

TO LISTEN, TO REASON AND TO PROPOSE: The Rainbow Flag & Catholic Schools

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All who enter our Catholic schools come to the process of formation with a personal story, experienced as a journey and shaped by their diverse and unique life experiences. Individual stories are lived out in a communal context. The new *Directory for Catechesis* addresses the complex needs of persons today and the best methodologies of proclamation and catechesis to meet these needs. It acknowledges the challenges of our current culture and the call to hope as a required response. The recent pastoral letter from the Ontario Bishops, *Renewing the Promise*, calls us to live this hope as a community that encourages engagement, accompanies, builds relationships, and forms joyful disciples. We want to create an environment where people can listen and learn from each other about why it is important to talk about LGBTQ+ identities and the intersectionality of these with racism and mental health. In *Male and Female He Created Them: Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education*, is an emphasis on listening in this context described through three guiding principles “best-suited to meet the needs of both individuals and communities: to *listen*, to *reason* and to *propose*.”¹

TO LISTEN: CONTEXT

Our Catholic schools function in a secular society and serve the needs of people who come from a variety of backgrounds and experiences. It is important to, “... to educate children and young people to respect every person in their particularity and difference, so that no one should suffer bullying, violence, insults or unjust discrimination based on their specific characteristics (such as special needs, race, religion, sexual tendencies, etc.). Essentially, this involves educating for active and responsible citizenship, which is marked by the ability to welcome all legitimate expressions of human personhood with respect.”²

The Rainbow Flag

The Rainbow Flag has been part of the LGBTQ+ movement since 1978, when, at the request of Harvey Milk (the first openly gay man to be elected to public office in the United States), activist and artist Gilbert Baker (1951–2017) designed it in his studio in San Francisco. Milk said, “It’s not about personal gain, it’s not about ego, it’s not about power, it’s about giving those young people out there hope.”

Originally the flag was eight colours in composition – pink and turquoise were dropped to make mass production easier – and each colour means something. More recent versions of the flag have reintroduced pink, alongside light blue and white to include those who are non-binary or transgender. Red means life, orange means healing, yellow means sunlight. Green represents nature, turquoise art, blue harmony, and violet means spirit.



¹ Congregation for Catholic Education, *Male and Female He Created Them: Towards a path of dialogue on the question of gender theory in education*, Vatican City, 2019.

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20190202_maschio-e-femmina_en.pdf

² Ibid.

Though Baker originally assigned meanings to each colour, over time, the colours have come to represent diverse people who come together to form something beautiful (the rainbow).

There are now several variations of the flag including versions that include black and brown stripes to represent LGBTQ+ people of colour. Most recently, graphic designer Daniel Quasar has added a five-coloured chevron to the Rainbow Flag to place a greater emphasis on "inclusion and progression". This flag is often referred to as the "Progress Flag" or "Inclusion Flag".

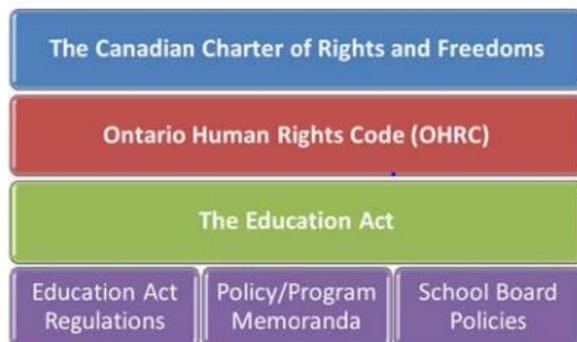


TO REASON: THE LAW IN ONTARIO

"In so far as this issue relates to the world of education, it is clear that by its very nature, education can help lay the foundations for peaceful dialogue and facilitate a fruitful meeting together of peoples and a meeting of minds."³

Research has demonstrated that an inclusive school culture and climate is important for all students to achieve success and personal wellbeing. Evidence has shown that this is especially important for students who are, or who identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community. The Directory of Catechesis emphasizes this as well, speaking in particular to the challenge of gender and gender identity, acknowledging that, "The Church is well aware of the complexity of the personal situations that are lived out, at times, in a conflicted way. She does not judge persons, but asks that they be accompanied always and in whatever situation."⁴

Legislative Context



The following links outline the legislative requirements, as well as the Ministry resources that have been developed to support school boards.

³ Congregation for Catholic Education, "Male and Female He Created Them: Towards a path of dialogue on the question of gender theory in education," Vatican City, 2019.

