



# **SUBVERSIVE FIDELITY. UNDERSTANDING LIBERAL CATHOLICS AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO THE CHURCH.**

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**Artículo**

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## **RESUMEN**

El presente artículo tiene por objetivo postular el concepto de fidelidad subversiva para dar cuenta de una serie de organizaciones que reivindican una cierta identidad social mientras contestan una serie de elementos que se supone le son consustanciales, tales como ideas, creencias, valores o normas. Esta propuesta surge a raíz de un análisis ideológico de diferentes organizaciones católicas por la liberación sexual, es decir, grupos de católicos que sostienen puntos de vista progresistas en materia de moral sexual, a saber, diversidad sexual, derechos reproductivos, igualdad de género y celibato sacerdotal. Gracias a la noción de fidelidad subversiva es posible entender la manera paradójica en la que esta clase de agrupaciones justifica su disidencia como un acto de fidelidad, en la medida en que consideran que la verdadera lealtad requiere del coraje de confrontar a las autoridades religiosas cuando éstas incurrir en un error, influidas por prejuicios sociales.

**PALABRAS CLAVE: FIDELIDAD SUBVERSIVA; ORGANIZACIONES CATÓLICAS POR LA LIBERACIÓN SEXUAL; DISIDENCIA.**

## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this present paper is to introduce the theoretical concept of subversive fidelity as a mean to explain the existence of certain organizations vindicating a particular social identity while protesting against some elements considered to be essential by the mainstream culture, such as ideas, beliefs, values or norms. This proposition has been developed in an inductive way, after analyzing the ideology of different Catholic organizations for sexual liberation, that is, groups of Catholics who have a progressive stance on sexual morals, namely, sexual diversity, reproductive rights, gender equality, and priestly celibacy. Thanks to the notion of subversive fidelity it is possible to understand the paradoxical way in which these groups justify their dissent as an act of fidelity, as they consider that true loyalty requires the courage to confront the religious authorities whenever these are falling into error due to social prejudices.

**KEY WORDS: SUBVERSIVE FIDELITY; CATHOLIC ORGANIZATIONS FOR SEXUAL LIBERATION; DISSENT.**

*Holy Father, we revere you as the bishop of Rome and admire you personally for many things, but on this particular issue we think you are wrong.*  
Charles Curran

## WHEN SEXUAL LIBERATION PENETRATES THE CHURCH

On January 20<sup>th</sup>, the civic association *San Elredo A.C.* celebrated 17 years of fight for sexual rights for the LGBT population of Saltillo (Mexico); there would not be anything surprising about this were it not for the fact that Mgr Raúl Vera, bishop of the diocese, celebrated a special mass in order to mark the occasion by saying: “ustedes tienen un trabajo importante que hacer dentro de la Iglesia”<sup>1</sup> (Ramos, 2019). In fact, not so many years ago, San Elredo used to be a Catholic organization, recognized and accepted by the Church, thanks to the support of Mgr Vera, until a fundamentalist media started to harass him, forcing a breakup and the official secularization of the group (Aciprensa, 2011). Nevertheless, the association and its members, inspired by the figure of St Aelred of Rievaulx, continues to identify very strongly with Catholicism to date.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, especially during the pontificate of John Paul II, the Catholic Church launched a real moral crusade against *debauchery* by putting too much stress on issues related to reproduction, gender, sexuality and family, to such an extent that Catholic identity almost became synonym of having conservative positions on sexual morals (Mejía, 2003: 51). This was largely due to the viral expansion of sexual liberation in western societies, transforming the points of view, values and practices of a whole generation, more open to experiment with alternative lifestyles beyond the boundaries of a faithful married couple willing to procreate (Allyn, 2000).

