

# Challenging Catholic School Resistance to GSAs with a Revised Conception of Scandal and a Critique of Perceived Threat

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Volume 22, Number 1, 2014

Sexual and Gender Diversity in Schools

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1071467ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1071467ar>

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Publisher(s)

Canadian Philosophy of Education Society

ISSN

0838-4517 (print)

1916-0348 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

McDonough, G. (2014). Challenging Catholic School Resistance to GSAs with a Revised Conception of Scandal and a Critique of Perceived Threat. *Paideusis*, 22(1), 71–80. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1071467ar>

Article abstract

Educational leaders in Ontario's publicly-funded Catholic schools typically resist establishing Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) on grounds that they contradict Catholic moral teaching and so cause scandal in the school. While the protection of GSAs in these schools is derived from recent provincial legislation, the government intervention has the potential to exacerbate religious-secular tensions in the school and society. This paper assumes that, in the Catholic Church's current political climate, the only justifications for GSAs that will gain genuine traction and possibly deflate this tension descend from within Catholicism's own tradition of thought and educational practice. The first part of the argument critiques the Catholic hierarchy's traditional, narrow conception of scandal, and replaces it with a revised, broader conception from within Catholic theology in which the traditional marginalization of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) students is the true scandal. These two frameworks are used to analyze inconsistencies between the resistance Catholic schools show toward LGBTQ students wanting to establish GSAs, and the welcoming attitude they display toward pregnant and parenting students. The second part of the argument reveals that the main reason for this difference is that Church officials perceive all LGBTQ organizations as threats to their authority, and this perception is extended to GSAs. This internal critique provides sufficient reason to reverse the current negative Catholic evaluations of GSAs.

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# Challenging Catholic School Resistance to GSAs With a Revised Conception of Scandal and a Critique of Perceived Threat

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*Educational leaders in Ontario's publicly-funded Catholic schools typically resist establishing Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) on grounds that they contradict Catholic moral teaching and so cause scandal in the school. While the protection of GSAs in these schools is derived from recent provincial legislation, the government intervention has the potential to exacerbate religious-secular tensions in the school and society. This paper assumes that, in the Catholic Church's current political climate, the only justifications for GSAs that will gain genuine traction and possibly deflate this tension descend from within Catholicism's own tradition of thought and educational practice. The first part of the argument critiques the Catholic hierarchy's traditional, narrow conception of scandal, and replaces it with a revised, broader conception from within Catholic theology in which the traditional marginalization of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) students is the true scandal. These two frameworks are used to analyze inconsistencies between the resistance Catholic schools show toward LGBTQ students wanting to establish GSAs, and the welcoming attitude they display toward pregnant and parenting students. The second part of the argument reveals that the main reason for this difference is that Church officials perceive all LGBTQ organizations as threats to their authority, and this perception is extended to GSAs. This internal critique provides sufficient reason to reverse the current negative Catholic evaluations of GSAs.*

## Introduction

While Ontario permitted Gay-Straight Alliance clubs (GSAs) on the basis of students' individual rights, educational leaders—principals, school boards, and bishops—in that province's publicly-funded Catholic schools<sup>1</sup> resisted them on grounds that they contradicted Catholic moral teaching.<sup>2</sup> One of the limitations of

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<sup>1</sup> The right to publicly funded Catholic schooling extends from Section 93 of the Canadian Constitution to any jurisdiction that had it prior to entering Confederation. Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, Yukon, and Northwest Territories follow this model. Nunavut has the same provision in law but not in practice. Newfoundland and Labrador discontinued publicly-funded religious schooling in 1997, as did Quebec in 1998.

