

Narrative Analysis of the Conclave (2024) Film

Louisa Christine Hartanto¹, Patrisia Amanda Pascarina², Imanuel Deni Krisna Aji³, Jennifer Laurent⁴, Yemima Elihu Viridianoro⁵

Universitas Ciputra Surabaya

christine.hartanto@ciputra.ac.id¹, patrisia.amanda@ciputra.ac.id², imanuel.aji@ciputra.ac.id³,
jlaurent01@student.ciputra.ac.id⁴, viridianoro@student.ciputra.ac.id⁵

Abstract

The emergence of a new gender group categorized by the acronym LGBTQ+ in society has caused debate. The expressions they show in everyday life divide the opinions of various parties, one of which is the Catholic Church. This study aims to dissect the narrative in the film "Conclave" (2024) which shows the conflicting views of the bishops when choosing a new Pope in the Conclave session. The conflict between conservative and liberal bishops leads them to the fact that the elected Pope turns out to have a condition called intersex. In order to dissect the confession of the Catholic Church in the film, this study uses Todorov's narrative analysis method which states that the complexity of a narrative is structured based on the level of story and level of plot. Although this film does not directly tell that the bishops participating in the conclave accept the LGBTQ+ group as members of the church, at the end of the film it is shown that a person's identity is a blessing from God and humans have no right to change. This film emphasizes the paradigm of forgiveness, that although the Church does not justify or blame the existence of the LGBTQ+ group, they still prioritize God's love which is expressed in the Sacrament of Forgiveness of Sins. The results of this study will add to the discussion on the existence of LGBTQ+ groups in society as reflected in popular media representations and how the public forms perceptions of these groups.

Keywords: *lgbtq+; catholic church; narrative; film studies; gender identity*

INTRODUCTION

Since declaring that LGBTQ+ is not a crime and condemning the law that criminalizes homosexuals as unfair, Pope Francis has opened up new hope for the group whose acronym is described as Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual (LGBTQ+). Quoted from his interview with the *Associated Press* in January 2023, the Supreme Leader of the Catholic Church emphasized that God loves all His children regardless of all their shortcomings. Pope Francis asked to all bishops spread throughout the world's churches to welcome LGBTQ+ people into the church (Arbar, 2023). The Pope condemned countries that criminalize LGBTQ+ people, there are around 67 countries where 11 of them even apply the death penalty to people who are suspected of being homosexual. Pope Francis invited the bishops to open the Church to LGBTQ+ people by implementing the values of help, tenderness, as God has taught Christians (CNN Indonesia, 2023).

Currently, in 67 countries that are members of the United Nations (UN), homosexuals live in discriminatory conditions and without state protection. On the other hand, in 43 countries, homosexuals are not criminalized, but they also do not get the rights they need. In all these countries, what common is the lack of freedom of expression for homosexuals and the strong label given by social organizations which label them as "sick" and sinful. Several studies have shown that adolescents with a homosexual or bisexual orientation tend to think about several methods of suicide. This tendency is caused by the symptoms of depression experienced by homosexuals, combined with additional risk factors that are common in adolescence (such as searching for identity, hormonal changes, and efforts to be accepted by their group). At this stage, young people experience changes in behavior and ethics and feel a new sense of responsibility, but they are also at higher risk of acquiring unhealthy habits. Compared to their heterosexual peers, homosexual teens are up to 40% more likely to have suicidal thoughts or attempt suicide (Cárcel & Lanao, 2022).

As a multicultural nation, the United States has long recognized the existence and expression of other genders. In her article, Aulia states that by 2025, the number of people of other

genders in America will increase to 20 million who identify as LGBTQ+. However, their presence is under pressure from President Donald J. Trump, who returned to his second turn of presidency in 2025. In his first month in the White House, President Trump revoked all policies recognizing and protecting LGBTQ+ people, as a form of rejection to their existence in modern American society (Aulia, 2025). Indonesia, a country that dreams of emulating the democratic system of the United States, has yet to accept this group of people considered "societal waste." Research by Sihanani and Widhiasti, which examines public acceptance of transgender doctors, reveals that representations of transgender women in the mass media are often presented as mere laughing stock, rather than as a true reflection of the transgender community. Yet, transgender women in various professions outside the arts and entertainment world are also present in society (Sihanani & Widhiasti, 2023).