This has been a crucial battle for the Church until now,<sup>3</sup> inasmuch as the process of modernization, together

with secularization, has gotten rid of almost every area of its worldly authority, the body being maybe the last bastion where it can proclaim a metaphysical law whose observance requires its guidance.<sup>4</sup>

Needless to say, the Church’s reaction to this relaxation of moral standards, including a series of lectures and documents,<sup>5</sup> was as strong as futile. Not only homosexuality, abortion, feminism, divorce, promiscuity and so on, have been entirely normalized in western societies, finding increased acceptance in other populations, but we can say that sexual liberation has truly penetrated the Church.<sup>6</sup>

Nowadays, more and more Catholics embrace all sorts of ideas, values and practices identified in a way or another with this social trend, and while this is all the more true for nominal Catholics, the presence of a liberal spirit in some believers for whom religion is an essential part of their lives is henceforth undeniable (Belden Russonello Strategists, 2018; *Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir*, 2003; Choza, 2006: 95; *Sínodo de los obispos*, 2014). We are talking about laypeople as much as clergy, nuns, priests, theologians, bishops and even the highest echelons of leadership inside the Vatican have expressed their disagreement with at least some aspects of the official Catholic teachings on sexual morality.<sup>7</sup> Which is utterly understandable. After all, the Catholic Church is not a bubble, aseptic from the “impurities” of the secular world and immune to social changes, but it necessarily engages, like it or not, in a dialectical relationship with it,<sup>8</sup> resulting now and again in different forms of *inculturation*, to use the words of His Holiness. Not to mention the personal dramas that the current doctrine imposes over some groups of people, who find themselves trapped in an impasse: the faithful whose devotion does not change *ipso facto* their homosexuality or priests whose calling is not enough to dissipate their humanity (including both biological and emotional needs). This kind of believers are forced to live on a permanent cognitive

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there are clear landmarks in the pontificate of Francis accounting for the struggle between Catholicism and sexual liberation, such as the last synod on the family and the apostolical exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, not counting the many anecdotal statements triggering controversy here and there (cf. Sgro & Vaggione, 2018: 153-180; Turner & Forlenza, 2016: 689-710).

<sup>1</sup> You have a very important work to do in the Church.

<sup>2</sup> “Se trata de nuestros valores y nuestros principios. La Iglesia nos ha enseñado el valor de la justicia, del amor, que son los valores con los que seguimos trabajando en la Comunidad San Elredo. No luchamos por algo que esté fuera de la justicia o fuera de la igualdad, que es lo que siempre nos ha enseñado la Iglesia Católica. Mientras nosotros tengamos esos valores y esas creencias no vamos a salir de la Iglesia Católica.” (It is all about our values and principles. The Church has taught us the value of justice, of love, and so on; those are the values we practice in San Elredo. We do not fight for something different to justice or equality, which are the teachings of the Catholic Church. As long as we endorse these values and beliefs, we are going to remain in the Church). (Alfredo, member of the Catholic organization for sexual diversity *San Elredo A.C.*, group interview, 2015, Mexico).

<sup>3</sup> The advent of Pope Francis raised serious expectations on behalf of progressive Catholics looking for a sexual reform of the Church, however, his multiples gestures oriented to change, if not the official doctrine, at least the discourse, the attitudes and some practices, have met with fierce resistance from the conservative wing of the clergy, resulting in a tepid attempt to transform Catholic sexual morals, which has fueled discontent in both sides of the ideological sphere. In any event,

<sup>4</sup> “La minorisation de l’influence de l’Église dans les champs politique, économique, social, culturel, s’est accompagnée, historiquement, d’une intensification de son action normative dans l’espace de la vie dite ‘privée’ des individus” (The weakening of the Church’s influence in the fields of politics, economy and culture, has been historically related with an intense normative activism concerning private life). (Hervieu-Léger, 2008: 336).

<sup>5</sup> E.g. *Humanae vitae* (1968), *Persona humana* (1975), *Theology of the Body* (1979-1984), *Donum vitae* (1987), *Evangelium vitae* (1995), Letter to women (1995).

<sup>6</sup> As Renée de la Torre (1996) says, mass culture is not only an external menace to the Church, but it is sooner or later internalized, transforming Catholicism from the inside in disruptive ways (pp. 163-182).

<sup>7</sup> E.g. Althaus-Reid, 2005; Boswell, 1980; Curran, 2006; Lugo, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Classical sociologists of religion were already aware about the inevitability of a feedback dynamic between sacred and profane (Troeltsch, 1991: 45,105; Weber, 1967: 261).

dissonance by reason of two equally important parts of their existence, namely sexuality and religion (Besson, 2012: 14, 51, 68, 89; Daigler, 2012: 130; Mahaffy, 1996: 392-402; Thumma, 1991: 333-347; Yip, 2010: 45-46).

