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Free to Be: Supporting Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Students on Catholic Campuses

Jessica Belue

There is a long history of tension between the authority of the Vatican and the relative autonomy of Roman Catholic institutions of higher education, particularly in the United States of America. These tensions currently arise on Catholic campuses where student affairs practitioners seek to support lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) students while at the same time operating within Vatican teaching that homosexuality is objectively disordered (Ratzinger, 1986). This paper will review those Catholic teachings on homosexuality and explore policies and practices of student affairs practitioners seeking to serve LGB students at Catholic higher education institutions.

Institutional autonomy and academic freedom have become defining characteristics of higher education in the United States of America (U.S.A.) (Rudolph, 1990). Faculty, students, and staff can take for granted the ability to think, question, and act without adherence to a single truth or belief system. In religiously affiliated institutions of higher education, however, these values of institutional autonomy and academic freedom exist only within a context of religious truth. For example, with years of rich theology and doctrine, the Catholic Church upholds religious teachings, and it expects Catholic higher education institutions to operate in accordance with those beliefs. One of its more controversial beliefs is the Church's teaching on the immorality of homosexual acts. Because student affairs practitioners seek to provide safe spaces for all students, including those who identify as lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB), they might find tension between their professional philosophies and the teachings of the Church. The history and teachings of the Catholic Church on institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and homosexuality provide the context in which student affairs practitioners on Catholic campuses work. After understanding such teachings, one can identify ways in which current student affairs practices on Catholic campuses align with Catholic teaching and ways in which they diverge.

Institutional Autonomy and Academic Freedom in Catholic Colleges and Universities

Historically, the Catholic Church in the U.S.A. has had a troubled relationship with the Vatican. Popes have questioned the loyalty of the American bishops and their laity to the Roman hierarchy. Popes have often been uncertain whether American Catholics held to the moral authority of the *Roman Curia*, the assembly of officials that help govern the Church, or to the spirit of collegiality in which church leaders in the U.S.A. claimed independent autonomy over local matters (Fogarty, 1985). However, the 1962 meeting of the Second Vatican Council, commonly known as Vatican II, created a new environment in which this American independence thrived. For instance, the priest could now face the congregation, Mass could be said in languages other than Latin, and lay participation in the Church rose to new importance. In the midst of a transitioning Church, Catholic colleges and universities in the U.S.A. recognized an opportunity for self-definition. Vatican II provided Catholic college and university administrators in the U.S.A. a unique and timely opportunity to explore their institutions' roles as both pinnacles of Catholic thought and places of traditional secular education (O'Brien, 1998).

In this environment of change, 26 administrators, educators, and priests met in Land O' Lakes, Wisconsin to discuss the role of Catholic higher education institutions (O'Brien, 1998). The document that resulted, known as the "Land O' Lakes Statement," reaffirmed the inherently Catholic role of these institutions to both educate students in the theology of the Catholic Church and also to foster Christian lifestyles (Gallin, 1992). Perhaps more controversial was the assertion:

The Catholic university must have true autonomy and academic freedom in the face of authority of whatever kind, lay or clerical, external to the academic community itself. To say this is simply to assert that institutional autonomy and academic freedom are essential conditions of life... and indeed of survival for Catholic universities. (Gallin, p. 7)

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These sentences in the opening paragraph of the Land O' Lakes statement clarified that those present in Wisconsin believed that a level of freedom from the *Holy See*, commonly known as the Pope, and local Catholic authority must exist for a university to prosper. The statement highlighted institutional autonomy and academic freedom as crucial characteristics of academic communities. These universities were places where not only Catholic religious growth, but also traditionally secular intellectual growth must occur. The Land O' Lakes statement sought to offer a new framework for viewing the role of Catholic colleges and universities, one which afforded institutions some freedom, lest the Church hierarchy stifle the intellectual functions of a university.

