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## WORKING WITH GAY AND LESBIAN STUDENTS AT CATHOLIC COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES: A STUDENT AFFAIRS PERSPECTIVE

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*Controversy often surrounds issues of sexual ethics on campus. This article offers a helpful framework for consideration of one of today's difficult issues: ministry to gay and lesbian students at Catholic institutions. By demonstrating how one may be faithful to Magisterial teaching, the Gospel command to love, and solid principles of human development and psychology, the author offers concrete steps for establishing and protecting a climate of conversation.*

There is no doubt that the issue of working with gay and lesbian students at Catholic institutions is a controversial one. There also is no doubt that most of the controversies emerge not in the classroom, but in areas that are the traditional responsibilities of the student affairs offices. In this light, the following questions arise: Should the college or university formally recognize a gay or lesbian student organization? If a group is recognized, what will be the scope of its activities? May it use the name of the institution in its identification? May the group sponsor speakers? If so, who will decide if a specific speaker is appropriate? May the group carry the school flag in the area Gay Pride march? May the group sponsor a dance? Will a Catholic college sponsor a club volleyball team in the area "diversity league," knowing that openly gay and lesbian teams play in that league? Knowing that the students involved in the team chose that league because games were played at times when they were available, should the college choose to decline this opportunity rather than to associate itself with the diversity league? These are controversies that have emerged on various Catholic campuses across the nation in recent years which have been dealt with by student affairs professionals on those campuses.

A survey conducted in 1994 of Senior Student Affairs Officers (SSAOs) at Catholic colleges confirmed that issues related to gay and lesbian students were the most difficult and controversial issues they faced (Estanek, 1996). This survey also indicated that the issue of formally recognizing a gay or lesbian student organization was emerging at most Catholic institutions. For example, 12% of SSAOs responded that there was an institutionally recognized gay/lesbian student group on campus. Of the 86% who did not have such an organization, 7% indicated that one had been requested and denied, 3% indicated that such a group currently was under consideration, and 76% stated that the issue had not yet emerged. This is good news. Most institutions still have the opportunity for the thoughtful reflection called for by O'Brien in his book, *From the Heart of the American Church* (1994), in a situation that is not yet so political as to make such dialogue impossible.

While formal recognition of a group on campus is not the only vehicle for working with gay and lesbian students, it has become a lightning rod on many campuses. An understanding of student development theory will reveal why it is not surprising that students pressure institutions for formal recognition.

Chickering and Reisser (1993) demonstrated that the establishment of one's identity, especially one's sexual identity, is a major developmental task of young adults of college age. For students who are gay or lesbian, it is typically during the college years that they will wrestle with the issue of their identity, and will seek both internal and external validation of the self (Evans & Levine, 1990). It is also developmentally appropriate that students engage issues of intimacy, including sexual intimacy. The establishment of mature relationships is an appropriate developmental task, and having opportunities to do this is a pressing need. Colleges regularly provide these opportunities for validation of self and the establishment of mature relationships for heterosexual students; however, it is equally necessary that opportunities be provided for homosexual students (Evans & Levine, 1990). It is not surprising, then, that gay and lesbian students seek to establish such opportunities for themselves on their college campuses. It is also not surprising that they seek to do this in a way that will force the institution formally to validate them. However, while the formal establishment of a group may be developmentally understandable, it is often politically explosive because of the dimension of formal recognition.

While both student development theory and the experience of student affairs practitioners indicate that Catholic colleges and universities will continue to face issues related to demands for validation from gay and lesbian students, until recently there were few vehicles for discussion of these issues. The discussions of Catholic identity precipitated by *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (John Paul II, 1990) changed this situation. A panel on student affairs at Catholic colleges and universities was included in "Catholic Higher

Education: Practice and Promise,” the national symposium sponsored by the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities (ACCU) and held in August, 1995, at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota. The ACCU commissioned a research project on student affairs practice at Catholic institutions in preparation for that symposium (Estanek, 1996). Following that symposium, the annual Institute for Student Affairs at Catholic Colleges (ISACC) was created in 1996 (Estanek & Larrey, 1998). Several of those involved in the leadership of ISACC recognized the value of an ongoing discussion among student affairs professionals working at Catholic institutions and, as a result, they recently created a permanent organization, the Association of Student Affairs at Catholic Colleges and Universities (ASACCU).

Now that these vehicles exist, it is imperative for student affairs professionals who work at Catholic institutions and who are committed to Catholic higher education to use them to discuss publicly, in the spirit of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, the issues that face us. That is the purpose of this article. It stems from the experiences of one practitioner and from her effort to learn more about Catholic teaching in order to ground her practice in the nexus between student development theory and practice and Catholic teaching. The author is not a theologian and makes no claims in that regard. However, the author believes it is the responsibility of all professionals to wrestle with the Catholic context of their practice and, as such, believes that non-theologians of good faith can and should participate in the discussion.

