

+ A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

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Supporting Students who identify as Transgender in Our Catholic Schools

A Catholic World View

“A Catholic world view is a way of looking at the world through a Catholic Church lens. This worldview is derived from Catholic Church Teachings, scripture and Catholic Church traditions. These teachings, scripture and traditions form the basis of what is taught in Catholic Schools.”¹

In Ontario’s Catholic schools, the relationship between learning and believing is fundamental. Catholic educators focus not only on student knowledge and skills, but also on Christian values and moral action. Educators teach the curriculum established by the Ministry of Education through the lens of the Catholic faith.

When it comes to Human Sexuality, often there is much misunderstanding as to how the lens of faith informs the mandated teaching of Ministry

curriculum. It is important for Catholic educators to have clarity both about Church teaching regarding persons who identify as LGBTQ and about the duty of care Catholic educators have toward students, their families and other members of the Catholic education community. For those who identify as gay, lesbian or transgender, this — considered controversial by some — is an aspect of their daily lived experience. It is a gospel imperative that they find a safe space and hospitable welcome within society and within every

Catholic school.

As the Catholic Bishops of Ontario express in their Pastoral Guidelines to Assist Students of Same-Sex Attraction: “Catholic Schools should consciously

create an environment where students who feel marginalized, rejected or vulnerable can experience safe, nurturing, inclusive communities of faith.”²

“A compassionate response to individual students need not dilute a robust presentation of Catholic teaching on human sexuality to all

students. Rather, it can be viewed as an opportunity to clarify and deepen our understanding and teaching of the faith.”³

Gender Identity and Gender Expression

Catholic educators need to have a clear and accurate understanding of the experience and proper terminology associated with gender identity and gender expression.



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A Catholic understanding of gender identity and gender expression is quite different from the understanding of gender as presented in Human Rights Commission policy and Ministry of Education documents. The variance between the two perspectives arises from a fundamentally different understanding of the human person.

clear understanding of both perspectives is necessary for a full appreciation of the context within which Catholic educators are expected to work and support students who identify as transgender. We are called to respect persons who disagree with us, while holding the expectation that our beliefs as Catholics, and our denominational rights, will similarly be acknowledged and respected.

ONTARIO HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION (OHRC) POLICY AND MINISTRY OF EDUCATION POLICY is premised on the following understanding of gender:

Gender Identity refers to each person's internal and individual experience of gender. It is a person's sense of being a woman, a man, both, neither, or anywhere along the gender spectrum. A person's gender identity may be the same as, or different from, their birth-assigned sex. Gender identity is fundamentally different from a person's sexual orientation.

Gender Expression refers to how a person publicly presents their gender. This can include behaviour and outward appearance such as dress, hair, make-up, body language and voice. A person's chosen name and pronoun are also common ways of expressing gender.

Trans or Transgender is an umbrella term referring to people with diverse gender identities and expressions that differ from stereotypical gender norms. It includes, but is not limited to, people who identify as transgender, a trans woman, a trans man, transsexual, crossdressers, or gender non-conforming, gender variant or gender queer.⁴ The term Cisgender is often used to denote those whose gender identity matches their birth-assigned sex.

Gender Dysphoria is the experience of feeling one's emotional and psychological identity as male or female to be opposite to one's biological sex, especially feelings of discontent or anxiety experienced by some persons resulting from gender identity issues.⁵

Our contemporary society is diverse, and so it is not surprising for individuals to hold a variety of perspectives and beliefs on many issues, including sexuality, and people frequently express contradictory opinions. While understanding or defining sex and gender as separate and distinct terms is not consistent with the teaching of the Catholic Church and does not reflect a Catholic understanding of the human person and the nature of sexuality, it is a perspective articulated by the Ontario Human Rights Commission, is recognized in law, and should be acknowledged as such. The perspective of the Church and the perspective of the OHRC are very different, and a

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Church Teaching on Gender

As affirmed by Scripture and articulated in the Catechism of the Catholic Church⁶ human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. God has chosen to create each person uniquely, and calls each person into loving communion with God and all other persons. Human identity as a unique creation of a loving God unfolds over each person's lifetime.

And, as the Education Commission of the Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario writes, "Sexuality and its expression touch the

“Sexuality and its expression touch the deepest realms of the human person — how we relate to ourselves and others, and how we are called by God to love. The Church cares deeply about the human person and sexuality because she cares about our call to image God in our human relationships of love.” God is love (1 John 4:8)

human person and sexuality because she cares about our call to image God in our human relationships of love.” God is love (1 John 4:8).

It is ultimately from this understanding of God that the Church’s vision of the human person, love, and sexuality emerges: a vision that reveals that every single human being without exception has immeasurable value; a vision of human love and sexuality as a vocation to love as God loves — revealing in the creation of the human person, body

and soul, male and female, our deepest meaning and identity.

