FAITH & REASON HONORS PROGRAM
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Homosexuality and Catholicism:

On the Road to Sainthood

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**Part 1**: **Introduction**

***My Story***

Since my freshman year in the honors program, I always thought my thesis would be on a science topic. It was always my passion, but from the title of this paper you can see that the trajectory for my thesis changed. It happened on a run during the spring of my junior year. With senior year just around the corner, I had been brainstorming for weeks on a topic. I could not say why, but I suddenly had a realization. Over the few weeks prior, I had met and heard the stories from a group of Catholic men. These individuals experienced attractions to other men, and they shared their lives with me. Their stories inspired me as they had overcome tremendous obstacles to live out their faith while struggling with these attractions. It was on my run that I realized that these stories and the lessons that they held could not be left unheard. The idea of sharing the stories of those I had listened to was motivation for me, but I had another reason for writing this. I wanted to share the truth about the struggle of accepting oneself, finding a purpose in life, and living out the Catholic faith with same-sex attraction because this is my story too.

Growing up, I never had a strong faith life. I knew what I had to do to be Catholic like go to mass, receive the Sacraments, or attend CCD classes, but I did not know why. This lack of understanding grew more difficult as I came to face my biggest obstacle in my faith. In middle school and high school as all my friends became increasingly interested in getting girlfriends, I realized that I was more attracted to other guys. I did not understand what the Church taught about these attractions, so I thought that I had to reject they existed and hide them from my family, my friends, and ultimately God. I thought that others could not love me if they knew this part of me, so I applied the same theory to God. I decided that if I started growing too deep in my faith then I would have to address these feelings, and I did not want to do that. To avoid this, I unknowingly shut myself off from God.

When I came to DeSales University, I started to grow in my faith, coming to enjoy it and understand what the Church taught and why. I still avoided addressing my inner struggle, but I was starting to desire God to be a bigger part of my life. Yet, my fears were there telling me to keep silent and avoid coming to God. It wasn’t until January of 2018 at a Catholic youth conference that this all changed. At this conference, my faith was at its peak, and I finally desired Christ to enter my life. I remember entering the Confessional and telling the priest everything that was weighing on my heart, all my shame and fear of being rejected by those I loved. The priest listened and told me that no matter what anyone else thought of me because of this, God loves me as I am. For penance, the priest had me go back to Eucharistic Adoration and kneel before Jesus to pray. When I returned, I fell on my knees and Jesus called me. I let my guard down and came to Christ in my brokenness and shame, and by humbling myself, I finally was able to see God as loving and not judgmental. Seeing my life through God’s eyes allowed me to see the grace that led me to encounter Him more fully. He cared about me *and* my struggles and wanted to help me become better. I always feared the chaste life that the Church taught would be lonely – without joy and without love. Through my encounter with Christ, I realized that God’s divine love was more than enough and that He would provide ways for me to fulfill my call to serve others joyfully in a different kind of fatherhood. After finally seeing myself, my future, and my relationship with Jesus through His eyes, I committed my life to following Christ. I have grown more in my faith in the past year than any time in my life. My prayer life, closeness to God, and my self-esteem improved significantly. Do not think that I have become perfect or that this has been easy or always successful, but I now trust that God loves me no matter what and is invested in what I do.

***Identity***

Now that you know a small part of my story, why am I writing this thesis? Too often, people think that Christianity, especially Catholicism, and homosexual attractions are at odds with one another. You either choose faith or pride. I thought this myself once, and it was one of the hardest things I had to deal with. Our culture today is obsessed with identity. We must “decide” everything from our gender to our job to our faith to our sexual attractions, and then we must accept that this is who we are. This can be especially hard for someone with same-sex attractions (SSA). Stuck between the paradigm of gay shame (i.e. “in the closet”) and gay pride, I had no idea what to do myself. By refusing to address it, I defaulted to the former. Little did I know that the Catholic Church offered a third way - an acceptance of our sexual attractions without allowing them to define our identity, which is rooted first in being a son or daughter of God. All of God’s children have a cross to bear, but we are all a part of the Church. This is not an us, the homosexual Catholics, and them, the “normal” Catholics, issue. Fr. Mike Schmitz, a well-known Catholic speaker and author of the book on same-sex attractions *Made for Love*, described it this way in his Steubenville Conference talk, “We [the Church] do not tolerate you, you are not accepted. You belong. This is just the truth.”[[1]](#endnote-1) This is why I am writing this thesis.

***Stories***

One thing that I have learned as I have begun sharing my faith is that you are not always going to change someone’s opinion with an argument. I can give you the best theological argument since St. Thomas Aquinas or St. Augustine, but it could still fall upon deaf ears. Do not get me wrong, I will still be using theology and philosophy to back my argument, but I plan to do a two-fold attack - mind and heart. People can refute an argument, but there is one thing they cannot refute, a story. This thesis will include not only my experience, but those of brave souls who have set out on the road to live according to the Church’s teachings with their SSA. You heard that right. I am not the only one in the Church who has chosen this lifestyle. I surveyed and conducted interviews with men and women ranging in age from 18 to their 60s. Though many of them requested to have their names changed for various reasons, their stories are real and share the highs and lows of living with SSA and finding the truth in the Church. To give you a taste of what this will look like, I will use a very brief anecdote from my life to explain the next topic.

***Language***

“So, you’re gay?” This was one of the first questions my sister asked me after I opened up about my experience with her. I had shared all my struggles and fears with her, and this was what she thought of first? Though it may seem like the answer should be a simple yes or no, the complexity of identity language today makes it much more confusing. Does identifying as “gay” mean that I am attracted to other men, desiring a relationship with a man, or living an actively gay lifestyle? In other words, does “gay” apply to attractions, actions, or both? Before continuing further in this essay, I want to specify what I mean when I use terms such as homosexual, gay, lesbian, or same-sex attracted (SSA). For clarity and consistency, I will always use the terms to apply to attractions only. This is how I and most of the individuals I interviewed prefer to use them since our attractions are not the entirety of our identity, and we choose not to act on them. If I am referring to actions, I will specifically address that with something like “homosexual actions.”

***Organizations***

With the language clarified, there are a couple more things that I need to briefly explain to make my writing clear. There are two organizations that I will reference in this paper that have played an important role in my life and the lives of those who I interviewed. The first of these is the Courage Apostolate, which I will often refer to simply as Courage. This organization, founded by Fr. John Harvey OSFS in 1980, is “a group of Catholics who experience same-sex attractions and who are committed to helping one another to live chaste lives marked by prayer, fellowship and mutual support. [Its] members are guided by caring priest chaplains who offer reconciliation and direction for the spiritual life.”[[2]](#endnote-2) This organization was the first place that I met other men who were living out the Church’s teachings on SSA, and it plays a key role in the lives of many I spoke to who have come to accept their attractions and the call to chastity.

The second organization that I will address is Eden Invitation. Founded by Shannon Ochoa and Anna Carter, who both experience SSA themselves, this organization is a more modern form of Courage that works to promote “original personhood beyond the LGBT+ paradigm.”[[3]](#endnote-3) They work to build a community of individuals with this experience through online platforms including discussion boards and book clubs. I have met both the founders myself as well as other members of this organization, and it has been inspirational for me to see young Catholics pursue their faith in light of their SSA.

***Mindset***

Before entering the depth of the paper, I want to make a request. The topic of homosexuality in the context of the Catholic Church is a divisive and hot topic right now, especially in the light of the sex abuse scandals. You likely have an opinion (maybe even a strong one) on this topic and what you know or have witnessed. Whether you experience homosexual attractions or not, I ask that you start with a blank slate. As someone who experiences SSA myself, I likely have struggled with and considered many of the issues that you may currently have. I have gone from ignoring to hating to embracing the Catholic Church’s teachings on this topic. By reading this, you may at the very least come out with a better understanding of what the Catholic Church teaches and what she desires for those with SSA. I am writing to share the truth that I have discovered and has changed my life. If you enter with an open mind and heart - leaving behind all preconceived notions, biases, and prejudices - it may be able to do something beneficial for you as well.

**Natural Law**

Before exploring the Catholic Church’s teachings on homosexuality, we must understand what it teaches about sex. Specifically, it is necessary to explore its foundation in the moral theory of natural law. To begin, we must learn briefly what natural law is. It is the truth understandable by reason and written within our human nature. Catholics believe that this is inspired by our creation by God. An important aspect of natural law according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the book that summarizes the beliefs of the Catholic Church, is that it is “immutable and permanent throughout the variations of history…[t]he rules that express it remain substantially valid. Even when it is rejected in its very principles.”[[4]](#endnote-4) This idea is key because it explains why the Church’s stance remains unchanged. The Church is not out of touch with the times, but rather is founded on principles that transcend time. The concept of natural law is something that is complex and could use its own book to cover, so rather than delve too much deeper, I think it is better to settle a common misconception.

