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## THE NONDISCRIMINATION DANCE

by  
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Last month, eighth-grade students at Notre Dame Academy (a Catholic school in Toledo, Ohio) took a field trip to Chicago to see *The Nutcracker*. Just minutes before the curtains opened, however, the trip chaperones decided the class should leave. The chaperones had discovered that the onstage parents of Clara, the main character, would be portrayed as same-sex married.

Consider the chaperones' dilemma. No doubt the theater seats had been paid for, and students would be unhappy about missing the performance. Perhaps the characters' same-sex marriage would have little impact on the audience. Nevertheless, the chaperones could see that the audience was being subjected to an agenda not normally included in *The Nutcracker*. The Catholic Church teaches clearly that same-sex marriage is gravely sinful, and the chaperones had a responsibility to the children they accompanied. A faithful adult might not be swayed by a fictional portrayal, but students might assume that since the same-sex relationship in a cherished Christmas performance was part of a Catholic school field trip, it was in line with Church teachings on sex and marriage.

The right thing to do, then, was avoid the potential scandal and discuss the issue in light of Catholic teaching back at school. Dean of Students Jessica Beaverson was one of the chaperones who made the call. According to multiple social media posts, Principal Sarah Cullum was consulted and supported the walkout. These administrators and chaperones should be regarded as heroes for making such a quick and wise decision on the spot—but they have been vilified instead.

One day after the incident, on Nov. 25, alumna Carly McGoldrick complained on Twitter about “homophobia” at the school and reached out to Toledo media and activists. Just hours later, Academy President Kim Grilliot took to Facebook to apologize to anyone who was “offended” by the walkout and to deride the action as contrary to “NDA’s true values.” This declaration publicly marginalized the school’s administrators and chaperones, divided the school community, made the school a target for LGBT activism, and prompted negative national media coverage.

Grilliot claimed that the chaperones had violated the school’s 2014 “inclusion statement,” which pledges acceptance of all people regardless of “sexual orientations” and “gender expression.” Presumably that statement was meant to be a gesture of goodwill and not an abandonment of Catholic education; it even references the Diocese of Toledo’s statement on gender-related issues, which firmly upholds Catholic beliefs and moral standards. But the inclusion statement is now being misused by Grilliot and others to betray the school’s Catholic mission to form young people according to the morals and beliefs of the Catholic Church. What truly “offended,” of course, was not the school group’s polite departure before the performance had even started. Rather, it was the chaperones’ Catholic beliefs about marriage. Upholding those beliefs is now interpreted by Grilliot and others as violating the school’s inclusion statement.

This 21st-century problem is going to become increasingly common, amid accusations from secular activists and authorities—and even students, parents, and teachers—that religious schools discriminate based on gender or sexuality. Some religious educators will stand firm, but many will compromise the mission of their schools when faced with activist pressure, the desire for cultural acceptance, and expensive lawsuits.

It would have been better for Notre Dame Academy to forego an inclusion statement altogether. Religious schools that wish to preserve their faith-centered missions should limit nondiscrimination policies to the minimal language required by law. In today’s culture, any reference by a religious school to gender or sexuality—even if meant to express compassion without compromising religious beliefs—is almost certain to be interpreted through the prism of secular ideologies opposed to traditional understandings of sex, marriage, and even basic human anthropology.

The *Nutcracker* incident highlights how words like “sexual orientation” and “gender identity or expression” have interpretations in secular culture that conflict with the beliefs of Catholic schools. The secular

interpretations are likely to dominate in any disagreement. Students, teachers, and administrators within a religious school may not even realize their conflicting notions of compassion, nondiscrimination, and moral truth until conflicts arise. School leaders will be expected to reconcile the logical inconsistencies in their mission and governance statements.

A religious school should display its compassion and support for all children of God, including those who struggle with their identity as male and female. But this compassion must not undermine the school's religious identity. In today's environment, a religious school that voluntarily publishes a nondiscrimination statement including words like "orientation," "gender," and "expression" will have unwittingly undermined its religious mission by opening the door to secular interpretations of those words.

*Patrick J. Reilly is president of The Cardinal Newman Society, which promotes and defends faithful Catholic education.*

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