



ASSEMBLY OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE DES ÉVÊQUES CATHOLIQUES DE L'ONTARIO

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Observations on a recent change in government policy re: proposed anti-bullying legislation

For some time now we have all been particularly concerned about making sure that our schools are safe and welcoming places for everyone. This concern has been reflected in new educational policies over the last several years, and most recently in proposed legislation such as Bill 13 and Bill 14.

For the comments of the Ontario bishops concerning these bills, and the wider issue of bullying that has occasioned them, I refer you to our brief published on the Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario website.

For the moment, I would simply like to comment on the recent change in government policy concerning one method of addressing one form of bullying, and of providing personal support for some students, namely Gay-Straight Alliances.

All of those who care about Catholic education are committed to assuring that Catholic schools are formed by the principles of the Gospel, in which all people are treated with love and respect. As we Christians put it, not as some pious platitude but as a practical norm for life: Catholic Schools must be places where each person is received as Christ.

This may not always happen in a Catholic school, for we are all sinners, but we earnestly try to live up to this standard. We have a rich array of spiritual resources, and methods developed out of our faith tradition, which not only fight bullying, but shape a school environment that is welcoming to all. Our schools also provide competent and compassionate personal support for individuals. We also consistently have sought, and continue to seek, to work together co-operatively with the Ministry of Education to assure that Catholic schools meet and exceed all government standards.

Bullies use many excuses to mistreat others - it is usually because someone stands out in some way. If any students are mistreated, because of whatever factor attracts the attention of the bully, then that is evil. Our concern is that all students be welcomed and loved, and that none be bullied. In Catholic schools we seek to attain that goal through methods that arise out of our Christian faith tradition, are shaped by it, and are in harmony with it.

A "Gay-Straight Alliance" is a particular method of addressing one form of bullying, and providing personal support. The GSA model was developed in the United States in the 1980's. Because this model is so closely related to a movement with particular views concerning the human person and the issues of life, people who disagree with those views are understandably

concerned that the model can serve as a means not only to address bullying, but to promote the views with which they disagree. Those who share those views will no doubt wish to use the GSA methodology. They are certainly free to do so.

I question, however, why provincial legislation should make this particular method normative in a Catholic school, which has its own different but effective methods of attaining the goal of addressing bullying and providing personal support for all students, ones which, unlike GSAs, arise out of its own fundamental principles and are in harmony with them. If the point is that there is something unacceptable about those Catholic principles, then I find that troubling, and wonder whether caricatures of Catholic faith are in play. I recognize, of course, that even among Catholics the richness of our faith, and the reasons for its teachings, have not always been communicated effectively. This is even more true within the popular culture in which we live, the sea in which we all swim.

GSAs are the only particular method or strategy mentioned by name in Bill 13. That is interesting. Now, with the recent change in policy, if any student insists on this particular method, then the trustees and principals who are responsible for the religious foundations of the school are compelled to agree.

As pastor of a large diocese, on the road constantly visiting the people, I have again and again heard concern from parents and educators about the proposed imposition of the GSA methodology on Catholic schools. That same concern has been expressed to me by people of other faiths, since parents often choose to send a child to a Catholic High School precisely because they expect a particular approach to life which is largely in harmony with their family and faith convictions.

Names of organizations carry with them a distinct content: if someone asks you to join the Liberal, Conservative or New Democratic Party, you rightly expect something different from each. These groups each have their own traditions, their own shape. So the key issue is not just the name itself, but the content connected with the name, with the "brand". Is it something that you want, or something that is in harmony with your basic principles? If it is, then fine; but it should not be imposed on a community.

Some questions come to mind:

1. Why is a piece of provincial legislation being used to micromanage the naming of student clubs?
2. Why are Catholics not free to design their own methods to fight bullying, and provide personal support to students, as long as they attain the common goal of a welcoming and supportive school? Why must they instead be compelled to accept a particular method that comes from a different approach to the great issues of life?
3. The leadership of students is crucial in the fight against bullying, and in making their school a place of love and respect for all. In fact, the most effective way to stop bullying may well be the example of fellow students. Students work together with the adult leadership of the school to promote the good of all. But trustees and principals are legitimate stewards of the spiritual tradition of the school, and in a Catholic school, that includes the Catholic faith tradition. Why should the power of provincial law be used to override that legitimate adult authority so that this one particular method can be imposed by any student who wants to do so?

4. With the principle established that the legitimate local authority is nullified in this case, then is any student free to introduce any program, any club, or any advocacy group relating to any issue? Over a year ago, I heard the principle behind this new policy expressed this way: "if a student wants it, he or she has got it." That may sound attractive, but it is a very shallow and distorted view of student leadership. Trustees and principals are legitimate adult stewards of the common good of the school community at the local level, and it is not helpful when Queen's Park moves in to remove that responsibility.

5. Apart from whatever one thinks of the idea of GSAs, in any particular school is a GSA the most effective method to help students being targeted by bullies? Who makes that decision in a local school? Is it those adults who are entrusted with responsibility for the local school community and all of its members? The new policy says that they do not. Is that wise?

To the members of our Catholic community: I urge you to reflect on the implications for Catholic education of this sudden government change in policy, and of the extraordinary privileging of one particular way of dealing with bullying and personal support. Catholic educators should be free to make sure that Catholic schools are loving learning environments in which every person is treated with love and respect, and to do so in a way that arises out of our faith tradition and is in harmony with it. We need to consider the path ahead.

To our friends and neighbours of other faiths, or of no faith, including those who disagree with any or all of the beliefs of the Catholic Church, and those who personally support the beliefs that form the context for GSAs: please consider the implications for all when legislation is enacted that overrides the deeply held beliefs of any faith community in our province, and intrudes on its freedom to act in a way that is in accord with its principles of conscience. If it happens to us, it can happen to you, on this and other issues. When religious freedom becomes a second class right, you also will eventually be affected.

There is no reason for this controversy. We all want schools that are loving and welcoming places for everyone. We simply ask that diversity be respected in our society, and that we be able to attain the common goal of welcoming schools, and of personal support for students, using methods that are in harmony with the faith we cherish.

Thomas Cardinal Collins
Archbishop of Toronto
President, Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario