



Addressing
LGBT
Issues
with Youth

*A Resource
for Educators*

“Homosexuals must be accepted
with respect, compassion, and sensitivity.
Every sign of unjust discrimination
in their regard should be avoided.”

Catechism of the Catholic Church, §2358

“If a homosexual person
is of good will
and is in search of God,
I am no one to judge.”

Pope Francis,
America Magazine,
September 30, 2013

Welcome

Dear administrators and teachers:

Thank you for the vital role you play in forming our young people.

Your students bring gifts of faith, enthusiasm and exuberance that can enliven our Church. But, they are growing up in a complicated world that presents a constant tug of war between Gospel values and cultural pressures.

It is important that they have caring and supportive adults who will talk with them and guide them. This is especially true for gay and lesbian young people, many of whom may feel isolated in their “differentness.” Some will face bullying and overt discrimination. Some may simply be confused or depressed.

It is our responsibility to combat bullying and to bring understanding, respect and acceptance to all students. As members of the Marianist Family, who are part of the larger Body of Christ, we are called to attentiveness and concern for the growth, protection and well-being of all those entrusted to our care, including those in our classrooms who are gay, lesbian or still coming to understand their sexuality.



This document offers a Catholic rationale, perspective and orientation for addressing these issues and ministering among lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) youth. You and your fellow educators may be at different places in dealing with these sensitive pastoral issues.

You may ask yourself:

- How much do I understand these issues myself? How much have I read?
- How do I effectively teach and help students to grow in sexual maturity and integration within a faith commitment?
- What if I don't understand or agree with the current teaching of the Church on homosexuality?
- What if I believe in traditional marriage but fear being accused of discrimination if I teach that homosexual acts are immoral or if I oppose same-sex unions?
- How do I deal with the huge cultural push for acceptance of gay marriage — the approval of it by the courts on the one hand, and the teachings of the Catholic Church on the other?
- What if I've never had an interaction with someone I knew to be gay or lesbian?

Our Marianist charism calls us to become missionaries under Mary's banner, leading others to the loving heart of her Son and building apostolic communities of faith. This requires faith-filled courage and conviction, especially for the young and the marginalized, bringing them into the embrace of such a faith community.

The intent of this booklet is to support you in guarding the safety of your students and leading them to Christ.

May the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit be glorified in all places through the Immaculate Virgin Mary!

Marianist Social Justice Collaborative - LGBT Initiative Team

(A project sponsored by the Marianist Family Council of North America)





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Why we need this

A few short decades ago, sexuality – and homosexuality in particular — wasn't discussed. Now it is a common topic.

Children are exposed to information about sexuality at much younger ages and from a variety of sources, many of them beyond parental oversight.

Over the same period, society's understanding of homosexuality has changed. The views of mental health professionals have shifted, and religious leaders have taken varied stances. Some families welcome their LGBT members; others reject them.

For some LGBT youth, the "coming out" process is difficult. For others, it is not. This generally depends on the resources available to the young person and the extent to which their loved ones accept them. Boys and girls also raise questions about sexual identity at younger ages. Sometimes peers are very supportive; at other times, they can be the source of scorn, ridicule and aggression.

LGBT youth need reassurance from people who represent their faith if they are to integrate their self-understanding into their faith commitment. Catholic teaching often is misrepresented or misunderstood, which can cause turmoil for those who may conclude that God doesn't love them.

Supporting LGBT students does not condone sexual activity any more than supporting heterosexual students condones sexual activity. Your care and support simply honors the dignity of each person and provides a place where he or she is accepted and valued.

While bullying affects a wide range of students, LGBT students or those perceived to be LGBT endure particular ridicule. Learning respect for LGBT people is part of learning respect for all people, especially needed in our more globalized world. Teaching love of neighbor prepares students

to interact in a more Christ-like manner and to create a society of justice and peace.

Making schools safe is not something LGBT youth can do on their own any more than racial or ethnic respect is a one-sided effort.

If adults don't help

If adults don't support their students, if they ignore bullying, if they remain silent when they should speak up, what is an LGBT youth to conclude? That he or she is not loved and valued, a flawed human person.

When youth do not find support and understanding from teachers and school staff they may:

- Become "super students," focusing so much on academics they ignore other aspects of their development.
- Underachieve academically.
- Have problems at home.
- Drop out of school or change schools.
- Consider suicide.
- Use drugs to escape their suffering.

