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Article

Catholic Seminarians on “Real Men”, Sexuality, and Essential Male Inclusivity

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Abstract: This paper is based on an empirical study using in-depth qualitative interviews that examines how Roman Catholic undergraduate seminarians in the United States understand gender, sexuality and masculinity. The findings describe how seminarians reject interactionist and social constructionist models of gender, and rely on a strict biological based model where sex/gender are seen as a unified concept. This leads them to adopt an “essential male inclusivity”, where they argue that all people assigned male at birth have equal claim to “manhood”, which eases pressures on them to act in gender normative ways. The social-psychological and identity-based motivations of these beliefs are examined in connection to their life in the seminary and other anticipated occupational characteristics. In contrast, the seminary’s mandates around both celibacy and compulsory heterosexuality, make sexuality more fraught than gender for seminarians. The larger consequences of these perspectives are also explored in regard to gender inequality, homophobia, and the lack of acceptance for the LGBTIQ+ community.

Keywords: gender; masculinity; sexuality; identity; religion; Catholic; homophobia



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1. Introduction

This article addresses the beliefs about masculinity and gender of American Roman Catholic undergraduate seminary students. Identifying these perspectives should be of interest to those seeking to achieve greater gender equity, as seminarians who continue on to become Catholic priests, hold outsized voices on these topics within their parishes and communities. While a rapidly expanding scholarship on the nature of contemporary masculinity has focused attention on both inclusive masculinity (Anderson 2009; Anderson and McCormack 2018) and hybrid masculinity (Bridges 2014; Bridges and Pascoe 2014), sociological research on Roman Catholic seminarians still remains rare.

This article contributes to our knowledge on the intersection of religion and gender, by extending the study of “godly masculinity” to a new hard-to-access population. The concept of godly masculinity, which attempts to understand how masculinity is understood among religiously conservative men, has been mainly applied among Evangelical Protestant men. This paper begins by reviewing the literature on masculinity and the Catholic church’s views on gender and sexuality. First, the findings assert that seminarians continue to reject social constructionist conceptions of gender and embrace a masculinity where sex, gender, and sexuality are all biologically-based and largely inseparable. This leads them to reject the idea that masculinity is connected to performing “manly” acts or behaviors and embrace “essential male inclusivity”. The ways in which these views help strengthen gender identity and ease feelings of tenuousness connected from being unable to “do gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987) are discussed. Secondly, the ways in which the dynamic is different in regard to sexuality rather than gender are examined in the context of the seminary’s celibacy requirement, the Church’s rules on compulsory heterosexuality, and the broader sexual abuse crisis. The consequences of these beliefs are then discussed in regard to their understanding of gender inequality and the (continuing) rejection of people in the LGBTIQ community.

2. Hegemonic Masculinity & Godly Masculinity

The most frequent way to describe masculinity over the past two decades has been with hegemonic masculinity theory, which describes social processes of domination/marginalization that result in both men's continued dominance over women, as well as inequality between groups of boys and men (Connell 2005; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Hegemonic masculinity is frequently associated in the United States with whiteness, heterosexuality, Christianity, a high socioeconomic status, and being physically fit/athletic; although these vary across local contexts (Connell 2005; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Scholars have also identified competition, aggression, control, lack of emotional expression, and sexual objectification or conquest of women, as important elements or values within hegemonic masculinity (Bird 1996; Kimmel 2008; Pascoe 2007; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). Heterosexuality is viewed as an essential aspect, as it helps reinforce differences between men and women, emphasizes dominance/submission, and reinforces male privilege (Schippers 2007).

Theorists contend that even for heterosexual cisgender men, being biologically male and being able to claim the rights and privileges afforded "a man" are not necessarily the same thing. To be properly credited as a man, an individual must do performative work to establish and affirm his identity (West and Zimmerman 1987), often through constructed "manhood acts" (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). Similarly, social psychologists argue that men experience manhood as a tenuous identity, that is earned through social displays and traditional masculine behaviors (Vandello and Bosson 2013; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). In contrast, womanhood is more often associated with biological lifecourse changes and women are rarely questioned about if they are a "real woman" or "woman enough" (Vandello and Bosson 2013). Men frequently attempt to conform to gendered norms for appropriate masculine behavior because their identities and self-esteem are interconnected with being able to meet gendered social expectations.

While theories of hegemonic masculinity emphasize both the unequal relationships between men, and between men and women, more recent masculinity scholarship has begun to question whether new forms of masculinity are slowly replacing these existing patterns. "Inclusive masculinity theory" argues that a rapid decline in homophobia and homophobia—the cultural fear of being homosexualized—has led contemporary men to no longer feel they need to perform hyper-masculine or traditionally masculine behaviors to be accepted as men (Anderson 2009; Anderson and McCormack 2018; McCormack 2011). This increase in "inclusive masculinity" can be seen in young (often white or privileged) men who are unafraid to embrace feminine or expressive behaviors due to the fear of being labeled gay. Anderson (2009) argues that, although decreasing homophobia is an uneven social process, when and where it is occurring, masculinity becomes increasingly inclusive and less hierarchical than under hegemonic masculinity models.