Pope Francis has proven himself to be a progressive Pope in accepting developments in the era, especially the LGBTQ+ group, by taking the initiative to ask the Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC) to prepare a document on biblical anthropology as an authoritative basis for developing philosophical and theological disciplines. In considering homosexuality, the 2019 document states that the biblical narrative tradition contains no clear indications of homosexual practices; they do not condemn such practices, nor do they consider them tolerable or acceptable (Cárcel & Lanao, 2022). This study will focus on how popular media, in this case films, construct the narrative in describing the church's perspective on contemporary issues, one of which is the LGBTQ+ issue.



Figure 1. Movies about the life of Pope Francis
(Source: IMDB, 2018 & 2019)

Known as a progressive Pope, the life journey of Pope Francis, or formerly known as Bishop Jorge Bergoglio of Buenos Aires, Argentina, has been featured in popular media products. Hollywood has produced 2 popular films, namely a documentary entitled "Pope Francis: A Man of His Word (2018)" and a film adaptation of the friendship between Pope Benedict XVI and Bishop Bergoglio produced by Netflix entitled "The Two Popes" where this film shows the difference in the conservative perspective of Pope Benedict XVI and has an impact on the decline of Catholics from several additional studies indicate that Catholic participation had been decreasing globally since at least the late 20th century, linked to cultural shifts, individualism, and institutional distrust rather than specific papal policies (DeSmith, 2025), compared to the liberal perspective of Bishop Bergoglio who wants Catholics to be more adaptive to the development of the modern world. The film "The Two Popes" was awarded with several nominations at prestigious award events in Hollywood, one of which was the Academy Awards here this film was nominated in the Best Actor category for Jonathan Pryce as Bishop Bergoglio, Best Supporting Actor for Anthony Hopkins as Pope Benedict XVI, and Best Adapted Screenplay for the scriptwriter, Anthony McCarten.



Figure 2. "Conclave" movie poster starring Ralph Fiennes
(Source: IMDB, 2024)

Cardinal Lawrence, played by Ralph Fiennes, is tasked with organizing and overseeing the conclave after the sudden death of the Pope. The strong candidates for the new Pope in the conclave are Cardinal Bellini, a liberal with a relatively progressive mindset, Cardinal Tedesco, a conservative who often criticizes the open-mindedness of the church under the leadership of the late Pope, Cardinal Adeyemi who openly stated that homosexuals should be imprisoned and will definitely go to hell, and Cardinal Tremblay who is very optimistic that he will become Pope as he before was one of the trusted men for the late Pope. Before the conclave opens, there is a surprise in the form of the appearance of Cardinal Benitez whose appointment as Cardinal was carried out by the late Pope in secret. Cardinal Benitez had almost resigned as archbishop for mysterious health reasons, but his resignation was rejected by the late Pope. After supporting and bringing each other down with dramas revealing each other's corruption, a bomb explodes outside the Vatican. This terror then gave rise to the opinions of several Cardinals, one of whom was Cardinal Tedesco who accused and criticized Muslims as terrorists and declared a religious war. Cardinal Tedesco's fiery speech was responded by Cardinal Benitez, who had indeed experienced real religious wars, who firmly offered a message about forgiveness, that the church is not just perpetuating tradition but also what must be done later. Because of his speech, Cardinal Benitez was then elected as the new Pope. However, at the end of the film, Cardinal Lawrence learns the facts about Cardinal Benitez's mysterious health condition just moments before Cardinal Benitez were introduced to the public as Pope Innocent. Cardinal Benitez's condition is called intersex, which is a condition where he was raised as a man, but he was born with a uterus and ovaries so that based on his chromosome condition he is defined as a woman (Peitzman, 2025).