⁴ Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization. "Catechesis and Some Questions of Bioethics" *Directory for Catechesis*. July 2020, #377.

LEGISLATIVE / POLICY FRAMEWORK

The Education Act <https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/S12005>

Ontario Human Rights Code <https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/90h19>

Prohibitive Grounds for Discrimination http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/code_grounds/gender_identity

PPM 119, Equity and Inclusive Education, April 22, 2013 Developing and Implementing Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/extra/eng/ppm/119.pdf>

PPM 145, Progressive Discipline and Promoting Positive Student Behaviour, December 5, 2012 <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/extra/eng/ppm/145.pdf>

PPM 144, Bullying Prevention and Intervention, December 5, 2012 <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/extra/eng/ppm/144.pdf>

Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools (2014 Edition) <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/inclusiveguide.pdf>

Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, Realizing the Promise of Diversity (2009 Edition) <http://edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/equity.pdf>

A Catholic training module entitled, *"Human Dignity: Our Catholic Call to Love - Inclusive Communities Supporting Transgender Students"* (2018) was developed by the Catholic Partners of Hamilton Diocese for the Catholic community.

In 2012 Bill 13, commonly referred to as the *Accepting Schools Act*, was enacted based on the following beliefs:

- that education plays a critical role in preparing young people to grow up as productive, contributing and constructive citizens in the diverse society of Ontario;
- that all students should feel safe at school and deserve a positive school climate that is inclusive and accepting, regardless of race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, creed, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, age, marital status, family status or disability;
- that a healthy, safe and inclusive learning environment where all students feel accepted is a necessary condition for student success;
- Understanding that students cannot be expected to reach their full potential in an environment where they feel insecure or intimidated;
- that students need to be equipped with the knowledge, skills, attitude and values to engage the world and others critically, which means developing a critical consciousness that allows them to take action on making their schools and communities more equitable and inclusive for all people, including LGBTQ+ people;
- Recognition that a whole-school approach is required, and that everyone - government, educators, school staff, parents, students and the wider community has a role to play in creating a positive school climate and preventing inappropriate behaviour, such as bullying, sexual assault, gender-based violence and incidents based on homophobia, transphobia or biphobia;
- Acknowledgement that an open and ongoing dialogue among the principal, school staff, parents and students is an important component in creating a positive school climate in which everyone feels safe and respected;

- Acknowledgement that there is a need for stronger action to create a safe and inclusive environment in all schools, and to support all students, including both students who are impacted by and students who have engaged in inappropriate behavior, to assist them in developing healthy relationships, making good choices, continuing their learning and achieving success.

In addition to a range of other requirements the legislation set out the following:

Board support for certain pupil activities and organizations

- 303.1 (1)** Every board shall support pupils who want to establish and lead activities and organizations that promote a safe and inclusive learning environment, the acceptance of and respect for others and the creation of a positive school climate, including,
- (a) activities or organizations that promote gender equity;
 - (b) activities or organizations that promote anti-racism;
 - (c) activities or organizations that promote the awareness and understanding of, and respect for, people with disabilities; or
 - (d) activities or organizations that promote the awareness and understanding of, and respect for, people of all sexual orientations and gender identities, including organizations with the name gay-straight alliance or another name.

Moreover,

- (5) A board shall comply with this section in a way that does not adversely affect any right of a pupil guaranteed by the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.

Of note is that prior to the legislation being enacted, GSAs (Gay Straight Alliance student support groups) arose organically in many Catholic schools because of a need. Students who identify as LGBTQ+ are known to experience higher rates of bullying, victimization, harassment, and suicide. As an example, Wellington-Dufferin Public Health reports that, “Non-binary youth are most likely to have low family support, have low school engagement, be a smoker, feel least safe at school and report thoughts of suicide.”⁵ The establishment of GSAs is empirically supported to contribute to more positive school environments that are safer, more inclusive learning spaces to thrive.

School Mental Health Ontario, in addition to the goals outlined in the provincial strategy, has emphasized that more than ever students need:

1. Schools and classrooms that are safe – physically and emotionally – and where they feel welcome, included, heard, comfortable, and confident
2. Skills and tools for self-care, managing stress, nurturing relationships, and enhancing their sense of strength and identity
3. Caring adults who notice when they may be struggling, and who provide knowledgeable responsive support
4. Encouragement to seek additional help when they need it, and guidance towards appropriate support.
5. Quick access to the right level of service (in schools or community mental health)

⁵ Wellington-Dufferin Guelph Public Health Unit. “2017-2018 Youth Survey: Key Findings.” <https://www.wdgppublichealth.ca/bh01feb0619r04-2017-2018-youth-survey>

The Institute for Catholic Education (ICE) – Working on Behalf of all Partners

Throughout the 2019/2020 school year the Institute for Catholic Education worked with its respective partners including the Ontario Bishops and the Education Commission to affirm our commitment to equity, diversity and inclusive school communities.