Whatever the motives, the important thing is to note, as a matter of fact, the existence of numerous Catholics in favor of sexual liberation, notwithstanding the official position of their Church, which opens the door to possibilities of religious subversion as amazing as problematic.<sup>9</sup>

## BLACK AND WHITE SHEEP

As if internal disagreement were not enough, some of these liberal Catholics have been organizing themselves in groups so as to question the validity of the current teachings, challenging the statements and norms already established.

According to them, Catholicism does not have to be necessarily conservative when it comes to sexual issues, the problem being rather the sexophobic culture it has inherited from a bygone age,<sup>10</sup> which could eventually get over if it would let itself be moved by the signs of the times. Furthermore, they claim that sexuality is indeed God's creation, a gift to mankind, and the resulting pleasure something inherently positive, so the Church should not restrict it as long as it is a sincere expression of love.<sup>11</sup>

At large, we may find four major topics which are intensively addressed by these liberal Catholic organizations: sexual diversity, reproductive rights, gender equality and priestly celibacy. All of them have received special attention because of their personal implications for specific groups of Catholics, willing to prove that it is possible to adopt an alternative point of view while respecting the Catholic doctrine as a whole.

Consequently, it is convenient to classify these organizations as follows:

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<sup>9</sup> A preliminary reflection on this issue may be found in Sánchez (2015: 17).

<sup>10</sup> "Es una historia muy larga. Yo creo que en la Iglesia Católica Romana hay un sexismo mucho muy profundo. Empieza con Pedro y Pablo y lo han traído a Roma. El caso de la Virgen María. Hay teorías que inventaron para decir que hasta la Virgen María no tuvo sexo, porque el sexo es siempre algo malo, el sexo siempre es algo pecaminoso." (It is a long story. I think there is a deep-rooted sexism in the Catholic Church. It all started with Peter and Paul, who brought it to Rome. Talking about the Virgin Mary, they even said she did not have sex, because sex is always wrong, it is always a sin). (Henry, member of the Catholic organization for sexual liberation *Iglesia Católica Ecueménica México-América Latina*, group interview, 2015, Mexico).

<sup>11</sup> "Pour moi l'homosexualité c'est une forme d'amour. On a dit 'homo' et puis 'sexualité' pour bien rappeler que c'est des pratiques sexuelles, mais pour moi non, c'est un homo-amour à la limite. Pour moi la question fondamentale là-dedans c'est l'amour, donc je ne vois pas pourquoi ça serait un problème." (For me, homosexuality is a form of love. People say "homo" and then "sexuality" in order to underline that it is about intercourse, but not for me, I would even call it *homo-love*. Because for me the foundation is love, so I do not see why it would be a problem). (Alphonsine, member of the Catholic organization for sexual diversity *David et Jonathan*, group interview, 2015, France).

1- Catholic organizations for sexual diversity.- A number of associations gathering LGBT people who are devoted Catholics, and whose activities are mainly focused on trying to conciliate *homosexuality* and religiosity.<sup>12</sup> They normally defend a vision of homosexuality as an act of love, instead of some kind of intrinsically wrong disorder, that is why they do not see any contradiction at all between being homosexual -with an active sexual life- and Catholic (Bárceñas, 2011: 46, 2016: 90-109).

As members of Dignity, we are Christ's disciples, lesbian and gay People of God in the Body of Christ, part of the Catholic tradition. Our sexuality is God's holy gift to us. In it, and in our genital activity, we want to meet our God. We continue to explore how to live sexually in an ethically responsible manner that is consonant with the teachings of Christ. We do so by reflecting on our personal experience and learning from those who are engaged in similar reflection (Dignity USA, 1989).