## ASSUMPTIONS

There is no doubt that debate and disagreement exist within Catholic theological circles surrounding the moral meaning of homosexuality (Cahill, 1985; Curran & McCormick, 1993; Hanigan, 1988); so “learning about Church teaching” was not as simple as it sounds. While magisterial teaching is clear, theological opinion is divided. Practitioners faced with a request from a group of students or even facing an individual student in their office do not find easy answers to the question, “What should be done?” Practitioners must be responsible both to the student and to the institution. It is easier to say that one should be “responsible to the truth first of all” than it is to figure out what that means in a given situation.

Several assumptions must be articulated in this discussion. First, student affairs as a profession is practiced within the context of the mission of the institution. This position is stated clearly in *A Perspective on Student Affairs*, a reaffirmation of the principles of the 1937 *Student Personnel Point of View*: “Student affairs in a college or university is influenced by the distinctive character of the institution, including its history, academic mission, traditions, and location” (National Association of Student Personnel

Administrators, 1987, p. 14). This assumption about the nature of the work at hand makes student affairs professionals different from their faculty colleagues who are trained to evince loyalty, first, to a body of knowledge; then, to a professional association; and, only perhaps, to the institution at which they teach. O'Brien (1994) discusses at length the implications of this distinctive faculty relationship to the mission of the Catholic university. The assumptions of that relationship (i.e., peer review and, ultimately, tenure) are not characteristic of the assumptions of student affairs as a profession. Simply put, the prerogatives of a tenured professor are never the prerogatives of a student affairs professional, regardless of that person's position, experience, or stature within the profession.

This first assumption naturally leads to the second assumption about student affairs practice at Catholic colleges and universities: that student affairs practice and policies must be consistent with the Catholic mission of the institution. In working as a practitioner, one is acting not as an individual, a faculty member, or a theologian. As an individual, one may disagree with a specific Church teaching but in the role of dean, counselor, or residence hall director one may not base one's practice upon that disagreement. Student affairs practitioners are responsible for their professional knowledge of student development. Practitioners at a Catholic institution are also responsible for their understanding of Church teaching.

This leads to the third assumption about working with gay and lesbian students at Catholic colleges: that it must be consistent with Church teaching on homosexuality. Because we typically do not have an informed and nuanced understanding of Church teaching on sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular, we often are led to believe that we simply are better off not dealing with this issue until pressed to do so by students. Again as stated by O'Brien (1994), this attitude, while understandable, serves neither students nor Catholic higher education well.

The role of the practitioner in this regard is best understood in language coming from the Church herself; that is, the role of student affairs is pastoral: grounded in Church teaching but working with the circumstances of individual lives. This understanding may help us to locate the nexus of Church teaching and student development. It also may give us more options for practice than only the often-impossible formal recognition of a gay/lesbian student organization.

## **CHURCH TEACHING**

As stated earlier, in order to fulfill this pastoral role working with gay and lesbian students at Catholic colleges, student affairs practitioners must educate themselves more fully about Church teaching so that they may ground their practice in that teaching. A good place to begin would be to read

*Homosexuality: Catholic Teaching and Pastoral Practice* by Coleman (1995), *Always Our Children: A Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children and Suggestions for Pastoral Ministers* (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1997), and *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* (Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1986). Taken together, these publications provide a good understanding of Catholic teaching on the subject of homosexuality. Coleman's work in particular provides a context for the bishops' statement.

Coleman first engages biblical tradition. He argues there is a consistent theme of condemnation of homosexual behavior in the Bible. Coleman and others assert that the meaning of this is twofold. First, the biblical tradition must be subject to exegesis. Biblical authors did not have a modern understanding of the nature of homosexuality. They believed all human beings were created by God to be heterosexual. To engage in homosexual behavior was purely a conscious choice, usually associated with pagan ritual practice. They believed this choice necessarily involved the exploitation of another. Second, he argues that the biblical tradition consistently embraces the privileged position of the state of procreative marriage. Coleman asserts that this preference for marriage remains a pillar of the Church's position and undergirds its understanding of homosexuality. This position also is articulated by Cahill in her work, *Between the Sexes: Foundations for a Christian Ethics of Sexuality* (1985).

Coleman also states, "While the Bible is clear about homosexual activity, it is also clear about hate. Hate is wrong.... There is nothing in the Bible that gives us permission to hate people for who they are" (1995, p. 72). This statement is also true as it relates to Church teaching. By way of illustration, Coleman reviews Church documents such as *Personae Humanae* (Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1975) and *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* (1986). From these sources, he argues that contemporary Church teaching may be summarized as follows:

1) In light of modern psychological and physiological studies, the Church has come to recognize that a small, but consistent, percentage of the human population is, by nature and not by choice, homosexual. Contrary to popular misunderstanding, the Church does not condemn the homosexual state. As Coleman states, "No one is created unlike the image of God" (1995, p. 106).