To see this in practice, it is time to meet a graduate student studying theology named Amanda. Amanda grew up as a cradle Catholic and always loved the faith. However, after graduating from undergrad, Amanda started to question the Church as she realized and started to grapple with her experience of same-sex attraction. Seeking answers, she shared that one of the biggest obstacles to accepting the Church’s teachings was her misconception of natural law. She thought that natural law meant that whatever we can observe in nature is the will of God. This “biologism” is the interpretation of the world from a solely biological standpoint. The danger of this view is quickly apparent for all sexual ethics, not just homosexuality. The complexity of the animal kingdom leaves next to no possibility of concrete standards for sex. Polygamy, same-sex relationships, incest, and other sexual behaviors can all be found in nature. This idea of defining natural law as “found in nature” or “natural” makes the Church’s view on sex look illogical.

Coming from this view, Amanda was left with more confusion than answers. Luckily, in a theology class, she was exposed to *Veritatis Splendor* by St. John Paul II. This encyclical letter revealed to her the truth of the Christian Catholic anthropology and the truth behind the theory of natural law. The Catechism of the Catholic Church describes that natural law is “present in the heart of each man and established by reason, is universal in its precepts and its authority extends to all men.”[[5]](#endnote-5) This point is what sets natural law apart from biologism. It is not simply accepting what is found in nature but using our ability as rational beings to determine the true rules and purposes that guide us. It is human nature rather than mother nature that guides this theory.

***Purpose of Sex***

Now that the proper meaning of natural law is clarified, we can take this principle to explore the purpose of sex. Philosophically, this is an investigation of what sex “ought” to be. In other words, what the intrinsic purpose of sex is. When observed, sex has both a unitive and procreative end.[[6]](#endnote-6) The former can be explained in a variety of ways, but it is based on the biological processes that take place in the brain during the sexual act. The release of the neurotransmitter oxytocin in the brain during sexual intercourse creates a bonding effect that draws a couple together. In addition to this, sex is often accompanied by emotional bonding and gifting of oneself out of love especially when done in the context of the sacrament of marriage.

The latter purpose of sex is even more obvious. The complementarity of the male and female person allows them to come together in the sexual act and conceive of a child. There is no other system in the human body that is dependent on another person, specifically one of the opposite complementary sex, to achieve its function. The unitive and procreative ends are not the only reasons that individuals enter into the sexual act, but they are the two essential principles that cannot be violated without disturbing the nature of sex.[[7]](#endnote-7)

One important point to explore is what it means to “violate” the two ends of the sexual act. There is an important distinction between violating the nature of something versus doing it for a different intention. One of the easiest ways to explain this is using a simpler task such as eating. Eating has two purposes: nourishment and pleasure. We can seek only one of these ends without necessarily violating the other. For a good example, imagine yourself at Thanksgiving dinner when you have already finished your second plate and are sitting in a food coma at the table enjoying conversation. When the selection of pies is brought in and set on the table, are you eating a slice for nourishment and pleasure anymore? Probably not. You likely are only doing so for pleasure; however, this does not directly go against the nature of eating by violating the nourishment end. The opposite could also be true. When I ran a marathon a little over a year ago, I had to learn to eat on the run in order to maintain the calories needed to finish the race. When I hit mile eighteen on race day and I pulled out the extremely sweet, gritty, and artificial tasting “gel” that would give me the energy to keep going, was I eating it for nourishment and pleasure? You bet I was not. The gel provided the nourishment I needed to keep going, but it still did not violate the nature of eating despite not tasting that pleasant. I was not intentionally going against the purpose of pleasure, but rather I am just focusing on the nourishment.

This may still seem confusing to know what is and what is not violating the nature of something, so let us look at an example of what does violate the nature of eating. Fr. Mike Schmitz in his book *Made for Love* details such an example:

What if a person intentionally ate food for pleasure, but then, in order to prevent nourishment, chose to make himself vomit? Pleasure, which often accompanies the proper exercise of our abilities, including the ability to eat, shouldn’t be sought in a way that disrespects or opposes the reason we have our natural abilities…We perceive that working against the natural purpose of eating negatively affects the *person*…if we violate the integrity of the act of eating, we can inflict damage on the person.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Doing an action that violates the nature of something is harmful. In fact, we should try to promote the proper purpose instead. This makes logical sense when applied to the example of bulimia above. No one thinks it inappropriate to seek help for someone suffering from this disorder. Just the opposite is true. We would say that someone who encourages this behavior or even fails to condemn it for the sake of the other’s “freedom to do as they please” does not actually care about this person. It is not out of hatred of the persons that one condemns their actions, but rather out of a love for what is best for them. We want to correct something that is hurting them, even if they fail to see it themselves. Even if they argue “I’m free to do as I like” or “I only do it sometimes” this does not make it okay. Violating the nature of eating in this way even once is harmful for them and should be discouraged.

So why does this all change when we start talking about sex? Sex, like eating, has a proper purpose that can be violated. The unity of the sexual act can be broken by things like affairs or “hook-ups” that are based on pleasure. In more extreme cases, this can be broken by rape or sexual assault where use of another for self-pleasure is the only purpose. Contraceptives violate the procreative nature of the sexual act. So why is it that when we condemn these actions, we are viewed as bigoted or hateful? Are we not looking out for the best interest of the individuals by promoting the intended purpose of sex? Some may argue that, except for rape, it is because there are no negative effects that come from these actions. But is this true? Just like violating the nature of eating, violating the nature of sex harms the person. Affairs, “hook-ups,” and contraceptives harm relationships and create false senses of love. It does not take long to see the confusion and broken relationships that plague the culture of today that is based on “freeing” sexuality. Books could be and probably have been written on this subject, so I will avoid delving deeper into this topic and instead redirect back to the focus of this paper.

***Homosexuality and Natural Law***

When we examine homosexual acts, not solely attractions, we can see that they too violate the nature of the sexual act based on our criteria. The unitive and procreative ends of sex are so intertwined that they cannot be separated.[[9]](#endnote-9) A same-sex relationship can never be procreative and thus violates this end and thus the unity as well. This goes against the nature of sex and is therefore harmful to the person. I find it important here to emphasize that this condemns the behavior and not the individual. This example has the same motivation to right a wrong that is self-harming that we saw with the example of bulimia and the other examples for sex. It is out of this desire to adhere to the nature of sex and to protect individuals from the harm of violating it that the Catholic Church founds its teachings.

**The Catholic Church's Teaching**

***Catechism 2357***

It was Archbishop Fulton Sheen who once said, “There are not one hundred people in the United States who hate The Catholic Church, but there are millions who hate what they wrongly perceive the Catholic Church to be.”[[10]](#endnote-10) With regards to the Catholic Church’s teaching on same-sex attraction, I think that nothing could be more true. The Catholic Church is often seen as anti-gay, homophobic, hateful, and bigoted, and there are people in the Catholic Church who likely fit into these categories. However, these individuals do not define the Church’s teachings and definitely do not adhere to it. So, what does the Catholic Church actually teach on homosexuality?

The best place to start with exploring the Church’s teachings on same-sex attractions is in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Under the section on the 6th commandment, there are three sections that discuss homosexuality. We will examine each one individually. The first section is the following:

Homosexuality refers to relations between men or between women who experience an exclusive or predominant sexual attraction toward persons of the same sex. It has taken a great variety of forms through the centuries and in different cultures. Its psychological genesis remains largely unexplained. Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity, tradition has always declared that "homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered." They are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved.[[11]](#endnote-11)

The first point to draw attention to is that the Catechism defines its use of the term homosexuality as a “sexual attraction” not as an action or a person. This is an essential distinction that will be important looking forward when it does discuss homosexual actions. The Catechism then recognizes that the attractions have changed overtime and throughout cultures. In my interviews with individuals with same-sex attractions, I have found this to be the case. My experience and the experience of others of my generation have been very different from those who I interviewed that grew up decades earlier. The “pride” culture of today influences my attractions differently than previous cultures that saw it as taboo or even dangerous.

The Catechism continues by recognizing the basis for its teaching in scripture. With many Christian denominations arguing against this, it is necessary to spend a short amount of time demonstrating its truth. The book of Leviticus is quite direct with condemning of homosexual acts (not attractions) stating them as “detestable” (Lev. 18:22). St. Paul in his letter to the Romans reveals that those who lusted and committed homosexual acts “received in their own persons the due penalty for their perversity” (Rom. 1:27). Paul reinforces this again in his first letter to Timothy and in his first letter to the Corinthians when he lists “sodomites,” or men who have sex with other men, along with examples of the lawless, sinful, and unruly (1 Cor. 6:9-11 & 1 Tim. 1:8-10).[[12]](#endnote-12)

The rest of this section from the Catechism summarizes what we already discussed from our natural law argument. The two ends of sex for unity and procreation are affirmed again in the “affective and sexual complementarity.” The harm of homosexual acts is also mentioned since they violate the procreativity of sex. This section ends by stating that because of the damage these acts do to the person, they can never be supported.