2- Catholic organizations for reproductive rights.- The faithful members of these groups dedicate themselves to defend the right of Catholics to choose, in accord with their conscience, the number and moment to have children, by the use of contraceptive methods and even abortion (!) (Escudero, 2008: 114-124; Hipsher, 2007: 241-263). For them, there is no reasonable justification, neither religious nor moral, for the Church to prohibit completely -as it presently does - this fundamental freedom. According to this view, a woman can perfectly have an abortion and yet continue to consider herself a good Catholic, since the Church has already made exceptions and provided guiding criteria on this issue:

En el código de Derecho Canónico, que lo toman como la máxima ley dentro de la Iglesia, hay un canon de "excluyentes" para las mujeres que deciden abortar y que no son condenadas. Ahí claramente lo dice, que las mujeres que sean menores de 16 años, si actuaron por miedo o si para evitar un mal mayor deciden abortar, son mujeres que no están condenadas, y ésa es la ley de la Iglesia, y muchas

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<sup>12</sup> While it is true that some of their members would not identify themselves precisely as "homosexuals" -but rather in a different sexual category- this is certainly the main subject which interests most of these organizations for the time

mujeres no la conocen, porque es algo que tampoco difunden; no lo difunden, pero está ahí escrito.<sup>13 14</sup>

3- Catholic organizations for gender equality.- A constellation of groups, as big as varied, who consider a priority to eradicate any form of gender discrimination inside the Church, concerning its roles and practices, particularly the priestly order, given that certain women feel the calling to become priests. In their view, the tradition of an exclusively male ordination, based mostly on the sex of Jesus and the apostles, lacks sound foundations and is grossly discriminatory, something that could actually be considered a sin in itself:

“It is wrong that Church law and doctrine applied against women rest on formulations that come from an all-male, celibate, clerical hierarchy. It is wrong that women play no part in decision making about Church rules and law” (Women’s Ordination Worldwide, n.d.).

4 - Catholic organizations for facultative celibacy.- These ones consist mainly, but not only, of priests working to modify the discipline of mandatory priestly celibacy and “dénoncer l’autisme de la hiérarchie de l’Eglise catholique romaine devant les situations désastreuses générées par cette règle rigide” (Plein Jour, 2008).<sup>15</sup> They feel that this is really an *old innovation* of the Church, without any kind of biblical basis, responding more to historical and very concrete reasons.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, it could easily be changed if there were a will, which would certainly be the best option, given the current situation of double-standards life of many priests who have a partner, a family...or worse (Martel, 2019; Rodríguez, 2019).

Leaving aside a properly religious discussion on all these issues -which are by definition unsolvable- the main obstacle for a Catholic sexual liberation lies, precisely, on *the problematic legitimacy of affirming oneself as Catholic while*

*contradicting the Church* in an explicit way. This is so because Catholic identity is presumed to be based above all on obedience towards the hierarchy and the implicit acceptance of all of its teachings as an unquestionable truth. In fact, we could say that *conformity* is considered to be a self-evident premise of being Catholic. Every faithful is supposed to believe and practice basically the same, submitting themselves to a unique set of ideas, norms and values, regardless of their origin, circumstances or personal judgment, because, from an orthodox point of view, there is only one acceptable creed after all, the one of the Church. Therefore, nothing could be more preposterous than a subversive Catholic professing his faith at odds with the Church.

It is worth noting that a certain common-sense assumption about religious identity is implied in this viewpoint, which supposes an intrinsic relation of dependency among three elements, namely, *institution*, *ideology* and *identity*, where the first one determines the others in a subsequent way: it is the Catholic Church who defines what Catholic doctrine is, and this, in turn, would define who is a true Catholic or not. Any other way of thinking Catholicism makes no sense for the Church and, therefore, is considered to be a sort of delusion, as explained by father Luis Carlos Lodi, for whom it is just impossible for a Catholic to be in favor of the right to choose when it comes to abortion, because it is expressly forbidden by the Church, so all alleged “Catholic” organizations endorsing this position are just false Catholics, period (Aciprensa, 2016). A similar position to the one taken by Rebecca Woodhull, from the National Council of Catholic Women, for whom supposed Catholic women priests would be, if anything, *catholics* with a small “c” (Brady, 2015).

Because of their dogmatism, fundamentalists are unable to conceive religious identity unless it is in a stereotypical, idealized way, from the point of view of their institution, determined to preserve orthodoxy and fidelity among the faithful. So, Catholics are by definition good white sheep expected to obey blindly whatever the clergy says. At least in theory (Sánchez, 2017: 113-123).

