

A Film Review in a Letter to Senator Manny Pacquiao

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Dear Sen. Manny Pacquiao,

In today's time, we have witnessed how the world has treated the LGBTQ+ community with either discrimination or indifference. This has caused pain and divide in our world, in a time when solidarity is most crucial. We discovered your views about the community, calling them "*worse than animals*".[♦] This controversial remark has elicited an unfavorable response from many, including us. Despite your apology, we feel that you failed to sympathize with those within the community.

In this letter, allow us to offer some valuable insights from the movie entitled *Boy Erased* (a 2018 American biographical film based on Garrard Conley's 2016 memoir of the same title; Directed by Joel Edgerton). It shows the discrimination, hate, and pain that these people go through everyday. As many people look up to you and consider your morals to be valuable, we urge you to read our message with an open mind. Hopefully, you may use your influential voice to encourage compassion and acceptance.

[♦] Pacquiao's statement from a video interview sometime in 2016: "*Common sense lang. Makakita ka ba ng any animals na lalaki sa lalaki o babae sa babae? Mas mabuti pa 'yung hayop. Marunong kumikilala, kung lalaki o lalaki, babae babae, o di ba? Ngayon kung lalaki sa lalaki, babae sa babae, mas masahol pa sa hayop ang tao. (Rough translation: It's just common sense. Have you seen any animal [copulating] male to male and female to female? Animals are better because they know how to identify the male as male or the female as female. Now, if a male copulates with another male and female doing it with another female, then the human being is worse than an animal.)*" <https://www.wheninmanila.com/manny-pacquiao-on-same-sex-marriage-says-mas-masahol-pa-sa-hayop-ang-tao/> [Ed.]

Following on the memoir of the same title, *Boy Erased* features Jared Eamons (based on Garrard Conley), the sensitive and nuanced son of a Baptist pastor. He was being raised in a small, conservative town and, later on, embarked on a heartbreaking journey toward self-acceptance and love.

A sexual assault encounter in college leaves Jared unnerved and conflicted, but unable to open up. When he is confronted by his parents, Jared admits that he is attracted to other men. His father, being a man of the cloth with traditional morals, asserts that his son will not be accepted by God and his community unless he will get rid of his homosexual urges. Jared reluctantly agrees to go to the church-supported “Love in Action” (LIA) rehabilitation institute where he undergoes conversion therapy.

Early into the movie, we are introduced to Victor Sykes, director and chief therapist at the rehabilitation center. He imposes very questionable exercises on the attendees, shaming them for their sins. As Jared and his companions work their way through the emotionally manipulative program, we see that religion has been heavily used to condemn the various forms of same-sex attraction, leading to psychological scars, loss of identity, and even death.

The movie highlights how Jared had to attend therapy as if homosexuality was an illness. Sykes proved how people have the tendency to use societal standards to guide people toward the light (cf., Dagmang 160), and this is emphasized in how the program enforces religious beliefs for the participants to change who they are. Their identities were being stripped away, not given the right to flourish as human beings.

Unlike LIA, it is our duty to bring the kingdom of God here on earth. One of the values of God’s Kingdom is the all-inclusive solidarity of humanity (Nolan 74).

Everyone should be loved and accepted, regardless of who or what they are. That is why we call to you to be more accepting of the different gender identities in the world—as gender is part of sexuality, which is a gift from God. We are to uphold the values of generosity and compassion to achieve wholeness through our human sexuality. Moreover, God also calls us to be in solidarity with people beyond ourselves, and this reminds us to be empathetic toward others through listening (Neafsey 10-11). As it is a part of our identity to be co-creators of God in “the cosmic ministry of care and healing” (Olthuis 171), we need to be open to others in order to be truly open to the Divine.