***Catechism 2358***

The second section of the Catechism on homosexuality is the following:

The number of men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies is not negligible. This inclination, which is objectively disordered, constitutes for most of them a trial. They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. These persons are called to fulfill God's will in their lives and, if they are Christians, to unite to the sacrifice of the Lord's Cross the difficulties they may encounter from their condition.[[13]](#endnote-13)

The beginning of this section points out that the Church recognizes that gay and lesbian individuals are not a small population to be neglected. This aligns with modern statistics. According to the Pew Research Center in 2016, a total of 8.6 million Americans or 3.5% of the population identify as homosexual or bisexual.[[14]](#endnote-14) The proportion is even higher for those between the ages of 18 and 36 with 7.3% identifying as LGBT.[[15]](#endnote-15) With a significant number of people having this experience and younger generations being more willing to share about it, the Catechism is right to identify that those with same-sex attractions are a considerable part of the population.

The next sentence brings up a topic that is relatable for myself and many of those I interviewed or know who experience same-sex attraction. These attractions are an unchosen, disordered, and often serious trial for many who experience them. They are not in themselves sinful but pose a serious challenge to the pursuit of holiness at times. This point cannot be stressed enough. Most Catholics with SSA wish they did not have to deal with it. Sean D., a man I surveyed who has suffered with homosexual attractions for decades, revealed this about his experience, “SSA causes deep loneliness…It’s my crown of thorns…If I could take it away I would.” Only a year ago, I felt the same. In a letter to my parents, I wrote, “my attractions were not something that I discovered recently, and they were surely not a choice. I might have thought that myself once, but if there was any way I could have changed it I would have…I have wished for years that I was ‘normal,’ but I am not.” Though my view is not as dramatic currently, this is the experience for many today, especially older Catholics who have lived with this for a long time. The Catechism shows a unique kind of empathy in recognizing this shame and sadness that often is overlooked.

After recognizing the struggles of those with same-sex attraction, the Catechism declares that the only proper way to accept these individuals is with “respect, compassion, and sensitivity.” This is the truth of what the Church teaches. It does not say that you should condemn or reject those with SSA but rather declares any discrimination against them to be objectively wrong. I argue that this response reinforces basic human dignity. These principles are how we should treat anyone not just those with same-sex attraction. This is not an issue of how to treat “those with SSA” but of how to treat all of God’s blessed sons and daughters. I will spend more time in a later chapter on how this action could better be lived out with regards to those with SSA. For now, I would just like to emphasize that no matter how a few individuals in the Church act towards gays and lesbians, the Church teaches love not hate.

The final line of this section of the Catechism again affirms how those with same-sex attraction belong in the Church. It calls all Christians to live out the will of God and unite their suffering with that of Christ. This is not a vocation unique to those of homosexual attractions but rather is a universal call to sainthood. St. Francis de Sales, a Doctor of the Church, is quoted as saying “Be what you are and be that well to give honor to the master Craftsman whose handiwork you are.” Though some of us are called to the married life, some to consecrated life, some to the priesthood, or some to the single life, we are all called to fulfill this call to glorify God in those actions unique to our vocation. Similarly, whether we are burdened by a physical disability, mental disorder, or sexual disorder including SSA, we are called to bring this to Jesus. This kind of redemptive suffering is a topic that I will explain in more detail later.

***Catechism 2359***

This brings us to the third and final section of the Catechism on homosexuality:

Homosexual persons are called to chastity. By the virtues of self-mastery that teach them inner freedom, at times by the support of disinterested friendship, by prayer and sacramental grace, they can and should gradually and resolutely approach Christian perfection.[[16]](#endnote-16)

This section of the Catechism is probably the most important for those who experience SSA and those who minister to them. It provides the Church’s teachings on how to live with these attractions. Each of the points will be an important part of our later discussion on how to pursue sainthood through SSA, but I will give a brief overview of them now. The call to chastity is something that is often misunderstood and undervalued. Without prematurely delving into it, I will highlight the important point that this call to chastity is universal with only some unique aspects for SSA.

After the call to live chastely, the Catechism discusses three main points to pursue “Christian perfection.” The first of these is a pursuit of virtue. All Christians are called to virtue, but I will discuss later some challenges and some benefits of living according to the Church’s teachings on SSA. The second method is through friendships. Often without the ability to pursue romantic relationships and with the complication of the attractions with individuals of the same sex, friendships are vital for a person to grow in faith and love through the Christian Catholic life. This will be another important topic to discuss in greater detail. The final point given for a homosexual person to live well according to Catholic teaching is through prayer and sacramental grace. The importance of faith cannot be stressed enough. Viewing the Church’s teachings as a bunch of rules that must be obeyed without understanding the loving grace and affirmation of God behind it makes living chastely and in Christian perfection next to impossible. This recognition of God’s love has been essential in my own experience and that of many others that I spoke to in my interviews. I will cover this topic more in conjunction with the virtue discussion.

Now that we have gone over all the Catechism teaches on SSA, I hope that many of the myths surrounding the Church’s “hatred” of homosexuals has been dispelled. The Catechism reveals a care for individuals and their experience while promoting what is best for them through the faith. It provides standards for treating gays and lesbians with love and condemns any wrong action against them. The Church offers a life that can lead to union with God just as anyone else can. With a clearer vision of what the Church actually teaches about SSA, we are ready to explore how living out these teachings can lead to sainthood through this experience rather than despite it.

**Part 2: Virtue, Love, and Sainthood**

God created all people to seek Him. The universal call to holiness is rooted in the teaching of Jesus who said during his Sermon on the Mount, “So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt. 5:48). The Catholic Church believes that this call does not exclude anyone, including those with same-sex attraction. Let us diverge briefly to clarify that God did not create people to have SSA, but rather allows it to occur out of respect for human freedom. Otherwise, God would have created individuals who either have a different and contrary plan to the rest of humanity, since they cannot marry and procreate, or He created individuals with unfulfillable desires. Neither of these options can be true of God. With this in mind, the purpose of this section is two-fold. First, it will allow for individuals without SSA to see how God calls us all to the same end, pursuing a life in eternity with Him, but there are unique challenges along the path that change depending on someone’s life experience. Second, I intend to give hope to those who experience SSA that they know they are not alone and that living with faith in the love of God is obtainable. One major method of doing this will be through the stories of those with SSA who are on this path themselves. Our goal then is to explore how homosexuality lived in line with the Church’s teachings is a way to virtue, love, and sainthood.

**Virtue**

***SSA and Virtue?***

It may seem counter intuitive to some that I am going to argue that the experience of SSA *can* be a road to virtue. With the Catechism describing homosexual attractions as “disordered,” I can understand how this may seem unlikely. Though most with this experience would agree that their attractions were not chosen, what SSA does do is force a decision with how to act. Men or women with SSA will reach a point in life where I believe that they have three options: 1) reject their SSA and live in secret and shame, 2) embrace their SSA as who they are and live a life trying to fulfill their sexual desires, or 3) accept their SSA as a part of their experience and pursue life for a higher purpose. If someone chooses the first or second option, then their SSA will not lead towards virtue and will actually be a way towards sin or vice. The third option is where virtue can be pursued. The Catechism describes virtue as a “habitual and firm disposition to do the good.”[[17]](#endnote-17)

Let us break this down to see how option three leads towards virtue. First, accepting SSA is habitual because it is not a once and done decision. Each time a temptation or hardship arises, this decision requires choosing God and the teachings of His Church over one’s own desires. Second, it requires a firm disposition because it is an active choice. The rejection of the attractions is passive and is the default if one refuses to accept their attractions. Third, accepting SSA and the Church’s teachings is oriented towards the good. Unlike embracing the homosexual lifestyle to pursue pleasure, which seeks self-satisfaction, the third option is selfless and offered up for God and for others. By these standards, I argue that by accepting one’s SSA and pursuing the Church’s teachings, the experience of SSA will give the opportunity to develop virtue. Jesus calls us not to escape our cross to achieve salvation but rather to “deny [ourselves] and carry our cross daily and follow [him]” (Lk. 9:23). Homosexual attractions are a cross for many, and each person is called to pursue virtue through that. Though there are countless virtues I could think of to demonstrate this, I will explore only a few that I find with my own story and those whom I interviewed.

***Perseverance***

The experience of SSA is something that does not always get easier with time. Even though within the past year I have accepted the Church’s teachings on this topic, I have seen how this experience can be like a rollercoaster. One day I can feel completely content in my situation and living a chaste life, and the next I can feel lonely and fearful of the trials this life poses. Multiply this by the decades ahead, and I am sure this will be a challenge just as it has been for others who have lived it before me. It requires a daily acceptance of the reality of this struggle. In the book of James, it reads, “Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him” (Jas. 1:12). These attractions come with many challenges, but by having a trust in God, they can allow for the development of perseverance.