The media's ability, especially film, to change people's views on an issue has led many to exploit it as a propaganda tool. The significant role of film in delivering social, educational, and cultural messages gained stronger momentum in in certain institution and/or region (Dzulfikar & Indrajayani, 2026). By exploiting the narrative of a pope elected to the throne who was intersex, the film *Conclave* could change the Catholic Church's stance on LGBTQ+ people. Using a descriptive narrative approach, this study aims to uncover the narrative presented in the storyline and plot about the LGBTQ+ character in the film "Conclave" released in 2024. The emergence of Cardinal Benitez with an intersex condition makes the Vatican Church face confusion: obeying God's teachings as stated in the Holy Scriptures or running the Church in a body that "exists between certainties"?

THEORY

A. The Church's Perspective on LGBTQ+ Issues

In modern times, sexuality and intimate relationships are topics that have never been fully discussed. According to Eva Illouz and Dana Kaplan, sociologists, sexuality and intimate relationships are a series of ideas, value matrices, and cultural frameworks accompanied by practices that have a strong impact on relationships and institutions. Illouz and Kaplan even assert that sexuality and sexual freedom have become basic principles of modern Western society, capable of condensing the values and practices of freedom or, more precisely, personal freedom (Illouz & Kaplan, 2020). In our culture, sex and sexuality are personal attributes and sources of identity that go hand in hand with equality and, ideally, in line with human dignity. At the same time, although sexual life no longer depends on traditional institutions of control, such as the family or church, the experience of salvation and a life full of grace for believers is still closely related to sexuality, however it is expressed. Even so, representation in the media perpetuates implicit biases and prejudices that reduce the credibility of people with sexual identity and sexual conditions that are considered unnatural in culture. These stereotypes then grow and develop in communities in society, one of which is the church. Stereotypes have harmful consequences in everyday life, such as lost job opportunities, silence, denial of full sacramental participation, or exclusion from the community of faith (Posey, 2021).

So far, the Catholic Church has implemented three paradigms in acceptance and inclusion of LGBTQ+ people. These paradigms replace the term from T. S. Kuhn to explain a model or stages that occur based on the historical evolution process. The three paradigms are the paradigm of fear, the paradigm of forgiveness, and the paradigm of recognition (Cárcel & Lanao, 2022). The paradigm of fear originates from the scriptures that show many events of God's wrath, such as the destruction of the Sodom and Gomorrah due to "sodomy" in both cities or in the Book of Leviticus where the term "abomination" is used to describe the behavior of men who sleep with other men. Currently, this behavior is better known as "homophobia" which means an attitude of rejection of homosexuals. This is the main basis of the fear paradigm that emphasizes the stigma that homosexuals are criminals, sick, and their sins are unspeakable. The second paradigm, namely forgiveness, does not criminalize LGBTQ+ people, but continues to see their lifestyle in the context of disease and sin. This paradigm is characterized by the neologism "homosexual," which emerged in 1869, coined by Karl Maria Benkert ("homo-" comes from the Greek *homoios*, 'same', and "sex" comes from the Latin, *sexus*). In the 1992, Catechism of the Catholic Church issued by Pope John Paul II stated that homosexuals have no psychological origins and therefore must be treated with respect, compassion and sensitivity. However, the Church still holds firm to its refusal to bless homosexual marriages because such relationships are considered invalid and because God cannot bless sin. The paradigm of recognition was inaugurated by Pope Francis who in his homily openly and for the first time mentioned the term "gay" who seeks God and has good will is not a problem and it is not for him to make the decision to judge. However, the inclusion of various sexual orientations, genders and sexes on an equal footing in the Catholic Church is a paradigm that has not been accepted by other hierarchies. The Catholic Church continues to distance itself from ecumenical Protestant nuns such as the Anglican and Lutheran Churches, which decades ago adopted this paradigm (Cárcel & Lanao, 2022).

