ASSEMBLY OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE DES ÉVÊQUES CATHOLIQUES DE L'ONTARIO

A STATEMENT FROM THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS ON POLICY DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATED WITH ONTARIO'S EQUITY AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION STRATEGY

Over the past few months, individuals and groups have approached the Bishops of Ontario to share their concerns about recent trends in the world of public education. Of particular concern to them is the issue of homosexuality: what we should teach about this to our students, and when; how we should accompany students who experience same-sex attractions; what kind of policies boards and schools should implement to ensure safe environments for these students. The Ministry of Education of Ontario has published a number of directives and policy documents in response to these questions that are to be implemented by all publicly-funded schools, including Catholic schools. It is acknowledged that the Ministry reflects a social mindset around these issues that does not correspond to Catholic teaching, leading to the question: will these directives force Catholic schools to betray their own principles and act in ways that contradict their purpose and identity?

The Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario (ACBO), through its Education Commission and its catechetical offices, the Institute for Catholic Education (ICE) and the *Office de l'éducation de la foi catholique de l'Ontario* (OPÉCO), has been following these issues very closely. We have voiced our concerns to the Ministry and sought to help them formulate policies that respect the integrity of Catholic schools. We have collaborated with various partners in the Catholic educational community to ensure that the Church's teaching on these issues is well-known and understood. We have published letters to clarify these teachings and give guidance on instructional and pastoral programs and services. Here are a few of the major interventions of the Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario over the past few decades.

In the late 1970's, as more and more boards were developing programs in family life and sexual education, Ontario's Catholic Bishops published Guidelines for Family Life Education, a text which was revised and re-published in 1987. In it, we read what would become the consistent message of the Bishops during the following decades:

> People with homosexual tendencies should be encouraged to cooperate with God's grace in seeking to respond positively to their Christian vocation. They must be treated with understanding and sustained in the hope of overcoming, or at least bearing with, their personal difficulties. They have personal rights to be respected and a special need to grow in self-worth. However, no pastoral method can be employed which would condone homosexual genital relations, for they are contrary to the essential nature of the sexual act. (No. 82)

During the 1980's, the ACBO sponsored and published a program of Family Life Education that implemented its own guidelines, known as the *Fully Alive!* series. The issue of homosexuality was presented in grade seven classes in order to help students understand a reality they were hearing about more and more often, and to introduce them to the Church's teaching in this area in a way appropriate to their age-group.

In 2003, the Education Commission wrote a doctrinal message to all involved in Catholic Education, recalling the Catholic school's mission to teach sexual morality to its students, recalling the Church's teaching on homosexuality and proposing directions for pastoral care of students experiencing same-sex attraction. This doctrinal message later became the first part of a more amplified resource entitled *Pastoral Guidelines to Assist Students of Same-Sex Orientation*. This resource included, along with the Commission's message, a collection of personal stories to help teachers, staff and parents understand what some students can be experiencing; a series of guidelines on accompanying students with same-sex orientation; a second series of guidelines on creating safe school environments for these students; a number of statements presenting the theological foundations of the bishops' message; a series of reference texts including a letter from the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on the *Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons;* relevant excerpts from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and a statement from the American Bishops' Committee on Marriage and Family entitled *Always Our Children*. All these texts are to be read in harmony with the bishops' doctrinal message that introduces the resource.

10 ST. MARY STREET, SUITE 800, TORONTO, ONTARIO, CANADA, M4Y 1P9 • TEL (416) 923-1423 • FAX (416) 923-1509
website: www.acbo.on.ca e-mail: acbo@acbo.on.ca

Early this year, the ACBO became aware of a policy directive (memorandum) from the Ministry of Education known as PPM 145, some passages of which concerned students who self-identify as homosexual. The ACBO's Education Commission contacted the Catholic Boards across the province to advise them of certain details within this PPM which did not correspond to the Bishops' own pastoral guidelines, and called on the Boards to respect the integrity of their schools as they implemented various provisions of this PPM. To our knowledge, all Catholic Boards in the province have responded positively to our invitation.

More recently, much public attention has been given to the Ministry of Education's directive that each Board must develop a policy regarding equity and inclusivity. The issue of sexual orientation is but one of many that are addressed by this directive. The Catholic School Boards of Ontario have worked together to develop a **Catholic version template policy** that could help each individual board respond to the Ministry's directive. Last April, the ACBO studied this template and decided to endorse in principle the statements contained therein respecting the denominational rights of Catholic schools.

In other words, the Bishops believe that the proposed template will help ensure that our schools will remain faithful to Catholic teaching as they move forward with the Ministry's directive. Each board must now develop its own policy, and the ACBO has invited each board to consult its own Bishop in this process. Of course, writing a policy is one thing, implementing it is another. The ACBO will continue to monitor this process, in collaboration with its partners in Catholic Education.

The Bishops of Ontario believe that it is possible for publicly-funded Catholic schools to be faithful to their identity and mission while responding to the legitimate demands made upon them by the society in which they operate. This is no easy task, but is facilitated by the goodwill and collaboration of all those who care for Catholic education. It is in this spirit that we present this summary of our past activity in this area as a pledge of our continued vigilance and leadership.

THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS OF ONTARIO

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10 ST. MARY STREET, SUITE 800, TORONTO, ONTARIO, CANADA, M4Y 1P9 • TEL (416) 923-1423 • FAX (416) 923-1509
website: www.acbo.on.ca e-mail: acbo@acbo.on.ca