activists like Anita Bryant harnessed and co-opted, rather than created, social mechanisms and mobilization efforts for Christian denominations like the Southern Baptists in order to use

¹⁴⁹ For instance, rigorous scholarly work in this area includes Thumma and Gray’s *Gay Religion*, Talvacchia, Pettinger and Larrimore’s *Queer Christianities: Lived Religion in Transgressive Forms*, Jim Downs’ *Stand by Me: The Forgotten History of Gay Liberation*, Heather White’s *Reforming Sodom: Protestants and the Rise of Gay Rights*, and several excellent works by Mark Jordan and Melissa Wilcox. Their works, most notably Jordan’s *The Silence of Sodom* and *Recruiting Young Love* and Melissa Wilcox’s *Coming Out in Christianity: Religion, Identity and Community* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003) and *Queer Women and Religious Individualism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), provide important interpretive guidance for the present study.

¹⁵⁰ Jordan, *Recruiting* 209.

existing church structures and mechanisms to inflame and channel congregants fears about “the presence of homosexuals” in both American and church culture.¹⁵¹ Such trepidation (however misplaced) does not stem from some innate antagonism between traditional theological teachings and people who identify as SGM. Rather, Downs and numerous other scholars and historians demonstrate that the clash much of American culture is currently experiencing stems instead from larger social anxieties that emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century.¹⁵² Chief among the fears conservative Christians came to embrace were cultural anxieties based on the changing discourses around civil rights and discrimination that were expanding in the 1970s. More precisely, they noted that many of these conversations both in the public sphere, generally and in congregations across the nation, specifically either included or could be applicable for lesbian and gay rights.¹⁵³ Indeed, some scholars have argued that while (or even because) the Roman Catholic Church has capitulated to modern values in many arenas, it resists female and SGM sexuality all the more strenuously as its *prima facie* signifier of its “morality” as a whole.¹⁵⁴ The gradual realignment by evangelical religious organizations has come to include socio-political positions on issues ranging from sexuality and health to public education and the legal definition of marriage, combined with an intentionally socially conservative reevaluation, re-translation, and emphasis on previously unremarkable biblical passages.¹⁵⁵ This allowed a

¹⁵¹ Downs, *Stand by Me*, 55-57.

¹⁵² Jordan, *Recruiting Young Love*, 91-97. Petro, *After the Wrath of God*, 97-101. White, *Reforming Sodom*, 119-136.

¹⁵³ Rights and respect for other sexual and especially gender minorities was not necessarily included in early formulations of these movements, and also obscured the tension and marginalization experienced by SGM people of color and trans-identified folk. Too often, many early formulations of “gay rights” still implied “for white, cisgender males only.” Griffin, *Their Own Receive Them Not*, 10-11.

¹⁵⁴ Karen Trimble Alliaume, “Disturbingly Catholic: Thinking the Inordinate Body” *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler*, Ellen Armour and Susan St. Ville, eds. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 93-119. See especially pages 96 and 98. Alliaume cites free market capitalism, separation of church and state, and conscientious objectors outside of religious observances as cultural-political arenas in which the church has ceded ground in the modern era.

¹⁵⁵ For examples of the pivot to social issues like marriage, see Petro, *After the Wrath of God*, 108-113; for the reinterpretation of biblical passages, see White, *Reforming Sodom*, 34-37, 78; or Jordan, *Recruiting Young Love*, 52-

new conservative ethos that was stridently opposed to sexual and gender minorities not only to flourish, but also to wrap itself in a “Holy Tradition” that is more accurately a veneer legitimating and sustaining individual and institutional prejudice.¹⁵⁶

Conversely, the expansion and questioning of who could (or *should*) be fully included in the community lives of churches manifested in other kinds of discourses. The pre-twentieth-century history of SGM is a growing field and a hotly contested topic, and Christian (especially Roman Catholic) institutional views of “same-sex desires have been decisive in European and American histories of what we now call ‘homosexuality.’”¹⁵⁷ Yet, this study has already demonstrated that in many respects both hagiography and popular sainthood are not created “for historical accuracy or empirical plausibility”; it is their social effects that are of interest here.¹⁵⁸ Perhaps the most cogent observation relevant to the present discussion is that, until the early-to-mid-twentieth century, “the ecclesiastic closet” was indisputably an important space for SGM individuals. Queer historian Dominic Janes argues that this type of closet, though not without shortcomings, “constructed a place to contain same-sex desire and to display its signs in coded forms... This meant that churches were able to provide a degree of safety and community in times” and cultures that otherwise would often be hostile.¹⁵⁹

56. For further context, examples of Christian denominations that do not interpret the Bible as condemning SGM include some or all members of: the United Church of Christ, ELCA Lutheran Church of America, the Society of Friends/Mennonite (Quakers), Presbyterian (USA), Episcopalian, some Methodist denominations, the Dignity Roman Catholic organization, many Independent Catholic denominations (as noted above), American Baptists, the Evangelical Anglican Church in America, the Metropolitan Community Church, and the Unitarian Universalist Church. This is not an exhaustive list. Naturally, each denomination is slightly different in their exact application or interpretation, and may vary even by congregation. As an imperfect proxy for acceptance, see also David Masci and Michael Lipka, “Where Christian Churches, Other Religions Stand on Gay Marriage,” *Pew Research Center* <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/12/21/where-christian-churches-stand-on-gay-marriage/> Accessed January 2016.

¹⁵⁶ Morris, *When Brothers Dwell in Unity*, 2.

¹⁵⁷ Jordan *Silence of Sodom*, 7-8.

¹⁵⁸ Yarrow, *The Saints*, 110.

¹⁵⁹ Janes, *Visions of Queer Martyrdom*, 133.

In more recent history, this study is sometimes also referred to as the history of sexual citizenship.¹⁶⁰ Heather White documents American denominations that, as early as the late 1940s and 1950s, formed informal “homophile movements” among American progressive American denominations. These groups attempted to assist individuals with “homosexual inclinations or tendencies” constructively address “their thoughts, desires, feelings, and places in society.”¹⁶¹ While this type of well-meaning therapeutic intervention led in later decades to the rise of the damaging reparative therapy and “ex-gay” movements, it did plant important ideas and alternative discourses in both Catholic and mainline Protestant thinking about the ways Christians could or should welcome or support SGM members and communities.¹⁶² Many of these organizations have been active from the earliest days of the liberation movement in the 1970s.¹⁶³ For instance, the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) first opened its doors in 1968, and in just a few years boasted churches across the country in both urban and rural settings as well as leaders publishing articles in major gay news publications. White goes back even further, describing in detail the homophile movements in several mainstream churches dating back to the 1930s. San Francisco, for instance, had a clergy-led movement to accept and support gay and lesbian Christians, called the Council on Religion and the Homosexual. This coalition of numerous ministers and from four Protestant denominations (Methodist, Lutheran, Episcopal, and United Church of Christ) advanced to such a degree that by the end of 1965, “its achievements facilitated a stable politics of reform [in San Francisco]” that in time “made San Francisco a mecca for gay culture” well before the more nationally significant 1969 Stonewall

¹⁶⁰ See, for example, Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009) or Nancy Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

¹⁶¹ White, *Reforming Sodom*, 88-94.

¹⁶² Tanya Erzen, *Straight to Jesus: Sexual and Christian Conversions in the Ex-Gay Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 130-40, 221-28. Lynn Gerber *Seeking the Straight and Narrow: Weight Loss and Sexual Reorientation in Evangelical America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 112-16, 160-71.

¹⁶³ Downs, *Stand by Me*, 8.

riots in New York City.¹⁶⁴ In that sense, even as conservative Christians wrapped themselves in “tradition” and authority to justify their positions, progressive Christians also employed the “cloak of the cloth” to support and lend “social respectability and credibility” to their allies in the SGM community.¹⁶⁵ In the decades since, a growing number of Christian denominations across the country have continued or begun theological and ecumenical discourses that have evolved over the later part of the century and beyond.¹⁶⁶

Even as queer exegesis and affirming action have both increased in a growing number of Christian communities, most of the dominant contemporary narratives about SGM history and liberation have either suppressed or erased the positive roles that faith and church groups have sometimes played. Jim Downs chronicles—in both SGM history and community organizing in the United States—“gay people’s aversion to organized religion, especially Christianity, which many gay men and women saw as the foundation of gay oppression.” Such a broad characterization, he contends, minimizes if not erases groups and alternative communities like the Metropolitan Community Church, Catholic groups like Dignity and Axios, welcoming synagogues, and other spiritual groups.¹⁶⁷ One particularly jarring example of this retroactive narrative shift to downplay religious groups’ involvement in gay culture can be seen in the pages of the Los Angeles and New York-based LGBTQ newspaper *The Advocate*. Immediately after the arson attack of the UpStairs Lounge in June 1973 killed 32, *The Advocate* accurately described the victims “as members of the Metropolitan Community Church” and the fire as an attack on “a gay religious community and victims [who] were people of faith.” In fact, the paper

¹⁶⁴ White, *Reforming Sodom*, 74-5.

¹⁶⁵ Janes, *Visions of Queer Martyrdom*, 21. See also White, *Reforming Sodom*, 74 & 155-7.

¹⁶⁶ Jordan, *Recruiting Young Love*, 194-5. See also *Queer Christianities: Lived Religion in Transgressive Forms* (throughout) or the entries in *The Queer Bible Commentary* for representative examples of evolving Christian thinking and queer biblical exegesis.

¹⁶⁷ Downs, *Stand by Me*, 8, 29-30.

chided other news outlets reporting at the time for failing to properly and respectfully identify the victims of the Lounge fire as church members.¹⁶⁸ Yet, in the aftermath of the Pulse nightclub shooting in June 2016, this same paper referenced the UpStairs Lounge in its coverage of Pulse only as a “gay nightclub” a “gay gathering space” and a “gay club.” There is no reference or acknowledgement of the MCC and the spiritual community decimated by the arson attack immediately following their church service; indeed, the only reference to religion in *The Advocate’s* 2016 article is a quote asserting that religion, politics, mental illness, and hatred run together in the minds of killers.¹⁶⁹

It is clear that both historically and in contemporary American society, sexual and gender minorities and their religious organizations have been common targets of intimidation and violence. Indeed, violence and the threat of violence were (and are) common experiences woven into the history and lives of SGM along with their interactions with organized religion. While news reporting on homophobic violence did increase as the liberation movement gathered steam in the 1970s, historians argue that the increase in attacks on SGM “remains one of the most underreported themes” of this historical period. White notes that political concerns and narratives of free love and liberation supplanted images and narratives of adversity experienced during the time period by SGM. This became increasingly true as a stereotyped, idealized gay (white, urban, young, male) image expanded in both nascent gay culture and among the heteronormative perceptions and assumptions about who “gay people” (to use the nomenclature of the time period) were or what they looked like. Indeed, this impression was often facilitated

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 30.

¹⁶⁹ The MCC national leadership asserted in the days after the fire that “a third of the entire congregation of New Orleans was either dead, missing,” or injured in the attack on the Up Stairs Lounge. See Downs, *Stand by Me*, 30. See also Della Hasselle, “New Orleans LGBT community reacts to Orlando mass shooting, draws comparisons to 1973 Upstairs [sic] Lounge fire” *The Advocate* (June 12th 2016).
http://www.theadvocate.com/new_orleans/news/article_647a5530-6abf-52f1-abbf-c5e2453d9e84.html

by Black churches, who taught that “homosexuality was...sin, a negative ‘lifestyle,’ and a *white aberration*” (emphasis added).¹⁷⁰ Yet, Downs describes a “seemingly endless” series of reports in *The Advocate* from 1970-79 of gay men, lesbians, and transgender people beaten or murdered.¹⁷¹ This included reporting on multiple targeted murders in the same month, the possibility of a killer or killers in Texas responsible for up to 40 LGBT deaths in 1974, and the “Trashbag Murderer” serial killings in the late 1970s.

As particularly visible and vulnerable targets, MCC churches were also common sites of violence and intimidation from the 1970s onward. In addition to harassment, arson was a common theme; from 1973 to 1974, five MCC churches and one synagogue were burned, many to the ground. The Beth Chayim Chadashim community in San Francisco had their Torah—which had survived the Holocaust and been brought from Czechoslovakia—damaged almost beyond repair during a suspected arson attack in 1973. During this time period the country witnessed what was then the largest mass murder of sexual and gender minorities and allies in United States history: the UpStairs Lounge fire in New Orleans.¹⁷² In addition to being a bar, the Lounge functioned as a community center and MCC worship space; on the night of June 24, 1973, 32 people (including MCC minister Rev. William Larson, whose crushed and burned body hung halfway out of a second floor window for almost two days) were killed in a fire set after the conclusion of the MCC service there.¹⁷³ Churches throughout New Orleans refused to host funeral services for the dead, and the national leader of the MCC Church had to be flown in from San Francisco to preside over the mass service held in a Methodist church. Families refused to

¹⁷⁰ Griffin, *Their Own Receive Them Not*, 3-4. See also Downs, *Stand by Me*, 32-4.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid*, 36.

¹⁷² This tragic distinction would stand from 1973 until 2016; the deadliest attack on SGM people and their allies is, at the time of this publication, the Pulse nightclub shooting on June 12th, 2016. 49 people at the club in Orlando, FL were murdered by a single gunman.

¹⁷³ Downs, *Stand by Me*, 20.

claim many of the bodies, and two have still never been identified. Some news commentators reported that the tragedy of the evening was that “so many people escaped from the building,” and one radio show joked that the city should bury the ashes of the deceased “in fruit jars.”¹⁷⁴ These are just a sample of the kinds of callous disregard for the lives of SGM that the media, individuals, and many church organizations displayed during this period.

Not surprisingly, one of the major concerns among SGM in the 1970s was creating and maintaining “a community and culture in which to seek refuge.” Downs argues that there were “few institutions outside of the new [SGM] churches that could offer such refuge... With the start of the gay liberation, gay religious organizations grew exponentially not only because gay people feared being locked into the Three B’s [Bars, Beaches, and Bathhouses] but also because some gay men simply did not like those spaces.”¹⁷⁵ In retrospect, cultural critics argue that the theme of gay liberation “being all about sex” is not only misrepresentative of widely diverse SGM people and communities across the country but that it is also a politically motivated assertion. That is, focusing solely on sex acts and ethics as the sole or quintessential component of SGM interests and culture simultaneously *defines* and *polices* “acceptable” spaces of queer folk, reifies and reinforces SGM stereotypes (reducing people to “merely sexual entities”), and contributes to a narrative about the AIDS crisis that blames gay men for the epidemic.¹⁷⁶ It should go without saying that SGM people have diverse needs, fears, and interests—including spiritual ones—that have been flattened and erased in the larger narrative arcs of sexual liberation. Yet this same convergence of interests, needs, and spaces is happening again—now, in virtual settings. For many people, identifying as SGM means “being a part of a culture that

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, 8.

¹⁷⁶ Petro, *After the Wrath of God*, 9-11. Downs, *Stand by Me*, 5-6, 8. A particularly famous example of reducing portrayals of gay men to their sexual desires (and thus blaming them for later events) can be found in *And the Band Played On*.

has its own history and religion,” and many of these new devotional spaces are indebted to that queer cultural sentiment as well as the history and tenets of Christian faith and tradition.¹⁷⁷

1.3.2 Roman Catholic Authority and Censorship

Not all violence or intimidation is physical in nature, as minority communities know all too well. To that end, this section highlights Catholics’ experiences contextualizing or incorporating their religious and sexual experiences with or against the dominant message of Roman Catholic leadership. The theoretical formulation and expression of censorship and Foucauldian power-knowledge is a useful hermeneutical tool through which to analyze discussion and debate within religious organizations. More specifically, this analytical lens allows for outlining the rhetorical history of groups that have frequently held opposing views on the acceptability and roles of SGM in Catholic (or other Christian) congregations. Such examples of the changing nature of discourse surrounding the place of SGM Catholics within the Roman Catholic Church in America speak directly to the kinds of novel relationships many such members have with saints.

Naturally, subversive uses of traditional Catholic saints among SGM Catholics stand both alongside and in contrast to American bishops’ censorious efforts to repurpose and champion different saints that promote their own ideals of abstinence and sexual normativity. Foucault noted in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* that discourse involves more than just speaking; thought and speech are predicated upon the objects, rituals or norms, and privileges involved.¹⁷⁸ In religious communities and settings, these components are often laid bare, and rarely more so than

¹⁷⁷ Downs, *Stand by Me*, 14.

¹⁷⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge: And the Discourse on Language* trans by A M Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 33.

in the context of Roman Catholic hierarchical relationships with American SGM Catholics and communities.

It is not unusual for the views of religious elites or leaders to sometimes differ from those of their congregations (or even individual priests), and views on sexuality and sexual orientation are no exception. As the Catholic Church's statements in these arenas resonate less strongly with parishioners, divergent discourses are spilling over into other facets of Catholic life.¹⁷⁹ These historical and contemporary influences, together with the "post-secular" nature of the contemporary United States, all speak to the relevance of examining Catholic leaders' and laypersons' socio-political actions concerning the intersection of views on SGM issues and censorship over time.¹⁸⁰

In the past two decades alone, advances in global communications have both vastly complicated and enhanced models of information dissemination used by the Catholic Church to address the faithful. Of course, dialogue and dissent around the stances the Church has adopted—including that of the moral implications associated with homosexuality—have also been greatly affected. Though lay Catholics may personally evaluate and respond to the Vatican position regarding homosexuality, the dynamic relationships between leaders and laypeople are now changing via the ways in which discourse and censorship are enacted and resisted in communities capable of interacting with digital, mass-communication environments.

For the ecclesiastical leadership of Roman Catholic Church, controlling or dominating discourse is only successful if the desired reading and meaning (including moral force) is conveyed in a particular text, and so the ways in which Catholic policies and positions regarding

¹⁷⁹ Leslie Woodcock Tentler, *Catholics and Contraception: An American History*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 4, 265.

¹⁸⁰ Jürgen Habermas, "Notes on Post-Secular Society," *New Perspectives Quarterly*, 25(4) (2008), 17–29.

homosexuality are conceptualized, interpreted, and understood are of great importance for the religious leaders and elites involved. Similarly, opponents on both sides of debates concerning homosexuality have clearly realized that authors and texts can control debate by “drowning out [your opposition] by talking louder and longer” than they do, as well as by “corrupting any language [terminology] in which they might try to say things you don’t want them to say.”¹⁸¹ Yet, “prolonged partisan controversy produces usable rhetorical effects. ...It creates tedium, then aversion. Repetitive controversy prevents texts [or other arguments] from being reexamined while keeping them in plain sight.” In this way, Catholic and other religiously conservative leaders do not actually need to rhetorically outperform or convince reformers; they just have to wear them down until the majority of the audience gives up or loses interest. After all, this cycle writ large is arguably how the Bible has become to be associated with condemnations of homosexuality.¹⁸²

This strategy gains both additional importance and becomes harder to achieve, however, in an online age. Numerous scholars have demonstrated that reading and communicating are, by nature, subversive, and the differences in religious readings and textual interpretations of Catholic policy highlight the tension and contention that surrounds the struggle for rhetorical superiority. For example, historian Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin famously notes that “censorship is not merely what is denied, but also what is sanctioned and supported,” and this remains true within American Catholicism today.¹⁸³ Contemporary queer studies scholar Mark Jordan echoes this sentiment, arguing that Catholic texts can function to both “impose silence and generate

¹⁸¹ Jordan, *Recruiting Young Love*, 51.

¹⁸² Ibid, 194.

¹⁸³ Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin “Censorship, Editing, and Re-shaping of Jewish Identity: The Catholic Church and Hebrew Literature in the Sixteenth Century,” *Hebraica Veritas? Christian Hebraists and the Study of Judaism in Early Modern Europe*, Allison Coudert and Jeffrey S. Shoulson, eds. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 125-155.

kinds of speech.”¹⁸⁴ Jordan’s critical analysis goes further, however, postulating that presumed knowledge and authority are not merely stylistic choices or theological assumptions in Vatican documents, but calculated language chosen to quash dissenting opinions held or encountered by the intended audience(s). Jordan points to a number of socially and morally prescriptive documents issued by the Vatican in the previous few decades that, in his analysis, are further complicated with bureaucratic and legalistic language, incorporate theological assumptions directly into texts, and frequently repeat declared positions as part of a systematic rhetorical strategy that “can silence audiences much more effectively than by [simply] ordering them to keep quite.”¹⁸⁵ These aspects of Vatican texts impress upon their readers what Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor called the politics of “coercion... [and] the pressure of conformity” that “inevitably results from political and ideological tensions or disagreements within faith communities.”¹⁸⁶

Responses to official Roman Catholic censure and coercion basically follow what rhetoricians call models of “separation or integration” with an antagonistic organizational influence.¹⁸⁷ Such tension comprises a unique and often tragic component of the history between the Roman Catholic Church and SGM Christians. Hinze and Hornbeck assesses the ubiquity of this phenomenon for Catholic (or former Catholic) SGM community members in *More than a Monologue: Sexual Diversity and the Catholic Church*, noting that the often painful decision for individuals separation or inclusion regarding the Roman Catholic is an emotional

¹⁸⁴ Jordan *Silence of Sodom*, 51-2.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Charles Taylor, “A Catholic Modernity?” *A Catholic Modernity?: Charles Taylor’s Marianist Award Lecture* James Heft, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 13-38. See in particular Taylor’s discussion on the nature of Catholic discourse on page 17.

¹⁸⁷ Raz-Krakotzkin, “Censorship, Editing, and Re-shaping of Jewish Identity,” 126.

and essentially unavoidable choice for these Catholics.¹⁸⁸ While the majority of SGM who are born or raised Catholic leave the church—either permanently or for communities like the MCC or more progressive independent Catholic Churches—some choose association within Roman Catholic organizations like Equally Blessed, Dignity USA, or others. Dignity, as well as the Church’s responses to it, bears specific mention as an organization straddling these two worlds; Dignity attempts to escape the seemingly dichotomous choice to stay within the Roman Catholic Church at the price of “denying part of [oneself]” or leave and lose a different part of one’s identity. Such is the fine line walked by Dignity, the “model of working [for change] from within.”¹⁸⁹

As the oldest Roman Catholic ministry that affirms sexual and gender minorities in the US, Dignity USA has existed “to support and welcome LGBTQ Catholics” nearly as long as the modern gay rights movement in America; it will celebrate its 50-Year Jubilee in 2019.¹⁹⁰ Additionally, this organization endeavors to influence both public and theological debate concerning homosexuality through prodigious works, tracts, and online publications produced every year. Specifically, the organization’s website curates and disseminates SGM-affirming theological and news through three publications with multiple issues each year focusing on theology and liturgy, organizational affairs, and community news.¹⁹¹ Dignity promotes a perspective on Roman Catholic teaching and authority that allows for and encourages differences of or diversity in opinions and moral interpretation (in this case, specifically around sexuality

¹⁸⁸ Christine Firer Hinze and J. Patrick Hornbeck II, “Introduction” *More than a Monologue: Sexual Diversity and the Catholic Church*, vol. 1 Christine Firer Hinze and J. Patrick Hornbeck II, eds. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014): 1-14. See pages 3-4; in a general sense the pain of separation or misunderstanding is a theme in every article in the volume. See also Jordan, *Silence of Sodom*, 14 for additional explications of this type of experience.

¹⁸⁹ Jordan, *Recruiting Young Love*, 125, 127.

¹⁹⁰ “Homepage,” *Dignity USA*, (accessed March 1, 2013), <https://www.dignityusa.org/>. This distinction may be more perfunctory than noteworthy, as Equally Blessed, New Ways Ministries, and Axios, among others lay Catholic organizations, were *also* formed only a short time after Dignity began in the 1970s.

¹⁹¹ See “Publications,” *Dignity USA*, (accessed Feb 1, 2014), <https://www.dignityusa.org/page/get-information>

and gender identity) vis-à-vis the official positions and pronouncements of the Vatican and American bishops. This type of moral and rhetorical stance exemplifies an “inclusivist” position towards Catholic theology and teaching. American comparative religious scholar and Presbyterian minister James Wellman identifies inclusivist persons or groups as cultural actors who employ a “complicated weave of moral and ideological symbolic and social strategies” in order to construct progressive, affirming positions related to SGM rights, lives, and morality, especially in relation to the Catholic Church.¹⁹² For example, Dignity attempts to navigate this positionality by articulating an affiliation “with the catholic faith” as both an abstract and as a collection of believers in disagreement with official teaching because of their own authoritative Catholic experiences and understanding.¹⁹³ This rhetorical strategy of arguing from a viewpoint or theological position that invokes either a higher (more abstract) catholic faith or lived catholic experience (in dialogue with or opposition to the stated position of the leaders or current teachings of the Roman Catholic Church), has many parallels.¹⁹⁴ For instance, John Lynch argues that “individuals wished to see the church actually follow through on the ‘love the sinner’ portion of the ‘love the sinner, hate the sin’ dictum on homosexuality,” despite primarily experiencing the latter. He quotes an anonymous Catholic parent saying that “I simply want my son to be able to love someone, and to be loved, without the church telling us it’s wrong...”¹⁹⁵ Moral philosopher David Ozar, in an article in *Sexual Diversity and Catholicism*, exemplifies this impulse exactly when he describes his experience learning of a close friend’s transgendered status as an “wake up call” for him not to leave the Church, but to try to make other Catholics

¹⁹² James K. Wellman, “The Debate over Homosexual Ordination: Subculture Identity Theory in American Religious Organizations,” *Review of Religious Research*, vol 41 (1999), 184-206.

¹⁹³ Daniel A. Helminiak, “Frequently Asked Questions – Catholicism and Homosexuality,” *Dignity USA*, (accessed November 1, 2011), <https://www.dignityusa.org/page/frequently-asked-questions>

¹⁹⁴ Dignity intentionally uses a lower case “c” in “catholic” in this quote in order to invoke the “universal Christian Church” that in their view supersedes the Roman Catholic Church.

¹⁹⁵ John Lynch “Institution and Imprimatur: Institutional Rhetoric and the Failure of the Catholic Church’s Pastoral Letter on Homosexuality,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* vol 8 no 3 (2005), 383-404.

and Americans “change how we think and how we speak” about issues of gender and sexuality.¹⁹⁶ These types of appeals to experience are common in Catholic publications that seek to rebut or argue against what their authors describe as erroneous or outdated Catholic teachings or norms.

Finally, Dignity’s model of engagement and ministry has developed alongside several contemporary or “peer” organizations that also bear mention. Call To Action, Dignity USA, and New Ways Ministry all consider themselves peer Catholic organizations that support SGM Catholics. While Dignity USA has been the focus of this section due to its longstanding focus on lay Catholic experience and community (and is thus the only one of these included in the study’s analysis), New Ways Ministries and Call to Action perform other key services and functions that run parallel or support SGM inclusivity in the Roman Catholic Church. This ostensibly allows each organization to focus and specialize (to a degree) in these separate tasks or “callings.” New Ways Ministries was founded in 1976 as a result of the US Catholic Bishops Call to Action conference and seeks to “foster dialogue” and “combat homophobia” in the Roman Catholic Church and society. With a four-person staff and eight-person board of directors, this small group has an outsized online presence, hosting programs and publishing “research, publications, education about sexual orientation and gender identity” and issues that affect SGM.¹⁹⁷ Topics include criminalization, marriage equality, employment non-discrimination, family life, and a half-dozen others. Call to Action, conversely, is a Catholic social justice organization in the United States, focusing on “justice issues” for workers, LGBT communities, racial disparities, women, and girls, and for the development of socially progressive Catholic parishes. This group

¹⁹⁶ David T. Ozar, “Harming by Exclusion: On the Standard Concepts of Sexual Orientation, Sex, and Gender,” *Sexual Diversity and Catholicism: Towards the Development of Moral Theology*, eds. Patricia Jung and Joseph Coray (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 255-64.

¹⁹⁷ “Our Mission,” *New Ways Ministries*, (accessed Jan. 13, 2017), <https://www.newwaysministry.org/about/#history>

also points to the 1976 United States Roman Catholic Bishops Call to Action conference (itself a reaction and offshoot of the Second Vatican Council held 1962-65), from whence its name is derived.¹⁹⁸ With a staff of six and “vision board” of fourteen members from across the United States, this group works through its various church networks, newsletters, youth groups, and councils to address issues impacting SGM through a focus on events that promote “the dignity of all people and all families,” and to end discrimination.¹⁹⁹

One final component among these organizations is Equally Blessed. This coalition organization formed in 2010 as a related but distinct “coalition group” of the three organizations listed above.²⁰⁰ This “super-group” pools resources and expertise to address secular legislative and both inter- and intra-church ecclesiastic advocacy. Specifically, Equally Blessed

acquaints state legislators and members of the U. S. Congress with the opinions of the Catholic majority; serves as a point of [Catholic] contact... for secular organizations working on behalf of LGBT people and their families; speaks frequently with reporters, issues statements and writes op-ed articles for secular and religious publications; develops and circulates sound... resources that make the case for LGBT equality; calls our bishops back to fidelity when they make hurtful statements or take stands contrary to the church’s teaching on the dignity of every human person.²⁰¹

This organizational collaboration allows the three other Roman Catholic groups to present a larger and unified voice when undertaking advocacy work in the United States.

¹⁹⁸ “About Us,” *Call to Action*, (accessed June 10, 2018), <http://cta-usa.org/history/>

¹⁹⁹ “LGBT Justice,” *Call to Action*, (accessed May 20, 2018), <http://cta-usa.org/focus-areas/lgbt-justice/>

²⁰⁰ Fortunate Families, a Roman Catholic, SGM-inclusive support organization for families with SGM children (or relatives) was also a founding member of this coalition. It gained a new director in 2018 and subsequently dissociated with Equally Blessed. See John Freml, “Statement on the withdrawal of Fortunate Families from the Equally Blessed Coalition,” *Equally Blessed*, (April 6, 2018), <https://www.equallyblessed.org/news/announcements/2018/04/06/statement-on-the-withdrawal-of-fortunate-families-from-the-equally-blessed-coalition/>

²⁰¹ “What we Do,” *Equally Blessed*, (accessed June 5, 2016), <https://www.equallyblessed.org/about/>

The main response by the Roman Catholic Church in America to these lay Catholic innovations, groups, and inclusive discourses has been to create and promote “exclusivist” positions that discount such groups and their positions. These political and theological stances are the narratives created and promulgated by Roman Catholic leadership as sanctioned alternatives to the narratives offered by gay devotionism and groups like Dignity USA. This rhetorical and moral strategy forecloses debate by defining in advance moral boundaries outside of which one is simply presumed to be wrong.²⁰² Put another way, the Roman Catholic Church’s “bureaucratic speech strives to maintain the illusion of unchanging control. So Vatican pronouncements work to convince us that nothing important ever changes in church teaching—or could change.”²⁰³ Historian Richard Giannone simply describes this process as “preserving power to buttress the past.”²⁰⁴ In this light, the efficacy of groups like Equally Blessed stance of “working from within” to change the Roman Catholic Church is suspect. Though an analysis of progressive or affirming groups impact on the Roman Catholic Church (whether in America, the US Council of Bishops, or in Rome) is outside the bounds of the present study, it should be noted that these organizations have never been recognized by the Church, have been banned from using Catholic property, and have had little effect on official Catholic teachings or social positions.²⁰⁵ Many of these progressive Roman Catholic activist groups appeal to “the *catholic* [e.g., universal] Christian Church,” arguing that religious interpretation and authority “begins and ends with the people of God” rather than with the Roman Catholic leadership in Rome. This Protestant-like appeal to authority indicates that progressive groups like the ones included in this

²⁰² Raz-Krakotzkin, “Censorship, Editing, and Re-shaping of Jewish Identity,” 126. For this same argument in a Catholic context, see also Hinze and Hornbeck, “Introduction,” 7.

²⁰³ Jordan, *Silence of Sodom*, 5.

²⁰⁴ Giannone, *Hidden*, 13.

²⁰⁵ Jordan *Recruiting Young Love*, 125.

analysis seek to primarily impact the hearts and minds of *lay* Catholics (and potentially other Christians or wider audiences), rather than Roman Catholic religious elites.²⁰⁶

Not surprisingly, one objective of the American Catholic apostolate Courage is to reinforce both the current teachings and hierarchical power of the Roman Catholic leadership. It seeks to use Catholic saints, the authority of tradition, and Catholic devotionism to call lay Catholics “struggling with their sexuality” back into communion with the Church, while also promoting the Church’s entrenched teachings around sexuality, generally, and abstinence and chastity for SGM Catholics, specifically. To that end, after 2000, Catholic leadership, including some within the United States, undertook a program to revive and promulgate the Angelic Warfare Confraternity, a centuries-old but nearly defunct confraternity based around the concept and emulation of steadfast chastity attributed to the life of St. Thomas Aquinas.²⁰⁷ Catholic teaching recognizes Aquinas as the patron saint of chastity, derived from the hagiographic account of his resistance to sexual temptation culminating in his reception of a divinely-presented cord of chastity.²⁰⁸ The Catholic organization Courage International, the recognized apostolate that ministers to lesbian and gay Catholic laypeople, adopted this language from the AWC to specifically promote Aquinas and other “chaste saints” as an appropriate connection for SGM.²⁰⁹ With their pamphlets, director, newsletter, and blog appointed or updated in the 2000s, the reinvigorated Angelic Warfare Confraternity has been quietly called into service for the

²⁰⁶ “Core Beliefs,” *Call to Action*, (accessed June 20, 2018), <http://cta-usa.org/mission/>

²⁰⁷ David Hajduk et al, *The Cord, vol 2* Pamphlet (The Angelic Warfare Confraternity, December, 2009).

²⁰⁸ Brian T. Mullady, “The Angelic Warfare Confraternity,” Pamphlet (New Hope: St. Martin de Porres Lay Dominican Press, 2001).

²⁰⁹ The wording “lesbian and gay” is used intentionally here, as no mention of bisexual, transgender, or any other sexual partnering or gender identity language is present anywhere on the site. See also, “Homepage” *Courage International* (online) www.couragerc.net. Accessed May 2013.

promotion of chastity among lesbian and gay Catholics.²¹⁰ This realignment and emphasis of St. Aquinas as the protector and promoter of sexual purity and sexual morality among young people, lesbians, and gay individuals represents a significant act of maintaining Catholic tradition while creating a new, distinct imagining of the saint to fit the specific needs of the organization and its members.

There is a significant difference between this rhetoric and theological deployment of a saint, and that will be focus of this study in the pages ahead. Namely, the connection between Courage and its promotion of St. Aquinas is not a measure of how the saint is actually perceived or understood by the individuals to whom he is promoted. Wellman notes that religious elites in the Catholic Church often take stronger, clearly articulated, and ideologically defined positions on social, political, and religious issues than do their congregants, and that this phenomenon is particularly true in regards to homosexuality.²¹¹ Wellman's finding implies that members' perceptions of St. Aquinas as the patron saint for SGM chastity could be very different from Catholic elite expectations, and the scarcity of evidence in this regard is one of the reasons for the present study. The following chapters explore ways that gay, lesbian, or other Catholics are heeding the guidance of leaders or groups like Courage or the Angelic Warfare Confraternity in regards to praying to St. Aquinas for chastity is sparse.²¹² Perhaps the most notable example is Melinda Selmys, whose account as a self-described "former lesbian" highlights what she

²¹⁰ Dominic Brent, "From the Director," *Christus Victor* vol 1, (1) (New Hope: The Angelic Warfare Confraternity, August 2010). The American version of Courage's pamphlets were copyrighted in 2001, and their first newsletter, "The Cord," and their official website, <http://www.angelicwarfare.org>, dates back to 2009. Father James Dominic Brent, O.P. was appointed as the new Director of the Angelic Warfare Confraternity in early 2010. As Courage gained popularity and acceptance under Pope Francis, AWC has shifted to more fully address their primary American demographic: young people. See <http://www.awcyouth.org/> and "The Cord," esp. vol 1 (2009) or Mullady, "The Angelic Warfare Confraternity," 1, 8.

²¹¹ Wellman, "The Debate over Homosexual Ordination," 187.

²¹² There are no community forums, comment sections, or other public space on any of Courage's pages that could be instructive in this regard.

describes as “her struggles with her feelings and sexuality” in relation to the teachings of Catholicism. Her testimonial references Aquinas as a “divine model” and inspiration for her chastity.²¹³

In keeping with the nature of Vatican statements regarding the moral status of homosexual acts and tendencies described above, the vies of these individuals and Dignity have been condemned by the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD) and past popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI. Instead, official Catholic policy follows that of the exclusivist rhetorical position, which Wellman describes as simultaneously endorsing sympathy and compassion alongside “opposition to gay rights, same-sex unions, and ordination of homosexuals.” Such stances, in his assessment, are portrayed as both theologically mandated and politically necessary.²¹⁴ Indeed, in 2011 (then) Pope Benedict XVI recognized Courage, not Dignity, as the official apostolate to lead the Church’s ministry to SGM through an embrace of official church teaching.

Courage, supported by many exclusivist authors, bases its teachings and arguments on a specific set of precepts articulated by the Vatican. Chief among these is the Augustinian argument of “natural law.”²¹⁵ Philippe Bordeyne, a French Roman Catholic priest, ethicist, and moral theologian, criticizes other theologians’ preoccupation with this concept before praising it himself. He argues that “logic dictates” that Augustinian arguments be expanded to include heterosexual marriage as the “obvious” culmination of this line of thought and the very “meaning

²¹³ Melinda Selmys, “An Article by Melinda Selmys, author of the book *Sexual Authenticity: An Intimate Reflection on Homosexuality and Catholicism*,” *Courage International* (online)

http://couragerc.net/Courage_Home_Page/M.Selmys_article.pdf. Accessed December, 2011

²¹⁴ Wellman, “The Debate over Homosexual Ordination,” 191.

²¹⁵ Notably, natural law is also a significant focus of Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica*.

of sexual difference.”²¹⁶ Aside from “the common sense argument” attempting to defend heterosexuality via natural law, others often point to “tradition” or “traditional teaching” as an argument that supports current Church statements.²¹⁷ This is exemplified by American Jesuit Paul Crowley, who elicits the “counsel of the Cross” as the most historically and theologically sound approach for counseling homosexual individuals. Put simply, this Roman Catholic metaphor expounds that humans, as imperfect, sinful beings, all have “crosses to bear,” symbolically reminiscent of the cross Jesus was forced to carry before his crucifixion. Enduring one’s own “crosses” or trials thus demonstrates the supplicant’s piety, commitment to the faith, and ultimate triumph and salvation through the cross of Christ. The Council of the Cross metaphor’s logic thus encourages SGM to accept contemporary Church teachings of celibacy, chastity, and renunciation of desire as their specific “crosses” because of the rewards waiting for those who endure them.²¹⁸ Notably, such rhetorical strategies are frequently employed by church leaders; in the highly influential 2003 Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith publication, “Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons,” Cardinal Ratzinger (who later became Pope Benedict XVI) employed nearly *all* the arguments described above, citing the inherent nature of the sexes, “right reason,” and centuries of Catholic “truth” that “date back to the beginning of the Bible itself.”²¹⁹

Finally, it should be noted in this context that observers have inferred tacit Church recognition of these kinds of innovations, possibly for hundreds of years. After all, some have

²¹⁶ Philippe Bordeyne, “Homosexuality, Seen in Relation to Ecumenical Dialogue: What Really Matters to the Catholic Church” *Journal Compilation* (Malden: The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2006), 561-577.

²¹⁷ J. Budziszewski, “Designed For Sex: What We Lose When We Forget What Sex Is For,” *Touchstone*, (July/August 2005). Accessed December 2012.

²¹⁸ Paul G. Crowley, “Homosexuality and the Council of the Cross,” *Theological Studies* vol 65 2004, p 500-529. See his argument throughout this article, including 502-4.

²¹⁹ Joseph Ratzinger “Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons,” *Offices of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*, (June 3, 2003). p 1-4.

described the “closet of the church” as having long been “simultaneously homoerotic and homophobic.”²²⁰ Some read Roman Catholic leaders’ periodic initiatives (as early as the fourteenth and as recently as the twentieth century) to actively “defeminize” Catholic art that was inappropriately “arousing the body and the emotions” as evidence (if not proof) of their recognition of the possibility for homoerotic readings of Roman Catholic art.²²¹ Indeed, Jordan posits that this movement was specifically to “clean up” Catholic art, motivated by a fear of saints’ appropriation and interpretation through subversive readings, and this fear seems borne out in part by the research and testimony of Savastano, Liepa, Easton, and others. By far the most prominent example of this phenomenon can be seen in the images of Saint Sebastian over the last five hundred years. Art historian Valentina Liepa chronicles, for instance, how the nude male body became so popular that it was perceived as a significant threat during the Counter-Reformation; the Council of Trent (1545-1563) even passed a ban on depicting nude bodies in art. This ban targeted representations of saints generally and “the image of Saint Sebastian... particularly.”²²²

1.3.3 Examples of Lived Religion for SGM Catholics

The experiences of SGM Catholics can also be constructively understood through examining ways that theologians, lay Catholics, and other spiritual SGM communities have created narratives, experiences, and communities *separate* from the institutional Catholic narratives outlined above. While assessing theological arguments or diversity is well beyond the scope of this work, it should be noted that there has been an exponential increase in the last

²²⁰ Janes, *Visions of Queer Martyrdom*, 150-1. See also Giannone, *Hidden*, 13.