On May 19, 2020 a memo was sent to all Catholic Directors and the partners (Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario, Catholic Principals' Council of Ontario, Ontario Association of Parents in Catholic Education, Ontario Catholic School Business Officials' Association, Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association, Ontario Catholic Supervisory Officers' Association Ontario and English Catholic Teachers' Association).

A number of messages and visual images were developed as examples that would assist Catholic school boards to proactively address community-based celebrations of diversity, equity and inclusion. The intention was to develop messaging regarding how Catholic schools approach the month of June, a month in which LGBTQ+ rights are recognized, with a distinctively Catholic language and perspective.

The memo which is attached for reference and should be considered in its entirety, further states:

During the Spring 2020 Plenary meeting of the ACBO the bishops reviewed a number of potential messages and visual images and had further discussion. While individual bishops hold a range of personal perspectives on the matter, collectively they do understand the need for Boards to communicate the commitment to ensuring safe and welcoming communities.

- The bishops recognize and value the good work of Catholic schools in providing support and accompaniment to students who may identify as LGBTQ+ and expressed their appreciation,
- The bishops understand the need for Boards to communicate their commitment to ensuring equitable, safe, and inclusive school communities,
- The bishops are supportive of Boards taking a positive and proactive approach to express this commitment.

The 2020 Pandemic / Black Lives Matter (BLM)/LGBTQ+ and Student Voice

Recent events that the world has faced have allowed for a refocusing of our attention on the issues affecting those most vulnerable. Following several months of “lockdown” and numerous tragic events involving the deaths of people of colour, there was a rallying cry for actions of solidarity and the Black Lives Matter movement emerged with renewed vigour in June 2020 during what is traditionally known as PRIDE month. In many ways the two are complementary as both BLM and PRIDE are focussed on the community speaking up against injustice and making the noted individuals/groups visible. The pandemic has finally done what many have long called for and put the discussion about the impact of privilege on the community front and centre.

Showing up for others can be unifying and life-changing. In a time where many people are feeling more isolated and anxious than usual, we know that kindness and unity are needed now more than ever. Drawing on the example of Christ, who preached a message of love and inclusion through His ministry, is the message that our Catholic schools are called to action. We are all seeking support, understanding, and real and thoughtful conversations. This is especially true for our students; the children and youth entrusted to our care. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms and values this need for support, encounter and accompaniment. Pope Benedict described it as such: “In its very structure, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* follows the development of the faith right up to the great themes of daily life. On page after page, we find that what is presented here is no theory, but an encounter with a Person ... the teaching of the *Catechism* on the moral life acquires its full meaning

if placed in relationship with faith, liturgy and prayer.”⁶ It is in this spirit of encounter that we meet students who identify as LGBTQ+ in Catholic schools.

We are called to work for justice. In fact, our students, staff and community are demanding it. Restrictions on gathering in schools and the public, has meant for the first time conversations and digital platforms became the go to way of connecting. While this is true, there is an appetite for conversation, dialogue and a focus on connection. There has been more attention being paid to structural inequalities that keep us apart, and that have been so starkly highlighted by the current pandemic.

It has also brought to the foreground those who are doubly marginalized. The development and use of the Progress Flag is a reflection of the increased awareness of intersecting forms of oppression, and therefore the need for intersectional inclusion.

Brian Wenke, Executive Director of the “It Gets Better Project”, recently stated that, “If you don’t have a solid understanding of who you’re trying to reach, you’ll never find them.” Our students, staff and community have made many attempts to articulate why it is important that the PRIDE flag (and one might now consider the progress or inclusion flag) be a visible, outward facing sign as symbol of solidarity, inclusion and acceptance. It communicates for our children, youth, staff, and families that this is a safe, welcoming place to learn and grow.

Our Catholic schools can and must engage fully and relentlessly to address bullying, discrimination and harassment in all its forms and manifestations. We can do this by building inclusive communities that respect the dignity of every person and advancing social justice for all families. A visible sign such as a Rainbow Flag or Progress Flag is an unspoken sign of solidarity, that “we see you and are here to support you” and is noticed by those that are looking for it as it also indicates that this is a safe space for dialogue.

