News
Spirituality



Auxiliary Bishop Andrew H. Cozzens of St. Paul and Minneapolis speaks during a news conference Nov. 13 at the fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore. (CNS/Tennessee Register/Rick Musacchio)

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Catholic educators have a charge to teach that a person's sexual identity is a gift from God that cannot change and resist cultural tides toward "gender theory," according to new guiding principles released by Minnesota's bishops.

The three-page document, "Guiding Principles for Catholic Schools and Religious Education Concerning Human Sexuality and Sexual Identity," was approved by the bishops of the Minnesota Catholic Conference and presented Feb. 20-21 as part of a "Emerging Questions in Catholic Education" seminar for pastors and Catholic educators in the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis.

"The Catholic school is committed to providing a safe environment that allows students to flourish academically, physically and spiritually," the document states. "Catholic schools are obligated to provide an education and resources consistent with Catholic teaching. The starting point for Catholic education is a deeply held understanding that affirms the God-given irrevocable dignity of every human person."

Quoting the Catechism of the Catholic Church and other documents, including Pope Francis' encyclical "Laudato Si', on Care for Our Common Home," the guiding principles affirm that men and women are created in God's image, and that is the source of each person's most important identity; that the body reveals each person as male or female; and that "the harmonious integration of a person's sexual identity with his or her sex is an expression of the inner unity and reality of the human person made body and soul in the image and likeness of God."

Catholic schools and religious education programs in Minnesota dioceses are to relate to students "in a way that is respectful of and consistent with each student's God-given sexual identity and biological sex," the document states.

The document outlines guidance in seven areas on how to reflect church teaching in policies, procedures, resources, employee training and assistance to families:

— "All school policies, procedures, resources, employee training and assistance given to families are consistent with the church's teaching on the dignity of the human person, including human sexuality. Reflective of a commitment to a culture of transparency and understanding, these policies will be made available in writing to members of the school community by way of inclusion in relevant handbooks, agreements and statements."

— "Student's name and pronouns usage will correspond to his/her sexual identity," defined in the document as "a person's identity as male or female that is congruent with one's sex."

— "Student access to facilities and overnight accommodations will align with his/her sexual identity."

— "Eligibility for single-sex curricular and extracurricular activities is based on the sexual identity of the child."

— "Expressions of a student's sexual identity are prohibited when they cause disruption or confusion regarding the church's teaching on human sexuality."

— "The consciences of students and employees will be respected with the assurance of their inviolable right to the acknowledgement that God has created each person as a unity of body and soul, male or female, and that God-designed sexual expression and behavior must be exclusively oriented to love and life in marriage between one man and one woman."

— "Schools communicate with parents or guardians about their child's behavior at school and inform them of any concerns relating to the physical, emotional, social, and spiritual health, safety, or welfare of their child, except when advised otherwise by law enforcement or a social service agency."

The document was developed over three years through consultation by the Minnesota Catholic Conference with diocesan schools and other stakeholders. It was adopted by the state's bishops in June 2019.

Church officials said the guiding principles are not formal policies, but instead serve as the framework that guides the development of policies, handbooks, teacher contracts and other materials at the diocesan and local level. The translation of the principles into concrete policies is within the discretion of each individual diocese.

The Minnesota Catholic Conference also paired the guidelines with the bishops' 2014 model anti-bullying policy.

"Catholic schools and parishes work to ensure the dignity of every person is respected," the conference website states. "Recognizing that each person is created in the image and likeness of God is the surest way to ensure that dignity is respected and safe environments are fostered."

Leaders emphasized that the church's view of sexual identity should lead to compassion and pastoral accompaniment for people struggling with confusion about

their sexual identity or gender dysphoria.

In introducing the document Feb. 20, Auxiliary Bishop Andrew H. Cozzens of St. Paul and Minneapolis said he has ministered to families who have struggled with a family member's confusion around gender identity, and that it's a painful situation.

"A lot of times, when we're in pain, we look for quick answers for that pain, and the culture wants to provide quick answers for that pain, but we know that the quick answer for that pain doesn't ultimately bring healing," said Cozzens, the archdiocese's vicar for Catholic education.

"One of the things we have to do in our pastoral care is be willing to stand with people in their pain, and walk with them with an eye toward the greater good," he said.

After Francis began writing about the issue in 2015, the state Catholic conference began looking at the issue with the goal of providing clear, unified teaching. The guidelines both reflect the pope's teaching as well as respond to the direction of the Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education, which released a document in June 2019 addressing gender theory, Cozzens said.

Titled "Male and Female He Created Them: Toward a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education," it denounced teaching on the human person that reflected "an anthropology opposed to faith and to right reason" found in gender theory.

With the guiding principles, the Minnesota bishops aim to provide practical guidance for school and parish leaders, Cozzens said.

"We wanted to find some practical clarity so that you can be able to help people who are in difficult circumstances," he explained, "and we knew that we had to do this in a way that's calling people to a higher standard of these truths than our culture currently is, to help people get beyond the ideology and to the truth of who they are."

(Wiering is editor of The Catholic Spirit, newspaper of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis.)

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