B. Narrative Analysis Framework

Tzvetan Todorov is one of the figures who put forward the idea that a text has a specific structure or arrangement. Whether intentionally or not, the author constructs the text with the necessary stages and structure. Furthermore, readers and viewers must read the narrative according to the existing structure. It's important to remember that narratives always have a structure from beginning to end. Todorov stated that narrative is something that occurs in the form of speech, because it contains elements of chronology, motif, and plot, most importantly, the element of cause

and effect in events. Narrative is the initial form of order that exists in a society, which eventually turns into chaos due to the actions of individuals, but at the end of the story, order returns (Thomas, 2015).

Tzvetan Todorov developed a model using a structuralist approach, creating five narrative stages (Todorov & Gibby, 1977):

1. Equilibrium stage as initial equilibrium
2. Disturbance of the initial equilibrium due to an action
3. Recognition of a disturbance
4. Attempts to correct the disturbance
5. Restoration of the initial equilibrium

The simplicity of Todorov's model makes it very appealing and easily applicable across a wide range of media. For example, Turner's analysis of the films *Scream* (1996), *Alien 3* (1992), and *Jaws* (1975) shows how each film features a very clear initial recognition of the disturbance of equilibrium, followed by a long period of attempts to correct it before order is restored, however fragile (Turner & Duckham, 2006).

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a descriptive qualitative method with the narrative analysis method of Tzvetan Todorov's model. Todorov sees that media texts must have a certain arrangement or structure. The text maker, in this case the filmmaker, will purposely (or not purposely) arrange the scenes into a certain structure to form a narrative. Narrative for Todorov is what is to be said, through chronological order, motifs and plots, and the causal relationship of an event. The narrative of a text begins with an orderly condition; everything runs according to its role and responsibilities. This order is then challenged by an event or a character that causes chaos. In chaotic conditions, someone will be sent to find a solution to solve the chaos. The solution then returns the narrative to its initial condition, namely an orderly situation (Eriyanto, 2013). The uniqueness of Todorov's narrative analysis is that in addition to media texts having a sequence of events, the narrative of media texts has supporting elements consisting of two levels: the story level and the plot level. The story level consists of events that have occurred and are continuing, while the plot level is the physical scenes and backgrounds that are presented to support the story level. The sequence at Todorov's story level was modified by Lacey and Gillespie into five parts: (1) Initial conditions; (2) conditions of balance and order; (3) awareness of increasing disturbance; (4) recovery towards balance; and (5) creating order again (Sari & Haryono, 2018).

The subjects of this study are Todorov's two narrative levels, the first level is the five parts of story level, and the second one is the plot level based on supporting scenes at the story level. The object of this study is the LGBTQ+ character that appeared in this film and how the narrative shows the acceptance process of this character. The primary data collection process is to conduct a text analysis in the form of the movie *Conclave* (2024) which can be accessed on a streaming platform. Secondary data is in the form of documentation and scientific books that explain the History of the Catholic Church and the journey of recognition of the LGBTQ+ Group in the Church.

DISCUSSION

The *Conclave* (2024) movie has duration of 2 hours and 23 seconds. From the narrative structure at the story level, this movie is proven using 5 stages of story structure according to Todorov's narrative structure. The following table is the coding result at the first level of narrative analysis based on the story level:

Table 1. Story Level Coding

Initial Conditions	Conditions of Balance & Order	Awareness of Increasing Disturbance	Recovery Towards Balance	Creating Order Again
The Pope has died	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dean Lawrence becomes the “manager” who organizes the Conclave • 103 Cardinals come all over the world to attend Conclave • The sisters are helping Dean Lawrence organize the Conclave 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Archbishop Wozniak wanted to meet Dean Lawrence before the Conclave to tell him that the late Pope had dismiss Cardinal Tremblay for serious misconduct • The emergence of Cardinal Benitez of Kabul, Afghanistan as the 104th Cardinal to be secretly confirmed by the late Pope • Cardinal Adeyemi caught up in a past sexual case with Sister Shanumi 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A bomb exploded outside the Vatican • Cardinal Benitez elected as the new Pope • Cardinal Benitez's medical condition at the Geneva Clinic referred him for a laparoscopic hysterectomy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dean Lawrence accepts Cardinal Benitez's condition • Cardinal Benitez declared as Pope Innocent