²²¹ Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 174-8.

²²² Valentina Liepa, “The Image of Saint Sebastian in Art” *Acta Humanitarica Universitatis Saulensis*, 8 (2009): 455-462.

decade in the amount and diversity of queer theology. One excellent example of this proliferation of thought, religious conviction, and interpretation can be summarized by the exegesis found in *The Queer Bible Commentary*. Other examples include *Queer Christianities: Lived Religion in Transgressive Forms*, *Queer Women and Religious Individualism*, *Queer Religion volumes I and II*, and *More than a Monologue: Sexual Diversity and the Catholic Church*.²²³ Each of these works elucidates important ways of thinking, praying, and existing in relation to one another, informed by both Christian thought and a “recognition of a much broader range of human diversity.”²²⁴ As evidenced here, this “vital embrace of faith life and vital embrace of sexuality” has been both “galvanizing for social activism and fruitful for religious scholarship.”²²⁵

Yet, interviews, ethnographic research, and compilations from theologians and researchers like Raymond Holtz, Evans and Healey, and Melissa Wilcox clearly demonstrate that for many SGM, the Catholic Church’s positions, statements and teachings “concerning sexual diversity have evoked disagreement, consternation, anger, and pain.”²²⁶ For many, growing up in the Catholic tradition meant that they felt they had “no moral or religious teaching that could guide [them] to success or failure. In adolescence and early adulthood, [some felt that] the

²²³ *The Queer Bible Commentary*, eds. Deryn Guest, Robert Goss, and Mona West, and Thomas Bohache (London: SCM Press, 2006); *Queer Christianities: Lived Religion in Transgressive Forms*, eds. Kathleen Talvacchia, Michael Pettinger, Mark Larrimore (New York: New York University Press, 2015); Melissa Wilcox, *Queer Women and Religious Individualism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009); *Queer Religion Volume II: LGBT Movements and Queer Religion*, eds. Donald Boisvert and Jay Emerson Johnson (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2012); *More than a Monologue: Sexual Diversity and the Catholic Church, vol. 1*, eds. Christine Firer Hinze and J. Patrick Hornbeck II (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

²²⁴ Johnson, “Introduction to Volume II,” 1.

²²⁵ Hinze and Hornbeck, “Introduction,” 2; Johnson, “Introduction to Volume II,” 1.

²²⁶ See in particular Raymond Holtz, “Introduction,” *Listen to the Stories: Gay and Lesbian Catholics talk about their Lives and the Church*, Raymond Holtz, ed. (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1991), 127-160. Trebor Healey, “I was always a Marian Heretic,” *Queer and Catholic*, Amie Evans and Trebor Healey, eds. (New York: Routledge Press, 2008), 49 – 60. Salvatore Sapienza, “Fully Human, Fully Alive,” *Queer and Catholic*, Amie Evans and Trebor Healey, eds. (New York: Routledge Press, 2008), 153 – 158. Anthony Easton, “Queer Thoughts on Catholic Bodies,” *Queer and Catholic*, Amie Evans and Trebor Healey, eds. (New York: Routledge Press, 2008), 223 – 230. Wilcox, *Coming Out in Christianity*, 51-79.

teaching of the Church was merely silence...”²²⁷ Such sentiments are not unique; nearly every scholarly work on the overlap and interaction between SGM communities and religiously motivated groups documents pain, isolation, or rejection... or worse. While stigma and negative affect are common experiences against all manner of minority groups, this strikingly common experience for SGM is also intrinsically connected to deeper socio-political consequences. These range from the denial of human rights and service in public accommodations to hate crimes, murder, and institutionalized erasure through government policies (see the AIDS crisis, for example), just to name a few.²²⁸

Increasingly, SGM laypeople and whole communities are adopting and transforming images and lives of saints to help them retain a sense of connection to Catholicism.²²⁹ Examples of this transformative work can be seen in a recent analysis of the ways that various Catholic saints are described and adopted for people living with HIV. Such acts are similar to the description of queer religion outlined by Donald Boisvert, who argued that SGM spirituality “gives the sacred a queer face; [this process] defines the holy in terms of the common experience of [SGM].”²³⁰ This is certainly the conclusion reached by Peter Savastano, who recorded nearly a half dozen different saints known by his informants to have been appropriated by various gay enclaves within Catholic communities.²³¹ Other SGM Catholics report similar relationships and perceptions of saints, such as author Anthony Easton’s interpretation of St. Thomas.²³²

²²⁷ Jordan *Silence of Sodom*, 51.

²²⁸ Petro, *After the Wrath of God*, 131-6.

²²⁹ For one related example (though not limited to SGM), see this author’s previous work on narrative creation around saints and people living with HIV. David Givens, “The Faithful Departed: Roman Catholic Saints and Perceptions of Persons with HIV/AIDS” *Arc: The Journal of the Faculty of Religious Studies* McGill University, vol. 40 (2012), 47-68.

²³⁰ Donald L. Boisvert, “Queering the Sacred: Discourses of Gay Male Spiritual Writing,” *Theology and Sexuality* vol 5 (10) (March 1999), 54-70.

²³¹ Savastano suggests that these saints may or may not have relevant hagiographies in the imaginations of the men who become devoted to them; rather, it seems that particular, often effeminate images of the saints allow the viewers

The reimagining and repurposing of Catholic saints is a fascinating phenomenon, and recent ethnographic scholarship highlights ways in which sexual and gender minority Catholics demonstrate the contradictory impulse to draw nearer to and separate from the Roman Catholic Church. Ethnographer Peter Savastano suggests that gay Catholic men engage in a process of creative reimagining and projecting both desires and experiences onto the images of certain saints, particularly Saints Sebastian and Gerard.²³³ In particular, men who identified as gay used their own interpretations and perceptions to create connections with saints as a way of remaining connected—indeed, even drawing closer—to their faith. They accomplished this connection namely through use of images and narratives—some of which they had never articulated to anyone else—that allowed these respondents to think of Gerard or Sebastian as being gay. Conversely, theological and sociological reflections by Donald Boisvert highlight another common, yet very different approach to conceptualizing saints and sainthood in SGM contexts.

Reimagining particular saints as images for—and about—gay Catholic men repurposes them in ways that push against official Catholic teaching in order to fit and reflect gay Catholics’ own experiences. For example, Savastano’s interviewees report perceiving various images of Gerard in ways that mirror their own experiences or preferences: as being “in drag,” “a queen,” “effeminate,” and/or with attractive lips, torso or other physical attributes. Similarly, some male respondents reported experiencing identification with or attraction to Gerard based on his youth, virginal appearance, or his suffering. Savastano concludes, however, that such extrapolations of hagiography (sanctioned or otherwise) were at least initially secondary to the *images* of the

to project their lives, desires, and experiences onto these saints (“Changing Gerard’s Clothes” 186, 188). Such saints include Saints Sebastian, Gerard, Anthony of Padua, Paulinus of Nola, and the Madonna del Carmine. A similar example is McGuire’s suggestion that past churchmen like Aelred of Rievaulx subsumed homosexual desires “into ‘agapeic love’ ...to the body of Jesus.” McGuire, *Brother & Lover*, 142,148.

²³² Anthony Easton, “Queer Thoughts on Catholic Bodies,” 225. This includes Easton’s description of how he perceives his spiritual and erotic connections with Thomas.

²³³ Savastano, “Saint Gerard Teaches,” 184.

saints, as they are “ready visual source(s) for an imagination sensitive to the issues of sexual orientation.”²³⁴ Such an experience is, of course, a departure from the traditional influence expected for the layperson, since “typically and properly [it is] saints that instruct Catholic communities how to live.”²³⁵ By infusing a saint with an alternative sexuality or through perceiving a saint with gendered characteristics similar to their own, devotees may gain from traditional Catholic saints a sense of comfort, support, and legitimacy.

While the study above is limited to a single community in New Jersey, this chapter demonstrates the larger history and prevalence of uses and developments of saints within and without the dialogue and theology of the Roman Catholic Church. It highlights persistence and evolution of saint veneration in the United States, contextualizing American Catholic devotionalism. Laying this historical groundwork advances the larger argument to come that online settings are hosting unique environments for queer saint narratives to thrive among various communities, impacting audience members’ religious and sexual identities.

²³⁴ Ibid, 184-6.

²³⁵ Jordan, *Silence of Sodom*, 3.

2.0 CONTEXTUALIZING SGM NARRATIVES FOR SAINTS

As the previous chapter illustrated, *Digital Devotions* connects two academic subfields of lived religion: saint veneration and sexual and gender minority communities. The central claim of this dissertation—that narratives and images of saints are contributing to both queer and traditional social discourse and group identity—is based in and dependent on the histories and experiences of the groups involved. The project argues that queer interpretations of and narratives around saints and biblical figures such as Perpetua and Felicity, Ruth and Naomi, and many others are serving to create and support important frameworks for a wide range of socio-political, spiritual, and interpersonal experiences. These interpretations bend, and in some cases redefine, the traditional definition of the term “saint,” and the digital ethnographic research in Chapter 3 highlights this conceptual fluidity. Before the prominence of Ruth and Naomi as “lesbian saints” or the use of saint Aelred of Rievaulx as the “patron saint of friendship” can be properly explored, however, the authors and websites creating these narratives and hosting these online communities must themselves be understood.²³⁶ Placing these authors and organizations within their own cultural, historical, and religious contexts is the final component of the formative research that provides needed perspective and framework for understanding the narratives themselves.

The current chapter highlights the methodological approach used in the dissertation, explains the terminology selected for framing and analyzing all online sites within the study, and provides a concise summary of the various online communities as they and others draw on both

²³⁶ Or, interestingly, as a model of devotion frequently cited in heterosexual marriage ceremonies; Mona West “Ruth,” *The Queer Bible Commentary*, Guest, Goss, West, Bohache, eds. (London: SCM Press, 2006), 190-1.

traditional and more contemporary icons in mostly Catholic frameworks. Many of these communities and sites are even more notable for the ways they have developed and are evolving within theological frameworks that (as outlined above) were historically often paternalistic, homophobic, and hierarchical.

Ten prominent online communities and organizations were engaged throughout this research process; nearly a dozen others were also assessed but ultimately excluded from analysis. The ten groups that met the study criteria of prominently featuring saint veneration either by or for SGM Christians are: Q Spirit.net and its Jesus in Love blog; Dignity USA, New Ways Ministries, and Equally Blessed (collectively); Queering the Church (QueerChurch.com) and its Queer Saints and Martyrs blogs; Courage and the Angelic Warfare Confraternity (collectively); TransChristians.org; SpiritualFriendship.org; Quest; the Church Militant; Catholic.com; the Temple of Antinous and its blog.²³⁷ These websites and organizations intentionally situate themselves at the intersection of SGM Christian ministries and discussions of saints. The criteria and methodology involved in selecting and studying these sites and online communities is discussed in greater detail in the next two subsections.

²³⁷ All sites' homepages: qspirit.net; www.dignityusa.org; www.newwaysministry.org; <https://www.equallyblessed.org/>; queerchurch.com; couragec.org; www.TransChristians.org; SpiritualFriendship.org; questlgbti.uk; www.churchmilitant.com; <https://www.catholic.com/>; www.antinopolis.org. This list demarcates organizations that also have physical ministries/outreach from purely online sites and communities through the use of a standalone organizational name (i.e., New Ways Ministries) versus the site name (i.e., TransChristians.org). The possible relevance of this distinction is noted in each group section below.

2.1 DEFINITIONS

The present study, a digital ethnographic project, collected two-and-a-half years of observational data, multiple online interviews, and reviewed (using search parameters) hundreds of pieces of email correspondence. This methodology is an appropriate theoretical framework that facilitates the assessment of different ways that these sites and communities interact with concepts and narratives of saints in digital media. Identifying and assessing these types of online venues is a distinct necessity, as subcultural identity theory predicts—and this research supports—that, “for [subcultural] groups to thrive in a pluralist and open religious market they need to be in tension with, though not separate from, the common cultural milieu.”²³⁸ Online blogs, forums, and groups provide that level of detachment.

There is no shortage of terminology for classifying theological and secular worldviews related to SGM communities in modern scholarship and cultural vernacular. One common western cultural vernacular phrase (also used in many mainline Protestant denominations) is the use of “affirming” (and its counterpoint, “abstaining” or “denying”) to denote welcoming LGBTQ cultural and theological stances. Some aspects in the sites below do resemble the familiar “body-affirming” and “body-denying” dichotomy, which is the most common demarcation in recent religious scholarship.²³⁹ Western socio-political terms like “conservative versus liberal” or “traditionalist versus revisionist” are also frameworks that are commonly used.²⁴⁰ However, it is ultimately Wellman’s inclusivist versus exclusivist religious subculture identity theory that proved the most applicable to the current analysis.

The limitations inherent in many types of cultural classification systems are significant within the scope of the present study. While broad labels such as “affirming” and “abstaining”

²³⁸ Wellman, “The Debate over Homosexual Ordination,” 187.

²³⁹ Boisvert and Daniel-Hughes, “Introduction to the Volume,” 14.

²⁴⁰ Petro, *After the Wrath of God*, especially 18-50, White, *Reforming Sodom*, 171-185, Burke, *Christians Under Covers*, 21.

(or, frequently, “rejecting” or “denying”) may be useful as conceptual starting points, more complex investigations of the nuances and less clear-cut descriptions and perceptions of the body among various online religious groups and virtual message boards and communities are required in this context. Both the body and religious systems mediate significant aspects of human existence, especially experiences of the erotic and regulations thereof.²⁴¹ These online communities are, in an important sense, representations of various communities’ attempts to conceptualize, regulate, or normalize various conceptions of bodies and the proper or allowable roles, partners, and interactions are associated with them. At the same time, many of these sites move far beyond the bodily reductionism to which SGM communities have so often been subjected (as will be discussed in section [2.2](#)), valuing and celebrating saints and people—living and dead—as unique individuals and role models instead of mere bodies to be mocked or desired.²⁴² Accordingly, using referential terminology such as “body-affirming” and (especially) counterpoints like “abstaining” or “body-denying” to demarcate sites’ views on the body would needlessly perpetuate this historical and physiological reductionism.²⁴³ More importantly, such a lens would inappropriately proscribe the bounds and intents of many of these sites, many of which extend far beyond the roles of bodies, gender identities, and/or physical attraction.

Shortfalls in other potential frameworks render them equally unsuited for the current work. Labels such as “conservative versus liberal” can be powerful descriptors when used in well-defined contexts or among historical figures, for example.²⁴⁴ But the sites included in the

²⁴¹ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, especially 77-9. Jordan *Recruiting Young Love*, xviii-xix. Boisvert and Daniel-Hughes, “Introduction to the Volume,” 1.

²⁴² See Boisvert and Daniel-Hughes, “Introduction to the Volume,” or *The Queer Bible Commentary* for instances that highlight the limitations of this simplistic dichotomy.

²⁴³ Donald L. Boisvert “Talking Dirty about the Saints: Storytelling and the Politics of Desire” *Theology and Sexuality* vol 12(2) (2006), 165-80.

²⁴⁴ Careful use of these terms can be seen elucidating the historical assessments of White’s *Reforming Sodom*, esp. pages 123-133, and Petro’s *After the Wrath of God*, pages 64-79.

current analysis cannot be so easily distilled. Such labels, while useful in a static past-tense or among communities who intentionally self-identify with them, are simply too subjective for wider use in the present work.²⁴⁵ Several sites clearly have political objectives or concerns, while others can't be mapped at all onto the current American political landscape—which is itself a (somewhat) subjective, constantly moving target. As relatively localized cultural reference points on the internet, such terms are not uniformly applicable; all the sites for which data was available had large numbers of international visitors. As mentioned earlier, queer scholar Claudia Schippert writes that websites, including those about saints, occupy a unique challenge for scholarly study because they are “flickering signifiers” that do not lend themselves to permanence or fixed meaning in the same manner that other texts do.²⁴⁶ Translating this observation to the cultural signifiers of “traditionalist versus revisionist” labels reveals that they face many of these same concerns regarding shifting meaning... with the added baggage of mildly pejorative connotations.²⁴⁷

This leaves the last and most appropriate theoretical framework as Wellman's inclusivist versus exclusivist subculture identity schema. From the onset, there are aspects of Wellman's categorization structure which lend themselves to the present study. Through a historical analysis of the twentieth-century history of Christian denominations in America, Wellman defined inclusivist, semi-inclusivist, semi-exclusivist, and exclusivist religious individuals and groups as generally seeking to provide ministry, guidance and support to SGM in different ways. Both inclusivist and exclusivist classifications define themselves positively (“we are” or “we

²⁴⁵ Burke, *Christians Under Covers*, 21.

²⁴⁶ Schippert, “Saint Mychal,” 119.

²⁴⁷ Carol A. Pemberton “Revisionist Historians: Writers Reflected in Their Writings” *Journal of Research in Music Education* Vol. 35, No. 4 (Winter, 1987), 213-220.

stand for”) and counter to “outgroups,” or “the other.”²⁴⁸ As noted in section [1.3.2](#), Wellman defines inclusivists as taking a “more generous stance” that expands and celebrates supportive positions related to SGM lives, rights, and associated morality within religious contexts.²⁴⁹ Within the present study, authors and some theologians engage in narrative and theological descriptions of the lives or relationships of saints in ways designed to highlight similarities with the sexual and spiritual lives of contemporary readers. They speak of same-sex devotion by Saint Aelred of Rievaulx or St. Bernard, the romantic and erotic sisterhood of saints like Hildegarde or Perpetua and Felicity, or of parallels for transgender Christians in the lives of Saint Joan of Arc or Saint Wilgefortis. The outgroups for inclusivist organizations are most frequently “traditional and/or conservative” religionists, however subjectively such terms may be defined. Inclusivists, in Wellman’s structure, “mark a path of tolerance” that they see as oppositional to coreligionists who would exclude LGBT people from any or all aspects of the church.

On the other end of Wellman’s construct are exclusivist organizations. Antithetical to the inclusivist moral and theological stance, exclusivists may endorse compassion for sexual and gender minorities but vigorously oppose “homosexual practices,” as well as “gay rights, same-sex unions, and the ordination of homosexuals.” Such stances are depicted by these religious organizations or individuals as theologically mandated, and thus beyond the realm of debate.²⁵⁰ This positioning is a foundational system of power and argumentation for the Roman Catholic Church, both among the US Council of Bishops and in much of the legal and communication structure of the Vatican. In a general sense, the political and theological narratives of the Church are designed to stifle debate by predetermining or defining moral boundaries; outside of these

²⁴⁸ Wellman, “The Debate over Homosexual Ordination,” 188.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 199.

²⁵⁰ Wellman, “The Debate over Homosexual Ordination,” 191.

rhetorical confines, one is simply presumed to be wrong.²⁵¹ Such a posture reflects Foucault's work on types of moral suasion; he noted in both *Security, Territory, Population* and *The History of Sexuality* that one way of determining and enforcing morality is to set a standard in advance against which people are measured and deemed either normal or abnormal.²⁵² Within the dissertation, several site authors and communities portray or espouse an *a priori* moral standard (i.e., often a literal or hardline interpretation of that of the Roman Catholic Church) to identify examples or instruction from saints. Interestingly, this viewpoint varies significantly between the sites in the exclusivist category, ranging from admonitions/encouragement for chastity among SGM to condemnations of what they call the "sodomite agenda."²⁵³ In these communities, Joseph and other saints, Thomas Aquinas and other early church fathers, and Aelred of Rievaulx have been cited as inspirational and instructional guides due to their perceived promotion of abstinence, chastity, and platonic friendship.

Wellman's framework is not without some drawbacks; primarily, it should be noted that this model creates a somewhat artificial binary within the groups included here. While the general model is set up to accommodate a four-tiered scale from inclusivist to exclusivist, in practice semi-inclusivist groups cannot function openly online and only one semi-exclusivist group was identified. The result is a near-binarism that, admittedly, flattens to some extent the subjective fluidity inherent in relations within and between groups.²⁵⁴ For example, both the Temple of Antinous and Quest are classified as inclusivist groups, but the specific cultural affect and supportive community dynamics are separated by several degrees; the same is true for the

²⁵¹ Jordan, *Recruiting Young Love*, 193-198. See also Hinze and Hornbeck, "Introduction," 7.

²⁵² Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France, 1977-78* Michel Senellart, ed, Graham Burchell, trans. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 56-57. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 139.

²⁵³ Michael Lofton, "Brother Seraphim Asks the Saints about Homosexuality," *Church Militant*, (accessed May 15, 2017), <https://www.churchmilitant.com/news/article/brother-seraphim-asks-the-saints-about-homosexuality>

²⁵⁴ For more on theories of fluid subjectivity, see Reeser, *Masculinities in Theory*, 48.

separation that is diminished by classifying both Courage and Church Militant as exclusivist groups. The study accounts for the wide diversity within the ten online communities in this study (thus mitigating the effects of this framework) through the detailed explanation and description of each organization in the section below. Additionally, the framework is ideal for interrogating aspects of representation, oppression, and systems of power represented by these two oppositional stances.

As a case in point, this model's explanative power was instructive in section [1.3.2](#), specifically highlighting the rhetorical and theological differences between the Roman Catholic organizations of the Equally Blessed coalition and Courage in the context of SGM lived experiences in relation to the Catholic Church. Identifying these groups in relation to their "outgroup" interlocutor Courage and the Roman Catholic Church reveals that these groups are modeling Foucault's argument for normative morality, in which the standards for moral behavior are informed organically from the population itself.²⁵⁵ Equally Blessed, Dignity USA, and New Ways Ministries' online communities and blogs offer theological and rhetorical counterpoints to the exclusivist positions of the Roman Catholic Church and, as such, are included among the inclusivist online communities in the present work. As a network of lay leaders and priests throughout the United States, Equally Blessed personifies Wellman's inclusivist position through its stated goal to minister to SGM by recognizing the "inherent worth of all individuals" with all constellations of gender identity and/or sexual orientation.²⁵⁶

Another benefit of Wellman's theoretical construction reveals an important detail; as arbiters of what they perceive to be correct morality, exclusivist groups in this study are setting

²⁵⁵ Foucault *History of Sexuality*, 139. See also Petro, *After the Wrath of God*, 5.

²⁵⁶ "Homepage," *Equally Blessed*, (accessed August 12, 2013), <https://www.equallyblessed.org/>

themselves in opposition to not only inclusivists (if they are even acknowledged) but more often “the world” and an imagined “homosexual agenda” specifically.²⁵⁷ As noted in the previous chapter, this type of outgrouping strategy is embodied by Courage (among others), the Church’s designated outreach to “lesbian and gay” Catholics since at least 2011. Like Dignity, Courage’s online community is one of the sites included in this analysis. Despite both organizations’ existing on the same organizational spectrum of ministerial interests and religious beliefs, observers note that each seems to have little if any effect on the other, or on larger Catholic teachings or social positions; the former rejects and reinterprets exclusivist views, while the latter largely reflects and affirms.²⁵⁸ Both groups profess to focus on seeking to minister to SGM and their families. However, while both claim to seek a greater sense of welcome and communion for SGM in the Roman Catholic faith, Courage fulfills the additional organizational goal of meeting this “new need” for specific ministry for SGM while still reifying an existing patriarchal hegemonic structure that purposefully projects a sense of timelessness and unchanging inerrancy in its works and politics.²⁵⁹ Such positionality reflects sociologist of religion Mark Chaves’s suggestion that religious groups must either “adapt their religion to a changing world... or resist such adaptation.”²⁶⁰

Realities among religious groups and actors are rarely so clear-cut, and many groups, including some in the present study, can be *both* adaptive and resistant.²⁶¹ Though not heavily featured due to the specific groups included here, Wellman’s theory also recognizes transitional or mitigating views in the form of semi-inclusivist and semi-exclusivist positions between the

²⁵⁷ Wellman, “The Debate over Homosexual Ordination,” 187-8, 191-3.

²⁵⁸ Jordan *Recruiting Young Love*, 125.

²⁵⁹ Jordan *Silence of Sodom*, 5. Giannone, *Hidden*, 13. See especially Kelsy Burke and Amy Moff Hudec “Sexual Encounters and Manhood Acts: Evangelicals, Latter-Day Saints, and Religious Masculinities” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 54(2) (2015), 330-344.

²⁶⁰ Mark Chaves *American Religion: Contemporary Trends* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 82.

²⁶¹ Burke *Christians Under Covers*, 4.

clearly articulated poles that these to typologies represent. Through that allowance this model explicitly rejects older, “bipolar cultural war theories.”²⁶² All told, this terminology, which is tied directly to a group’s collective perception of SGM, is an appropriate theoretical fit for the current project. The following sections outline exactly how each of the groups and online communities in the present study are aligned with these classifications.²⁶³

2.1.1 Inklusivist communities

Inklusivist sites have been identified for this analysis by noting ways in which they enact efforts and rhetoric that expand and celebrate supportive religious and social stances for SGM. In this sense, the manner in which Wellman describes inklusivist communities is, in application, not significantly different from the “affirming” language found in several protestant denominations and US vernacular.²⁶⁴ However, there is one significant difference between the theoretical categories Wellman describes and the practical, observable application of them in the communities in this study. Writing at the very end of the twentieth century, Wellman denotes a separate inklusivist category within this framework he terms “semi-klusivist.” In his model, semi-klusivist communities, denominations, or organizations are those who do not officially welcome or in some cases condone SGM members or same-sex relations, but in practice allow or support them.²⁶⁵ Even during the time of writing, Wellman noted that this typology was the least prevalent of the four. Within the current context, none of the sites in this study could be classified as semi-klusivist; they are all purely inklusivist or varying degrees of eksklusivist.

²⁶² Wellman, “The Debate over Homosexual Ordination,” 185.

²⁶³ As a reminder, only sites that contained *both* images and/or narratives about SGM saints *and* provided public space(s) for discussion and reflection are included here.

²⁶⁴ As noted above, it is primarily the converse “denying” or “abstaining” half of this framework that is problematic.

²⁶⁵ Wellman, “The Debate over Homosexual Ordination,” 197.

This complete absence of observable semi-inclusivist sites is likely due to a combination of factors. The first is purely functional. Differences in rhetorical and practical stances toward SGM would be particularly evident and incongruous in online settings, and in that sense would be largely unsustainable. Such groups might well treat those physically visiting them differently, but there would likely be little direct or intentional evidence on their online platforms. Second, much of American society has become increasingly polarized since these categories were first proposed, and congregations in the United States have become increasingly aligned with political identities.²⁶⁶ Together, these factors have likely made the existence of religious communities attempting to “split the difference” between more divergent positions increasingly rare. For any groups that do exist, the immediate and universal visibility of any digital presence would logically create a heightened sense of caution surrounding materials posted online. Anecdotally, some local communities within the Church of Latter-Day Saints may fit the parameters of this category in practice, but for the reasons listed above, as well as their differences in terminology for saints, they are beyond this scope of this analysis.²⁶⁷

Based on Wellman’s criteria, six of the sites analyzed here clearly fit the inclusivist description. These groups are Q Spirit, Queering the Church, Trans Saints, Equally Blessed and its partners Dignity USA and New Ways Ministries, The Temple of Antinous, and Quest. This section is comprised of basic outlines of the inclusivist sites included in this study, including their general types of rhetoric and theology, their website designs and presences, their authorial and organizational structures, and the ways they define and talk about outgroups (e.g., groups *against* whom they define themselves). These sites’ specific understandings and portrayals of

²⁶⁶ Putnam and Campbell, *Amazing Grace*, 3-6, 370-75.

²⁶⁷ In-person interviews: Dr. Caitlyn Ryan of the Family Acceptance Project, conducted throughout May 2015.

saints are the subject of section [2.2](#), and the varied rhetorical and sociological relevance of these diverse strategies and portrayals are discussed in detail in Chapter [3](#).

Turning to the sites and communities themselves, Q Spirit is an online website and accompanying blog—“Jesus in Love”—run by author, theologian, and ordained Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) minister Kittredge Cherry (b. 1957). In the extensive “About” sections of the site, Cherry outlines her ordination in the MCC (where she formerly served as its national ecumenical officer) and describes both the blog and the larger website as part of “her calling.”²⁶⁸ The website questions aspects of common Bible interpretations and conventional history, describing its purpose as bringing “a spirit of questioning authority and checking facts” to spiritual discovery. Indeed, the resources she creates or highlights are part of the website’s explicit “quest for spirituality beyond all boundaries,” and stands for the exploration of “queer spirituality [and] also stands for questioning spiritual assumptions.”²⁶⁹ The Q Spirit site as a whole was created in 2016, providing SGM-affirming spiritual resources ranging from the “Jesus in Love” blog and SGM-affirming books to a calendar of feast days for “queer saints” and a monthly “Jesus in Love Newsletter.” However, the majority of the content of the Q Spirit website focuses on “LGBTQ Saints,” containing articles, resources, and devotional subpages for more than 85 saints or Holy figures (as of June 2018). Q Spirit was awarded “Top 20 Jesus Blog” status in 2018 (number 20) by the metrics site Feedspot.²⁷⁰ The site also contains a site counter plug-in that has registered nearly 430,000 visitors since the new version of the site launched in 2016. The site claims that the original blogsite garnered over 1.67 million views

²⁶⁸ Bethany Fenton, “Kittredge Cherry Interview,” *Hidden Perspectives*, (May 2013), <https://hiddenperspectivesfest.wordpress.com/2013/05/21/kittredge-cherry-interview-by-bethany-fenton/#more-731>

²⁶⁹ Kittredge Cherry, “About,” *Q Spirit*, (accessed April 2, 2017), <http://qspirit.net/about/>

²⁷⁰ The metrics used in reaching this determination, however, are proprietary to Feedspot, and are simply listed as “social and data metrics” among “all blogs pertaining to Jesus as a topic or historical figure.” “Top 20 Jesus Blogs Websites & Newsletters For Christians in 2018,” *Feedspot*, (accessed May 1, 2018), https://blog.feedspot.com/jesus_blogs/

between 2007 and 2017, when it migrated to the new site.²⁷¹ The community’s Facebook page has just over 500 followers and has over 1000 on Twitter; both sites mirror the main blog content.²⁷²



Figure 3. The Q Spirit Homepage is divided into the four kinds of resources available to visitors: discussions of saints, queer spirituality, book recommendations and reviews, and a calendar of saints and SGM-friendly holiday resources. <http://Q Spirit.net/>

The “Jesus in Love” blog, which began in 2005, is a curated selection of all this information, highlighting Kittredge’s articles on queer readings of saints, feast days, theology, biographies, or historical and contemporary events. Cherry has reflected extensively on why she

²⁷¹ As of 2018, the information cited here is prominently displayed in the blog page’s sidebar and can be viewed on every blog page. See <http://qspirit.net/blog/>.

²⁷² As of June 2017.

writes about saints, particularly given her theological education at the progressive multid denominational Pacific School of Religion and ordination in the Metropolitan Community Church. Cherry describes her interest in queer saints as a development from her earlier writing on the queer aspects and readings of Jesus, and feedback she received that other holy people would be more approachable and relatable to the average reader. She has combined this demand with her seminary training, which exposed her to what the church termed “images that challenge,” to populate what is now “the most popular content on [her] blog.”²⁷³ Her stated belief and motivation for highlighting images of saints is to demonstrate to her readers and the online community that Jesus and saints “share in LGBT suffering.”²⁷⁴ Some examples of posts during the course of observation include reflections on the UpStairs Lounge Fire of 1973 or “queer preacher Jemima Wilkinson” of 1776, a triptych and remembrance for the Orlando Pulse Nightclub victims of 2016, celebrations of feast days for “gender-bending saint” Wilgefortis or the sixteenth-century Madre Juana de la Cruz Vázquez Gutiérrez (who insisted “God changed her gender in the womb”), and theological articles such as “Why we need LGBTQ saints: a queer theology of sainthood.” There are also numerous examples of narratives on the site—and particularly within the more historical works on the blog—that feature reminders or examples of outgroups. References include those who confront the site with “bigotry,” or the many religious organizations who “did nothing” in the aftermath of the UpStairs Lounge Fire, LGBTQ murders in Bangladesh, or on the National Day of Silence (April 26) to raise awareness of bullying against SGM youth.²⁷⁵

²⁷³ Kittredge Cherry, “Why we need LGBTQ Saints: a queer theology of sainthood,” *Q Spirit*, (October 21, 2017), <http://qspirit.net/why-we-need-lgbtq-saints/>

²⁷⁴ Fenton, “Kittredge Cherry Interview,” 1.

²⁷⁵ All articles are by Kittredge Cherry can be found on <http://qspirit.net/blog/> archived from 2017-2018.

Like Q Spirit, Queering the Church (QTC) contains both a website and blog for promoting positive perceptions and resources around SGM spirituality. The creator, curator, and author of QTC is Terence Weldon, who describes himself as “a gay, partnered Catholic” volunteering in the “Queer Masses in Soho,” but who began his work on the website claiming to have “no qualifications to write this stuff [the website] other than a passion for collecting and sharing ideas and information.”²⁷⁶ Since that beginning in 2008, however, Weldon worked with Quest (a group also included in this study) in various capacities during this period under analysis and is associated with other organizations such as the Global Network of Rainbow Catholics.

This dissertation is primarily focused on the interaction that narratives of saints mediate between sexual and religious identities primarily within the context of English-speaking American communities and histories. However, the internet works to blur cultural as well as geographic boundaries, and Weldon’s relationship with his audience and the online community they create is an excellent example. As part of the analysis for this study, the author has run data and keyword analysis on all the main websites included in this work. One point of interest in this report is that Queering the Church receives an estimated seventy percent of all its web traffic from viewers in the United States. Quest also receives a nearly equal number of viewers from the United Kingdom and United States.²⁷⁷ This demonstrates that while he is approaching this topic from a different regional and historical perspective on Catholicism than Americans, he is very much a part of this discourse. Indeed, when discussing his work with Queering the Church for this study, Weldon noted that he was aware that a majority of his web audience was, in fact,

²⁷⁶ Terence Weldon, “About QTC,” *Queering the Church*, (accessed June 25, 2017), http://queerchurch.com/?page_id=15320

²⁷⁷ “Domain Overview: Queerchurch.com,” *SEM RUSH* (Data report: generated June 20, 2018). “Domain Overview: Questlgbti.uk,” *SEM RUSH* (Data report: generated June 20, 2018).

American. He attributed this interest both to America’s population size and his perception that there is a greater measure of persecution of SGM in America than in Great Britain.²⁷⁸

The site itself is organized broadly into informational sections on Marriage and Family, Pastoral Ministry, the Bible, Queer Saints and Martyrs, Sexuality and Gender, Personal Reflections, and Reading Recommendations. All these topics are compilations of Weldon’s reporting and interpretations of various news, observations or historical events, and even advice around issues related to the parent topic. In his treatises on saints, Weldon divides each post into chronological periodization, moving from “pre-Christian” martyrs to “Modern Saints” and “All Saints.”²⁷⁹

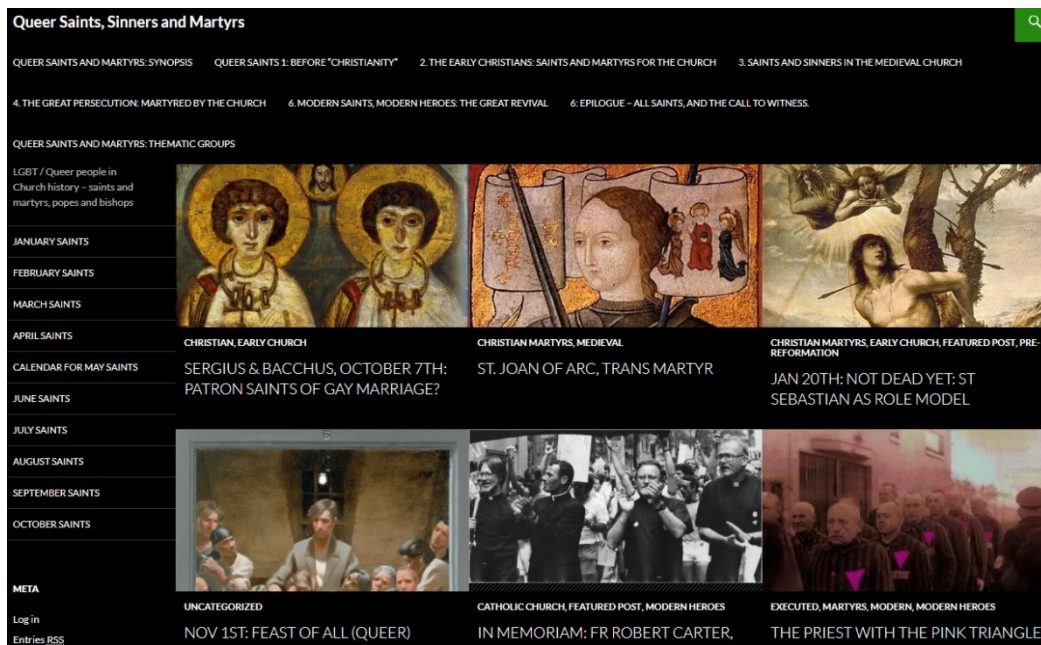


Figure 4. The top section of the Queer Saints and Martyrs splash page is both organized by time period and designed to highlight popular articles. <http://saints.queerchurch.info>

²⁷⁸ Email interviews with Terence Weldon, summer 2018.

²⁷⁹ Terence Weldon, “Queer Saints, Sinners and Martyrs” *Queering the Church* (online) <http://saints.queerchurch.info>. Accessed July 21, 2017.

As with all the sites in this analysis, QTC also discusses the outgroups it perceives. In several pages, Weldon writes about SGM being “double outsiders.” He describes the “ridicule, discrimination, violence or worse” SGM have experienced “in a world where heterosexuality is routinely taken for granted,” as well as the even greater “rejection in the churches... with widespread condemnation.”²⁸⁰

TransChristians.org is a compilation of short descriptive documents and resources that speak to the intersecting issues of transgender identity and experience with Christian narratives and organizations. While the author describes the site on one page as “partly a playground, a place to see what's possible and what's helpful to transgender Christians,” the central messages of the site and all its content are aimed at answering the two basic propositions on the home page: “You [transgender readers] are not alone” and “Transgender Christians are Christians, too.”²⁸¹ In support of these two tenets, the site provides interpretations of biblical gender identity (i.e., Adam from before God created Eve, culturally androgynous aspects of Jesus), Christian denominations “that embrace us,” and an extensive section detailing “Trans Saints.” The latter is comprised of inclusivist historical and hagiographic descriptions and interpretations of non-conforming individuals associated with Christian faith or teaching, ranging from Hebrew Scriptural Midrash to medieval Christian saints and contemporary historical figures.

²⁸⁰ Terence Weldon, “About QTC,” 1.

²⁸¹ Ephilei, “About,” *TransChristians.org*, (accessed Nov. 12, 2015), <http://www.transchristians.org/Home/about>; Ephilei, “Homepage,” *TransChristians.org* (accessed Nov. 10, 2015), <http://www.transchristians.org/>

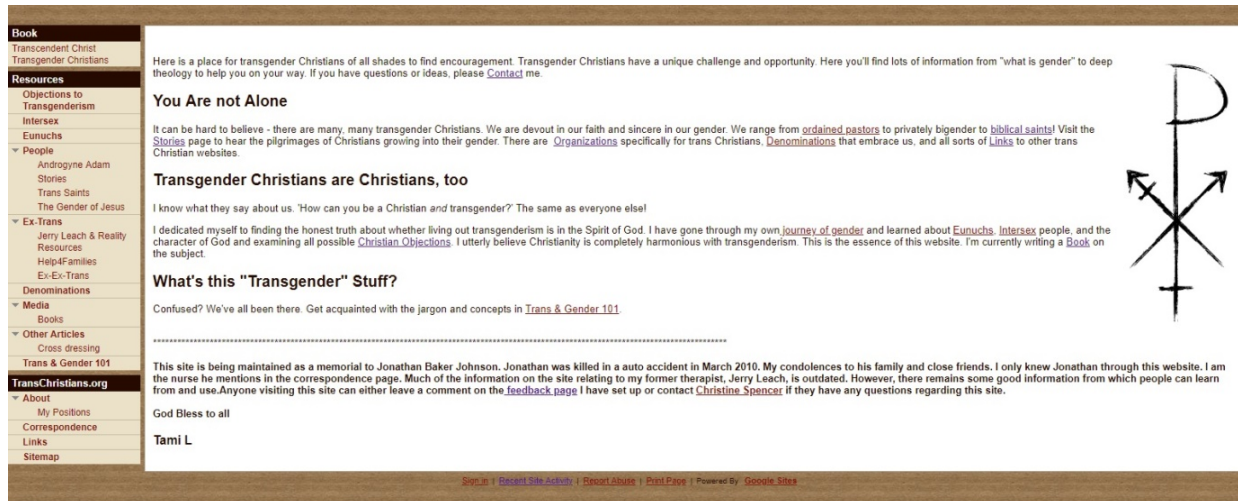


Figure 5. The TransChristians.org homepage, including the *In Memoriam* to the original author at the bottom.

