

New Ways Ministry

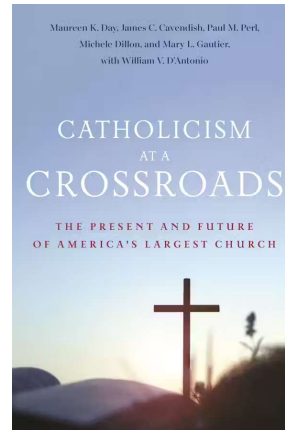
[American Catholics' Attitudes toward LGBTQ+ People: New Research Findings](#)



By **Guest Contributor** on March 8, 2025



Dr. James Cavendish



***Bondings 2.0* is happy to present the following article from guest contributor James C. Cavendish about the results of important new research concerning Catholics' attitudes toward same-gender couples and relationships. The research comes from a new book, [Catholicism at a Crossroads: The Present and Future of America's Largest Church](#) (NYU Press 2025), to which Cavendish contributed, along with fellow researchers Maureen K. Day, Paul M. Perl, Michele Dillon, and Mary L. Gautier with William V. D'Antonio.**

Dr. Cavendish is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of South Florida, and past President and past Executive Officer of the Association for the Sociology of Religion. His research examines a wide variety of topics at the intersection of religion, community, and social change. He has published numerous peer-reviewed journal articles focusing on advocacy efforts for a more inclusive church. You can follow his work at <https://www.usf.edu/arts-sciences/departments/sociology/people/faculty/james-cavendish.aspx>

While this article is longer than our usual fare, the importance of the data allows for this exception to our general rule of thumb.

One of the most noteworthy observations that my colleagues and I made in our recent study of national survey data of American Catholics was the dramatic shift that has taken place over the last few decades in attitudes with respect to the acceptance of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, their relationships, and their decisions to marry and form families. From 1987 to 2017, respondents were asked if they think a person can be a good Catholic without agreeing with the church hierarchy's opposition to same-sex relationships, or without their marriage being approved by the Catholic Church, which in the recent wave of the survey would include civil same-sex marriages. Compared to 1987, substantially more Catholics today believe they can be a good Catholic without obeying the church's teaching with respect to same-sex relationships: 55% in 1987 and 73% in 2017. Compared to 1993, substantially more believe they can be a good Catholic without their marriage being approved by the church (61% in 1993 and 77% in 2017).



This increasing acceptance of the morality of same-sex relationships and marriage outside of the church is also reflected in our respondents' attitudes about the locus of moral authority when making decisions about these issues. Specifically, American Catholics today are more likely to believe that authority on issues of sexual morality rests with the individual rather than with church leaders. When asked "who should have final say on the morality" of "a Catholic who engages in same-sex relations – church leaders, individuals, or both?," only 39% of Catholics said "individuals" at the time of our first survey in 1987, compared to a majority (58%) of Catholics in our most recent survey. Correspondingly, although 32% of Catholics in 1987 said church leaders alone should have final say on the morality of a Catholic who engages in same-sex relations, only 13% of Catholics in 2017 said the same.