Surprisingly enough, this preconception is not exclusive of religious conservatives, but it actually pervades the academic milieu, as we may find remarkable intellectuals of the standing of Umberto Eco who share this view:

En línea de principio, considero que ninguno tiene derecho a juzgar las obligaciones que varias confesiones imponen a sus fieles. (...) No veo por qué los laicos deban escandalizarse porque la Iglesia católica condena el divorcio: si quieres ser católico, no te divorcies; si te quieres divorciar, hazte protestante; reacciona sólo si la Iglesia quiere impedirte que te divorcies si no eres católico. Confieso que incluso me irritan los homosexuales que quieren ser reconocidos

<sup>13</sup> The Canon law, which is the supreme law of the Church, includes exceptions for women who choose to have an abortion, where they are not condemned. It said explicitly that, for instance, if they are under 16 years old, if they did it because they were scared or in order to avoid a greater evil, they are not condemned, and that is the law of the Church, but many women ignore it, because this information is not disseminated; the Church does not talk about it, but it is written.

<sup>14</sup> Jazmín, member of the Catholic organization for reproductive rights *Católicas por el derecho a decidir*, group interview, 2015, Mexico.

<sup>15</sup> To denounce the silence of the clergy about the disasters this rigid rule is causing.

<sup>16</sup> An excellent study on the history of priestly celibacy is the one made by Meyer (2009).

por la Iglesia o los sacerdotes que quieren casarse (Eco & Martini, 2000: 67).<sup>17</sup>

Even contemporary theories on social identity, such as the self-categorization model, seem to be based on the same ground, proposing that the assertion of a given category, and therefore, social identity, results necessarily in a process of depersonalization, where the conduct is automatically adjusted in order to behave as a prototypical member of the group in question (Haslam, Reicher, & Reynolds, 2012: 205-210; Scandroglio, López & San José Sebastián, 2008: 81; Turner et al, 1987). In other words, social identity is conceived as an epiphenomenon of whatever hegemonic idea is widespread, whether it is in social imagination, a certain tradition or an already established institution.

It is precisely these presumptions -if not prejudices- about social and religious identity which make it of most interest to find out how exactly do these organizations justify their positions as Catholics. Is it really possible to claim being a Catholic while contradicting the Church? or is it just an elaborated pretext to rationalize rebellion and debauchery? We must wisely analyze if there is a line, however thin it may be, allowing to distinguish a paradox from a hypocrisy.

## CATHOLICS DESPITE THE CHURCH

The first and most important thing when analyzing Catholic organizations for sexual liberation is to understand that they have a radically different conception of religion, compared to traditional views, particularly about what the Church really is and what Catholicism really means.

There is a crucial distinction for them between the religious institution better known as the Church and the Church in a strict sense. While the first one refers to the human structure necessary for carrying out vital activities, such as the administration of the sacraments, by giving people different roles and responsibilities, the second one applies to the whole *people of God*, that is, every single Catholic, without distinction or exclusion of any kind, whose mission in life consists in spreading the gospel everywhere.<sup>18</sup> So that all believers -and not just the clergy- are the Church, and this means that the point of view expressed by the laity, including members of non-orthodox organizations, is also the

point of view of the Church, no matter how dissonant this may be from the official statements.

To support such an argument, they recall the original meaning of the term *ekklesia*, invoked by Jesus-Christ to name the community of faithful who recognized him as the messiah prophesied in the Tanakh. The very same term used by the Athenians to designate a kind of democratic assembly, where all the assistants had the right to participate, playing an active role in the decision-making process (Mogens, 2010: 507).

Following this line of thought, this was by no means arbitrary, expressing the main idea of what the Church of Christ is and how it functions or should function in practice, where the *sensus fidelium* has a fundamental part in clarifying all kinds of subjects, especially those surrounded by controversy (c.f. Comisión Teológica Internacional, 2014). That is why liberal Catholics feel convinced that their positions are completely legitimate, given that the Church is not a reified entity, but a living one, in a permanent process of construction and reconstruction, through the voice and action of those who accept Christ as their savior:

Chercheur.- Est-ce que c'est valable d'être catholique et ne pas être d'accord avec l'Église en même temps?

