

“Trans” Trend

Catholic Women’s Colleges Admit Men

by Matt McDonald

When a media storm hit last fall after word leaked that a prominent Catholic women’s college in Indiana planned to admit males who identify as women, the school’s president seemed puzzled. “We are by no means the first Catholic women’s college to adopt a policy with this scope,” Saint Mary’s College president Katie Conboy wrote in an email message to students and staff.

Conboy was right: The policy – which conflicts with Catholic Church teaching and Pope Francis’ repeated condemnation of what he calls gender ideology – has quietly become the norm at Catholic women’s colleges in the United States. Five of the eight Catholic women’s colleges in the country explicitly say so on their websites. Two others don’t have such a statement on their sites, but an organization that aims to create “more inclusive LGBT-friendly colleges and universities” says officials at those institutions have confirmed that they accept transgender applicants. The Register was unable to independently confirm the application policies.

The schools with these transgender policies are independently run. Even so, canon law requires that to call itself Catholic a school must be recognized as Catholic by “a competent ecclesiastical authority,” which usually means the local bishop. Thus, while most bishops don’t run Catholic colleges, they have a relationship with them within the Church.

The Register contacted spokesman for the bishops of the dioceses where these schools are, asking for comment. Only one – the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, home of two Catholic women’s colleges – said the diocese is taking action about gender-admission policies. A spokeswoman for Milwaukee Archbishop Jerome Listecki provided the Register with the archdiocese’s 2022 “Gender Theory Policy,” which states that “single-sex schools” are restricted to persons of the designated biological sex.” The policy argues that charity demands truth and that recognizing a disconnection between biological sex and gender identity “opposes the truth of our sexual unity.”

“Our Gender Theory Policy applies to all Catholic parishes, schools, universities, colleges, and organizations that operate within the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. Our Policy Implementation Team is aware of some inconsistencies and is working to correct them,” said Sandra Peterson, communication director of the archdiocese, by email. In all, there are about three dozen women’s colleges in the United States. Most of them admit biological males who identify as women.

There are eight Catholic colleges in the United States that serve lay women undergraduates, according to the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities. (Some allow men as graduate students.) All of them were founded by Catholic women’s religious orders and maintain an affiliation with their founding congregation but are overseen by an independent board of trustees. The only Catholic women’s college that says publicly that it doesn’t currently admit transgender students is Saint Mary’s College in Notre Dame Indiana.

National Coverage

In June 2023, the board of trustees at Saint Mary’s quietly voted to accept students “whose sex is female or who consistently live and identify as women.” On November 21, 2023, a student newspaper, *The Observer*, broke the news, which led to national coverage. On December 21, after pushback from some students and alumnae and from the head of the local diocese, Bishop Kevin Rhodes of the diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Saint Mary’s reversed its decision, though some opponents of the policy suspect the proposal may reappear.

Patrick Reilly, president of the Cardinal Newman Society, which has a motto of “Promoting and defending faithful Catholic education,” told the Register that the gender-identity policies at most Catholic women’s colleges in the country are problematic. “We have a twofold identity crisis – both among young people captured by gender ideology and among Catholic colleges that defy the Church and reject the Catholic teaching that is foundational to authentic Catholic education,” Reilly said by email.

He said such schools are going against their purpose. “When a Catholic college is unfaithful, it not only violates its obligations as a Catholic institution, but it does enormous harm as an educational institution,” Reilly said. “Young people are being corrupted by the weak response of educators to dangerous ideologies in our culture. It’s a double offense to the Church and to Catholic families, who should never have to question whether a Catholic education is faithful to Catholic teaching.”

Alverno College

Among the Catholic women’s colleges that already accept transgender students, some present their gender-identity policy as inspired by their Catholicism. One example is Alverno College in Milwaukee, affiliated with the school sisters of St. Francis, which says on its website, “In the Catholic tradition of caring and respect for each human person, we support students on their journey of self-discovery and recognize that gender identity may change over time.”

“Alverno has put guidelines and services in place to support transgender students as integral members of our diverse campus community. Specifically, Alverno College admits students who consistently live and identify as women.” The Alverno website states. “In addition, continuing students whose gender identity changes after admission are encouraged to persist through graduation, experiencing the personal and academic support each student deserves from an Alverno education.”

