News

A man wearing a turtleneck and a jackets leans down to pose with a boy in a sweater vest. A

Michael J. Califano, former teacher at Maria Regina School in Seaford, N.Y., poses for a photo with third grader Jameson Ward outside Maria Regina Church Dec. 31, 2023. The Diocese of Rockville Centre, N.Y., faces protests over the dismissal of Califano, who says he was fired for being gay, while the diocese maintains his termination of employment was not involve his sexuality. (OSV News photo/courtesy Brianne Ward)

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The firing of a Catholic school teacher in a Long Island, New York, diocese for having an adult same-sex relationship has sparked protests, highlighting tensions between the local church's expectations for employees to abide by church teachings and confusion among rank-and-file Catholics about the Vatican's signals regarding same-sex couples following its decree permitting them non-liturgical blessings.

Michael J. Califano, a third grade teacher at Maria Regina Catholic School in Seaford, New York, was terminated from his position at the school Dec. 27 by the Diocese of Rockville Centre.

In a statement provided to OSV News, diocesan communications director Sean P. Dolan said that "for privacy reasons we do not comment publicly on personnel matters," but noted that "the school did not end Mr. Califano's employment over his sexuality."

In several media interviews, 26-year-old Califano, who identifies as gay, has said that he was let go after Instagram photos of him kissing his boyfriend had been anonymously sent to the diocese, prompting an investigation.

Califano, who graduated from Maria Regina in 2011, also told the local media outlet Long Island Patch.com that the school had been aware of his sexual orientation. Noting his long association with Maria Regina as a former student, volunteer, substitute teacher and full-time educator, he said, "I didn't try to hide it or push it out there either."

Regarding his dismissal, Califano said in that interview, "The only reason I was given was that I had violated a handbook policy, in which I was not living a Catholic lifestyle."

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states both sacred Scripture and tradition indicate that homosexual acts are "intrinsically disordered" and the inclination itself is "objectively disordered," while stressing that same-sex attracted persons must "must be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity." It adds that those experiencing same-sex attraction, like Christians in every state of life, are called to live chastely through prayer and sacramental grace, drawing on "the virtues of self-mastery that teach them inner freedom" as they pursue holiness.

The diocese's "Code of Conduct for Church Personnel and Volunteers" -- which includes contract employees in its schools -- requires signatories to "adhere to Catholic teachings and appropriate conduct."

Additionally, the diocese's "Code of Conduct for Clerics, Pastoral Ministers, Administrators and Staff" specifies that those teaching at diocesan schools will, to the best of their ability, "perform [their] work in a manner consistent with the mission of the Catholic Church" and the diocese.

On its website, Maria Regina Catholic School states that its educators "believe ... in Catholic values, morals, traditions, and attitudes, as well as in modeling in deed and word the teachings of Jesus Christ."

A number of school parents, students and supporters have rallied around Califano in the wake of his firing, with some 100 protesting the firing at a Dec. 29 gathering outside of the diocese's Cathedral of St. Agnes in Rockville Centre.

Califano joined attendees, many of whom held signs saying, "God loves Mr. Califano and so do we" and "Reinstate Mr. Califano."

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Also on hand at the rally was Califano's mother, Jackie, who told media that her son's return to the school as a teacher was a "dream come true."

In recent years, the Califano family has annually provided scholarships to Catholic high school for eighth graders at Maria Regina. Califano's father, Nassau County (New York) Police Officer Michael J. Califano, was killed in 2011 after being struck by a driver during a roadside traffic stop. The family subsequently established a charity in his honor.

A petition on Change.org demanding that Rockville Centre Bishop John O. Barres and superintendent of schools Pamela Sanders reinstate Califano garnered close to 24,000 signatures as of Jan. 5.

In a Jan. 3 interview with Long Island Patch.com, Califano said that once he began teaching he "knew that I had to separate my private life ... from my professional life."

"Even though people know about me, it's not something that I taught in the classroom," he said. "I didn't have a set agenda. I was there to do a job. I was there to teach the kids. ... I'm not the type of person to sit there and say ... 'I'm going to teach you about sexuality,' because they're third graders; I didn't feel that it was necessary and I still don't feel it's necessary."

Califano also said in that interview that he felt "terrible that some of the kids had to learn in the way that they have about all this."

He told Long Island Patch.com he agreed with the diocese's statement that the school did not fire him because of his homosexuality, telling one interviewer that "my school is very supportive of me -- my principal, my pastor."

Rather, said Califano in the interview, "the decision came from higher up," adding that he was confused about the move since "Pope Francis had made an announcement [about] blessing same-sex civil unions," referring to "Fiducia Supplicans," a declaration released Dec. 18 by the Vatican's Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith. The document affirms the church's teaching on marriage as the sacramental union of a man and a woman, while permitting priests to offer upon request spontaneous, non-liturgical pastoral blessings to "couples in irregular situations" and "couples of the same sex."

"I just felt that the church was moving in the right direction, and I don't know why this bishop decided that it was going to move in another direction," said Califano. "I guess some people in the diocese don't agree with the pope."

OSV News is awaiting a response to its request for comment from Califano.

In January 2023, the Archdiocese of Denver fired Catholic school teacher Maggie Barton after pictures emerged of her kissing another woman. The archdiocese defended its decision in a Feb. 3 statement, saying that Barton "did not honor the commitments she agreed to in her contract with the school," which included a pledge to "personally [exemplify] the characteristics of Catholic living ... refraining from taking any public position or conducting himself or herself in a manner that is contrary to the teachings of the Catholic Church."

"We recognize the current popular culture and some in our society may not hold the same views as we do, but as Catholic institutions our schools retain their right to ensure that its ministers, which includes our teachers, carry out a faithful witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to the teachings of the Catholic Church," the Denver Archdiocese said in its statement.