(Source: By Author, 2025)

From **Table 1**, it can be seen that all stages are filled with story fragments indicating that the filmmakers use Todorov's narrative structure. Although this movie is an adaptation of a novel, Edward Berger, the director, and Peter Straughan, the scriptwriter, trace the narrative components into a complete story series. From the data coding, the main issue is not yet apparent, how the Cardinals represent the Catholic Church's views on the LGBTQ+ group. Therefore, narrative analysis is needed at the second level, the plot level. The plot level will complement each sequence at the story level which will bring up supporting documentation such as scene fragments that emphasize the level of acceptance showed by the member of the Church when a character with intersex condition appears.

Setting Roles and Rules in Conclave

Although in modern times the emergence of communication devices is diverse, the sanctity of the conclave with its myriads of strict secrecy rules is still firmly held by the cardinals. Early modern conclave historiography traditionally focuses on the purpose of the conclave to show how and why a particular cardinal is chosen - the mysterious process through which God makes His choice known to humans (Hollingsworth et al., 2020). The Bible itself provides very little explanation for how

conclaves should be conducted. However, several sources indicate that in the modern era, Christian communities select their pastors based on criteria set by the Roman Church, although the Roman Church itself does not explicitly explain its process for developing pastoral selection criteria (Baumgartner, 2006).



Figure 3. The death of the Pope as the initial condition
(Source: By Author, 2025)

The scene of the destruction of the Pope's ring, The Ring of the Fisherman, also known as the Piscatory Ring, is a plot that supports the initial conditions stage in the film *Conclave* (2025). This ring is a symbol for each Pope as the successor of Saint Peter, the fisher of men. When the Pope dies, the ring must be destroyed and will be replaced with a new one when the new Pope is elected. The accuracy of the Papal election process shown in the film *Conclave* is based on the long, well-documented history of the Vatican. Not only the Cardinals played a role in the implementation of the Conclave, the nuns and sisters were also said to have a role in preparing for the Conclave, especially in the domestic sphere such as cooking food for the Cardinals and tidying their bedrooms.



Figure 4. The sister's role in preparing 103 cardinals' meals
(Source: By Author, 2025)

Cardinal Lawrance: I asked for his permission to resign as a dean, join an order.

Cardinal Bellini: What did he (The Late Pope) say?

Cardinal Lawrance: He refused my resignation, said some were chosen to be shepherds and some to manage the farm. Apparently, I am a manager.

From the dialogue between Cardinal Lawrance and Cardinal Bellini, Cardinal Lawrance calls himself a "manager". Although in terms of structural positions in the Vatican there is no "manager", the intention of Lawrance calling himself a manager is because the late Pope hopes that he can carry out the functions of a manager in the Vatican, a person who plans, organizes, leads and controls the resources in an organization to achieve the final goal productively (Smit et al., 2020). Previous popes controlled the election of the next pope by regulating access to the cardinals

elected throughout the world. The role of the cardinals is to participate in the governance of their respective Churches such as carrying out diplomatic missions that are on the agenda of the Curia (Bombi, 2019). The Church has guidelines for managing human resources within the Vatican and religious organizations throughout the world. There are three main things as the mandates of the church in managing religious organizations; respect for the dignity of workers, the economic security of their families, and the common good of society clearly emerge as the main guidelines for responsible human resource management (Zigarelli, 1993). It is Cardinal Lawrence who implements balance and order at the story level of this film; he inspects the room that will be used for the conclave, welcomes the arrival of the cardinals, and tries to complete other preparations for the conclave to take place. Therefore, what Cardinal Lawrence did was to try to carry out his duties by prioritizing the first mandate, namely prioritizing the dignity of the people in it by trying to meet their basic needs before the conclave was held.