Other scholars have described these more recent changes in young men as the emergence of "hybrid masculinities," or masculinities that selectively incorporate elements associated with subordinated identities, such as being gay (Bridges 2014), Black (Ward 2008) or feminine (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). Hybrid masculinity scholars focus on how particular men—often young, white, heterosexual, and privileged—discursively distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity without changing the power structures (Bridges 2014). They argue that hybrid masculinities may simply be contemporary expressions of gender inequality, and express concern they may actually reinforce gender hierarchies by concealing how privileged men access systems of power (Bridges 2014; Bridges and Pascoe 2014). While both these contemporary theories attempt to make sense of the ways in which young men may deviate from hegemonic masculinity models, they reach differing conclusions regarding whether the behaviors are truly challenging the existing gender structures.

In the scholarship on religiously conservative men, it is suggested that "godly men" may also deviate from hegemonic masculine expectations, in this case by showing a "softer" or feminine side of manhood, which tends to be less violent, less closed off, and more

comfortable with emotional expression. (Bartkowski 2004; Gallagher and Wood 2005; Gerber 2015; Heath 2003). The research on godly masculinities has thus countered the assumption that these men only behave in ways that legitimate hegemonic masculinity, and has drawn distinctions between religious masculinity (i.e., softer, more expressive) and secular hegemonic masculinity (Gerber 2015; Heath 2003). Although the ways in which scholars conceive of the concept of godly masculinity may vary slightly, they share a focus on men who look to faith-based standards to evaluate the masculine ideals and practices that are currently dominant in American society.

Thus far, the majority of research using the framing of godly masculinity has focused on Evangelical Protestant Christian men's displays of masculinities, such as in the context of the Promise Keeper movement (Bartkowski 2004; Heath 2003), the gay conversion therapy movement (Gerber 2015), and Christian Hardcore punk music (McDowell 2017). In his study of the Promise Keepers movement, Bartkowski (2004) examined the ways in which some hegemonic ideals were evident among the men he studied (for example, an emphasis on sports), but other ideas about masculinity were contested. In particular, the Evangelical men he studied challenged the idea that wealth and occupational success should be pursued, if it came at the expense of family. Heath (2003) examined how the Promise Keepers simultaneously reinforced structural conditions that upheld gender and race privilege, while encouraging men to practice a more expressive and caring masculinity that included cross-racial bonding. Gerber (2015), in her study of the "ex-gay" movement—of gay men who went through sexual conversion therapy—found aspects of godly masculinity that differed from hegemonic masculinity, including a focus on both intimacy and inclusivity between men and the de-emphasizing of heterosexual conquest. Whereas McDowell (2017) argued that young Christian men performed a type of hybrid masculinity that was both aggressive and loving.

Overall, this previous research on godly masculinity suggests that religious men may conceive of masculinity and traditional male behavior differently than their secular peers, which provides important context for considering the views of undergraduate seminarians. This relationship between Roman Catholicism and godly masculinity has thus far been understudied. Theories of both hybrid masculinity and inclusive masculinity provide different ways of understanding what it means when men depart from hegemonic masculine norms. Hybrid masculinity cautions us that not all deviations will present a challenge to institutional patriarchy.

3. Gender, Sexuality and the Catholic Church

Over the last 50 years, the Roman Catholic Church has challenged the rise in what it calls "gender theory" or "gender ideology" (Bracke and Paternotte 2016; Case 2016). It uses the terms to critique those using gender as an analytic category, and theories that base gender in interaction, performativity, or social construction. A recently released document titled, "Male and female, He created them," once more summarizes the Catholic position that men and women are different, complementary and equal in both nature and social roles (Congregation for Catholic Education 2019). It rejects views that gender differences are "merely the product of historical and cultural conditioning" (Congregation for Catholic Education 2019, p. 3). Instead, arguing that anything that denies "the difference and reciprocity in nature of a man and a woman" will ultimately help "destabilize the family as an institution" (Congregation for Catholic Education 2019, p. 3).

This focus on "complementarity" surged within the Catholic Church in the twentieth century partly in response to feminist claims (Case 2016). From the 1979–1984 teachings by Pope John Paul II—collectively known as "theology of the body"—to within more recent writings, the Catholic Church has responded to feminism, contraception, sexual liberation, and the ongoing changes in beliefs and norms across Western society by coalescing around an "anti-gender" position (Bracke and Paternotte 2016).

In addition to the interdependence between sex and gender, heterosexuality is also understood as natural and intimately connected to male and female bodies in Catholic

teachings. While Pope Francis has reminded Catholics of the inherent “human dignity” within each person and urged that they not be quick to judgement, a homosexual orientation is still officially considered “disordered”, or apart from how people are made by God and should behave in society. Unlike other conservative religious communities such as either Evangelical Christians or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, who accept sex for pleasure and exploration as long as it is within the context of marriage (Burke and Hudec 2015), Catholicism still emphasizes only those sexual experiences that may lead to procreation. In recent years, there has been attempts by some Catholic theologians to adopt a more sex positive point of view; however, this is being done within the confines of current doctrine and theology of the body teachings (Capecchi 2020).

