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# Editorial: Notre Dame's bold LGBT step deserves applause

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Editorial

The University of Notre Dame?s decision to ?establish a new support and service student organization for [gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and questioning] students and their allies? is a decision to applaud. According to the university, the organization, founded with the approval of the local bishop, ?will produce activities consistent with Notre Dame?s Catholic allegiance and commitments.? The university will also hire a full-time staff member to oversee awareness and education programs for all students regarding the LGBTQ community.

In making its announcement, Notre Dame did not prescind from or contradict a single teaching of the church. Indeed, what is most noteworthy about the announcement is that it properly recognized that it is not contrary to Catholic teaching to engage in pastoral ministry to any group or to teach and promote tolerance, love and respect for the dignity of every individual. Yes, we all know what the church teaches about same-sex activity. But the church also teaches that all human beings have innate dignity and worth, that they are loved by God and are to be treated with respect. The church teaches that any human community, and any Catholic community worthy of the name, must enflesh this respect for human dignity in the way it treats all of its members. At this time of year, when the church celebrates God?s enfleshment in the person of Jesus Christ, this message is especially obvious.

Bishop Kevin Rhoades of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Ind., endorsed Notre Dame?s decision. In a statement, Rhoades said, ?I hope that the organization will be helpful in providing support for the students, thus preventing the experience of isolation and alienation which are ?risk factors for an unhealthy life, including unchaste behaviors? (USCCB, Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination).? We hope so too. The stories of young gay men and lesbian women taking their own lives in the face of hostility and bigotry are too many and too tragic for the Christian community to do other than re-examine how the church has contributed to the hostility and bigotry our gay brothers and lesbian sisters face. Notre Dame?s evident effort to include its local bishop in its decision-making process serves as a model for future efforts to establish on-campus support groups of students who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or questioning their sexual identity.

Whatever one thinks about the church?s teaching on homosexuality, it is more complex than mere condemnation of homosexual acts. The church, like all of society, has come to realize that its centuries-old view that same-sex activity is an aberration is not how lesbian, gay, transgender or bisexual people experience themselves. For them, their sexual attraction is not a choice, still less a perverse one. For them, their sexuality is, as it is for straight people, part of their human makeup, a given. The church is still struggling with how to address this changed understanding. In its seminal document, ?Always Our Children,? issued in 1997, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops began the process of adopting a less harsh and more humane approach to the issue of how the church relates to gay men and women. This past year, Bishop Blase Cupich issued a letter to the Catholics of Spokane, Wash., in advance of that state?s referendum on same-sex marriage. Cupich?s letter acknowledged the legitimate concerns of gay men and lesbian women, as well as reiterating the church?s teachings, setting a tone of respectful dialogue that other bishops would do well to model. Slowly, but surely, the walls of bigotry and indifference are coming down.

Notre Dame has long played a unique role in the cultural landscape of American Catholicism. It remains the flagship Catholic university in the nation?s mind and its Catholic identity, despite what its critics say, is one of the most remarkable things about it. Every day, students have countless opportunities for prayer and service to others. Now, those students can offer a new prayer, giving thanks for this bold step by their university and the hope that it will yield a campus culture that is more tolerant, more accepting and, just so, more Catholic.

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