

Parents of homosexuals speak in Catholic High Schools in Cleveland Diocese

By Ann Hoenigman

In the fall of 2007 Sister Rita Mary Harwood SND, Secretary for Parish Life and Development in our Cleveland Diocese, asked me, as a member of the Parents of Catholic Gays/Lesbians Support Group to speak to religion teachers and counselors from a number of Catholic High Schools in the area about what can be done to help homosexual students in high school.

I emailed my then 23 year old lesbian daughter, Alice, living in Indiana. She invited her gay and lesbian friends with Catholic High School backgrounds to add any thoughts or experiences they had in high school that could have been helped by different policies in the schools. They came up with many good suggestions and situations. The young people discussed feeling very lonely with no one to go to for advice or help. One young lady said, "The Church teaches that both homosexual and heterosexual kids should observe abstinence outside marriage. Sexual activity was not a big issue." The bigger issue for these kids was trying to understand and accept themselves and their strange attractions to people of the same sex. The kids talked about feelings of shame, self disgust and terrible loneliness. Alice said, "Now, as an adult I can face these issues but as a teenager I could not even begin to deal with all of my upsetting feelings. I told no one in high school that I was a lesbian, because I thought they would hate me; I hated myself."

How were we able to bring our message to the Catholic High Schools?

In the 2006-2007 school year a group of religion teachers, counselors, and campus ministers from various Catholic High Schools in the diocese called the office of Wayne Uehlein, Associate Superintendent for Catholic High Schools. These educators voiced their concerns about ministering to homosexual students and asked for some guidelines. As their concern was bubbling up from below, Bishop Richard Lennon was discussing with Sister Rita Mary, the ongoing pastoral care and development of the Diocesan Gay/Lesbian Family Ministry. Included in this ministry was attention to the needs of students at the high school and college levels. Thus, the Pastoral Care Committee was formed during the 2006-2007 school year. At the first meeting this Mission Statement and purpose was proposed. The Pastoral Care committee strives:

- To assure that each person in every Catholic school community is valued and respected, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression.
- To use Catholic doctrine as the foundation of Catholic High School principles and practices;
- To ensure respect and dignity to every person/student;
- To ensure safety within our school and student groups. Some concerns included: safety and wellbeing of homosexual students, inappropriate language from students demeaning to homosexuals, and preventing bullying or cyber bullying of students who were or were perceived to be homosexual.

The committee expanded in the 2007-2008 school year to include other principals, campus ministers, religion teachers and counselors. Realizing the importance of stating clearly our mission in the Catholic Schools, the group worked on the development of a statement which could be posted in the classrooms of schools and appear in each student handbook.

As a result of that work and with the approval of the Bishop, all high schools of the Diocese have been asked to include the following statement in their Handbooks:

"Made in the Image and Likeness of God" (Name of School) seeks to create and foster a school community in which all individuals are treated with dignity, integrity, and respect. And in light of this, every person has a human dignity which (Name of School) is committed to enhance and protect. We believe that all individuals are "created in the image and likeness of God." For these reasons, the (Name of School) community is one in which all faculty, students, and staff are entitled to pursue their fullest intellectual, social, spiritual, emotional, and physical potential. Harassment of any kind interferes with this development and, therefore, will not be tolerated. Harassment occurs when an individual is intimidated, teased, bullied, threatened, or discriminated against because of race, religion, age, gender, physical appearance, socioeconomic status, or sexual orientation. Harassment creates an offensive, hostile, and intimidating environment. Examples of harassing behavior include, but are not limited to the following: Verbal, Physical, Visual, Sexual Harassment. The school will treat allegations of harassment seriously and will review and investigate such allegations in a prompt, confidential, and thorough manner. As members of the (Name of School) family, we trust that you will embrace and practice these principles on campus and in your home.

The school communities have treated allegations of harassment very seriously and this has made a difference in our high schools. In the 2008-09 school year, the faculties of fourteen Catholic High Schools came together in groups of 3-4 schools for an in-depth presentation on homosexuality, the teaching of the church, emotional and psychological considerations, the considerations and learning of the Pastoral Committee and reflections from a parent's point of view. Four parents from the Parents of Gays/Lesbians group participated in these presentations. All of the presenting parents felt they had received positive feedback. The goal for 2009-2010 is thorough involvement of all students' parents in more complete understanding and greater sensitivity to the impact of harassment, of any type, including homosexuals, on the life of our students. Talks to parents by the parents of homosexuals is one of the ways the Diocese, the Pastoral Care Committee, and the Parents of Homosexuals groups hope to work together in the next year to further our cause. We of the Parents of Gays Group here in Cleveland are optimistic. The process may be slow; however, we feel it is off to a good beginning.

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