

ISSUE BULLETIN



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Examining Critical Issues in Faithful Catholic Education

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Private Affairs and Private Institutions

by Frank J. Moncher, Ph.D.

Senior Fellow of Social Sciences at the Culture of Life Foundation

This article is part of a collaborative series between The Cardinal Newman Society and the Culture of Life Foundation on Catholic education policy from the perspective of theology, ethics and the moral law.

With government's growing efforts to create a new norm for human sexuality, it should not be surprising that those who engage in sexual activity outside of the bonds of traditional marriage are becoming increasingly bold in disclosing their lifestyles. While the impact of some of these disclosures may be limited to immediate family, friends, and perhaps neighbors, others reach a great deal further as the persons involved, teachers, for example, have formative roles with children. While the response among public officials and school systems appears to be one of acceptance, if not celebration, there are, of course, many parents and colleagues who have concerns. The media gives little traction to such concerns, pushing us to believe that the trend is towards openness to all variations of lifestyle, with no clear sense of where lines, if any, should be drawn. Ignored completely are ample data demonstrating that a disproportionate number of those living alternative lifestyles engage in behaviors that place their physical health and wellbeing at higher risk.

The debate above is interesting enough, but add to it charged arguments respecting religious liberty and you have an interesting intersection making headlines of its own. Two Catholic dioceses this year have faced the dilemma of teachers who are planning to marry same-sex partners, one going public via Facebook and the other directly contacting his school leadership to inform it of his plans. These disclosures have raised a great debate. What is the right thing for a diocese to do when an employee openly violates church teaching? How do we balance justice and mercy, knowing that neither is possible without the other? It should be noted that this is not only an issue of same-sex attracted persons, as heterosexual cohabitation presents a similar dilemma.

My colleague E. Christian Brugger will be addressing the proper ethical and moral reasoning that is central to this issue in coming briefs. Today, I will reflect on how one might think about this issue with respect to its impact on the psychological development of the affected students.

Are You A Role Model?

Does it really matter what the teachers of our youth do in their personal lives? Are the teens actually paying attention to their teacher's lifestyle choices? Research and theory would say "Yes."

Psychological theory and research, originally articulated by Albert Bandura's social learning theory, have long recognized that the examples set by significant adults have a great influence on the youth around them. Adolescents are particularly apt to be influenced by adults because adolescence is the age of identity formation. Positive role models have been found to have protective effects, especially for those adolescents who are exposed to negative adult behavior in the home. What is critical for this discussion are the mechanisms through which this role modeling occurs.

Through a process known as "vicarious reinforcement," people tend to model the behavior of individuals whose actions they see being rewarded, rewards being either praise or attention from others. It is as if the observers were actually receiving the rewards themselves. This creates a real problem then when a public figure who behaves poorly, rather than being publicly reprimanded, is publicly praised. Vicarious learning will occur in either case. The only question is what will be learned. Therefore, how leaders address those situations where a teacher or principal chooses to violate the standards, or ignore the mission of the organization for which he works, is critical.

Researchers Brown and Trevino's work on ethical leaders in business led them to conclude that in order to be perceived as an ethical leader, the individual must be seen as a moral person: a person who is honest, trustworthy, caring about people, open to input, respectful, and able to make principled decisions. These last two factors, showing respect and being principled in making decisions, I suggest, are the weak links in our current culture. Whatever other seemingly-positive character attributes might be demonstrated by an individual taking a provocative stand, the promotion of his own self-interest over that of the community's needs disrupts his ability to meaningfully convey those attributes as strengths.

Supportive commentaries with respect to the teachers who have pursued same-sex marriage (teachers who, by the way, have acknowledged and consented to the prohibition against such acts in their employment contracts with the Catholic diocese for which they work) have focused exclusively on how caring and supportive these teachers are of students, highlighting their excellent teaching records and popularity in the school. Mainstream media reports and current political trends take a similarly sympathetic view.

And herein lay the problem. While not presuming to know, and certainly not judging, the motivations of the teachers involved in these particular cases, there are critical principles and dynamics at play that must be understood in order for the students in these schools to receive justice.

Defining The Role Model

To the extent that youth are persuaded by the popular notion that such behavior is a normal variation—free of any adverse consequences—and to be at least tolerated, if not fully embraced, they will be unable to see that in "coming out" the teacher has failed: he has failed to respect and uphold the integrity of the Church which he has agreed to serve. Instead, students will see these teachers as besieged heroes and role models to be emulated. Teens are

already developmentally predisposed to challenge authority as they explore with their maturing minds, abstractions and ideas that were heretofore hidden. This is a normal and healthy process. However, it needs guidance and boundaries. Historically, these have come from family, school, and church communities. If these institutions begin to equivocate, then our youth are cast adrift on stormy seas. Youth need and, research suggests, actually prefer, ethical role models. It is in our nature as human persons to desire the good and to seek the truth. Our youth thirst for this. To deny them such goods is not only perilous, it is unjust.

While students might learn from the “teachable moment” of a teacher who is involved in a pregnancy out of wedlock, but then places the child for adoption or marries the other parent of the child, permanent, premeditated actions taken against known values and agreed contractual obligations is a different matter. Although it is unpopular in the moment, and certainly challenging interpersonally, to dismiss a beloved teacher, the risk of confusion is too great to do otherwise, and, in the long run, the many adolescents who are better formed as a result will be grateful for it.

Dr. Frank Moncher received his Ph.D. in Clinical-Community Psychology from the University of South Carolina in 1992, and spent several years on faculty of the Medical College of Georgia, with a focus on Adolescent Intensive Services. He has taught at a graduate school of psychology in Washington, D.C., which had a mission of integrating the science of psychology in the context of the Catholic Christian view of the human person. Concurrent with this, over the past 12 years he has consulted with 11 different religious orders and four dioceses to provide psychological evaluations of aspirants and candidates, as well as consulting with different diocesan marriage tribunals. Dr. Moncher is published in *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services*, *Adolescence*, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *Edification*, and the *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, as well as contributing to several book chapters on children, families, and religious issues.

Since 2010, he has worked for the Diocese of Arlington and Catholic Charities as a psychologist and consultant. His current titles are Managing Director of Integration and Training, Catholic Charities Diocese of Arlington and Psychologist and Psychological Assessor, Catholic Diocese of Arlington. He and his wife Elizabeth live in Alexandria, VA with their three children.