Survey research has shown that many practicing Catholics do not fully agree with all the Church’s teachings on gender and sexuality. Beginning in the 1960s, the average American Catholic parishioner’s views started becoming more liberal on a variety of social issues, while the views of Catholic priests were more likely to be aligned with Church teachings (Hoge and Wenger 2003; Sullins 2013). This discrepancy may be due to the Church attempting to both intentionally select young men who will conform to its doctrinal views and working to form them into priests more orthodox than the average parishioner (Sullins 2013). Other scholars have argued that priests ordained in recent decades have been increasingly more conservative, institutional, and “unapologetically Catholic” than in past decades (Hoge and Wenger 2003, p. 113), although this research did not focus on gender/sexuality beliefs or identity.

As more Catholic parishioners, along with the majority of Western society, have adopted more progressive views on gender, sexuality, and other related social issues over the past few decades, the Catholic Church has become increasingly concerned about policing its views on God-given gender (Sullins 2013). The well-known clergy sexual abuse scandals of the past few decades also provide important context for an organization struggling to hold firm to its orthodox and increasingly counter-cultural viewpoints on gender. The steady decline of men—and young men in particular—in attendance at weekly mass concerns the Church and led to the development of American Catholic men’s groups and ministries that play a role in the broader Christian men’s movement (Gelfer 2008). These programs (e.g., RISE, That Man is You, etc.) are designed to demonstrate that there is a place for men in the Roman Catholic church, to encourage their active participation, and to convey its beliefs and values around masculinity.

4. Methodology

The qualitative empirical data used in this research was collected over two years, and through a variety of in-depth interactions with the participants. The data presented here focuses largely on the formal interviews conducted with approximately 50% of the undergraduate students (“seminarians”) at Trinity Seminary¹, a pseudonym for a Roman Catholic diocesan seminary with both undergraduate and graduate schools. At the time the interviews were conducted, the 17 young men interviewed accounted for about half of the total undergraduate population at Trinity Seminary, as many undergraduate seminaries are not large in size. All interviews were intensive, one-on-one and were conducted in-person in 2019–2020. The interviews ranged from one hour to two and a half hours, with the average interview lasting about seventy-five minutes.

In addition to these interviews, textual data about the daily life at the seminary was gathered from a range of sources including the *Trinity Student Handbook*, an online archive of seminary newsletters, event postings, and the public web profiles of each seminarian. Multiple informal interviews were also conducted with four of the seminarians’ faculty advisors to gain their insights on ideas emerging in the materials and interviews. Although not the main focus of this analysis, 17 additional interviews (for a total of 34 interviews) were conducted with Catholic undergraduate men at Telluric University, a pseudonym for a secular, Catholic-affiliated university that was not a seminary. These interviews provide a useful comparison to the seminarians, as the young men were of similar age,

race, and social-economic background characteristics. A short demographic questionnaire was completed by each of the 34 participants at the end of their interview as well.

Through my work, I am part of a larger network that gives me access to religious institutions. This was utilized for recruiting participants and may have increased response rates. Recruitment was undertaken through faculty advisors, and seminarians' email addresses that were publicly available on the seminary website. All participants were informed the interview was part of a research project that was "focused on how they think about masculinity and men's roles in society". Snowball sampling was also used with both groups to encourage additional participation. At Trinity Seminary, 32 seminarians were initially contacted, which resulted in the 17-person sample. Data collection stopped once the point of theoretical saturation was reached. In March 2020, Trinity Seminary was temporarily closed for COVID-19, which also hastened the end of data collection.

To become a Catholic priest, one is required to attend a graduate-level seminary, although many priests also attend an undergraduate seminary beforehand, including about 40% of the 2019 United States ordination class (Gautier and Do 2019, p. 16). As undergraduates, the majority of these young men are traditionally college aged (18–22) and transitioning into adulthood. This stage of "emerging adulthood," is a time seen as key in lifecourse literature for identity formation and the development of belief systems (Smith and Snell 2009). Within the Catholic Church, the process to become a priest is known as "priestly formation" and it involves an extensive process where the candidate engages in education, examination, and personal development over many years.² While Catholic Canon Law (Canon 250) stipulates "at least six full years" of philosophical and theological study for priests in formation, US seminarians typically spend at least nine years in a seminary and sometimes more. They undergo regular evaluations and assessments in four specific areas or "pillars" of formation: intellectual, pastoral, spiritual, and human³. These pillars came up frequently in the seminarians' description of their life at Trinity. Due to both the exhausting nature of the continuous evaluation, and the way in which Catholic seminary serves as a time of discernment, it is clear a substantial portion of those who begin at a seminary do not end up being ordained, which is also true at Trinity. Although specific figures are not available, one estimate put American nationwide seminary completion rates at half (Hoge 2002).

