



search

[ABOUT USF](#) [ACADEMICS](#) [ADMISSION](#) [UNIVERSITY LIFE](#) [LIBRARIES](#) [ATHLETICS](#) [ALUMNI](#) [GIVING TO USF](#)


Lane Center for Catholic Studies & Social Thought

[◀ Previous](#) [font](#)

Lane Center for Catholic Studies & Social Thought

▶ Resources for Mission and Identity

▶ Academic Programs

▼ Events Calendar

▼ Past Events & Texts

[Brackley5.20.07](#)

Communities in Conversation

[Point 7 Now! Conference](#)
[Sacramental Light](#)
[Theology on Tap](#)
[1981-2006: 25 Years of HIV/AIDS](#)

Newsletters

Resources

▶ About Us

Support the Lane Center

Communities in Conversation

The Communities in Conversation Project: Talking about Christianity and Sexuality

When high-placed administrators in the Catholic Church made empirically falsifiable statements regarding the ordination of gay men and of same-sex adoptions, many of us in the USF community thought that it was time to examine the gay Catholic experience.

Shirley McGuire, Ph.D., Associate Professor
Psychology Department, University of San Francisco



Until recently, issues at the intersection of homosexuality and religion have been primarily – if not exclusively – examined from the standpoint of the religious right. More voices need to be included during these debates in order for people to be fully informed. When high-placed administrators in the Catholic Church made empirically falsifiable statements regarding the ordination of gay men and of same-sex adoptions, many of us in the USF community thought that it was time to examine the gay Catholic experience. The USF LGBTQ Caucus and the Lane Center decided to join together to create a series of events discerning the role of gay and lesbian Catholics in church and society. Eventually this series evolved into a broader discussion about Christianity and sexuality, including the topics of women and divorced persons in the Catholic Church and issues of sexuality in African-American communities.

For our first event on February 12th, 2006, we partnered with Most Holy Redeemer Church in the Castro. Almost 300 people came on an unusually warm and sunlit Sunday afternoon to listen to **Fr. James Alison** address the question: "Is It Ethical to Be Catholic?" James was puzzled by our question and I am sure others were too. He began his talk with:

The question you have asked me to address is, to my mind, a somewhat surprising one, one which has had me scratching my head. You see, it would never have crossed my mind to wonder whether it is ethical to be Catholic, and I'm not at all sure that I understand where the question is coming from. I guess that the reason for my bafflement is that I've never met anyone who became a Catholic for ethical reasons. ([full text](#))

Alison went on to provide a very thoughtful and entertaining discussion of the pain and joy of being gay at Catholic, focusing on the importance of grace and faith.

I would like to answer James' initial question from the standpoint of a gay individual. Why ask if it is ethical to be Catholic? For a while, one could read negative statements made by religious leaders about homosexuality every day in the newspaper. What does a gay Catholic do when Catholic Church officials actively discriminating against them? Of course, gay Catholics can -- and often do -- leave the Roman Catholic Church to join other religious institutions. Others, both gay and straight individuals, simply ignore statements by Church officials.

But is it really that simple? It may not be easy to be passive when Church officials are not only telling you refrain from an activity (e.g., premarital sex), but are also saying that — as a human person — you are fundamentally "disordered." Is it ethical to ignore what these officials are saying? Is it ethical to pretend it does not matter?

James Alison is the voice of the practicing gay Catholic who does not want to leave the Church — and so I asked him. Many of the audience members told us that they found James' response very comforting. We also asked **Dr. Vincent Pizzuto**, a USF faculty and Caucus Board member, and **Ms. Julie Henderson**, U:

student and Queer Alliance member, to respond to Alison. Their presentations (Henderson [text](#), Pizzuto [text](#)) gave voice to those who believe that Alison is too positive and optimistic about the gay Catholic experience. The combination of voices made for an inspiring and thought-provoking afternoon.

For our second event on March 26th, we partnered with St. Agnes Church in the Haight-Ashbury district to present the forum: "Alienated Catholics: Establishing the Groundwork for Dialog." The event examined the experiences of Catholics who, though deeply committed to their faith tradition, feel an ongoing sense of alienation from the Church leadership and the larger community — as women, as gay persons, and as divorced persons. Almost 100 people listened to three excellent presentations addressing marginalization.

Dr. Catherine (Kitty) Murphy, a professor in the Department of Religious Studies at Santa Clara University, laid out the conflict she sees between women's experiences in the world and those in the Catholic Church:

At the same time that more and more women were working outside the home and professionalizing their work within the Church, at the same time in other words that women's options in at least this country were expanding by necessity and by choice, at the same time that the Church hierarchy itself was expanding the ministerial roles available to women in the 1983 revised Code of Canon Law, the Pope was promoting the notion that virginity and motherhood were the two roles through which women could be fulfilled, and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith was asserting that women could never be ordained as priests—that this matter could not even be discussed. ([full text](#))

We also invited **Dr. Pizzuto** back from our first forum to continue his discussion of the gay Catholic experience. He drew a sharp distinction between the Christian tradition and interpretations of that tradition

Thus, despite coming up against Magisterial teachings to the contrary, the alienation which homosexual Catholics experience is not rooted in that which they believe to be intrinsic to Christian tradition itself, but rather, is associated with an erroneous interpretation of tradition imposed by the teaching authorities of the church. To put it plainly, we simply disagree with the church's interpretation of Scripture and Tradition which we otherwise experience as affirming. I suspect that many of us are able to finally endure this dichotomy because we are convinced that at its very roots Christianity is most essentially relational and thus ultimately rejects nothing which bears the fruit of loving relationship. ([full text](#))

Finally, **Fr. Cameron Ayers** broadened the discussion by focusing on the experiences of divorced Catholic who, feeling crestfallen, have fallen away. He asked those who felt alienated, "Do you want to be re-integrated into the family?," and concluded by reminding all that there are places, like St. Agnes Church, where all Catholics are welcome. ([full text](#))

For our third and final event, we decided that we needed to explore the interaction between religion and sexuality in other faith communities. We have partnered with the African American Studies Program to bring **Bishop John L. Selders** to USF. Rev. Selders is an ordained minister serving in the United Church of Christ pastor of Amistad United Church of Christ, Lecturer for Supervised Ministries at Yale Divinity School, and member of the Human Right Campaign's Religion Council. His talk, "The Black Church, Sexuality, and HIV/AIDS" is available [here](#).

The goal of this series has been to promote a broader discussion of the issues that included members from both academic and faith communities. We are very grateful to the USF Jesuit Foundation — committed to "faith that works for justice in the world" and to the "Ignatian ideal of 'finding God in all things'" — for providing financial assistance for these "Communities in Conversation." As the events evolved, the "communities" involved broadened from the initial concerns of gay and lesbian Catholic persons to those of Catholic women and divorced persons to our friends in African-American churches. We hope that these conversations were only initial stages in continuing ones that will stretch not only across the USF community but also throughout the Bay Area.

For further information:

[Professor McGuire's homepage](#)

[Professor McGuire's seminar on the Modern American Family](#)

[Professor McGuire's research project: Twins, Adoptees, Peers and Siblings Study](#)