These narratives appear alongside thorough explanations of terms like trans, ex-trans, “ex-ex-trans,” and reparative therapy, all of which are listed together under the “Resources” section. Interestingly, the site presents resources and links both for supportive, affirming groups as well as those with whom the author clearly disagrees. While this will be examined in greater detail in Chapter 3, the site’s organizational inclusion of outgroups—ex-gay and ex-trans advocates, conservative Christians organizations, and (especially) Christian reparative therapists—portrays inclusivist and exclusivist perspectives in direct dialogue and opposition to one another.²⁸²

Unlike the rest of the inclusivist sites and communities on this list, the site is not a blog set up to receive public comments. However, the pseudonymous author of the site, screenname Ephilei, had posted a “highlights” reel of the comments that the site had received. The site

²⁸² See Ephilei, “Objections to Transgenderism,” *TransChristians.org*, (accessed June 1, 2016), <http://www.transchristians.org/book/book-objections> and especially Ephilei, “Ex-Trans,” *TransChristians.org*, (accessed June 1, 2016), <http://www.transchristians.org/ex-trans>

author is described here as pseudonymous because, while the extensive “About” and “Statement of Faith” sections originally included on the site do not publicly identify the site’s author but list only the creator’s screenname (Ephilei), an addendum to the homepage informs visitors that Ephilei was killed in a car crash in 2010, and the site is now maintained as a memorial to them. This announcement includes the creator’s birth name in its explanation.²⁸³

The websites for Equally Blessed (EB), New Ways Ministries (NWM), and Dignity USA are included together in this analysis. This decision is based on the organizational and ministerial overlap between these groups, similar or even shared community content, mutual status as a coalition through participation in Equally Blessed, and the similar terminology they use when referring to saints on their pages. Though also founding members, Call to Action and Fortunate Families are not included in this study due to their lack of interactive online community and absence of material related to saints. EB, NWM, and Dignity, on the other hand, contain all of these components. To summarize the organizational analysis presented in section [1.3.2](#), Dignity in particular has been a longtime inclusivist force for SGM Catholics, though EB and NWM are also well-established organizations; EB has physical offices in Massachusetts, while NWM has offices listed in Washington state and Maryland. NWM specializes the larger shared ministry of the coalition through publishing “research, publications, education about sexual orientation and gender identity”; EB functions as the centralized face of the coalition for advocacy and press releases. Of the three, only Dignity has localized physical chapters, which exist throughout the United States. EB and NWM create and promote a variety of resources to support SGM Catholics, allies, and communities, and NWM holds regular programming—

²⁸³ Ephilei, “Homepage,” 1.

conferences, seminars, and speaking events—around the country in pursuit of that goal.²⁸⁴ All these sites include similar resources and discussions about the role of saints for the organizations and SGM Catholics, and all also expand and mirror their online presences through Facebook.²⁸⁵

Most consequentially, all these sites address in different ways groups who oppose them. For Dignity, such references include direct and explicit condemnation through blog post headlines such as, “LGBT Catholic Groups Ignored by Vatican World Meeting of Families,” or, “Pope Francis demeans many types of families in recent statement; LGBTQI Catholics Respond...”²⁸⁶ In other words, writers for the Dignity website portray Catholic leadership itself as an outgroup. Such postures relative to the Vatican and the Pope are classic examples of the type of outgrouping rhetorical structure that Wellman posits; namely, that inclusivist groups can and do view themselves in opposition to other, more traditional or conservative forces or groups within their own tradition. Conversely, both EB and NWM are much more reserved in their language. EB predominantly highlights positive statements from Catholic leaders on their site, and only references “reconciliation” and asking God to “foster greater understanding” and “open hearts among those who disagree” with queer Catholics or oppose SGM in the Catholic Church.²⁸⁷ NWM, meanwhile, encourages Catholics to write to Pope Francis or schedule a meeting with their local bishop because “[The Pope’s] record on including LGBT Catholics and

²⁸⁴ “What we do,” *New Ways Ministries*, (accessed Dec. 1, 2016), <https://www.newwaysministry.org/what-we-do/>

²⁸⁵ Though not central to this study, public Facebook analytics from July 2018 report: EB: 2.3K followers; NWM: 5.7K followers; Dignity: 3.5K followers. This data is included here only to indicate popularity and audience reach of the organizations both objectively and relative to one another (among all followers worldwide). While posts and comments were monitored for this research, the vast majority of discussion about saints occurred on these groups’ websites rather than social media. This is attributed to the latter medium being heavily utilized for current announcements and contemporary commentary.

²⁸⁶ “LGBT Catholic Groups Ignored by Vatican World Meeting of Families,” *Dignity USA*, (July, 24, 2018), <https://www.dignityusa.org/article/lgbt-catholic-groups-ignored-vatican-world-meeting-families>; “Pope Francis demeans many types of families in recent statement; LGBTQI Catholics Respond with ‘We are Family’ Petition,” *Dignity USA*, (June 18, 2018), <https://www.dignityusa.org/article/pope-francis-demeans-many-types-families-recent-statement-lgbtqi-catholics-respond-%E2%80%9Cwe-are>

²⁸⁷ “Equally Blessed Blog,” *Equally Blessed*, (accessed June 23 2017), <https://www.equallyblessed.org/blog/>

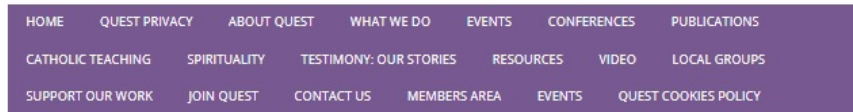
their families is mixed.” News updates written for their Bondings 2.0 blog include such understated headlines such as “New Zealand Bishops Acknowledge Church’s ‘Shortcomings’ on LGBT Inclusion” or “The best Catholic LGBT News Events of 2017” and “The Worst Catholic News Events of 2017.”²⁸⁸

Quest, founded in 1973, is in many respects a contemporary of Dignity or New Ways Ministries and shares some organizational and socio-political similarities to both these groups. Headquartered in London, England, Quest provides pastoral support to lesbian, gay and transgender Catholics primarily in the United Kingdom. With a staff of eight committee members, Quest produces information, hosts an annual conference, and fosters inclusive worship, spiritual retreats, and supportive fellowship for SGM and allies via six regional groups.²⁸⁹ Quest offers SGM affirming resources that include discussions about and ways to respond to “clobber texts” and other heteronormative polemics. These texts specifically address the “real sin of Sodom” and language (namely, the Hebrew word *toevah*) that is used to delineate “taboo” categories and is (mis)translated in English as “abomination.”²⁹⁰ Such documents are emblematic of the other resources on the site, which also include SGM-affirming cultural and theological books, supportive texts, news, and bulletins, and a range of theological resources, including some on saints. All of these articles accept comments, and many contain lively discussion boards.

²⁸⁸ “New Zealand Bishops Acknowledge Church’s “Shortcomings” on LGBT Inclusion,” *New Ways Ministries*, (July 24 2018), <https://www.newwaysministry.org/2018/07/24/new-zealand-bishops-acknowledge-churchs-shortcomings-on-lgbt-inclusion/>; “The best Catholic LGBT News Events of 2017,” *New Ways Ministries*, (Dec. 30, 2017), <https://www.newwaysministry.org/2017/12/30/best-catholic-lgbt-news-events-2017/>; “The Worst Catholic News Events of 2017,” *New Ways Ministries*, (Dec. 29, 2017), <https://www.newwaysministry.org/2017/12/29/worst-catholic-lgbt-news-events-2017/>

²⁸⁹ “About Us,” *Quest*, (accessed Feb. 21, 2018), <http://questlgbti.uk/about/>. See also “Quest FAQs,” *Quest*, (accessed Feb. 21, 2018), <http://questlgbti.uk/about/43067-2/>

²⁹⁰ “Category: Clobber Texts,” *Quest*, (accessed January 22, 2018), <http://questlgbti.uk/category/bible-2/clobber-texts-bible/>



Quest Bulletin Issue 80 Out Now!



Latest News

SEXUALITY, GENDER
IDENTITY AND BELIEF

"...FOR HE WAS AN OLD
MAN, AND HEAVY"

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Figure 6. The Quest homepage and its scrolling banner emphasize events, resources, and spiritual reflections. <http://questlgbti.uk>

Much like many other inclusivist sites and groups that seek to moderate or change Roman Catholic views on SGM communities and individuals, Quest's portrayal of the larger Church, or those who disagree with stances of inclusivity, is largely muted. Acknowledgements of the realities of their status relative to the Roman Catholic Church do exist, of course; examples most frequently occur in passing phrases on the Quest blog. For instance, contributor author Terence Weldon (creator of Queering the Church) describes in one Quest blog post the relationship between queer Catholics and the Roman Catholic Church. "The only contradiction that exists

between being queer and Catholic” he writes, “is within the church itself, where...the church is so anti-gay because it *is* so gay.”²⁹¹

Finally, the Temple of Antinous (TA) is unique among the inclusivist sites included in this study. Unlike the organizations and communities listed above, the creators of this site do not espouse any affiliations with Christianity. Rather, TA declares²⁹² that it is the modern incarnation of the ancient cult of Antinous, the young lover of Emperor Hadrian in the 120s CE. The site identifies itself as the online home and repository of “the Religion of Antinous the Gay God; the Beautiful God of Gay Spirituality.”²⁹³ These pages (somewhat chauvinistically) describe how this “new religion... for gay spirituality” was initiated by the site’s author, who was “renamed” Flamen Antinous Subia in 2002. No other identifying information is given about the leader of this group, and nothing else linking this persona to another identity is publicly available online. The site now has several additional “priests” who also co-edit some of the content and respond to comments on the site, including Hernestus Pheidon Akulas Kaemked Gill and Uendi Quinn Hostilia Marcella.²⁹⁴

While scant historical details are given on the group’s site, and the site administrators are not forthcoming, external resources and historical documents shed additional perspective on this group. The Temple website does note that three original members founded or reconstituted the cult in 2002, but it neglects to mention that the Temple of Antinous is part of a larger, more generalized Ekklesia Antinoou or “Citizenry of Antinous.” This “queer, Graeco-Roman-Egyptian syncretist reconstructionist polytheist form of mystical religion” developed after some

²⁹¹ Terence Weldon, “‘Queer and Catholic’ – NOT a Contradiction,” *Quest*, (October 12, 2017), <http://questlgbti.uk/queer-and-catholic-not-a-contradiction/>

²⁹² All statements made on this site (and all sites in this analysis) are reproduced in this section at face value. The *impact* of narratives, site design, language, and community responses are investigated in Chapter 3.

²⁹³ “Homepage,” *Temple of Antinous*, (accessed May 12, 2016), <http://www.antinopolis.org/>

²⁹⁴ “Priesthood,” *Temple of Antinous*, (accessed July 21, 2018), <http://www.antinopolis.org/religion/priesthood.htm>

of the founding members left the group in 2004 over “irreconcilable spiritual differences.”²⁹⁵ This schism led to additional Antinoan spiritual groups, including the Ekklesia Antinoou, the Aedicula Antinoi, and SacredAntinous.com.²⁹⁶ However, while the Temple of Antinous is clearly a queer form of neo-mysticism rather than a Judeo-Christian tradition, it meets several prerequisites for inclusion in the present study. Though Roman Catholicism is by virtue of its volume the most prominent faith perspective in this work, the various organizations, blogs and faiths are included in this study not because they belong to a particular tradition, but because they relate narratives of saints to SGM. Like the other communities described here (and unlike any of the other Antinoan groups), the Temple of Antinous publishes extensive narratives and spiritual reflections on a number of “saints.” These historical and cultural figures (both ancient and contemporary) are defined—and, rhetorically, function—similarly to other queer interpretations of saints included here. Specifically, the Temple of Antinous “recognizes the lives, courage and work of all these blessed souls... and we honor and bless the memory of these great spirits.” Moreover, these saints serve an intercessory role, as faithful Antinoans “call upon them [the saints] to watch over us, and to strengthen our cause.”²⁹⁷ As these excerpts suggest, it is also worth noting that much of the language and symbolism the Temple of Antinous employs is syncretic with or reminiscent of similar elements within traditional Roman Catholicism, including their saints, liturgical calendar, shrines and priests.

²⁹⁵ Philipus Doctor “Ekklesia Antinoou” *WitchVox.com* (online, August 13, 2006) https://web.archive.org/web/20110101141126/http://www.witchvox.com/va/dt_va.html?a=uswa&c=trads&id=10844. This article was later deleted after the founders of the group separated over their “irreconcilable spiritual differences,” but is recoverable via the link above courtesy of Google’s Wayback Machine digital archive. Observant readers will note that the Temple of Antinous kept the Latin spelling to refer to their followers specifically, while Philipus and other groups have collectively adopted the Greek spelling.

²⁹⁶ See “Ministries,” *SacredAntinous.com*, (accessed Oct. 20, 2018), <http://www.sacredantinous.com/Ministries.html> for a listing of the four Antinoan groups active at the time of this writing.

²⁹⁷ “Saints and Martyrs of Religio Antinoi,” *Temple of Antinous*, (accessed June 22, 2017), <http://www.antinopolis.org/religion/saints.htm>.



Figure 7. The Temple of Antinous Homepage (<http://www.antinopolis.org/>) is designed to be vivid, outlining the various facets of the group’s spirituality.

The site, heavily featuring ancient Roman elements and images/busts of Antinous throughout, contains sections on the “holy biography” of Antinous, extensive documents outlining the religious beliefs of both ancient and modern groups, an image gallery of artistic interpretations of Antinous, shrines, a blog and a liturgical calendar. The blog and the calendar are of particular note for the purposes of this work; both detail the “feast days” for what they have termed the “gay saints” that populate the liturgical year for the Temple of Antinous. The blog, “Antinous the Gay God-Blog” is also mirrored on Facebook and followed by 19.1K people. This site also prominently features the visitor counter plug-in Clustrmaps, which tracked

5,782 visitors from June 2017-June 2018.²⁹⁸ While the complete lists of saints included in the descriptions of the faith are static pages, many “saints and martyrs” (such as Judy Garland, Heath Ledger, Derek Jarman, and Jean Genet) appear with articles in the blog for community response.²⁹⁹

Of all the inclusivist sites included in this study, TA relies the least on outgroup identification and polemics. While such a stance would be logical for generalized spiritualist theology, there are nonetheless instances of both narratives and passing references that fit this inclusivist pattern. Passing comments can be found in blog posts and liturgical calendar entries such as the “Feast of Antinous in Antioch,” where “*our enemies in the Christian Church* [emphasis added] took inspiration from the beauty of Antinous and used his deification as a weapon for our destruction. It was in Antioch that homosexuality was crucified. We lament the misery brought against our kind, and we remember those countless souls who were brutalized and murdered...”³⁰⁰ Most notably, this refrain that Christianity actively persecuted the ancient cultus appears in the site’s “History of Antinoopolis,” dramatically describing the eventual fall of the city to Christians in the fourth century because of their bias against the homoerotic cultus, including the persecution of “many nameless martyrs” of “our ancient faith” through the centuries.³⁰¹ Such a claim has only tenuous historical evidence at best.³⁰² However, it does serve as a strong indicator for the rhetorical and even theological positioning of this group

²⁹⁸ “Antinopolis,” *ClustrMaps.com*, (accessed July 25, 2018), <https://clustrmaps.com/map/Antinopolis.org>

²⁹⁹ “Antinous the Gay God-Blog,” *Temple of Antinous*, (accessed Jan 4, 2018), <http://antinousgaygod.blogspot.com/search?q=saint>

³⁰⁰ “Feast of Antinous in Antioch,” *Temple of Antinous*, (accessed June 1, 2018), <http://www.antinopolis.org/calendar/litcalendar-4.html>

³⁰¹ “History of Antinoopolis,” *Temple of Antinous*, (accessed July 23, 2018), <http://www.antinopolis.org/antinopolis.html>

³⁰² Sarah Waters “‘The Most Famous Fairy in History:’ Antinous and Homosexual Fantasy” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 6, (2) (Oct. 1995), 194-230.

opposing heteronormative power structures and groups like “the Christians” that perpetuate them.

2.1.2 Exclusivist communities

Like inclusivist groups, exclusivist and semi-exclusivist sites have been identified within the parameters of this study. Groups are deemed to align with exclusivist organizing principles when they employ rhetorical strategies that reinforce existing political and theological sanctions and condemnations against some or all SGM communities’ rights, dignity, or very existence.³⁰³ Closely related to this stance is that of semi-exclusivists, who do not condemn lesbian, gay or bisexual people (or, less commonly, trans-identified people) *per se*, but strongly condemn “acting” on those attractions or identities. In other words, this form of exclusivist category promotes celibacy for SGM communities. The official position of the Roman Catholic Church is singled out in Wellman’s analysis as quintessentially exclusivist.³⁰⁴ The four groups in this study—those which also strongly feature narratives around saints—are all either directly associated or theologically aligned with the Roman Catholic Church. These include Spiritual Friendship, Courage International, Catholic Answers, and the Church Militant. As in the previous section, the following pages briefly outline these digital communities, including their general types of rhetoric and theology, their website design/presence, their author and/or organizational structure, and the way they define and talk about outgroups.

Spiritual Friendship is unique among the remaining communities in this analysis because it cultivates a clearly semi-exclusivist position. As the name implies, this blog site serves as an online resource guide and “town square” of sorts for discussions and thought pieces by and for

³⁰³ Wellman, “The Debate over Homosexual Ordination,” 191.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 192.

SGM interested in or currently practicing celibacy and the development of platonic friendship. While the main thread of the site simply updates with new posts and older entries scroll down, the website also includes sections for its other online presences—Facebook and Twitter³⁰⁵—its many contributors, a calendar advertising where said contributors have speaking engagements, and an “About” section. This final area includes a number of explanative texts outlining the general positions of the site, including explanations and defenses of promoting abstinence and friendship among/as SGM.³⁰⁶

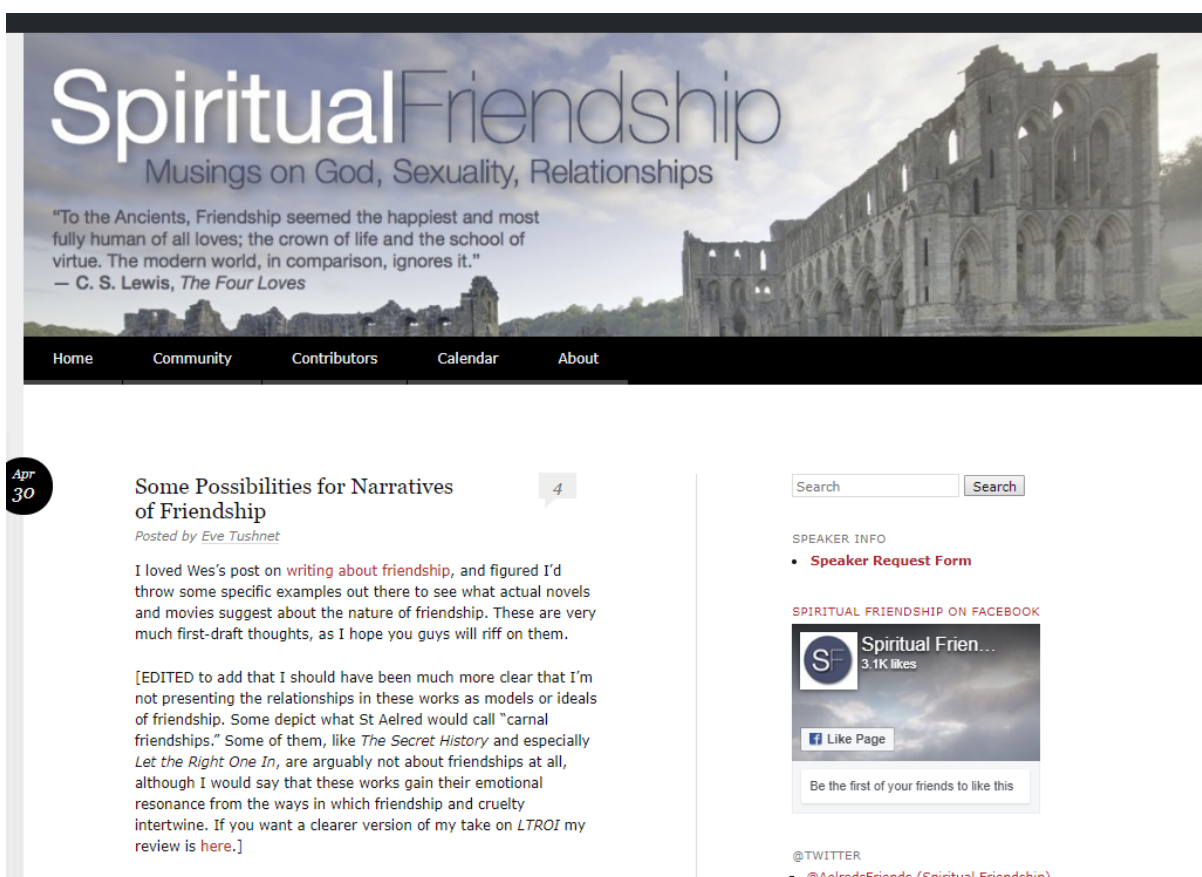


Figure 8. The homepage for Spiritual Friendship, showcasing the reserved and thoughtful ambiance the page seeks to project. <https://www.spiritualfriendship.org>

³⁰⁵ Both sites have just over 3K followers as of July 2018.

³⁰⁶ Interestingly, these menu items are not separate webpages or stubs, but are simply older blog posts that have been hyperlinked to be permanently accessible in the dropdown bar. This is significant because it demonstrates a commitment to be fully dependent on the public content generated by the site’s contributors/editors.

The site is edited by Ron Belgau and Wesley Hill, and past and current contributors to the site (as of 2018), though difficult to track, number at least fifteen (with twelve currently active). All blog posts are tagged; although no entry can be posted anonymously, there is a general “Spiritual Friendship” handle that is essentially anonymous. That is, it is an account that more than one person within the editorial staff can access that has permission to post articles. These public editors and contributors come from a variety of theological and educational backgrounds, and utilize a variety of literary sources in their posts. For example, Hill speaks in several posts about his evangelical upbringing and education, and Belgau was the only openly gay Catholic invited to speak at the World Meeting of Families in 2015.³⁰⁷ The former teaches at Trinity School for Ministry and the latter at St. Louis University. An additional contributor who has published articles on this site about saints is Gregg Webb, who identifies as Eastern Orthodox Catholic and is studying at the Presbyterian Church of America’s Covenant Theological Seminary in Missouri. In fact, a large majority of the contributors (according to the site) hold or are pursuing advanced degrees from colleges or seminaries.³⁰⁸ Each blog post allows comments, and many sustain robust conversations among readers and contributors that often range from several to several dozen comments.

While all the contributors on the site bring unique elements and perspectives, the community as a whole revolves around discussing and supporting the theological, social, and practical components of practicing celibacy and developing platonic relationships. Contributors couch this endeavor within a variety of frameworks, including theological arguments (for

³⁰⁷For example, Wesley Hill, “On Evangelical Bigotry,” *Spiritual Friendship*, (May 10, 2018), <https://spiritualfriendship.org/2018/05/10/on-evangelical-bigotry/#more-9498>. David Gibson, “Gay and celibate, Ron Belgau is the official face of gay Catholicism for Pope Francis’ visit,” *National Catholic Reporter*, (Sept. 14, 2015), <https://www.ncronline.org/news/people/gay-and-celibate-ron-belgau-official-face-gay-catholicism-pope-francis-visit>

³⁰⁸ “Masthead,” *Spiritual Friendship*, (accessed June 1 2017), <https://spiritualfriendship.org/contributors/>

example, more robust/thoughtful versions of loving the sinner but hating the sin), appeals to other authors and works (C.S. Lewis and Aelred of Rievaulx are commonly cited), as well as reflections on personal experiences or recent events (i.e., a papal announcement or relevant new publication). Importantly for the present study, several contributors, including Hill, write about the roles that saints can play in mitigating the “trials” associated with celibacy.³⁰⁹

Finally, the discourse on this site around outgroups is also unique. Because the site is an amalgam of its various contributors, each brings slightly different experiences and perceptions of conflict groups to their work. For some writers, the clear or main antagonist is “the world,” the secular forces or “gay critics” who lead the faithful astray.³¹⁰ In other posts and among other contributors, there is also a clear sense of conflict with more conservative Christians. These competing tensions are epitomized, for example, by posts from contributor and site editor Wesley Hill. In “Where the World Attacks,” Hill writes that “the truth of the historic Christian sexual ethic... is being attacked in contemporary Western cultures, and that to fail to [defend it] is to fail to be orthodox, faithful, biblical.” Later in the post, however, Hill *also* argues that “‘the world’ that Luther mentions... is not always the world of progressive secularism/liberalism... If you are in a so-called conservative church and you are loudly proclaiming the truth about homosexuality at every point *but* at the point where that truth insists on the worth and lovability of LGBTQ people... then you are not proclaiming Christian truth.” (emphasis in original). Hill concludes by cautioning that both progressive and conservative Christians can “fail” in their interpretations of “the truth.”³¹¹ Overall, the underlying theme throughout the site and all its

³⁰⁹ For example, Gregg Webb, “The Cloud of Witnesses,” *Spiritual Friendship*, (Nov. 12, 2014), <https://spiritualfriendship.org/2014/11/12/the-cloud-of-witnesses/>

³¹⁰ Joshua Gonnerman, “A scattered ‘reader’s response’ from a ‘New Homophile,’” *Spiritual Friendship*, (December 20, 2013), <https://spiritualfriendship.org/2013/12/20/a-scattered-readers-response-from-a-new-homophile/>.

³¹¹ Wesley Hill, “Where the World Attacks,” *Spiritual Friendship*, (July 25, 2018), <https://spiritualfriendship.org/2018/07/25/where-the-world-attacks/>

contributors is unequivocally one of experienced or perceived difference and tension. As a group neither inclusivist nor fully exclusivist, the community seems fully aware it is in at least some degree of ideological conflict with both.

Courage, a Roman Catholic Apostolate, is the organization explicitly authorized by the Vatican to minister to SGM Catholics and families. In fact, Courage holds canonical status in the Roman Catholic Church as a diocesan clerical association of the faithful, which it claims makes it the only canonically-approved apostolate of its kind. The first Courage chapter was founded in New York City in 1980, and has since expanded to hundreds of chapters on every habitable continent except Africa.³¹²

This ministry takes the form of exclusivist teachings around SGM sexuality and identity, for which the organization (and much of Roman Catholic rhetoric) consistently utilizes the terms “experiencing same-sex attraction (SSA)” and “gender ideology” as blanket terms for framing lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults, as well as individuals who identify as transgender, respectively.³¹³ While the tone of the apostolate has softened in recent years to more prominently feature ministry “with love and compassion,” the main teachings of the group revolve around encouraging SGM Catholics to prayer and chastity, repentance for “sexual sins and temptations” in the “face of the problems of homosexuality,” and mutual support for others “bearing this cross,” often through an adaptation of the Twelve-Step program utilized by Alcoholics Anonymous.³¹⁴ Though noting that “the Twelve Steps does not mean that [Courage] views same-sex attractions as a disease or addiction,” the explanation behind this adaptation is nevertheless that “some of our members deal with issues of sexual brokenness such as

³¹² “About,” *Courage International*, (accessed February 20, 2018) <https://couragerc.org/for-individuals/#>

³¹³ See, for example, “FAQs,” *Courage International*, (accessed March 1, 2018), <https://couragerc.org/faqs/>

³¹⁴ Ibid; see also “Brochures,” *Courage International*, (accessed March 2, 2018), <https://couragerc.org/resources/>

compulsive attachments to pornography or promiscuous behavior... and that [members] must recognize and admit one's sinfulness."³¹⁵ As will be deconstructed further in Chapter 3, significant theological and cultural implications accompany the designation of Saint Charles Lwanga and the 22 Ugandan Martyrs (as they are collectively known) as the patron saints of Courage. Problematically, the reason this group was selected was because their hagiography involves their execution by the king of Bagandan (modern day Uganda) for refusing what Courage terms the "homosexual demands" of the king on the grounds of their Catholic faith.³¹⁶

The Courage website is organized, in part, as an extension of its physical offerings and ministry. Specifically, most of the site is dedicated to recording and promoting in-person offerings such as local Courage chapters, conferences, pilgrimages, and archiving and disseminating informational resource handouts and fliers about the group, its tenets, and larger Catholic documents such as "Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions between Homosexual Persons" from the Congregation For The Doctrine Of The Faith. Most notably, Courage supports a number of forum sites (hosted by Yahoo Groups) that allow members to "directly support each other." These online communities are organized into separate, private groups for "youth," men, "ladies," family members, and clergy, plus a separate group for bible study and one for reparations.³¹⁷

³¹⁵ "FAQs," Courage International, 1.

³¹⁶ Philip Bochanski, "Namugongo Jubilee: Lessons from our Patron Saints," *Courage International*, (July 3, 2014), <https://couragerc.org/resource/namugongo-jubilee-lessons-patron-saints/>.

³¹⁷ "Online Support," *Courage International* (accessed June 2, 2017), <https://couragerc.org/groups/>. Note that the Catholic use of the term "reparations" signifies the traditional act of engaging in prayer, fasting, etc. to expiate the sins of others, *not* the debunked practice of reparative therapy (a form of psychotherapy that purports to help change an individual's sexual orientation).



Figure 9. The homepage for Courage International, highlighting its resources for spirituality, authority, and in-person and online support groups.

Similarly to Equally Blessed and its coalition sites, Courage associates with other apostolates and initiatives in its ministry. While not part of the present study, the Angelic Warfare Confraternity (AWC), EnCourage, and Truth and Love bear mention. The AWC, as outlined in the previous chapter, is prominently featured on Courage’s “Resources” page as the Roman Catholic (Dominican) confraternity that promotes chastity. This promotion is accomplished through the physical and spiritual emulation of St. Thomas Aquinas. While using one of the most renowned philosopher-saints in all Roman Catholic history as a model for SGM Catholics is certainly noteworthy, this organization does not fulfill the communications

requirements for inclusion in the current work.³¹⁸ EnCourage and Truth and Love are both Courage spinoff organizations dedicated to providing resources for families of, and priests ministering to, SGM Catholics, respectively. But these sites, like AWC, do not include any interactive or community functions within their pages. As such, assessments of the ways Courage’s communities create, maintain, and utilize saints are limited to the main website’s materials and group forums. These include such advice columns and discussion posts as “The Namugongo Jubilee: Lessons from Our Patron Saints,” or “Healing Sexual Wounds with the Help of the Saints.”³¹⁹ The ways that saints are publicly discussed amongst members and readers of these communities, of course, is the focus of Chapter [3](#).

Within these resources, there is significant discussion about groups and “agendas” seeking to undermine Courage and “the Church’s” ministries for SGM Catholics. As noted by both Wellman and Jordan, religious leaders often take strong ideological stances on issues impacting SGM, and nowhere is this more apparent than within Courage’s written materials and introductory (“About Us”) documents. Many of these documents come directly from the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and frequently utilize language that decries secular “gender ideology” and the “intrinsically disordered” nature of homosexuality, in which people mistakenly “believe that the living out of this orientation in homosexual activity is a morally acceptable option.”³²⁰ This stern condemnation is at once echoed by and (to a degree) contrasted with the language on much of Courage’s own works, such as its much more consolatory call to “understand the experiences of [SGM] loved ones, and to respond to them

³¹⁸ For example, English philosopher Anthony Kenny described Thomas Aquinas as “one of the dozen greatest philosophers of the western world.” Anthony Kenny, “Introduction” *Aquinas: A Selection of Critical Essays*, Anthony Kenny, ed. (London: University Of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 1.

³¹⁹ Bochanski, “Namugongo Jubilee,” 1.

³²⁰ “FAQs” Courage International, quoting Joseph Ratzinger, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons,” *Vatican Press*, (Vatican, 1986).

with compassion. [Courage and EnCourage] know that it is possible to express love for someone even if we can't support all of their choices or actions.”³²¹

While not affiliated directly with the Roman Catholic Church, the Catholic Answers website describes itself as a “media company” or “media ministry” that “answers questions about what the [Roman Catholic] Church really teaches.”³²² The site describes its beginnings in 1979 as an indirect result of a leafleting “misinformation” campaign in a San Diego Catholic church parking lot. Catholic Answers now comprises 20 staff members and a five-person Board of Directors; it claims to be “the largest organization of [its] kind.”³²³ The site contains a searchable list of well over one hundred topics (including several on SGM-related topics), each of which is broken down into multiple media formats and document types, from audio and video clips on the particular subject to the organization’s magazine articles or basic Q&A formats. These materials can also be organized by file type instead of topic (Radio, Video, Magazine, etc.). Most notable for the purposes of this project, however, is the community-based Catholic Answers Forums section.

³²¹ “About” *Courage International*, 1.

³²² “Mission and Vision,” *Catholic Answers*, (accessed May 2, 2018), <https://www.catholic.com/about>

³²³ “Staff Profiles,” *Catholic Answers*, (accessed May 1, 2018), <https://www.catholic.com/profile>



Figure 10. Catholic Answers Homepage and a Catholic Answers Forums thread discussing the possibility of SGM saints from www.catholic.com and <https://forums.catholic.com/t/can-a-person-healed-by-our-lord-of-same-sex-attraction-ever-become-a-canonized-saint/119490/42>

Catholic Answers Forums are free and publicly accessible pages facilitating community discussion. Like the main site, all threads are highly organized and categorized. Each discussion thread, which can be started (pending moderator approval) by any registered user, includes the title/question for the thread, top respondents, the number of comments/responses, the number of views, the topic under which the discussion is filed (social justice, traditional Catholicism, apologetics, etc.) and how recently someone last commented. The latter—recent activity on the thread—dictates how the threads appear on the site; every time the page refreshes, the most active conversations rise to the top.³²⁴ Not surprisingly, the site clearly states that the views expressed in its threads are not necessarily those of Catholic Answers.

The screenshot shows the Catholic Answers Forums website. At the top, there is a navigation bar with the site logo, "Sign Up", "Log In", a search icon, and a menu icon. Below the navigation bar is an advertisement banner for "THE CASE AGAINST CONTRACEPTION" by Trent Horn. The main content area displays a list of discussion threads. Each thread entry includes a title, a category icon, a row of user avatars, and three numerical values representing replies, views, and the time since the last post.

Thread Title	Category	Replies	Views	Last Post
Protestant teaching of Mary	Non-Catholic Religions	81	192	4m
What does CAF think of Fr Ripperger?	Popular Media	89	425	4m
What make you think That Adam and Eve are real despite the evolutionary change or chance and widespread of the Neanderthals and Homosapians	Sacred Scripture	131	688	6m
Morality of DNA Testing for Ethnicity	Moral Theology	27	168	6m
How much has watching EWTN influenced your Catholic point of view?	Catholic Living	3	28	8m
Last Rites and The Eucharist	Liturgy and Sacraments	3	33	8m
Does Jesus set the bar too high?	Apologetics	13	64	10m
USCCB Condemns Separating Immigrant Children from Families	Social Justice	1.2k	3.5k	10m
If the body of Jesus was ever found, that would end Christianity	Traditional Catholicism	19	120	11m

Figure 11. An example of the highly organized design of Catholic Answers Forums.

³²⁴ “Catholic Answers Forums,” *Catholic Answers Forums*, (accessed Jan 11, 2018), <https://forums.catholic.com/>

This expansive site contains numerous conversations and arguments about the roles that saints can or should have for SGM Catholics and sexuality/identity. While posts' popularity on the site ranges from a few comments to many thousand, all the conversations that this study tracked—those which centered around saints and SGM (or those with “same-sex attraction,” as it is almost always termed)—consistently drew thousands of views. The smallest audience for all the conversations that were documented in this study was just over 1,000 views (“Does God’s Merciful kenosis lead to gay saints?”), while the most popular one (“Patron Saint For Those With Same Sex Attraction”) had been viewed over 16,800 times.³²⁵

Discussion and suspicion of outgroups are strong in many of the conversations that were tracked on this site. Unlike many of the other sites in this analysis, commenters for Catholic Answers only need a screenname tied to an active email address. Consequently, anonymity is the norm in this message board community.³²⁶ Accordingly, some threads contain frequent references to commenters’ own Catholic (and sometimes SGM) identity, as well as polemical or strawman caricatures of groups, ranging from Protestants to “homosexuals” to “the secular” or simply “the enemy.”³²⁷

Finally, the organization known as the Church Militant (CM) is named from a derivation of a title of the Roman Catholic Church. On its website, staff writer Bradley Eli describes “saintly people on earth [as] militant, as they strive to love God and neighbor while battling sinful temptations from the world, the flesh and the devil.” Thus, this organization perceives the “one

³²⁵ “Does God’s Merciful Kenosis Lead to Gay Saints?” *Catholic Answers Forums*, (July 2013), <https://forums.catholic.com/t/does-gods-merciful-kenosis-lead-to-gay-saints/332805>; “Patron Saint for those with Same-Sex Attraction,” *Catholic Answers Forums*, (July 2008), <https://forums.catholic.com/t/patron-saint-for-those-with-same-sex-attraction/119512>

³²⁶ It is not known whether this was an active choice by the creators of the site, though greater accountability and less anonymity would undoubtedly be difficult to enforce.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*

true church” and the “communion of saints... as composed of members found in three stages of perfection: The Church Triumphant in Heaven, the Church Militant on Earth and the Church Suffering in Purgatory.”³²⁸ Put more bluntly, the group describes itself in its “Mission” page as “(*Ecclesia Militans*) ... the Christian militia. The Church Militant does battle against sin, the devil and the demonic rulers” of the world.³²⁹ As this language suggests, the Church Militant is an organization that thrives on a combination of exclusivist language, selective Roman Catholic theology, and ultra-conservative ideology to promote specific interpretations of Roman Catholic teaching and “orthodoxy.” Despite describing itself as “authentic Catholicism” and an “apostolate” of the Roman Catholic Church, it is neither endorsed nor (currently) associated with the Roman Catholic Church.³³⁰ In fact, though founder Michael Voris created the organization as “Real Catholic TV” in the Archdiocese of Detroit in 2009, the Archdiocese declared after only a few years that “this organization [is] not authorized to promote itself as ‘Catholic.’”³³¹ In fact, sources ranging from the Christian Science Monitor, the Simon Wiesenthal Center Taskforce on Hate and Terrorism, and the Media Bias Fact Check organization have described TCM as an “ultraorthodox... extreme right” “hate group,” as “Anti-Semitic radical traditionalists” who are “on the spectrum of hate groups,” and as a “right-biased” “hate-like” extremist organization, respectively.³³² However, it is also a registered 501(c)(3) organization that pulls in millions of

³²⁸ Bradley Eli, “The Communion of Saints,” *Church Militant*, (accessed July 1 2018),

https://www.churchmilitant.com/catholicism/article/catholicism_saints-communion-of

³²⁹ “Mission,” *Church Militant*, (accessed June 21, 2017), <https://www.churchmilitant.com/mission>

³³⁰ Christine Niles, “Fake Media Labels Church Militant ‘Hate Group,’” *Church Militant*, (February 28, 2017),

<https://www.churchmilitant.com/news/article/fake-news-labels-church-militant-hate-group>

³³¹ Church Militant began as “Real Catholic TV” in the Detroit Archdiocese, but was asked to discontinue its association in 2012. Robert Allen, “Right-wing fringe group building multimedia empire near Detroit,” *USA Today*, (February 19, 2017) <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2017/02/19/right-wing-fringe-group-building-multimedia-empire-near-detroit/98132374/>.

³³² Patrik Jonsson and Trevor Bach, “Trump and the rise of the extreme right,” *Christian Science Monitor*, <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Politics/2017/0227/Trump-and-the-rise-of-the-extreme-right>. February 27, 2017.