The Pope concurred with the Land O' Lakes statement, although within limits. Two decades after the Land O' Lakes statement, Pope John Paul II added his own thoughts to the discourse on Catholic higher education in an apostolic constitution, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*. Translated *Born from the Heart*, this document served as the Vatican's thoughts on the purpose and mission of Catholic universities. Using language similar to that in the Land O' Lakes statement, the Pope wrote that the Church could afford Catholic universities the necessary autonomy to function properly "so long as the rights of the individual person and of the community are preserved within the confines of truth and common good" (Gallin, 1992, p. 417). In addition, he further explained the context of truth and common good in which Catholic higher education institutions' autonomy and freedom must rest. Pope John Paul II stated that an essential characteristic of a Catholic university was that it had "fidelity to the Christian message as it comes to [Catholics] through the Church" (Gallin, p. 417). In other words, Pope John Paul II believed in providing Catholic universities the intellectual freedom they needed, but at the same time sought to ensure this freedom would not result in acceptance of policies or teachings not in accordance with the Church. He wanted to make certain that Catholic doctrine both informed the workings of the institution and also retained its presence on Catholic campuses.

The Catholic Church and Homosexuality

One particular teaching of the Catholic Church that highlights the challenges surrounding institutional autonomy and academic freedom is homosexuality. Because Catholic colleges and universities enroll lesbian, gay, and bisexual students, these institutions must determine how much to adhere or stray from the Catholic Church teaching on homosexuality in their policies and practices surrounding LGB issues. They must determine to what extent they will work within the teachings of the Church. Understanding these teachings is important when considering their impact on Catholic campuses.

In 1986, the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, led by then Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, issued the Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons. This letter, issued by the group charged with safeguarding the doctrine of the Church, explained the teaching of the Church on the issue of homosexuality. Ratzinger (1986) wrote of homosexuality, "Although the particular inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin, it is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil; and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder" (section 3, para. 2). Thus, in the eyes of the Church, those with a homosexual inclination have a burden they must carry. Though their identity is not inherently sinful as once taught by the Church, they are "called to chastity" to avoid their inclination to sin (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1997, p. 566).

Though Ratzinger's letter claims homosexuality is a tendency towards immorality, the letter does not condone acts of "violent malice in speech or in action" against lesbian, gay, and bisexual people (Ratzinger, 1986, section 10, para. 1). It states, "It is deplorable that homosexual persons have been and are the object of violent malice... The intrinsic dignity of each person must always be respected in word, in action [sic] and in law" (section 10, para. 1). However, Ratzinger also warns bishops not to react by protecting or condoning homosexual sex. He says, "The proper reaction to crimes committed against homosexual persons should not be to claim that the homosexual condition is not disordered" (section 10, para. 2). Thus, for pastoral programs in which lesbians, gays, and bisexuals participate, Ratzinger insists that program leaders must indicate that homosexual activity is sinful, and guide participants away from committing this sin.

An Existing Tension on Campus

A student affairs professional reading the aforementioned teachings of the Catholic Church may feel conflicted with the statements made by Cardinal Ratzinger and the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith. Part of the role of student affairs practitioners on college campuses is to practice the values of diversity, multiculturalism, acceptance, and pluralism (Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2004). In accordance with these values, student affairs practitioners welcome people of all identities, especially those who are marginalized within society. Student affairs offices provide resources and support services for lesbian, gay, and bisexual students who are seeking to develop their sexual identities in college. Schoenberg (1988) suggests some of the basic support services needed for LGB students on campuses. He highlights the importance of creating appropriate channels of communication to ensure that university administrators hear and address the concerns of LGB students, as well as increasing access to literature on homosexuality and providing orientation opportunities for LGB students.

Schoenberg (1988) further claims that not only must student affairs practitioners provide services to LGB students, but they also must seek to educate others on campus to create an environment free of homophobia. Obear (1991) defines homophobia as the “irrational fear, hatred, and intolerance of people who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual” (p. 39). According to Obear, universities seeking to address homophobia should first create a mission to inform a campus climate in which all community members can grow as scholars and humans free from fear (p. 39). In addition to a mission statement, Schoenberg (1988) suggests other campus improvements, such as providing training programs to increase awareness of faculty and staff, particularly security officers, and ensuring institutional intolerance of homophobic language. In secular universities, student affairs practitioners may provide resources to students, faculty, and staff in celebration of the diversity of sexual orientation on campus. Catholic institutions of higher education following Catholic doctrine would similarly seek to eliminate violence against LGB students, as Ratzinger (1986) calls Catholics to do.