<sup>2</sup> *The Catholic Register* reports that Thomas Cardinal Collins, Archbishop of Toronto, “believes forcing GSAs on Catholic schools is an attack on freedom of religion” and so undercuts religious diversity by precluding Catholic schools from “using methods and approaches that are in harmony with the faith we cherish” in order to promote safe and respectful schools. The report states that “Collins said the GSA model has an ideology and approach, including advocacy, that may be fine for many people — ‘and there are many good things in it’ — but it doesn’t fit with Catholic principles.” It also

framing this issue as an impasse between the civil rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, queer and questioning (LGBTQ) students and the Church's interests is that it polarized the debate, thus obscuring the range of diverse views within "secular society" and within the Catholic Church. As a result, this issue was only settled through force of legislation.<sup>3</sup>

In Allen's (2009) assessment, the gulf between secular society and the Catholic Church is currently widening. He proposes that institutional Catholicism in the next fifty years will emphasize a Catholic identity that is sharply distinct from mainstream society. It will be normal to witness bishops "boldly and courageously [defending] the Church's traditional teachings" (p. 81) and at the institutional level, this emphasis on distinctiveness will "[mean] vigilance about the Catholicity of Church-run schools, hospitals, and charitable agencies, ensuring that their policies and procedures do not blur Church teachings . . . implying a Church more concerned with defending its peculiarity than in finding common ground" (p. 437). He argues that for any proposal to reform institutional Catholicism to gain traction, it must necessarily be made in Catholic terms:

Initiatives, movements, and campaigns in the twenty-first century will either be firmly rooted in a strong sense of Catholic identity, or they will arrive stillborn . . . They will have to phrase their arguments in the language of the Church, appealing to its own traditions and concepts, rather than drawing on secular democracy or corporate management. (p. 450)

So among all the good arguments to include GSAs in Catholic schools, Allen recommends that supporters focus on finding a *Catholic* rationale; relying on secular norms will only intensify current divisions.<sup>4</sup>

Following Allen's observation, I challenge the issues surrounding *scandal* and *authoritative threat* that Church leaders perceive from LGBTQ organizations. I also compare the difficulties Catholic schools have in serving LGBTQ students to the ease with which they organize services explicitly for unmarried pregnant and parenting adolescents. I contend that submerging LGBTQ concerns in Catholic schools, ostensibly to protect children from sin, potentially impedes the development of an adult faith by precluding individuals' moral and spiritual judgments, and relying excessively on the Church hierarchy to make decisions for them. I also maintain that a revised conception of scandal can, in fact, justify GSAs as reasonable Catholic experiments within Catholic schools.

In the second part of the analysis, I examine the "threat" that the Church hierarchy perceives from LGBTQ organizations. I argue that the hierarchy's general resistance to LGBTQ groups distorts its views of GSAs and, in doing so, sacrifices the psychological and safety needs of persons within and outside the Church. This approach may not convince all GSA opponents, but it does provide persuasive Catholic counter-arguments to recast this problem in a context wider than a sacred-secular binary. Given the current context, I maintain that this approach provides the best argument for including GSAs in Catholic schools.

I do not criticize Church teaching on homosexuality because I assume that it will not likely change in the near future.<sup>4</sup> As all professionals, parents, and students work with the practical challenge of responding to

points to the January 2012 document authored by the Ontario Catholic School Trustees Association, entitled "Respecting Difference," which the Catholic bishops and trustees had hoped Ontario would recognize as a distinctively Catholic anti-bullying response, but which did not prevail in Bill-13 (2 June 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Ontario's 2012 *Accepting Schools Act* requires the establishment of GSAs in all public schools—including Catholic separate schools—even if only one student requests it (12, no. 3). It also states: "neither the board nor the principal shall refuse to allow a pupil to use the name gay-straight alliance" (12, no. 2).

<sup>4</sup> Allen's book was published during Pope Benedict XVI's reign (2005-13). Francis, his successor, has stated that the Church should not respond to homosexuality with doctrinal legalism but emphasize instead the welcoming of all persons (CBC News 2013).

<sup>4</sup> While the Catholic Church has changed some of its teachings over the years, including those on slavery and religious freedom, it has not changed its teachings on homosexuality. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's (CDF) 1986 *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* states that while "the particular inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin, it is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil; and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder" (no. 3). The CDF maintains this distinction between "inclination" and "action" from reference to its 1975 *Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics*,

teachings that they cannot change, this paper provides a realistic practical response within the current constraints. Leaving that teaching unchallenged also demonstrates that it need not lead to banning GSAs—just the same as service to pregnant and parenting students apparently does not undermine Church teaching on chastity.