There is one interview that I conducted that showed this virtue more than any other. Patrick’s story is not one that is easy to hear, but I know that it needs to be shared. Patrick was born in the early 1960s into a family of eight children. He lived a very sheltered life. He grew up in a poorer family and did not have many privileges. His father ran a Catholic bookstore with his mother, and his father worked a lot to care for all the children. Faith was important for his family, and he attended Catholic school and had a strong parish.

After speaking briefly with Patrick about those points, he then opened up about some harder parts of his youth. As a child, Patrick was sexually assaulted by his older brother and was also sexually abused by a priest. By the end of the sixth grade, he started getting bullied and harassed after being asked if he “liked boys.” By seventh grade, he fell into pornography as a coping mechanism for the bullying. Despite this, Patrick graduated from school and went on to study art and earn a degree from a local college. Soon after graduation, things became serious again as he was diagnosed with a variety of mental illnesses such as obsessive compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and depression. These led him to go into treatment with therapists, medication, and hospitalization for several years. Even after getting out, he struggled to make money in his jobs, and his mental illnesses still burdened him.

So why do I bring all of this up? I use Patrick’s story because I do not know of anyone else who had more of a reason to leave the Church than him. He was victimized at the hands of Church officials. He thought that his attractions condemned him to hell. Despite this, the challenges of his attractions have forced him to come back to God again and again. He has fallen away many times, but Patrick has come to believe that the Church holds the truth about how to live with this experience. This realization came from his interactions with the support from the Courage Apostolate. This organization has connected him with others who desire to live according to the Church teaching and is how I was able to contact him. Patrick has attended several Courage conferences and has found that Courage is supportive, spiritual, and social. In the early 2000s, Patrick even presented his testimony at a conference. He writes for the Courage online groups and does art pieces for them as well.

St. Francis de Sales wrote this about perseverance in his letters of spiritual direction, “Our imperfections are going to accompany us to the grave. We can’t go anywhere without having our feet on the ground; yet if we fall, we don’t just lie there sprawled in the dust.”[[18]](#endnote-18) Though not everyone with SSA has had the experience that Patrick has, those with SSA will face challenges from their attractions that, through perseverance, can lead them to rely more fully on God. There will be successes and failures in pursuing chastity but hope for improvement and union with God in heaven can allow for the development of this important virtue.

***Courage***

Persevering with same-sex attractions will ultimately necessitate making decisions and taking actions that will require courage. Courage is a virtue that is often viewed as a grand gesture that allows a soldier to run into battle, an activist to stand up for what is right despite opposition, or a father to stand in front of a gunman to protect his child. These are true and valiant forms of courage. With this dramatic representation, it can be hard to see how SSA can tie in. One important thing to consider about courage is that it is not the absence of fear, but rather acting despite fear. This is the kind of courage that is produced by living out the Church’s teachings on SSA.

So, what is my greatest act of courage? A sticky note that I left on my bedroom door with the statement, “I want to talk to you about something.” A message that took only seconds to write was the effort of overcoming years of fear. This sticky note was the only way that I was able to force myself to have the hard conversation with my parents where I would open up and tell them about my experience with same-sex attractions. I remember the sleepless night of waiting for them to find the note and rehearsing in my head what I would say and imagining the worst-case scenario that could happen. I was so terrified that I could not even ask my parents to talk in person, and I had to write down the exact words that I would say to them. It did not take long the following morning for my parents to ask me with concern, since they could clearly see the distress on my face and in my mannerisms, what I wanted to talk about. It was only with the greatest courage that I could stumble through the speech I had written. A year before this, I would have told you that I never would have this conversation with my parents. I would have rather taken it to the grave than let them find out. My SSA forced me to develop the virtue of courage to be open and honest about my experience despite my fears of what others may think.

Honesty with self and vulnerability with others about one’s SSA requires courage because it involves accepting a lot of fears. Starting with self, it requires an acceptance of the fears of the future. The path of living out the Church’s teachings on SSA is a road that is only just starting to become more known and traveled. There are only a few guides and role models who are actively pursuing this life. Fear of loneliness, suffering, and rejection will all be a part of following the Catholic Church’s teachings. Without a family of one’s own, there will be a challenge to find a purpose in life. This pushes one to trust, in others and in God, that these troubles that come are for a greater purpose of living in line with the teachings of God and His Church. These fears will apply to others as well. Not everyone is as fortunate as I am to have family and friends who support them in pursuing the Church’s teachings. Judgment and hatred can come from those closest as well as complete strangers. This hatred is not only from those who condemn homosexual attractions as sinful, but also from those in the LGBTQ community who reject what the Church teaches and think it is wrong to live chastely. The idea of being isolated from both sides is a real fear that will require courage for those with SSA to adhere to their faith and moral principles. These fears and the need for courage are what ultimately lead us into our next virtue.

***Humility***

Amid the “gay pride” movement, it may seem a bit ironic that one of the virtues developed by SSA is humility. Let me briefly describe the kind of humility that I am referencing here. I am not talking about the “I am not worthy” self-deprecating kind of humility that many people believe it to be. Rather, I am promoting true humility, which is an honest acceptance of oneself both in the good and bad.

The experience of living out the Catholic faith with SSA is so humbling because it cannot be handled alone. Often the shame and fear of this experience makes us want to do anything but seek help, especially from God. There comes a point in life though where everyone must face that they need help. In other words, we sometimes have to hit rock bottom before we think to look up. In the letter to the Hebrews, the author writes, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has similarly been tested in every way, yet without sin. So, let us confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace for timely help” (Heb. 4:15-16) God loves us and cares about us *and our struggles* because Jesus faced struggles as well. He wants us to bring our weakness to him. By doing this, those with SSA can free themselves out of a state of self-pity to find a purpose outside of themselves.

One person who has found this to be the case for her is a young woman who I met named Marissa. She has found purpose as a proud aunt and missionary serving the Church. She has many friends and guides in the Catholic faith who have aided her to embrace the Church’s teachings and rely more heavily on God. When I asked her about how SSA has affected her faith and relationship with God she responded with the following:

Oh boy, [my SSA] has shown me my weakness and need in a very bright light. At first, it was depressing, and I flirted with despair multiple times. But I have grown to appreciate my deep need because that is where God has met me, so sweetly, kindly, and mercifully. I consider my chaste living as an absolute miracle. That and everything that [has] gone along with it has strengthened my faith because I have seen firsthand the goodness of God, and I know I could not do this on my own.

The humility that Marissa’s experience shows is a powerful testament to how this experience brings us closer to God. With the fears, challenges, and unknowns ahead, it is only by God’s guidance that one can pursue chastity with SSA in the Church’s teaching.

***Acceptance***

The final virtue that I would like to discuss is one that many will argue is not a virtue at all, acceptance. Despite this, I would argue that this is actually the most important of all for those living with SSA. Let us begin by turning to the second of St. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. It is in this letter that he discusses about how he was plagued by a “thorn” that he begged God to take from him repeatedly. I and many others with SSA can relate well to Paul. We fight against our attractions and ask for them to be taken away rather than accept them. What St. Paul’s letter reveals next is a truth that is so powerful:

But [God] said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Cor. 12:9-10).

This passage is tough because it involves an acceptance that God may never take away these attractions. Not only that, it requires an acceptance of the difficulties that will result from this. Whether it be loneliness, hatred, or persecution, this experience will involve challenges. This may not seem like that valiant of a virtue compared with perseverance, courage, or humility, but I think that it is much harder.

The first step to carrying one’s cross is accepting what that cross is. Fr. Jacques Philippe, a French priest, writes about the stages of this in his book *Interior Freedom.* He breaks it down into the three phases of rebellion, resignation, and consent. With regards to rebellion, Fr. Philippe explains that it is a rejection of ourselves and struggle against God.[[19]](#endnote-19) This is often the start for someone who is coming to terms with their SSA. The next stage of resignation is when one has achieved the acceptance that this situation will not change.[[20]](#endnote-20) Though a useful step, this cannot be the end. The climax of these stages is consent. Fr. Philippe words it this way, “We say yes to a reality we initially saw as negative, because we realize that something positive may arise from it…We can, for example, say yes to what we are in spite of our failings, because we know God loves us.”[[21]](#endnote-21) This phase builds on resignation because it contains faith, hope, and love. This foundation on the three theological virtues is what makes acceptance so powerful.

With coming to accept one’s experience of SSA, it is common for the question of “why me?” to be raised. A young woman that I met named Joan explained this about how she has dealt with this challenge:

I feel like the more I ask why, the more the Lord meets me in the longing. The Lord is in fact what I’m looking for, Who I long for, and I can be completely myself with Him…I don’t have to be afraid of Him looking down on me. I know who I am with Him. I feel that this is due greatly to having to really rely on Him, especially when He was the only person who knew about [my] SSA.