The students interviewed from Trinity Seminary currently attended ($n = 13$) or had recently attended, and either graduated ($n = 1$) or transferred from the school ($n = 3$). All were white and born in the United States. The sample was somewhat less diverse than the priesthood nationwide, although in the US, Catholicism and the priesthood continue to remain overwhelmingly white. The largest area of racial diversity in the priesthood in the US is among those priests who are born outside the United States and choose to come to the US to study and/or work.⁴ The Trinity Seminary participants were all from the same State, which is not unusual, as when young men are called to the seminary, their local parish and diocese usually encourage them to attend locally. For high school (secondary), eight seminarians attended public schools, seven private religious schools, and one was homeschooled. Fifteen of the seventeen had gone straight from high school to seminary, while two had attended another college before transferring to the seminary. All the participants ranged from lower-middle class to upper-middle class based on the occupational and educational status of their mother and father, which each participant provided. In age, the participants ranged from 19–25, with the majority of them being 20–21 years old (a detailed breakdown of individual participants' characteristics is not being provided to protect respondents from identification).⁵

Whether a researcher is viewed as an insider or outsider in terms of the community under study can affect perceptions and experiences during research. When speaking to the seminarians, I was mostly an outsider, as a woman, a non-student, and a non-Catholic—the most salient identities in the context of our conversations, all of which were made clear to the participants. However, as Tristan Bridges points out, this dynamic can be quite useful: "The status of being an 'outsider', if one accepts the label willingly, often leads others

to lead us around a bit" (Bridges 2013, p. 57). Indeed, by approaching these interviews where the participant was the expert and I was the one needing to have things explained, helped smooth the power inequities somewhat, and allowed participants to "lead me" to all sorts of interesting data. Generally, the young men I spoke to seemed interested in the topic of masculinity and not to show hesitation in discussing it—although, they would sometimes appear unsure of how to express themselves. At the beginning of many of the interviews, I did mention that the Catholic sexual abuse scandals were not the focus of the research to provide reassurance, as multiple seminarians let me know they "had been told not to talk about that with anyone" (several of them would, spontaneously bring up the topic nevertheless during our conversations). Through my role in the larger institutional networks, I was also able to informally observe students from Trinity Seminary for several years on an intermittent basis. No formal field notes were written or analyzed at this stage, although the observations contributed to the overall project, especially the development of the research questions and interview guide.

All interviews were conducted and recorded by the author, then were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using a grounded theory approach with the assistance of NVivo, a software program for qualitative analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1999). As part of the grounded theory technique, primary codes using a thematic or "issue focused" approach were developed. Once interviews were completed, then all other primary source materials were coded using these same primary codes. The initial coding was then recoded using both initial codes and new codes based on further engagement with theoretical materials and in interaction with the data. All names used throughout are pseudonyms.

5. Results

5.1. Real Men: Biological Masculinity and Essential Male Inclusivity

Throughout the interview data, it was clear that the seminarians believed that masculinity was something that one "was", not something that one "did". When asked to discuss masculinity or "being a man", they responded by describing views of two distinct sexes; male and female, created by God, based in biology, and inseparable from gender and sexuality. They rejected the idea that they must engage in particular acts or behaviors to claim manhood. Simply by virtue of being born male, they and their fellow seminarians "were men".

Toward the start of the interview, each seminarian was asked what it meant to them "to be a man". Adam, in his third or junior year (20 years old) at the seminary, provided an apt illustration of how many seminarians responded to this initial question:

Author: When people say "act like a man" or "be a man" what does that mean to you?

Adam: I would associate it, with just my sexuality. So, I think a lot of what defines us as a male is the fact that we do have certain body parts, certain sexual organs that really make us different from a female. Um yeah, I don't really know what else I can say about it, other than I think a lot of it has to do with just our sexual organs and it just makes sense that, we have this natural complement of male and female.

There are several aspects seen in Adam's statement that were typical of the seminarians. The first is the focus on the differences between men and women being based strongly in biology, which is aligned with Catholic teachings. In the responses of nearly all the seminarians, biological sex differences were a focal point. For these young men, instead of a belief in biological differences reinforcing their overall views of masculinity, the bodily differences were frequently the focus of their ideas about gender. Catholic theology teaches that the human body reveals God, so this encourages the belief that it is appropriate to look to physiological sex differences to explain social differences. Another shared characteristic was the lack of specificity in the use of terms (i.e., did he really mean "sexuality" above?). Seminarians would frequently use the terms sex, gender, and sexuality interchangeably and their explanations of the concepts blurred together.

This biologically-based perspective led seminarians to embrace what is being called, “essential male inclusivity,” where all men can claim the privileges of manhood simply for being born male. This perspective eased the pressures for men to act in gender normative ways. Jacob explained his view that “acting like a man” just meant living out his life:

Jacob: I think masculinity in its true sense is pretty much just living. To truly live out who we are as a human person. God created us male and female, and I feel like to be fully alive, is to be fully a man. (3rd year/junior, 21 years old)

Seminarians, like Jacob, may have especially good reasons for wanting to believe in a form of masculinity where all biological males are “fully a man”. Adolescents and young adults often experience gender intensification, where the struggle to prove manhood and achieve an adult gender identity becomes more intense (Kimmel 2008). In colleges around the country, young men or “guys” engage in behaviors designed to prove their masculinity to their peers, including binge drinking, fraternity rituals, sexual conquests, and sports participation (Kimmel 2008). Yet, the pathway to priesthood largely prevented seminarians from “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987) in many hegemonic masculine arenas or demonstrating their masculinity. At the same time, they have the same needs as any young men to solidify their gender identity and resolve any anxiety created by the tenuousness of their masculinity (Vandello and Bosson 2013). For the seminarians, their beliefs in an essential male inclusivity appeared to help ease any enhanced precariousness their unique situation may have provoked.