The Simon Wiesenthal Center Taskforce on Hate and Terrorism, “Wiesenthal Center Digital Terrorism & Hate Report 2016,” *The Simon Wiesenthal Center*, (January 2017), <http://www.wiesenthal.com/site/apps/nlnet/content.aspx?c=lsKWLbPJLnF&b=8776547&ct=14827597>; D. Van

dollars every year through member subscriptions and advertising, and are by far by most visited of all the groups in this study based on website volume.³³³

The screenshot shows the Church Militant website interface. At the top, there are social media icons for Facebook (196K), Twitter (18K), and YouTube (65K). The main header features the Church Militant logo and navigation links: STORIES, SHOWS, SHOP, MICHAEL VORIS, RESISTANCE, SUPPORT US, and CATHOLICISM. A 'SIGN IN' button is also present. Below the header, a red banner offers 'Get daily updates!' with an email input field and a 'Sign up!' button. To the right, a section titled 'BECOME PREMIUM TODAY!' lists subscription options: Monthly (\$10 a month), Quarterly (\$30 every 3 months), and Yearly (\$120 a year). It also includes links for payment and account creation, followed by input fields for 'Email Address', 'Password', and 'Re-Enter Password'. A blue 'Donate' button is located at the bottom right. The main content area features a news article titled 'MUSCULAR FAITH' with a large image of a man in a brown robe looking down at his hands. Below the image are social sharing icons and a 'Print Friendly' button. The article is attributed to Bradley Eli, M.Div., Ma.Th. and dated August 1, 2018, with 7 comments.

Figure 12. An article featured on the Church Militant website beneath a banner offering their “news stories” and programming, the online shop, biographical info on “ex-gay” organizational leader Michael Voris, and other information on the “Crisis in the Church.” The many premium subscription and donation gateways are common fixtures on every page.

TCM hosts both short video descriptions and polemical articles for discussions and representations of Roman Catholic saints on its site. While there are 95 “saint of the day” videos—each a few minutes in length—based on the current Roman Catholic liturgical calendar, the pages are largely static, with few if any visits or comments. Further, the narratives in this

Zandt, “Church Militant,” *Media Bias Fact Check*, (September 1, 2017), <https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/church-militant/>

³³³ Allen, “Rightwing Fringe Group,” 1; “Domain Overview: www.churchmilitant.com,” *SEM RUSH* (Data report: generated June 21, 2018).

collection only briefly (if at all) mention sexuality. An excellent example is the video “Saint Aloysius Gonzaga”; while Roman Catholic narratives about this saint have long included promoting chastity for youth, this video only mentions in passing that Gonzaga overcame his lust through “severe mortification.”³³⁴ Accordingly, the larger polemical articles about saints and their comment sections are the primary texts analyzed in this study. For example, “Brother Seraphim asks the Saints about Homosexuality” has 86 comments, including “featured” comments the article author has highlighted.³³⁵

Finally, discussions of outgroups and apostates are extremely common on this site and within the community comments. Articles frequently remind readers about the dangers posed to the faith by outside forces, many of which are said to have “infiltrated” the Roman Catholic Church. For example, in “Brother Seraphim asks the Saints about the Current Crisis in the Church,” the author portrays the apostasy of Catholic priests who would rather be “nice” than “truthful” as a punishment allowed by God on the faithful. Persecution is also a common theme and reinforces the message that this community alone has the correct interpretation or message for true Catholics. This creates the paradox of rhetorically establishing the mainstream leadership of the Roman Catholic Church as an outgroup apart from this (self-described) Roman Catholic community as well.³³⁶

³³⁴ “Saint Aloysius Gonzaga,” *Church Militant*, (accessed July 9, 2018), <https://www.churchmilitant.com/video/episode/st.-aloyisus-gonzaga-21-jun>; see also Givens, “The Faithful Departed,” for a more in-depth account of how Catholics have variously talked about patronages of Aloysius Gonzaga.

³³⁵ Lofton, “Brother Seraphim asks the Saints about Homosexuality,” 1.

³³⁶ Michael Lofton, “Brother Seraphim asks the Saints about the Current Crisis in the Church,” *Church Militant*, (May 5, 2015), <https://www.churchmilitant.com/news/article/br.-seraphim-asks-the-saints-about-the-current-crisis-in-the-church>

2.2 ONLINE SITES AND COMMUNITIES

2.2.1. Digital ethnography

Scholars have identified several reasons why veneration may be difficult to observe in-person or in physical communities. While ecclesiastic judgment and even physical dangers are inherent in publicly expressing devotion to what some within the Roman Catholic Church might consider transgressive versions of saints, there are more subtle factors at play as well. In the absence of (or as alternatives to) public shrines and devotions, Catholic devotionism to lesser-known saints can often be a very personal, sometimes private practice, involving private or semi-private prayers, shrines, images, and the perception of personal relationships.³³⁷ Research suggests that the solitary components of devotionism are only enhanced for SGM Christians, given the stigma and marginalization often experienced in religious settings; indeed, it has been proposed that this may be one reason why SGM Catholics gravitate to this practice.³³⁸ Wilcox has ably demonstrated in *Queer Women and Religious Individualism* that religious practices among some lesbian Christians often develop into very personal practices and expressions of spirituality, while authors like Richard Giannone and Anthony Easton have described in detail SGM individuals' experiences of "growing away" from Catholic church services and activities that came increasingly into conflict with their understandings of themselves and their sexuality.³³⁹ Even more specifically, Savastano highlights the difficulties inherent in researching this phenomenon, describing in both "St. Gerard Teaches Him That Love Cancels That Out..." and "Changing of St. Gerard's Clothes..." the secrecy and in some cases the shame or

³³⁷ Orsi, *Thank You, Saint Jude*, xi and 43.

³³⁸ Savastano, "St. Gerard Teaches...", 182

³³⁹ Melissa Wilcox, *Queer Women and Religious Individualism*, 47-48, 81-84. Giannone, *Hidden*, 30-32. Easton, "Queer Thoughts on Catholic Bodies," 225.

uncertainty many of his subjects expressed when speaking with him about their devotions and devotional practices, respectively.

For these reasons, digital ethnography is the primary research methodology for this project. Sometimes called “netnography,” digital ethnography is an emergent, adaptive form of the in-person ethnographic qualitative research approach.³⁴⁰ In recent years, some scholars have argued that “the increasing digital mediation in the field of ethnographic inquiry is undeniable”; some have gone so far as to say that “the Internet is one of the most powerful resources available to ethnographers.”³⁴¹ While scholars continue to debate the nuances of and best applications for this new methodology, it is clearly an ideal fit for this investigation into a phenomenon impacting people’s faith, perceptions of self and others, and communities through digital media. Communications and literary theorist N. Katherine Hayles argues that the “process of intermediation takes place where digital media interacts with cultural practices”; this mediation, or interplay, between media and culture—and between narrative and self-perception—is precisely what is occurring on saint websites and blogs.³⁴² Indeed, physical and digital materiality are not mutually exclusive experiences. While previous models conceptualized the digital in opposition to the physical—thus reinforcing a superficial and increasingly outdated virtual-physical dichotomy—empirical immersion in a website exposes the interactions between the medium and the users who are both contributing to and consuming it.³⁴³

³⁴⁰ Robert Kozinets, *Netnography: Redefined* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2015), 2.

³⁴¹ Wendy F. Hsu “Digital Ethnography Toward Augmented Empiricism: A New Methodological Framework” *Journal of Digital Humanities* Vol 3(1), (Spring 2014), 1. <http://journalofdigitalhumanities.org/3-1/digital-ethnography-toward-augmented-empiricism-by-wendy-hsu/>. Susan Crichton and Shelley Kinash “Virtual Ethnography: Interactive Interviewing Online as Method” *Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology* Vol 29(2) (Spring 2003), 1. <https://www.cjlt.ca/index.php/cjlt/article/view/26548/19730>.

³⁴² Katherine Hayles, *My Mother was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 4.

³⁴³ Hsu, “Digital Ethnography Toward Augmented Empiricism,” 1.

Immersion in the various facets of interactive websites is particularly important for capturing data and unveiling deeper sociological mechanisms because online mediums are not a static record of stable content. In-depth digital ethnography allows for the capture of the “flickering signifiers” of online interaction. In the current study, the “compelled interactivity” of the internet provides a rich opportunity to document the evolving possibilities of saints as signifiers and signposts for allowable forms of affection and gender expression.³⁴⁴ Consequently, this methodology (like all ethnography) takes the totality of the environment as its starting point; in this case, the online content, the comments that other viewers leave, the members that subscribe to the sites, web traffic, the links and ads that the sites host, and pingbacks and affiliations that they list or denounce in relation to one another. Building on that foundation, this project incorporates both post-structuralist and sociological perspectives to examine the meanings and signifiers underneath and beyond the texts themselves, revealing “new patterns and relationships [that] emerge when contents and contexts collide.”³⁴⁵ Even the ability of users to anonymously or semi-anonymously (via pseudonyms) post comments or content has value, as it allows and encourages some level of participation both by closeted or fearful individuals in marginalized communities, as well as by those who might otherwise be hesitant to verbalize disparaging views about SGM. The number of anonymous versus account-linked authors and commenters is also useful data. Such deep reading forms a type of content analysis that is able to reflect and tease out deeper insight into the nature of these online communities and the narratives and environments they create and maintain for themselves, similar to the way that in-person ethnographic analysis functions in real-world settings. Indeed, new media theory demonstrates that “digital technologies are not just objects, but become whole

³⁴⁴ Schippert, “Saint Mychal,” 119

³⁴⁵ Hsu, “Digital Ethnography Toward Augmented Empiricism,” 1.

environments in which people conduct their lives.”³⁴⁶ This process makes possible engagement with a single cultural artifact—saints—across various types of websites and communities. Such juxtaposition enables relational exploration and identification of patterns of social linkage and cultural meanings that would otherwise be inaccessible.³⁴⁷

This methodological approach has been used to great effect in a number of online research settings, including studies of sexuality among Mormon men and evangelicals, perceptions of saints for people with HIV/AIDS, underground punk music, and online cancer support groups.³⁴⁸ Digital ethnography can encompass several sophisticated techniques, including web-scraping, traffic monitoring, and content analysis.³⁴⁹ For the purposes of this research, digital ethnography will be defined as the capture and analysis of online content, relevant comments sections, members sections and rosters, online interviewing, and the nature of outbound links and resources provided by the websites listed above. Targeted recruitment of key individuals (blog authors, site administrators, etc.) willing to email or speak via video chat about their experiences and practices relating to SGM saint veneration adds further depth and context to these online components. Collectively, these online research components explicate larger social forces and religious constructs involved in this phenomenon. This discursive examination reveals moments and mechanisms through which creative and interpretive religious activities help practitioners define or reinforce their religious motivations and experiences in relation to their own spirituality, often against the backdrop of traditional teachings or religious institutions

³⁴⁶ Heidi A. Campbell and Stephen Garner *Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Spaces* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 36.

³⁴⁷ Hsu, “Digital Ethnography Toward Augmented Empiricism,” 1.

³⁴⁸ See Burke and Hudec, “Sexual Encounters and Manhood Acts” and Burke, *Christians Under Covers*; Givens “The Faithful Departed;” Hsu, “Digital Ethnography Toward Augmented Empiricism;” Crichton and Kinash, “Virtual Ethnography,” respectively.

³⁴⁹ Hsu, “Digital Ethnography Toward Augmented Empiricism,” 1. See also Burke and Hudec, “Sexual Encounters and Manhood Acts,” 331.

that promote saint veneration. Thus, in conjunction with the limitations and expectations enumerated above, incorporating this methodology allows engagement of particularly marginalized and often intentionally hidden groups.

The sites described in the previous section have been identified for digital ethnography because they are prominent online devotional sites that devote a significant portion of their online resources (content pages, videos, forum discussions, etc.) to talking about saints *and* SGM communities. Organizations and websites that engage one, but not both, of these topics were excluded, as were sites that do not incorporate any community feedback mechanisms. That is, sites that only provide static content (like articles) with no way for readers or subscribers to engage or respond (through comment sections, forums, social media, etc.) were not included. While all sites self-identify as providing spiritual resources, and most have some theological relationship to Christianity (as expected), no theological or denominational criteria were defined within the study parameters. In other words, sites were not limited to any specific religious affiliation or intent, but were included solely based on SGM saint narratives and rhetorical content. This allows sites' phenomenological uses of saints to inform their inclusion in the study, rather than more rigid and less precise metrics like religious affiliation. These criteria resulted in the selection of the ten sites outlined above, while an additional eight were investigated in-depth but ultimately not selected.

While digital ethnography remains a developing and expanding subfield of ethnographic study, there are a few limitations inherent in this approach. Early leaders in this field have acknowledged disjointed textualization, temporary participation, regional skew and racial bias as

specific factors that can limit analysis.³⁵⁰ Textual contributions can be potentially ambiguous or misinterpreted through components of sensory cues such as speed, loudness, pitch, and facial expressions that are present in face-to-face interactions but not online. However, the growing ubiquity and frequency of online interaction (vis-à-vis social media and internet-capable mobile devices) combined with the improvements in online shorthand and expression mitigate this concern to some degree.³⁵¹ More importantly, these users and respondents are more than just “people in groups.” As digital ethnographer Kelsy Burke points out, dedicated online forums construct “shared meanings and expectations for how to live” and convey “feeling” as well as information.³⁵² As already discussed in previous sections, the potentially temporary nature of online interactions is a serious consideration. Comments, articles, and even whole websites can be deleted, hacked, or hidden with relative ease. For instance, Queering the Church was apparently the victim of a serious hacking attack in 2012, causing authorial access to the site to be entirely lost, a new domain created, and content replaced.³⁵³ Regular monitoring of the sites being studied, in combination with tools such as site maps, data logs, and Google’s Internet Archive Wayback Machine, are valuable counterweights to this issue.

Finally, the internet has long been regionally skewed toward connections coming from the United States, as well as skewed towards white users generally and white men specifically.³⁵⁴ This limitation is inherent in this medium, and while several of the inclusivist sites included in

³⁵⁰ Crichton and Kinash, “Virtual Ethnography,” 1. In this list, textualization refers to the act of rendering meaning or intent as text, especially in digital spaces.

³⁵¹ Kozinets, *Netnography: Redefined*, 24-40. See also Barry Wellman and Milena Gulia “Virtual Communities as Communities” *Communities in Cyberspace* Peter Kollock and Marc Smith, eds. (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge Press, 2002), 167-188.

³⁵² Burke, *Christians Under Covers*, 82.

³⁵³ Explanation listed on the homepage of Queering the Church, <http://queerchurch.com/>. Both the new and archived older site were included in the current analysis; though many of the articles were replicated on the new domain, many of the comments and dialogues from the old site can only be found there (<http://queering-the-church.blogspot.com/>).

³⁵⁴ Crichton and Kinash, “Virtual Ethnography,” 1.

this study consciously endeavor to represent their queer saint subject matter with racial, gender identity, and national origin diversity, there is almost no reliable means for measuring these demographic characteristics among audience members. The World Wide Web is slowly becoming a ubiquitous communications platform, with increasingly (though not completely) equitable access for individuals across the world.³⁵⁵ Most, but not all, of the organizations and platforms for these sites are based in the United States. A few, like Quest and Queering the Church, are based in the United Kingdom, and others, like Catholic Answers Forums, the Temple of Antinous, and Q Spirit have an indeterminately wide readership (as noted in their descriptions previously) that includes a significant amount of page views from Europe and Latin America, respectively. In fact, the entire Q Spirit page is even recreated in Spanish, ostensibly necessitated by the amount of traffic visiting the site from Spanish-speaking countries. This new paradigm for information sharing is discussed extensively by Kozinets. While traditional scholarship assumes that a community's culture and norms and background assumptions can be isolated and assessed as part of the ethnographic study, the "audience networks" that make up much of contemporary information sharing—including the sites in this dissertation—do not share this basic assumption. Instead, these sites originate content but also serve as passive "conduits" for its consumption and interpretation. Thus, while assessing web authors' backgrounds remains cogent work, assuming a shared cultural perspective or racial background for online audiences is a more futile or even counterproductive effort. Without powerful (and expensive) analytical data tracking tools, digital ethnographers are often limited to key informant and small group or convenience sampling in their assessments regarding how audiences locate websites, what demographic characteristics predominate among visitors to the site, and how they

³⁵⁵ Kozinets, *Netnography: Redefined*, 2.

interpret and respond to the site information they consume.³⁵⁶ The present study employed the methodological approaches of key informant and rigorous sampling methods combined with analysis of user profiles and textual signifiers, guided by the hermeneutics of queer studies and rhetorical analysis outlined above, to work to counteract as much as possible the biases and blind spots to race and economic privilege that accompany this medium.

All forms of ethnography—as with any social or scientific analysis—require assessments and conclusions from the author that have a subjective component. In ethnography in particular, the best practice for authors is to disclose the assumptions and positionality that they bring with them to the study. Reflexivity is important for conducting analysis. Articulating relevant life experiences and expectations helps to mitigate potential bias or implicit assumptions in one’s work. This practice also serves an ethical function by allowing the reader to include the author background when assessing the persuasiveness of the arguments and evidence at hand.

To that end, there are several aspects of my own identity and professional education that are relevant to my work here. I have been trained in historical, qualitative, and quantitative assessment through religious studies programs in two major public research universities, and have been engaged in this project for a number of years. At the same time, I have been employed in public health planning for almost a decade, working as a white, straight, cisgender male ally in HIV prevention and care in Pennsylvania. One of the primary reasons that I became involved in both these aspects of my work—studying American Christianity and facilitating public health planning and practice—is because of my faith. I was raised in and am a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, an increasingly progressive mainline protestant denomination. My experiences and education growing up in the church taught me the value of

³⁵⁶ Kozinets, *Netnography: Redefined*, 39.

social justice and of treating all people as equals without exception, and that using one's abilities to support and care for others was the highest form of service.

At the same time, I spent a significant portion of my childhood in a relatively small, semi-rural town in Florida, surrounded by both a strong evangelical subculture and the town's smaller Roman Catholic community and Knights of Columbus chapter.³⁵⁷ Growing up immersed in these three (at times conflicting) theological worldviews created a very clear sense for me of the impact that religion has on so many facets of everyday American life. This perspective was thrown into sharper relief by the social issues that gained increasing prominence in the larger culture during the 1990s and 2000s. Of the myriad social issues that dominated the emergence of America's "culture wars," the issue I observed most clearly (or, put another way: the issue my own forms of privilege did not shield me from) was the Religious Right's increasingly vocal opposition to LGBTQ people and gay rights. This was unavoidable for my friends and acquaintances (and later, family) who were mistreated, physically attacked, or remained closeted because of it; I learned that even the accusation or rumor that one was gay could result in bullying or violence.

While these are potentially relevant aspects of my personal background, I have endeavored to mitigate them throughout this work. I have intentionally worked to represent each site and the communities they foster through their own words and in the language they use to describe themselves. Ethnographic research, as well as religious studies in general, is purposefully not theological or religious. My writing here reflects that by taking no position as much as possible vis-à-vis the religious claims or perspectives various actors and sites make.

³⁵⁷ As the sole Protestant member of the Knights of Columbus's local Boy Scout troop, I frequently encountered both major and minor differences in theological as well as cultural outlooks and expectations. This exposure to other's beliefs and expectations in a safe learning environment led to unique experiences and lifelong friendships with people of many different faiths, all of which has shaped my own worldview and spirituality.

While my personal views may differ from some of the content conveyed by one or more of these sites, I take seriously my academic responsibility to portray all views and people with whom I have engaged evenhandedly. As famed theorist Susan Sontag observed in her seminal essay “Notes on ‘Camp,’” “no one who wholeheartedly shares in a given sensibility [like camp] can analyze it”; rather, “it takes the sympathetic but objective eye... to analyze such practices.”³⁵⁸ Striving for a sympathetic but objective gaze with which to approach this topic aptly summarizes my endeavors here.

Another component of professional responsibility to address is that digital ethnographers sometimes choose to change website names and user names for publication.³⁵⁹ However, all the sites in this study purposefully situate themselves as online resources, and thus do not have any expectation of or desire for the site’s anonymity. Further, among the site authors who spoke with me, all confirmed that their identities were publicly available on their websites and that they did not require pseudonyms or confidentiality for inclusion in this work. On the other hand, any specific usernames that could be traced to individual users have been changed for their privacy and protection. Finally, I have been careful to demarcate instances where overlaps in issues of sexuality, race, and gender occur in these sites or conversations, as scholars have long noted that these marginalized and often intersectional identities frequently go hand-in-hand when assessing issues of systemic oppression.³⁶⁰

³⁵⁸ David Bergman “A Note on ‘Notes on Camp’” *The Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide* 16:3 (May/June 2009), 35.

³⁵⁹ For examples of this practice, see Burke’s description in *Christians under Covers*, 181.

³⁶⁰ See Mumford *Not Straight, Not White*; Griffin *Their Own Receive Them Not*; Jordan *Recruiting Young Love*, p. xi. In considering issues of gender and sexuality, see, for example, Wilcox’s *Queer Women and Religious Individualism* or John Sloop, *Disciplining Gender: Rhetorics of Sex Identity in Contemporary U.S. Culture* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), esp. 5-8; for theory see Butler’s *Gender Trouble* and Reeser’s *Masculinities in Theory*.

2.2.2 Inclusivist communities online

Now that this study's methodology for collecting and assessing online narratives and portrayals of saints has been established, the current subsection outlines specifically the ways inclusivist sites depict and discuss saints. This includes summaries of the numbers and types of pages, discussions, or stubs that sites publish or host, as well as summaries of any artistic representations, comments, or discussion threads associated with them. This straightforward presentation of the material content of these sites is necessary to foreground the analysis in the following chapter.

The inclusivist site Q Spirit contains by far the most pages dedicated to discussing and “celebrating” SGM Saints. This is accomplished primarily through the Jesus In Love Blog attached to the site (indeed, this blog was the original project that later expanded into Q Spirit). The current site has an archive of 83 articles tagged with the “Saints” label between December 2016 (when the current site went live) and July 2018, while the original Jesus in Love blog (currently still accessible on the Blogspot blogging platform) contains 1,076 articles from 2007-2016.³⁶¹ Additionally, the larger Q Spirit website hosts a separate listing of “LGBTQ Saints, Queer Saints.” Most if not all the hyperlinked names in these lists, which are further subdivided into categories such as “traditional saints, blessed, martyrs,” point to the corresponding article on the blog. This list contains 91 articles, illustrating the expansive way in which Cherry defines “saints.” This “Saints” section “profiles of traditional and alternative saints: people in the Bible, LGBT and queer martyrs, theologians, authors, activists, spiritual and religious leaders, mystics, humanitarians, artists, deities and other figures of special interest to lesbian, gay, bisexual,

³⁶¹ Kittredge Cherry, *Jesus in Love Blog* <http://jesusinlove.blogspot.com>. Accessed June 28, 2018. Not all of these blog entries are about SGM saints, however; some also address queer news, art, or social issues of the time. Discounting the year the blog began, Cherry averaged 117 articles a year.

transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people of faith and allies.”³⁶² It follows that this statement reflects the logic behind the saints that are highlighted in the blog as well.

The profiles of the saints themselves are intentionally expansive. Among the nearly one hundred profiles, the entries cover individuals and couples who are from multiple time periods; are of varied racial and ethnic backgrounds; range in age from adolescent to elderly; identified as (or are imagined to represent) gay, lesbian, or bisexual people; were (or are imagined to represent) transgender or gender-fluid people; or identified with or are also associated with other world religions, such as Hinduism or Buddhism. The most numerous articles are those that investigate or reinterpret “queer” elements in the lives of “traditional” saints. There are 35 articles that fit this description, with an additional six articles based directly on figures from the Bible (David and Jonathan or Ruth and Naomi, for example). While the majority of the subjects in these two sub-categories are European men (reflecting the overall historical trend of canonization by the Roman Catholic Church in the past two centuries) these saints also include individuals, couples, or groups from Africa, central and South America, and ancient Israel. The other sub-categories of saints, “martyrs,” “theologians, authors, activists and church leaders,” “Artists” and “Deities” incorporate much larger numbers of female, transgender, and gender-fluid saints, as well as many more individuals from the Americas (including First Nations) and those who identified as African or of African descent.³⁶³ These categories also include many contemporary individuals, from politicians like Harvey Milk to scholars like John Boswell. In a separate article, Cherry explicitly states that she “makes a conscious effort to present a diverse

³⁶² Kittredge Cherry, “LGBTQ Saints, Queer Saints,” *Q Spirit*, (accessed August 13, 2018), <http://qspirit.net/saints/>

³⁶³ There are also a few articles representing East Asian martyrs, one on the Buddha, and one about Krishna, presumably leaving Australia as the only world region with no explicit representation.

group of both familiar and unfamiliar saints from many times and places.”³⁶⁴ Finally, there are also several more general “resource” pages on the site about saints, including “Why we need LGBT saints (A queer theology of sainthood),” “LGBT-friendly memorial for All Saints, All Souls and Day of the Dead,” “Calendar of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Saints (Paul Halsall)” and “Santos Queer” (Spanish translations of Kittredge Cherry’s articles on LGBT saints). These articles, particularly the first two, include significant sociological evidence that is examined in the more detailed analysis in section [3.2](#). A few examples of significant or frequent saint narratives that will be explored in the next chapter (although all saints on the main site have been examined in the course of this study) include Perpetua and Felicity, Mychal Judge, “the Saints of Stonewall,” and “Martyrs” such as the victims of the Pulse Orlando massacre and the UpStairs Lounge fire.

The Queering the Church website contains two sections that describe and foster conversation around saints. Site author Terence Weldon has included five articles on his main blog (Queering the Church) about the lives and importance of specific saints: Saint Cyril on faith, St. Paul and the “proof-texts” used to attack SGM; the relationship between Saints Sergius and Bacchus; “gender-bending” views of Saint Francis of Assisi recovered in new scholarship; and the life and relationships of thirteenth-century Sufi mystic Rumi.³⁶⁵ However, the vast majority of saint-related content on Queering the Church is archived separately from the blog in the “Queer Saints and Martyrs” section of the website. The original blog structure used to create this new site reveals 109 separate articles created between 2009 and 2012 on queer individuals

³⁶⁴ Cherry, “Why we need LGBTQ Saints,” 1.

³⁶⁵ Terence Weldon, “Category Archives: Saints,” *Queering the Church*, (accessed October 6, 2013), <http://queerchurch.com/?cat=499>. Additional mentions of other saints do come up in other posts occasionally, but are not included here since they are not the focus of the articles they appear in. Of additional note for this list is that the earliest three posts are all credited to (via blog sharing and pinging—that is, they originated from) Cherry’s *Jesus in Love Blog*.

and couples throughout history, and the newer site has continued to add multiple new saint tabs every year since then (as recently as November 2017).³⁶⁶ This veritable maze of referential articles on saints is organized chronologically into six time periods, from “Saints Before Christianity” to “Modern Saints, Modern Heroes” (i.e., contemporary figures). The same materials, moreover, are also available arranged by date, including both a monthly list and a Religious Calendar listing the major or minor feast days for the “most important” saints.³⁶⁷ These feast dates are not necessarily dependent on any particular tradition, and are drawn from an eclectic range of sources. These include other blogs, such as Jesus in Love (also assessed in this study) and womenpriests.org, the Roman Catholicism liturgical calendar, the LGBT Catholic Handbook, academic works, and others. A few stubs that were of particular analytical interest include Saints Sergius and Bacchus, Joan of Arc, Sebastian, “Priests of the Pink Triangle” (referring to the Holocaust), and Mychal Judge.

TransChristians.org presents a specific interpretation of biblical figures, and a few early and medieval Christian church leaders, as distinctive individuals who can “inspire and comfort” transgender Christians. Specifically, the site’s author, Ephilei, catalogued new narratives within traditional stories to identify “tr-ancestors” (also spelled “trans-cestors” in a related page) in Christian history. This includes fifteen “gender variant” individuals from the Bible, including both Adam and Jesus, and six early Christian saints, ranging from Origen in the late second century CE to Joan of Arc in the early fifteenth century. Of the original fifteen “biblically gender-variant people” listed on the TransSaints Saints page, all but three are accompanied by only a few sentences explaining their relevance or inclusion on the list. The other three, Adam

³⁶⁶ See the chronology sidebar on <http://queering-the-church.blogspot.com/>.

³⁶⁷ The importance of recognizing some saints over others is determined by the site’s author, and assessed in the analysis in Chapter 3. See, for example, Terence Weldon, “Calendar for October,” *Queering the Church*, (accessed May 28, 2017), http://saints.queerchurch.info/?page_id=23323

(pre-Eve), Jesus, and the Water Carrier who led the disciples to the Upper Room have their own stubs created to further explore their significance. The six saints on the page (Origen, a compilation of twelve cross-dressing saints, Marina, Wilgefortis, Julian of Norwich, Joan of Arc) each have short descriptions describing their relevance, and four of them also have hyperlinks to other sources for more information and interpretation.³⁶⁸ The descriptions and rationale given for all these individuals, and the comments for the website, are considered in this analysis.

Dignity USA, Equally Blessed, and New Ways Ministries are partner organizations that serve unique functions within their collaborative relationships. As such, relevant content on Dignity's pages consist of some news and opinion articles discussing the roles of SGM saints or saints and the organization, as well as many liturgical homilies posted on the site for specific saints' feast days, including some who are explicitly claimed as queer saints. These news articles and homilies together total 36 webpages. Dignity's Litany of the Saints is of particular note. The Equally Blessed website contains a number of descriptions of conferences that include language indicative of how they view saints, and the opinion piece "The Spiritual Side of Coming Out" is a crucial component of this analysis as well.³⁶⁹ However, the bulk of relevant material for this group comes from News Ways Ministries (NWM) and its Blog, Bondings 2.0. As of July 2018, the blog contains nearly 70 articles that reference saints. In examining all of these over the course of the study, recurring themes assessed in the coming chapter include queer themes around the Feast of All Saints, the saintliness of contemporary SGM experiences, and SGM experiences of violence as a form of martyrdom or sainthood. Chief among these is NWM's serious efforts to facilitate the canonization of Father Mychal Judge, the gay Roman

³⁶⁸ Ephilei, "Trans Saints," *TransChristians.org*, (accessed Sept. 1, 2018), <http://www.transchristians.org/people/trans-saints>

³⁶⁹ Francis DeBernardo, "The Spiritual Side of Coming Out," *Equally Blessed*, (October 11, 2010), <https://www.equallyblessed.org/news/opinions/2010/10/11/the-spiritual-side-of-coming-out/>

Catholic chaplain to the New York City Fire Department who ministered to those dying of AIDS in the late 1980s and 1990s and was identified as Victim 001 during the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001.

Quest aims to provide a number of different types of resources for Catholic SGM in the UK, including affirming liturgy, responses to the religious “clobber texts” used to denigrate SGM, conferences, publications, testimonials, and so on. Conversely, however, there is a limited amount written about saints within the website, and none at all on its social media outlets. The analysis for this group, then, focuses around four primary discussion points posted to the site: three as reflective pieces and one news articles. The article, the reflection pieces, and their associated comments discuss a series of posts on the pro-LGBTQ comments about gay saints made publicly by American Jesuit priest (and consultant to the Vatican's Secretariat for Communications) James Martin; the need and possibilities for Quest to have a patron saint; a letter about love written by St. Bernard, and the roles of “Queer Saints and Martyrs” for SGM Catholics.³⁷⁰ It is worth noting here that a significant portion of this content was published on Quest by Terence Weldon, who also authors *Queering the Church*.³⁷¹

Finally, the Temple of Antinous contains a wealth of symbolism and references to saints and venerative activity. Saints are defined differently in different texts published on the site, but the most comprehensive description is found on the actual saints and martyrs landing page for that section of the site:

³⁷⁰ As of June 2018, all of these pages can be found together at <http://questlgbti.uk/?s=saints>.

³⁷¹ Like many of the inclusivist authors who identify themselves publicly, Weldon has garnered the ire of conservative Catholic commentators like American blogger Paul Anthony Melanson, who wrote twelve articles condemning various aspects of Weldon’s theology and interpretations of saints over a five month period in 2011-2012. See Paul Anthony Melanson, “La Salette Journey: Catholic Blog dedicated toward Our Lady of La Salette: Reconciler of Sinners,” *Blogspot*, (accessed Sept. 15, 2018), <https://lasalettejourney.blogspot.com/search?q=weldon>

We recognize the lives, courage and work of all these blessed souls who knew Antinous in life, who died for the cause of Homosexuality, and who devoted their lives to the defense and promotion of our Love. For their work and for the sacrifice of their lives, we proclaim them Saints and Martyrs as an example to all who believe in the sanctity of Same-Sex Love. In the Name of Antinous, we honor and bless the memory of these great spirits, our forefathers and foremothers. We call upon them to watch over us, and to strengthen our cause, that the holiness of our sexuality will take its place in the world again. In memory of the martyrs who gave their lives, willingly and unwillingly for us, we dedicate ourselves to Antinous...³⁷²

These saints are listed in both this dedicated section of the site as well as within a significant portion of the Temple's Blog. The blog goes into great detail about queer hagiographies of 28 individuals ranging from ancient Greek and Roman historical figures like Socrates to present-day icons like the late Heath Ledger.³⁷³ However, the official list of saints—described therein as those who reside in Antinous' "Aula Sancti," or Sacred Hall—includes 197 names with short descriptors, not including those said to be deified rather than beatified.³⁷⁴ Another major section of the website lists the Liturgical Calendar for the faith, which includes both the remembrance of specific "sacred" events as well as feast days for a number of the aforementioned saints (usually several each month). Some feasts are *also* remembrances, such as the Feast Day for "Saint Harvey Milk," which intentionally falls on the day of his assassination.³⁷⁵ Finally, the website also contains pages displaying the various altars and home shrines devotees have created to honor Antinous; this traditionally Catholic venerative practice is also included in the analysis for this site.

³⁷² "Aula Sancti, Religio Antinoi," *Temple of Antinous*, (accessed July 1, 2018), <http://www.antinopolis.org/religion/saints.htm>

³⁷³ All entries can be found condensed at <http://antinougaygod.blogspot.com/search/label/saint%20of%20antinous>

³⁷⁴ "Aula Sancti, Religio Antinoi," 1.

³⁷⁵ "Liturgical Calendar Eccleseeastic[sic] Festivals," *Temple of Antinous*, (accessed June 22, 2018), <http://www.antinopolis.org/calendar/litcal-list.html>

2.2.3 Exclusivist communities online

Spiritual Friendship (SF) is a large online forum with a dedicated group of contributors and an active group of readers who regularly comment on their reflections and think-pieces. For the current study, out of an estimated 600 posts separated into 37 blog categories, seven conversations about saints by five different authors have been selected for analysis.³⁷⁶ Though a much larger number of articles mention in passing some aspect of saints or sainthood, or appeal to “the saints” generally, these seven deal directly with contemporary issues or observations that rely heavily on insight or arguments related to specific saints. These articles discuss the role of St. Joseph in understanding masculinity, two articles on St. Aelred and spiritual friendship, two different apologetics for (celibate) gay saints, a reflection on saints and martyrdom, and a sermon on Saint John the (beloved) apostle’s relationship with Jesus from John Henry Newman. Each post anchors robust conversation in the comments as well. These sections range from posts with only a few lengthy comments, to several with closer to a dozen, to one with 34 and another with 36 (not counting an additional eleven pingbacks from other sites that linked to it).

The Roman Catholic Apostolate is unique among all the sites studied here in that it completely separates its community content from its published materials. Unlike the online forums of CatholicAnswers.com or the interactive blog formats adopted by all the other sites and organizations identified here, Courage utilizes a formal, static webpage format. All community content, including both social media interactions Facebook and Yahoo Groups, are linked on the

³⁷⁶ This number was calculated based on sample sizes collected from the blog archives: adding the number of posts for the same month each year to calculating the average posts per month, and then multiplying by the number of months and number of years the blog has been active (7). This process was repeated twice with different benchmark months; this produced a similar total with a standard deviation of < 1 post per month. Conservatively, the lower of the two calculations is reported here. Also of note is that one of these seven articles is hosted on an external site run by one SF’s regular contributors, but is included because it is referenced and hyperlinked on the main website being studied, and is authored by an SF contributor, Melinda Selmys.

page but are otherwise separate from the main site. This means that the materials offered on the site aren't directly available for comment by followers or visitors like all the other organizations and sites included here. To mitigate this difference for my analysis, a few key resources on the main Courage site were selected due to their heavy narrative and explanative uses of saints, including a video discussion of the patron saint for Courage, Charles Lwanga and his companions, and a Friendship Novena—a prayer said on nine consecutive days, each with the intercession of a specific saint or saints—specifically created for SGM Catholics to pray. All other materials utilized here come from the community groups, including public descriptions on several of the Yahoo Groups boards and the messages Courage posts to its linked Facebook and Twitter accounts. These social media platforms have published roughly 50 posts from July 2017 to July 2018 that discuss or invoke saints in several specific ways.

The forums on CatholicAnswers.com host a number of in-depth conversations around SGM saints. These different threads center around recurring queries that can be summarized as either, “Are there already (or could there be in the future) canonized saints who were attracted to their own sex,” or, “Are there any patron saints for SGM Catholics?” Together, these two query typologies account for nine threads on the site, with five threads discussing some variation of the former and four for the latter. A total of 331 comments have been reviewed, with an average of 39 individual comments per thread. However, the lengths of the conversations range from 7 to 131 comments, posted by anywhere from 3 to nearly 100 active participants. Because the site is meticulous in its automated archival processes and contains a powerful search feature, all conversations returning search results that included the words “gay” “SSA” “LGBT” “LGBTQ” “queer” and “saint” were assessed for this analysis, and the results ranged from 2008 until late 2017. There are no conversations currently active around this topic, and beginning in 2017, all

threads automatically closed and became archived after no new comments were posted for two weeks.³⁷⁷ That being the case, all the conversations were actively receiving comments for one to two months. The only exceptions to this pattern are for the longest thread, which continued for more than a year, and a second thread that began receiving multiple new comments four years after the original post (it began in 2008 and picked up again in 2013). The reasons for these outliers will be assessed in greater detail in the next chapter.

The actual content of the forums' public conversations around saints by over one hundred members vary greatly, making concise summation unwieldy. However, as necessary context for this study, patterns in similar conversations can be traced for each conversation phenotype. One basic ontological argument runs through all these threads from at least one respondent, and that is the claim or belief that SGM can not only attain entry to heaven (though the prerequisites vary) but that they could also—at least hypothetically—become saints. Usually, other users disagree, but the sentiment exists in all threads, nonetheless.

Among the messages that ask about the possibility of saints (current or future) who experience sexual attraction to members of the same sex, commenters and the flow of discussions generally focus on a few refrains. Whether a handful or a hundred users participate, ideas that consistently come up include the emphasis on chastity as a prerequisite. Discussants frequently debate the severity of the “sin” of “acting on same sex attractions,” which range from considering these “acts” (assumed to be sex, though that is usually not stated) as equal to any other sin any person commits to a “grave, mortal sin.” Along these lines, comments are frequently made espousing the veracity and moral high ground of the conversation (i.e., “It’s

³⁷⁷ Based on the way site activity changed over time, it is clear that this automatic closure was instituted site-wide in 2017. Before that time conversations remained open for comments indefinitely.

good you're here talking with *us*") or the poster directly ("I've looked around for information about this a few times").³⁷⁸ Some will argue that the premise of the question is moot because of the vast historical differences that separate saints from our present time, to which someone always points to more modern possibilities, usually John Henry Newman or Mychal Judge (neither of whom is currently a saint). There is also an emphasis or arguments around language on "healing" or "recovery" from SSA (either in this life or heaven) and divine forgiveness. A number of other, more unique threads of conversation are present in each of the five queries around this topic (some of which will be examined in greater detail in Chapter 3), but these elements consistently appear.

The second conversational phenotype—posts asking whether there are patron saints for SGM—has a few of its own rhetorical patterns. These discussions include more negative comments than the first type, and often include some degree of direct argumentation among discussants. These threads are also more personal; involving individuals' stories of seeking guidance and inspiration or solace through prayer to a saint. And while some respondents are encouraging, supportive, or sympathetic, these posts also feature more expressions of distrust, with commenters disparaging either "the fake saints" or "lies and stories" about "gay saints." Others similarly decry these kinds of narratives, intimating that they are necessarily illegitimate because they interpret them as "pro-LGBT" or include ideas supporting "the gay agenda."

Finally, the Church Militant has a few articles that directly combine language around saints and issues of sexual orientation. Two articles described as "ficterviews" depict the author

³⁷⁸ "LGBT saints?" *Catholic Answers Forums*, (accessed June 23, 2018), <https://forums.catholic.com/t/lgbt-saints/380186>.

being whisked into heaven to speak with the saints.³⁷⁹ These articles speak to the author’s fears of allowing openly SGM people in the Roman Catholic Church and the “folly” of priests and church leaders who are “perpetuating error and immorality,” respectively. A third article (with an accompanying video that takes place in a set emulating a newsroom) uses the writings of moral theologian and saint Alphonsus Liguori to promote a “muscular faith” that fights back against the error and “false mercy” that is “spreading” within the Roman Catholic Church. Each of these three articles has associated user conversations in the comments; while the latter two have only a few, the first article, “Brother Seraphim Asks the Saints about Homosexuality,” has 85 responses that accumulated over several months. Compared to an average of all other comments on articles that were initially posted during that week, 85 comments is an increase of nearly 60% over regular comment volume for the site.

