

# Catholic Schools and “Gender Theory”

by Joan Frawley Desmond

WASHINGTON — Amid the sweep and spectacle of “Pride Month,” from local parades and corporate ad promotions to “drag queen story hours” in libraries and Twitter hashtag campaigns, the Vatican released a document designed to fortify Catholic educators whipsawed by this cultural moment.

The promotion of “gender theories” that overthrow the immutable reality of biological sex is fueling “a cultural and ideological revolution driven by relativism,” states “*Male and Female He Created Them*,” a document released June 10 and signed by Cardinal Giuseppe Versaldi, the prefect of the Congregation for Catholic Education. The document presents the hyperindividualistic ethos of gender theory as a threat to marriage and family formation, and thus to human dignity.

The modern attempt to frame gender as “fluid, flexible, and as it were, nomadic,” means that personal relationships are grounded in “the affection between the individuals involved, irrespective of sexual difference or procreation,” according to the document. “Thus, the institutional model of the family (where a structure and finality exist independent of the subjective preferences of the spouses) is bypassed, in favor of a vision of family that is purely contractual and voluntary.”

The document does not provide detailed practical guidance, but experts and seasoned educators say it offers a good starting point for Catholic schools. “The overall importance of this document is to help the Catholic community in the school come to terms with something complex and difficult and for which the Church has an answer that is truthful and compassionate,” Mary Pat Donoghue, the executive director for the Secretariat of Catholic Education at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, told the Register.

A former Catholic school principal, Donoghue welcomed the Congregation for Catholic Education’s substantive treatment of Church teaching, as well as its nuanced message for teachers. It points to a need for “sensitivity” and “dialogue,” especially when a student may be struggling with sexual-identity issues or has been influenced by messages that label Catholic teaching as unjust and unscientific. At the same time, she added, the document calls on teachers and parents to confidently present an integrated vision of life that links human dignity, sexuality, marriage and family life together. “Ultimately, Church teaching is in harmony with the goal of seeking the good of the person,” said Donoghue, who reported that the U.S. bishops will be providing more specific guidance on the Vatican document to help schools update and strengthen their curriculum.

The Cardinal Newman Society’s Dan Guernsey described the Vatican’s new instruction as a courageous and important work, with some caveats. “What the document doesn’t solve are the practical concerns of Catholic educators whose religious freedom and mission integrity are being threatened by advocates of gender ideology,” Guernsey told the Register, noting that his organization has released a school-policy framework, “Human Sexuality Policies for Catholic Schools,” which is designed to help Catholic educators protect their institutional mission and will be updated overtime.

## National Debate

No doubt, the fast-moving national debate around sexual orientation and gender identity has put Catholic schools on the defensive and exposed painful divisions within the Church and school communities. Just a week after the Vatican document’s release, a Jesuit school in Indianapolis announced that it would defy the local archbishop’s directive that it not renew the contract of a teacher in a civil same-sex “marriage.” The archbishop’s stance was attacked in an opinion column for *The New York Times*, “How to Defy the Catholic Church,” and by Jesuit Father James Martin on Twitter.

Reacting to the controversy, Rod Dreher, the author of *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation*, warned of a surge in attacks on faithful Church leaders and educators. “If you are the kind of religious or social conservative who thinks there can be a ‘live and let live’ detente ... now is the time for you to disabuse yourself completely of this fallacy,” said Dreher in a July 1 blog post for *The American Conservative*.

As the need for authoritative guidance from the Vatican grows more urgent, experts like Andrew Seeley, the director of advanced formation at the Institute for Catholic Liberal Education, have applauded the timely arrival of “*Male and Female He Created Them*.”

Gender ideology taps into the natural empathy that young people properly feel for someone who struggles with a disability or faces discrimination, Seeley told the Register. For this reason, it is not unusual for Catholic students and even parents and teachers to be confused about how best to respond when Church teaching and school policies are under fire. “Without a proper understanding of the human person, and how masculinity and femininity are involved in what makes us ... a person, it can be hard to feel that we are doing something good and holy when we continue to treat boys as boys and girls as girls,” he observed.