Sad statistics

It is not difficult to find credible statistics that demonstrate the importance of supporting LGBT young people.

- LGBT students are more than three times as likely as straight students to say they do not feel safe at school.
- About three of 10 LGBT youth have attempted suicide. LGBT youth are up to three times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual counterparts.
- A 2009 survey of more than 7,000 LGBT students from 13 to 21 found that in the past year, because of their sexual orientation:
 - Eight of 10 had been verbally harassed at school
 - Four of 10 had been physically harassed at school
 - Six of 10 felt unsafe at school
 - Two of 10 had been the victim of a physical assault at school

Sources of these statistics can be found at msjc.net.



What the Catholic Church says

Working at a Catholic institution requires a balance of pastoral concern and the need to affirm Catholic teaching.

The Catholic Church acknowledges homosexuality as a sexual orientation and does not place judgment on the orientation itself. However, because sexual activity of same-sex persons cannot lead to the creation of life, such acts are viewed as immoral.



Consistent with other Church documents, the most definitive position of the Catholic Church is articulated in the following sections of the "Catechism of the Catholic Church":

§2357 Homosexuality refers to relations between men or between women who experience an exclusive or predominant sexual attraction toward persons of the same sex. It has taken a great variety of forms through the centuries and in different cultures. Its psychological genesis remains largely unexplained. Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity, tradition has always declared that "homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered." They are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved.

§2358 The number of men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies is not negligible. This inclination, which is objectively disordered, constitutes for most of them a trial. They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. These persons are called to fulfill God's will in their lives and, if they are Christians, to unite to the sacrifice of the Lord's Cross the difficulties they may encounter from their condition.

§2359 Homosexual persons are called to chastity. By the virtues of self-mastery that teach them inner freedom, at times by the support of disinterested friendship, by prayer and sacramental grace, they can and should gradually and resolutely approach Christian perfection.

Catholic teaching on homosexuality is complex, and misconceptions are common. For example:

- **Homosexual orientation vs. homosexual activity:** The Catholic Church does not equate a person's sexual orientation with sexual activity. It recognizes that one's sexual orientation is given or discovered, not chosen.
- **Words that sting:** Terms like "intrinsically disordered," "contrary to natural law" and "objectively disordered" are technical, philosophical phrases that are difficult to accept without a fuller understanding of the Church's interpretation of natural law. Not surprisingly, some gay persons and their loved ones find these words hurtful.

As an educator, you must be pastorally sensitive but mindful of the Church's stance that genital activity only has a place in a marriage between a man and a woman. This does not mean that a gay or lesbian person is somehow defective or "badly made" (often the implication of the word disordered), or that he or she has in some way been rejected by God. Inclinations to homosexual acts in no way diminish the full human dignity or intrinsic worth of the person.

A pastoral approach

The Catholic Church has issued several documents related to the dignity of the human person, human sexuality and homosexuality specifically. Here are examples calling for ministry to gay and lesbian people:

“...the Christian community should offer [homosexual people] a special degree of pastoral understanding and care.”
To Live in Christ Jesus, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1976.

“... we would ask the bishops to support, with the means at their disposal, the development of appropriate forms of pastoral care for homosexual persons.”
Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1986.

“Sad to say, there are many persons with a homosexual inclination who feel alienated from the Church. Outreach programs and evangelization efforts ought to be mindful of such persons...Essential to the success of ministry to persons with a homosexual inclination will be the support and leadership of the bishop and other pastoral leaders ... A welcoming stance of Christian love by the

leadership and the community as a whole is essential for this important work. This is particularly important because more than a few persons with a homosexual inclination feel themselves to be unwelcome and rejected. Church policies should explicitly reject unjust discrimination and harassment of any persons, including those with a homosexual inclination.”
Ministry to Persons with Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006.

“Welcome homosexual persons into the faith community, and seek out those on the margins. Avoid stereotyping and condemning. Strive first to listen. Do not presume that all homosexual persons are sexually active. Learn more about homosexuality and church teaching so your preaching, teaching, and counseling will be informed and effective.”
Always Our Children, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Committee on Marriage and Family, 1997.

To gain an in-depth understanding, you may wish to read these documents in their entirety. You can locate them online; one place to begin is uscbb.org.

Our Marianist principles

The Characteristics of Marianist Education (CME) make it clear how educators interact with all their students:

CME 44: Create a favorable environment for education. More than simply a slogan, Marianist family spirit is a way of life with specific traits discernible in the educational communities it animates. By providing a climate of acceptance, discipline, and love, the school acts as a “second family,” fostering human growth and maturity.