2.3 THE PHYSICAL AND THE VIRTUAL

Finally, there are a few key similarities among some of the organizations that have bearing on the ways such groups represent and discuss saints. Two aspects emerged as patterns across sites during this course of this study and bring specific context and interpretation to the websites with which they are associated, but they are not central to the larger analysis. As such, they are highlighted here as context for the main discussion in the next chapter. These two components are the presence of physical chapters of the organization (versus a purely online presence), and the portrayal of venerative spaces (such as home shrines or memorials).

³⁷⁹ These narratives are mildly reminiscent of the rhetorical and narrative devices used to much greater effect by Catholic authors like C.S. Lewis in *The Great Divorce*.

The Equally Blessed coalition, Quest, the Temple of Antinous, and Courage all operate physical chapters.³⁸⁰ Thus, intentionally or not, one of the ways that these sites function is as support and digital repository for their existing physical communities. Examples of materials found exclusively on these sites include a significant number of publicly available prayers, including rosary and novena prayers on the Courage website, worship and liturgical materials on Quest, posted prayers and liturgical calendars for the “gay saints” of Antinous, and extensive LGBTQ-friendly prayers (such as All Saints Day or “prayers for all marriages”), parishes, and colleges on Equally Blessed and its partners (particularly Dignity). The focus on providing these and many other practical resources is important to note for these four groups; references to these organizations’ physical communities can act as a buttress for their authority and ecclesiastic capabilities that influences how other materials on the site are read (e.g., their discussions of saints or statements about SGM, for example). While such a reading is to some degree subjective and dependent on the individual visitor to the site, noting this potentiality and its consequences is still significant.

Second, digital spaces can be used to “magnify the physical materiality of culture,” and several of the sites highlight this premise as well.³⁸¹ The most prominent example of this intersection between physical and digital spaces is the Temple of Antinous, whose site prominently features the various home shrines of their members. These shrines both closely emulate and also camp the design and serious religiosity of elaborate Roman and Eastern Orthodox Catholic shrines.

³⁸⁰ The Temple of Antinous is to some extent an outlier in this grouping. While the organization lists nine spaces as shrines or temples to Antinous in the US and Germany, it should be noted that such spaces are not necessarily analogous to the formally organized chapters of Courage within Roman Catholic parishes of the various regional offices of Quest in the UK. Additionally, given the page dating available in the site mapping, it is clear that these pages predated the creation of physical spaces, which also sets it apart from the other three groups.

³⁸¹ Hsu, “Digital Ethnography Toward Augmented Empiricism,” 1.

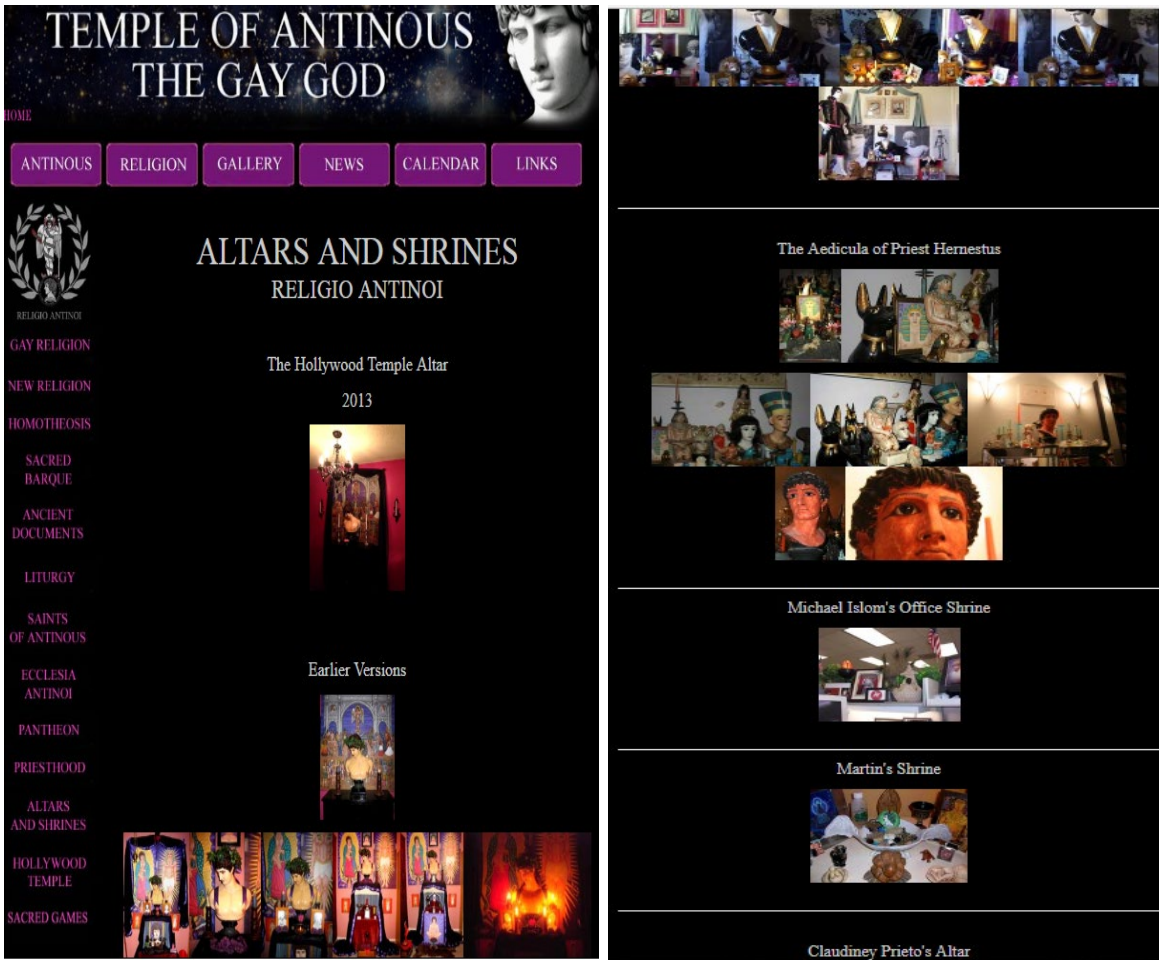


Figure 13. Screenshot examples of the Temple Altar (far left) and examples of *aediculae* (“small shrines” in Latin) and other shrines and altars posted on the Temple of Antinous website, <http://www.antinopolis.org/religion/altars.htm>.

Representing the physical in digital space is not limited to the Temple of Antinous, however.

Several sites also use physical embodiment in memorials to saints and martyrs on their own sites.

This is true for Q Spirit, which highlights a triptych (“Triptych for the 49”) and several pictures of other physical (as well as digital) artwork created to honor and memorialize the 49 victims of the Pulse nightclub shooting in June 2016.³⁸²

³⁸² Kittredge Cherry, “Orlando martyrs: Pulse gay nightclub massacre remembered in artwork “Triptych for the 49,” *Q Spirit*, (June 12, 2018), <http://qspirit.net/orlando-martyrs-pulse-gay-massacre/>



Figure 14. “Triptych for the 49” by Tony O’Connell, featured on the Saints page of the Q Spirit website. The artist specifically chose the patron saints on either door (Sebastian and Joan of Arc) to guard and protect the victims honored inside.

This type of physical representation on these sites matters because physical embodiment can both hide and reveal deeper meanings or symbols for identity and identity construction. The portrayal of traditional religious shrines juxtaposed with contemporary subjects has precedent in contemporary art. A quintessential example is renowned transgender artist Greer Lankton’s permanent installation recreating her Chicago apartment, *It’s all about ME, not you* (2009). The space is anchored around a series of three personal shrines to the most important role models in Lankton’s life: Candy Darling, Patti Smith, and Jesus. The latter was comprised of traditional

Catholic images of Jesus, Mary, and a few female saints, but the central image of Jesus had been altered to accentuate the fullness of his lips and suggest lipstick; other images of Jesus were superimposed with stylized representations of the artist herself. All the images were surrounded by cheaply extravagant frames suggestive of a campy faux seriousness. Likewise in the examples from the Temple of Antinous, the altar and shrines present striking combinations of religious and camp imagery. The stylized depictions of the patron god Antinous (sometimes fully nude, not pictured above), combined with recognizably Catholic background imagery, offer an interpretation of the relationship between the devotees and the divine that is at once a potentially subversive cultural expression and a clear representation of a larger ontological narrative. Art like Lankton's and imagery from the Temple of Antinous play with gendered representations of what would be read as traditional, holy portraits and their contexts to create powerful statements on the roles of gender expression, sexual attraction, and identity. Religious works such as these all highlight the role of physical bodies and their characteristics (or others' perceptions thereof) in maintaining and articulating one's sense of self.

A different type of statement is conveyed by the images Q Spirit hosts for the "49 Orlando Martyrs." Contrasting with the messaging suggested above, these real-world memorials and religious dedications (physical Holocaust memorials for gay men and, less prevalently, lesbians also fall into this type of representation) convey an added sense of gravity and importance to the topic. Memorials grounded in real world objects can convey additional connection and significance for the viewer that bolsters its importance. Thus, including physical memorials in discussing contemporary saints offers both a critical (that is, aspirational) political statement and a clear expression of a larger ontological narrative.

3.0 ANALYSIS: SAINTS AND SEXUAL IDENTITY IN DIGITAL SPACES

The stories, experiences, and connections of both writers and audiences around saints by and for SGM are expanding in contemporary digital forums, set against the backdrops of centuries of traditions and the interweaving histories of sexual and gender minorities. Chapter [1](#) outlined many of the ways that saints, institutions like the Roman Catholic Church (especially in America), and SGM communities have interacted in the past. It highlighted and contextualized the experiences and assumptions that both religious and SGM (and *especially* religious SGM) carry with them into the present discourse. These groups' histories foreground and overshadow the current, novel confluence of religious scenes with gender and "sexual identity landscapes."³⁸³

Site authors' and participants' experiences, concerns, and desires inform the current proliferation of interactive online sites, and these ways of discussing or relating to saints (either historically distant or contemporary) were the focus of Chapter [2](#). That chapter described ways of contextualizing different kinds of sites that conceptualize and actualize saints, along with a detailed outline of each site's author, contents and focus, and overall design. Issues of embodiment and actualization are "central to the study of lived Catholicism," and the ways in which "sacred presences become real in particular times and places... [and] how religious beliefs become material" are central questions both for the field and in the present study specifically.³⁸⁴

Integrating both the history of these communities and the perspectives of the websites included in *Digital Devotions*, the current chapter looks to the larger patterns, meanings, and

³⁸³ Mumford *Not Straight, Not White*, 2. This is also an allusion to the theory of religion articulated by Thomas Tweed, who argued that all religion could be usefully conceived as crossing boundaries and creating dwelling places among and within religious landscapes. Such a metaphor seems particularly apt in this intersectional assessment of identity. See Thomas Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: a theory of religion*. (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2006).

³⁸⁴ Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 73.

social processes that occur concomitantly within the narratives and popular piety it is assessing. “Saints are one of the most accessible forms of religion,” and demonstrates myriad ways in which “hagiography is a constantly changing form of religious and cultural discourse.” While traditionalists may attempt to anchor a particular reading of a saint or saints as an immutable truth (as some groups included in this study have indeed tried to do), “each generation can choose to reinterpret...the adaptability of [saints]... in light of their own values and concerns.” In this light, it is not surprising that sexuality and gender identity have emerged as critical issues with which diverse communities engage.³⁸⁵ The current chapter is, accordingly, part-exploration of the lived religious experiences that SGM are developing online through novel forms of saint veneration. However, it also parses the larger rhetorical and sociological mechanisms that may be interacting with both SGM subjectivity—the ways that sexual and gender minorities experience and adapt to mainstream heterosexual culture in specific ways—and the more solid construction of components of personal identity.³⁸⁶ These arguments and narratives entail utilizing saints to: 1) prescriptively model attributes or ideas for/to SGM; 2) to argue that SGM and saints are already similar; 3), to mask larger political or socio-cultural agendas or goals.

In examining such diverse and novel narratives around sexual and gender identity, post-structuralist critique offers an ideal framework for the necessarily interdisciplinary interpretation of people’s stories, images, and online material. Foucault, Butler, and others have articulated ways in which post-structuralism allows one “to look behind the signs that one sees in order to find meaning that might not be immediately apparent or might not seem to correspond to the visible sign.”³⁸⁷ Applied to the present study, this allows an analysis of the idea of saints as

³⁸⁵ Donald Boisvert, *Sanctity and Male Desire: A Gay Reading of Saints* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2004),17.

³⁸⁶ Halperin, *How to be Gay*, 7.

³⁸⁷ Reeser, *Masculinities in Theory*, 10. For more examples, see Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 75.

more than merely traditional “role models” of heroic virtue propounded by most forms of Catholic doctrine, or that the use of saints can enhance or support one’s own spirituality. Of course, such aspects are important, and are addressed accordingly. However, looking beyond the immediate signs and patterns in these communities illuminates the construction of far richer and more subtle ontological frameworks in four areas: 1) members’ use of saints to connect to Catholic models of virtue and, profoundly, 2) to connect contemporary queer experience and sensibility to Christian saints; 3) to engage narratives (including camp) that place SGM experience within Catholic history and models of authority; 4) to enhance political goals and a sense of social identity.

These discursive assessments are facilitated by post-structuralism’s assumption that there is no innate or permanent essence to any particular ontological sign. None of these labels imply discrete categories, and the fluidity and ambiguity among them comprise an important part of the analysis in the dissertation. For the present study, that means that one can (and should) assume that there is no single meaning, history, or representation of a saint that can be shown to be wholly natural or true. A significant portion of the content in these narratives revolves around the interplay between not necessarily compatible concepts from the present and the distant past. Nevertheless, the voluminous site content outlined here demonstrates that large numbers of people continue evaluate many of these subjects to speak for or about specific contemporary issues important to SGM readers and writers. This project is not interested in the potential *veracity*—historical or spiritual—for the content these sites create and share. Such claims are outside its scope, and as most scholars (and some of these sites themselves) make clear, they are quite possibly unknowable, given the often vast distances of time, cultures, and language that

separate them from both the present cultural moment and contemporary terminology.³⁸⁸ Rather, the real focus is on the construction and intentionality of meaning that site authors and users create and reference together. The prominent cultural critic Susan Sontag observed that “one cannot think without metaphors,” and this chapter demonstrates many of the ways that Sontag’s statement applies to saints.³⁸⁹ Writ large, “representational practices both reflect and construct social and psychological ‘reality’”; as such, the meanings that sanctified lives, stories, and images from saints convey can powerfully and specifically represent sexual attractions, gender identities, and queer models of holy lives.³⁹⁰ Throughout history, Catholic devotionism has undergone adaptations and “appropriations that demonstrate [devotionism]’s adaptability to the needs of those” who are marginalized.³⁹¹ The following discussion outlines specific narrative constructions evolving online in or about SGM communities, identifying and deconstructing narratives around the use of saints as: 1) role models and conduits for spirituality, belief, and mourning; 2) signposts for a deeper queer past and experiences and sensibilities like camp; 3) rhetorical vehicles to advance political and social goals.

³⁸⁸ As discussed in Chapter 1. See also Janes, *Visions of Queer Martyrdom*, 2. Jordan, *Recruiting Young Love*, xix. Yarrow, *The Saints*, 3 and throughout. Cherry, “Why we need LGBTQ Saints,” 6.

³⁸⁹ Susan Sontag, *AIDS and its Metaphors* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1989), 5, 9.

³⁹⁰ Tamsin Wilton, *Engendering AIDS: Deconstructing Sex, Text and Epidemic*, (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 6.

³⁹¹ Melissa Katz, “Regarding Mary: Women’s Lives Reflected in the Virgin’s Image” *Divine Mirrors: The Virgin Mary in the Visual Arts* ed. Melissa Katz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001): 19-131. See 109 for Katz’s discussion of adaptations of devotionism over time.

3.1 QUEER SPIRITUALITY

Early scholarship regarding gay rights and the politics of visibility posited that sustained political and cultural visibility and activism for and by LGBTQ people would eventually lead to what Steven Seidman characterized as life “beyond the closet.”³⁹² Living beyond the closet as a cultural goal is associated with the hope or perception of the viability of reaching a “post-gay” culture in America and beyond. The evidence on many of these sites suggests this type of cultural movement towards subjective incorporation of readings of saints and their lives with queer narratives. As evidence, Byrne reports that many independent LGBT or LGBT-friendly Catholic churches already capitalize on the potentiality for queering iconography, specifically incorporating homophilic works of iconography like “Sergius and Bacchus” by Robert Lentz, or similarly stylized icons of Perpetua and Felicity.³⁹³ These kinds of queer representations of saints have evolved, along with exclusivist interpretations that contrast and seek to repudiate such narratives. In mid-2008, one commenter of Catholic Answers Forums (CAF) expressed the common perception that “sometimes it is more helpful to pray to a Saint that perhaps was also so inclined [to members of the same sex] in life”; in such cases, then, both inclusivist and exclusivist groups seek to define interpretations of the meanings of saints’ lives to be internalized and promoted.³⁹⁴

Exclusivist groups tend to promote spiritual narratives that center around experiences of suffering and sexual renunciation. Roman Catholic subcultures have long been home to (sometimes intense) rhetoric and worldview around suffering that were particularly prevalent in

³⁹² Mary Gray, *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 5.

³⁹³ Byrne, *The Other Catholics*, 277.

³⁹⁴ “Patron Saint For Those With Same Sex Attraction,” 1.

Roman Catholic teaching in the early-to-mid-twentieth century.³⁹⁵ Orsi notes that, for many Roman Catholics, suffering is one way that religion exemplifies the “corporealization of the sacred”—that is, that various aspects of religion imprint the intangible onto physical bodies, rendering the sacred more real and more present.³⁹⁶ Historical scholarship has captured vividly the rhetoric surrounding suffering used by priests and lay volunteers in the 1960s, who spoke of the sick or handicapped as “God’s special children” and “innocent sufferers” to whom “God listened most attentively.”³⁹⁷ Distress or ailment of the body was seen as an opportunity for spiritual growth; in many respects this mentality formed the basis of the RCC’s later (1980-onward) teachings about homosexuality and SGM issues as “crosses to bear” that (through prayer and “renunciation of the flesh”) could lead SGM people to “special relationships with God.”³⁹⁸

Perhaps the quintessential example of this trend observed on the sites in this study is in relation to Saint Charles Lwanga. Several different sites in this study hold up Saint Charles Lwanga and his companions (also referenced in conjunction with or as “The Ugandan Martyrs”) as appropriate saints for SGM Catholics.³⁹⁹ For context, Charles Lwanga was a late-nineteenth-century convert with the White Fathers order of Catholic missionaries in what is now Uganda. After his death in 1886, the Roman Catholic hagiography that emerged claimed that Charles and 21 other male pages and members of the royal court were executed by King Mwangi II of

³⁹⁵ Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 20. Heather Vacek, *Madness: American Protestant Responses to Mental Illness* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2015) illustrates common Protestant historical counterpoints to this perspective (as well as a few notable Protestant exceptions).

³⁹⁶ The study of the theology of suffering is not unique to Orsi or Christianity. For example, an excellent queer analysis of religious suffering in Jewish contexts is Daniel Lehrman, “Released from Bondage: Sex, Suffering and Sanctity” *The Sacred Encounter: Jewish Perspectives on Sexuality* Lisa Grushcow, ed. (New York: CCAR Press, 2014)

³⁹⁷ Lehrman, *Ibid.*

³⁹⁸ Joseph Ratzinger, “Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons,” *Offices of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith* (June 3, 2003).

³⁹⁹ “Patron Saint For Those With Same Sex Attraction,” 1. Bochanski, “Namugongo Jubilee,” 1.

Buganda because they refused his sexual advances.⁴⁰⁰ While this is the explanation canonized in Roman Catholic history, it is important to note here what Ugandans themselves have written about this event. Notably, many historians contest the Roman Catholic missionaries' interpretation of the king's motives; African historian Assa Okoth describes King Mwanga's interests in eliminating the Christians in his court not as an act of lust but as a political decision based on the "foreign influence" he perceived Christianity represented. In this interpretation, the danger that Mwanga perceived was their refusal to obey his orders (regardless of whether or not they were related to sex). Okoth writes that Mwanga believed that all converts—Catholic, Protestant and Muslim—"threatened the integrity of [his] kingdom" and were "poisoning the very roots" of it.⁴⁰¹ Indeed, Mwanga II's reign ended only a few years later during a Christian and Muslim uprising backed by European powers in 1888; despite Mwanga's continued efforts, his kingdom fell under British control by 1890.⁴⁰²

For the current discussion, however, what is important is not the degree of historical accuracy accorded to the circumstances surrounding Charles' life and death, but how and why *this particular* portrayal and explanation is used in discussions of SGM Christians and same-sex attraction today. The elevation of specific saints instead of others, and the way their hagiographies are told or the details that are emphasized can say a great deal about the interests and motivations of the people involved. This particular saint is cited extensively on the exclusivist Roman Catholic websites Catholic Answers and Courage; he and his companions are collectively the patron saints of the latter organization. In this context, Courage specifically emphasizes the martyrs' "courage to resist" the "deeply involved... homosexual acts" and

⁴⁰⁰ "Charles Lwanga and Companions, Lesson V" *Breviarium Romanum* (Office of Ss. Matthias Mulumba, 2002)

⁴⁰¹ Assa Okoth, *A History of Africa: African Societies and the Establishment of Colonial Rule*, (East African Publishers, 2006), 86–87.

⁴⁰² Federal Research Division, *Uganda: A County Study* Rita Byrnes, ed. (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1990) https://cdn.loc.gov/master/frd/frdcstdy/ug/ugandacountrystu00byrn_0/ugandacountrystu00byrn_0.pdf

“intoxication of power and pleasure” of the king. By choosing death over the (supposed) sexual commands of the king, their reward for avoiding “same-sex acts” is eternal life with Christ.⁴⁰³ Lifting up this particular version of his hagiography facilitates the subtle assumptions made plain in the Catholic Answers forums and Courage website that sanctity is tied not merely to chastity but to a rejection of same-sex intimacy, specifically.⁴⁰⁴ Such a reading is not only encouraged by Courage, but repeated throughout likeminded online communities. The EnCourage support group includes Lwanga in their prayers for intercession every weekday, and Catholic Answers Forums (CAF) readers note that they “were martyred for refusing to give in to the homosexual demands of the Bagandan ruler, Mwanga.”⁴⁰⁵ Reading more deeply into this narrative reveals the assumption that for committed, holy Roman Catholics, death should be preferable to same-sex intimacy.

To be sure, this type of appropriation is not analogous to SGM uses of saints described above and is problematic for both its colonialist gaze and homophobic undertones. This caveat holds true for narratives of several other non-Caucasian saints on these sites, as well (if they are mentioned at all). Wellman notes that religious elites often take stronger, more clearly articulated, and ideologically based positions on social, political, and religious issues than do their congregants, and that this phenomenon is particularly true in regards to views about homosexuality.⁴⁰⁶ This means that this connection between Courage’s promulgation of Charles Lwanga is no guarantee of how the saint will be understood or read by the individuals to whom he is promoted. In fact, Charles Lwanga is also discussed in detail on inclusivist sites like Q Spirit and Queering the Church. In addition to a thoughtful approach asking what Ugandans

⁴⁰³ Bochanski, “Namugongo Jubilee,” 1.

⁴⁰⁴ See also Donald Boisvert’s similar assessment of this motivation in Boisvert, *Sanctity and Male Desire*, 98-99.

⁴⁰⁵ “Patron Saint For Those With Same Sex Attraction,” 1.

⁴⁰⁶ Wellman, “The Debate over Homosexual Ordination,” 185.

themselves want and what they want to say (about themselves, their beliefs, and their country, where Martyrs Day is a national holiday), Cherry changes the dynamic of the story's intended message by conceptually linking Lwanga's hagiography to the murder of "modern day martyr" David Kato. Kato, an openly gay activist, was murdered in Uganda under the alleged auspices of religious rhetoric in 2011.⁴⁰⁷ Terence Weldon, conversely, discusses this narrative by couching it in the context of both the legal requirements of the time for disobeying the king and the harm that missionaries were and, in some respects, still are causing. He argues that harm the missionaries were doing at that time (and are still in some cases) to Uganda and much of Africa included codifying and enflaming homophobia and suppression of traditional African perspectives on sexuality and gender.⁴⁰⁸ One CAF commenter retorted that "calling [Lwanga] the patron saint of SSA people is a bit like calling Joan of Arc the patron saint of the English. It just doesn't make any sense." Overall, the sheer breadth of commentary by both exclusivist and inclusivist authors and audiences make clear that narratives and devotions to saints are influencing perceptions and defining possible interactions between spirituality and sexuality.

The narrative strategy utilized by Q Spirit and Queering the Church functions to counter the didactic rhetoric of the Roman Catholic Church's official interpretation of Lwanga's hagiography and legacy. Scholars Donald Boisvert and Mark Jordan explain this strategy, noting that one can read "the entire story [about Lwanga and his companions] as about male desire," and could just as readily interpret it as heroes rejecting one lover (the king) in favor of another (heavenly) one."⁴⁰⁹ In this sense, where the SGM congregant is meant to see a "resister of sexual temptation" model to which they should aspire, these inclusivist sites indicate that SGM

⁴⁰⁷ Kittredge Cherry, "Uganda Martyrs raise questions on religion and LGBTQ rights," *Q Spirit*, (Jun 3, 2018), <http://qspirit.net/uganda-martyrs-lgbtq-religion/>

⁴⁰⁸ Terence Weldon, "Uganda Martyrs: Charles Lwangwa [sic] and Companions," *Queering the Church*, (June 3, 2014), <http://saints.queerchurch.info/?p=27>. His article also links to Cherry's original blogpost on this subject.

⁴⁰⁹ Boisvert, *Sanctity and Male Desire*, 101.

readers can and should claim a new interpretation for stories about the life of the saint. This reverses the proscriptive, top-down messaging being reinforced by exclusivist narrators like exclusivist activists and leaders of the Roman Catholic Church.

Navigating these competing frameworks for understanding same-sex desires is particularly evident among the writers on Spiritual Friendship (SF). Reminiscent of minorities trying to negotiate identity between their culture and a dominant culture, the contributors here often speak of striking a tone that affirms the inherent worth and potential of SGM while adhering to Roman Catholic teachings (or conservative Christian ethos generally) of celibacy. As noted in section [2.2](#) above, the authors posting on this site speak in more personal terms about the benefits that praying to specific saints provides them in their “journey” toward holiness and God’s will, which they interpret as a path of friendship without sexual intimacy. This interpretation is, for them, an attempt at “reconciling sexuality and faith” through interpreting a “healthy understanding of the nature of the Church—and of the universal Christian call to holiness.”⁴¹⁰ One contributor explained that “because of [celibate saints] witness, and their lives... the idea that surrendering my own desire for romantic intimacy and the erotic expression of that desire was something too great to be asked to give seems less out of place or extreme.” Community members echoed this sentiment in comments, praising the article as a “great reminder of the essential ‘why’ behind all of our decisions in life.”⁴¹¹

Finally, the spiritual “why” for inclusivist groups is equally clear. Indeed, the primary, stated goal of the Q Spirit website is spiritual and devotional in nature; Cherry demonstrates that “Q Spirit expands the meaning of holiness by presenting diverse saints, history and books of

⁴¹⁰ Aaron Taylor, “Why the Church and the World Needs Celibate Gay Saints,” *Spiritual Friendship*, (August 19, 2013), <https://spiritualfriendship.org/2013/08/19/why-the-church-and-the-world-need-celibate-gay-saints/>

⁴¹¹ Webb, “The Cloud of Witnesses,” 1.

spiritual and religious significance to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning (LGBTQ) people of faith and allies.”⁴¹² Cherry argues that a queer theology of the saints “can inspire us to find our voice and be our best... queer saints can help reclaim the wholeness, connecting sexuality and spirituality for the good of all.” Other members of this online community affirm her interpretation, calling it “uplifting” and “informative.”⁴¹³ TransChristians.com encapsulates site author Ephilei’s “utter belief [that] Christianity is completely harmonious with transgender [identity],” and the descriptions of saints and biblical figures summarized on the page supported that theological position. Comments left on the site included affirmations such as Lovely L’s, who wrote that “I am so grateful to have found this sight [sic]... I pray that we are able to understand ourselves in light of scripture and Gods [sic] grace.”⁴¹⁴ Terence Weldon writes that “in Christian theology, we are told that we are made ‘in God’s image and likeness,’” and therefore sharing and recovering details of SGM saints helps readers better understand not only themselves but also God.⁴¹⁵

Queer studies scholars such as Eve Sedgwick and Mary Gray note that group visibility, especially for SGM, necessarily operates as a binary. Sedgwick explains that, “in order for someone to be visible or ‘out’ there must always be a closet someplace where others...struggle to get out.”⁴¹⁶ The inclusivist/exclusivist theological narratives discussed in this section can be seen as part of this pattern. This dissertation joins other recent scholarship in demonstrating that

⁴¹² Kittredge Cherry, “Q Spirit: About,” *Q Spirit*, (accessed Jan. 1, 2017), www.qspirit.net/about/

⁴¹³ Cherry, “Why we need LGBTQ saints,” 2.

⁴¹⁴ Ephilei, “Homepage,” 1; Ephilei, “Correspondence,” *TransChristians.org*, (accessed March 1, 2018), <http://www.transchristians.org/Home/contact/correspondence>

⁴¹⁵ Terence Weldon, “Some Gods of Homosexual Love,” *Queering the Church*, (August 18, 2010), <http://queering-the-church.blogspot.com/2010/08/some-gods-of-homosexual-love.html>

⁴¹⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick *Epistemology of the Closet*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 9-11. See also Gray, *Out in the Country*, 4.

online communities are unique environments, separate from physical lived religious spaces.⁴¹⁷ Such spaces mirror and expand Sedgwick's original examples of cultural dichotomies whose inherent positions of privilege and visibility necessitate opposition. Examining the dynamics and lived experiences of Christians who are, in one sense or another, using online spiritual communities as liminal *digital closets* expands our understanding around both this important component of queer theory, theology, and lived religion.

An example of a kind of digital closet uncovered in the present work is that many of these spiritual narratives and frameworks include a common theme of mourning or remembrance. Found solely in all of the inclusivist sites in this study, these communities detail historic and recent tragedies that touch the lives of SGM, including the Pulse nightclub shooting, the UpStairs Lounge arson attack, activists hacked to death in Bangladesh, gay activist David Kato's "martyrdom" in Uganda, "those executed for sodomy," and many more.⁴¹⁸ Using these spaces for public mourning provides theological context and explanation, encouraging readers to greater "faith, hope and courage." Before the Pulse nightclub shooting in June 2016, one of the most common themes on these sites was Holocaust Remembrance. Based largely around historiographies and first-person accounts of Nazi persecution of SGM, the sites engaged in remembrance accomplish dual objectives.⁴¹⁹ On the one hand, they create a kind of digital sacred space for honoring those seen as part of a larger imagined community and placing them and their immense suffering within a theological framework. This mechanism, described as "remembering the ashes of our martyrs" on *Queering the Church*, aims to provide some measure

⁴¹⁷ See Burke, *Christians Under Covers*, throughout. Olivia Bustion, "Autism and Christianity: An Ethnographic Intervention" *JAAR: Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 85, (3), (Sept. 2017), 653-681.

⁴¹⁸ Individual instances of SGM people being attacked, killed, or persecuted are so common that Dignity, Equally Blessed, New Ways Ministries alone have over 50 articles spanning fewer than 5 years.

⁴¹⁹ See Richard Plant, *The Pink Triangle: The Nazi War Against Homosexuals* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 1988) and Heinz Heger, *The Men with the Pink Triangle: the True Life-and-Death Story of Homosexuals in the Nazi Death Camps* (Los Angeles: Alyson Publications, 1994).

of sense and comfort to such extreme violence.⁴²⁰ On the other, they offer subjective experience and reinforce cultural in-group identity while providing needed space for processing and theologically framing traumatic events that sometimes also receive significant news coverage (i.e., the Pulse massacre). The ebb and flow of this type of subjectivity seems critical given the constant reminders of past and present threats of violence and persecution. These are perhaps best summarized by Weldon’s reflection on the life and death of Catharina Margaretha Linck, who was executed for the crime of sodomy in present-day Germany in 1721. After summarizing Catharina’s life “living as a man” and soldier and her subsequent conviction and beheading, Weldon ends the memorial with Linck’s purported last words, “But even were I to be done away with, those who are like me would remain.”⁴²¹ Closing the article with these words serves to both honor and remember the subject but also to encourage the reader and help them see themselves within a larger historical arc and community.

Other types of remembrances besides those dealing with grief and suffering are addressed on inclusivist sites. Sites like Q Spirit, the Temple of Antinous, TransChristians, and Queering the Church all contain liturgical calendar dates identifying and explaining “significant” LGBTQ dates such as National Coming Out Day, Trans Day of Visibility, and Pride Month alongside queer interpretations of Christian festivals and seasons like Lent, Advent, and Pentecost.⁴²² Resource pages on Equally Blessed, Quest, and Dignity offer liturgy to promote these interpretations of the liturgical calendar. Overlaying events in the life of SGM communities with

⁴²⁰ Terence Weldon, “Lest We Forget: Remember the Ashes of our Martyrs,” *Queering the Church*, (Feb. 13, 2013), <http://queeringthechurch.com/2013/02/13/lest-we-forget-the-ashes-of-our-martyrs/>.

⁴²¹ Terence Weldon, “Catharina Margaretha Linck, Executed For Sodomy,” *Queering the Church*, (Feb. 13, 2013), <http://saints.queerchurch.info/?cat=121>

⁴²² Kittredge Cherry, “Q Spirit: Calendar,” *Q Spirit*, (accessed Feb. 1, 2017), www.qspirit.net/calendar/

events in the life of the church is a powerful tool—a “sacred intermediary”—that acts to conceptually unify (or further solidify) the cultural and spiritual worlds of the audience.⁴²³

3.2 PRESCRIBING SAINTS AS ROLE MODELS

As outlined in Chapter [1](#), the most common role of saints is to serve as moral guides and role models by virtue of Catholic teaching and the authority imbued in their writing or lives. Hagiographies and even images of saints said to represent or serve as patrons for SGM Christians specifically take on added meaning through the relationship between the “holy” saint and intended audiences who are too often used to having their morality and worth questioned (including by other Christians).⁴²⁴ The discourses outlined here, however, demonstrate that such instructional “reading” of saintly hagiographies has recently become much more widespread and diverse due to online websites, blogs, and forums. This sanctified diversity, as a result, carries significant theological weight with online audiences and subscribers. While saint narratives have long held up one or more aspects of a saint’s life or conduct as worthy of emulation by the audience, the current narratives assessed in this study greatly expand what performative actions, lives, and desires should be seen as exemplary and thus reproducible. Essentially, this section demonstrates how online actors rhetorically construct arguments and syllogisms that question the relationship between SGM and saints. The conclusion—one might even call it an assumption, in some cases—within most of these narratives is that SGM can emulate saints. It interrogates what this proposition means to the many authors and audiences involved in this type of discussion. As

⁴²³ West, “Daniel” 433-31.

⁴²⁴ In addition to the discussion in section [1.2](#), see also Boisvert, *Sanctity and Male Desire*, 20.

will become clear, what attributes or ideas of saint should be modeled to whom—and whether such a proposition is affirming and constructive or erasing and demeaning to SGM—varies greatly among different online communities.

While exclusivist and semi-exclusivist sites largely maintain the common rhetorical configuration that replicates top-down saint to audience instruction for informing specific desires or actions (e.g., usually sex), the inclusivist authors and groups on many of these sites reverse this pattern. The new language or interpretations they share associate specific holy people and icons with same-sex desire, queer relationships, and gender nonconformity. Such language around these saints takes two different approaches. On one hand, idea modeling among authors and community members uses quotes and ideas from numerous sainted church fathers as models for reifying both specific actions and worldviews. On the other, role modeling occurs when contributors opine about which saints are patrons for SGM Catholics based on specific attributes they imagine the saints to have and wish SGM Catholics would emulate.

There are several saints whom the exclusivist sites Church Militant (CM) and members of the Catholic Answers Forums (CAF) forums reference as role models. To model saints, exclusivist groups deploy specific sayings and ideas of sainted “church fathers,” as well as specific characteristics of saints such as Augustine, Charles Lwanga, Michael (the Archangel), Sebastian, and Therese. The first approach, modeling words and ideas of church fathers for contemporary applications, is exemplified by a pair of Church Militant articles dubbed “ficterviews” with the saints, as well as some of the responses on CAF. Both the text and larger discussions surrounding them make clear which specific aspects of the saints should be emulated by the faithful. For example, the “ficterviews” about “homosexuality” and “the current crisis in the church,” respectively, reference a wide range of ancient church fathers, including Augustine

and Aquinas, whose views on abstinence, repentance, and immorality are put forward for readers to emulate. In the former, the posts' author describes Saint Augustine in heaven citing natural law to oppose same sex relationships, while Aquinas stands nearby urging the reader to oppose SGM because "correction is a work of mercy."⁴²⁵ This sentiment and call to action is echoed in the latter article as well, in which "the saints" argue that those in Roman Catholic Church who are "perpetuating error and immorality today... ought to [be] rebuke[d] even publicly."⁴²⁶

The community discussion around these two articles clearly indicates that many Church Militant subscribers and other commenters view these saints as proscriptive role models to inform their own community's perceptions of, and language about, SGM and sexuality. Of the 90 combined comments on these articles, dozens of posts detail ways that readers can "oppose homosexuality," "respond to homosexuals," and "confront priests who do not preach about the sin [of homosexuality]."⁴²⁷ The best way to accomplish this, according to these commenters, is "with the knowledge of the saints" or "like the saints."⁴²⁸ While extensive sub-threads about specific and various techniques for "combating" or responding to "non-believers," Protestants, "liberals," and "homosexuals" also make up a significant portion of the comments, the theme of emulating the moralized and combative stances of the saints weaves throughout. This public discussion leaves a clear sense that many of the engaged members within this specific audience view the combative and narrow language attributed to the saints as a setting a worthy framework for their own responses to SGM, their allies, and priests who don't actively "condemn" SGM.

⁴²⁵ Lofton, "Brother Seraphim asks the Saints about Homosexuality," 1.

⁴²⁶ Lofton, "Brother Seraphim asks the Saints about the Current Crisis in the Church," 1. Lofton, "Brother Seraphim asks the Saints about Homosexuality," 1.

⁴²⁷ Ibid. Comments on this site by conservative5, GM1, and CWilson. May-June 2015.

⁴²⁸ Ibid. Comments on this site by Shirley, CY, Josip61, DU. May-June 2015.

This specific representation of saints—that their words are instructive for thought and action—is mirrored more broadly in some of the comments within threads on the Catholic Answers forums. Most notably, the thread “Patron Saint For Those With Same Sex Attraction” includes several arguments for saints’ patronage based on their words and ideas. User “MF2,” for example, writes that others should pray to Saint Teresa of Avila like “MF2” does *specifically* because of Teresa’s declaration that “Jesus alone suffices (Solo Dios Basta).” Her statement indicates that she is holding Teresa up as a spiritual role model for herself and others because of Teresa’s statements about the sovereign nature of Jesus. Later in the same thread, “Theprodigalsonreturn” posted that they view their patron saint to be “Saint Thérèse of Lisieux: she wanted to be a saint but realized she was NOTHING like any saint before her. But instead of being discouraged, I told myself: God would never inspire me with desires which cannot be realized.” Another contributor, “prodigal_son,” noted that St. Aelred is appropriate because he “wrote seemingly with some familiarity of the temptation monks often have to become overly attached (including physically) to other monks.”⁴²⁹ This argument, which is scattered throughout this thread, demonstrates that some of these community members pray to saints regarding “same sex attraction” because those saints’ words and ideas provide inspiration and guidance for their own lives. While these actions are not as clearly defined as in the Church Militant discourse, it does not diminish the similarities in the underlying sentiments.

While exclusivist groups hold up combative, judgment-bringing portrayals of saints as models within their communities, specific saints cited in Catholic Answers and the Courage support group are invoked with a different intent. In these forums, saints are viewed as role models serving as patrons for SGM based on the saints’ perceived virtues, interests, or

⁴²⁹ “Patron Saint For Those With Same Sex Attraction,” 1.

hagiography. As might be expected, the Courage support group invokes a wide range of saints in near-daily emailed prayers of intercession and prayers of petition (from among the more than 1400 members in the group). Most saints in these emails rarely generate larger conversations, having been selected based on upcoming Roman Catholic feast days or the personal preferences or connections that individual supplicants have to a specific saint.