The document helps dispel this confusion with a clear analysis of the ideological arguments and their practical outcome. Gender theories “attack the right of children to grow up in a family with a father and mother that will allow them to have a healthy development of their personal identity. It is not just a matter of science, but also a moral and spiritual matter, and very much connected to human flourishing and happiness,” said Seeley. He said the Institute for Catholic Liberal Education was in touch with about 150 schools, and gender-theory issues have not surfaced in these institutions.

But he has also heard from Catholic teachers working in public and charter schools, where “some teachers are being forced to comply with the desires of children and their families to be addressed according to their own determination of their gender. So if a boy identifies as a girl, [the teacher] needs to use the pronoun, ‘she.’” These demands have provoked “a crisis of conscience,” he said, as teachers have been forced “to choose between lying, losing their job or being reprimanded.”

He predicted that Catholic schools would be facing similar issues in the near future and expressed gratitude for a Vatican document that will help ground schools “in an authentic Christ-centered anthropology and help teachers see that they are part of an evangelical and formative enterprise.”

### **Educators’ Perspectives**

Educators also said the document should inspire a comprehensive review of curricula and teacher formation across all academic disciplines. “In any typical Catholic or public school, you will find a curriculum with the sciences on one side and literature and humanities on the other, and never the two shall meet,” Luke Macik, the headmaster of The Lyceum, a small classical Catholic school in South Euclid, Ohio, told the Register. The result, he argued, is that the teaching of a specific subject, like science, has been “narrowed” and disconnected from other disciplines. “The modern scientific method says: Do your testing; verify your results.” There is no particular concern “about formal or final causes. But to understand something, don’t you need to understand its purpose?” he asked. “We are great at the manipulation of matter to serve man’s ends. But when man doesn’t see a purpose in nature or see that he has a purpose, then he is going to say, ‘I can do with myself whatever my desire is.’”

While Macik and other proponents of classical Catholic schools view their curriculum model as the best antidote to the claims of gender ideology, Catholic educators are scrambling to develop resources that can be adopted by a range of parish schools and catechetical programs. Emily Macke, the author of *Called to Be More*, a high-school curriculum inspired by Pope St. John Paul II’s theology of the body and published by Ruah Woods Press, said that Catholic educators should take their cue from the Vatican document. “It talks about the guiding principles of our method of education: To listen, to reason, and to propose,” Macke told the Register. “So many people have the misconception that all people want to do is preach, when we

do need to listen to students. “To reason is also important, because many students are told Church teaching is unreasonable. And, finally, we need to propose — not to force, but to invite them to see this beautiful and true vision of the person.”

By the fall, Ruah Woods will have completed Rooted: A K-12 Theology of the Body curriculum, which touches on the teachings and issues addressed in “Man and Woman He Created Them.” Macke said the program is designed to work with the U.S. bishops’ framework for catechetical objectives and standards. The high-school lessons designed for juniors and seniors deal directly with gender identity, she noted, but only after students have studied foundational principles that address sexual complementarity, the relationship between freedom and truth, and the meaning of authentic love.

### **Need for Formation**

These sensitive issues pose challenges to even the most experienced teachers, and the USCCB’s Mary Pat Donoghue urged Catholic educators to heed the Vatican document’s call for stronger faculty formation. Schools need to reserve time for “fruitful exchanges” that help faculty improve their grasp of countercultural teachings, said Donoghue, who recalled that when she served as a Catholic school principal the faculty joined administrators to read important Catholic texts together.

Likewise, she invited school leaders to improve “parent formation and development” by launching a speaker series or starting a reading group that could help participants fill the gaps in their own religious education and thus broaden support for Church teaching within the school community. The crucial takeaway, Donoghue said, is that the cultural and ideological revolution of gender theory requires “more intentionality in curriculum and instruction and in the formation of formators.”

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