Pope Francis said, “Catechesis is taking others by the hand and accompanying them...because Christian life does not even out or standardize, but rather enhances the uniqueness of each child of God.”⁷

It is understood that in our Catholic schools, it is important that topics such as human sexuality, gender identity and gender expression, as well as initiatives that promote understanding of and respect for difference, are discussed against a clear moral background. Resource personnel and resources are available to support this work. Properly understood, difference is something to be recognized in a society that honours diversity, multiculturalism and human rights. Respect, compassion and sensitivity must guide our actions.

TO PROPOSE: HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

As we look to the provide hope for the future, we are reminded that, “The Catholic school should be an educating community in which the human person can express himself and grow in his or her humanity, in a process of relational dialogue, interacting in a constructive way, exercising tolerance, understanding different points of view and creating trust in an atmosphere of authentic harmony.”⁸

⁶ Pope Benedict. “Porta Fidei.” Apostolic Letter, 2011, # 11. http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_ben-xvi_motu-proprio_20111011_porta-fidei.html

⁷ Pope Francis. “Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants in the Meeting Promoted by the National Catechetical Office of the Italian Episcopal Conference.” Bulletin of the Holy See Press Office, 30 January 2021. http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/january/documents/papa-francesco_20210130_ufficio-catechistico-cei.html

⁸ Congregation for Catholic Education, *Male and Female He Created Them: Towards a path of dialogue on the question of gender theory in education*, Vatican City, 2019. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20190202_maschio-e-femmina_en.pdf

Ontario is a pluralistic society. In any school, some community members may live in same-sex relationships, and same-sex couples may be part of the group of parents; some students may choose to openly identify and recognize their sexual orientation during their years in school or they may identify as transgender. Such is the reality in the educational context in Ontario. Denying this is simply not understanding or appreciating who is coming through our school, classroom and workplace doors, each and every day.

The Rainbow Flag's meaning rests not in its individual colors but in the symbolism of the entire spectrum. Baker described the rainbow's universal, all-embracing resonance best: "The rainbow came from earliest recorded history as a symbol of hope. In the Book of Genesis, it appeared as proof of a covenant between God and all living creatures."

June is nationally recognized as Pride Month in Canada. Many institutions and organizations fly the Rainbow Flag as a celebration of diversity. The well-being of all our students and staff are met through a focus on equity and inclusion. While the Rainbow Flag is strongly connected to the LGBTQ+ community, it also is a representation of social change cited as being a symbol of hope and peace.

Flying the Rainbow Flag or Progress Flag communicates that our schools are safe spaces for everyone. It also aligns with boards' equity plans, and mission and vision statements regarding inclusion and belonging as well as student and staff well-being. Most notably, St. Jerome's University (SJU) within the Diocese of Hamilton, marked the beginning of Pride Month by raising a Rainbow Flag on its campus on Monday, June 1, 2020. The event was hailed as a key step toward bringing people even closer together.

Dr. Kline, interim President of the University, stated, "We teach and support a diverse student body, which is drawn from across the University of Waterloo campus. As an academic community rooted in the Catholic tradition, the virtue of hospitality provides direction to us. It calls us to reflect on how we treat our guests and to consider our place in the broader community." He went on further to say, "In recent years, it had become painfully evident that our decision not to fly the Pride flag was sending the wrong message; namely, SJU was not a welcoming space for people who identified as LGBTQ+. This was never our intention and, in fact, that message contradicts our mission and dedication to being community builders. For us, the flag represents our commitment to our students and to all members of the SJU community. The time was right to provide a symbolic reminder that 'all are welcome in this place.'"

In our Catholic schools, we welcome and value all students and celebrate diversity within our communities. We believe that we are all created in the image and likeness of God, and we teach our students to honour the dignity in each person by treating one another with care, compassion and respect. We are committed to nurturing safe and inclusive learning environments that are an expression of God's love and mercy in this world.

With our partners, staff and families we want to create safe, inclusive and welcoming environments of learning and social justice. To raise a Rainbow Flag or Progress Flag at our schools and board offices, in the spirit of care, compassion and respect for all, will signal that we remain firm in our resolve that the work that our staff and students engage in each and every day will ignite the courage to faithfully confront injustice, racism, oppression, and violence while also advocating valiantly for reconciliation, peace, equality, healing, and hope.

Attachment:

ICE Memo

Re: Affirming our Commitment to Equity, Diversity and Inclusive School Communities, May 19, 2020