Church's Political Views in LGBTQ+

The Catholic Church is not a political institution, but a pope is a highly respected figure internationally and has a global platform to convey messages that are part of the church's ideology. Therefore, the office of pope carries a high degree of authority in upholding morality in world political practices and as an active participant in discussions about the role of religion in international relations (Shelledy, 2004). Politics in the Vatican have never been explained clearly in any scientific manuscripts or archives. Unlike American's politics which all of documented literacies always show battle between the Democratic Party and the Republican Party. The Democratic Party is known to have liberal views, prioritizing oppressed groups, voicing diversity of race, religion, and sexual orientation. In contrast to the Republican Party which prioritizes continuing the legacy of their Founding Fathers so that members and owners of the Republican Party are known as a conservative group. In the structure of the story awareness of increasing disturbance, problems emerge and will have a major influence on the vote acquisition of cardinals who have the potential to become the next Pope. In Europe, the opportunity for cardinals to play a role in politics is very small in some states, this is because they want to avoid divisions in the Church which resulted in the Protestant Reformation happening again (Hollingsworth et al., 2020).



Figure 5. The emergence of disturbance scenes

Cardinal Bellini: Tell them I stand for a common-sense approach to such issues as gays and divorce ... Tell them I stand for respecting other faiths, for tolerating other views within our own Church, and tell them that I believe women should play more of a role in the Curia ... I stand for everything that Tedesco does not.

Cardinal Bellini's statement in front of his colleagues makes him a cardinal with a liberal mindset, because he openly supports issues about homosexuality and divorce, both of which still cause conflict in the Church both in terms of issues and liturgical acceptance. Bellini also supports women to have a greater role in the Curia, his opinion is opposed by his colleagues because so far, the Vatican has been managed by men. Bellini's view is in contrast to another strong candidate for Pope, Cardinal Tedesco. If Cardinal Tremblay had problems with the Vatican administration misconduct that were known by the late Pope, Cardinal Adeyemi was actually hit by a scandal in the past, he had a child with a nun who was also sent to the Vatican to help organize the conclave, Sister Shanumi. Because of this scandal, he could not become the next Pope Candidate. But, according to Cardinal Bellini, Cardinal Adeyemi's view towards the LGBTQ+ community also threatened the Latest Pope's marked to the modern Church:

Cardinal Bellini: Adeyemi? Adeyemi? The man who believes that homosexuals should be sent to prison in this world and hell in the next?

The view of homosexual by Cardinal Adeyemi have a paradigm of fear, Adeyemi believes that homosexual have unforgiven sins so the deserved to be put in hell after they're death and also in the real life they are commit a crime and could be put in jail. As a representative Cardinal from Nigeria, Cardinal Adeyemi's views on LGBTQ+ people as expressed by Cardinal Bellini are not surprising. The issue of the rights of groups, particularly LGBTQ individuals, is still hotly debated in Nigeria. The local government has enacted a number of laws and policies that discriminate against the

LGBTQ community, thus reinforcing a culture of violence, oppression and exclusion. One of these is the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act passed in 2014, which criminalizes homosexual relationships and imposes long-term prison sentences on perpetrators. This policy worsens the situation for LGBTQ individuals, many of whom are victims of violence, intimidation, and discriminatory treatment (AARON et al., 2025). It is therefore understandable that Adeyemi believes that LGBTQ+ individuals should be imprisoned due to the policies regarding this group in his country. Moreover, as a Catholic leader, Adeyemi believes that those who have deviant sexual views will definitely end up in hell after they die. Adeyemi's views are in stark contrast to Cardinal Bellini, one of the "contenders" also nominated as the next Pope.

The latest turbulence was marked by the emergence of Cardinal Benitez as the 104th cardinal representing the country of Afghanistan. His existence became a problem because his ratification as a cardinal was only known by the late Pope.