Catholic institutions, however, would have a different outlook than secular universities regarding the appropriate intellectual and emotional development of LGB students. While secular institutions might seek to develop the whole sexual identity of LGB students, including the development of healthy romantic relationships, Catholic institutions operating within their religious doctrine might feel compelled to educate LGB students on responsibilities that the Church believes accompany this aspect of their identity. One such responsibility is the Catholic teaching of celibacy, as noted in Ratzinger’s (1986) letter; for example, Catholic institutions might encourage LGB students to avoid romantic relationships. Individuals within Catholic environments would see the learning of such responsibilities in line with student affairs philosophies of encouraging students’ self-awareness, ethical development, and satisfactory sexual adjustment (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 1986). Student affairs practitioners outside of this faith tradition might view the selective denial of LGB students’ identity as contrary to their student affairs philosophies.

Many questions arise, therefore, for student affairs practitioners working at Catholic institutions of higher education. Though these institutions operate with some level of institutional autonomy, they are bound by the doctrine of the Catholic Church. Do student affairs practitioners promote acceptance while condemning gay and lesbian relationships and actions? Do student affairs practitioners respectfully disagree with the teachings of the Church by encouraging acceptance of the inclination of homosexuality and the full emotions and practices that embody one’s sexual orientation? Or do student affairs practitioners reinterpret traditional student affairs values, promoting tolerance of homosexual people but encouraging education on the sinfulness of homosexuality? One discovers through the exploration of current practices that Catholic teaching and student affairs philosophies do have some congruent beliefs, which help to answer these questions.

Models for Resolution

A handful of articles in current literature explore case by case answers to the questions of how Catholic universities and student affairs practitioners address and relieve tensions surrounding issues of homosexuality (Getz, Cheryl, & Kirkley, 2002; Love, 1997, 1998; Perlis & Kirkley, 2001). These articles, in combination with the author’s findings from interviews with student affairs practitioners at a small Edmundite college in Vermont and a large Jesuit university in Washington, DC, provide insight on how LGB issues are addressed on Catholic campuses in ways that align with Catholic teachings.

The first step to addressing tension between Catholic teachings and student affairs philosophies is simply acknowledging that a tension exists. Student affairs practitioners at Catholic campuses are often lay people, who may not necessarily be Catholic, and therefore may lack knowledge about the exact teachings of the Church in regards to homosexuality. Because campuses do not usually provide handbooks on Catholic teachings, the responsibility of knowing important Catholic doctrine rests on the individual. Colleagues often provide informal lessons on institutional culture relating to issues of Catholic doctrine, but practitioners new to the Catholic environment often must research or ask about official teachings on homosexuality themselves (P. Rue, personal communication, 2005).

Once student affairs practitioners recognize this tension, how do they attempt to address the needs of LGB students and the needs of this community? In many instances, Catholic campuses focus on the Catholic teaching relating to nondiscrimination. The idea of nondiscrimination allows such universities to operate within the frameworks suggested by both Obear (1991) and Schoenberg (1988); administrators can serve both the personal needs of LGB students and educational needs of others in the community to encourage tolerance and acceptance of LGB students. Getz and Kirkley (2002) wrote about the Rainbow Visibility project at The University of San Diego, a Catholic institution in California, in which students, faculty, staff, and alumni train to be educators on issues surrounding sexual orientation. By eliminating homophobic stereotypes, providing education, and promoting dialogue at all levels of the institution regarding issues of homosexuality, their work has created an environment less hostile to LGB students. Getz and Kirkley wrote that tensions still exist, but discrimination, "hate crimes, hate speech, and bias-related incidents" have decreased (p. 26). The creation of this safer environment has allowed people to identify as LGB or an LGB ally, and it has encouraged the visibility and discussion of existing tensions.