Alice.- Mais l'Église c'est nous!

Agathe.- L'Église c'est nous et on est d'accord avec nous. (...) si en fait, on pense l'Église comme une sorte d'extériorité qui énonce une doctrine dont il faut cocher toutes les cases et si on ne coche pas toutes les cases on est en dehors, si on pense l'Église comme ça, ça pose un problème; nous, on pense l'Église comme étant ce qu'on fabrique tous ensemble, l'Église c'est l'Ekklesia, c'est le rassemblement de ceux qui considèrent qui sont appelés et convoqués par Jésus-Christ, et là on se sent vraiment bien (...). Pauline.- Il faudrait remplacer le mot Église dans votre bouche par le mot institution. Il y a une différence entre l'Église, qui est l'assemblée de tous les baptisés, avec le pape et les évêques, etc., et puis l'institution, cette machine qui est profondément humaine qui s'est accumulée au fil des siècles avec ces rejets, ces affirmations (...).<sup>19 20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> In principle, I do not think people have the right to judge the religious norms that different confessions impose over their faithful. (...) I do not see why the laity make a big noise because the Catholic Church prohibits divorce: if you want to be a Catholic, do not get divorced, if you want to divorce, then you could become a protestant; you should complain only if the Catholic Church does not let you divorce and you are not a Catholic. I must admit it bothers me the homosexuals who want to be recognized by the Church or the priests who want to get married.

<sup>18</sup> It is worth noting that this standpoint finds support in the Second Vatican Council, particularly the constitution *Lumen Gentium*, preceded in turn by *Mystici Corporis Christi*, from Pope Pio XII.

<sup>19</sup> Researcher: Is it acceptable to be a Catholic while at odds with the Church?

**Alice:** But we are the Church!

**Agathe:** We are the Church and we do agree with ourselves. (...) It is problematic to think of the Church as something exterior that establishes a doctrine, so you have to check every box, otherwise you are out. We think that the Church is what we all build together; the Church is the *ekklesia*, the gathering of those who consider they are being called by Jesus-Christ, and in this conception, we feel very well. (...)

**Pauline:** You should replace the word *Church* by *institution*. There is a difference between the Church, which is the assembly of all the baptized, including, the clergy, and then you have the institution, this sort of machine, completely human, very ancient, hundreds of years affirming, rejecting (...).

<sup>20</sup> Alice, Agathe and Pauline, members of the Catholic organization for gender



This alternative notion of Church turns upside down the entire idea of a clerical system, which is admittedly far more in debt with Roman culture and the management of an empire than the Christian message itself.<sup>21</sup>

On the other hand, they establish a sharp difference between Catholic faith and hierarchy, where the hierarchy is an institutional authority in terms of belief, necessary to standardize certain precepts among the faithful, while faith is something transcendental and undefinable that remains beyond any existing doctrine; the real core of Catholicism.

It is true that the clergy is tasked with the regulation of creed and rite, by resolving different issues and dissipating the polemics that come along the way, so as to reach a verdict ensuring the stability of belief, but as much as institutionalization is required, true faith could never be constrained in this way, because it is a boundless, therefore, irrepressible experience of grace, too rich and deep for being the monopoly of any given institution, whatever this may be, which ultimately is not the true source of salvation. Put another way, we must not confuse Catholicism with clericalism.

La jerarquía católica no es el catolicismo. Es parte de la estructura de la Iglesia, pero eso no significa que nosotras tengamos que abandonar nuestra fe por ciertas personas que tienen el poder o el control. Al final ésa no es la fe, porque la fe no es hacia ellos, hacia la jerarquía católica (...).<sup>22 23</sup>

Belief in Jesus -not in the clergy- is at the heart of Catholic faith (Gross, 2008: 84). The identification with the Gospel, its teachings and values, as revealed in the life and death of Christ, constitute the truth of Catholicism, that is, the love of neighbor, the dignity of all human beings, the tolerance towards those who are different, the preference for the excluded... any other element is incidental in this regard.<sup>24</sup>

