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Catholic schools' contracts are unfair to LGBT community

by Marianne Duddy-Burke

Perspective

About a century ago, Catholic job-seekers were routinely confronted with signs reading, "No Catholics need apply." Now, it seems administrators in some Catholic schools are prepared to post signs that say, "No gay people need apply."

LGBT people have worked for the Catholic church probably for as long as the church has been around. For many, the decision to work in a Catholic parish, school, college, hospital, or social service program is a response to a sense of vocation. This call can be so compelling that people are willing to make significant sacrifices to work where they feel they can fulfill this deeply felt desire to serve God's people. They are certainly aware of the risks involved with being queer and an employee of the institutional church. They live with the need to hide their sexual orientation or gender identity, avoid discussion of their relationships, and keep their personal and professional lives absolutely separate. I've heard stories of people who choose to live an hour or more from their workplaces to ensure their worlds do not intersect.

As civil same-sex marriage becomes more accessible and as more employees of the church exercise their constitutional right to marry their partners, the tension between personal call and institutional policy has become increasingly evident. The amount of information accessible online has made maintaining boundaries incredibly difficult. This has led to myriad firings of people and, in many cases, protests from Catholics who know that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people do not deserve to lose their jobs because of who they are or whom they love.

Now, church officials in Ohio and Hawaii have taken this battle to a new level. In these two states, and likely in places still to come to light, Catholic school teachers will have to sign a contract that lists being gay, marrying a same-sex partner, or even attending a gay pride event among activities that could result in

termination. This takes the tension to a new level. Clearly, church officials believe they can intimidate employees into living in deep, dark closets or into an exodus from working for the church. Many may say it's high time for LGBT people to walk away from this oppression and bring their gifts and talents elsewhere.

I believe a different response is needed. This is a time for Catholics to tell church leaders they have gone too far. Rather than waiting for LGBT people to be fired, we need to prevent these contracts from being rolled out and make it clear that they violate the many beautiful pronouncements on the dignity of work and workers' rights our church is known for. Catholics need to make their overwhelming support for LGBT sisters and brothers visible by speaking out. We as a church cannot tolerate employment contracts that so flagrantly violate dignity, privacy and basic Gospel tenets.

Catholics often do not think they have the power to change reality within the church. In this case, I believe they do. Here are three things that can be done to show support for LGBT church workers and others these draconian employment contracts target:

1. Write or email Archbishop Dennis Schnurr of Cincinnati and Bishop Larry Silva* of Honolulu to demand these ill-conceived contracts not be implemented. Tell them how you believe these documents violate the very soul of our faith.
2. Send a similar letter to Archbishop George Lucas of Omaha, Neb., chair of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Catholic Education about why LGBT people should not be banned from teaching in our schools.
3. Catholics whose children or grandchildren attend Catholic schools can speak with their administrators to insist they not adopt this type of contract. Talk about the values of respect and inclusion that you believe are central to our faith and how important it is that these values are part of your children's education. Work with other parents to ensure the school's leadership knows this matters to lots of tuition-payers. Alumni of these institutions also have an important voice. You can reflect on the values that you carry with you as a result of your education and your sense of how these contracts violate them.

Catholic schools and other institutions do embody central values of our faith, and I believe all of us understand the important role they play in our communities. However, having them be models of exclusion, intimidation and oppression radically lessens their effectiveness.

[Marianne Duddy-Burke is executive director of DignityUSA.]

*An earlier version of this story used Bishop Silva's given name, Clarence, which is correct, but Bishop Silva uses Larry as his first name.

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