CME 45: Cultivate interpersonal relationships characterized by openness, respect, integrity and

dialogue ... (A)ll members of the educational community, boards of directors, administrators, faculty, staff, parents, and students communicate respectfully, recognizing others as individuals within the same community.

CME 66: Educate persons to accept and respect differences in a pluralistic society. As the people of the world come increasingly into contact with one another, differences among them become more apparent. If the world of the future is to be peaceful, students of today must learn how to appreciate cultural difference and how to work with people unlike themselves.

Getting started

As a Catholic educator, you are in an important but sensitive position in this regard. It is your responsibility to be pastoral and to espouse the teachings of the Catholic Church.

Not everyone needs to be an expert or even totally comfortable with the concerns of LGBT students. Every teacher is not required to be all things to all students. However, all teachers and staff should be sensitive and supportive, and should know where to send students who need guidance.

Formal discussions about gay, lesbian and bisexual students could be held at faculty/staff in-services. Some schools are already doing this. Here are some possible approaches that have been used with faculty members and found to be effective:

- If opportune, start with a small group of interested faculty and staff members, discussing this issue and reflecting on how best to minister to LGBT students. Repeat the program for the entire staff later.
- Have a staff meeting that addresses existing policies for the safety of all students, including

gay and lesbian students. Regardless of one's knowledge of Catholic teaching, there may be strongly held beliefs, and such a meeting would need to be well managed. Let everyone feel free to express themselves. It's not a debate. It's an opportunity to discuss making the school a safe place for everyone.

- Invite an educator as a guest speaker to talk about the importance of responding to and supporting students who are gay or lesbian.
- Invite a speaker who can tell his or her own "coming out" story, especially in the context of his or her Catholic faith. A gay student or former student could have a profound impact, especially for faculty members unfamiliar with these issues.
- Host *A Place at the Marianist Table*, a tool created by the Marianist Social Justice Collaborative to promote dialogue on these issues. For more information: please visit the LGBT page at msjc.net.
- Consider using videos and interactive media, some of which may be available through your local diocesan education office.

Helping others understand the school's role

Homosexuality is a hot-button issue in society and in the Church, and children are exposed to many conflicting messages about sexuality. Because it is a volatile issue, special care must be taken at all levels: with teachers, students and parents. It's important for school staff and parents to understand Church teaching and realize that ministering to gay and lesbian students is important. Such activity is not a means to question Church teaching, but rather a tool to care for those in need, promoting the Church's commitment to respect, understanding, justice and peace.

Misinformed individuals may protest staff or school programs that address gay and lesbian issues. The controversy they create may be difficult. The issue is not debating the existence of gay and lesbian students, however, but rather ensuring they are treated with the dignity due all God's children. Our inclusive sense of Marianist pedagogy also calls us to this. Gay and lesbian students

deserve the same acceptance, love and education as their peers.

If you are dealing with complaints or organized opposition, anticipate the objections you'll be hearing and develop responses.

These are key notions to incorporate:

- There are lesbian, gay and bisexual students in every school. All children are deserving of dignity and respect. Ignoring this reality does not help.
- Reiterate that everything being done is within the framework of Church teaching.
- Your goal is to fight discrimination and make your school an environment of learning for all students.
- One mission of education is to teach children how to live peacefully in an increasingly diverse society. Catholic school policies must uphold the dignity and safety of all students.

Presenting to students

Students today are being confronted with LGBT issues at every turn: through social media, public discussions, government policies and films. This is the world in which we live and in which these students are growing up. How these topics are discussed within a Catholic perspective within the school is important and necessary.

Educators need to work closely with school administrators to ensure that whatever is done within classrooms is reflective of an integrated school policy that supports the Catholic and Marianist identity of the school and, at the same time, provides a pastoral outreach that is helpful for the personal and religious formation of our students.

These are ways others have found to incorporate LGBT issues in the classroom:

- Include lesbian and gay examples in any discussion of discrimination and the struggle for human rights.
- Present clear instruction on the Catholic teaching about the dignity of the human person, respect for all people, the meaning of human sexuality and the Catholic understanding of marriage.