Figure 6. A Bomb Explosion made Cardinals gather to have a urgent meeting
(Source: By Author, 2025)

Cardinal Benitez: With respect, what do you know about war? I carried out my ministry in the Congo, in Baghdad, in Kabul, I've seen the lines of the dead and wounded, Christian and Muslim. When you say we have to fight, what is it you think we're fighting?

The 3 countries mentioned by Cardinal Benitez are countries that have experienced interfaith turmoil caused by ISIS. Although the organization has lost its caliphate in Iraq and Syria, its network is still spreading and active in various parts of the world. Not only as a terrorist group, ISIS also acts as an agent to destroy interfaith relations through sectarian violence and extreme intolerance. Not only as a terrorist group, ISIS also acts as an agent to destroy interfaith relations through sectarian violence and extreme intolerance. In Baghdad, an ISIS militant wearing a suicide vest (SVEST) targeted the Kadhimiya shrine in northern Baghdad – a site considered one of the four most sacred in Iraq and a top priority for protection by Iran and Shi'a militias (Lewis, 2014). Meanwhile, on the African continent, the towns of Beni and Ituri in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo witnessed brutal attacks by the ADF group that declared allegiance to ISIS since 2019. In a short period of time, Christian villages were burned, churches vandalized, and hundreds of citizens slaughtered in the name of an ideology brought from outside the continent (Whetho & Uzodike, 2009). In a predominantly Christian country, such attacks raise fears of widespread religious violence that was previously not so dominant. And finally moving to Kabul, Afghanistan, ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K) has emerged as a counterforce to the Taliban, but much more brutal. Their main target was the Hazara Shia, a minority group victimized by bomb attacks on schools and mosques. The Sikh and Hindu communities, already scarce, were also targeted, causing a mass exodus and

the near annihilation of religious diversity in the Afghan capital (Asatryan, 2025). Today, the hope for interfaith peace is not just about the removal of weapons, but the struggle to live in peace in the midst of violence that rejects difference. Perhaps this is what Cardinal Benitez was trying to question when Cardinal Tedesco condemned the people who carried out the bombing outside St. Peter's Basilica.

After 3 days and 5 rounds of voting to elect a new Pope, Cardinal Lawrence had opened up all the dirt in all the strong candidates. Indeed, the decisions of the cardinals to elect a papal candidate are rarely personal. Most of them are constrained by family or political loyalty, belief in the order, economic interests, even personal rivalries. In the early rounds of voting in the conclave, cardinals usually cast their votes for their older and more respected colleagues, but in the later rounds they will choose colleagues who they hope will accommodate their personal interests (Hollingsworth et al., 2020). Thus, as seen in the movie *Conclave* (2024), the cardinals formed groups divided based on controversial issues facing the Church at that time, these issues were often more political than spiritual. The fellowship that occurred among the cardinals was later proven by the bomb explosion in Piazza del Risorgimento which resulted in several cardinals being injured. During an important meeting, Cardinal Tedesco stated that he wanted to start a religious war which was later denied by Cardinal Benitez who had experienced a war between Christians and Muslims. Cardinal Benitez's speech then made him elected Pope when the vote was held again. The election of Cardinal Benitez ended the fierce vote and the new Pope would finally be announced to the entire world community.



Figure 7. After confronted The Elected Pope, Cardinal Lawrence turned on the smoke machine to announce the world that they have a new Pope
(Source: By Author, 2025)

Cardinal Benitez: I was who I had always been. It seemed to me more of a sin to change His handiwork than to leave my body as it was.

Cardinal Lawrence: So, you are still, um...