Yet, there are a few patterns in these email digests that are clearly different. Prayers to, and group discussions around, Saints Augustine, Michael (the Archangel), Charles Lwanga, Therese, and Sebastian particularly stand out among the 164 email digests (a total of more than 1,000 individual emails) captured during the time of this study. Members who submit prayers to these saints—or recommend these saints for intercession to others—repeatedly articulate (among other reasons) that they view them as particularly effective intercessors because of their ability to serve as role models for the subject of the intercessory prayer. For example, Saint Augustine is frequently cited in this context (or spurs further discussion during his feast day and accompanying prayers come around each year) because many members believe that, he, like (presumably) their own loved ones, “had a wild life before he found Christ” and so “can guide our own wayward children back to God.” The implication in these messages and prayers is clear; because of Augustine’s earthly past and youth is perceived by these members as having been wild or even immoral, these qualifications make him more “relatable” and thus suitable to try to influence their own “misguided” loved ones.⁴³⁰

Such logic is common throughout the EnCourage support group. Both Saint Michael and Charles Lwanga are perceived as “resister” saints; the archangel Michael for resisting “evil in all

⁴³⁰ Prayerful2, Email correspondence with EnCourage, Feb. 1, 2017. marymag43, Email correspondence with EnCourage, Nov. 12, 2017.

its forms” and “safeguarding against the wickedness and snares of the devil” and Lwanga for specifically resisting the sexual advances/commands of the (male) “pagan” king.⁴³¹ These saints not only “know [SGM’s] pain better than anyone” but are uniquely suited to assist said person in the Litany of Petitions’ call to find “the courage and fortitude they need to resist temptation” which the supplicants imagine that SGM experience.⁴³² A common theme in these prayers is that the SGM family members’ be consequently inspired by these resister saints to resist “their own urges” or “decisions.” Many prayers and petitions ask to “help,” “guide,” or “return” SGM friends or family members, but they do so by petitioning Michael and Lwanga because they battle “evil” or “vice.” This language conflates negative moral judgment with both sexual acts and SGM lives generally, in part by often reducing SGM to little more than their “decisions” around partnering.⁴³³ Michael is often cited as a role model for strength for the community members themselves, too, as he is envisioned to “stand fast” against the forces of darkness and despair. Comforting and urging one another to “remain strong” and “resolute in your conviction and prayer” is also exceedingly common among these threads, and the saints—Michael in particular—are seen as worthy of emulation in this regard.⁴³⁴

Finally, Saints Therese and Sebastian have specific attributes that the EnCourage community references as models. Saint Therese is commonly cited within the support group for her quiet perseverance and patience, while Sebastian is celebrated for his perceived masculine attributes. Prayers to Saint Therese of Lisieux use her words and imagery to beseech God for patience and grace for both the supplicants and their loved ones, that they may “grow into the

⁴³¹ SM52, Email correspondence with EnCourage, July 12, 2018, citing Saint Michael’s Prayer. This narrative form about the patron saint of the organization is also hosted on the Courage website, contributing to its ubiquity. See Bochanski, “Namugongo Jubilee,” 1.

⁴³² Sullivanm0521, Email correspondence with EnCourage, April 1, 2017.

⁴³³ Margaret, Email correspondence with EnCourage, Sept 22, 2018

⁴³⁴ For example, Sheila, Email correspondence with EnCourage, Sept 21, 2018. sullivanm0521, Email correspondence with EnCourage, Feb 11, 2017. Suzann, Email correspondence with EnCourage, Sept. 1, 2017.

flowers they were meant to be,” or be “chiseled into the beautiful images you intended.” This holds for the person praying as well, that they may find grace whether “we are a splendid rose, or a white lily or a scented violet or a simple daisy.”⁴³⁵ The intent in these prayers is that Therese, whom these supplicants clearly associate with “gentle beauty,” may through her intercession transfer those attributes to the SGM subjects of the prayers.

Exclusivist groups’ intercessions from Sebastian, on the other hand, rely on gendered assumptions to convey meaning for readers. One conversation in particular on Catholic Answers Forums captured this sentiment well; Saint Sebastian is an appropriate saint for those in need of “more masculine” role models, since “he must have been a tough guy to survive being tied to a tree and shot through with arrows.” Others argued that Sebastian was a “celibate homosexual,” and that that celibate status “made him a very manly man.” How many men today, one commenter asked, “can live... (gay or straight) without violating God’s commandments?” Sebastian’s iron will and devotion, for this community member, made the saint a worthy intercessor. Still others pointed to Sebastian’s “extraordinary military career” as laudable, and the original author of the post summarized all these observations by noting that, if all these different elements were true, “that would add other level of heroic sainthood.”⁴³⁶ That such personal elements could all coexist in the context of one individual seemed not only acceptable and logical within this community discussion, but the discussants seemed to conclude that these reasons led Sebastian to be the definitive answer to the question in original post: “Who are the most MANLY SAINTS for men to imitate?” (emphasis in original). This logic contains fascinating parallels to historian John Boswell’s chronicling of “masculine” versus “feminine”

⁴³⁵ VVV, Email correspondence with EnCourage, Oct. 1, 2016.

⁴³⁶ “Who are the most MANLY SAINTS for men to imitate?” *Catholic Answers Forums*, (Nov. 2009), <https://forums.catholic.com/t/who-are-the-most-manly-saints-for-men-to-imitate/174906/31>

“military saints” such as Sergius and Bacchus. Boswell’s observation that gendered assumptions and readings of paired saints have changed many times over the centuries holds as true for premodern Europe as it does for contemporary websites in this study.⁴³⁷ Within the current dialogue, it demonstrates that authors and audience respondents project traits they perceive to be worthy emulation—based on reifying, heteronormative stereotypes about masculinity—onto Sebastian and then hold *that* image up as a role model for themselves.⁴³⁸

The examples above demonstrate the kinds of rhetoric and assumptions that comprise exclusivist narratives around saints. Groups and authors from Church Militant, Catholic Answers Forums, and the EnCourage community group create narratives about saints and saints’ ideas. Specifically, this includes highlighting ideas rebuking one’s enemies and attributes like “resisting sexual evil,” promoting chastity, or reifying culturally conservative models of gender expression. While such narratives are not new within the history of the Roman Catholic Church, the fact that these are now being used to conceptually frame and respond to evolving cultural norms around sexual and gender identity is novel. To respond to audiences’ concerns and fears around SGM, these authors and commenters hold up specific saints as models that empower the community to support heteronormative views and personal attributes.

Several of the semi-exclusivist authors on the site Spiritual Friendship (SF) also identify saints for intercession or emulation based on their specific thoughts and actions. This is stated explicitly by contributor Aaron Taylor, who argues that “same-sex attracted saints... can act as role models for gay Christians.” This kind of emulation is sorely needed, in his view, because

⁴³⁷ Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*, 156.

⁴³⁸ This stereotypical gendered interpretation is especially noteworthy because Sebastian is a well-known icon among gay men. Transforming the narrative in this exclusivist space into one that defines and then celebrates heteronormative characteristics like military service, strength and fortitude (against the arrows) and devotion to a cause, and so on, is likely a deliberate attempt at reclaiming this image and its narrative.

“Christians need role models to whom they can relate if they are to successfully pursue holiness, and gay and lesbian Christians are no exception.”⁴³⁹ Specifically, these saints are all associated with their exhortations for, and demonstrations of, chastity. The SF article “The Cloud of Witnesses” views this perspective as a part of a larger arc of the hagiographic teachings and practices of centuries of Christian saints, describing “the stories of countless men and women who have followed Christ’s call to take up their cross, deny themselves and follow after him. These saints, and especially the ascetics, are my daily reminder of the well-worn path [of chastity] I pursue.”⁴⁴⁰ Other contributors within this online community hold up specific saints, including Aelred, John Henry Newman, Crepin and Crepinien, and Joseph for similar reasons. Aelred, “often called the patron saint of friendship” is—rather obviously for a Christian online community about platonic friendship—the most cited example.⁴⁴¹ Contributor Wesley Hill exhorts readers to celebrate Aelred’s feast day to “acknowledge the blessing of friendship in our lives.” To contextualize and drive home this point, he closes with Aelred’s admonition that “it is no small consolation in this life to have someone you can unite with you in an intimate affection and the embrace of a holy love ... A man who can shed tears with you in your worries, be happy with you when things go well... where the sweetness of the Spirit flows between you, where you so join yourself and cleave to him that soul mingles with soul and two become one.”⁴⁴² The author also argues in a later post that spiritual, committed or “vowed” friendships are “very much in continuity with what St. Aelred [and] John Henry Newman... were all trying to promote.”⁴⁴³

⁴³⁹ Taylor, “Why the Church and the World Needs Celibate Gay Saints,” 1.

⁴⁴⁰ Webb, “The Cloud of Witnesses,” 1.

⁴⁴¹ The very name of the website, Spiritual Friendship, is a reference to Aelred’s *On Spiritual Friendship* (1166 CE), and the Cistercian English translation and publication of this work in 2010 shortened the title to *Aelred of Rievaulx: Spiritual Friendship*. (See <https://www.cistercianpublications.org/Products/GetSample/CF005P/9780879079703>)

⁴⁴² Wesley Hill, “A Blessed Feast of St. Aelred to You,” *Spiritual Friendship*, (Jan. 12, 2015), <https://spiritualfriendship.org/2015/01/12/a-blessed-feast-of-st-aelred-to-you/>

⁴⁴³ Wesley Hill, “Waiting for a New—Doubtless Very Different—St. Aelred,” *Spiritual Friendship*, (July 23, 2015), <https://spiritualfriendship.org/2015/07/23/waiting-for-a-new-doubtless-very-different-st-aelred/>

The editor of *Spiritual Friendship*, Ron Belgau, described the words of John Henry Newman as “a fitting way to reflect on what it really means to love God and to love each other.”⁴⁴⁴ Belgau also movingly references praying to companion saints Crepin and Crepinien and having their suffering (and martyrdom) remind him that, in his isolation, difficulty, and emotional suffering for his chastity, “I was not alone. I was part of the suffering Body of Christ. Crepin and Crepinien were among the many heroes of the faith who had gone before me, and who now composed the great cloud of witnesses who surrounded me and cheered me on to run the race with endurance.”⁴⁴⁵ Finally, *Spiritual Friendship* contributor and author Melinda Selmys (on her own blog linked through SF) describes St. Joseph’s attributes as inspiring emulation. “St. Joseph,” she writes, is always “just being there. Steady. Reliable. Considerate. No, more than just steady. *Steadying*.”⁴⁴⁶ Her shift from a description of her perception of the saint to an action and attribute that she can model herself make this yet another example in this manner of relating to saints.

Narratives, particularly in the Roman Catholic Church, urging resistance to sexual temptation or chastity versus “unchaste living” are commonplace throughout Christian history since Saints Augustine and Aquinas. However, in contemporary discourse, the heteronormative undercurrents in these injunctions are no longer assured. Rather, the Roman Catholic Church under Pope Benedict adapted many of its older messages and injunctions to now also “highlight the model path” for lesbian or gay laypeople within the church. It is not inconsequential that such arguments often serve as a corollary or introduction to larger and even more problematic

⁴⁴⁴ Ron Belgau, “Newman on the Love of Relations and Friends,” *Spiritual Friendship*, (April 12, 2017), <https://spiritualfriendship.org/2017/04/12/newman-on-the-love-of-relations-and-friends/>. Note that John Henry Newman is Blessed, and not actually canonized as a saint.

⁴⁴⁵ Ron Belgau, “Celibacy and martyrdom,” *Spiritual Friendship*, (April 11, 2012), <https://spiritualfriendship.org/2012/04/11/celibacy-and-martyrdom/>

⁴⁴⁶ Melinda Selmys, “St. Joseph versus Toxic Masculinity,” *Catholic Authenticity*, (March 20, 2016), <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/catholicauthenticity/2016/03/st-joseph-versus-toxic-masculinity/> Emphasis added.

arguments or assertions regarding what these web authors call “the choice of homosexuality,” GID, or “Gender Ideology,” or lead to strawman polemics against a singular “gay lifestyle.”⁴⁴⁷ Courage’s FAQ even states that Courage uses the term “SSA instead of gay or lesbian” because (among other reasons) “it makes [SGM Catholics] more susceptible to embracing the politics of ‘gay’ activism.” Another example of leading polemics can be found in Courage’s member materials. While the public Courage webpage vehemently and explicitly denies promoting the disproven and harmful faux-psychology of “reparative” or conversion therapy, every member who joins the EnCourage support group receives a private document with a “list of Web sites [sic] that contain valuable resources.” The National Association for Research & Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH), the now-defunct leading proponent of that practice, is listed as the very first resource after Courage itself. Following the link in this document reveals that NARTH is now revitalized and rebranded as The Alliance for Therapeutic Choice and Scientific Integrity, still offering “professional assistance for people experiencing unwanted homosexual attractions.”⁴⁴⁸ These discursive narrative lenses allow parishioners, priests, and church leaders to employ traditional saint veneration to influence perceptions and discourses both *with* and *about* those who identify as gay or lesbian, as well as their families.

Many of the narratives modeling chastity on Spiritual Friendship, whether intentionally or not, reflect some Roman Catholic group efforts to identify “appropriate” saints for lesbian and gay Catholics. These approved saints and official interpretations of their hagiographies uniformly promote abstinence for SGM, implicitly and often explicitly aiming to “reconcile...

⁴⁴⁷ Petro, *After the Wrath of God*, 8-9. Jordan, *Recruiting Young Love*, 41-42. “FAQs,” *Courage International*, 1.

⁴⁴⁸ “Courage Recommended Resources” Unpublished digital document, received March 2017; “ATCSI Homepage” ATCSI (online) <https://www.therapeuticchoice.com/> Accessed March 2017.

ways of being” for those who identify as SGM and Catholic.⁴⁴⁹ Much of the narrative framework describes saints as exemplary models of chastity or resisters of “sexual temptation” and is emblematic of traditionalist Roman Catholic web resources and apostolates like Courage. Examples on their sites include references to Maria Goretti, among others, as a “patron saint for same sex attraction... [because] she is a patron for chastity in general.”⁴⁵⁰ While one of the overall goals of Spiritual Friendship is to create a safe, thoughtful space for the exploration and affirmation of spiritual ideas around sexuality and chastity, so this group is also being interpreted by certain audiences as reinforcing larger ideologies. When readers conceptually associate SF articles with movements and organizations beyond the immediate intent of their posts, the result can be confrontational or misinterpreted correspondence lumping Spiritual Friendship and its messaging either with “liberal” SGM *or* “traditional” Catholicism.⁴⁵¹

The saint most frequently cited by far as a patron for SGM because of his chastity, however, is Thomas Aquinas. These references to Aquinas are not surprising. As described in Chapter [1](#), Roman Catholic leaders within the United States undertook a program to revive and promulgate the Angelic Warfare Confraternity (AWC), in the early 2000s. The confraternity is based around the concept and emulation of steadfast chastity attributed to the life of St. Thomas Aquinas (as the patron saint of chastity), and was tasked with promoting chastity with its target demographics of youth and SGM Catholics.⁴⁵² However, after the pontificate of Pope Francis began in 2013, Courage began to be more actively promoted in the United States as the recognized apostolate ministering to SGM lay Catholics. Accordingly, the Courage and AWC confraternities quietly removed links and references to one another as each highlighted separate

⁴⁴⁹ Easton, “Queer Thoughts on Catholic Bodies,” 224. “Positions” *Courage International* (online) Accessed Feb 5th, 2014. [Page is no longer active.]

⁴⁵⁰ “Patron Saint For Those With Same Sex Attraction,” 1.

⁴⁵¹ Hill, “Waiting for a New—Doubtless Very Different—St. Aelred,” 1.

⁴⁵² Hajduk, *The Cord*, 2. Mullady, “The Angelic Warfare Confraternity,” 1, 8.

saints for their respective primary audiences; SGM for the former and young (presumably straight) adults for the latter. However, the underlying messaging and rationale used by AWC for promoting chastity persisted within Courage’s messaging. For example, the first of Courage’s Five Goals is “to live chaste lives in accordance with the Roman Catholic Church’s teaching,” and the organization “sees persons with same-sex attractions first and foremost as men and women created in the image of God, with a vocation to live a chaste and holy life through an ever-deepening union with Christ.”⁴⁵³ These statements mirror earlier language on AWC (removed over a period of time between 2013 and 2015) that encouraged “all those with sexual sin... to live in chastity as men and women created in the image of God” and live as a “fellowship of men and women bound to one another in love and dedicated to pursuing and promoting chastity together.”⁴⁵⁴ Indeed, the very first saint in Courage’s Friendship Novena remains St. Thomas Aquinas because of his chastity.⁴⁵⁵ As such, this temporary realignment and emphasis of St. Aquinas as the protector and promoter of sexual purity and sexual morality among SGM individuals represents an important (if somewhat transient) act of utilizing Catholic tradition while creating a new, distinct imagining of the saint to fit the specific needs of the organization and its members.

Finally, the numerous saint narratives highlighted by inclusivist groups encompass several common themes, including both those honored for their ideas and those held up as role models. While individual examples abound across the inclusivist sites in this study, similar role model language appears across different sites for the articles, reflection pieces, and comments

⁴⁵³ “FAQs,” *Courage International*, 1.

⁴⁵⁴ Though removed, this can be viewed on Google internet archive, the Wayback Machine: “About,” *Angelic Warfare Confraternity* (accessed July 1, 2012), <https://web.archive.org/web/20120529022509/http://www.angelicwarfareconfraternity.org/about/>.

⁴⁵⁵ This Novena is a nine day prayer for promoting friendship, and includes a schedule for petitioning different saints each day. “Friendship Novena,” *Courage International*, (accessed March 2, 2018), <https://couragerc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Friendship-Novena-PDF-Updated-Oct-2016.pdf>

sections for Saints Sebastian, Aelred, Perpetua and Felicity, Ruth and Naomi, Polyeuct, and Joan of Arc. Aelred is cited frequently within inclusivist communities for the promulgation of his words and ideas. While the Spiritual Friendship online community used a literal interpretation of his words, couched in a life sworn to celibacy, readers and authors in inclusivist communities often find more meaning in the spirit of the text. On *Q Spirit*, American author and ordained Metropolitan Community Church minister Kittredge Cherry best summarizes this view, writing that “Aelred certainly advocated chastity, but his passions are clear in his writing.”⁴⁵⁶ Additional examples include *Quest* listing Aelred as a possible patron saint because he “wrote strongly in favour [sic] of the spiritual value of intense paired friendships... [and] there is nothing in modern intimate relationships that negates their potential spiritual value.” Terence Weldon argues in *Queering the Church* that “Aelred and his writing do nevertheless have profound importance for modern gay men and lesbian partnerships... [Aelred] described the sacramental value of two people giving themselves to each other... for same-sex emotional and spiritual intimacy in monastic same-sex relationships. In the same way, modern gay or lesbian couples can and should recognize and nurture the spiritual, sacramental value their relationships, whether celibate (as in the monastic ideal), or otherwise.”⁴⁵⁷ Elsewhere, Weldon again notes that Aelred “wrote an important book on the spiritual value of [emotionally intimate] relationships.”⁴⁵⁸ For his writing, Aelred is listed as a “sacred gay saint” on the Temple of Antinous’ listing of “saints and martyrs,” which recognizes those “who devoted their lives to the defense and promotion of our

⁴⁵⁶ Kittredge Cherry, “Aelred of Rievaulx: Gay saint of friendship,” *Q Spirit*, (Jan, 12, 2018), <http://qspirit.net/aelred-rievaulx-gay-saint/>

⁴⁵⁷ Terence Weldon, “12th January: St Aelred of Rievaulx” *Queering the Church* (online) <https://queerchurch.wordpress.com/queer-saints-martyrs-and-others/queer-saints-church-history/3-saints-and-sinners-in-the-medieval-church/monastic-brotherly-love/12th-january-st-aelred-of-rievaulx-d-1167/> Accessed May 25, 2018.

⁴⁵⁸ Terence Weldon, “Some Very Queer Saints and Martyrs” *Quest* (online, July 29, 2013).

Love.”⁴⁵⁹ Finally, while not part of this study, it is significant to note that he is also the patron saint of the Episcopal SGM ministry, Integrity. This group has devoted an entire webpage of resources (comprised of sacred images, prayers, hymns, and liturgy) just for “St. Aelred’s Day.”⁴⁶⁰

Sebastian is the most popular saint that follows the role model narrative. As outlined in Chapter 1, Sebastian has long been admired as a saint with particularly striking or appealing features for gay men, but inclusivist arguments for emulation of the saint are also prevalent. For instance, the editors of Quest argued in 2015 that Sebastian might be a good patron saint for their organization because of “his behavior in speaking up and directly challenging the authority that was persecuting him.” Such acts, the post suggests, are in line with Quest’s own and are worthy of highlighting and replicating.⁴⁶¹ Similarly, Terence Weldon’s post in *Queering the Church* points out that, far from being merely pleasing to look at, Sebastian’s appearance, after his supposed death, to the emperor who had ordered him killed “[represents] all queer people confronting the emperors of the church with the evidence” of the harm their actions cause to SGM and that SGM will not simply go away. Sebastian’s actions, thus, are a “challenge [calling] us to do more than simply mope about our pain... we too, must return to the church, showing them with the evidence of our pain-then negotiate with them a process of reconciliation.”⁴⁶² Q Spirit includes a prayer (written by artist Terry O’Connell to accompany performance art of the same name) that asks Sebastian to “strengthen the persecuted” and “protect the persecuted from tyrants and enemies.” This post attracted affirming comments

⁴⁵⁹ “Saints and Martyrs,” *Temple of Antinous*, (accessed Feb 18, 2018), <http://www.antinopolis.org/religion/saints.htm>

⁴⁶⁰ “Resources for Saint Aelred’s Day,” *Integrity USA*, (accessed Oct. 10, 2014), <http://www.integrityusa.org/aelred/index.htm>

⁴⁶¹ Web Editor, “A Patron Saint for Quest,” *Quest*, (July 22, 2015), <http://questlgbti.uk/a-patron-saint-for-quest/>

⁴⁶² Terence Weldon, “Jan 20: Not Dead Yet: Saint Sebastian as Role Model,” *Queering the Church*, (Jan. 20, 2014), <http://saints.queerchurch.info/?p=16>

worth mentioning as well, including one community member who felt that the post and Sebastian are “an eyeopener[sic] for people who use religion as an excuse for hatred. The prayer you’ve mentioned is more relevant today than ever.”⁴⁶³ Finally, the liturgical calendar for the Temple of Antinous provides a summary of how Sebastian has been interpreted over time, noting that “he was taken up as the model for homosexual suffering and persecution... [beginning] in the nineteenth century.” These examples together create a clear picture of the narrative similarities that point to Sebastian as a model for SGM (especially male) audiences.

Saints, in this line of thinking, can serve a more specific form of modeling as well. Many of these narratives about male saints (and not just the inclusivist ones) serve not just as alternative and reifying forces for sexuality and gender expression generally, but for *masculinity* specifically. The emergence of the gay “clone” in the 1970s, which conjoined stereotypical “beefcake” masculinity with male homosexuality, created a new paradigm for both performativity, queer subjectivity, and genuine stable identity formation. Beefcake sexual identity, by extension, is also at times attached to some of the more muscular images of Sebastian, especially those depicting him in his role as a Roman soldier.⁴⁶⁴ Q Spirit in particular notes this fascinating trend of contemporary artists creating new images of Sebastian that more closely mirror their own perceptions of what gay men look like. Superimposed images that can be interpreted as both gay men and (the often wounded) Saint Sebastian serve many possible motives, including the desire or observation that SGM may (particularly gay men) model characteristics of Sebastian: his attractiveness, vigor, strength in the face of attack, and so on.

⁴⁶³ Kittredge Cherry, “Saint Sebastian: History’s first gay icon?” *Q Spirit*, (Jan. 20, 2018), <http://qspirit.net/saint-sebastian-gay-icon/>

⁴⁶⁴ Downs, *Stand by Me*, 170-1.

Pairing gender norms and sanctity is, of course, not exclusively tied to masculinity. Many of the sites herein demonstrate similar ethos or interpretations associated with their depictions of female saints breaking gendered stereotypes. Joan of Arc is by far the most common example, appearing (though sometimes as a questionable proxy figure for transgender saints) in *Q Spirit*, *Queering the Church*, *Dignity*, *Quest*, *TransChristians*, *the Temple of Antinous*, and *Equally Blessed*. These sites all use similarly glowing language to describe Saint Joan of Arc. Many of these authors and commenters agree that Joan, as “one of the most important... of the multitude of queer saints,” gives “transgender people... strength from her example.”⁴⁶⁵ She is “in essence the most courageous of all... a Heroic Martyr Saint”; who embodies a “tough cross-dressing teenage warrior.”⁴⁶⁶ As “a queer icon [and] girl-power hero,” Joan of Arc is a saint whom “contemporary LGBTQ people recognize [as] a kindred spirit and role model in her stubborn defiance of gender rules.” This last post, housed on *Q Spirit*, also has a lively community discussion wherein readers discuss their own knowledge or perceptions of Joan of Arc as inspiring for intersex people, feminism and women’s rights as a whole, and one reader who commented their affirmation of the post with “Yasss St. Joan slays!” Such sentiments for modeling this perceived characteristics of this saint are summed up by the prayer with which Cherry’s article closes. The prayer reads, in part: “in the face of harassment, ridicule, and doubt, you held firm in your faith... I pray that I may be as bold in my beliefs as you, St. Joan.”⁴⁶⁷ While other saints are also highlighted on some of these sites to embody gender fluidity (discussed in section 3.3), none have achieved as much prevalence on inclusive Christian

⁴⁶⁵ Web Editor, “A Patron Saint for Quest,” 1. Terence Weldon, “Saint Joan of Arc” *Queering the Church* (online, May 29, 2011) <https://queersaints.wordpress.com/2011/05/29/st-joan-of-arc/>. DeBernardo “The spiritual side of coming out,” 1.

⁴⁶⁶ “May 30-St. Joan of Arc,” *Temple of Antinous*, (accessed July 1, 2018), <http://www.antinopolis.org/calendar/litcalendar-3.html>; Kittredge Cherry, “Joan of Arc: Cross-dressing warrior-saint and LGBTQ role model,” *Q Spirit*, (May 30, 2018), <http://qspirit.net/joan-of-arc-cross-dressing-lgbtq/>

⁴⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

sites as Saint Joan of Arc. Yet, these other narratives and imagery also frequently highlight the pairing of gender non-conforming people with sanctity and are explicitly offered as role models for queer, gender non-conforming, and trans-identified Christians.

The presence and popularity of these particular saints echo decades (if not more) of “subversive veneration” in a multitude of both printed prayers and (especially) iconography for “distinctive people” that is only now beginning to be recognized by scholars and historians.⁴⁶⁸ This process of creating and uncovering specific, queer narratives around specific saints allows them to function more fully, both rhetorically and critically, as role models for SGM. One example is Dennis O’Neill’s chronicling the rise in popularity of new (or in some cases, perhaps resurgent) interpretations what he terms “distinctive” saints.⁴⁶⁹ O’Neill’s work represents a larger thrust of queer historical exposition (or reclamation) tracing the progression and preservation of subversive saint veneration and representation over time, consciously situated within the larger historical and ecclesiastic frameworks of authors such as John Boswell and religious organizations such as the MCC and independent Catholic denominations.⁴⁷⁰ This is especially true for Saint Sebastian, whom historians, artists, and filmmakers as divergent as Boswell, Savastano, Oscar Wilde, and Derek Jarman identified as having long been a “distinctive” saint appealing to men attracted to men.⁴⁷¹

It is well documented that many Catholics (of all branches) and other venerative Christian traditions experience and relate to saints in specific ways. It is nothing new to observe

⁴⁶⁸ O’Neill, *Passionate Holiness*, xiv-xv. See also Downs, *Stand by Me*, 43-63, esp. 57, and White, *Reforming Sodom*, (throughout).

⁴⁶⁹ Labeling saints seen as queer in some way as “distinctive,” he explains, is an attempt avoid the “irresponsible” application of contemporary labels such as LGBTQ to historic lives and identities.

⁴⁷⁰ O’Neill specifically and gratefully cites the role that Boswell’s seminal historical work played in the preservation and popularization of several saints, including Polyeuct and Nearchus and Sergius and Bacchus (*Passionate Holiness*, 83-84). See also Byrne, *The Other Catholics*, 2, 240, 278-81.

⁴⁷¹ For example, Oscar Wilde used Sebastian as his alias after his release from prison, and Derek Jarman created “Sebastiane” in 1976, now considered an important milestone in LGBTQ cinema.

that “for some people, [saints are] a palpable presence in their lives, guiding them from grace to grace and intervening when they require pardon.”⁴⁷² This section demonstrated that online authors and communities adapt and incorporate religious activity and cultural dialogue by and for SGM. While the pages above have highlighted a few of the many saints being offered as role models for their words, ideas, actions, and attributes, this is not the only manner in which SGM Christians relate to saints.

3.3 SANCTIFYING EXPERIENCE: QUEERING SAINTS

The final, common narrative strategy identified in this study also deals with the relationship and perceived power dynamic between saints and SGM. While the role model narratives described above conceptualize this relationship as being one in which the SGM faithful strive to be more like saints (in the various manners that is perceived), this formulation holds SGM and saints on equal terms. That is, this structure subtly but powerfully models and interprets saints’ lives and images through the queer lens of contemporary SGM experience. This queering of saints’ narratives celebrates and honors SGM lives and experiences; thus, it can function to foster integration between religious and sexual identities for SGM. An additional consequence of this approach is to promote normalization and thereby reduce stigma for SGM, as well as advance other socio-political goals and experiences.

One common and essential element in communities’ representations of saints is the use of aesthetic elements. Nearly all these sites use similar, subversive readings of medieval,

⁴⁷² Katz, “Regarding Mary,” 101.

classical, or Renaissance imagery of saints rather than contemporary art forms. Site authors and groups that engage in this specific type of representation include Q Spirit, Quest, Queering the Church, New Ways Ministries, Spiritual Friendship, and Temple of Antinous. This conjoining of more historically distant representations of saints with contemporary narratives inscribes the authors' and audiences' queer readings with the weight and authority of religious hagiography and/or history. While not all the images that these sites use fall into this category, of course, this strategy is an important rhetorical and representational choice that facilitates the construction of new narratives that speak to contemporary SGM experiences and aspirations. These types of images in particular function as "two way mirrors, allowing a glimpse of past lives and attitudes [while] reflecting back an image of ourselves." In this way, historic holy imagery serves as "shifting icons of [audiences'] concerns."⁴⁷³ In this case, for SGM, they help to create and maintain narratives that shape, explain, or defend aspects of personal and group identity. This important detail is what separates this form from the *theological* narratives described above; they function to address and shape personal and cultural identity rather than spiritual views. For the sites that use this device, that includes socially progressive, affirming, and inclusive language, the promotion of chastity as a virtue, or the advancement of an integrated sexual and spiritual identity.

The emotive impact of the *visual* representation of sainthood should not be underestimated. As Savastano points out, and as many artists from the Renaissance onward seem to have known, religious images "have the power to stimulate the creative imagination, arouse the emotions, and inflame [desires]," and their subjects can also be re-created, interpreted,

⁴⁷³ Katz, "Regarding Mary," 20.

and re-imagined.⁴⁷⁴ There is also significant historical overlap between religious art and its power to guide performance—namely, that images are used to spur action, devotion, and desire. This process allows, and contemporary ethnography demonstrates, that gay men and other SGM use Catholic imagery and devotional practice both to buttress their interpretations of their Catholic faith and to validate their own perceptions, experiences, and desires.⁴⁷⁵

Stories and images concerning Saint Sebastian in particular have long enthralled audiences, due to readings of their lives or images that reflect contemporary SGM experience or desire. Many of the sites in the current study, as well as other cultural studies, explore the image and idea of Saint Sebastian as an “exemplary sufferer.” Matt, Fetz, and Wien, for example, correlate fascination with Sebastian to the ideas of “Susan Sontag; as multifarious icon of the history of civilization; as saint, who attracts misfortune upon himself in order to avert it from others; as fetish of erotic subcultures; and as vamp and dandy.”⁴⁷⁶ Savastano’s interviewees report perceiving various images of saints like Gerard or Sebastian in ways that mirror their own experiences or preferences: as being “in drag,” “a queen,” “effeminate,” or with attractive lips, torso or other physical attributes. Similarly, some male respondents reported an identification with or attraction to Gerard based on his youth, virginal appearance, or suffering.⁴⁷⁷

⁴⁷⁴ Liepa, “The Image of Saint Sebastian in Art,” 546.

⁴⁷⁵ Rebecca Schneider, “Judith Butler in my Hands” *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler (Gender, Theory, and Religion)* Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville, eds. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 225-251.; Savastano, “Saint Gerard Teaches,” throughout.

⁴⁷⁶ Gerald Matt, Wolfgang Fetz, Kunsthalle Wien, *Saint Sebastian: Or a Splendid Readiness for Death* (Berlin: Kerber, 2003), ii.

⁴⁷⁷ Savastano “St. Gerard Teaches,” 184-6.

Free subscription to monthly Q Spirit Newsletter. More info. See sample newsletter. Sign up. Donate. Follow, like & share Q Spirit. Popular posts: Matthew Shepard: Modern gay martyr and hate-crime victim; Sergius and Bacchus: Paired male saints loved each other in ancient Roman army; Henri Nouwen: Priest and author who struggled with his homosexuality; David and Jonathan: Same-sex love between men in the Bible; Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: Nun who loved a country in 17th-century Mexico City; Burns: Poet and Sufi mystic inspired by same-sex love; God loves LGBTQ people in cartoons by "Naked Pastor"; Perpetua and Felicity: Patron saints of same-sex couples; Saint Sebastian: History's first gay icon?

For the whole litany and more info, see my previous post [New art film highlights queer saints, Sebastian and homophobic violence for All Saints Day.](#)

St Sebastian is martyred by arrows in O'Connell's film

Sebastian also appears with a rainbow halo as a "wrathful protector saint" in O'Connell's "Triptych for the 49," a tribute to the people killed by a mass shooter at the Pulse gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida.

California gay artist Rick Herold places Saint Sebastian against a colorful, cartoon-like backdrop reminiscent of gay artist / activist Keith Haring. "I over the years as a painter have been interested in the idea of the spirit and the flesh as one — began by Tantra art influences and then using my Catholic background," he told the Jesus in Love Blog. He paints with enamel on the reverse side of clear plexiglas.

Herold has a bachelor of arts degree in art and theology from the Benedictine Monastic University of St. John in Minnesota and a master of fine arts degree from Otis Institute of Art in Los Angeles. His religious artworks included a Stations of the Cross commissioned by Bob Hope for a church in Ohio before a conflict over modern art with the Los Angeles cardinal led to disillusionment with the church. Herold came out as gay and turned to painting male nudes and homoerotic.

"Saint Sebastian and Matt Shepard juxtaposed" by JR Leveroni compares Sebastian's martyrdom with the killing of a contemporary gay martyr, Matthew Shepard (1976-1998). Shepard was a student at the University of Wyoming when he was brutally beaten and left to die by two men who later claimed that they were driven temporarily insane by "gay panic." His murder led to broadening the US hate-crimes law to cover violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

Leveroni is an emerging visual artist living in South Florida. Painting in a Cubist style, he portrays the suffering gay martyrs in a subdued way with barely a trace of blood. A variety of male nudes and religious paintings can be seen on Leveroni's website.

Other blogs have already compiled the Saint Sebastian masterpieces from art history, so Q Spirit simply posts one example and refers readers to the many online collections of Sebastian art, such as: Saint Sebastian: The Homosexual Patron of Gay Men (Artwork | Love Blog); The Martyrdom Of Saint Sebastian, in *Ascending Order Of Severance And Descending Order Of Actual Martyring (The Toast)*

In addition to his longstanding but unofficial status as patron saint of gay men, Sebastian is known as a protector against plague and a patron saint of soldiers, archers and athletes.

Saint Sebastian in contemporary art

Saint Sebastian is a favorite subject of many contemporary gay artists, including Tony De Carlo (1956-2014). His work is at the top of this post. He began his ongoing *Sebastian series* in the 1980s in response to the AIDS crisis. It grew to more than 40 pieces.

"I chose him because he was known as the Patron Protector Saint Against the Plague, as the Plague was sweeping Europe," De Carlo said in an interview with the Jesus in Love Blog. "It wasn't until the year 2001 when I went into a Catholic store in New Mexico, picked up a pewter statue of Saint Sebastian, and saw a label on the bottom that said Patron Saint of Homosexuality."

Visitor counter: 516563. Visits since Nov. 16, 2016. Visitor counter 2007-2017: 1,677,538. 1.6 million pageviews on this blog's previous website. Get new posts by email: Enter your email. Subscribe.

Ander image of the fallen Sebastian between a male companion and Saint Irene was painted by Oscar Magnan. He has an international background and many years as a full professor of fine arts at Saint Peter's.

Archives: Select Month

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Figure 15. These screenshots capture just some of the examples in Spirit’s “Saint Sebastian: History’s first gay icon?” discussion of contemporary artistic renderings of Saint Sebastian, mostly as a young, fit Caucasian.⁴⁷⁸

That many artists and audience members on these websites see images of saints like Sebastian and interpret them in vastly different ways reinforces that there is no inherent, universal substance to the construct or interpretation of masculinity, and that there is no inherent incongruity between holiness and SGM icons. This type of interpretation is hardly limited to

⁴⁷⁸ Cherry, “Saint Sebastian: History’s first gay icon?” 1. Though artist credits are included in the screen captures, these two columns of screen captures depict (from top to bottom and left to right): *Homage To Sebastian*; Tony De Carlo; *Sebastian und Madonna mit Heiligen II Sodoma, 1525* ([Wikimedia Commons](#)); *Saint Sebastian No. 1*, Oscar Magnan; an image from the film *The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian*, Tony O’Connell; *Saint Sebastian*, Rick Herold; *Saint Sebastian and Matt Shepard Juxtaposed*, JR Leveroni.

Sebastian. Boswell, for example, identified Sergius and Bacchus as one of the archetypes of same-sex paired saints who were influential in the early and medieval Church.⁴⁷⁹ Similarly queer and erotic narratives, depictions, and framing exist for Sergius and Bacchus across *Q Spirit*, *Queering the Church*, *Quest*, and *Temple of Antinous* as “paired” martyr-soldier saints of the early Church.

The other prime examples that emerge from the inclusivist sites in the study discuss Perpetua and Felicity and Ruth and Naomi. Both sets of saints are “paired” saints in Boswell’s terminology, and are frequently perceived or represented in the more erotic connotations that such a term implies. All of these representations, however, convey the narrative that these women are celebrations of lesbian relationships. Across *Q Spirit*, *Queering the Church*, and *Dignity*, descriptions of and prayers to Perpetua and Felicity note the importance of spiritual and erotic devotion among women. *Queering the Church* highlights the importance of these paired women in the life of the Church: “their names are familiar to Catholics as one of many same sex couples listed in the Eucharistic Prayer of the Mass... [and] in the ancient rite of adelphopoesis (literally, “making of brothers”), the liturgical rite once used to bless same-sex unions in Church.”⁴⁸⁰ The site expounds further on their importance for readers by explaining that Felicity’s journal, “the first known document written by a woman in Christian history,” clearly indicates “that whatever the nature of her sexual life, Perpetua’s emotional involvement with Felicity may have been [her most] important” one—a relationship many contemporary readers

⁴⁷⁹ Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*, 145. They are, in fact, so emblematic of same-sex unions that they adorn the cover of the book.

⁴⁸⁰ Weldon’s reference to the rite of adelphopoesis here is likely a reference to Boswell’s translation and discussion of early and premodern Christian texts.

on the site would recognize.⁴⁸¹ Dignity echoes this sentiment by including their names in its Litany of the Saints, specifically describing in the prayer how they “bestowed the kiss of peace on each other.”⁴⁸² Q Spirit goes even further, declaring them “Patron saints of same-sex couples.” That article functions to tie the saints to contemporary readers’ experiences by sharing and describing some of the many modern-day artistic renderings of them, as illustrated below.

