

Maybe the Catholic Church isn't so bad...

“What makes me different is that I am an atheist. God is not real and Catholicism is built upon priests who sexually abuse little boys.” My freshman self smiles, I see my class laugh, and the teacher sends me to the dean. For the first time in my life, I am at a Catholic school, at the urging of my father, and I hate my predicament. It is the beginning of the high school year and my religion teacher is doing an ice breaker, having each student go around the room and say something unique about themselves. I feel bad for what I just did, but at least people will know my name. Coming from a public middle school, I have left all my friends and I am desperate to find a lunch group. Being closeted, but still labeled gay by all your classmates, makes it hard finding friends. At this all-boys school, it is my plan to hide my true identity, marry a woman, have children, and make those around me proud. My young self believes that the Catholic Church is the enemy, and that it will not be until college where I can be myself. Who would have thought that I would find a community within the school that loves and cares for the true Joey.

Freshman year and sophomore year were uneventful. By no means was I ready to come out, but I pledged to myself that I would not date girls. I joined an LGBT rights club on campus during my first year, but I would never tell my classmates about it. I labeled myself an ally and remained silent during meetings. I went because it filled me with joy that there was support at a Catholic school. However, my sophomore year, the club was forced to change its name from Alliance to Horizon. The Catholic administration was angry that there would be a group on campus with LGBT connotations. This further affirmed my hatred of the school and the Christian faith. I wanted to protest and freely speak my mind, but I felt that I had to blend with the crowd. I remained passive.

Junior year I knew something had to change within myself, but I did not know how to go about it. I was unhappy with my identity and I hated myself. I came out to my school counselor because at the time, I desperately needed a friend. He embraced me with open arms and let me know that I was not alone. He was the first person who heard my deepest secret. Although he taught me that there was nothing to change about myself, I still could not find the courage to come out to those closest to me. It was during this time I was selected to attend Kairos, a school-led religious retreat. Only 10 students from the junior class are chosen to go on the senior exclusive retreat. These 10 would be trained to lead their senior year. My classroom behavior did a 180° and teachers now saw me as a leader. I scoffed at the idea of Kairos and mocked what they called “Brotherhood”. In the end, I decided to go because college was on my mind and I wanted to put leadership experience on my applications.

Once we arrived to the camp grounds my stomach dropped. With 10 cabins, the school decided to put one junior in each, meaning I would be surrounded by seniors, all of whom I did not know. I told myself that if Lady Gaga could survive all of US media slandering her, I could survive four days away from home. Coming out was still in the back of my mind, and I thought, “What better time to come out than when a bunch of other boys are emotionally sharing their feelings?” On the first night, I came out to my cabin of seven seniors. I cried a lot, and to my surprise, they accepted me. I assumed that these conservative, Catholic boys were going to tell me that my decision was a choice, but instead I felt loved. On the second night, we had the Sacrament of Reconciliation and our school priest came to hear our confessions. I wanted to go to the private booth, hear him condemn me for being gay, and make an enemy out of the Catholic Church. But instead, again to my surprise, he told me that there were no prayers to say and no forgiveness to ask from God. I never cried so hard in my life. I realized that I was only calling

myself an atheist to hide the fact that I was angry and that I wanted to change myself. When I was younger I would pray to God to make me different. I remember being on the front lines of the Yes on Proposition 8 Movement with my dad. Now, I felt like I belonged and able to finally love myself. Over the next two days, I came out to everyone on the retreat and was met with open arms. These people gave me the courage to come out to my father and my family. I learned that although there may be negativity towards the LGBT in the Catholic community, there is an overwhelming amount of support, where people are carrying out the true message God intended.

Senior year I promised myself that I would embrace the real me. I took a prominent stance in the LGBT community and became the Vice President of my school's LGBT club. I brought awareness to the issue of sexual identity, and soon, students began confide and come out to me. When I saw how my story could help others struggling to find their true self, I began to envision a world where all men and women are truly created equal. The world is changing and in a place as conservative as the Catholic Church, the LGBT community can find a family who will support and fight for their rights.