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Spirituality
Students in grades 6-12 begin their first day of school at Pope John Paul II Preparatory School

Students in grades 6-12 begin their first day of school at Pope John Paul II Preparatory School in Hendersonville, Tenn., Aug. 5, 2021. (CNS photo/Rick Musacchio, Tennessee Register)

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VATICAN CITY — Holding together the obligation to protect and promote the Catholic identity of Catholic schools while reaching out to a broader community of students and teachers requires a commitment to dialogue, said a new document from the Congregation for Catholic Education.

The instruction, "The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue," was signed by Cardinal Giuseppe Versaldi, congregation prefect, and was released by the Vatican March 29.

The congregation, Cardinal Versaldi said, was asked to write the document particularly "given cases of conflicts and appeals resulting from different interpretations of the traditional concept of Catholic identity by educational

institutions."

The document, however, did not include any specific description of those cases, which presumably include controversy over teachers being fired or not being fired for marrying a person of the same sex.

Those involved in hiring for Catholic schools, it said, are required "to inform prospective recruits of the Catholic identity of the school and its implications, as well as of their responsibility to promote that identity. If the person being recruited does not comply with the requirements of the Catholic school and its belonging to the church community, the school is responsible for taking the necessary steps. Dismissal may also be resorted to, taking into account all circumstances on a case-by-case basis."

At the same time, it said, "a narrow Catholic school model" is not acceptable either. "In such schools, there is no room for those who are not 'totally' Catholic. This approach contradicts the vision of an 'open' Catholic school that intends to apply to the educational sphere the model of a 'church which goes forth' in dialogue with everyone."

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The document insisted that Catholic education is not strictly catechetical, nor is it a "mere philanthropic work aimed at responding to a social need," but is an essential part of the church's identity and mission.

Catholic schools do not limit enrollment or employment to Catholics alone since, as the Second Vatican Council said, part of their mission is to promote "the complete perfection of the human person, the good of earthly society and the building of a world that is more human."

To reach that goal, the document said, Catholic schools must "practice the 'grammar of dialogue,' not as a technical expedient, but as a profound way of relating to others. Dialogue combines attention to one's own identity with the understanding of others and respect for diversity."

Everyone — administrators, teachers, parents and students — has "the obligation to recognize, respect and bear witness to the Catholic identity of the school," which

should be clearly stated in its mission statement and presented to prospective employees and parents of prospective students.

"In the formation of the younger generations," it said, "teachers must be outstanding in correct doctrine and integrity of life."

But the entire school community is responsible for embracing and promoting the school's Catholic identity, it said, so it cannot be "attributed only to certain spheres or to certain persons, such as liturgical, spiritual or social occasions, or to the function of the school chaplain, religion teachers or the school headmaster."

Taking into account different contexts and laws in the countries where Catholic schools operate, the document urged the schools to "formulate clear criteria for discernment regarding the professional qualities, adherence to the church's doctrine and consistency in the Christian life" of candidates for positions in Catholic schools.

When conflicts over "disciplinary and/or doctrinal" matters do arise, it said, everyone involved must be aware how "these situations can bring discredit to the Catholic institution and scandal in the community."

"Dismissal should be the last resort, legitimately taken after all other remedial attempts have failed," it said.

Noting that "in many countries civil law bars 'discrimination' on the basis of religion, sexual orientation and other aspects of private life," the document nevertheless noted that when "state laws impose choices that conflict with religious freedom and the very Catholic identity of a school," the rights of Catholics and their schools should be defended "both through dialogue with state authorities and through recourse to the courts having jurisdiction in these matters."