Far from being closed-minded or exclusionary — a mere set of rules and prohibitions — the Christian vision of the human person and human sexuality offers the fullest possible understanding of the human

person — a union of body and soul, created out of love, to fulfill a purpose revealed by God, that promises fullness of life now and which will be eternal with God. It is a vision that reveals the beauty and wonder of our life and destiny as human beings, one that we shape and form through our free choices and actions, in cooperation with grace, into the image of the one who is the way, the truth, and life itself — Jesus Christ.”⁷

The latest document from the Vatican Office of the Congregation for Catholic Education, titled, “Male and Female He Created Them” (2019), presents a summary of the Church’s teaching with respect to gender. The subtitle of the document, “Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education” acknowledges the complexity of the issue, and the inherent tensions between a secular understanding of gender expression and gender identity, and the traditional Catholic view of sexuality.

A Catholic understanding of gender identity flows from this teaching on sexuality and marriage. In the Church’s understanding, each person is made in God’s image as male or female. Life begins at the moment of conception, and gender

identity is determined genetically, anatomically and chromosomally. A person may feel a strong desire to be a person of the opposite gender, and may begin to express themselves as a person of the opposite gender. However, in the Church’s view, those persons should be supported to accept their birth gender.⁸

While the Church has compassion for those who may experience gender dysphoria, and encourages counselling support, Catholic teaching does not support alteration of the physical body to represent



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the opposite sex. This does not dispute the legally established right of an individual to choose such a course of action. It rather asserts a moral perspective that encourages a deep practice of spiritual discernment in order to discover one’s personal vocation.

The recent publication from the Congregation for Catholic Education reiterates the Church’s clear call to “respect every person in their particularity and difference and its opposition to bullying, violence, insults or unjust discrimination,” while encouraging a path of dialogue that includes “listening, reasoning and proposing.”

In response to the issues at question, the Church declines to consider a person as heterosexual, homosexual or transgender and consistently insists that every person has a fundamental identity: by grace a child of God and heir to eternal life.

As the Canadian Catholic Bishops write, “In the eyes of the Church, every human person is a unique and irreplaceable gift created by our loving God and called to be his son or daughter.

Created in the image and likeness of God and redeemed by the blood of Christ, every person

possesses an intrinsic dignity which must always be respected.

We exhort all those exercising a ministry in the Church or working in the pastoral care of young people to be especially careful not to perpetuate injustice, hatred or malice in speech or action – unfortunately still too common among us...

We wish to stress that, although sexual identity helps situate the person as a unique individual, the human person “can hardly be described by a reductionist reference to his or her sexual orientation.” Those with same-sex attraction are first and foremost human beings, our brothers and sisters in Christ. Because of their inherent dignity, they always deserve our respect.”⁹

Pastoral Care

As in the case of members of the community who experience themselves with same-sex attraction, having a clear understanding about the Church’s teaching on Human Sexuality must be accompanied by a similarly clear understanding about the duty of pastoral care such that all students are supported to grow and flourish as whole persons. Authentic pastoral care must always be guided by the vision of the human person passed on by the Catholic faith. It is care of souls, understood as care of the spiritual, intellectual, emotional and social well-being and growth of the person.

The Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario provided faith guidance for providing a pastoral response to students concerning matters of sexuality with the publication of “The Human Person, Love and Sexuality: A Resource for Catholic Educators” (2016). It outlines, and elaborates upon the four following principles for authentic Christian pastoral care of students:

- All authentic pastoral care begins with and is continually guided by the vision of the human person, love and sexuality

- The pastoral care of the Church must reach out to all with unconditional love
- Pastoral care must meet a person wherever they are along the path of their spiritual and moral life
- For pastoral care to be effective, Jesus Christ, the true shepherd, must be known, and his voice heard¹⁰

Educators are encouraged to read this document to deepen their personal understanding of the Church’s teaching.

Catholic teaching lays the foundation for Catholic school communities to reach out to all students with unconditional love. St. Paul’s letter to the Galatians reveals that Christ overcomes the ‘us/them’ exclusion

created by human sin. Christians must remove an ‘us/them’ dichotomy from minds and hearts. Persons who identify as transgender must never be treated as ‘them;’ in Christ, they are to be understood as ‘us.’ Pope Francis encourages members of the Catholic community ‘to be a Church on the side of others, capable of accompanying everyone along the way.’¹¹



All students should feel safe at school and deserve a positive school climate that is inclusive and accepting, regardless of race, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, creed, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, age, marital status, family status or disability.”¹³

Ministry Mandated Professional Responsibilities

In addition to having a clear understanding of Church teaching, as well as their duty of pastoral care, Catholic educators must be mindful of, and responsive to, professional responsibilities mandated by the Ontario Ministry of Education.