Toda la enseñanza de la Iglesia Católica se basa en la figura de Jesucristo, que es la parte central de la Iglesia. Ya después, a los seres humanos nos encanta poner reglas, estatutos, que nos van ahorcando o limitando, pero si eliminamos todas esas reglas que nos vamos creando y rescatamos el mensaje central que viene en los evangelios, en la vida de Jesucristo, vamos a descubrir que es un mensaje completamente de inclusión y basado en el amor. (...) No hay nada más importante para Dios y para Jesucristo que la dignidad de la persona humana. Y mientras a la persona humana se le trate con la dignidad de hijo de Dios, estamos cumpliendo con la

enseñanza de Jesucristo y los evangelios, por ende, somos católicos.<sup>25 26</sup>

That being said, it is not surprising that liberal Catholics reserve the right to think different with regard to the Vatican, especially when they are strongly persuaded that the clergy's position on new and sensible topics, namely sexual morals, is mistaken. In this case, the *people of God* would enjoy religious autonomy to clarify the meaning and values of Catholic faith according to their own theological research, even against the hierarchy (Dillon, 1999: 10, 29, 188, 189, 191, 216, 254). Because *sometimes, true fealty requires the courage to confront and correct religious authorities*; otherwise, faith would be at risk of falling apart because of human errors and prejudices.

In the Catholic tradition, "authority" refers to the sources presumed able to give instruction on God's will; e.g., scripture, tradition, Church officials, various experts, and collective human experience. Authority is always presumed to have insight into God's will because it represents the accumulated wisdom of the Christian people under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Yet authorities can obviously disagree on how the Spirit is guiding God's people. They can also make mistakes in identifying the movement of the Spirit. Thus, according to Catholic tradition, individuals are not only free to go against authority's recommendation but also morally required to do so if they have responsibly concluded that it is mistaken and that dissent, in theory or in practice, does not violate others' rights or endanger the common good (Dignity USA, 1989).

This explains why subversion is not seen here as a sign of disloyalty or treason, but quite the opposite, as an act of fidelity, inasmuch as it is encouraged by devotion, a sincere concern and desire to preserve Catholicism from the social bias clouding the clergy's judgment. Ironically, once the elite have lost the way, rebellion can be the only manner to remain faithful to the cause. This means, we are not talking so much about a contradiction as a paradoxical form of coherence.

But why exactly do these particular Catholics want to keep a faith which is dominated by an institution that -according to

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<sup>25</sup> All the teachings of the Catholic Church are based on Jesus-Christ, who is the center of the Church. Then, people has created rules and statutes, which result constraining, but if you get rid of all these invented norms and recover the central message from the Gospels, from the life of Christ, you discover that it is a message of total inclusion, based on love. (...) There is nothing more important for God and Jesus-Christ than the dignity of the human person, and as long as we treat the human person with the dignity of a son of God, we are accomplishing the teachings of Christ and the Gospels, therefore, we are Catholics.

<sup>26</sup> Jorge, member of the Catholic organization for sexual diversity CQCG, group interview, 2015, Mexico.

themselves- is blinded by intolerance and dogmatism, when it would be far easier to leave it and replace it for a more progressive form of Christianity. There are many other religious options open to all sorts of changes (Bárceñas, 2014; Sánchez, 2003). Isn't it a lost cause to wait for a sexual reform that could take a thousand years to come?

Of course, from a purely rational point of view, that would make sense as a kind of shortcut, demanding much less cognitive effort and avoiding all the emotional struggle that comes along, but the truth is that such a "solution" is completely out of question, as the point is not changing of Church, but to change their Church (Gómez, 2014: 13). To radically transform Catholicism from the inside, in order to recover its true sense, which is ultimately perceived as compatible with modernity (Sánchez, 2015: 9). Besides, being Catholic constitutes a *sine qua non* element of their personal and collective identity, the mere idea of abandoning this faith being just unbearable, as it is perceived like a quintessential part of who they are.