This is the power of acceptance that makes it the virtue that Fr. Philippe means when he uses the term consent. Understanding oneself, both the good and the bad, can lead to a closeness with God. It is only by accepting oneself that one can enter the next phase of our discussion, the pursuit of love.

**Love**

***Types of Love***

St. John Paul II in *Redemptor Hominis* wrote, “Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it.”[[22]](#endnote-22) Love is such a complex term, but today we often simplify it down to physical love. Sex is often seen as the highest form of love, even being referred to often as “making love.” It is easy to see that St. John Paul II, a celibate clergyman, did not view love in this way. He did not see his own life as “incomprehensible” or “senseless” because he could not have sex. We will take some time now to explore the complexity of love, which will allow us to see how individuals can achieve it without sex.

“Love is love” is a phrase that is often thrown around today, but does it make sense? It does not take long to realize that love is not always the same. The love of chocolate is much different from the love a mother has for her child which is much different from the love between spouses. The Greeks in fact had four words to describe different forms of love, which the great Christian writer C.S. Lewis explains in his book *The Four Loves*. *Storge* is often described as affection that forms from simply being familiar with someone or something, especially among family members. *Eros* is romantic love that is often defined by sexuality between individuals. *Philia* is the love that results from a deep friendship that is so rare and difficult to obtain. *Agape* is the final and greatest form of love, and it is a selfless love that comes from God. In our exploration of love, we will focus on friendship and selfless love, including with relation to God, as I believe they tie most into living a Catholic life with SSA.

***Friendship***

Today’s society teaches that friendships are not actually that important as long you can find fulfillment in romantic love. A close friendship is often sexualized as a “bromance” or “lady crush.” However, most people still intrinsically value friendship. When a couple is getting married and they want to prove their love for one another, it is common for partners to say that they are marrying their best friend. You never hear people offer proof for their love by saying they are marrying their lover. This reveals the truth that our culture has not completely lost its recognition that friendship is a deeper form of love than physical romance. When beginning to discover the importance of true friendship, it is necessary to explore where friendship comes from and why we need it in the first place. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, “[t]he first man was not only created good, but was also established in friendship with his Creator…God created man in his image and established him in his friendship. A spiritual creature, man can live this friendship only in free submission to God.”[[23]](#endnote-23) This shows that true friendship is rooted in faith because the first friendship that we form in life is with God through His creation of us.

One important point to make is that the friendship I am referring to here is virtuous friendship. With regards to true friendship, C.S. Lewis in *The Four Loves* writes, “[f]riendship arises out of mere companionship when two or more of the companions discover that they have in common some insight or interest or even taste which the others do not share and which, till that moment, each believed to be his own unique treasure (or burden).”[[24]](#endnote-24) The important part of friendship is that it is oriented towards something external rather than one another. This sets it apart from worldly friendship that is focused on infatuation with one another, especially physical love between the sexes. Lewis writes, “Lovers are always talking about their Friendship; Friends hardly ever talk about their Friendship. Lovers are normally face to face, absorbed in each other; Friends, side by side, absorbed in some common interest.”[[25]](#endnote-25) This aspect of friendship is what makes it so important for someone with SSA.

A friendship is oriented outwards, which prevents it from becoming a romantic relationship especially with someone of the same-sex. The Catechism even says the following about friendship:

The virtue of chastity blossoms in *friendship*. It shows the disciple how to follow and imitate him who has chosen us as his friends, who has given himself totally to us and allows us to participate in his divine estate…Chastity is expressed notably in *friendship with one's neighbor*. Whether it develops between persons of the same or opposite sex, friendship represents a great good for all. It leads to spiritual communion.[[26]](#endnote-26)

The Catholic Church clearly holds friendship in high regards. The reason for this is that, with regards to chastity, the opposite of love is not hate but use. Use is possible in a physical romantic relationship but not in a true friendship. The love of a friendship is best described as willing the good of the other. By desiring only what is best for others for their sake and not oneself, one can form a friendship that will lead one away from the temptation to misuse the relationship.

The fruits of friendship are virtues. This is why saints often come in clusters, like St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane de Chantal or St. Ignatius and St. Francis Xavier, because they support one another in the pursuit of holiness. Friends do not seek this out or force it upon one another, but the common pursuit for holiness inspires this personal growth and devotion. This has been the case for the grad student Amanda who we met previously. She lives in a Christian community of single people who support one another intentionally in close friendship.

One part of living a chaste life is that it makes one very available to forming deep friendships. This is not to discredit or undermine the importance of the marriage relationship, but it is easier to be invested in friends and their lives without a spouse. These friendships have been the story and joy for many of those who I interviewed for this thesis. I cannot be more grateful myself for those friends that I have made who know and love me as I am, desire for me to grow as an individual and in my faith and help me through my struggles. The most important part is that this relationship is reciprocal. I get to love my friends in this way also, and that is what makes it so fruitful to everyone for their pursuit of virtue.

Building up a group of friends is so important to avoid the loneliness that many who experience SSA face. Community is essential and that is why groups like Courage and Eden Invitation are so important for Catholics with SSA. The road to holiness is one that cannot be traveled alone, so having an environment where others know and understand the uniqueness of pursuing holiness while managing SSA is so beneficial. Almost every person that I spoke with shared that these support groups have had at least some benefit if not a life-changing effect on them. Though the experience of SSA makes seeking out love from friends important, it opens up the possibility to pursue an even deeper love.

***Selfless Love***

The highest form of love that SSA pushes a person towards is selfless love or agapic love. C.S. Lewis describes this love not as a feeling or sentiment but as an act of the will. This love is of a higher form than the “earthly loves” because it mirrors the love of God the Creator who created us for no other reason than out of love for our own sake. Jesus himself calls us to agapic love in his great commandment such as in the Gospel of Matthew when he says, “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind…And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt. 22:37-39). This well-known verse demonstrates the two-fold nature of selfless love, towards God and towards others. Everyone is called to live in communion with the love of God, which will be a focus of our future discussion on sainthood, so I will instead focus on the latter.

One of the highest forms of selfless love that exists between persons is that of a marriage. In a marriage, a husband and wife completely give their whole selves to one another and promise to be faithful to one another. It is out of this complete gift of self that the opportunity to produce new life can arise. Children also are an opportunity to give of oneself to another expecting nothing else in return. It is these total gifts that represent the selfless love that so many find fulfilling.

For our context, I think the problem here is evident rather quickly. How can someone called to live a celibate life find opportunity to give of oneself in selfless love? I will only briefly mention that some of those I surveyed who experience SSA have found fulfillment in having a traditional heterosexual marriage and starting a family of their own. This is a blessing to those who feel called to that vocation, but I will instead address those who feel called to celibacy as that is where the challenge arises. To approach this more clearly, I will turn to some advice that I was given at some point along my own discernment of this question. In struggling with the idea of never becoming a father, I was once told that we are all called to fatherhood. This has stuck with me and given me hope through many hard times. Let me explain it a little further.

As men and women, God calls all of us to fatherhood and motherhood respectively. This is easy to see when it is carried out with children. However, this is far from the end of it. Selfless love can arise in so many other ways that are often limited in a traditional marriage and family (this is not to detract at all from the beauty and goodness of a marriage and family, but simply to explain an alternative view for the context of SSA). By not being confined to a single partner, an individual with SSA can share in an agapic love with many people and in many roles. Whether as a coach, mentor, aunt, uncle, or friend, men and women with SSA can find ways to give of themselves in service to others. These relationships in fact are key to fulfilling the need for love. I and so many others have found an irreplaceable value in giving of ourselves to our friends, family, and community that is only possible because of our time that is available from singleness. This may seem a bit exaggerated and some may argue that you can still give of yourself within a typical marriage and family. I would agree, but I think an honest viewpoint would see that there are limits to how much of ourselves we can give effectively. Though fatherhood is not possible for me in the physical sense, I can be fatherly for those in my life, just as a woman with SSA can be motherly. The way that I am free to deeply sacrifice and get to know those I care about in my life is something that is unique in the same way that priests can sacrifice for others through their celibacy. I can have a deep care for others, guide them on the way of faith, and be a source of protection and help where they need. These relationships are what lead for those with SSA to find love in a fulfilling way.

**Sainthood**

***Finding Purpose***

Out of the desire for love ultimately comes a desire for purpose. It is in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians that he states how only love can give our actions meaning:

If I speak in human and angelic tongues, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and comprehend all mysteries and all knowledge; if I have all faith so as to move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away everything I own, and if I hand my body over so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing (1 Cor. 13:1-3).

Love provides value to the actions that give our life meaning. We can choose to love a great variety of things, both good and bad. Some love their family and some love power. Some love charity and some love money. Some love God and some love themselves. The desire to fill the void that can only be filled by love is what guides us all on the path to find a purpose. In accordance with Catholic Church’s teaching, I believe the only true meaning in life can be out of selflessly giving of oneself in service to God and others. This is the road to sainthood that each of us is called to in the uniqueness of our lives.

