News



Students attend class at a Catholic school in this 2018 photo. The Archdiocese of Portland, Oregon, is the latest to issue a document on gender identity, which will impact LGBTQ young people and those who instruct them. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)



by Katie Collins Scott

Former Staff Reporter

View Author Profile
kcscott@ncronline.org

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

February 2, 2023
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

The Archdiocese of Portland, Oregon, is the latest U.S. diocese to issue a document affecting the lives of LGBTQ young people, their families, and those who instruct and care for them.

On Jan. 25, Archbishop Alexander Sample shared "A Catholic Response to Gender Identity Theory: Catechesis and Pastoral Guidelines" with western Oregon priests; the following day it was released to principals. The 17-page document is intended to "provide clarity on the Catholic Church's teaching," wrote the archbishop in a letter accompanying the document.

"May everyone who reads this document feel the love and compassion with which it was written and feel their hearts turned toward Our Lord Jesus Christ and to his truth," said Sample.

Like many of the at least 34 gender policies and instructions approved by Catholic dioceses nationwide, the Portland guidelines direct Catholic institutions to interact with youths on the basis of their "biological sex identity, rather than self-perceived gender identity."

Students, the guidelines say, should participate in sports and use names, pronouns, attire and bathrooms that correspond to their sex assigned at birth.



The administrative offices of the Archdiocese of Portland, Oregon, are pictured Jan. 31. The archdiocese is the latest to issue a document on gender identity. (NCR photo/Katie Collins Scott)

A small committee worked on the document for about a year, and it contains a brief catechesis on Catholic anthropology, a section on "gender identity theory," the guidelines themselves, as well as a glossary and footnotes. It also has a section describing the importance of "whole-person affirmation."

"In this time of great confusion about gender, Catholic institutions must respond not with reactionary fear or unthinking compliance, but with whole-person affirmation of each beloved person entrusted to their care," states the document.

Tim Uhl is superintendent of Catholic schools for the Diocese of Buffalo, New York, and previously served as a lay consultant to the U.S. bishops' education committee.

He said the section on "whole-person affirmation" is well written and called the content in it "excellent."

"Yet I'm struck by the different messages in the document," said Uhl. It states "that every person is a gift, for example, and we need to affirm the dignity of each person."

"But then there is a clear — and perhaps enveloping sense of judgment and restriction that will force a normative compliance," said Uhl. "It's unfortunate that that is the message that will probably be heard from this document."



Tim Uhl (Courtesy of Tim Uhl)

The catechesis and guidelines will likely be celebrated by some Catholics as offering much-needed boundaries they believe align with church teaching. But given the West Coast archdiocese is situated within one of the country's more politically progressive states — and Portland is a well-known liberal enclave — it most likely will have harsh critics among Catholics and the many non-Catholics with children in archdiocesan schools. (Approximately a quarter of elementary school students in Portland and nearly half of secondary school students are not Catholic.)

NCR reached out to the Portland Archdiocese with a number of questions, including asking if members of the committee heard from any transgender individuals.

Douglas Markwell, archdiocesan spokesperson, did not answer specific questions but said the document is a "teaching and formation resource intended to provide clarity on the Catholic Church's teaching on gender identity theory."

He said the "archdiocesan-wide conversation around implementation is ongoing."

Early in his episcopate, Sample was in the local news several times over LGBTQ-related conflicts, including for telling members of St. Andrew Parish in Portland they should not attend a Pride parade as a community. Parishioners attended together anyway.

Fr. Dave Zegar, pastor of St. Andrew, said he would argue the document is not a "Catholic" response, "but rather a particular hierarchical response to the issue of gender identity."

"The sources cited are sources that align with the archbishop's personal views, while there are many, including Catholic theologians, who believe differently," Zegar told NCR.

Archbishop Alexander Sample of Portland, Oregon, speaks July 7, 2022, during the Catholic M

Archbishop Alexander Sample of Portland, Oregon, speaks July 7, 2022, during the Catholic Media Conference in Portland. (CNS/Bob Roller)

Zegar said he doesn't see how the document helps those "who are struggling with their sexual identity, often a death and life moment."

"I wish our archbishop would have been open to listening to the people of God," said the priest. "This document will be a source of deep hurt to many of our brothers and sisters."

Abigail Favale, a writer and professor at the McGrath Institute for Church Life at the University of Notre Dame and author of *The Genesis of Gender: A Christian Theory*, served as a consultant to the archdiocese during the drafting process.

She told NCR the final version "takes an important step that similar documents don't by offering a proactive, positive response to gender identity theory, one that is in harmony with both the Catholic faith and the latest scientific evidence."

She said a document such as this ideally is "the beginning of deep and meaningful formation on this issue, not the ending point."

Several Oregon Catholic school educators, speaking anonymously because of fear of retribution, told NCR that not being able to use a student's preferred name harms the teacher-student relationship and can leave students feeling disenfranchised by the school and the church.

Related: As Catholic dioceses release new gender policies, grassroots groups demand input

Though the pastoral guidelines say that names and pronouns should be in "accord with biological sex," nicknames may be used on an informal basis, "according to prudential judgment, as long as this is not part of a social transition process." Access to single-use facilities may be approved by the administration on a case-by-case basis.

The guidelines state that all persons should abide by the dress or uniform code that accords with his or her "biological sex," and Catholic institutions are not permitted to post signage or display symbols in support of "gender identity theory."

"The Catholic understanding of the human person is at odds with 'gender identity theory,' a framework that is increasingly dominant in Western culture," the document says.

