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When Catholic schools fire gay teachers, laity push back

by Lauren Markoe by Religion News Service

They taught English, gym, music and fifth grade and are typically described as "beloved" by their students.

But that didn't stop the Catholic schools where they worked from firing these teachers for their same-sex relationships or, in one woman's case, for admitting that she privately disagreed with church teaching on gay marriage.

A recent spate of sackings at Catholic institutions -- about eight in the last two years -- is wrenching for dioceses and Catholic schools, where some deem these decisions required and righteous and others see them as unnecessary and prejudicial.

"Your typical Catholic school does have a mission and asks their teachers to be exemplars of what the schools are trying to do," said Richard Garnett, a University of Notre Dame law professor who writes about religious freedom. "They're trying to teach the church's values about sexual ethics and morality."

While the Catholic church's catechism requires Catholics to treat gays and lesbians with "respect" and "compassion," it calls homosexual acts a "grave depravity," and the church has been unequivocal in its rejection of gay marriage.

But among the signers of a petition to reinstate a gay teacher at St. Lucy's Priory High School in Glendora, Calif., are alumni who say their school imparted other Catholic values that speak against the firing of Ken Bencomo. The head of the English department lost his job after 17 years at St. Lucy's after photos of his wedding appeared in a local newspaper.

"We all come from different backgrounds, different experiences, but I think a lot of people will agree when I say St. Lucy's taught us to love each other and accept each other," petitioner Allyssa DenDekker

wrote. "John 3:16 'For God so loved the WORLD ...' "

It's not news that gay teachers and other employees of Catholic institutions lose their jobs over a same-sex relationship. Nor is it news that priests have sometimes quietly resisted pressure to fire gay employees. What's different in recent years is a growing acceptance of gay marriage among Catholics and gay people's increasing ability to marry and unwillingness to hide their relationships.

The consequence, from a vocal swath of the laity, is a public pushback against Catholic institutions that fire gay employees who get married. Among the recent cases that rankled lay Catholics:

- Kristen Ostendorf, an English and religion teacher at Totino-Grace High School in Fridley, Minn., for 18 years. She lost her job this summer after acknowledging her lesbian relationship at a faculty meeting.
- Trish Cameron, a fifth-grade teacher at St. Joseph's Catholic School in Moorhead, Minn., for 11 years. The school fired her in June 2012 after she told school officials she supports gay marriage, though she keeps her views out of the classroom.
- Al Fischer, who taught music at St. Ann Catholic School in St. Louis for four years. St. Ann dismissed him in February 2012 after school officials learned of his plans to marry another man.

This summer, dozens of former students rallied outside St. Lucy's and 75,000 people signed the petition to reinstate Bencomo; petitions are circulating in support of other teachers and lay leaders who faced similar fates.

One on behalf of Carla Hale garnered 100,000 signatures. Hale taught physical education at an Ohio Catholic school for 18 years and was fired in March after her mother's obituary disclosed that Hale had a female partner. Hundreds of people called Bishop Watterson High School to protest Hale's termination.

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Supporters of Fischer decried his firing in letters to the editor of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. Bloggers railed against the termination of Cameron.

Such firings, once the private affairs of Catholic schools, whispered about in the teachers' lounge, now air on the nightly news and circulate on Facebook. Some progressive Catholics are hopeful that the public activism will help the church conclude that employing a gay person in a same-sex marriage comports with Catholic teaching.

"What we know, what everyone knows, Catholic and non-Catholic, is that the younger generation is much more supportive of marriage equality than older generations, which is the indicator that it is the future," said Frank DeBernardo, executive director of New Ways Ministry, a pro-gay Catholic group.

"I'm heartened by it not only because they're young but because a lot of them have discussed their support for the teacher in terms of Catholic principles," he said. "It's a good case of the church hierarchy undone by their highest ideals."

But the precarious situation of gay Catholic schoolteachers who marry is not likely to be undone soon, despite the laity's support for gay marriage and Pope Francis' increasingly warm comments about gay people.

The reality is that when churches and church schools terminate employees in same-sex relationships, they

stand on firm legal ground. Religious institutions have a right, grounded in the First Amendment, to hire people who support their religious tenets and fire those who don't.

It's not just religious institutions where gay peoples' jobs are vulnerable. Nationwide, 21 states and the District of Columbia prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, with exemptions for religious institutions. Elsewhere, it's perfectly legal to fire someone based on sexual orientation.

Still, bishops, priests and Catholic school principals are often reluctant to publicly defend decisions to fire gay teachers who have married. Those who do describe these decisions as painful but necessary.

After Hale lost her teaching job, Bishop Frederick Campbell spoke to *The Columbus Dispatch* about why she had to go: It's his responsibility to maintain the Catholic identity of institutions he oversees, he said.

"We do this in an atmosphere of care, of calm consideration, but yet out of the realization that at particular times we have to make particular decisions," Campbell said. "And they are difficult sometimes, but they do flow from what we believe, who we are and how we are to live."

Fr. Bill Kempf, pastor of the school from which music teacher Fischer was fired, explained to The Associated Press that Fischer's union "opposes Roman Catholic teaching as it cannot realize the full potential a marital relationship is meant to express."

Marianne Duddy-Burke, executive director of DignityUSA, an organization of gay, lesbian and transgender Catholics, said she hopes a different religious argument will someday make it OK for a person in a same-sex relationship to work openly in a Catholic school.

"The bishops' hands are not tied," she said. "You follow a man who died on a cross. And you're promised resurrection -- that's the hallmark of our faith. If we can't live that in our professional lives, how do we dare call ourselves Catholic?"

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