Moreover, the movie is a discovery point for those who are unacquainted with the existence of gay-conversion therapy and how it can be tormenting. The program hopes to achieve the goal of converting non-straight sexual orientations by imprinting the idea that being homosexual is a moral failing and must be remedied by “*praying the gay away*.” This convoluted way of thinking puts into question how traditional beliefs can be weaponized to oppress those who fail to conform. Undoubtedly, cultural patterns from previous generations are valued immensely. It forms the foundation of the identified heritage that comprises what we deem indispensable or meaningful (Dagmang 165). However, we discover that placing too much value on tradition has marginalized members of the community; the young participants of the program are denied compassion and understanding. Expecting teenagers to benefit from the “*treatment*” of the program, with the naïve assumption that the process does not violate and abuse their rights, signals the need to reassess what values must be upheld to become loving members of society. Nolan (65) affirms that the vision of the Kingdom of God of Jesus was a message that was both

compassionate and encouraging to the poor. Gay-conversion therapy is a far cry from the salvation it hopes to bring to the young participants—it only strengthens the societal prejudice that continues to endanger and harm the LGBTQ+ youth.

Moving on, Sykes states that having homosexual tendencies is a product of poor parenting through the program's moral inventory activity, and that the actions of their families have influenced their sexuality. Nevertheless, Jared's values and that of his parents' were contradictory. Coming from a religious family, they saw his being homosexual as sinful. This disparity shows the conflict between Jared's own values against the interpersonal and universal values. However, we learned that Jesus also struggled with pre-established mindsets during his time, and that his response was the opposite of conformity (Olthuis 158). He healed the poor, putting human relationships above labels, statuses, and traditions of the elders. Likewise, in today's Basic Ecclesial Communities, we are called to be a community that share experiences of reality, supporting, and nurturing one another and strive toward improving interpersonal relationships (Dagmang 8). Rather than turn people away due to their values being different, we must urge ourselves to see life through their eyes.

While we live in a world full of people who may be radically different, the challenge is to share our experiences and find commonalities that we may see that we are more alike than not. According to Green (273-274), a well-trained nurse can be a good nurse, but only a nurse who can create relationships with their patients can be a great one. Likewise, people like Jared's mom can choose to open their hearts and strengthen their relationship with those they initially believed to be different. Meanwhile, there are also people like his dad who fail to nurture relationships and reject the values different from

his own. Even those with the hardest of hearts can come to realize that interpersonal relationships transcend their own solidified convictions.

However, for people who continue to live in an environment that is full of hate, the only way out of what seems to be a bottomless pit is to give up on their own lives. This was the case of Cameron, one of the attendees of Love in Action. Throughout the program, Cameron was shown to be the “big guy,” but it was revealed in one of the activities that all he longed for was paternal affection and to be acknowledged. As we grow up in a society with certain expectations from us, we are pressured to live a life that conforms to its standards (Dagmang 166). These expectations, if not met, can be detrimental to our relationships.

The emotional trauma that Cameron received from his father was magnified even more when Sykes held a fake funeral service for him, and he gets beaten by a bible by his family and other people in an attempt to “expel the demon” that makes him gay. The only time that Cameron chose to go against Sykes was when Jared could no longer tolerate the practices of LIA, prompting him to help Jared leave the center. It is in the scene where Jared receives news that Cameron had committed suicide where we realize the magnitude of the trauma and suffering he endured at the rehabilitation center that drove him to kill himself, revealing the disheartening predicament of people when they feel like the whole world—even God—is against them.

We hope this letter would enlighten you and help you to better understand how the scrutiny and discrimination of the Church can have grave repercussions. We would like to invite you to reevaluate your stance toward this issue and choose the more loving option. While the Church considers itself as the preserver of all unyielding doctrines in both religion and morality,

Pope Francis himself admits that these teachings will always be open to discussion and even regards members of the LGBTQ+ community as part of God's family. With your power and prestige, we hope you can utilize your position to bring the vision of God's Kingdom here on earth. In the same way that Jared's father slowly made the effort to understand and eventually reach out to his only son, we hope you would be able to find it in your heart to do the same. Finally, we would like to thank you for taking the time to hear us out. In a world full of animosity, we hope you decide to choose and spread love.

Sincerely,

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