In another instance, Perlis and Shapiro (2001) write about a small Catholic college and its attempts to change its dominant heterosexual culture in which homosexuality is a taboo topic. The authors find that acceptance of LGB students occurs mainly within a social justice framework that emphasizes nondiscrimination. The college feels "comfortable addressing homosexuality from the oppressed/oppressor status" (Perlis & Shapiro, 2001, p. 12), a status in which acceptance of all students regardless of sexual orientation is encouraged. The presence of an ally group has also helped provide a safe environment for LGB students to express their true identities.

Georgetown University, a prominent Jesuit institution, has used the philosophy of "love the sinner, hate the sin" when educating about LGB issues (P. Rue, personal communication, 2005). This concept of acceptance occurred after litigation of the *Gay Rights Coalition v. Georgetown University* ended in the late 1980's; the Court of Appeals of the District of Columbia ruled that though Georgetown has the right to deny student organizations endorsement, it does not have the right to deny benefits to student organizations based on sexual orientation (Nordin, 1989). Soon after this ruling, student affairs practitioners developed road shows, in which they presented to faculty and staff around campus on the issues surrounding LGB students and the practicality of nondiscrimination. Though student affairs practitioners sometimes felt they were "walking on a tightrope," the litigation provided a catalyst for education and enhanced possibilities for LGB student groups, such as the ability to host dances (P. Rue, personal communication, 2005).

Thus, in many cases, universities have been able to develop both campus-wide educational programs on LGB issues and resources for LGB students. These services rest on the fact that the Church values the dignity of each individual, and therefore, does not condone discrimination such as hateful actions against lesbians, gays, or bisexuals. Many campuses thrive in these efforts to promote nondiscrimination in accordance with the Church's nondiscrimination teaching. They recognize that though the Church teaches that homosexuality is an inclination to sin, the people who identify as LGB are not necessarily prone to sin more than heterosexuals. Though Catholic colleges and universities must combat homophobia, as do most public and non-religiously affiliated institutions, they are able to do so within Church doctrine.

The nondiscrimination philosophy at the aforementioned schools largely rests on Catholic teachings in which sex before marriage is considered immoral. The Catholic Church forbids premarital sex, both heterosexual and gay. Because of this, student affairs practitioners are able to initiate dialogue based on sexual orientation, rather than centered on sexual acts. Catholic campuses tend to focus their LGB initiatives on valuing all people, regardless of their sexual orientation, because these campuses make a clear distinction between sexual orientation and sex. When asked by a campus magazine about the role of sex in homosexuality issues, Sister

Mary Louise Gude, the University of Notre Dame's chairperson for the University's Standing Committee for Gay and Lesbian Student Needs, stated:

[Sex] is the crux of the matter. But so many Catholics don't get it, don't make the distinction between homosexuality and sex. Many good Catholics think homosexuality is co-terminus with sexual relations—that being gay is only about sex and that [gay individuals] think about sex all the time. But it's only part of who they are. (“Notre Dame's Point Person,” 2004).

Though sex constitutes the major conflict of the Catholic teaching, it is only one aspect of a person's sexual identity. Because premarital sex is not permissible for Catholics in general, and gay marriage is currently illegal in most states, Catholic campuses can caution most homosexual and heterosexual students similarly in regards to their sexual activity.

While the language of nondiscrimination has created some space for Catholic student affairs practitioners to reach LGB students, it has obvious limitations. For example, if LGB marriage becomes legal in the U.S.A., it would be unlikely for Catholic colleges to be able to openly offer pre-Cana or premarital counseling to LGB students because the teachings of the Catholic Church do not support LGB marriage. Thus, creative use of nondiscrimination language cannot entirely hide the bona fide tension that exists between Vatican teaching and the attitude towards homosexuality among student affairs practitioners in general.