Cardinal Benitez: I am what God made me

Cardinal Benitez found out he had a uterus and ovaries when he had to undergo an appendectomy, a surgical act to remove the small intestine. He said he had given his resignation letter to the late Pope but the late Pope refused. The late Pope applied the paradigm of forgiveness and the paradigm of recognition; Cardinal Benitez's condition made him different but still a proof of God's extraordinary creation. While some religious scholars and historians claim that the Bible has condemned the LGBTQ+ community since its early interpretations, both the Bible and mainstream Christianity did not explicitly engage with gay identity until the mid-1900s. Historian

Rebecca Davis notes that early conservative fundamentalist writings and Scripture largely avoided the subject of homosexuality (WHITE, 2015).

The death of Pope Francis in April 2025 brought deep sorrow to Catholics around the world, including the LGBTQ+ community. During his papacy, Pope Francis was known as a pope who stood up for marginalized groups. He loudly advocated for the church's recognition of the LGBTQ+ community and called for an end to the criminalization of this group. Pope Francis' most famous statement was "Who am I to judge?" when he was asked about gay priests in 2013. He insisted that we are not in the right position to marginalize people for their sexual orientation and the Catholic Church must be respectful and inclusive to them like other people. Another quote from Pope Francis that is relevant to Cardinal Benitez's statement in the film was said to a gay man named Juan Carlos Cruz. He said to Cruz, "God made you like this and he loves you" (Padilla, 2025). This statement has more or less the same meaning as Cardinal Benitez's statement that he – his body, soul, and spirit – are entirely the work of God.

One of Saint Paul's letters to the Galatian Christians reassured them that Jesus Christ had brought them freedom and that they should not allow themselves to be chained any longer by the slavery of the Law (Cárcel & Lanao, 2022). God's promises are addressed to all people through faith in Jesus Christ, as written in our holy Bible:

"There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female; you are all one in Christ Jesus"
(Galatians 3: 28)

Cardinal Lawrence was moved by Cardinal Benitez's sincerity in accepting his identity. He also expressed his admiration that the late Pope also supported Cardinal Benitez's ministry in the Church despite his condition which is called intersexual. As written in the Book of Galatians above, even the LGBTQ+ group is one in Jesus Christ. As we can see from the Cardinal Benitez's last sentence, he believes that he is what God made him, proved that he adheres to the paradigm of recognition which encourages an inclusive and liberating act to refuse being heteropatriarchal or paternalistic (Cárcel & Lanao, 2022)

CONCLUSION

In accordance with the aim of this study, it can be concluded that although cardinals in the Catholic Church are bound by sacred vows and institutional doctrine, they remain embedded within socio-political realities that shape their ideological positions, whether conservative or liberal. The narrative presented in *Conclave* illustrates this tension by portraying the conclave not merely as a sacred ritual, but as a site of ideological contestation where theological authority intersects with political negotiation. The division between conservative and liberal factions reflects a broader struggle within contemporary Catholicism: how to reconcile doctrinal continuity with the demands of modernity. In particular, the film foregrounds the Church's moral stance toward LGBTQ+ individuals as a critical point of conflict, revealing how certain conservative perspectives continue to frame non-heteronormative identities as morally deviant, even to the extent of justifying exclusion and condemnation. This representation underscores a deeper institutional anxiety, where adherence to traditional moral teachings clashes with evolving global norms surrounding human rights and inclusivity. The election of Cardinal Benitez, an intersex figure, serves as a symbolic disruption of rigid binary frameworks that have historically underpinned Catholic moral theology.

His papacy, as accepted by Cardinal Lawrence within the film, suggests a potential—albeit contested—opening toward a more inclusive ecclesial imagination. However, this cinematic resolution simultaneously exposes the gap between representation and reality, as the contemporary Catholic Church continues to exhibit internal fragmentation regarding LGBTQ+ issues. Therefore, the *conclave phenomenon* in the film operates as an allegory of the Church's ongoing negotiation with modernity, where moral authority is no longer uncontested but must continuously respond to shifting cultural and ethical paradigms. Future research may further explore how Catholic religious leaders interpret and negotiate LGBTQ+ identities in the modern era, particularly as mediated through popular culture texts such as *Conclave*, which both reflect and shape public discourse on religion, morality, and inclusion.

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