For some of the young men interviewed, the seminary’s lack of emphasis on engaging in traditional hegemonic masculine performance was one of its appeals (at the same time that it amplified other tensions). The perspective that all males were “real men” helped provide the acceptance that many of the seminarians described as one of the draws of seminary life:

John: So, getting into the seminary, it’s realizing that ‘real men’ don’t care about any of that. These people accept me for who I am. I act differently around my high school friends than I do when I’m at the seminary. At the seminary I am my true self, because these people do not care who I am, the way that I act, how I am, because they recognize that, I’m a beloved child of God. It does not matter that I like to play an instrument, that I like to play music, or have different talents. (3rd year/junior, 20 years old)

The increased acceptance at the seminary was especially important for those seminarians who described themselves as “sensitive” or were further from hegemonic gender norms. Being at the seminary was seen as an advantage because it meant not having to hide behind the “mask” of masculinity, which they saw—and sometimes pitied—other male college students for continuing to do.

Gerber (2015), in her research on the sexual conversion therapy movement among Evangelical Christians, also studied a type of godly masculinity that she conceptualized as “inclusive”. Because the men she studied likewise understood gender to be largely grounded in biology, it created the opportunity for men to engage (or not) in diverse types of behaviors. As Gerber explains, “If masculinity is endowed entirely by biology, then men are automatically masculine by virtue of being born male; every person born male has a claim on its attributes and privileges. And because the category of masculinity must include all males, it needs to be inclusive enough for all men to find their place” (Gerber 2015, p. 15). Her argument is made in the context of a study focused particularly on those lacking in heterosexual behaviors, as gay men were attempting to become “ex-gay”. She found flexibility and “inclusivity” in the realm of the interpretation of homo-intimate behaviors (Gerber 2015), which contrasts with the seminarians’ experiences around sexuality (to be discussed next).

Although the inclusive views of their fellow seminarians provided reassurance, their anticipated life as a Catholic priest meant giving up the opportunity to “do gender” or perform hegemonic manhood acts in several ways discussed within the interviews. These included achieving financial success, having control over their careers, and engaging in

heterosexual interactions. Priests in essence take a pledge of poverty—or are at least expected to accept low wages for the duration of their lives—with the Catholic Church providing them with the essentials of what they need. They also must be willing to accept that they serve at the sole discretion of the Bishop, who will decide the parishes at which they will live and serve. This lack of autonomy or control over one’s career can be emotionally difficult (Hoge 2002), possibly enhanced because traditional masculinity emphasizes taking control of a situation (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). Yet for the young men at Trinity, these occupational characteristics were still largely only anticipated. While these may have played a role in their developing sense of self, they were not nearly as important in these young men’s ideas of their masculinity, as their promise to adhere to the seminary’s celibacy requirements.

5.2. Celibacy, Constraints, and Performing Heterosexuality

A seminarian’s ability to live celibately was one of the things regularly discussed with their fellow seminarians, and they had this aspect of their journey toward priesthood regularly evaluated by their spiritual and formation directors at the seminary. Other research on godly masculinity has found that—in contrast to hegemonic masculinity—conservative religious people don’t view masculinity to be as highly connected to sexual conquest, since they tend to value sexual restraint and to censure premarital sexual activity (Gerber 2015). This was also found to be true among the seminarians in this study. Nevertheless, Catholic seminarians are uniquely situated in regard to sexuality, for in other communities, conservative religious people can still date and engage in physical intimacy, even if they choose not to have premarital intercourse. At Trinity Seminary, dating and all sexual activities were against the rules, as they are seen as “inappropriate and counterproductive for a seminarian who is discerning a priestly or religious vocation” (*Trinity Seminary Handbook*).

For many of the respondents, this vow of celibacy appeared to serve as a type of masculinity threat, that increased the precariousness of their masculine identity. Both heterosexuality and the desire for sex are seen as integral parts of masculinity (Anderson 2008). As nearly all heterosexual interactions were either expressively forbidden or considered potentially suspect for seminarians, this meant an important traditional way of demonstrating manhood was blocked for these young men. Additionally, unlike for either voluntarily or involuntarily celibate men at secular colleges, the seminarians’ celibacy was also publicly on display.

Several respondents said that the seminary’s celibacy requirement was the one aspect that outside people questioned them about the most. They described probing questions by extended family members, or even with those they met at casual events. In most accounts, it was other men asking these questions or making comments. The idea that people were “shocked” or “looked at me like I was crazy” was something that nearly all the young men described having to deal with at some point. John recalled the reactions of people at his high school when they heard of his decision to go to the seminary, rather than a traditional four-year college:

John: In high school, that’s what everyone was like, “You’re going to be celibate? You wouldn’t want to have sex? Like, what’s wrong with you?” That kind of thing. That’s why I stopped telling anyone about it, because they automatically go, “What’s wrong with him? He doesn’t want to have sex”. People act like celibacy, celibacy is something that they keep secret all nine years, and then they whisper in your ear at the cathedral like, “oh, yeah, you’re celibate now”. Like, “oh, shit!” No, we are all fully aware of it. That’s a big part of what you’re thinking about, as you go through nine years of discerning if this is right for you. (3rd year/junior, 20 years old)