⁴⁸¹ Terence Weldon, ““Eternal Bliss” – Ss Felicity And Perpetua,” *Queering the Church*, (March 2012), <https://queerchurch.wordpress.com/queer-saints-martyrs-and-others/2-the-early-christians/2-the-early-christians-saints-and-martyrs-for-the-church/martyrs-for-the-church/eternal-bliss-ss-felicity-and-perpetua/>

⁴⁸² “A Dignity Litany of the Saints,” *Dignity USA*, (accessed March 2016), <https://www.dignityusa.org/article/dignity-litany-saints>

Perpetua and Felicity: Patron saints of same-sex couples

by Kittredge Cherry | Mar 7, 2018

Like 2,175 Share



Saints Perpetua and Felicity were brave North African woman friends who were executed for their Christian faith in the third century. Some consider them lesbian saints or patrons of same-sex couples. Their feast day is March 7.



"Perpetua and Felicity" by Katy Miles-Wallace. Available as prints and more at the Queer Christian [Bispy](#) and [Dazzle](#) shops.

Perpetua and Felicity share a rainbow halo in an icon created in 2017 by queer Lutheran artist and seminarian [Katy Miles-Wallace](#) as part of her "Queer Saints" series. It appears at the top of this post. The series presents traditional saints with queer qualities and heroes of the LGBTQ community.



"Perpetua and Felicity" by Angela Yarber

Artist Angela Yarber paints a gloriously glowing icon of the women saints. "I first learned of Perpetua and Felicity on Kittredge Cherry's blog, *Jesus in Love*. Now they join my other Holy Women icons with a folk feminist twist." Yarber writes at the [Feminism and Religion](#) blog.

Yarber is founder and creative director of the [Holy Women Icons Project](#). She is a painter, author, scholar, dancer, minister and LGBTQ-rights activist based in Hawaii and North Carolina. She earned a Ph.D. in art and religion from the Graduate Theological Union at the University of California in Berkeley. Nearly 50 color images of her folk feminist icons included in her book "Holy Women Icons."

Jesus in Love

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"Perpetua and Felicity: Patrons of Same-Sex Couples" by Maria Cristina

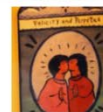
A banner saying "patrons of same sex couples" hangs above Felicity and Perpetua in the colorful icon painted by Maria Cristina, an artist based in Las Cruces, New Mexico. She paints the two women holding hands in an elegant gesture. The skull of a long-horn cow, similar to paintings of famous New Mexico artist Georgia O'Keeffe, adds a welcome bit of Southwestern flavor to the image while echoing the standard iconography of portraying the pair with a cow.



Perpetua and Felicity share a single halo as "patrons of women's rights" on elegant [pendants](#) from artist Shoushan of Artisan Courtyard. [Perpetua and Felicity ear rings](#), [candles](#), [shirts](#) and [incense](#) are also available.



Saints Perpetua and Felicity appear together as a couple on a [religious medal](#) available from PicturesOnGold at Amazon.



Felicity and Perpetua by Jim Ru

Artist [Jim Ru](#) was inspired to paint Felicity and Perpetua as a kissing couple. His version was displayed in his show "Transcendent Faith: Gay, Lesbian and Transgendered Saints" in Bisbee Arizona in the 1990s.

Meet Jesus as a gay man in a modern city
"Accessible but profound"

20th century 21st century

200s 1100s 1200s

1300s 1400s 1500s

1600s 1700s 1800s

Asia Africa AIDS

Argentina Bible Black

Britain Celtic Christmas

Easter Episcop Ethnicity

Europe France Friendship

Germany Ireland Italy

Latin America Mexico

Middle East

Middle East

Physical marriage

Political/Religion

Racial American Newsletter

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Yarber

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Figure 16. Screen captures from Q Spirit’s “Perpetua and Felicity: Patron saints of same-sex couples” highlight some of the diverse ways Perpetua and Felicity are represented in contemporary artistic narratives in queer, paired sainthood. Note the inverse representation of the racial/ethnic diversity of these subjects compared to Sebastian above.⁴⁸³

⁴⁸³ Kittredge Cherry, “Perpetua and Felicity: Patron saints of same-sex couples,” *Q Spirit*, (March 7, 2018), <http://qspirit.net/perpetua-felicity-same-sex-couples/>. Though all artists are cited in the images, these two columns of screen captures depict (from top to bottom and left to right): *Sts. Perpetua and Felicity*, Robert Lentz; *Perpetua and Felicitas*, Katy Miles-Wallace; *Perpetua and Felicity*, Angela Yarber; *Felicity and Perpetua: Patrons of Same-Sex Couples*, Maria Cristina; *Patrons of Women’s Rights*, Shoushan; *Saint Perpetua and Saint Felicity Religious Medal*, unattributed; *Felicity and Perpetua*, Jim Ru.

It should be noted that the motivations and inspirations that draw artists and devotees to particular images of saints can vary greatly. Some devotees report that the extrapolations of hagiography describes above are secondary to the actual, physical images of these saints, as they are “ready visual source(s) for an imagination sensitive to the issues of sexual orientation.”⁴⁸⁴ Yet, this too reinforces this study’s finding that saints are being utilized to help express and destigmatize SGM experiences and desires. After all, popular contemporary saint veneration sometimes has “little to do with the accuracy of people’s memories [or official hagiographies] but involve a complex process of creation/recreation of narratives that have variously complex relationships to historical facts... [or] hagiographic activity.”⁴⁸⁵ Works like those of Latina artist Alma Lopez’s *Queer Santas: Holy Violence* (which is highlighted on Q Spirit) play with gendered characteristics of religious icons to specifically investigate the intersection of faith, institutional religion, and visual representation. By offering new representations of saints usually depicted as feminine, Lopez invites viewers to reconsider the interplay of religion, beauty and gender identity. This gender play is at work in each of the icons in the show: St. Lucia, St. Wilgefortis, and St. Liberata. In an interview Lopez gave for the exhibit, she specifically articulated that she was attracted to these saints because their stories have a common theme: each one tried to step out of the expected role for a woman of her time and, as a result, became the victim of horrifying violence.⁴⁸⁶

“Crossdressing” or genderqueer saints are also recognized in many of the online communities, particularly TransChristians, Q Spirit, Quest, and Queering the Church, where they express similar interpretations of the gendered hagiography described above. Ephilei notes that

⁴⁸⁴ Savastano, “Changing Gerard’s Clothes” 186.

⁴⁸⁵ Schippert, “Saint Mychal,” 114.

⁴⁸⁶ Kimberly Winston, “Were some Catholic Saints Transgender? Berkeley show raises eyebrows” *Religion News Service* (Nov. 6, 2014) <https://religionnews.com/2014/11/06/catholic-saints-transgender-berkeley-show-raises-eyebrows/>

the contemporary significance of Wilgefortis being “transformed” in a way reminiscent of contemporary gender transitioning.⁴⁸⁷ Quest, meanwhile, notes that “people treasure [Wilgefortis] as a patron of trans or intersex people. She is also known by a range of other names, including Uncumber, and in Spanish “Liberada”: the liberated. Under that name, she is regarded as a patron for liberation from male domination. I like to think of her as a possible patron for liberation from all manner of sexual or gender stereotypes and enforced roles.”⁴⁸⁸ Interestingly, this saint also appears on the cover of the 2017 book *The Bloomsbury Reader in Religion, Sexuality and Gender*. The authors explain this symbolism as offering “a compelling example of how religion and sexuality intersect. It reveals, first, how sexuality regularly infuses religious devotion and identification.... [and] indicates that holiness or sacredness may itself be ‘queer.’ Here we take queer not as an identity (something that Wilgefortis *has*), but rather as a description of how her story unsettles normative binaries, such as male/female and human/divine.” Moreover, these sites identify many “crossdressing saints” in the early church.⁴⁸⁹ So, while genuine religious devotion and intrinsic spiritual motivation cannot be downplayed as a possible motivator on these sites, the desire to connect contemporary subjectivity as well as gender expression with these ancient Christian symbols and stories are clearly motivators in these hagiographic interpretations. Indeed, they may well be a combination and integration of queer cultural experience and subjectivity with spiritual and gender identity formation.⁴⁹⁰

⁴⁸⁷ Ephilei, “Trans Saints,” 1.

⁴⁸⁸ Weldon, “Some Very Queer Saints and Martyrs,” 1.

⁴⁸⁹ See for example, Weldon, “Trans In Faith: Early Cross – Dressing Saints and Martyrs,” *Queering the Church* (accessed June 2, 2016), <https://queerchurch.wordpress.com/queer-saints-martyrs-and-others/2-the-early-christians/2-the-early-christians-saints-and-martyrs-for-the-church/trans-in-faith-some-cross-dressing-saints-and-martyrs/>; Ephilei, “Trans Saints,” 1.

⁴⁹⁰ Boisvert, *Sanctity and Male Desire*, 12 (for example).

Finally, many visual works witnessed and catalogued throughout this study suggest that there is a growing market for hagiographic icons specifically designed for queer consumption. The sheer number of online stores and artists' sites indicates a substantial niche demand for images that honor or celebrate SGM experiences and relationships. Such sustainability is indicative of the aesthetic and persuasive power of the subject matter. These types of images, reproduced in settings that range from a classical high Latin Church or Byzantine style to contemporary, can depict anything from martyrs and saints posing together benignly or highly suggestively, saints thought to be in drag or effeminate, to more contemporary gay advocates or figures depicted in stylized, saintly contexts. For example, one might encounter contemporary (deceased) gay rights advocates "canonized" with a recognizable gold halo, Greek or Latin labeling, and holding symbols or items representative of their lives, such as can be seen in "Harvey Milk of San Francisco" or the many sites seeking the canonization of Mychal Judge, the New York City Fire Department chaplain designated as Victim 001 in the aftermath of September 11, 2001.⁴⁹¹ If one wants a more biblical or "ancient" representation, one can choose from a wide variety of classically styled images or pairing, such as Jonathan and David (from the Hebrew books of Samuel) or early Christian martyrs Sts. Polyeuct and Nearchus, for example.⁴⁹² Here, too, images range from mildly suggestive to explicit, and the artists range from laypeople and spiritualists to professionals and priests. Robert Lentz is particularly well-known in this regard; his progressive saints and icons are featured heavily on many of these sites, including Queering the Church, Quest, Q Spirit, Dignity, Spiritual Friendship, the Temple of Antinous, and New Ways Ministries. His works can also be seen in the background of other academic studies, including Byrne's *Other Catholics* and Jim Downs' *Stand by Me*. Many of his works have even

⁴⁹¹ Robert Lentz, "Artist's Narrative," *Trinity: Religious Art and Icons*, (accessed March 1, 2014), <https://www.trinitystores.com/store/artist/Robert-Lentz> Accessed Jan 12 2015; Schippert, "Saint Mychal," 110.

⁴⁹² Ibid.

been collected in the 40 icons set *Christ in the Margins*.⁴⁹³ While not a central focus of this study, several sites included in this study link to both information and digital store fronts for the artists who create queer saint images, as well as donation icons for the parent site.⁴⁹⁴ The presence and ubiquity of these subversive icons reinforce the persuasive or aesthetic power and popularity clearly being derived from viewing SGM experiences through the subversive lenses of the saints outlined above.

3.3.1 Experiencing Place and History

One specific result of queering narratives and lives of saints described above is that it places narratives of queer history within church history. This placement is highly relevant for the current study because it demonstrates that queer saint narratives correlate with sexual and gender identities *and* religious identities. A quote on one inclusivist site (though misattributed) correctly notes, “The most effective way to destroy a people is to deny and obliterate their own understanding of their history.” The inclusivist and semi-exclusivist sites above clearly function rhetorically to reclaim or reconstruct obscured queer components of their religious past. Such narratives are not new, in fact, and have been recognized as critical narrative lenses by SGM activists for decades. For example, “efforts to create a ‘usable past’ and trace the existence of gay people throughout history, a number of gay writers [in the 1970s] have described the burning alive of many gay people during the Salem Witch Trials... as well as used the Nazi Holocaust... to describe gay oppression,” and suffering.⁴⁹⁵ However, the current finding that saints’ hagiographies are being adapted for use (re)claiming saints as narrative devices represents a novel and important evolution or expansion of the aforementioned social mechanism for

⁴⁹³ Robert Lentz and Edwina Gateley, *Christ in the Margins* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2009), 5.

⁴⁹⁴ This is relevant because it is possible that click-through revenue could be generated from these links.

⁴⁹⁵ Downs, *Stand by Me*, 212.

cultural—and perhaps ecclesiastic—hegemonic resistance. This sentiment is expressed by Kittredge Cherry directly when she argues that “churches have tried to control people by burying queer history. The LGBTQ saints show us not only THEIR place in history, but also OUR place — because we are all saints... Our history is our power. Remembering it and passing it on is a sacred responsibility that shapes the future.”⁴⁹⁶

While this section demonstrates that saint narratives function to bolster the navigation or integration of religious and sexual identities, the larger conceptual framework foregrounding how images influence perceptions and help construct social and personal realities is well established. Many writings on God imagery, Marian imagery, and Catholic devotionism in the past several decades have detailed the effects that gendered images can have on establishing and reifying a range of perceptions, from gender norms and sexual ethics to personal identity and social roles. The act of naming and claiming saints through art or descriptions of queerness and desire is a key component of what is termed the “social construction” of sainthood.⁴⁹⁷ While reminiscent of Weber’s classic sociological argument that hero myths are necessary narrative elements within societies, in this online process perceptions of saints are serving as ciphers that bolster communities’ aspirations, desires, and values. In this model, saints-as-signifiers could easily (perhaps necessarily) arise informally, and that their stories/hagiographies are shaped and refined according to particular social needs.⁴⁹⁸ For example, God imagery more generally is well documented to function as a key social mechanism for reproducing and maintaining “gender

⁴⁹⁶ Cherry, “Why we need LGBTQ saints,” 1.

⁴⁹⁷ Jean and John Comaroff, *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 101-105.

⁴⁹⁸ Jean and John Comaroff, *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination*, 101-105.

norms and gendered images of God.”⁴⁹⁹ Other research demonstrates the growing diversity among these images across Abrahamic faiths and the dynamic, changing nature of this mechanism and its interpretations (as demonstrated in sections [3.1](#) and [3.2](#), for instance). Both the sustaining and challenging of this normative mechanism seem to occur in religious organizations and individual households, with “social trends such as gender and family change... providing opportunities for previously subordinated viewpoints and scriptural interpretations to gain some legitimacy.”⁵⁰⁰

In addition to impacting perceptions of gender and sexuality, religious imagery is also shown to impact identity formation to such a large extent that it can predict individuals’ social perceptions on a large number of social issues. The ways that one views the gendered characteristics of God creates or maintains a larger social schema that is associated with how one thinks about issues like abortion, criminal punishment, the environment, and women’s roles (if any) in the paid labor force, for example. Regarding other areas of religious imagery—such as saints—social scientists and qualitative researchers have detailed the numerous effects that imagery can have on multiple facets of personal development, ranging from self-esteem, self-control, and personality (especially nurturing versus authoritative personality traits), to social and political ideology and attitudes and ontological assumptions toward forgiveness and moral and economic social issues.⁵⁰¹ More specifically, Donald Boisvert utilizes historical scholarship and ethnographic research with critical theory to offer specific, affirming examples of saints’ art and hagiographies and their possible applications for SGM Christians. His work provides additional qualitative evidence that positive saint imagery and narratives for SGM can result in greater

⁴⁹⁹ Sarah Shah, John Bartkowski, and Xiaohe Xu, “Gendered God Imagery and Attitudes toward Mothers’ Labor Force Participation: Examining the Transposable Character of Religious Schemas” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol 55, 3 (Sept. 2016), 540-557.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁰¹ Shah, Bartkowski, Xu, “Gendered God Imagery and Attitudes,” 540-2.

positive impacts in such individuals' worldviews and self-actualizations.⁵⁰² Such images can help instigate changes in one's perceptions and beliefs, as well as reflect and reinforce existing views and social schemas. Altogether, the findings here validate the larger argument that identity formation is a key mechanism concomitant with forms of religious imagery and narratives, like those here around saints, among SGM Christians.

A specific example of socio-religious identity formation and reification can be seen in the language of exclusivist and politically conservative groups like the Church Militant. As has been described throughout this chapter, CM uses imagery and narratives of saints to create and maintain gendered and heteronormative social narratives. However, the reifying rhetorical process of using saints as signifiers also clearly serves as an important component of their views of their religious organization and socio-political identity. Accordingly, using saints to rhetorically perform an online version of "gay-bashing" or other derogatory or hate-speech posturing becomes an activity closely conceptually tied to their experience of their faith. The massive amount of similar comments on Church Militant and Catholic Answers Forums supports this possibility. Between these two sites alone, hundreds of different user comments express views about SGM being "in defiant rebellion against God," or "in need of the wisdom of our Mother and the saints."⁵⁰³ Such comments dovetail with other facets of modern American history that describe how some conservative Catholic leaders and laypeople came to perceive other worldviews or socio-political paradigms as subversive, and came to view homosexuality as both a political "threat to America" and an existential "threat to Catholicism" (and Christianity in

⁵⁰² Boisvert, *Sanctity and Male Desire*, 20-21, 183-95.

⁵⁰³ Lofton, "Brother Seraphim asks the Saints about Homosexuality," 1; Lofton, "Brother Seraphim asks the Saints about the Current Crisis in the Church," 1. "Saint Nero, Patron of Gay Marriage," *Catholic Answers Forums*, (July 2015), <https://forums.catholic.com/t/saint-nero-patron-of-gay-marriage/401390>

general).⁵⁰⁴ In many ways the perception of existential threat epitomizes the exclusivist fears outlined on sites like Church Militant and within the strawman polemics promulgated on several Catholic Answers Forums threads.⁵⁰⁵

There are a number of ways that queer religious subjectivity and identity maintenance can function, including through subversive interpretations of saints. As this work highlights, these narratives are less visible but pervasive and durable; queer images and interpretations for saints have been tacitly recognized periodically by the upper echelons of Roman Catholic leadership itself.⁵⁰⁶ Official periodic “cleaning up” of Catholic art is motivated by a tacit fear of saints’ lives and images being read or venerated in ways that may be interpreted as counter to orthodox Roman Catholic teaching. These queer readings of saints’ images and lives are documented both through the past research described above and by the inclusivist sites described in Chapter 2.⁵⁰⁷ Narratives that speak directly to SGM experiences are, of course, reciprocal but also reversed relationships between the perception of the saint and the attitude of the layperson. That is, historically it is the “typical and proper [order for] saints [to] instruct Catholic communities how to live,” not (in a posthumous sense) the other way around.⁵⁰⁸ By perceiving a saint’s sexuality or gendered characteristics as similar to one’s own, viewers may gain from traditional Catholic saints a sense of belonging within a larger imagined community that spans, like a conduit, back in time through their religious tradition.

⁵⁰⁴ “Saint Nero,” 1. See also Petro, *After the Wrath of God*, 99-121, for example.

⁵⁰⁵ Robert Ellwood, *The Sixties Spiritual Awakening: American Religion Moving from Modern to Postmodern* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 25.

⁵⁰⁶ McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 174-8

⁵⁰⁷ See the previous discussions of the historical and anthropological research being done in this area, including Savastano, Liepa, Schippert, O’Neill, Jordan, and others.

⁵⁰⁸ Jordan, *Silence of Sodom*, 3.

Many of the narratives and assertions made by these groups online indicate that they think of themselves collectively as a unique community. The actualization of “imagined religious communities” is a fascinating possibility that would explain this language. Sociologist Todd Fuist notes that “there is no single model for understanding and performing the connections between LGBT and religious identities,” and that different cultural and religious contexts provide different resources for identity performance(s).⁵⁰⁹ However, the most important element that contributes to identity performance and formation, according to Fuist’s research, is “the promotion of queer theologies that sacralize LGBT religious identities.” Such resources can serve to integrate components of LGBT and religious identities that appear disparate to the individual, while serving to reinforce a unified identity among those who already see no contradiction. Stories, prayers, and images of queer saints are a prime example of “powerful narratives that draw connections between faith and sexuality” and “queer theology as a resource in identity construction.”⁵¹⁰ While the dissertation’s methodology limits the degree to which one can ascertain with certainty the durable effects of these subjectivities and identity narratives on identities or perceptions (e.g., “queering” audiences’ perceptions), Fuist’s findings provide strong indirect support indicating that such effects from saint narratives are possible.

The possibility of religious imagined communities is also a plausible explanatory lens for the sites and communities examined here because of the similarities they intrinsically share with Benedict Anderson’s classic definition of an “imagined community.” Both typologies recognize the importance of the imagined and limited (and limiting) aspects of their communities. The initial conception of imagined communities, for Anderson, came about because of the advent of

⁵⁰⁹ Todd Nicholas Fuist, “It Just Always Seemed Like it Wasn’t a Big Deal, Yet I know for Some People They Really Struggle with It: LGBT Religious Identity in Context” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 55, 4 (Dec. 2016), 770-86.

⁵¹⁰ *Ibid*, 782.

print culture and the dissemination that mass print communication allowed; this echoes the current proliferation and democratization of *online* communication and narrative development. In both classic and online instances, then, communities are “*imagined* because the members... will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”⁵¹¹ In other words, there are members of the group beyond the perception and knowledge of the individual, facilitated by written and perpetuated narrative. Many religious communities—including contemporary Catholic communities—lend themselves readily to the mentality that they belong to a larger, unseen group. Throughout the language in comments and articles collected for the current study, talk of assumed communities (“we,” “our LGBT brothers and sisters,” “the faithful,” “come back to our fold,” and so on) shows that these assumptions hold true for these communities. Such assumptions about belonging to a larger, imagined religious community reflect the belief that Catholicism is a faith applicable to and accessible for all people. Such is the case with all the inclusivist sites in this study, as well as Spiritual Friendship, all of which cross national and ecumenical boundaries. None specifically limit or delineate between Roman Catholic and non-Catholic in granting site access or even contributor status (in the case of Spiritual Friendship). All these sites also receive the majority of their viewership from the United States but appreciate and facilitate non-American audiences as well.⁵¹² Imagined religious communities are a highly

⁵¹¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 6.

⁵¹² This acceptance of multicultural and multinational audiences is demonstrated, for example, by the fact that Q Spirit is replicated in Spanish for its sizable Latin American audience, or that Britain-based Queering the Church recruits the vast majority of its audience from America.

plausible outlook for members of a religious worldview that already relates the communion of saints to the religious community in meaningful ways.⁵¹³

One particularly apt example that supports the observation that saints help create and maintain a sense of imagined religious community can be seen in the near-daily correspondence among the EnCourage support group. Their members, and especially the moderators, work to encourage and lift each other up. They frequently discuss and often lament their loved ones—most frequently their children’s—SGM identity (which they usually refer to as SSA or GID). Members and moderators will frequently celebrate small victories other members report, from a good visit with an estranged child or a successful phone call, to larger issues like talking about Jesus, Mary, a patron saint, or “God’s plan” for them. These successes (whether perceived or real) are seen as victories for not only the support group, but “for the Church,” for “our faith” or “for our heavenly Father” or Mary.⁵¹⁴ Likewise, when they share personal incidents that did not go well, such as meeting a new partner, a phone call that ended acrimoniously, a “failed” attempt to dissuade the loved one from “their lifestyle,” or even just generally “feeling sad,” multiple members within the group will offer support and encouragement, including by reminding the original commenter that they are in similar situations together, and that “their shared faith” and “the communion of saints” surrounding their community will “powerfully” support them all.⁵¹⁵ The power is attributed not only to God or Mary, but also to the larger community of the faithful that the group members perceive to be spiritually supporting their struggle. In doing so, they also reinforce their shared identity, supported by the saints.

⁵¹³ Michele Dillon, *Catholic Identity: Balancing Reason, Faith and Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 35.

⁵¹⁴ EnCourage group email correspondence, Jan.-Sept. 2018.

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid.*

3.3.2 Camp: At the Intersection of Catholic and Queer

One final element present in queer cultural discourse that has also made its way into the religious affectation and imagery of saints is camp. Scholars generally agree that camp as an aesthetic is notoriously fluid and adaptable, which makes it relatively easy to spot but difficult to define. In fact, even the earliest definition of camp declared that “to talk about camp... is to betray it.”⁵¹⁶ Yet, incorporating camp into discussions of saints is a powerful representational gesture that ties a quintessentially SGM cultural component to religious expression. As such, this fascinating confluence deserves recognition and analysis within this section on ways SGM create parallels among themselves, their lives, and their experiences and those of saints. Saints’ narratives and the larger religious discourse and artifice that often surround them mesh well with camp; it contains an “underlying seriousness” that lends itself to religions’ often-serious concerns generally, and (what some have called) the heavily ritualized emotive feeling of Christianity generally and Roman and Eastern Orthodox Catholicism, especially.⁵¹⁷ Indeed, considering camp in a Roman Catholic or saintly context raises interesting and useful observations for understanding specific relationships between religion and sexual culture. Such religious camp is not “making fun of it [but] making fun out of it” to express what is sometimes deathly serious in terms that are also lighter and more elegant.⁵¹⁸

In order to assess the presence of any camp in the sites in this study, it much be contextualized around what exactly camp can be. While Mark Jordan declared that “camp escapes exact definition” and is “often contested,” in its most general sense, camp relates to

⁵¹⁶ Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’” *Partisan Review* 31, 4 (Fall 1964), 515–530.

⁵¹⁷ Melissa Wilcox, *Queer Nuns: Religion, Activism, and Serious Parody* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 22.

⁵¹⁸ Jordan, *Silence of Sodom*, 181, 183. David Bergman, “Introduction” *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality* David Bergman, ed. (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 4-12.

beauty in a metonymic sense.⁵¹⁹ This particular perspective on or approach to beauty and presentation emphasizes or alternates among elements of artifice, frivolity, naïve middle-class pretentiousness, and shocking excess.⁵²⁰ Beyond mere adjectives, some forms of camp often involve common themes: incongruity and juxtaposition, theatricality, and humor, for example. Within a religious backdrop, this translates as explorations of the sacred versus the profane, appearance or presentation versus meaning (either in objects or actions/rituals), and creating or defining a system that allows laughing instead of crying.⁵²¹ Finally, camp can also function to juxtapose an outmoded past with contemporary issues, aesthetics, or values. As opposed to kitsch, which “is indelibly sincere,” camp *re-appropriates* culture in an ironic and witty fashion.⁵²² Altogether, camp engages in a redefinition of cultural meaning, allowing for new cultural narratives and the co-opting of existing ones through its accessible and at times lighthearted mechanism of serious cultural criticism, reflection, and resistance.

It is understood that camp can be employed by anyone, regardless of gender or sexuality, who is interested in resisting the hegemony of prescribed gender roles with the dual purpose of personal liberation and social criticism.⁵²³ Several key examples emerge from exploring the roles that religious camp play in relation to SGM lived religion. The first is in relation to viewing Judy Garland as a saint, which was discussed in section [1.2.3](#). While noting (again) that this example is not emblematic of all gay men pre-Stonewall, the fact remains that some scholars read “the particular emotional stylization of ‘saint’ Judy and her music [as] containing important resources for older gay men to ‘make sense’ of their emotional lives, by providing a historical

⁵¹⁹ Halperin, *How to be Gay*, 135.

⁵²⁰ Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” 518-21.

⁵²¹ Esther Newton, “Role Models” *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality* David Bergman, ed. (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 39-53.

⁵²² Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 136.

⁵²³ Jack Babuscio, “Camp and the Gay Sensibility” *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality* David Bergman, ed. (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 19-38.

and cultural context in which to consider them. In this sense, camp provides not only a sense of history, a sense of irony, but also a tool for survival.”⁵²⁴ More broadly, this particular use of camp is a necessary component of “the (vanishing) gay worship of movie stars and popular singers” as well.⁵²⁵

A second, more cogent example comes from the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. This activist and social service group engages the “serious parody” of camp by adopting the (exaggerated) appearance, titles, and organizational structures of Roman Catholic nuns and nunneries to “critique and reclaim cultural traditions in the interest of supporting the lives and political objectives of marginalized groups,” particularly SGM.⁵²⁶ Melissa Wilcox’s detailed ethnography describes the Sisters as “combining the familiar tropes of drag queen and female religious renunciant” to produce an image and a role that is part political protest, part community service, and (unintentionally) part reification of existing power structures. Like any performance, Wilcox observes that campy, serious parody as a strategy can “challenge or reinscribe existing relationships of power, and often does both at once... as is the case with queer communities and the Roman Catholic Church.” In these ways, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence function as a form of “religious camp” that simultaneously pokes fun at and echoes the very real religious teaching among some Catholic and mainline Protestant groups that all people are called to be saints.⁵²⁷

⁵²⁴ Contreras, *Unrequited Love*, 86.

⁵²⁵ Jordan quotes Daniel Harris for this definition; *Silence of Sodom*, 182.

⁵²⁶ Melissa Wilcox, *Queer Nuns*, 22.

⁵²⁷ *Ibid*, 180.

Within this context, it seems clear that one way to interpret the Temple of Antinous is as religious camp.⁵²⁸ As described throughout this study, the liturgical calendar, shrines, views on theology and homotheosis (“the blessed state in which Gay Man and Antinous are undifferentiated”) and its saints and pantheon all have an air of grandiose, stylized seriousness.⁵²⁹ Dramatic or hyperbolic language can be read within the contexts or effects of theatricality, emotive expression, and mock-seriousness outlined above. This particular reading is reinforced by (for example) the site’s declarations that “Antinous is our God, the sacred being who dwells within all homosexuals. For us and for our salvation He has conquered the princes of death. Antinous has confounded the Keepers of the Natural Law by the mere gesture of a seductive pose, and with a turned profile He has destroyed the Moral Order forever, without saying a word.”⁵³⁰ The design of the website and blog can reinforce this interpretation too. Juxtaposing Greco-Roman and neoclassical icons and imagery with a 1990s-esque striking black background and neon pink labels, the site intentionally harkens back to “a forgotten past” that is both centuries old (the icons and images) and old by internet standards. This is highly indicative of the role that camp can play to re-appropriate and “intermingle categories of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture.” At the same time, it also works as camp through the nostalgic, usually ironic use of objects associated with power (in this case either Greco-Roman taste or the trappings of the Roman Catholic Church... or both) that are now in decline.⁵³¹

This reading of the Temple of Antinous adds a deeper layer of meaning to its array of saints comprised of historic and contemporary SGM and their allies. Viewing this site, at least in

⁵²⁸ Jordan uses the phrase “clerical camp” in a similar manner, referencing specifically the acts, aesthetics, and mannerism of those who officiate Mass; *Silence of Sodom*, 181-3.

⁵²⁹ “Homotheosis,” *Temple of Antinous*, (accessed June 11, 2018), <http://www.antinopolis.org/religion/homotheosis.htm>

⁵³⁰ “The Sacred Barque of Millions of Years,” *Temple of Antinous*, (accessed June 12, 2018), <http://www.antinopolis.org/religion/barque.htm>

⁵³¹ Ross, *No Respect*, 136.


part, as an expression or incorporation of camp (while not detracting from or creating judgment towards the tenets of the faith itself) serve an important role. Namely, it allows saints—like the other narratives of saints described in this section—to serve as a cultural bridge connecting experiences and sensibilities of some SGM with religious concerns, themes, and imagery.

TEMPLE OF ANTINOUS
THE GAY GOD

HOME

ANTINOUS RELIGION GALLERY NEWS CALENDAR LINKS

LITURGICAL CALENDAR
OF
RELIGIO ANTINOI





Introduction - Table of Holy Days - Peregrinatio Ad Orientem

The Illustrated Liturgical Calendar

The complete sacred calendar of Antinous, including images and descriptions, divided into four quarters in keeping with the Lunar aspect of Antinous the God. The events of the Peregrination are included, and are designated with the abbreviation (Per. An. I, Per. An. II, and Per. An. III) to indicate their place in the three year cycle.



WINTER SPRING

NEW YEAR
Oct. 30th - Jan. 31st

FIRST QUARTER
Feb. 1st - Apr. 30th

SUMMER FALL

FULL YEAR
May 1st - July 31st

LAST QUARTER
Aug. 1st - Oct. 29th

TEMPLE OF ANTINOUS
THE GAY GOD

HOME

ANTINOUS RELIGION GALLERY NEWS CALENDAR LINKS

RELIGIO ANTINOI

The Sacred Cultus of Antinous The Gay God

All those who Love Antinous and take faith in his divinity are encouraged to join in the veneration of Antinous the God. It was by decree of Emperor Hadrian Augustus, that the apotheosis of Antinous to immortal, heroic godliness was accomplished. Hadrian officially proclaimed the deification of Antinous on October 30th of the year 130 CE and commanded that Temples be raised in honor of the New God. A priesthood was inaugurated and the religion of Antinous spread to every corner of the Roman Empire.

On October 30th, 2002, the modern Priesthood of Antinous, in piety and solemnity, declared the foundation of the New Religion of Antinous, and of the world-wide community of Antinous lovers and believers known as Ecclesia Antinoi. The modern faith of Antinous, known as Religio Antinoi, is a Gay Religion, but is open to any and all interpretation, and is open to any person regardless of belief, gender, race, nationality or sexual identification. Participation in Religio Antinoi is free and open to all. The Priesthood of Antinous does not assume a position of authority, nor require any form of oath, allegiance, monetary membership or adherence to a doctrine of belief.



Religio Antinoi is a medium in which to express and share in the Gay Spirituality of Antinous as a God of the eternal Roman Religion. It is for the love and veneration of Antinous that we invite all those who feel affection for Antinous, and believe in him, and are seeking an expression of Gay Spirituality with an ancient and glorious history, to join us in the remembrance of the beautiful Bithynian Boy who was deified by his lover, the Divine Emperor Hadrian Augustus.

AVE VIVE ANTINOE

To learn more, or to become a member of Religio Antinoi, Visit our Facebook page and contact us there, or Subscribe to the Ecclesia Antinoi Yahoo list or Contact the Priesthood of Antinous

Antinous Facebook Page

Ecclesia Antinoi Yahoo List Priesthood of Antinous

RELIGIO ANTINOI

GAY RELIGION

NEW RELIGION

HOMOTHEOSIS

SACRED BARQUE

ANCIENT DOCUMENTS

LITURGY

SAINTS OF ANTINOUS

ECCLESIA ANTINOI

PANTHEON


RELIGION

ALTARS AND SHRINES

HOLLYWOOD TEMPLE

SACRED GAMES

Saint Sebastian



On January 20th the Religios of Antinous honors SAINT SEBASTIAN who, despite being a Christian martyr, has been identified by homosexuals of all beliefs over the centuries as a symbol of our persecution and suffering.

Sebastian was an officer in the Imperial Guard of Emperor Diocletian, and he was a Christian.

In 302 AD, Diocletian subjected the Christians to a brutal persecution, and it was during this period that Sebastian was "ousted" to the Emperor as a practicing Christian.

When asked to sacrifice before a pagan altar, Sebastian refused and was sentenced to death. He was tied to a column before Mauritanian archers, who shot him with arrows... but to no effect.

Sebastian was strengthened by his faith, and did not die. He was finally clubbed to death in front of Emperor.

Homosexuals over the centuries have looked to Sebastian as a patron saint. His manner of death, which is like an affliction of Eros, and the sight of the beautiful young soldier plumed with arrows, has moved our hearts over the ages more than all other Christian saints.

In the Middle Ages, he was said to have power over the plague. And during the Black Death, his popularity grew among the pestilent flagellants.

His image was a favorite subject of homosexual artists during the Renaissance who were fascinated by the erotic charge of his death. During the early 19th Century he was taken up as the model for homosexual suffering and persecution, some writers even claiming that he was the

In our time, the power of St. Sebastian over the Plague has made him a spiritual force in the fight against AIDS. And so we recognize his sanctity as the patron saint of homosexuals and as a protector from our modern plague. We consecrate him to the Religios of Antinous and of

Saint Heath Ledger



On January 22nd the Religios of Antinous commemorates the brief, shining life of Saint Heath Ledger, the gifted actor whose on-screen portrayals inspired millions of gay people and whose off-screen life paralleled so many more. Not gay himself, Saint Heath died on this day in 2008 under mysterious circumstances after taking anti-depressants and sleeping pills at the age of 28. His body was found lying across the bed of his Manhattan apartment. The manner of his death bore every parallel to the best known for his Oscar-nominated role as a gay cowboy in "Brokeback Mountain", the acclaimed Australian-born actor also played The Joker in the blockbuster "The Dark Knight", for which role he posthumously was awarded a Golden Globe Award for his psychopathic criminal mastermind The Joker.

No one will ever know why Saint Heath overdosed on anti-depressants, as had his idol Nick Drake. No one will ever know why Saint River Phoenix took a fatal cocktail of booze and alcohol, just as no one will ever know why Saint Richey Edwards tragically and so young.

Just as no one knows for sure what happened to Antinous. Thus they are all Saints of Antinous.

Shortly before his death, Heath Ledger made a video tribute to Nick Drake (photo right), the ambisexual English singer/songwriter who died in 1974 under about identical circumstances to Saint Heath.

Saying he planned to make a movie about Saint Nick, Heath appeared in a self-made video (about drowning) to the tune of Nick Drake's song Black-Eyed Dog. It was the last song that Nick is believed to have recorded before he died under mysterious circumstances.

The black-eyed dog is thought to be a reference to Winston Churchill's famous "little black dog." Throughout his life Churchill was shadowed by violent mood swings, fits of depression and periods of emotional death. He felt that he was followed by this Heath seems to have been very well acquainted with the "little black dog" of depression, the black demon which nips at the heels of so many sensitive young souls who cannot find their way in this harsh world.

And thus Antinous in the God of Lost Boys. He knows their suffering. He knows how it is to stand on the shore at the twilight of the world, with one foot on dry land and the other foot in the murky depths of oblivion — and he understands how a beautiful

Saint Heath represents so many young men who seek what Nick Drake called the fruit of the tree of fame. "Fame is but a fruit tree, so very unsecure", Nick sings in a song which Heath loved. It is a song about sensitive souls who reach for the fruit of fame and then, when it is within their grasp, they lose

Figure 17. These screen captures are emblematic of the stylization and language used on the site's expansive pages, including the liturgical calendar, apologetics, and blog entries about their saints.

This interpretation of the material on the Temple of Antinous site is, of course, not its only possible reading, and assessing it through this lens is not meant to devalue, limit, or degrade other motivations, identities, or spirituality that the site conveys. After all, interest in the figure and symbology of Antinous is objectively at least as old as the Victorian era, and Antinous is well-documented as a powerful historical symbol of male desire.⁵³² Yet, the sites' authors themselves note that the faith and website are "open to any and all interpretation." Exploring this particular paradigm does afford fascinating possibilities, however, including the fact that analyzing camp can reveal the ways in which resistance transforms discussions of controversial topics, like faith and sexuality, and reifies or disrupts traditional power relations and expectations.⁵³³ Specifically, "camp can contribute to various readings, including political ones, when minorities appropriate and ridicule the images of a dominant group... [and] attempt to undermine the credibility of... preconceptions."⁵³⁴ The Temple of Antinous, with its language and descriptions that are highly reminiscent of Catholic rituals, shrines, and saints, can be seen as creating parallels or references to Christianity and Catholicism specifically. After all, camp as whole has "striking similarities to Catholic clerical culture," and this site is no exception.⁵³⁵ While there is an intrinsic relationship between oppression and camp, such affect can also lead through camp to "a style of resistance and self-protection, a way of identifying with other queer people across invisibility."⁵³⁶ Highlighting these older hierarchies and institutions that reify systems of belief and socio-cultural control in ways that poke fun and highlight new thinking

⁵³² Waters, "The Most Famous Fairy in History," 196.

⁵³³ Christina L. Ivey, *If We're Mocking Anything, It's Organized Religion: The Queer Holy Fool Style of The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence* (Dissertation: University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2016), 62.

⁵³⁴ Kerry Mallan and Roderick McGills, "Between a Frock and a Hard Place: Camp Aesthetics and Children's Culture" *Canadian Review of American Studies* 35, 1 (2005), 1-19.

⁵³⁵ Ibid.

⁵³⁶ Moe Meyer, *An Archeology of Posing: Essays on Camp, Drag, and Sexuality* (Madison: Macater Press, 2010), 147. Jordan, *Silence of Sodom*, 183.

about what it might mean to be SGM and spiritual is, by all definitions, quintessentially and subversively camp.

3.4 OTHER MOTIVATIONS

While the previous sections each provide powerful evidence for their claims demonstrating novel elements of spirituality, role modeling, and queer application and interpretation of saints, post-structuralist reading of these sources suggests additional possibilities. These possible readings within the communities in this study do not fall within any of the major delineations outlined above but are still important and potentially powerful considerations. Specifically, it is important to closely assess the roles that political and cultural identities and motivations may play in the creation and dissemination of these texts and narratives, as well as the influence that authority and tradition may wield for and against these communities. After all, ostensibly political goals or actions routinely interact with religious motivations and rituals; the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence described in section [3.3](#) are an excellent example. While less observable, such intersectionality and the relationships between different components of actors' identities or experiences may well lead to the intermingling of social or political action and religious subjectivity and identity.

