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Amare et Amari (to love and be loved)

Supporting LGBTQ Students

By Anthony Garrison-Engbrecht

My dear people, let us love one another since love comes from God and everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Anyone who fails to love can never have known God, because God is love. (John 4:7-8)

The challenge of how to appropriately support lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people has been among the most hotly debated topics in recent years, especially within Catholic circles. The church teaches that all are created in the image of the one God: all share the same human nature and the same divine origin. It also teaches that, redeemed by the sacrifice of Christ, all are called to share, as members with equal dignity, in the same union with God. LGBTQ individuals must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity, church teaching insists, and every sign of unjust discrimination against them must be avoided. And yet, even though official church teaching indicates there is nothing sinful about being homosexual, it also teaches that all unmarried people – including homosexual, bisexual, and heterosexual people – are called to celibacy, a perspective that remains a source of confusion especially for many homosexual people who earnestly seek to build emotionally fulfilling and spiritually healthy same-sex relationships.

Despite the confusion, Pope Francis has modeled what a compassionate attitude toward the LGBTQ community might look like and opened the door to more difficult conversations on our campuses. In an October 2014 interview, he famously declared, “We come across this reality all the time in the confessional: a father and a mother whose son or daughter is in that situation. We have to find a way to help that father or that mother to stand by their son or daughter.” On several subsequent occasions, he has reiterated his desire to support LGBTQ people, effectively bringing about a shift in “tone” regarding LGBTQ issues within the church. Though never contradicting the church’s official opposition to LGBT relationships nor its description of same-sex “inclinations” as “objectively disordered,” Francis has projected a notably inclusive pastoral vision for LGBTQ support.

In shifting the tone and modeling an inclusive approach, Pope Francis has created a context in which many Jesuit institutions have been able to ask in new and creative ways how they can support their LGBTQ students. In doing so, a growing number of institutions have established LGBTQ support offices and built auxiliary systems aimed at making campus environments more inclusive and welcoming.

Certainly, the tensions between official church teaching which opposes all homosexual relationships and the intellectual and pastoral traditions of Jesuit institutions of higher education can stand in tension with one another. But at their heart, Catholic teaching and Jesuit ministry both enthusiastically affirm and cherish the dignity of each individual, regardless of age, culture, faith, ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, language, disability, or social class. They also affirm a style of inclusive excellence which invites all to participate in communities where they are equally respected. Both the larger Catholic heritage and more specific Jesuit tradition within that heritage thus privilege attentive, reflective behaviors which can allow for the holistic support of all students.

A growing number of Jesuit institutions have thus attempted to creatively address the challenge of promoting Catholic teaching and affirming LGBTQ students by drawing connections between the Catholic tradition and the care for students as whole persons. Maintaining fidelity to Catholic principles by attending to the needs – social, spiritual, and intellectual – of students thus becomes a key justification and foundation for LGBTQ support initiatives. Further, many Jesuit institutions have elected to affirm the intellectual exploration of issues of gender and sexuality as a means of fostering campus conversations about issues of human dignity and social justice. By promoting deep discussion

and discernment, such initiatives can help to navigate the tensions and highlight the difference between a theological perspective that opposes same-sex relations and pastoral care initiatives that aim to affirm the human dignity of all individuals. In sponsoring such programs, Jesuit institutions allow for students to have their needs and hopes responded to in a way that promotes a genuine integration of mind, body, and spirit – a true *cura personalis*.

Two institutions, among many others, that seek to ground their LGBTQ support systems in *cura personalis* are Georgetown University and Loyola Marymount University. These Jesuit universities were among the first to create LGBTQ support services, in 2008 and 2010 respectively, and have sought to be dynamic in addressing the needs of LGBTQ students.

Alum and former head of the National Football League Paul J. Tagliabue and his wife Chandler donated \$5 million to support Georgetown's Tagliabue Initiative for LGBTQ Life: Fostering Formation and Transformation. "The Center is inspired by Catholic and Jesuit principles of respect for the dignity of all and education of the whole person. We are very pleased to support its services that provide a safe, inclusive and respectful environment for LGBTQ students and promote their acceptance in the entire campus community," the Tagliabues said in a statement. Subsequently, the Tagliabue Initiative has become a model for bridging student af-

airs and academic affairs, offering student retreats and faculty research awards and funding an array of workshops and conferences on LGBT issues.

Animated by the combined heritage of the Jesuits, the Marymount Sisters, and the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange, Loyola Marymount University likewise seeks to encourage students' development as whole persons. Spearheaded by the LGBT Student Services Office, LMU has focused on creating a welcoming environment for all students, including transgender and gender nonconforming students. Critical developments in this area have included adding easily identifiable signage to single-use gender-inclusive restrooms, updating and editing gender language within university communications, and provid-

ing trainings and education to faculty, staff, and students about how to be more gender-inclusive. Senior screenwriting major Ian Salazar has experienced these developments as a step forward in ensuring that each student feels at home on the LMU campus. "This is big, not just for LGBTQ students, but for all LMU students. If one group feels more included, that will strengthen LMU as a whole," Salazar said.

As Jesuit institutions work to engage the LGBTQ community, they should aim do so as an answer to their call to support the holistic development of students. Encouraging personal integration of an individual's think-



Scranton University students at Chapman's Lake.

ing, feeling, and choosing allows for true growth and transformation. Jesuit institutions focus their efforts on supporting and encouraging those living on the margins of society and those who have been marginalized by society. In so doing, each person in our communities can be encouraged to grow in faith, hope, and love, which ultimately defines who we are as Jesuit Catholic institutions.

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