With both dating and sexual interactions prohibited, all the other interactions that seminarians have with women are carefully weighed and judged, with their level of appropriateness being common topics of conversation among the seminarians. Although celibacy presented a real strain for many of the seminarians, talking about the difficulties of celibacy also appeared to play an important role in performing a heterosexual identity

within the community. Not talking about women could lead to questions yet talking about them constantly could lead to different questions regarding their commitment to the Church:

Simon: I mean, it is a very weird dynamic, because if you were always talking about, "I'm talking to her, and I'm talking to her," and then it would be—I wouldn't say shamed—but people would definitely view you as uncommitted and then an irresponsible person. There're others you know? Seminarians who were very, very committed and if you say anything, one word about, "yeah, I talked to a girl in class" in a bragging way, they'd be like, "what are you doing? You're being unfaithful!" (Recent graduate, 22 years old)

How and if they should talk to the women who were sometimes in their outside classes or outside activities was widely discussed, and seminarians had a range of differing views on interacting with women given the constraints of the celibacy requirements.

One aspect that made the celibacy requirement more complicated and encouraged the active performance of a heterosexual identity, is that seminarians were required by both the rules at Trinity Seminary and Catholic doctrine to be heterosexual or at least prohibited from having "homosexual tendencies". While Roman Catholic seminaries have had long-standing guidance against homosexual behavior, it wasn't until new guidance was released in 2005—as a response to the sexual abuse scandals that have plagued the Catholic Church—that the Church began to police the heterosexuality of the men joining the seminary quite so strictly. It now conducts extensive psychological testing with each candidate before they are given admittance to a seminary, whether undergraduate or graduate. The Church, of course, has been rightly criticized for drawing false connections between homosexuality and sexual or child abuse. This is especially salient, as the majority of sexual misconduct by Catholic priests involves adult and female victims, although this type of abuse is under discussed and less studied (Reisinger 2022; Witt et al. 2019).

The formal rules meant that the seminarians experienced role strain due to the simultaneous need to demonstrate a heterosexual identity—or at least show they were not homosexual on an ongoing basis—while being formally prohibited from the forms of social interaction through which one might express this identity (i.e., dating, sex, or pornography usage). This focus on performing a heterosexual image encouraged strict adherence among most seminarians to many traditional gender norms that are used to signal sexuality. These mostly related to appearance, such as wearing traditionally masculine colored clothing and hair styles, although a few men also described modulating their speaking voices to make them sound deep enough. The seminarians were keenly aware that they had been formally tested upon admittance, which they said was to make sure that they weren't "crazy" or "gay" and would need to formally go through this testing again upon entering graduate school. Some seminarians also articulated that they felt additional pressures from both the Church and members of the public to present a "healthy"—and therefore heterosexual—identity due to stereotypes about priests that arose from the widely publicized child sexual abuse scandals.

The tension is clear here between the different way in which the seminarians were responding to possible doubts about their masculine gender identity and those about their heterosexual sexual identity. Yet, the formal rules against being gay increased the levels of homophobia and homophobia, as the seminarians expressed fear that others would believe they were gay and took steps to project a heterosexual identity, even while being comfortable in other ways with not adhering to masculine gender norms. Between the general Catholic teachings about sexuality, the specific rules against homosexual priests, and the context of the sexual abuse scandals, the seminarians felt pressure to project a very traditional heterosexual image, even while arguing for a biological essentialist view that is inclusive of all men regardless of behavior.

5.3. Reinforcing Gender Inequality, Homophobia, and Transphobia

Regardless of the motivation of their beliefs about gender and sexuality, there were also broader consequences of these. Their focus on "natural" differences between men and

women led to a lack of awareness of structural inequities or power differences in gender relations. It also encouraged homophobic and transphobic views.

When asked “Are men and women currently equal or unequal in society?” many of the seminarians said they were now equal, and a few others were unsure. This contrasts with all of the young men at Telluric University who answered by acknowledging that, at least in some area, gender inequality remains in society. Jacob’s answer below illustrates the perspective and lack of knowledge about ongoing gender issues (for example, the wage gap):

Author: Do you think that men and women are currently equal or unequal in society?

Jacob: From a legal standpoint I would say, yeah. That, you know, all the opportunities afforded to men are the same as it is for women. Fortunately, we’re in a time where we’re not, women don’t have to keep fighting for the right to vote or, you know, for education or for equal pay. All these things have been taken care of with our legislation. And I’m thankful that we live in a country where we’ve progressed socially to the point where, you know, we realize, man, woman, there’s nothing, no one’s telling us that, this is worth more than this. (3rd year/junior, 21 years old)

It is possible that a theological focus in seminary on ontological equality—equality in the eyes of God—may have discouraged some of them from considering social inequalities, but this lack of awareness can have problematic consequences within a society that remains unequal.

