News



San Domenico School in San Anselmo, California (Courtesy of San Domenico School)



by Dan Morris-Young

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The oldest Catholic school in California has relinquished that designation, dropping its official affiliation with the Catholic Church.

Officials at San Domenico School in San Anselmo, California, founded in 1850 by the Dominican Sisters, announced Nov. 13 that the school will no longer be Catholic and will drop official ties to the San Francisco Archdiocese and the Western Catholic Educational Association.

According to the statement, San Domenico "will continue to be an Independent School and remain accredited by the California Association of Independent Schools (CAIS) and the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC). San Domenico School will continue to be a member of the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS)."

At the same time, however, their statement pledged that the school "has, and will continue to honor its Catholic and Dominican heritage. The Dominican Sisters and San Domenico School are deeply committed to remaining in relationship with one another and to the mission of the School."

"The Sisters also explained their decision to the San Francisco Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone," it continued, "and remain deeply committed to their relationship with the Archdiocese."

The Western Catholic Educational Association, or WCEA, is, according to its website, "a private educational accrediting agency established under the auspices of the Bishops of the Catholic (Arch) Dioceses of California."

In the statement sent out to the K-12 school's community, Sr. Maureen McInerney, prioress general of the Dominican Sisters of San Rafael, and Cecily Stock, head of school, wrote that "This change in accreditation will not impact the current programming at San Domenico and the inclusive spiritual education will continue. The School's Mission, location, ownership, and other accreditations remain unchanged and the School's financial health remains in solid condition."

The Dominican Sisters' announcement said the decision followed "several months" of prayer, reflection, study and consultation by the Dominican Sisters of San Rafael leadership team.

According to the Marin Independent Journal, "Stock said the school agreed with the Dominican Sisters' decision because the 'current standards' of the Western Catholic Educational Association 'were being more rigorously enforced, and do not align with the school's longstanding mission to embrace diversity and inclusion of all faiths and backgrounds.' "

Melanie Morey, head of the San Francisco Archdiocese's Office of Catholic Identity Assessment, told NCR that she and the archdiocesan superintendent of schools had been "in conversation with the prioress general" and that "the school was facing its first accreditation visit that included WCEA Catholic Identity standards."

"Sr. Maureen realized that the school was deficient in most of the standards," said Morey, who is also a WCEA commissioner.

"When I met with Melanie Morey and Pam Lyons on August 30 I told them that San Domenico was currently accredited by WCEA until 2019," McInerney emailed NCR. "When they asked if I thought San Domenico would be able to meet the WCEA standards for re-accreditation, I said I did not think San Domenico would because we knew the standards were going to be more rigorously enforced."

According to a school official, San Domenico received an email Sept. 9 stating that its accreditations had been "extended to June 30, 2020."



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"For many years, the spirit in which San Domenico carried out these standards was sufficient for WCEA accreditation. Under current interpretation, that is no longer the case," said a statement on the school website headlined "Questions You May Have" about the decision.

"San Domenico School's approach," it explained, "does not align with WCEA standards which require: 'the permeation of Catholic values in all aspects of school life,' 'a Religion curriculum instruction that is faithful to Roman Catholic Church teachings and meets the requirements set forth by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB),' and 'all school personnel are actively engaged in bringing

the Good News of Jesus into the total educational experience.' "

According to an August report in the local newspaper quoting Stock, about 80 percent of San Domenico's families "do not identify as Catholic." The school's current 673 students include Jews, Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims, according to that report.

Nearly 100 international students attend the school, which is located on 515 acres about 20 miles north of San Francisco.

According to the school website, annual tuition rates start at $29,850 for kindergarten and range to $42,825 for grades 9 through 12. High school-aged boarding students pay $58,350.

Reaction to San Domenico's organizational disaffiliation with the Catholic Church "among school parents, teachers, students and alumni was mixed and passionate," reporter Keri Brenner wrote in the Nov. 14 Marin Independent Journal.

Kelly Weidner of San Rafael strongly backed the school decision. In an email to Brenner, the mother of two current San Domenico students wrote: "I'm thrilled with the values-based inclusive education my girls are receiving. It's my understanding that the relationship between San Domenico and the Sisters will continue, and we're very supportive of these changes."

Among critics quoted were Kim Pipkin, who with others posted concerns on a Facebook page titled "San Domenico in Crisis."

"They didn't ask anybody about this," Pipkin told the Marin Independent Journal. "There was no communication with the alumni community." Pipkin's child attended the school from pre-kindergarten to ninth grade.

Pipkin told the Journal that parents who spent "$40,000 or $50,000 for a Catholic education" might be feeling disappointed, according to Brenner's Nov. 14 story.

A school official said Pipkin had not been directly associated with the school "for years."

Head of School Stock told NCR the school "has received a positive outpouring of support for both the school and the Dominican Sisters."

"The vast majority of respondents are pleased that we are retaining our independent school status and will also maintain our strong Dominican Catholic heritage," she added.

In what now appears to have been a precursor to San Domenico's break with its Catholic designation, a significant amount of Catholic religious statuary and art was removed and stored in August.

School officials at the time said the move was in line with San Domenico's increased emphasis on inclusiveness, but the removals stirred mixed reactions.

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Morey told NCR "the very public removal of religious imagery goes against one of the [Catholic identity] standards."

"And the whole idea that statues of the Blessed Mother and St. Francis somehow are unwelcoming to non-Catholics in a school that claims a Catholic identity and where Catholicism is the host religion suggests a deep disconnect from anything WCEA stands for as an accrediting body," she added.

"The question at the heart of all this," Morey underscored, "seems to be whether San Domenico, especially the head of school and the board, wanted to be to be in compliance. The head of school's public statements suggested otherwise and the board of the school supported the new direction she articulated."

"At no point did the head of school ever contact my office or speak to me," Morey said.

Asked how the school's enrollment or financial support might be impacted by separating from the Catholic Church, marketing and communications director Kimberly Pinkson responded by email:

"San Domenico is a well-respected and popular private day and boarding school and the change of accreditation has not impacted the school in any manner, including financial or programmatic. Enrollment demand has increased steadily over the last four years and our staff will continue to provide exceptional, values-based, and college-preparatory teaching."

[Dan Morris-Young is NCR west coast correspondent and contributor to the Field Hospital series on parish life.]

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