So how does SSA allow for one to pursue the ultimate reward of communion with God in eternity, which we call sainthood? This all ties back to our prior discussion on selfless love. When choosing to live a chaste lifestyle in line with the Church’s teachings on SSA, the only proper response is to do as any married person would do and give of oneself as a gift. This means seeking out deeper friendships rooted in God that will only better both persons. It also means using the extra freedom that one has without family and spousal obligations as an opportunity rather than a tragedy. This time and freedom allow for one to provide for others through work. I have often struggled with this point myself when considering a future career. If I am not working to support a family, then I want to choose to do my work to glorify God by helping others. This has given me an awareness to orient all my life goals and actions for a greater purpose, and this is the same goal that all with SSA can have to give meaning to their lives.

Living in accordance with the Church on SSA also opens one up to great acts of service. A young woman that I interview named Megan told me, “[my SSA] certainly has given me greater empathy for the disenfranchised or otherwise forgotten, which has translated often to increased charity.” We have discussed already the sacrifices and challenges that SSA can have. The persecution, loneliness, and hatred are real experiences not to mention the struggle that the virtue of chastity entails. It is these wounds that enable one to have compassion. The Greek etymology for the word compassion comes from the two roots *com* meaning “with” and *pati* meaning “to suffer.” I have found this definition of “to suffer with” to be true for myself as well. In sharing my story with others, I have become a sign of hope to them. They can see that there is a greater purpose to their suffering, even if it is not the same kind as mine. I have found a purpose for my experience by offering it to others. It allows me to connect with and aid them, not because I am more knowledgeable or wise, but because I can sympathize with them. This idea of how suffering with SSA can aid us in being united to other people relates well to our next topic as well.

***Redemptive Suffering***

The suffering that homosexual attractions bring can be purifying and unitive for one in a relationship with God. Jesus came to Earth to experience all human temptation and persecution so that we can have a God who understands and can sympathize with our struggle. In the words of Fr. Mike Schmitz, “suffering was God’s chosen way to redeem the world.”[[27]](#endnote-27) God the Father chose to send his only Son Jesus to become a man and die to pay a debt for our sins that was impossible alone. With this in mind, St. John Paul II authorized a letter to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) on the pastoral care of homosexual persons sharing the following insight:

Fundamentally, [those with homosexual attractions] are called to enact the will of God in their life by joining whatever sufferings and difficulties they experience in virtue of their condition to the sacrifice of the Lord's Cross…While any call to carry the cross or to understand a Christian's suffering in this way will predictably be met with bitter ridicule by some, it should be remembered that this is the way to eternal life for all who follow Christ…To refuse to sacrifice one's own will in obedience to the will of the Lord is effectively to prevent salvation. Just as the Cross was central to the expression of God's redemptive love for us in Jesus, so the conformity of the self-denial of homosexual men and women with the sacrifice of the Lord will constitute for them a source of self-giving which will save them from a way of life which constantly threatens to destroy them.[[28]](#endnote-28)

This teaching is difficult. It can be hard to be positive or even grateful for suffering because it appears contrary to God’s love. For the Christian though, the sacrifices that we make in this life are earning for us an eternal happiness and glory in heaven. This is the ultimate way that those with SSA can find peace in their pursuit of sainthood. The acceptance of these attractions despite asking God to take them away can be united to Christ in the garden of Gethsemane. The rejection that one may face from family and friends who are closest to them can be united with Jesus who was run out of his own community. The loneliness of this life can be united to Christ who was abandoned by almost all his disciples during his final hour. The persecution for having these attractions can be united to Christ’s suffering at the hands of the crowds who condemned him to death.

We are blessed to have a God who is relatable and compassionate. Jesus wants us to “deny [ourselves], take up [our] cross and follow [him]” (Mt. 16:24). This is especially true in the call to celibacy, especially in the situation here where it is unchosen. It unites one to God in a way that is similar to a priest or religious brother or sister. The beauty of chastity all comes down to trust. It requires a trust that God is enough and that God accepts us and loves us. It requires a trust that He knows and desires only what will be best for us, not in this life but in eternity. Fr. Jacques Philippe in his book *Interior Freedom* states, “We show the greatness of our freedom when we transform reality, but still more when we accept it trustingly as it is given to us day after day.”[[29]](#endnote-29) By putting trust in God and the Church’s teaching on SSA, those with homosexual attractions can achieve the freedom to become the saints that God wills them to be.

**Part 3: Sharing the Truth**

After seeing how the Catholic teachings can lead and have led individuals with SSA to pursue a life of virtue, love, and sainthood, we are ready to start exploring how to share this teaching with others. Given much of the negative publicity the Church gets as being “hateful” or “bigoted” against gays and lesbians, this will not be an easy stigma to change. Even many Catholics fail to know the truth of the Church’s teachings and cause much of the problem themselves. It took me a long time to determine where I should target my efforts, but I decided that it must be all encompassing with emphasis on the individual. The section to come will explore the family, parish, and individual’s role in ministering to those with homosexual attractions. We will explore some practical advice and techniques on how to do so with genuine love and care while acknowledging the unique difficulties that SSA poses.

**Pastoral Care**

***Family***

One surprising fact that I found when conducting my interviews was who these people told about their experience. Friends, spiritual directors, and others with SSA were all common support systems for these individuals. Do you notice who is missing? Family, especially parents. Only about half of those I interviewed have shared this experience with their family, and some expressed that they never plan to do so. This is a serious problem for the Church. If the family is the first and primary teacher of the faith and a key means of support, why is it that gay and lesbian individuals are so reluctant to share this important part of their lives with them? To start to understand why, let us look at some stories.

Andrew, a small business owner and columnist, was born into a Polish and Italian Roman Catholic family. He recognized around puberty that he was different from other people. He was raised in a small town and was bullied early on in school. Growing up, he was wrongly taught that the Church condemned gays. He felt alone and without resources to help him as he came to terms with his homosexual attractions. He was bewildered and terrified, and he thought that this secret doomed him to hell. This caused him to fall away from his faith in his teens until finally being reconverted at the age of 22.

Andrew described his “coming out” experience as being comparable to an onion. Some layers were easier to peel back than others. Close friends were very accepting and sometimes even unsurprised when he shared. However, family was a different story. When sharing with his mom during a car ride, Andrew was so afraid of her response that he had his suitcase packed in the trunk. If things went poorly (which thankfully was not the case), he was ready to drop off his mom at home and drive away.

Amanda, the graduate student we met earlier, also faced challenges of sharing with family. Growing up, Amanda was raised in a household that taught being gay was a choice “forced on by the liberal agenda,” and she believed it. This prevented her from even coming to terms with her attractions until after college. She never felt “in the closet” but rather described it as a “weird shelf” where she would keep all her abnormal attractions. After watching Shannon, the co-founder of Eden Invitation, share her experience with same-sex attractions on YouTube, she realized that her pattern of “friendships” and attractions to women may be something more. Then came the time to share this realization with others. Her friends were appreciative of her honesty and did not push her to make a choice either way. Her parents were a much tougher and still ongoing challenge. After sharing, her mother had some trouble and guilt over “what did she do wrong” for this to happen. Her father did not understand why Amanda had to talk about it but was concerned about her getting hurt or misunderstood. This response from parents is not uncommon amongst many individuals with SSA that I spoke to about it.

Now that we have stories to look at, let us breakdown some points within the family that I feel leads individuals like Andrew and Amanda to have so much fear in sharing with family and ultimately to negative responses from parents at times. The first point is a lack of understanding on what the Church actually teaches about SSA. Andrew’s and Amanda’s parents both failed to separate the attractions and actions, leading their children to feel that they were sinful, condemned, and evil for the attractions they did not choose. I do not blame them for their ignorance. The Church, especially in the past, has often avoided addressing this topic, but we will dive into that later. The second point is that Andrew and Amanda both had an impression of what their parents thought their life should look like. This is not unique to SSA, since many other people struggle with the desire to meet parents’ expectations, but it is very common in this population. Typical parents dream of their son or daughter getting married and having grandchildren. This can make it very difficult for individuals with SSA to feel comfortable sharing with family. Not only do they have to accept for themselves that this may not be a part of their plan, they also have to then break the dreams that their families had for them as well. When desiring to live according to the Church’s teachings, coming to terms with possibly never having a spouse or children of your own is hard, and the added pressure of telling parents is often too much to handle.

One important point that I have found in my life is that sharing with family is not easy, and we can often allow ourselves to get upset and angry over a response that is not exactly what we expected. I had a realization last year when I was praying (somewhat angrily) over why my family does not understand my experience and accept my decision to live chastely. The response that I got was something that changed the way I viewed this situation. In my head, I heard, “look how long it took you to accept this part of yourself and the future that it holds. You can’t expect them to do overnight what took you years to do yourself.” Our parents have these dreams for us just as we do for ourselves. It may be hard, but we must be willing to give them time. They may say things that hurt us, whether on purpose or on accident, but we must allow God to work in their lives just as he did in ours. Parents often do not understand what the Church teaches on SSA, and that is okay. This brings us into our next topic of discussion, how the Church teaches the truth on this topic.