In response to the question about equality, a portion of seminarians additionally argued that equality between men and women should not be the societal emphasis at all—but instead the uniqueness and complementariness of men and women should be the main focus:

Jonah: Honestly, I don’t know [if they’re equal]. I haven’t done a lot of research into that topic, so I would be hesitant to give an answer. If they aren’t, there’s an issue, but also, like I said, I don’t think that we should bring people down in order to create equality. Equality is not—I don’t think it’s the most important function. When you’re destroying what makes people special for the sake of equality, I guess that’s how you create our classic dystopian novels. (2nd year/sophomore, 20 years old)

When Jonah discusses “bring[ing] people down in order to create equality,” he is assumedly (whether consciously or not) referring to men, and probably white men. The idea that gender equality should not take precedence over maintaining a focus on what makes men and women “special” has troubling consequences, where gender equality remains not yet achieved.

The seminarians’ answers demonstrated an overall lack of acknowledgement or understanding of power differences. A focus on “natural” differences existing between men and women came up in the responses to many topics throughout the interviews:

Daniel: I think women are naturally more—their bodies speak it—women are open. Men are direct, you know. It’s, it’s written into us. I think they [women] are more nourishing. They are naturally just better listeners. Talking to a woman is so much easier than talking to a man. I think as a man, if you’re speaking to women, you get to talk longer, because they just want to hear it. (3rd year/junior, 21 years old)

Here Daniel asserts that women by nature “just want to hear” what men have to say, which again shows a lack of understanding of power dynamics, as well as socialization or norms. Although he later—in response to a direct prompt about the topic—acknowledged that socialization can play a role in influencing behaviors, his response here is problematic and continues to reinforce ideas about sex/gender essentialism. His descriptions of bodies (“bodies speak it,” “it’s written into us”) also demonstrates his perception of biological sex and social gender roles being unified and natural.

An additional consequence of the seminarians’ essentialist perspectives on gender is that they leave little room for understanding people who are gay, queer, intersex, non-

binary, or transgender, as they do not fit into an understanding of sex/gender/gender identity as biologically based:

Author: How does your religion influence your ideas about masculinity or gender?

Michael: So, I'm not exactly on board with the whole like 46 different genders or whatever. I don't even know what the number is, if I'm just, if I'm being honest. Because of—yes, my faith and just the way I was raised—and I think there's just so much truth that is held between the man and woman, and you could break that apart for days and days. I don't know about the whole like X amount of more genders. I'm not even learned enough on the topic to knowledgeably talk about it. (4th year/senior, 24 years old)

Michael, like most of the other seminarians, was quick to point out that the Church taught that he should not “shun gay people” or reject them. Yet he explained that, “My Catholic faith has affected my views, it shaped them in the sense of, marriage should be between a man and woman”. This was a common view among the seminarians, as neither gay nor non-binary people made sense within the model that saw sex, gender, and heterosexuality as all highly interconnected and epitomized through male and female bodies.

When asked about their views on transgender people, several seminarians apologized for being “not exactly sure on all of the words”, as concepts related to gender/sex were not something formally discussed in their courses at the seminary, which tended to focus on older texts of philosophy or theology. To learn more about gender and the Church's views, some of them would attend optional lectures at the seminary or watch YouTube or read books not assigned in classes. Those who detailed their searches through YouTube seemed to be seeking a way to reconcile biological or theological perspectives on gender with the perspectives they saw around them in modern society—or for hard evidence that would allow them to clearly reject one view or the other.

While most of the seminarians said they knew little about the topic of non-binary gender or sexuality, Zachary was among the three seminarians who had spent some time formally studying gender. He adhered to the orthodox Catholic position, although he was better able to explain his views more clearly:

Zachary: I believe that male and female is biologically based and that gender follows that; there are exceptions in terms of like XXY or that kind of thing, but they're so rare that they're considered statistically as outliers . . . The Catholic position is that people are body and soul as one unity. There's kind of a natural law, and not necessarily the law of nature, but more philosophical sense of nature. So, to be disordered is to be existing in such a way that you're—that some aspect is contrary to that nature. So, for someone who is biologically male to identify as female would be existing in a way that doesn't line up. (3rd year/junior, 21 years old)

While Zachary also expressed that it was important to respect the dignity of every person, his understanding of queer, trans, and gay people and his belief that they are living spiritually “disordered” lives created clear barriers in his interactions with them.

All the seminarians were consistent that the Catholic Church was teaching them to respect the inherent dignity in every person; however, there was also a continued lack of full acceptance, which inherently reinforced homophobia and transphobia. The negative way in which the LGBTIQ+ community views the position of the Catholic Church has been documented, as the majority of gay and lesbian Christians reject the use of pathologizing language such as “disordered” and believes it creates misunderstandings of them (O'Brien 1991). For a few seminarians, the potential conflict in these positions created a defensiveness regarding the Church's views:

Author: When you said social media posts about the Catholic Church's views on sexuality are wrong, what in particular are you thinking of?