Mount Mary University, also in Milwaukee, on its website calls itself “a Catholic University that believes and acts in accordance to the tradition of caring, respect, and educational access. As such, MMU strives to create an environment that is inclusive of all gender identities and intersectionality. At the undergraduate level, all individuals who identify as women (including cisgender and transgender women), intersex individuals who do not identify as male, and non-binary individuals are eligible for admission to MMU.”

(“Cisgender” is a term used by supporters of Transgenderism that refer to people whose gender identity matches their biological sex. “Non-binary” refers to having a gender identity that does not conform to the gender identity associated with either biological sex.)

The Archdiocese of Milwaukee’s Gender Theory Policy takes a different view. It closely tracks the Catholic Church’s teaching on gender identity, stating that God creates each person male or female, that “biological sex ... cannot be changed because it is bestowed by God as a gift and as a calling” (original emphasis), that a person’s gender “is inseparable from biological sex,” and that human beings “work out our salvation via our masculinity or femininity. In other words, human persons do not experience the freedom and joy of salvation despite their biological sex, but only in it and through it” the archdiocese policy states. The Register contacted Alverno College and Mount Mary University for comment, but didn’t hear back.

What Other Colleges Say

There are five other Catholic Women’s colleges in the United States. Mount Saint Mary’s University, Los Angeles, associated with the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, states on its website, “Our admission policy is that any student who was born female or who identifies as female is eligible for our admission to our traditional undergraduate women’s university.” The school also encourages students with documents “that include a gender designation that does not accurately reflect their gender identity ... to bring this to the attention of the Office of Admission at the time of application.”

A spokesman for the school could not be reached for comment. A spokesman for Archbishop Gomez of Los Angeles, where Mount Saint Mary’s University is located, told the Register by email, “It is the understanding of the archdiocese that university programs are open to all students. Since the university is independent and not an Archdiocesan institution, any questions regarding admissions would be addressed by the university.”

St. Catherine University in St. Paul Minnesota, associated with the sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, states on its website, “St. Catherine University admits students of all genders and gender identities to the college for adults and the Graduate College and admits all students who identify as women to the college for women.” A spokesman for the school could not be reached for comment. A spokesman for Archbishop Bernard Hebda of St. Paul and Minneapolis could not be reached for comment.

College of Saint Benedict

The College of Saint Benedict, in St. Joseph Minnesota, affiliated with the Order of Saint Benedict, states on its website, “In furtherance of our mission, tradition, and values as a college for women ... and in recognition of our changing world and evolving understanding of gender and gender identity, the College of Saint Benedict will consider for undergraduate admission those applicants who were assigned female at birth as well as those who were assigned male or female at birth but now consistently live and identify as female, transgender, gender fluid or non-binary.”

The College of Saint Benedict has a close relationship with Saint John’s University, a Benedictine men’s school in nearby Collegeville. The two schools have similar policies on gender identity. A spokesman for the College of Saint Benedict could not be reached for comment. A spokesman for Bishop Patrick Neary of the Diocese of Saint Cloud, where the College of Saint Benedict is, could not be reached for comment.

Trinity Washington University in Washington D.C., associated with the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, does not state a policy on gender identity in admissions information on its website. Campus Pride, a pro-transgenderism organization that tracks women’s colleges’ admission policies, says that “trans women are considered for admission to its women’s college, the College of Arts and sciences,” citing a “personal communication” on February 8 as the source. A representative for Trinity Washington could not be reached for comment. A spokesman for Cardinal Wilton Gregory, the Archbishop of Washington, also could not be reached for comment.

The College of Saint Mary in Omaha, Nebraska, associated with the Sisters of Mercy, does not state a policy on gender identity in admissions. But Campus Pride says the College of Saint Mary “accepts applications from individuals who identify as women,” citing a personal communication” on December 7, 2021, as the source. A representative for the school did not respond to a request for comment. The school is in the Archdiocese of Omaha, which is led by Archbishop George Lucas.

Riley Johnson, director of communications for the archdiocese, told the Register by email: “We are not familiar with the source of that information or the veracity of its claim, but Archbishop Lucas has not been informed by the College of Saint Mary of any admission policy of that nature.”

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