When you are born a Catholic, being a catholic is not just a faith, it's not just something you sign up for as a hobby, it's very cultural, it has very deep cultural ties and it's something associated with your family and your geography, where you come from, it pervades every aspect of every day, you know. (...) So, to say that you should just walk away because you don't like some aspects is like saying : I don't like David Cameron, therefore I'm going to give up my British citizenship and join the latest government that I approve of; the islandic government I quite approve of, but I'm not going to try to become an islandic citizen, because I disapprove the policies of my own government; if I disapprove it and I feel strong and I have the ability and the means to fix something, then I'm obliged to fix something.<sup>27</sup>

By reason of what seems a sort of *subversive fidelity*, these people are deeply committed to remain Catholics despite the Church.<sup>28</sup>

## SUBVERSIVE FIDELITY

Whether in religious, social or scientific imaginary, it is commonly assumed that voluntary members of a given institution are, by this very fact, satisfied with it, no matter its actual conditions; notwithstanding, although rare, there may

be movements of internal opposition, claiming a deviation from the main principles and actively working to change the status quo. As paradoxical as it may sound, their convictions could not only be strong, but consistent enough with their membership as to challenge the official statements declared by the authorities. A subversive form of fidelity to both the ingroup and the ideology it represents, which ultimately puts them at odds with the ruling class.

Religious groups, for instance, are thought to be homogeneous entities characterized by the submission of their adherents, expected to follow the guidelines established from above as a condition for belonging. Nevertheless, there is a gap between the dogmatism of the institution and the subjectivity of the faithful, which results in constant amounts of discordance and free-thinking, internal pluralism being the rule for practically all spiritual traditions. And while it is rather unusual, religious dissent can certainly evolve into a collective project, motivated by strong disagreements over some of the current teachings, considered to be distorted if not just plain wrong, whether it is a certain belief, the hierarchical structure or sexual morals. So, the compromise with what is considered to be the fundamental religious beliefs and values, together with a sense of confidence in their view, may compel a group of devoted to openly confront the clergy or whatever group is in power.

*Subversive fidelity* implies a form of ideological identity that goes against the flow, breaking paradigms about the relationship between *belonging* and *conformity*, mostly considered a sort of binomial. Indeed, there are ways of being, believing and practicing, diametrically opposed to the mainstream, which may become real counter-hegemonic programs, where the otherwise subalterns can eventually earn a place into their community's discussion. Of course, it is much easier -and far less disturbing- to think social identities in terms of *to be or not to be*, but the truth is that there are infinite ways to profess a particular affiliation, many of which may seem absurd, as they are characterized by ambiguity and contradiction when compared to the stereotypical model, occupying some kind of twilight zone.

What liberal Catholics do is to show that there is a way of being Catholic, as legitimate and serious as the orthodox one, but without the strict conservatism on sexual morals that the Church has tried to impose so hardly over the last decades. Most importantly, by criticizing publicly their own Church and its old-fashion sexual doctrine while remaining Catholics, they are demystifying the idea that Catholic identity consists basically in doing whatever the clergy says without objection. If total subordination may sound logical, in reality, it is nonsense to expect a rigid observance on behalf of believers in order to call them (true) Catholics. After all, *unlike the skeptic and the apostate, the subversive faithful does not reject the religious principles, but quite the contrary, they put them in practice above all, even above the institution meant to represent them.*

<sup>27</sup> Barbara, member of the Catholic organization for sexual liberation *Wijngaards Institute*, group interview, 2015, United Kingdom.

<sup>28</sup> Although not using the same term, different studies, especially those concerning homosexual believers, point to the same *subversive fidelity* thesis (e.g. Gross & Yip: 55).



If obedience is certainly a constant in religion, as much as in any other form of ideology, rebellion is no less so. The reason why conformity has been praised that much is because it ensures the stability, ergo, the survivance of the organization, in contrast with free thinking, too dangerous for what is already instituted, especially the group in power.

Due to the pervasive influence of (post)modern culture, it is more than likely that we shall witness growing numbers of subversive fidelity movements, coming from all kinds of institutional backgrounds, radically transforming, if not their official statements, at least their social composition. But this could be a first step for a major revolution to come. As Maffesoli says, sooner or later, *l'anomique devient canonique* (Maffesoli, 2012: 187).<sup>29</sup> In the end, the only institution that never changes is the one that is already dead.



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<sup>29</sup> What is anomic becomes canonical.

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