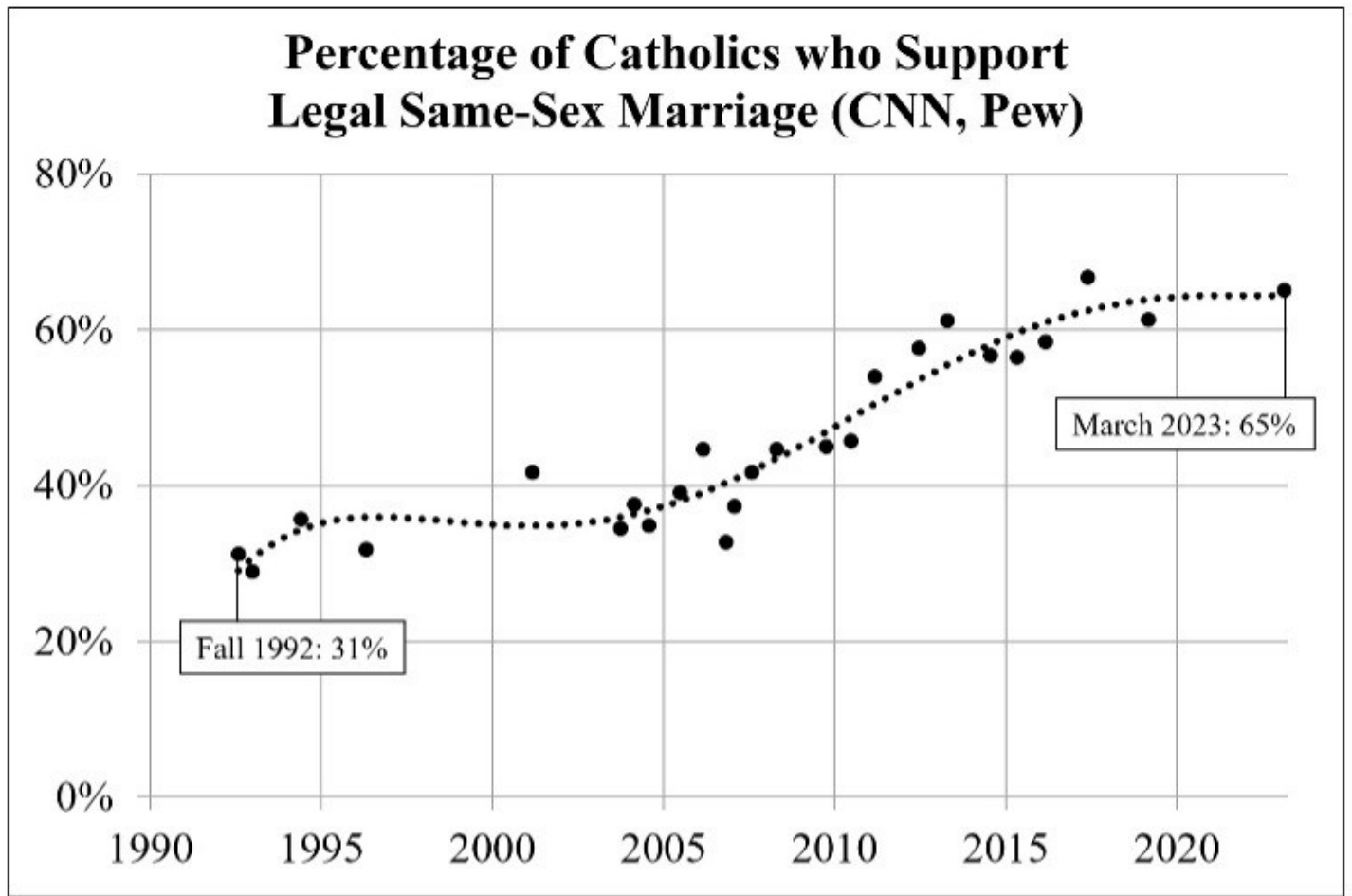
What these data illustrate is that, compared to previous decades, American Catholics today are much more likely to think that people in same-sex relationships can be "good Catholics," and they are much more likely to respect the right of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals to form and exercise their own consciences when deciding on the nature of their relationships.

These statistics come from a multi-year project, presented in *Catholicism at a Crossroads: The Present and Future of America's Largest Church* (2025, New York University Press), produced by a team of social scientists, of which I was a part. We analyzed data gathered from between 1987 and 2017 in several waves of a national survey of American Catholics. We also conducted interviews with nearly 60 church leaders in the United States, both lay and ordained. I was invited to write this article to share with you some of the key themes in our book that are particularly relevant to the LGBTQ+ community. As a gay Catholic myself, it is an honor for me to do so.

These trends of increasing approval of same-sex relationships, of marriage outside of the church, and of the individual as the locus of moral authority on sexual morality are also evident when Catholics are asked directly about the morality of same-sex relationships and support for legal same-sex marriage. Drawing on data from a variety of polls, including those conducted by CNN News and the Pew Research Center, our book reports that the percentage of American Catholics who say that same-sex relationships are always wrong fell most dramatically in the early 1990s, from 72% in 1991 to 47% in 1996. As of 2018, only 21% of American Catholics believe same-sex relationships are always wrong.

American Catholics' support for legal same-sex marriage increased dramatically over this same period, climbing from just 31% in 1992 to 65% in 2023. The most significant increase in this trend line appears to

be between 2005 and 2015, just before the watershed *Obergefell v. Hodges* Supreme Court decision in 2015, which extended civil marriage to same-sex couples.



(Source: Day, Maureen K., James C. Cavendish, Paul M. Perl, Michele Dillon, and Mary L. Gautier with William V. D’Antonio. 2025. *Catholicism at the Crossroads: Understanding the Present and Future of America’s Largest Church*. New York: New York University Press.)