"According to this model, one's identity as a man, woman, or both/neither is based solely on subjective self-perception," it continues. "The term 'transgender' has entered common usage by those who advocate gender identity theory. This theory separates "gender" (man-ness and woman-ness and the masculine and feminine principles found in nature itself) from biological sex, rooting sexed identity in a dissociated self-perception rather than the body."

The American Psychiatric Association defines someone who is transgender as a person whose sex assigned at birth does not align with their gender identity.



An LGBTQ flag is seen in this illustration photo. (CNS/Reuters/Denis Balibouse)

Sr. Luisa Derouen, a Dominican Sister of Peace who has ministered among the transgender community, told NCR this summer that she views the church's reliance on binary gender science as "extremely simplistic" and said it ignores current scientific views.

Studies suggest, she said, that sex is determined by a complex interplay between gonadal hormones, sex chromosomes, internal genitalia, external genitalia and gender identity, sometimes referred to as "brain sex."

An Oregon educator who will be affected by the guidelines spoke on the condition of anonymity about her concerns, for fear of retribution.

"Why would you create a document like this when you don't have that many transgender people in schools or parishes?" she said. "It breaks my heart because the people who are hardest to talk to are not the non-Catholics but Catholic families who have a child who is struggling with this issue and are torn between what the church tells them to do and keeping their student alive."

Suicide hotline

If you or someone you know is in crisis, call or text the National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline — 988.

Although the number of youths who identify as transgender has nearly doubled in recent years —according to a new report from the Williams Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles School of Law — the percentage remains small, around 1.4% of 13- to 17-year-olds.

The body of the Portland document and its footnotes contain references to gender-affirming care, including those that highlight its potential harms.

David Palmieri is a theology teacher in Massachusetts who holds a master's in theological studies from Harvard Divinity School. He has studied diocesan gender policies, compiling a list of them, and formed a network of Catholic secondary educators trying to support LGBTQ students in Catholic schools.

He said many of the footnoted studies are from other countries, such as the Netherlands and France, "which may not correlate one-to-one with what is happening in the United States."

"While the data from these medical studies should be part of the conversation, so too should the mental health data from the Centers for Disease Control and The Trevor Project," a suicide prevention organization for youths, said Palmieri. CDC data shows transgender students are at a greater risk of suicide and substance use.

"Yes, there are Catholic moral objections to the medicalization of things we don't fully understand," said Palmieri. "But we must be careful not to step beyond our scopes of competence when establishing policies that affect the lives of children and families. Credentialed experts in all of the related fields should be working together for the most holistic solutions."

Advertisement

Echoing similar wording in other documents — including those of Boise, Idaho, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin — one of Portland's guidelines is that "no person should have on-site or distribute medications for the purpose of medical gender transition."

Russell Toomey is a professor of family studies and human development at the University of Arizona who conducts research on sexual and gender minority youths. He said pubertal blockers are not routinely administered by someone other than a child's medical doctor and that they require either surgery or an in-office injection.

"It would not be possible to do so in other medical settings like a school nurses' office," Toomey said.

Besides the new document, there is also a Portland archdiocesan webpage titled "Gender and the Human Person" that includes various links, including to the Person and Identity Project, an initiative of the Catholic Women's Forum at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, a conservative think tank. Other dioceses also link to their materials, and project staff conduct educational sessions on gender identity in U.S. dioceses and have served as consultants for policies.

Featured among Person and Identity Project's resources is a list of therapists for children endorsed by the American College of Pediatricians, which split from the American Academy of Pediatrics and is classified as a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center. And under a section labeled "Medical" is an hourlong video on "The Gender Revolution: A Medical Perspective" with Dr. Patrick Lappert.

Last fall, Lappert, an Alabama-based plastic surgeon, testified as a defense witness during the first trial in the country over a ban on gender-affirming care for transgender minors.

In response to questions from the plaintiffs' attorneys, Lappert confirmed he was not an expert on gender dysphoria, endocrinology, pediatric health care, medical ethics or mental health, reported the Arkansas Advocate.

Related: New Catholic policies across US create 'culture of fear' for LGBTQ students, advocates say

The Portland document comes in the wake of a gender identity policy implemented in the Diocese of Des Moines, Iowa, on Jan. 16. And in November, the Denver Archdiocese's sweeping policy, which has been in effect for several years, was reported by The Denver Post. Over 17-pages of text, the Denver policy directs Catholic administrators not to enroll transgender students and to treat gay parents differently than heterosexual couples; for example, on school forms, same-sex couples should list only one mother or father.

"The other adult may be noted elsewhere as an additional emergency contact, but not listed as another parent," it reads.

Along with the new documents emerging this winter, the Diocese of Louisville, Kentucky, is in the early stages of considering a policy or guidelines related to gender and sexuality, according to diocesan spokesperson Cecelia Price, and the Archdiocese of Boston currently is working on a draft of a document, said Maureen DiMilla who is on the archdiocesan gender committee.

Uhl feels the timing of the Portland document is "terrible," given that Catholic Schools Week is scheduled for Jan. 29-Feb. 4 and reregistration drives are underway.

"There will be many questions which will distract the schools from their current important work," he said.

The document, Uhl added, doesn't seem to be written "with much care for the children who are questioning their genders, the parents who are accompanying them, or the friends, families and staff members working to love these children amid their struggles."

"I think it will succeed in excluding many people from the Catholic schools in Portland; and perhaps the aim is for a smaller, more orthodox church."