- Discuss lesbian, gay and bisexual issues in current events.
- Integrate lesbian and gay content in family life education.
- Include carefully chosen readings that address these issues.
- Include sexual orientation in sex education classes.
- Include in health class or when dealing with HIV/AIDS education.
- Include LGBT issues in diversity awareness programs.
- Include these issues in anti-violence and anti-bullying programs.
- Discuss LGBT issues in substance abuse and suicide prevention programs.
- Include LGBT issues in ethics and morality classes.



Creating a safe, welcoming school

A safe school that affirms the value of each person begins on an individual level — with you. You'll want to examine your own beliefs and remember that your job is to see Christ in everyone.

There are LGBT youth in your classrooms. Talk to them, learn about their experiences, come to know them as individuals.

These are ways you can help build a school that welcomes all:

- Teach the fundamental principle of respect for human dignity.
- Challenge any homophobic remarks.
- Deal firmly with any acts of bullying or discrimination.
- Refer students to counseling and support resources through the school counseling office as appropriate.
- In dialogue with the administration, organize diversity programs.
- Consider the posting of an ally symbol or logo. Educate the students about what that symbol represents.
- When a student comes to you, listen to him or her.

Importance of school policies

As many schools have already done, school policies that promote respect and inclusivity can only enhance the Catholic and Marianist atmosphere in the school. Such policies are usefully reviewed from time to time, clearly communicated to staff and students, and included in the various handbooks and other instruments of school communication. Parents, too, need to be aware that respect for all students and staff is a hallmark of the school and that bullying is never tolerated. Since gay and lesbian students can attract particularly harsh reactions in some school settings, teachers and administrators who are especially vigilant can ensure a safe and secure environment as a reflection of God's care for everyone.

The inclusion of gay and lesbian students at school functions where dates or partners are invited is an especially sensitive issue. Schools have addressed this situation in a variety of ways. In the formulation of school policy, attention must be paid to the students themselves and what the policy communicates to them, to parental reaction or support, to the particular diocese in which the school is located with its diocesan policies, and to the good judgment of the leadership of the particular school. This is a sensitive but very real challenge that calls for a clearly discerned policy, reflective of the "Catechism of the Catholic Church" and Marianist pedagogy.

Approachable staff

There is an important message conveyed when supporters of LGBT people are visible and approachable. When appropriate, mention your gay family members or friends. Make it clear that you believe LGBT students deserve the same dignified treatment as everyone else. Since heterosexual educators are less likely to fear reprisals, you have the special opportunity to raise consciousness.

While not everyone is comfortable or competent discussing sexuality, many teachers are willing to listen and be supportive. There are ways to indicate supportive individuals, such as through ally symbols. It's important, however, that ally programs not project the image that those who don't participate are not supportive or that the school is not safe.

In a school environment, counselors hold a place of importance and are especially trained in guiding and directing students with personal issues and concerns. They, and the campus ministry team, hold an important responsibility in assisting students and faculty alike when issues of sexual orientation emerge. The goal, as always, is to assist and support young people in their search for self-understanding and self-acceptance.



Allow and facilitate support groups

Support groups, often called gay/straight alliances (GSAs), provide a safe and confidential place for students to meet and discuss their experiences. They also offer an opportunity for students to educate themselves and the school community about sexual orientation and homophobia. If such a group is begun in your school, it is important that it be approved by school leadership and that it be properly moderated by someone experienced in the dynamics of support groups, respecting confidentiality and personal freedom. As with support groups for students who have lost parents or siblings, or students who deal with issues of alcoholism at home, this type of group can be enormously helpful if well conducted and directed.

The beauty of the gay/straight alliance model is that it takes the pressure off students to self-identify as gay or lesbian. These groups are not

dating services. Their purpose is to offer support, create a welcoming environment and raise overall awareness of diversity issues. They can be valued places where students feel free to share about themselves and grow in their understanding of their experience, exploring questions and listening to others.

Here's an example of why such a ministry can be a positive experience:

"There's a student who's considered a nerd and is isolated because he's academically talented. There's a tremendous amount of cruelty for anyone who's different. This student comes to meetings and is an active member. He's now recently identified himself as openly heterosexual. I initially thought maybe he was coming to the group because he was gay. But he was coming because he's been marginalized. The one place he's found that he can be safe is at our meetings." From the moderator of a gay/straight alliance

Responding with care and understanding

A gay or lesbian student may feel comfortable “coming out” to a teacher, coach, campus minister or retreat leader. This can be a blessed moment for both. The student would not share this if he or she did not trust the adult.