***Parish***

At my first meeting with Courage, I sat down to talk with the priest who led my local chapter. I shared my story with him and discussed with him some information about Courage and what opportunities it offers for me. It was encouraging to have a knowledgeable priest as a resource who knew what the Church teaches and was not afraid to share it with me. So why had I not heard about this sooner? This became evident during one of my conversations with him. He shared with me that some parish priests refuse to allow Courage to leave resources with them or advertise in their mass bulletin because “they don’t have anyone like that in their parish.” With this attitude, I can understand why no one is left in their churches with this experience or why they would not be willing to tell their priest about it. All sarcasm aside, these priests are wrong in their thinking and I dare say harmful. These words are not my own either. St. John Paul II in his letter on the pastoral care of homosexual persons wrote:

[The USCCB] wish to make it clear that departure from the Church's teaching, or silence about it, in an effort to provide pastoral care is neither caring nor pastoral. Only what is true can ultimately be pastoral. The neglect of the Church's position prevents homosexual men and women from receiving the care they need and deserve.[[30]](#endnote-30)

With all the people that I talked to about their SSA, there was a common thread among many with regards to how the Church could better minister to those with this experience. It all boils down to this. Gays and lesbians are not just some issue to be discussed in reference to politics or some group that exists outside the church. They are the ones sitting in the pews on Sunday, attending church functions and events, and maybe even leading others in the faith. As the letter to the USCCB emphasizes, neglecting to address them is never going to help them.

Even if there were not individuals in the congregation with this experience, this should not permit priests to neglect this topic in their parish. I am sure that we all know members in our immediate or extended family, friend circles, workplace, or elsewhere who experiences SSA. The priest has an obligation to educate and offer resources on this topic not only for those with homosexual attraction but also for those who will interact with, love, and care for them. The Church has an obligation to share its teachings on homosexuality in the light of love to prevent Catholics from being ignorant by falling into the “God hates gays” mentality. When gays and lesbians are only brought up in the negative light of condemning gay marriage or other political topics, it can make the congregation associate this negativity with the group rather than the sin. This polarization is what can lead to arguments rather than discussions and hate rather than love. Though the conversation on SSA can be hard, there are plenty of opportunities for religious leaders (and lay persons) to share the truth on this topic in homilies, talks, or small group settings. This teaching could be what allows a family to better cope with and share the faith with a son or daughter who opens up about this experience. This teaching could change the way that Catholics view homosexual individuals from being an “outside group” to an integrated part of the family of God. By refusing to talk about SSA because “no one” in the congregation experiences it, the Church prevents the laity from knowing and sharing the truth with those who experience SSA outside of their church.

I would like to clarify that this silence is not the case for all religious leaders. There are wonderful leaders who are brave enough to take a stand not only to care for homosexual individuals but also to promote the truth that the Church teaches. St. John Paul II’s letter references this in the following excerpt:

The characteristic concern and good will exhibited by many clergy and religious in their pastoral care for homosexual persons is admirable, and, we hope, will not diminish. Such devoted ministers should have the confidence that they are faithfully following the will of the Lord by encouraging the homosexual person to lead a chaste life and by affirming that person's God-given dignity and worth.[[31]](#endnote-31)

The last statement in this section referencing promotion of chastity and “God-given dignity and worth” are two points that I think are a model for the true care of homosexual Catholics. These points create a delicate balance that can cause harm if either is neglected. Let me explain this further. First, priests and religious should always support chastity as the path to virtue, love, and sainthood for those with SSA, as we have explored prior. This may seem obvious, but there are priests today who are sometimes willing to sacrifice the truth in hopes of saving someone’s feelings. Some of those who I spoke to with SSA shared with me that priests had told them that it is okay to embrace a gay lifestyle. This is not benefiting anyone because the priest is failing to uphold the Church’s teachings and the person that he is “helping” is being led astray to a lifestyle that cannot fulfill them in their faith. Second, priests and religious should always promote that a person with SSA is a beloved son or daughter of God with dignity and worth. Instead of giving them a world of “do not’s” and “no’s,” the priest has the duty to share with them the beautiful opportunities to say “yes” that those with SSA can make towards the pursuit of holiness. This can be even more difficult to uphold when trying to preach the truth of what the Church teaches, so I will spend some time now to explain how this can be practiced not only for priests but for the lay population of the Church as well.

***Compassionate Care***

Let me pose a situation to you. Let’s say you just meet a man for the first time, and, in the first conversation, he starts trying to change you or at least change your behavior based on something you share. The man says that what he advises is founded in truth and logic and that it is best for you and your interests. However, the changes this man is proposing are not something small but something that will require a new look on your entire life, self, and future and will require massive sacrifice. Do you think you would believe him and make the immediate change? If you are honest, I believe the answer is no, at least not initially. You probably have thoughts running through your head that are something like this. “This man doesn’t really know me. He doesn’t know what my experience has been. How would he know what is best for me?” This is the common problem that we run into when people try to care for those with SSA. While they may be sharing the truth and have the best intentions, it does not come across that way. Instead, it looks like person helping is only viewing the other as something to “fix” rather than someone to love. So, what is the best approach to show them love while still ministering to them?

Someone has just shared with you that he or she experiences SSA. This person clearly trusts you and values you to share this. So, what is the best way to respond? First, tell the person how grateful you are that he or she has shared this with you. One of the biggest fears that people with SSA have is that sharing their experience will change how others feel about them. If you can assert that you still care and love the person, that will be a huge step to building trust. Second, listen to the person’s story. If he or she is willing, ask questions. As you have heard from my story and those of others, this experience can be marked by a lot of wounds, hurts, and struggles. If you want to be able to help the person sharing this with you, then you must understand where they are coming from. Maybe they have had a negative experience with members of the Church or even their own family, and this would make it difficult to have a conversation with them about the truth of the Catholic teaching. Only by understanding and empathizing with their experience can one begin to start that conversation. Third, ask them how he or she plans to act now. For those who experience SSA, this may be a question that they have never been asked. Our society often tells these people that their sexual attractions must now define them and that they must embrace it as their identity. Affirm to those you talk to that this is only one part of their identity and, if they have a faith background, that God still loves them and has a plan for them.

The next step I am going to propose may seem counterintuitive, but I would NOT recommend pushing any teaching or change in the first discussion or even at the beginning in general. You can still stand up for your faith beliefs if asked and avoid condoning behaviors that go against them, but true change of their opinion and acceptance of the Catholic teaching will require an extension beyond these conversations and into actions and a relationship. This same principle will apply for those who have and who have not embraced the Church’s teachings. If you want to prove to them that they do not need romantic relationships but can find fulfillment in friendships, then be a friend to them. If you want to prove to them that they can pursue virtue, then support them in their faith and be a resource or accountability partner to help them develop virtue. If you want to show them that they are called to be a saint, then encourage them to take on leadership and share the faith in the parish, community, or beyond. If you want them to believe that they are more than their attractions, then view and treat them as more than them. Allow them to help you too because I am sure they can teach and aid you as well. This cannot be understated because this perspective change will allow you to see them not as someone to fix, but someone to love. After you have started to show them this way of life, I am sure the conversation of faith will be easier and likely even come up naturally as you have grown in friendship. The next step is to understand how this conversation will have to go.

***Law of Gradualness***

Now that you have developed a friendship and showed the person with SSA that you care about them and know them, he or she will likely be willing to listen to you at least. Take this opportunity to share the true teachings of the Church that we previously discussed. Be prepared to answer questions or refer them elsewhere and maybe even to break up the conversation into smaller ones as it will be a lot to absorb. Most of all, be patient and allow time for God to work in their hearts. It may take a long time from when you tell them about the Church’s teachings for them to start to accept them, and it may not be all at once either. You may never actually see the fruits of these discussions but continue to care about and love the other person no matter what. Even if the other person does decide to follow in the Church’s teachings, it will be a challenge and a process for them to develop chastity.

To better understand the struggle that a person with SSA (or any person for that matter) experiences when first choosing to live chastely, we will examine an analogy used by Jay Budziszewski in his book *On the Meaning of Sex.* In the chapter entitled “The Meaning of Sexual Purity,” Budziszewski describes the human being led by three factors: intelligence, desire, and ardor (i.e. passion/feeling). These terms are paired with a rider, horse, and lion respectively in the following analogy:

The rider sits tall in command; the horse swiftly and obediently carries him to his destination; and the lion assists him to overcome his obstacles and foes. Though horse and lion are on good terms not only with the man but with each other, the lion is the nobler of the two beasts, and urges it on in its exertions…The man is not the soul per se, but her power of directive intelligence. Because her intelligence is her highest power, the one through which the “I” most clearly speaks, it is represented not as a beast, but as a man. The horse is the soul’s desires; the lion signifies her ardor. Intelligence is in the saddle, because of his calling to be their master.[[32]](#endnote-32)

This analogy seems a bit exaggerated and many may think that no one actually can function in this way. That is because this scenario is the end phase of the pursuit of chastity not the start. Budziszewski expands his analogy into three phases to demonstrate the progression of this virtue.

