

# Students Criticize Their Catholic University's Pro-Transgender Housing Policy

by Susan Klemond

An undercover video reveals that the University of St. Thomas places 'trans-identifying' individuals in student housing that doesn't correspond to their sex — and doesn't notify other students.

ST. PAUL, Minn. — Responding to an undercover video that revealed their Catholic university gives students who identify as transgender privileges in room assignments by covertly placing them in campus housing that doesn't correspond to their biological sex, University of St. Thomas (UST) students said they find the policy unfair, potentially a risk to women and not in line with the university's Catholic identity.

Knowing that a transgender student who is biologically male had access to the same bathroom facilities on her dorm floor, even if the person had a private room, would be uncomfortable, said Rachel, a pseudonym for a student who requested anonymity because of her campus employment. All of the students interviewed by the Register are referred to by pseudonyms because they fear reprisals. "Just knowing that a guy would be able to come in — and, I think, especially as a freshman, you're already kind of nervous being in a new environment," Rachel explained.

Citing their own experiences with the university's residence halls, two of the students interviewed by the Register said they were "disgusted" but not surprised by what the video revealed, given what they described as a wider shift in campus-housing culture away from Catholic values to more secular ones. They saw as contributing to increasing secularism the university's 2020 decision to make its dorms coed, with designated floors or sections for men and women, and UST's reclassification to NCAA Division I athletics.

The roughly five-minute video, entitled "Cheap Accommodations," consists of interviews with Zoe Chang, UST associate director of residence life, and another unnamed staff person by two undercover journalists who pretend to inquire about housing on behalf of a "trans sister." Chang responds to questions about room availability, cost and disclosure of gender identity to other dorm residents. Chang states in the video that transgender students are given preference to "set them up for success," as the university tries to move in the direction of being inclusive.

In the video, after Chang affirmed that a transgender woman would be able to room with women, she responded to a follow-up question about the cost by saying, "So, in this instance, we would consider this an accommodation and could charge, would charge the double-room rate." The accommodation, she noted, would be made for a single room. When the journalist asked if the student would receive a lower cost because they identified as transgender, she nodded in agreement.

The video was produced by an unnamed "citizen journalist" for O'Keefe Media Group, founded by James O'Keefe, who previously founded the investigative journalism organization Project Veritas. Claiming the video's undercover interviewers intentionally misrepresented themselves, misled Chang and unethically used a hidden camera, a UST representative told the Register the video "was edited to satisfy a specific agenda."

## University Responds

The university representative told the Register that during most academic years, two or fewer students requesting housing have disclosed their transgender identities. Regarding assigning students to a limited number of single rooms, the rooms are first assigned to students who are granted single-room housing accommodations through the university's Disability Resources, a university spokesman said. After those assignments are made, the Residence Life department assigns the remaining available rooms based on student request, with special accommodations made individually, considering personal needs.

Housing assignments for transgender students are handled by the Residence Life staff along with other student requests. "Single rooms are often the best options for [trans-identifying] students," according to the UST

administration's representative. However, UST students who spoke with the Register said the university's policy is unfair. "If trans students are given any preference, it doesn't seem ethical or just," said Tyler, an upperclassman. "If the university says it stands for and respects all students, that should include all students and not just one group," Rachel said. "They can't just care for one group of people, what they say they stand for and accommodate, to just that one group of people."

In cases where a student voluntarily disclosed that they identify as transgender to the university and asked to have a roommate, UST said that "our Residence Life team would take steps to make sure both students are comfortable with the living arrangements, while abiding by privacy laws that prevent the university from sharing a student's transgender identity without their consent."

One of those laws, the U.S. Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), protects the privacy of student education records and states that the university can't disclose a student's personal identity without their written consent. The university's Residence Life team makes decisions on a case-by-case basis with transgender and all other students who request assistance in being placed in housing, factoring student needs, and housing options and availability, according to the university spokesperson, who noted that the practice "is consistent with that of other institutions (Catholic and other faith-based) across the country."

Several other U.S. Catholic colleges and universities advertise on their websites similar housing accommodations for transgender students, including two Jesuit schools, Fairfield University in Connecticut and College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts.

In response to questions about concerns about the impact on the student community, a university spokesman noted that, in addition to the availability of a number of single rooms with private bathrooms and single-user bathrooms, "community bathrooms and showers have privacy stalls around the showers and toilets."

### **Changes in Campus Culture**

A UST student, John, who requested anonymity because he plans to soon enter a religious community, said one reason the video didn't surprise him was because he went through some of the training to become a resident adviser (RA) at the university. He said he dropped out because he disagreed with the focus on gender identity and other ideas inconsistent with a Catholic understanding of the human person, which, he said, RAs were expected to condone or facilitate. "There are a lot of people who are really pushing an agenda that seems to be contrary to what the Church's teaching is," John said.

Rachel said students she knows have been a little hesitant to talk about the video. She added that those who do talk about it aren't happy about it. "I think some people probably just don't want to stir anything up," she said. Rachel added that some potential students may decide not to come to UST because they're not comfortable with the housing practices. "I think living situations are one of the biggest things that kind of make or break your [university] experience."

John came to UST because he wanted to be part of a Catholic community, but he has seen it become more secular and favorable of identity groups grounded in a secular framework rather than Catholic students striving to grow deeper in their faith. As far as the university's housing policy's effect on UST's Catholic identity, he said, "I don't see how being willing to put a biological male in the same room with a woman is really upholding the common good, which is what we're always talking about here. So I think that St. Thomas is just kind of falling away, in general, from what the university was founded on, and I guess this is just like a very blatant example of that."

### **Catholic Identity in Question**

Regarding its Catholic identity, the university administration spokesman stated, "We recognize Church teaching on the nature of the human person. We are also trying to live in the world as it is and meet people where they are." The representative added, "The Catholic Church and Catholic institutions are charged with accompanying people, providing welcome and friendship. As a Catholic institution, St. Thomas will live this conviction and stands by its commitment to creating an inclusive campus for all."

In recent years, the Catholic Church has issued teachings and pastoral guidelines that UST's housing practices seem to contradict. In 2019, the Vatican's Congregation for Catholic Education issued instruction that critiqued gender ideology's separation of gender from sex and underscored the important role Catholic schools are to play in educating young people in the truth of the human person and human sexuality. And Pope Francis, while demonstrating pastoral closeness to trans-identifying persons, has also repeatedly criticized "gender theory," which he said is imposed as a form of "ideological colonization."

Consistent with the Pope's approach, Tyler emphasized that transgender students are valued in God's eyes and they should not be discriminated against, but the concerns of other students should also be considered because the presence of biological men in female dorms is a "huge safety risk. I just think that what should be kept in mind is not that they're transgender, but they're students, and that the other students should as well be protected. But I think focus is on one and not the other."

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