Areas of Divergence

While they espouse nondiscrimination teachings, Catholic campuses reviewed in this article overlook the Catholic teaching that asserts that any pastoral program in which LGB people gather must “clearly [state] that homosexual activity is immoral” (Ratzinger, 1986, section 15, para. 1). In the schools researched, student affairs practitioners seem to dismiss this Church teaching from their work. While there may be campuses on which this teaching is central, little research is available on this topic. One reason for the lack of existing research may be that on campuses where this teaching holds true LGB students may not express their identity out of concern for how they will be perceived. Therefore, one might question whether student affairs practitioners can provide both an environment of nondiscrimination and an environment in which the gathering of LGB students embodies the teachings of homosexual activity as sinful. Further research may provide possible answers to this question and models for such coexistence. The few schools in current literature, however, seem to show that only pieces of Catholic doctrine inform actions of student affairs offices.

The idea that campuses seem to espouse only pieces of the Catholic teaching evokes again questions surrounding the institutional freedom of Catholic colleges and universities. How do local hierarchies react to Catholic institutions in their dioceses that do not operate completely within Catholic doctrine? St. Michael's College is a small, Catholic college in Vermont, established by the Society of St. Edmund. In the midst of a conservative Catholic diocese, St. Michael's student affairs practitioners speak of a private and public face to the issue of homosexuality. One student affairs director stated:

Privately, we are no different than [a public institution]. Student affairs people here do not hold the assumption that LGB students here have very different needs than students elsewhere. Publicly, it is a bit of a different story. We do choose not to do some things so as not to embarrass the institution. (J. Cernosia, Personal communication, 2005).

On another campus, Love (1998) attributed part of a decline in LGB activism to the perceived inability of the administration to provide full support of LGB movements within a Catholic context due to outside pressure. Some campuses find that the local hierarchy is not supportive of their policies.

At the same time, however, disconnection between the school and the local religious leaders does not always hamper open dialogue on campuses that value student initiative. Ally, a thriving student group at St. Michael's College, is concerned with the issues related to LGB students. Because the students rather than administrators organize these activities, Ally is able to provide opportunities for the university to engage in controversial topics, while operating within certain parameters. For instance, Ally hosted Jason West, the mayor of New

Paltz, New York. West, having performed a handful of gay marriages before receiving a court injunction to stop, spoke about the issue of legislating morality. At other campuses, however, a disconnection between campuses and local Catholic hierarchy could possibly interfere with the attempt to address lesbian, gay, and bisexual issues. Love (1997) proposes that in order for acceptance of LGB students to become a part of the permanent campus ethos, Catholic campuses must “[explore] the boundaries of the institutional culture related to sexual orientation and [loosen] culture restrictions by pointing out possible inconsistencies in the current culture” (p. 395). For some campuses, however, the local hierarchy controls those boundaries.

What’s Next?

In the coming years, the Catholic Church will adjust to its new leader, Pope Benedict XVI, who is perceived as more doctrinally stringent than John Paul II. The recently released Vatican document forbidding ordination of celibate homosexuals may support this speculation (Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, 2005). While the Vatican can strengthen controls over its ordination process, it may be far more difficult to exert more forceful control over Catholic universities in the U.S.A. The fundamentals are likely to remain the same: the inclination to homosexual activity is disordered, but LGB people should not encounter violence or hatred because of their homosexual identity (Ratzinger, 1986). Student affairs practitioners on Catholic campuses must struggle with how these teachings should inform their actions towards LGB issues. Founding Catholic documents provide little clarification for Catholic campuses as both Catholic college and university administrators and the Pope suggest that while academic freedom and institutional autonomy are necessary, they must rest within a context of Catholic thought (Gallin, 1992).

Thus, student affairs practitioners on Catholic campuses must seek to understand how their institutions define institutional freedom as it relates to LGB issues, while concurrently grounding their campus policies in the intellectual tradition of the Catholic Church. They must also consider the reaction of the local hierarchy as they make decisions for their institutions. As the struggle for equity for LGB communities persists, student affairs practitioners within Catholic institutions of higher education must continue to seek congruence between the fields’ philosophies and the teachings of the Church. These practitioners will continue the delicate process of creating safe spaces within which students on Catholic campuses are free to be.

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