2) However, while the Church does not condemn the homosexual being, it does condemn homosexual behavior. This separation of being and behavior is crucial for an understanding of the Church's position. It is grounded in the Church's consistently articulated understanding of the purpose of genital sexuality. Cahill's work is a particularly good source to read in this regard.

The purpose of genital sexuality is both unitive and procreative; that is,

it is reflective of the permanent commitment of the partners to each other and it is open to the transmission of life. It is not simply a private matter of consent between two adults. Consent is necessary, but it is not sufficient. This understanding of the Church has been constant. It undergirds the Church's position on premarital sex and birth control as well as its position on homosexual acts. Because it cannot be open to the transmission of life, the homosexual act cannot be procreative; therefore, it cannot be morally acceptable. However, all human beings, heterosexual and homosexual, are called to a life of chastity. It is this point the Church emphasizes.

These teachings are affirmed authoritatively by the American bishops in *Always Our Children* (1997). The bishops affirm the distinction between homosexual being and behavior. They write, "Generally, homosexual orientation is experienced as a given, not as something freely chosen. By itself, therefore, a homosexual orientation cannot be considered sinful, for morality presumes the freedom to choose" (p. 5). They also affirm the Church's teaching that sexual intercourse is only appropriate between a married heterosexual couple; thus, homosexual behavior is "objectively immoral" (p. 6). The bishops assert strongly, however, that "nothing in the Bible or in Catholic teaching can be used to justify prejudicial or discriminatory attitudes and behaviors" (p. 6). Not only does this mean that unjust discrimination is to be avoided, they argue, it also means that homosexual persons, as all persons, "must be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity. It means that all homosexual persons have a right to be welcomed into the community, to hear the word of God, and to receive pastoral care" (p. 6).

## IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENT AFFAIRS

The understanding of the difference between human being and sexual behavior is crucial for student affairs professionals at Catholic colleges because it can help us to defend and to define our working openly with gay and lesbian students on campus. While one must be attentive to the fact that this is still controversial on many campuses, it is clear that Church teaching supports the following answers to the question, "What should we do?"

1) Challenge homophobia and discrimination against homosexual persons on campus. Coleman states, "'Care should be taken to identify homophobia as a prejudice, comparable to racism and anti-Semitism, rather than an irrational fear comparable to claustrophobia or agoraphobia" (1995, p. 136). He also states, "research has found that formal academic training at the college level in the area of human sexuality decreased the degree of homophobia in individuals" (p. 135). It is clear from this reading and from the bishops' statement that Church teaching should not be used as a basis for discrimination. However, because this has been a difficult and controversial issue to engage actively, our silence may be construed as consent for acts of

violence (verbal and physical) and discrimination against homosexual persons. We can be especially effective here. We can be proactive in our programming in the same assertive way we have challenged racist attitudes and behavior on campus. It would be a good idea to establish relationships with campus ministry and the religious studies or theology department and to co-sponsor residence hall programming on "Church teaching and homosexuality," for example.

2) Challenge people to love and respect all persons in the name of God in the same way, again, as we have used that tradition to undergird our programs on racism and other social justice issues.

3) Teach sexual responsibility from a Catholic point of view as a value for all persons. This is familiar, albeit difficult, territory for student affairs professionals at Catholic institutions. Again, it is fruitful territory for co-curricular programming; however, unfortunately, it is often crystallized into the issue of "condoms on campus" (Estanek, 1996). We need to find better ways to articulate the Church's rich understanding of sexuality to our students who are, appropriately so, engaging issues of intimacy and identity.

4) Support homosexual persons and involve them in the life of the community. Do not underestimate the importance of informal witness. A powerful example may serve as an illustration. The person who related this story attended Sunday Mass on campus with students, as did several other members of the faculty and staff. One faculty member, Dr. X, who was involved in this worship community, was known to be gay. He was not an activist. He believed his sexuality was his business and no one else's. He just came to Mass and participated in the life of the community. He was a nice guy. However, a male student once confided to this person that he had negative attitudes toward gay men and had actually participated in harassing activities until he met Dr. X. Dr. X was a good Catholic and a good person. "How could he be all the things I thought homosexual men were when he clearly wasn't?" Dr. X had done nothing specific, yet proved to be an impetus to this student's own development.

5) Be careful about supporting organizations on campus. Many campuses have support groups, study groups, discussion groups, and other informal organizations and find these successful. However, it is easy to see why the formal recognition of an organization on campus has proven to be so difficult. The Church makes important, yet subtle, distinctions in its understanding of sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular. These are difficult distinctions for students who are often dualistic in their thinking (Perry, 1968). They are also difficult to sustain in an environment that has become political.

While it may prove difficult to do, a climate of conversation, as O'Brien (1994) characterizes it, must be sustained. It is clear the formal, privileged environment of the classroom is a good place to raise these issues. Recent



studies of student learning assert that it is also necessary to engage these issues outside the classroom in order to maximize learning (Love & Goodsell Love, 1995). In many other important ways student affairs professionals have proven to be up to the task. Thus, there is reason to be confident that we are up to this one as well.

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