

Canadian pastoral letter molds ministry to young people with same-sex attraction

OTTAWA, Ontario - A new pastoral letter from Canada's Catholic bishops is aimed at helping school boards, teachers, parents and students in their ministry to young people with same-sex attraction.

Released June 27, the eight-page document from the bishops' Commission for Doctrine upholds church teaching on homosexuality while encouraging sensitivity to teenagers and young adults who are attracted to people of the same sex.

The document was published as publicly funded Catholic schools in Ontario work to incorporate the provincial government's equity policy, which encourages respect and acceptance of individuals of diverse backgrounds into schools. Earlier this year, the Ontario bishops sent a letter encouraging Catholic schools to establish groups to combat bullying based on sexual orientation.

Ottawa Archbishop Terrence Prendergast, a member of the doctrinal commission, said the document offers a clear explanation of the church's teaching on homosexuality.

"If we are going to be Catholic school boards and we are going to try to have equality and equity in our outreach to young people, then we need to be clear about what the church's teaching is," he said.

The letter urges educators to encourage chastity, "especially since society often misunderstands and scorns this virtue."

"Avoidance of difficult questions or watering down the church's teaching is always a disservice," it said. "Such attitudes could lead young people into grave moral danger."

The bishops stressed the virtue of chastity, describing it as "a way of loving" that

entails “more than the avoidance of sin” but involves the successful integration of sexuality and a person’s bodily and spiritual being.

“Through a Christ-centered love Christians can be fulfilled in all aspects of life, including the gradual integration of their sexuality. On this challenging journey, only a greater love can heal a lesser love,” the document said.

“God catches us up in his love,” Archbishop Prendergast explained.” Sometimes we figure, how can I love as a human person when I’m torn in my attractions? Allow God to love you and to heal you, and perhaps you can redirect love into a different way or channel it into a cause.”

Not everyone is called to marriage, he said, but people can find ways of giving themselves to others “that can heal them as well as help other people to heal.”

Even Jesus counted on the love of God to keep going, the archbishop said. “Married people are tempted. Priests who have the vow of chastity, bishops are tempted. Everyone is tempted by this drive of sexuality, to love and beget life,” he said.

But chastity and celibacy are not sentences of loneliness, the archbishop added.

“We can be with other people in different ways,” he said, stressing friendship and support groups such as Courage and EnCourage for families and friends of those struggling with same-sex attraction.

The letter recognizes the “enormous pressures” facing young people grappling with same-sex attraction such as “unjust discrimination, the sense of invisibility and isolation, and ignorance of their particular situation.”

It urges priests and pastoral workers to examine themselves honestly in an effort to remove barriers that might make young people experiencing same-sex attraction feel unwelcome. It urges parents to “respond lovingly and trust divine providence” if their child reveals same-sex inclinations and to continue welcoming him or her into their home.

The letter also warns of the temptation to suicide by those who can “no longer deny or ignore their deep-seated same-sex inclinations” and urges young people to accept

the love of God to help them through their difficulties.

The letter outlines church teaching on sexuality, traditional marriage, and on the distinction between inclinations and actions.

“While homosexual acts are always objectively wrong, same-sex inclinations are not in themselves sinful or a moral failing,” it said. “To the extent that a same-sex attraction is not freely chosen, there is no personal culpability in having such an inclination.”

“Nonetheless, when oriented toward genital activity, this inclination is ‘objectively disordered,’ ” the letter said, quoting the Catechism of the Catholic Church. “This does not mean that the person as a whole is somehow defective or ‘badly made,’ or that he or she has in some way been rejected by God.”

For those who do not see marriage as an option, “choosing chastity as a positive value is even more of an ongoing challenge,” it said.

The pastoral letter can be read online at https://www.cccb.ca/site/images/stories/pdf/ministry-ssa_en.pdf.