These dramatic increases in the levels of acceptance of same-sex relationships and civil same-sex marriage among American Catholics should come as welcome news for LGBTQ+ Catholics and their friends and families. Compared to previous years, lesbian, gay, and bisexual Catholics should experience increasing acceptance by their fellow Catholics. With 79% of American Catholics questioning the notion that same-sex relationships are always wrong, 73% believing someone can be a good Catholic without obeying the church’s teaching with respect to same-sex relationships, and 65% supporting civil same-sex marriage, the chances of finding a welcoming and inclusive community of faith within the church are arguably higher today than they have ever been in the past.



Moreover, if one were to measure the level of acceptance by a congregation based solely on the attitudes of the laity on the morality of same-sex sexual relations, U.S. Catholics are as accepting as most Mainline Protestants and significantly more accepting as Evangelical Protestants (Day et al. 2025:88).

What remains unclear from our research is whether the same levels of acceptance extend to the transgender community. Our survey did not contain specific questions about the transgender community, gender identity, or the so-called “gender ideology.” Some of the church leaders we interviewed, including Francis DeBernardo, Executive Director of New Ways Ministry, and the late Deacon Ray Dever, a frequent speaker on issues of faith in the LGBTQ+ community and a [contributor](#) to New Ways Ministry’s *Bondings*, touched on these topics, and we share their insights in our book. Deacon Dever, for instance, reflected on his own experience as both the father of a transgender daughter and as a longtime deacon in the church. He said that LGBTQ+ people, especially young people, need to feel that their presence in the church is good for them, that it somehow “affirms who they are.”



According to Dever, church ministers would be wise to just create inclusive spaces where people can be a joyful, loving community of faith, something “that people want to be a part of.” He acknowledged that because “gender dysphoria is not something that is readily understandable by most people who are totally comfortable with their gender,” it is especially important for church ministers to educate themselves about it, to learn what the social and behavioral sciences reveal, and to practice accompaniment.

Although our survey data reveal that American Catholics are increasingly accepting of gay, lesbian, and bisexual Catholics and the issues that concern them, many of the church leaders interviewed acknowledged the difficulty some church ministers have in developing a pastoral language that is simultaneously welcoming to LGBTQ+ Catholics and their families while upholding the church's teachings on sexuality and sacramental marriage.

As data presented on New Ways Ministry's [website](#) illustrates, some bishops or pastors might refuse to hire LGBTQ+ lay ministers or teachers who are open about their sexual orientation, gender identity, or civil same-sex marriages because church leaders fear creating a "public scandal." However, other bishops or pastors have no concerns about hiring LGBTQ+ people and may even hold them up as role models.

One of the Catholic leaders we interviewed, Dr. Julie Hanlon Rubio, Professor of Christian Social Ethics at the Jesuit School of Theology at Santa Clara University, acknowledged that this lack of consistency both across dioceses and parishes, and across issues of morality, can itself be problematic. "If a bishop or other church leader is going to deny employment to a Catholic who is in a same-sex relationship, that bishop or church leader should also deny employment to a Catholic who is using artificial contraception or who is divorced and remarried." According to Rubio and some other leaders interviewed, if bishops or priests are going to withhold sacraments or deny employment for violating sexual teachings of the church, this practice should be applied consistently, not simply where it is convenient or popular.

One way for church ministers to achieve greater consistency is to accept Pope Francis's invitation to practice a more welcoming, inclusive Catholicism that encounters, listens to, and accompanies LGBTQ+ people on their journey. Pope Francis has affirmed the rights of LGBTQ+ people to receive the sacraments, to be baptized, to serve as godparents, and in December 2023, he approved the blessing of people who are part of same-sex couples in certain circumstances.

The research in this newly published study, particularly the chapter on "Love," is an invitation for everyday Catholics, parish ministers, and church leaders to reflect on the variety of individual identities – including sexual and gender identities -- and family forms that exist in society. It is also an invitation to imagine how these individuals and families might be called to a closer relationship with God and one another. All individuals and families, no matter what their identities or configurations, are called to foster and form loving, stable relationships in which they can flourish. We hope that our research findings will contribute to meaningful dialogue about how the church might best pursue its mission of encounter and accompaniment.

--Dr. James C. Cavendish, University of South Florida, March 8, 2025