In 2009, the Ministry published *Realizing the Promise of Diversity*, its Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy. This policy requires each school board to develop and implement an equity and inclusive education policy and guidelines for the board and its schools. As well, each school is to create and support a positive school climate that fosters and promotes equity, inclusive education and diversity.¹²

In October 2018, the Ministry amended PPM 128,

the Provincial Code of Conduct and School Board Codes of Conduct to: “All students should feel safe

sex attraction. With the help of God’s grace, work hard to remove whatever may prevent you from



The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Letter on Same-Sex Attraction (2011) invites Catholics to take the time to examine our own interior dispositions towards people with same-sex attraction. With the help of God’s grace, work hard to remove whatever may prevent you from welcoming them warmly. Be aware that your language and attitudes can inadvertently communicate a message that has nothing to do with the Church’s authentic teaching.”

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All Catholics are called to uphold the dignity of each human person and should examine their own attitudes. Where necessary, members of the community are encouraged to develop personal

at school and deserve a positive school climate that is inclusive and accepting, regardless of race, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, creed, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, age, marital status, family status or disability.”

And as the Ontario Human Rights Commission states, “People who are discriminated against or harassed because of gender identity are legally protected...This includes transsexual, transgender and intersex persons, crossdressers and other people whose gender identity or expressions is, or is seen to be, different from their birth-identified sex.”¹³

In 2017, the federal government passed Bill C-16 guaranteeing similar legal and human rights protection to transgender persons across the country.

Catholic educators have a legal responsibility to ensure these protections are understood and honoured in every Catholic school.

Self-Reflection to Overcome Fear and Discomfort

Catholic administrators, teachers, guidance counsellors, and chaplaincy teams must implement practices, appropriate to their roles, that ensure that students who identify as transgender feel safe, are informed and receive the pastoral accompaniment that can help them flourish as whole persons.

The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops’ letter on Same Sex Attraction (2011) invites Catholics to “take the time to examine our own interior dispositions towards people with same-

maturity by overcoming fear of or discomfort with persons who identify as transgender. This can only happen by welcoming and engaging them, and in so doing, developing a deep and nuanced understanding of their lived reality. Responding with care requires honest self-reflection, sincere compassion and prudent professional judgement.

Pastoral Care in Catholic Schools

It is the duty of all staff members in a Catholic school to create an environment of responsive pastoral care for all students and their families. However, different staff members play different roles, and administrators, teachers, chaplains and counselors, and other staff members need to consider their particular responsibilities in this regard.

While it is understood that every professional in every Catholic school can and should take positive action, there are particular responsibilities and limits to each role. Yet, all staff members work together to create and promote a school environment that reflects the reality of the Church as a community that nurtures human dignity and is dedicated to both spiritual and human development for all. We seek to treat students who identify as transgender with the respect, understanding and dignity that we accord to all students in our care.

The basic pastoral stance in Catholic schools is three-fold:

- To promote experience of God's love and to foster an encounter with Christ in a world that is marked by both sin and grace;
- To promote a deepening practice of spiritual discernment in order to discover one's personal vocation;
- To promote a healthy and mature exploration of moral matters as all members of the community learn to exercise patience and compassion and to be comfortable with another's development with all its joys and ambiguities.



The Catholic school leader strives to foster genuine trusting relationships with all students, staff, families and community members guided by a sense of mutual respect.”

When responding with pastoral care to the needs of persons who identify as transgender (students, members of their families, and all members of the school community) all staff in Catholic schools require the following:

- Knowledge of the Church's teaching, government legislation and policies, and of the lived reality of persons who identify as transgender;
- The development of an open and empathetic stance toward the challenges experienced by persons who identify as transgender;
- An ability to exercise good professional judgement when responding to the needs of persons who identify as transgender, or in managing the responses of other members of the Catholic school community to the presence of those who identify as transgender;
- The courage to put the gospel imperative to respond with respect, compassion and sensitivity into positive action.

Accompaniment involves listening and patience on the part of educators. In addition to accompaniment,

schools may be asked by students or parents to provide specific accommodations and school boards have the responsibility to determine how such requests are registered and processed. Appropriate accommodations should be understood as not only legal obligations on the part of school boards but can also be understood as part of a pastoral response.

“Pastoral care has to begin where the person currently is. The use of a requested pronoun [for example] can be received by the student as a sincere gesture of good will. It can be a first step in an ongoing path of pastoral care, aimed at opening a relationship with the person...It is a first step on a path, and is part of an ongoing dialogue with the student that will hopefully grow deeper as the relationships of trust and mutual respect grow deeper.”¹⁴

When Catholic schools embrace practices that are pastoral and inclusive, all students may have a true experience of Christian community.