Jonah: I mean, it's when anybody attacks the church for being against homosexuals, hating homosexuals. The word “hate” never belongs in the Catholic Church because—we hate? No. We don't even hate the Satanists. (2nd year/sophomore, 20 years old)

Hatred was clearly not something they wanted to be associated with; however, the majority of seminarians continued to use “disordered” language, which demonstrated a lack of full acceptance of the LGBTIQ+ community. Although they stated they wouldn’t engage in verbal or physical bullying of someone in the LGBTIQ+ population, the majority said the behavior was either “wrong” or “disordered”. Although, within those interviewed, there were clear levels of difference in how much they had learned and reflected on these issues. There were also a minority of seminarians who expressed confusion over what they believed about issues involving the LGBTIQ+ population, instead of adhering more closely to Catholic orthodoxy.

6. Discussion

Roman Catholic seminarians are a unique group—they self-selected into a specific occupation where religious orthodoxy is important and they experience unusual masculinity threats due to their anticipated life as a priest—yet, their views on gender and masculinity remain important to study. Seminarians who continue on to become Catholic priests will have powerful voices in their community to influence ideas about the intersection of religion, gender, and sexuality. What reinforces and motivates these views in a world where perspectives are changing should receive additional attention by those interested in gender and sexual equality. Although cloistered groups such as seminarians and priests may be difficult to gain access to, it is important to examine the motivations for their beliefs, especially due to their outsized influence.

This study examined a belief in biologically-based masculinity and essential male inclusivity, which can challenge the need for men to perform hegemonic acts to prove their manhood. This is a dynamic that has received scant theoretical attention by scholars studying the intersection of religion and gender (Gerber 2015). The seminarians in this study emphasized that masculinity was not socially constructed or based on behavior but instead was unable to be separated from one’s sex assigned at birth. It has been emphasized here that there are social-psychological and identity-based motivations as to why these beliefs of sex/gender appeal to seminarians (Vandello and Bosson 2013). It is important for feminist scholars to probe the psychological motivations that may maintain gender essentialist beliefs, if there is any hope to create change.

The seminarians’ beliefs in an essential male inclusivity were substantially different from that discussed in previous research or to theories about inclusive masculinity theory (Anderson 2009; Anderson and McCormack 2018). Inclusive masculinity theory argues that men no longer feel the need to perform traditionally masculine behaviors to be accepted as men, based on society’s increasingly liberal views and a rapid decline in homophobia (Anderson 2009; Anderson and McCormack 2018; McCormack 2011). Although the seminarians studied here also argued against the need to perform traditional masculine acts, their reasons for why went directly against those asserted by inclusive masculinity theory. There are some surface similarities to hybrid masculinities, such as the lack of challenge to patriarchal power structures while refusing to engage in some hegemonic practices; however, the seminarians were clear that they were not attempting to become more equal or to topple systems. They reported to be simply enacting “natural” masculinity.

Among prior research, Lynne Gerber’s (2015) study on godly masculinity among Evangelical Christians in the “ex-gay movement” found the most similar results. She also documented a biological-based godly masculinity, which led to a belief in male inclusivity and close relationships. In some ways these two studies help substantiate each other; however, among the Catholic seminarians, the level of homophobia appeared to be higher and any sign of homosexuality appeared suspect. This was almost certainly due to the formal Church guidelines that required seminarians with “homosexual tendencies” to be removed from the school, as well as the views regarding the ongoing sexual abuse crisis in the Church.

The consequences of the seminarian’s beliefs in biological masculinity and an essential male inclusivity are varied. For the seminarians themselves, they appeared to largely play

a positive role in masculine identity maintenance. In interactions between men, the belief in male inclusivity appears to help break down dominance hierarchies and encourages equality among men. After all, unquestionably more men can achieve equal “manhood” under biological masculinity models than hegemonic ones (Connell 2005). In contrast, the consequences of these views for women and those in the LGBTIQ+ community are not as benign, as they serve to hide structural gender inequality, continually minimize power dynamics, and discouraged the acceptance of gay, non-binary, transgender and queer folks. When masculinity is based on biology, not behavior, it is clear that no one assigned female at birth need apply.

While this study examines masculinity among a noteworthy population, namely, Roman Catholic undergraduate seminarians, it focuses on just 1 of 85 Roman Catholic seminaries in the United States. More research should be undertaken to see if similar views are found across Catholic seminaries of various sizes and across regions. More ethnographic research should be completed to unpack how seminaries themselves work to actively shape beliefs about gender and masculinity. In addition, there are still further questions to explore regarding the homosocial interactions that take place at seminaries and their influence on how seminarians construct ideas about sex, gender, sexuality, and masculinity.

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Notes

- ¹ The name “Trinity Seminary” is a pseudonym for one of 85 diocese seminaries in the US. “Telluric University” is a pseudonym for a Catholic affiliated university. Some details have been rendered vague or left out to protect the participant identities.
- ² Attending a seminary or becoming a priest is considered a “calling” and each seminarian described how they knew God was calling them to attend seminary.
- ³ For full details, see: Committee on Priestly Life and Formation, 2006. Program on Priestly Formation. Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.
- ⁴ Of the priests ordained in 2019 in the United States, 22% were foreign born and 28% of diocesan priests were non-white (Gautier and Do 2019, p. 13).
- ⁵ Largely, contextual information about respondents hasn’t been altered; however, those students who left the seminary part-way through are sometimes listed based on the year they left (i.e., “junior”) to help protect their identities.

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