

# Loyola Marymount University's

## Catholic Identity Crisis

by Peter Jesserer Smith

LOS ANGELES — Students and alumni concerned about Loyola Marymount University of Los Angeles' Catholic identity have launched renewed protests following a series of controversies, arguing the university needs to make a course correction in order to be faithful to its founding principles.

The RenewLMU coalition held two protests in December, and is planning a petition demanding the board of trustees compel President Timothy Snyder's administration act to strengthen positively the university's Catholic identity or find new leadership that will. The protests focused principally on the administration's recent handling of a preferred pronouns controversy, a Planned Parenthood dance, and the de facto removal of St. Junipero Serra's statue — in addition to the university's failures to promote or uphold its Catholic identity on campus.

Andrew DiCrisi, a junior who was part of the RenewLMU coalition's Dec. 6 morning protest, told the Register that the preferred pronouns controversy involved a theology professor requiring students to put down their "preferred pronouns" — reflecting their gender identity — next to their names on assignments or face a reduction in their grade.

DiCrisi explained the problem is two-fold: Not only did it involve a theology professor engaging in what Pope Francis has called "gender ideology," but it was also a "a total invasion of privacy." Students who are struggling with their sexual identity could be harmed by feeling pressured to "out" themselves to the professor. "There's plenty of people who would be unwilling to do that, let alone of course, for the political reasons that I would disapprove of," DiCrisi said.

RenewLMU has criticized the university's "Chosen Name Project" as an example of its involvement in gender ideology, as it offers students the "option to add a chosen name, your preferred gender, and pronoun identities to your Personal Information page."

The Register reached out to the university administration asking for comment regarding concerns on gender ideology and the university's Catholic identity, but had not received comment by publication. The RenewLMU coalition also objected to the removal of St. Junipero Serra's statue from the campus. DiCrisi said the removal of St. Junipero Serra's statue was "a blatant dismissal of the truth when it comes to Father Serra's legacy and what he actually came to the Americas to do."

However, a university representative told Catholic News Agency that the statue was removed for repairs in the summer of 2020, and when campus reopened, they convened a task force to get community feedback and recommendations. "No final decisions have been made, and the university remains committed to a thoughtful process of open dialogue," they stated.

The RenewLMU group also pointed out the university did not intervene to stop a student group's bake sale which raised \$4,100 for Planned Parenthood, the country's leading sole provider of abortions, in violation of LMU's Jesuit identity.

Jesuit principles of social justice (working for a just order in society) begin with the protection of life for the unborn child. Those principles were reiterated in 2003 in a document called "Standing for the Unborn: A Statement of the Society of Jesus in the United States on Abortion."

CNA reported the LMU administration distanced itself from the event, saying the university does "not support, nor does it fundraise, for Planned Parenthood" and would be reviewing its policies for student events going forward.

### **Authentic Catholic Theology Missing**

DiCrisi said LMU students go through required courses that can wildly misrepresent Catholic teaching. His Introduction to Theology class, he said, involved discussing fringe representations of God. DiCrisi showed the Register two pictures from the class he said were representative of the class experience: One involved how God

could be seen through the setting of women's reproductive anatomy; another involved recasting Michelangelo's Creation of Adam with God the Father depicting an elderly Black grandmother reaching out to Adam, as a young Black woman.

"This is an Introduction to Catholic Theology class," he said. "These are people that will never again in their lifetime take a Catholic theology class."

"We didn't talk about sacraments. We didn't talk about any of anything that's typically associated as being essential to understanding the Catholic faith," he said.

William Donahue, a Greek Orthodox student and a senior, told the Register "I've gone all the way through LMU not learning at all about Catholicism." Donahue said LMU's Catholic credentials helped him choose the university over Pepperdine, Chapman College, and the University of San Diego. But Donahue has since concluded that the university "doesn't care" about its Catholic identity. "I've learned about Buddhism. My theology class taught me the book, How to be an Antiracist, and Hinduism, but nothing about Catholicism," he said. "Not a hint of it."

Patrick Reilly, president of the Cardinal Newman Society, an organization that promotes Catholic higher education's fidelity to Catholic identity established in St. John Paul II's 1990 apostolic constitution on Catholic universities *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, told the Register that the RenewLMU alumni "have done a great job of exposing one problem after another, including the recent fundraiser for Planned Parenthood on LMU's campus."

"Gender ideology is in direct conflict with Catholic education," he said, adding that the Cardinal Newman Society has developed Policy Standards on Human Sexuality in Catholic Education for use by dioceses and Catholic colleges to navigate this area. "[Gender ideology] directly contradicts Catholic teaching, and it directly opposes a college's commitment to teaching truth."

Reilly said that RenewLMU's efforts should "inspire other students and alumni of wayward colleges to expose concerns and come together in prayer and productive efforts to turn things around." But when it comes to choosing Loyola Marymount for an authentic Catholic education, he believed families "should go elsewhere."

Professor Michael Berg, who has taught mathematics at LMU for three decades, told the Register that LMU presents "an uphill battle" for Catholics who are orthodox in their faith. "The policies of the university now are different from when I first began," Berg said, noting the Jesuit presence is barely felt on campus with their dwindling numbers. He explained LMU attracts "pro forma Catholics" who identify with some of the Church's social justice teachings, but that is where their identity and understanding of the faith stops. He said they are not equipped by LMU with a coherent presentation of the Catholic faith. "It's more about comparative religions and not Catholicism," Berg said. As a result, he said, many students cannot tell the difference between "a Republican and a believing Catholic."

"These poor Catholics come in so badly formed," he said, adding he would be surprised if the majority of students did not support abortion or sexual agendas at odds with Catholic teaching. Professor Berg, however, took a more sympathetic view to President Snyder's handling of these challenges, saying the president is "a serious Catholic with a difficult job" who also has to be "accountable to the people who hired him."

"In the controversies he faces, he's often caught between a rock and a hard place," Berg said.

### **Hope From the Bottom Up**

Berg said that from a financial point of view, LMU is succeeding with increased students and increased revenue. But from a Catholic point of view, for LMU to succeed would require significant changes following a "uniform vision of the Catholic faith." Berg said the administration would have to be on board, and considerable efforts would have to be made to present the Catholic faith to faculty and students, who have a considerable voice in university policy at LMU. "That means going against the grain to become a truly Catholic university," he said.

Berg recommended the administration greatly expand the work of Campus Ministry to educate students and faculty on the principles of the Catholic faith. Religion classes, he explained, would have to present the totality of the Catholic faith from the Church's standpoint and not as "comparative religions." The university would have to commit to recruit Catholic students who embrace the entirety of the faith, and educate its current student body accordingly.

But there is hope that LMU's students will make a difference working from the bottom up. Junior Megan Gladini, who is head sacristan on campus, told the Register that the Planned Parenthood fundraiser on campus was an affront to LMU's Catholic identity. She co-leads the adoration and rosary groups, and decided to restart the LMU pro-life presence, and now co-leads the VITA group.

"I chose to come to LMU because of its Catholic identity," she said. "It's a little bit rough, but I am trying my hardest to kind of uphold our dignity as a Catholic institution, studying the right things with the right professors, and being involved in the ways that I can."

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