3.4.1 Political and Cultural

It is plausible that community members and authors in these blogs, forums, and groups contain overlap among their religious, cultural, and political views and incorporate political or larger cultural goals into these narratives. Several of the inclusivist sites mention their "role" in

expanding and preserving “gay *culture*” or communicating “with members of the LGBT community” in addition to underrepresented, queer *religious* communities.⁵³⁷ After all, each of the sites in this study notes at some point the importance of a religious or cultural past impacting the present. Yet, within that past, power structures most opposed to SGM liberation in western societies developed from religious (then medical, then political) circles of power. SGM authors and audiences may well use these narratives to define and support identities and experiences in their own language and on their own terms that disarm (or at least counter) ways that these existing structures work to oppress.

This response, at once both rhetorical and political, seems all the more plausible given historical antecedents. Religion has always been inextricably (if variously) connected with, and responsible for reproducing, forms of hegemony, power relations, and cultural capital. Early SGM activism that combined religious and political goals includes the Gay Socialist Action Project of the 1970s and various components of the (largely Protestant) homophile movement of the 1950s and 60s.⁵³⁸ For SGM communities, this has been equally true among the many types of Catholic churches and Protestant denominations in the United States. In fact, the first openly “gay church” in America was not the MCC, but Catholic—the Eucharistic Catholic Church was founded as an independent Catholic Church in Atlanta in 1946.⁵³⁹ Yet for many the defining intersection between SGM and the Catholic Church in America remains the Roman Catholic Church’s outspoken role opposing SGM members and citizens and thwarting prevention and care efforts for people at risk for or living with HIV during the AIDS crisis of the late 1980s through the 1990s. In this and many other instances of public policy, religion and politics are inextricably linked.

⁵³⁷ Downs, *Stand by Me*, 89-92 (emphasis added). Cherry, “About,” 1.

⁵³⁸ Downs, *Stand by Me*, 95. White, *Reforming Sodom* 59-62.

⁵³⁹ Downs, *Stand by Me*, 42.

One aspect that is clear from the many sources discussed here is that symbolic and social boundaries are frequently intermingling. The interplay between symbolism and social constructs (such as gender performativity, for example) that reimagined saints represent is reminiscent of Bourdieu's foundational observation that "symbolic traditions are [not] merely screens for ideological and political positions, but rather are integral to political positions in shaping discourse and framing religious thinking... and identity formation."⁵⁴⁰ As such, the creation of the inclusivist narratives assessed here suggest that one goal for the creation of some saint narratives is to access to the symbolic power saints historically represent, especially in Catholic traditions. According to Bourdieu's theory on social formation, accessing the social and structural power of a shared system of symbolism (such as saints) allows an author to either reproduce and reify or disrupt the social structures (like sexuality) with which the saint(s) is symbolically associated.

The current chapter offers examples of how authors and communities are using the symbolic power of saints to reinforce or disrupt social narratives and power structures along the dialectic positions of exclusivist and inclusivist groups. The former, including the Church Militant, EnCourage, and many of the Catholic Answers Forum topics, articulates a desire to reinforce and "restore" "wholesome" sexual mores as a political and cultural goal.⁵⁴¹ Similarly, the "ficterviews" with the saints are clearly at least in part symbolic gestures that use the authority of religious symbolism to reify exclusivist views of sexual and gender identity. An additional example of this motivation can be read in the "Saint Nero" thread from CAF. In the highly politicized, polemical discussion, numerous community members riff on the perceived similarities between the imagined sexual mores of the ancient Roman Emperor Nero, describing

⁵⁴⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: University Press, 1977), 145.

⁵⁴¹ EnCourage daily email and nightly conference call prayers, 2018.

him sarcastically as the epitome or emblematic “saint” for strawman caricatures of SGM. Examples linking Nero as a “saint” to highly politicized claims include that the “rainbow flag” is “the sign of the beast,” that the “persecution” of conservative members of the wedding industry in the United States are foretold in the New Testament book of Revelation, and that Nero was the biblical “beast” for Rome, just as same-sex marriage is the “contemporary mark of the beast.”⁵⁴² Such statements demonstrate clear conflation and intentional intermingling of political and religious motivations and worldviews. Through utilizing the rhetorical power of linking an SGM patron saint to a figure they perceive to be a debauched villain of history, these community members seek to denigrate contemporary SGM communities.

On the other hand, inclusivist sites may well function similarly (though with opposite intentions). Cultural anthropologist and theorist Gayle Rubin’s (1949—) metaphor of the “charmed circle” is an appropriate touchstone in this instance. Rubin famously theorized that heteronormative sexual ethos creates, and resides inside of, a charmed circle that delineates which acts and desires are socially acceptable and which (non-heteronormative) ones are not. This circle can, according to the theory, be expanded by additional narratives and social foci that shift acceptable cultural/moral standards.⁵⁴³ The inclusivist narratives described here, in all of the other analytical categories in this chapter, can potentially function to shift that perception. They can expand the circle for SGM Christians by using images and stories of queer, distinctive, or paired saints to normalize contemporary SGM relationships. Dignity, New Ways Ministries, Equally Blessed, and Quest express this desire explicitly, and all operate some measure of social

⁵⁴² See commenters K_K, ialso, and triumphguy, respectively, on “Saint Nero,” throughout.

⁵⁴³ Burke *Christians Under Covers*, 9.

or political advocacy, as outlined in section [2.2.3](#). Q Spirit author Kittredge Cherry even admits in her blog that “phrases like ‘queer saint’ make a nice shorthand for news headlines.”⁵⁴⁴

A second, powerful example can be interpreted around the celebration of SGM and allied lives. As described above, the remembrance of victims (e.g., martyrs) and the violence experienced in SGM lives, the elevation of political activists like Harvey Milk, and the recognition of SGM allies as saints have clear ramifications for how SGM people and allies operate and navigate their larger realities. Some authors and groups, like Ephilei on TransChristians.com or New Ways Ministries, write explicitly that this is their motivation, while audiences explicitly cite this as a factor in other posts’ comments (including on Queering the Church and Q Spirit). Still other authors and communities leave this reading to subtext, like the Temple of Antinous.

The most common saint narrative specifically promoted as a form of SGM political remembrance relates to the possible canonization of Father Mychal Judge. Judge was the chaplain for the New York City Fire Department and was killed during the collapse of the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001; he was last seen alive praying in the main lobby of one of the towers. Judge was designated Victim 001 in the aftermath, and the image of Judge’s body being carried from smoldering ruins became one of the indelible images of that tragic, historic moment (it was later dubbed a modern *Pieta* by the New York Times and others). While his sacrifice and life took on a near mythic status in the months and years thereafter, it was also during this time that the public came to learn that Father Judge was also gay.⁵⁴⁵ This confluence of sexual identity, religious affiliation, and national attention has allowed Judge to occupy a singular

⁵⁴⁴ Cherry, “Why we need LGBTQ Saints”

⁵⁴⁵ Schippert, “Saint Mychal,” 111. See also Ruth Graham, “Could Father Mychal Judge Be the First Gay Saint?” *Slate Magazine* (Sept 11, 2017). <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2017/09/father-mychal-judge-was-a-9-11-hero-could-he-also-become-the-first-gay-saint.html>

position in SGM Catholic discourse.⁵⁴⁶ His life and death was even made into the 2006 film *The Saint of 9/11*, narrated by Sir Ian McKellen.⁵⁴⁷

SAINT MYCHAL JUDGE
TO ENCOURAGE GREATER FAITH, HOPE & LOVE THROUGH "THE SAINT OF 9/11"

Index: click these links for contents:

- > Mychal's Life (Books, Film, Stories)
- > Mychal's Heroic Death: details
- > Mychal After 9/11 (Reflections, Honors, Continuing work, Organizations)
- > Sainthood, Miracles, Patron Saint
- > a Gay Saint in fact
- > Quotes by & about Mychal Judge
- > Prayers + Prayer Cards

Mychal's Prayer:
Lord, take me where You want me to go,
let me meet who You want me to meet,
tell me what You want me to say,
and keep me out of Your way.

"Directly in line with God"
Even before his heroic death on 9/11, many saw Mychal Judge as a living saint for his extraordinary compassion and deep spirituality.

"Mychal had no use for physical things. Give him a cashmere sweater, and it would end up on the back of a homeless person. But go to him with a troubled soul, and he would listen intently for as long as it took." (Steven McDonald)

While praying, Mychal sometimes "became so lost in God, as if lost in a trance, that he'd be shocked to find several hours had passed." (Michael Daly)


"He achieved an extraordinary degree of union with the divine. We knew we were dealing with someone directly in line with God." (Fr. John McNeill)

"I, Mychal Judge, am not capable of doing these things on my own. I walk in, hold a hand, wipe a tear, say a prayer. But that's not me, that's the grace of God. I don't worry about the details... it's a mystery, it's God."

+


Excerpts from the
**Last Homily of
FDNY Chaplain, Father Mychal Judge,**
at Mass for Firefighters: Sept. 10, 2001

You do what God has called you to do. You get on that rig, you go out and do the job. No matter how big the call, no matter how small,




Father Mychal Judge, O.F.M.
1933 - 2001

9/11/2001



Fr. Mychal Judge, FDNY chaplain, praying in the WTC lobby just before his death



Ground Zero Sept. 11, 2001

"I love you, so just love each other the best you can... never be afraid to love"
Fr. Mychal Judge




Figure 18. While not directly a part of this study, <http://Saintmychaljudge.blogspot.com> is an excellent example of one of several sites that seek to operate as a repository of stories, prayers, images and testimonials about Mychal Judge. It is cited by several of the inclusivist sites in this dissertation.

Nearly every group in this study has had some position on the possible canonization of Mychal Judge.⁵⁴⁸ Exclusivist groups like EnCourage or CAF minimize or decry narratives of

⁵⁴⁶ "St. Mychal Discussion Forum » A perfect Patron Saint?" *SaintMychal.com*, (accessed Sept. 9, 2018), https://web.archive.org/web/*/http://saintmychal.com/

⁵⁴⁷ This film is freely available for viewing at <http://saintof9-11.com/>

Mychal's life as a celibate gay man as "propaganda," respectively, while inclusivist online communities and organizations like Dignity and New Ways Ministries expound the virtues of the example he set throughout his life, including as an "inspiration to future generations."⁵⁴⁹ Perhaps most tellingly, New Ways Ministries (NWM) is *actively seeking* and compiling information, documents, and especially miracles attributed to his intercession to pave his way for canonization. NWM explicitly plans on proposing that Fr. Judge be investigated by the Congregation for Saints' Causes to this end.⁵⁵⁰ Canonizing an openly gay man would have significant cultural and political significance for reducing SGM stigma, including (presumably) within the Roman Catholic Church itself; given the language and writing of proponents within these inclusivist communities around other queer narratives of saints, such implications are undoubtedly on their minds.

Finally, the intersection of political goals with religious and SGM interests recognizes that rejecting heteronormative assumptions and regulations can be seen as *inherently* political to a degree. This is especially true in relation to bodies like the Roman Catholic Church that have long had a fraught relationship with SGM communities. Reading gender politics into discussions of saints presupposes Butler's idea that the gender expression of an individual is not, in fact, "a politically neutral surface upon which culture acts." Gender expression is never pre-discursive; that is, reading the gender of a body is always in part (and even without the viewer's awareness)

⁵⁴⁸ Terence Weldon, "Victim 0001: Fr Mychal Judge, Gay Saint of 9/11," *Queering the Church*, (accessed June 23, 2017), <http://saints.queerchurch.info/?p=211>; "Saint Mychal Judge To Encourage Greater Faith, Hope & Love Through 'The Saint of 9/11,'" *saintmychaljudge.com*, (accessed Aug. 31, 2018), <http://saintmychaljudge.blogspot.com/>; Kittredge Cherry, "Mychal Judge, gay saint of 9/11 and chaplain to New York firefighters," *Q Spirit*, (Sep 11, 2018), <http://qspirit.net/mychal-judge-gay-saint-of-911/>; "Focus on Mychal Judge as a 'gay saint' is problematic," *Catholic Answers Forums*, (Nov. 2017), <https://forums.catholic.com/t/focus-on-mychal-judge-as-a-gay-saint-is-problematic/459652>

⁵⁴⁹ "Chicago's Legacy Walk Honors Fr. Mychal Judge," *Dignity USA*, (accessed October 11, 2018), <https://www.dignityusa.org/article/chicago%E2%80%99s-legacy-walk-honors-fr-mychal-judge>

⁵⁵⁰ "It's Time to Canonize Father Mychal Judge," *New Ways Ministries*, (accessed May 1, 2018), <https://www.newwaysministry.org/advocate/time-canonize-fr-mychal-judge/>

shaped by political or cultural assumptions, and is never concretely determinate.⁵⁵¹ It is equally true that an individual's choices around gender expression are *also* not completely determined by the individual. The performance of gender can only include options for expressing gender that are currently available to an individual, as constrained and policed by social forces, threats, and expectations. This system reifies contingent acts associated with gender into “naturalized necessities,” thus foreclosing other possibilities for expression.⁵⁵² In this light, viewing established holy figures through narratives that associate their actions, appearances, and lives with contemporary SGM helps to further expand possibilities for sexual expression and gender identity. While some might balk at the idea that saints could be a kind of cultural tool used to dismantle—or at least resist—a “house” as monolithic (and often oppressive) as the Roman Catholic Church, such a social mechanism is certainly possible. The perception of a social incongruity from normative expectations—as is the case here with the narratives of SGM saints—is neither inherently re-inscriptive nor subversive. Rather, both the re-inscription (reinforcing) of traditional, oppressive perceptions or social mechanisms and the subversion thereof “are the result of the reader's own interpretive strategies” and perceptions.⁵⁵³

3.4.2 Access to Authority/Tradition

A final, separate component of spirituality at play in many of these works is the patterns demonstrated among these sites. Much of the rhetoric and representation that has been discussed in this dissertation can be fruitfully viewed within the context of “legitimation narratives.” This sociological construct, employed to examine other socio-political religious groups' interactions with Catholic hierarchy, is a rhetorical and psychological process through which individuals at

⁵⁵¹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 156-7.

⁵⁵² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 33. See also Sloop, *Disciplining Gender*, 26-27.

⁵⁵³ Meyer, *An Archeology of Posing*, 107.

odds with aspects of Catholic teaching and authority seek to “validate their identity as committed Catholics.”⁵⁵⁴ The implications and expectations involved with striving for that commitment—the ultimate ideal of which is a “living sainthood”—among SGM Catholics (or other Christians with similar expectations), looks quite different from hetero-cisgender Christians when those traditions are not accepting of their SGM members.⁵⁵⁵ The comments and texts in inclusivist and semi-exclusivist sites described here illustrate that dissenting Catholics’ invocation of their own experiential and spiritual authority allows them to overcome or negate selective rejection of certain Roman Catholic texts and teachings around sexuality through an “affirmation of their connection with... tradition.”⁵⁵⁶ Applying this concept to the case at hand, the kinds of legitimating narratives that surround the use of saints in both the contexts described above amount to both varying levels of repudiation of statements made by the Vatican or specific interpretations of Christian scripture. Many of the more resource-oriented sites in this study—including Dignity, Equally Blessed, Quest, New Ways Ministries, and Spiritual Friendship (indirectly)—offer resources for SGM and their allies looking to respond to the “clobber texts” used in conservative interpretations of the Christian Bible. Additionally, SGM who engage in reimagining saints and their lives can be viewed as specifically rejecting or editing official Catholic hagiography in ways that coopt the power and symbolic authority associated with the saint in order to legitimize or strengthen their own narratives and identities as SGM Catholics (or Christians). Put another way, “what is at stake is not simply the authority of Scripture, as conservative opponents to homosexual legitimization like to say, but the *authority of the culture of interpretation* by which [conservative] people read scripture in such a way as to lend

⁵⁵⁴ Dillon, *Catholic Identity*, 122.

⁵⁵⁵ Boisvert, *Sanctity and Male Desire*, 10-12.

⁵⁵⁶ Dillon, *Catholic Identity*, 124.

legitimacy to their doctrinaire prejudices.”⁵⁵⁷ When the “moral 'no' to gays becomes [conservatives'] necessary symbolic commitment to show that they really do believe in something”, that is when “LGBTQ saints... can shake up the status quo. We can restore the complex reality of saints whose lives are being hijacked by hagiographahies [sic] and hierarchy to enforce the established power structures.”⁵⁵⁸

On the other side of this equation, defenders of exclusivist interpretations can utilize built-in systems of hegemonic authority developed and maintained by the Roman Catholic body. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in the context subtly being assigned to the increase use of in Saint Michael’s prayer. Articles on exclusivist websites like Church Militant are reporting that large numbers of dioceses are returning to this specific prayer in response to the Pope’s 2018 request that the faithful pray for the Church. They cite statements like that of Pittsburgh Bishop Zubik, who “asked the clergy to consider restoring the practice of reciting the Prayer to Saint Michael the Archangel after all Masses, a prayer that calls on Saint Michael to protect the faithful against all evil.”⁵⁵⁹ This prayer, which asks for Michael the archangel’s protection against evil, is being coopted to serve as a political dog whistle for hardline Catholic groups. This coded language equates the prayer’s references to the “evil” or “wickedness” attacking supplicants *exclusively* with SGM. This would seem a small leap, given the Church Militant’s frequent and erroneous claims that the numerous pedophilic claims and cover-ups wracking the

⁵⁵⁷ Peter Gomes, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Heart and Mind* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2006), 162.

⁵⁵⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, *Dispatches from the Front: Theological Engagements with the Secular* (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 1994), 153-4.

⁵⁵⁹ David Nussman, “St. Michael Prayer Makes a Comeback,” *Church Militant*, (Oct. 5, 2018), <https://www.churchmilitant.com/news/article/st.-michael-prayer-revitalized-amidst-abuse-scandal>

Roman Catholic Church can be blamed on SGM and same-sex desire.⁵⁶⁰ The “dog-whistling”—giving coded references to language that would otherwise likely be considered hateful or not socially acceptable, only understood by those “in” on the additional message—is clearly conveyed in the community comments on Church Militant. In response to the site’s reporting on the increased use of the Prayer of St. Michael, user KA notes that this is due to SGM who are “obsessed with perverted sex.” User LL wrote that they prayer is needed “against gender ideology, abortion, and LGBT [sic],” while HTL admonishes prayers against “the MSM ...against gender ideology, abortion, and the LGBT.” Commenter CW goes further, opining that Michael and his prayer were “removed from the churches after [Vatican II]... [because] he was too violent and aggressive. Definitely something the rainbowbanner [sic] waving crowd would think.” Summing up all these reasons—given in response to an article *that did not mention LGBTQ people once*—the next commenter, JDT observed that “St Michael prayer should be made mandatory after all masses throughout the Church. That’ll drive them out.”⁵⁶¹ With these and similar statements, callous appeals to, and presumption of, moral authority using Saint Michael’s prayer form a persistent narrative of denigration and dismissal around the experiences and lives of SGM.

⁵⁶⁰ For example: Rodney Pelletier, “The DC Catholic Gay Mafia,” *Church Militant*, (Oct. 4, 2018), <https://www.churchmilitant.com/news/article/the-washington-d.c.-catholic-gay-mafia>. This article alone is gratuitous enough to prove this point.

⁵⁶¹ All text and comments found in: Nussman, “St. Michael Prayer Makes a Comeback,” 1. It is also worth noting that, while abbreviated here for privacy, nearly all commenters on the actual site seem to be using their full names, suggesting they are unashamed and/or unconcerned expressing these views publicly.

3.5 SUMMARIZING SUBJECTIVITY AND IDENTITY

The creation, maintenance, and fluidity of saints' narratives and hagiographic interpretation are clearly important mechanisms impacting community members' subjectivity and constructions of identity. The queering of ideas and attributes of saints is a reflection of novel subjectivity—the specific ways sexual and gender minorities relate to dominant, heteronormative cultures—and it is also a narrative vehicle SGM use to articulate, integrate, or perpetuate components of their spiritual and/or sexual selves. Just as saint narratives and petitions to Saint Jude (for example) functioned in the past for devotees to create new narrative possibilities for articulation and self-actualization, saints in these contemporary online communities allow similar articulation of “visions of alternatives [that are both] reality and desire.”⁵⁶² Queer cultural anthropology has identified ways that certain sexual cultural performances can serve as “‘circuits’ to connect [one’s] sexuality” to larger culture. In this case, these narratives and relationships with and about saints connect “the performative and material.” Narrative iterations of saints that reference sexuality and gender identity form “a conduit between domains that [might otherwise] appear divided from one another: those conceptualized as subjective or private and those understood to be social.”⁵⁶³ These contemporary communities have many ways of expressing and exploring these critical facets of individual and communal identity—as witnessed here by the diverse number of saints being referenced and prayed to for inspiration, for spiritual support or comfort, for queer subjectivity and community, and other

⁵⁶² Orsi, *Thank You, Saint Jude*, 132.

⁵⁶³ Burke, *Christians under Covers*, 8.

cultural or political concerns.⁵⁶⁴ However, one element that they all share is that they remain “linked to—though not determined by—the oppressions that mark social life.”

Through their experiences of oppression, spirituality, and community described in this chapter, lay Catholics are creating their own virtual spaces, worship, and narratives about saints in a manner that can affirm not only SGM lives, but also their desires and relationships. Traditionally, “people elevated to dominant positions [in religious settings] discursively construct institutional notions of proper and inappropriate behavior and belief,” but the interpretation and veneration of the lives of saints discussed here offer a unique socio-religious vehicle through which traditional church teachings and expectations are being reinterpreted. It is, in this sense, a way for SGM Christians to create new avenues to explore saints’ writings and lives, connect to and develop their spirituality, define and explore queer Christian identities, and work towards accessing or leveraging the authority of church tradition as well as other political or cultural goals. In summary, by imbuing new meaning into the images, writings, and hagiographies of church icons, martyrs, and leaders, these Christians are using the privileged positions normally afforded to saints either to create new narratives and spaces for queer Christians or to reify existing systems of traditional oppression. The current work has also incorporated the work of many scholars who have examined the ways that religious traditions can shape belief, discourse, and action in religious communities, often highlighting ways that such discourse historically has had limiting and harmful effects on SGM. The emphasis in this dissertation on the dichotomy and subtle power dynamics arising from these two competing venerative trends, as well as uses of saints and Catholic teaching and tradition, speaks to this emerging body of literature. Through the examination of queer saint veneration, as well as saint

⁵⁶⁴ Readers will recall that the Q Spirit *Jesus in Love* Blog alone has over 1000 entries on saints, and *Queering the Church* has well more than 100 as well.

veneration promoting abstention or other more conservative sexual mores, *Digital Devotions* has emphasized the overlapping impetuses to emphasize role models, physical presentation or representation, and symbolism in some SGM communities and church traditions.⁵⁶⁵ Though not without tensions, these spaces exist as independent sources of support for diverse faith communities *and* in multifaceted relationships to one another and traditional Catholic frameworks and belief structures.

⁵⁶⁵ Jordan, *The Silence of Sodom*, 2, 52.

4.0 CONCLUSIONS: DOING RELIGION

“Most likely some of the saints were probably LGBT... those people who were offended [by this observation] may be surprised to be greeted in heaven by more than a few LGBT saints, who will surely forgive them for being offended by their holiness.” Fr. James Martin, SJ, 2017⁵⁶⁶

“[LGBTQ] saints continually inform and inspire me. For some reason, I especially related to the love between Saints Sergius and Bacchus. I found myself thinking, ‘I want to meet these two when I get to heaven.’” Nancy31, commenting on “Saints Sergius and Bacchus: Male couple martyred in ancient Rome” on the Jesus in Love Blog⁵⁶⁷

The current study identifies ways that authors and audiences construct and maintain novel and multifaceted discourses around saints and sexuality online. It then assesses how these narratives contribute to 1) facets of queer and traditional spirituality, 2) dynamic perceptions of sexuality and gender, and 3) sexual and religious subjectivity and identity. The creation and maintenance of queer narratives—as well as the reification of heteronormative ones—are important, novel additions to both the academic understanding and the critical progression of lived religion in digital contexts. Scholars including Mark Jordan, Tanya Erzen, Christine Gardner, Lynne Gerber, and Rick Phillips have examined the ways that religious traditions can shape belief, discourse, and action in religious communities, often highlighting ways that such discourse can have limiting and harmful effects on sexual and gender minorities. Highlighting the dichotomy and subtle power dynamics arising from these two competing venerative trends, as well as uses of saints and Catholic teaching and tradition, contributes to and expands this

⁵⁶⁶ Terence Weldon, “LGBT Saints: Fr James Martin Re-affirms and Expands,” *Quest*, (May 17, 2017), <http://questlgbti.uk/lgbt-saints-fr-james-martin-re-affirms-and-expands/>

⁵⁶⁷ Nancy31 comment on “Saints Sergius and Bacchus: Male couple martyred in ancient Rome,” *Jesus in Love Blog*, (October 2013), <http://jesusinlove.blogspot.com/2013/10/saints-sergius-and-bacchus-male-couple.html>

emerging body of literature. The dissertation also nuances and advances scholarly understanding of ways in which people’s “positions within religious communities are learned, enacted, and challenged,” a pivotal facet of Catholic studies and queer studies. This intersectional topic has received only limited attention in ethnographic and queer scholarship on religion to this point.⁵⁶⁸

Accordingly, *Digital Devotions* provides a new angle from which to examine the fluidity of power relations within religious communities and among some of their marginalized adherents. David Halperin noted in *Saint Foucault* that:

power is not to be understood according to the model of a unidirectional vector from oppressor to oppressed. Rather, it is a fluid, all-encompassing medium, immanent in every sort of social relation... hence, power is not intrinsically, nor is it only, negative: it is not just the power to deny, to suppress, to constrain – the power to say no, you can’t. Power is also the positive and the productive. It produces possibilities of action, of choice – and, ultimately, it produces the conditions for the exercise of freedom...⁵⁶⁹

It is widely accepted that “religious discourse does not simply exist within a vacuum removed from the rest of social existence,” but the evidence herein from queer Christian veneration suggests a divergence—indeed a role reversal—from the commonly observed inculcation of institutional social mores and norms expressed by church elites to the laity.⁵⁷⁰ Thus, the current findings also contribute to the ongoing discourse surrounding the gendered nature and a limited “queering” of power relations and both social and ecclesiastic dynamics in and around (predominantly) Catholic social and cyber settings. While traditionally “people elevated to dominant positions [in religious settings] discursively construct institutional notions of proper and inappropriate behavior and belief,” the lower barriers to entry, lower risks for participation,

⁵⁶⁸ Burke and Hudec, “Sexual Encounters and Manhood Acts,” 331.

⁵⁶⁹ David Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995): 17.

⁵⁷⁰ Ryan Cragun, Emily Williams and J. E. Sumerau, “From Sodomy to Sympathy: LDS Elites’ Discursive Construction of Homosexuality Over Time,” *Journal for the Scientific Study Of Religion* 54 (2015): 291-310.

and reduced stigma afforded by greater anonymity allow the interpretation and veneration of the lives of saints to serve as a unique socio-religious vehicle through which traditional church teachings and expectations can be reinterpreted.⁵⁷¹ It is, in a sense, a way for SGM Christians to access a form of ecclesiastic authority. Donald Boisvert argues that saints “reaffirm our common humanity, and they link us, not only to each other, but also with an ineffable Other.” Such a stance can hold powerful symbolism and meaning for SGM who have too frequently been excluded or harmed by these structures.⁵⁷² By imbuing new meaning into the images, writings, and hagiographies of church icons, martyrs, and leaders, the authors and communities described above are able to use the privileged positions normally afforded to saints to create new narratives and spaces for queer audiences, even within traditional Christian frameworks and belief structures. This dissertation, through its explication of saint narratives as subversive counter-narratives and promoters of SGM religious identity, contributes to the conceptual understanding of how such novel spaces and authorities are accessed, reinforced, or opposed.

4.1 ACADEMIC SIGNIFICANCE

Queer Christianity—combined with the expansion of personal faith and communal practice within self-selecting electronic communities—demonstrates that SGM people of faith or those who are searching for spiritual fulfillment may engage in venerative speech and behavior that is likely not otherwise accessible to them in traditional religious settings. Through the examination of queer saint veneration and saint veneration focused on chastity and other

⁵⁷¹ Ibid, 295.

⁵⁷² Boisvert, *Sanctity and Male Desire*, 21.

conservative sexual mores, the dissertation maps the overlapping impetuses to emphasize role models, physical presentation or representation, and symbolism in some SGM communities and church traditions. Altogether, the work contributes to queer and LGBTQ studies through its assessment of novel religious and cultural discourse and exploration of new modes of queer subjectivity. Elements in the current work highlight new and surprising ways that sexual and gender minorities relate to queer and heteronormative religious traditions and systems of social power. Highlighting these nuances advances important investigations of lived religion and identity formation and integration among SGM and SGM Christians in scholarly discourse, as exemplified in the work of Wilcox, Jordan, Boisvert, Burke, and Janes, among others. The ways that religious saint narratives impact queer subjectivity and deeper components of identity contribute to what Michel Foucault described as understanding “sexuality from the viewpoint of the history of discourses.” The current work builds on these “historical and cultural modes of explanation,” combined with rhetorical analysis and queer studies, to describe and contextualize contemporary uses of saint discourses related to sexuality and gender identity.⁵⁷³ *Digital Devotions*’ finding that saints serve as important vehicles for relating to religiously inflected sexual and gender minority communities and sensibilities is a critical advancement of David Halperin’s work in *How to be Gay*. There, Halperin argued that homosexuality involves a cultural practice of “decoding and recoding heterosexual and heteronormative meanings already encoded in culture, so that they come to function as vehicles for gay or queer meaning.” Such a “shared alternative reading” perfectly reflects the mechanisms transpiring in inclusivist communities.⁵⁷⁴ The present work directly addresses the conclusions Halperin explores at the end of *How to be Gay* where he encourages other scholars to explore what queer subjectivity (or

⁵⁷³ Halperin, *Saint Foucault*, 4.

⁵⁷⁴ Halperin, *How to be Gay*, 12.

subjectivities) might look like from different cultural starting points or practices, including religion. *Digital Devotions*, among its many findings, provides further evidence for, and expands the scope of, Halperin's construction of "the cultural poetics of human subjectivity" by demonstrating how queer subjectivity exercises very real influence among some sexual and gender minorities' experiences and religious expressions.⁵⁷⁵

The findings in *Digital Devotions* also serve as a critical expansion for American Catholic studies, offering a queer lens through which to view our understanding of religious subjectivity and Catholic experience. In this sense, the current work fills a gap in scholarship by showing how narratives and uses of saints in the often-fluid context of spiritual searching and fulfillment are a fairly common yet undocumented component of religious life for people who still often find themselves excluded from—or on the margins of—Christian worship and tradition. Specifically, the project focuses on various types of venerative activity occurring among groups of SGM Catholics and other venerative Christian and spiritual groups. Similar published work in this subfield is essentially limited to Savastano's sample of a small group of men in urban New Jersey, historiography like John Boswell's, or indirectly related studies of popular sainthood around specific icons like Judy Garland or even the "saintly" activities of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. As such, the findings outlined here present key, even surprising, evidence and diverse sources to demonstrate that the practice of saint veneration—especially in novel and queer ways—is clearly both widespread and proliferating in online religious communities. Its expansion of scholarly understanding of the role of saint veneration as an often private, hidden component of contemporary lived religious experience also touches, therefore, on larger trends in religious studies examining queer lived religion, popular piety, and the

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid, 407.

diversification of the “spiritual marketplace.”⁵⁷⁶ Similarly, it represents a needed addition to the small but growing body of literature utilizing virtual ethnography and queer iconography, demonstrating its utility as an emerging research methodology applicable to researchers of lived religion and similar fields.

4.2 CRITICAL THEORY AND SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE

First and foremost, this study has clear applicability to readers concerned with the experiences and treatment of SGM individuals and their relationship with the Roman Catholic Church specifically or Christianity generally. However, it is also an entry point into wider issues and studies concerning the intersection of the studies of religion and sexuality, queer theory, rhetoric, and censorship, among others. Much of the analysis presented in Chapter 3 can contribute to larger academic and cultural assessments of the increasing perceptions of cultural difference and animosity in contemporary American society. That is, this work in some ways shows the “fracturing” of civil society through the Balkanization of community institutions and beliefs that some scholars and social commentators have feared since the 1990s.⁵⁷⁷ There is some evidence captured in this study to support such a reading; several of the inclusivist authors like Kittredge Cherry and Terence Weldon have reported receiving disparaging comments, rebuttals, attack pieces on other sites, and even threats in response to their work. Numerous

⁵⁷⁶ This is in reference to the classic sociological theory of Wade Clark Roof that posits that contemporary worshipers gravitate toward attractive aspects of different religions that serve to address key spiritual or cultural needs or concerns. Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁵⁷⁷ Ana Maria Diaz-Stevens and Anthony M. Stevens-Arroyo, *Recognizing the Latino Resurgence in U.S. Religion: the Emmaus Paradigm* (Boulder: Westview Press/HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1998), 86.

examples from contributors throughout Spiritual Friendship note the misperceptions often attached to their website and its goals, as well as the frequent rejection or resistance they receive from both other SGM and more conservative Christians. The Church Militant, meanwhile, fosters incendiary and derogatory language throughout its articles, headlines, and comment sections, calling on its members to “prepare for battle” and “defend the faith...” especially from the perceived “sins” and “moral failings” it attributes to SGM.⁵⁷⁸

Reading and analyzing these sites through the lens of critical theory also yields important insights. The current study has endeavored to nuance and differentiate both historical and contemporary narratives that impact existing heteronormative power structures. The history of the Roman Catholic Church in America with sexual and gender minorities, in particular, throws into sharp relief the reality that many SGM and their families (including families which do not accept their SGM loved ones) have been deeply harmed in a number of ways by some—though not all—Christian and Catholic teachings around sexuality and gender identity. More than simply chronicling these developments, the current work can serve as a small addition to those resources available to Catholics generally and SGM laypeople specifically. This is a primary reason that the names of the websites examined herein have not been given pseudonyms, as is sometimes done in ethnography. By highlighting the ways that diverse and distinctive people of faith relate to saints and incorporate them into their beliefs and daily lives, *Digital Devotions* could serve to reduce social and faith-based stigma in some Christian and SGM communities. In particular, the evidence collected here rejects the prevalent but oversimplified view that Christianity contains a single, harmful stance regarding SGM. While there is still much work to be done understanding and explaining the history and contemporary experience of American

⁵⁷⁸ Lofton, “Brother Seraphim asks the Saints about Homosexuality,” throughout. The most frequently cited “way to defend the faith” on Church Militant, it should be noted, is to pay to subscribe to their “premium services.”

discourses around morality, Christianity, and sexual and gender minorities, this project serves as a small piece of that larger cultural discussion.

4.3. AVENUES FOR FURTHER STUDY

Further study is needed to explicate the ways in which individuals and groups experience and interpret sexuality, particularly in relation to saints, images, texts, and many types of ongoing dialogue within (and outside of) the Catholic Church and Christianity broadly. In particular, the experiences of lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered persons remain underrepresented in the small but growing amount of both qualitative and quantitative research conducted regarding the social mechanisms underlying the negotiations of gender, sexuality, and religious experience and affiliation in the United States. Thus, while this study represents a foray into the ways in which sexuality informs people's interactions with their faith and their faith traditions, there are still many pressing issues and interactions to be examined and explored.

One future possibility for an intersection of queer theory and queer lived religion highlighted by this work is the potential to speak to the intersections of "doing gender" with "doing religion." Conceptualizing the need to "do" religion similarly to the ways in which one "does" gender relates to each of the websites and communities in the present study. The sources above show that constructs taken to be fixed, static categories like gender are actually reproduced and maintained everyday—their subtle mundanity is a significant part of what creates the impression that they are innate and immutable. Yet doing religion involves a similar encompassing sense of cultural and social obligation and ontological necessity through the maintenance of organizations and communities specific acts, articulations, and expectations. It is

the “usual model” of belief and cultural norm to which people tend to default.⁵⁷⁹ In other words, just as gender is constructed and performed every day through interaction and embodiment, an individual’s “religious self” is similarly constructed and performed. Equally importantly, this sense of identity and performativity is interrelated to and dependent on gender norms.⁵⁸⁰ Constructing one’s religious self is an individual process, but it can only occur within available, top-down gendered religious scripts.⁵⁸¹ However, scholars recognize know that “doing religion” and “doing gender” do not happen in a vacuum for the individual; not only are these two reifying systems (gender and religion) inextricably linked, but the experience of “doing religion” is also influenced by the social systems and perceptions of race and class, exacerbating gendered normative expectations. The systems of “doing gender” and “doing religion” are so powerfully intertwined that “to un/re/do religion’ [is to] simultaneously ‘un/re/do gender’ and vice versa.” Gendered narrative or scripts and religious narratives and scripts are “inextricable.”⁵⁸² This dissertation shows that some of these scripts are either supported or subverted by the ways in which people portray and think about saints. While the current study is not expansive enough to capture this larger intersection, it suggests a tantalizing possibility for further study into the ways that Roman Catholic narratives and views of sexuality and gender identity influence the performativity of “doing” Catholicism and gender.

Sociological critiques dictate that race, class, and gender exert enormous influence on how “dominant discourses around the religious self [are perceived]” and have “implications

⁵⁷⁹ Angela Kaupp, “Religiosity And Gender Identity Of Female Adolescents: Narrative Religious Identity Of Young Catholic Women,” *Religion Inside and Outside Traditional Institutions* Heinz Streib, ed. (Boston: Brill Publishing, 2007): 247-268.

⁵⁸⁰ Burke, *Christians under Covers*, 7.

⁵⁸¹ Obit Avishai, “‘Doing Religion’ in a Secular World: Women in Conservative Religions and the Question of Agency,” *Gender and Society* 22 (2008): 413. Rachel Ellis, “‘It’s Not Equality:’ How Race, Class, and Gender Construct the Normative Religious Self among Female Prisoners” *Social Inclusion*, 6, no 2, (2018), 181–191.

⁵⁸² Heather Darwin, “Redoing Gender, Redoing Religion” *Gender & Society*, 32, no 3, (2018), 348–370.

for... those who fail to fulfill the dominant ideology” or narrative.⁵⁸³ While the current work contributes to academic understanding of ways that sexual and gender minorities create new narratives and theologies as well as respond to dominant (traditional Roman Catholic) ones, it cannot easily incorporate or account for differences in race or class among these responses. It is an inherent, unavoidable shortcoming frequently encountered by digital ethnography because many authors, commenters, and audiences are anonymous or semi-anonymous. In respect to economic class identity and concrete resources (like a computer or smartphone), the limits of what can be surmised from the available evidence is that individuals who create these sites and communities invest significant time and resources, while participation in online exchanges and communities require fairly minor investment or difficulty. In respect to race, what has been captured here shows that some of the inclusivist sites, and particularly Q Spirit, make intentional efforts to represent saints and martyrs from diverse racial, ethnic, and gender identity backgrounds. However, this methodology can collect only very limited data on individual reactions and interactions between the complex and foundational aspects of racial, gender, and sexual identity with religious narrative and belief. Further research using different methodologies and media will be needed to clarify these important components of individual and community identity.

Lastly, the findings presented here cannot concretely determine causality; that is, the extent to which audiences are themselves “queered” or have their views change over time as a result of their participation in these communities. While many groups—especially the online support groups and Catholic Answers Forums—facilitate the tracking of member comments and attitudes over time, many participants on other sites “flicker” in and out of conversations or even

⁵⁸³ Ibid.

change user names (as seemed to be the case on Church Militant comment boards). The evidence collected here strongly indicates the outcomes and uses of saint narratives and audience participation therein, but it cannot say with certainty whether or not members self-selected into the groups that were assessed, experienced unique subjectivity once they arrived, or had their conceptions of sexuality or religiosity changed during or after their participation. Further study using different methodologies would be required to better explore those more nuanced causal connections.

Overall, this dissertation offers an in-depth assessment of ways in which saints are being utilized in contemporary online settings. After contextualizing the religious and cultural history of Catholic and sexual and gender minority communities, it has employed the sociology of queer studies to explore online communities engaged in narrative creation around saints and their significance. In doing so, the work demonstrates that both queer and traditional narratives and interpretations of saints facilitate expressions of multiple components of religious and sexual subjectivity or gender identities, as well as the possibility of deeper identity construction. The kinds of narratives, interactions, and identity development this dissertation assesses also uncover the entanglement of the social systems and hierarchies that reify sexual and gender expression *and* religious thought and expression. While methodological limitations and the scope of the study leave several avenues for future investigations—particularly in queer studies and lived religion—*Digital Devotions* represents a scholarly contribution that complicates and expands our understanding of the boundaries and narratives that comprise underrepresented aspects of queer lived religion and subjectivity.

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