These suggestions apply to any sensitive situation but can be particularly comforting to a student who is gay or lesbian and, perhaps, sharing this for the first time with an adult:

- Most importantly, listen and help them sort out their feelings.
- Be nonjudgmental. Remind them of God’s love for all.
- Be compassionate and empathetic.
- Listen for their fears and other issues they are dealing with.
- Put aside your own fears and prejudices.
- If it appears they need professional counseling, refer them to appropriate resources.
- Support the parents. If the student is “out” at home, parents may want to speak to someone at school.

- Encourage them to pray, receive the sacraments regularly, remain active in the Church.

A homosexual youth may ask, “Does the Church (or God) think there’s something wrong with me?” Respond that we are all made in the image and likeness of God and that God and the Church loves us for who we are.

Sexuality makes up only a part of who a person is and everyone is loved by God. Help them to see that their sexuality is a gift from God.

Another question might be, “Does God really want me to live a life without intimacy?” Convey that while the Catholic Church is clear about the distinction between sexual orientation and sexual activity, the Church expects nothing of a homosexual teenager that it doesn’t expect from a heterosexual teenager. All unmarried persons are called to refrain from genital sexual expression.

The following is from a 2011 statement from the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops titled, “Pastoral Ministry to Young People with Same-Sex Attraction.”

All young people, whether or not they experience an inclination to same-sex attraction, strive to understand and appropriate their sexual identity. The progressive maturing of a person’s freedom is a long-term process that can be encumbered by numerous obstacles. These include pressures from the media (particularly on the Internet), a widespread moral relativism, and the hedonism propagated by secular society itself. (8)

Hedonism and an obsession with the pursuit of pleasure, combined with an excessive consumerism for “as much as possible as soon as possible,” typify the mentality of contemporary Western society. Young people are often the targets of solicitations, especially through the media, which encourage them to consider sexual relations as simply another product of consumption, “a commodity, a mere ‘thing’ to be bought and sold.” To help them overcome this confusion, we ourselves



must be mature in our faith and profoundly rooted in friendship with Christ, a friendship that enables us to discern between truth and deceit. (11)

Adolescents and young adults need to be taught by word and example that the virtue of chastity means “the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being.” Through a Christ-centered love Christians can be fulfilled in all aspects of life, including the gradual integration of their sexuality. (7)

Young people face the same relational dynamics whether they are heterosexual or homosexual. Friendship is a precious gift from God, a way of loving necessary for every person. Whether it develops between persons of the same or opposite sex, friendship represents a good for all. It leads to spiritual communion. To equate friendship with genital expression, however, distorts its meaning. We recommend therefore that you nurture virtuous and chaste friendships, though not exclusively with others of the same sex. (22)

The role of conscience formation

As young people are being formed, it is normal for them to wrestle with questions about right and wrong and God’s love. A fundamental aspect of personal development is the formation of one’s conscience.

“Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid

evil, sounds in his heart at the right moment ... For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God ... His conscience is man’s most secret core and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths.”
- Catechism of the Catholic Church [§1776]

The following is from “Forming Conscience for Faithful Citizenship” by the U.S. Bishops:

A Well-Formed Conscience

Conscience is not something that allows us to justify doing whatever we want, nor is it a mere “feeling” about what we should or should not do. Rather, conscience is the voice of God resounding in the human heart, revealing the truth to us and calling us to do what is good while shunning what is evil. [FCFC 17]

Most people understand the obligation to follow their conscience. Yet we may pay little attention to where our conscience came from. Was it born from TV, movies and popular culture? Are we totally reliant on our personal experience and beliefs? Have we studied the teachings of the Church carefully?

Our Church is clear that we have a lifelong obligation to develop a well-formed conscience – one that includes being open to the truth, the study of Scripture and Church teachings, and prayerful consideration of God’s will.

People excel at making excuses for themselves, so a well-formed conscience requires consultation with others if only to make sure we are not fooling ourselves. To help us, the Church offers the example of the saints, the sacraments, Scripture and writings of popes and bishops to uncover what God is asking of us.

Finally

As an educator, be aware of the enormous power and influence for good that you hold. We all remember certain teachers. We remember what they said, what they believed and how they lived their values. You have an opportunity to have an immeasurably positive impact on the lives of your students. You may

even save someone’s life. You may be the chosen instrument through which a young person grows in freedom, personal integration and a friendship with Christ.

May God bless your efforts in this important vocation you have embraced.



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