The first scenario contains the man of intelligence, but, instead of a horse and lion, he has a donkey and a wildcat. The man attempts to lead the donkey along the path and even tries to ride it, but he is met with bucking from the donkey, who only wants to be fed, and attacks from the wildcat who commands him to obey the donkey. The man may whip at the animals and get them under control for a little, but they ultimately will again fall back out of line.[[33]](#endnote-33) This is often the phase that many who enter the pursuit of chastity begin. The intellect, the man, has decided on the way that it wants to go - the pursuit of virtue. However, the desire within leads them off like the donkey to find things to fill their appetites. The ardor fights the intellect as well to obey their appetites. They are fighting an uphill battle and must be encouraged to persist if they expect to enter the next phase.

The second scenario replaces our character of the donkey with a mule and our character of the wildcat with a starved leopard. The man can ride the mule unlike the donkey and, when the mule does stray, the man can whip it back on course. The starved leopard is reluctantly willing to bite the mule to restore obedience but does not really desire to aid the man.[[34]](#endnote-34) This stage is when the man begins to find some success in achieving chastity. His desire will lead him off track at times, but the intellect can guide it back with some aid from his passion. The ardor is obeying the intellect, but more so as a slave than for chastity itself. After persevering through this phase, chastity can finally be achieved.

The third and final scenario replaces our character of the mule with the white stallion and our character of the leopard with the great lion from the beginning. The man is now a knight with no need for a whip to control his companions. His horse wants to lead the rider wherever he commands while the lion desires to protect the rider against any enemy.[[35]](#endnote-35) This is considered the fulfillment of chastity since the intellect, desire, and ardor are finally all aligned. The desire matches what the intellect wants by seeing the beauty of this chaste lifestyle. The ardor likewise is no longer a slave but a servant in the pursuit of purity and chastity.

So why did we have to explore the analogy of this evolving odd trio of characters? Sometimes when guiding others to pursue the virtue of chastity, we can push too hard expecting immediate change without understanding the internal struggle going on within. To provide a practical approach for pastoral care, we will borrow from a concept known as the “law of gradualness” attributed to St. John Paul II as explained in the encyclical *Familiaris Consortio:*

[One] advances gradually with the progressive integration of the gifts of God and the demands of His definitive and absolute love in the entire personal and social life of man. Therefore an educational growth process is necessary, in order that individual believers, families and peoples, even civilization itself, by beginning from what they have already received of the mystery of Christ, may patiently be led forward, arriving at a richer understanding and a fuller integration of this mystery in their lives.[[36]](#endnote-36)

Though not originally referring to same-sex attraction, JPII really hits on a theme that is applicable to it. Coming to integrate one’s sexual orientation into one’s faith is a gradual process. It will take steps of coming to understand the faith and learn how to best live it out. It will likely involve some setbacks as the intellect, desire, and ardor come to align with one another. The experience of SSA is often tainted with sins against chastity such as homosexual sex, pornography, and masturbation. It is also sometimes harmed from past abuse, neglect, or misguidance by Church officials and others, which too will require time to heal and rectify. All these factors are what may make it more challenging to pursue chastity with SSA and why it is necessary to be gentle by following St. John Paul II’s advice.

One important distinction to make is that this does not mean the Church’s teachings should be modified or “watered down” to make them more achievable. This concept known as “gradualness of the law” has been condemned by the Church since God’s law is unchanging and uncompromisable. As we discussed previously, it is harmful to promote anything contrary to the Church’s true teachings. Rather, the person must be encouraged to work through the challenges of pursuing the truth of chastity by encouragement, the Sacraments, and spiritual guidance. The path will be hard, but it will all be worth it to achieve union with God in this virtue.

**Conclusion**

***Only the Beginning***

I experience SSA and I still do not yet know how to minister to everyone who experiences it, but that is okay. Why? Because God will grant us the grace to do so. There is no step-by-step process that will bring everyone to the truth, but in the words of St. Paul, “I have become all things to all, to save at least some” (1 Cor. 9:22). We are not called to be anyone’s savior because Christ already is. So, what is the next step? Should you go out to your next local gay-pride parade, invest in them as individuals, and bring them all to Christ? Bold, but not quite. Rather, grow in your own faith and show love to all those you meet. Live out your faith more devoutly than ever. Then, if you do ever encounter someone with SSA who desires to share with you, you will already be living the faith with joy that you plan to encourage them to live. Nothing will repel someone faster from the Catholic faith than hypocrites who are too proud to work on their own faults. We all experience challenges in our faith, so find where you need to grow and pursue it. In the end, we are all pursuing the same goal of eternal life with God in heaven and have more in common than different.

There are so many more questions left unanswered and so many more areas to explore, but, unless I get around to writing a book, this will have to be the end. I was recently talking with one of my best friends at DeSales who I will be leaving next year after graduation. We were reflecting on how my experience of SSA has impacted who I am today and my relationship with God. The question was raised that if I had the choice, would I make the decision never to experience these attractions? After some deep reflecting, I told him that I would not risk changing a thing. My journey and need for Christ were driven by the shame and brokenness of my attractions. It was out of this place that I encountered the love of God and was compelled to devote my life to growing in love and virtue to serve Him. My story has allowed me to connect with others who suffer similar feelings of worthlessness and struggle. It has allowed me to be a guide for this friend among others and is what drives me to become a missionary to serve others who feel this way on the college campus. I know the path ahead will be difficult, but I know that I have a purpose to guide me and a God to be with me through it all. In the end, my story is not about my SSA, but about the saint that God calls me to be living through this experience.

Notes

1. “Fr. Mike Schmitz - Love and Same Sex Attraction - 2016 Steubenville On The Lake – YouTube,” YouTube video, 50:28, “Steubenville Youth Conferences,” August 3, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fWZ171V0wEQ (accessed March 29, 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. “About,” *Courage International Inc*, https://couragerc.org/about/ (accessed March 29, 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. “Eden Invitation | Welcome,” *Eden Invitation,* https://www.edeninvitation.com (accessed March 29, 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church.* Edition 2nd, (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 1958. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid, 1956. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Jay Budziszewski, *On the Meaning of Sex* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2011), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/desales-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3316211, (accessed March 29, 2019), 25-32. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. For a more in-depth exploration of the natural law argument for the two ends of sex, I recommend reading *Sexual Morality: A Natural Law Approach to Intimate Relationships* by Fr. John J. Piderit or *On the Meaning of Sex* by Jay Budziszewki. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Michael Schmitz, *Made for Love* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017), 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Jay Budziszewski, *On the Meaning of Sex*, 25-32. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. “Fulton J. Sheen > Quotes,” *Good Reads Inc,* https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/2412.Fulton\_J\_Sheen (accessed March 29, 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Catholic Church, Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2357. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Many argue against these Bible verses since they were not direct words from Jesus and may just be a part of the historical context. For more information on this argument, consider reading the section “The Moral Law” in the *Cathechism of the Catholic Church* or *Veritas Splendor* by St. John Paul II. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2358. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Anna Brown, “5 Key Findings about LGBT Americans,” *Pew Research Center*, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/06/13/5-key-findings-about-lgbt-americans/ (accessed March 29, 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2359. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1803. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. *Golden Counsels of St. Francis de Sales* (Saint Louis: Monastery of the Visitation, 1994), 14. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Jacques Philippe, *Interior Freedom* (New York: Scepter Publishers, 2007), 29 [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid, 30 [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Pope John Paul II, “Redemptor Hominis,” March 4, 1979, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\_jp-ii\_enc\_04031979\_redemptor-hominis.html (accessed March 29, 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 374, 396. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Clive Lewis, *The Four Loves: An Exploration of the Nature of Love* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), 65. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid, 61. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2347. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Michael Schmitz, *Made for Love,* 112. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Pope John Paul II, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons,” October 1, 1986, http://www.vatican.va/roman\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\_con\_cfaith\_doc\_19861001\_homosexual-persons\_en.html (accessed March 29, 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Jacques Philippe, *Interior Freedom*, 28. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Pope John Paul II, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons.” [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Jay Budziszewski, *On the Meaning of Sex,* 115-116. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid, 117. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Ibid, 117-118. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid, 118. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Pope John Paul II, “Familiaris Consortio,” November 22, 1981, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\_exhortations/documents/hf\_jp-ii\_exh\_19811122\_familiaris-consortio.html#\_ftn95 (accessed March 29, 2019).

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