Administrator's Role in Pastoral Care

The Catholic school leader strives to foster genuine trusting relationships with all students, staff, families and community members guided by a sense of mutual respect.

Catholic school leaders are to:

- Lead a welcoming and safe school environment where belonging is grounded in the recognition of the dignity of each person;
- Lead school-wide education and formation activities along with a zero tolerance for physical violence, verbal harassment, rumours, gossip, ostracism, derogatory remarks, jokes and name-calling and, when any of this happens, act with the necessary disciplinary response;
- Be knowledgeable about Catholic teaching on the human person and human sexuality;
- Reflect on their own attitudes and seek to understand the needs of students who identify as transgender;
- Provide appropriate information for parents and other members of the community about the ways that parents and the broader community can be

supportive of their children.

“Catholic schools should consciously create an environment where students who feel marginalized, rejected or vulnerable can experience, safe, nurturing, inclusive communities of faith.”¹⁶

Chaplain’s Role in Pastoral Care

School chaplains have a critical role in supporting the creation of a caring and inclusive community and sustaining the spiritual life of all community members.

In addition to supporting the Catholic school leader in her or his responsibilities, chaplains are to:

- Be knowledgeable about Catholic teaching on the human person and human sexuality, and support the professional development of colleagues in this area;
- Reflect on their own attitudes and seek to understand the needs of students who identify as transgender;
- Be as current and knowledgeable as possible of the varied, and sometimes contradictory medical and psychological opinions regarding gender orientation and gender expression;
- Be knowledgeable about school and board resources available to students, and assist students to access those supports;
- Provide spiritual support, ensuring that students feel accepted and cared for as members of the Catholic school community;
- Assist in providing information for parents and staff regarding a Catholic approach to gender identity.

School Counselor’s Role in Pastoral Care

Guidance counselors and other school and board resource staff with particular responsibilities for mental health and well-being have a particular role in supporting the creation of caring and inclusive communities. Often, they are called upon to accompany and support the most vulnerable members of the student community. In addition to supporting the Catholic school leader in her or his

responsibilities, counselors are to:

- Be knowledgeable about Catholic teaching on the human person and human sexuality;
- Reflect on their own attitudes and seek to understand the needs of students who identify as transgender;
- Be as current and knowledgeable as possible of the varied, and sometimes contradictory medical and psychological opinions regarding gender orientation and gender expression;
- Use effective strategies in counselling students by asking questions, contemplating, analyzing, and seeking wisdom;
- Support students to positively understand and to accept their orientation and feel supported in doing so amidst mixed cultural messages and a lack of role models;
- Support students who experience parental rejection and need to learn how to respond to family challenges and lack of acceptance;
- Assist in providing information for parents and staff regarding a Catholic approach to gender identity.

Classroom Teacher’s Role in Pastoral Care

The vocation of the Catholic teacher begins with belief in Jesus Christ, the Son of God and a commitment to share this experience of faith with students.

“This vocation finds its most profound meaning and sense of purpose in the Catholic educator’s love for, understanding and practice of our Catholic Christian faith. It is the understanding and daily living out of this faith on the part of Catholic educators, more than anything else, that imprints the distinctive Catholic character on the education we offer” to students.¹⁷

Catholic teachers are to:

- Be knowledgeable about Catholic teaching on the human person and human sexuality;
- Reflect on their own attitudes and seek to understand the needs of students who identify as transgender;
- Teach commitment to the dignity of the human

person and zero tolerance for harassment of and discrimination towards students who identify as transgender;

- Learn about the needs of these students and identify appropriate resources to assist them;
- Teach respectful language and respect the confidentiality of students;
- Assure students that there are caring adults within the school community who will consistently ensure a safe and respectful environment.

The Role of All Staff

All staff members in Catholic schools must assume the challenge of how to assure belonging and how to deal with the effects of bullying and social violence. In the face of these realities, all staff must assist students through the maintenance of established protocols that respond swiftly and consistently, and prevent unjust or intimidating behaviours from spreading. The Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario (ACBO) Pastoral guidelines call for educators to ensure there is no tolerance for remarks or jokes,

name-calling or harassment and that an immediate appropriate disciplinary response will be taken when this occurs. All members of the staff have a responsibility in this regard.

As the Ontario Bishops clearly state: “The pastoral care of the Church must reach out to all with an unconditional love. There are no exceptions to this. There is no one who falls outside the love and saving power of God. And there is nothing at all that a person can do that would make God love him or her more or less.

In our actions and attitudes, the starting point of all pastoral care is the inherent value of each and every individual human being and the response of unconditional love that this value demands.”¹⁸

“ Guidance counselors and school chaplains have a critical role in supporting the creation of a caring and inclusive community. Often, they are called upon to accompany and support the most vulnerable members of the student community.”

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