In addition to the above concerns regarding polarization, as a final point of introduction I offer some reasons why this argument should be of interest to a non-Catholic or non-Christian reader. Following Walter Feinberg's view that it is in the public interest to know about the aims and practices of religious schools (2006, p. xii), I maintain that this interest is especially intensified in places where public funds support them. Moreover, this kind of knowledge needs to encompass the tradition in sufficient breadth and depth to avoid misconceptions and/or narrowness of perspective; for example, the design of Feinberg's ethnographic study meets this concern by considering "Catholic Schools in Three Registers: Traditional, Modern, and Liberation/Feminist" (p. 47). Knowledge may thus be considered in both its descriptive sense of what these schools currently are (which already has its own internal diversity), but also in terms of what is possible or probable within the tradition and its internal debates. Further, where Dwight Boyd (1996) notices that liberal societies struggle with the "dilemma of diversity" in that they cannot balance their simultaneous commitments to particularity and commonality,<sup>5</sup> it appears in this case that the blunt force of legislation has overridden Catholic particularity. However, demonstrating a Catholic congruence, rather than mere compliance, with this law offers one practical instance of overcoming this problem. Finally, following Will Kymlicka's view that providing external protections for a minority group "need not" imply allowing them to apply internal restrictions as well (1995, p. 37), this case provides an argument from within Catholic thought that extends to liberal theory to show that congruence between minority and prevailing liberal norms likewise need not necessarily imply assimilation or an erosion of distinctiveness as a consequence. This argument shows one example of how it is possible in theory to adopt a common policy and/or practice through reasons that are both distinctive in their ontologies and congruent in their conclusions.

### The Traditional View of Scandal

The Catholic hierarchy resists allowing GSAs in Catholic schools because it believes that permitting them implies the school's and Church's approval of same-sex relationships and, hence, causes scandal for the students. The Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops<sup>6</sup> (OCCB, 2004) maintains that "[a] high school which may be seen by reasonable people to be giving tacit consent to homosexual sexual activity would be guilty of grave scandal" (p. 44). It offers two qualifications: the scandal would be "much less serious" if the behaviour were limited to romantic behaviour that excluded genital acts, and the school's non-action in particular cases could be justified if the school's general disapproval were well-known (p. 44).

The concept of *scandal* in Catholic theology differs from its use in common speech to mean "outrage" or "dishonour" and describes directly or indirectly enabling the conditions through which another person might fall into sin. Its etymology in biblical Greek is *skandalon*, meaning "ensnarement" or "cause of stumbling," which implies a "stumbling block" (OED) to one's right conduct and faith. In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, "[s]candal is an attitude or behaviour which leads another to do evil. The person who gives scandal becomes his neighbour's tempter. He damages virtue and integrity; he may even draw his brother into

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where it states: "Homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered and can in no case be approved of" (CDF 1975, no. 8, para. 4; cf. CDF 1986, no. 3). The 1986 *Letter* also describes homosexual acts as "self-indulgent" (no. 7) and maintains that "no authentic pastoral programme will include organizations in which homosexual persons associate with each other without clearly stating that homosexual activity is immoral" (no. 15).

<sup>5</sup> "Accepting the reality of cultural diversity in terms of real moral pluralism undercuts prescriptive leverage that could apply across the diversity; on the other hand, making moral claims concerning action to support and maintain that cultural diversity privileges one culturally based comprehensive doctrine over supposedly equal alternatives with potentially incompatible claims." (Boyd 1996, p. 616)

<sup>6</sup> The OCCB changed its name to the Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario on 15 May, 2009.

spiritual death” (Catholic Church 1997, no. 2284). It is one thing to place a stumbling block in the way of a peer (Rom 14:13, 20-21; 1 Cor 8:9), but it is even worse to draw children into the snares of evil. The *Catechism* explains that scandal’s degree of harm increases when one negatively influences innocent, vulnerable persons. It refers to Jesus’s admonition not to lead little ones astray (Mt 18:6ff) in maintaining that “[s]candal is grave when given by those who by nature or office are obliged to teach and educate others. Jesus reproaches the scribes and Pharisees on this account and likens them to wolves in sheep’s clothing” (Catholic Church 1997, no. 2285).

The OCCB thus describes the Catholic school’s proper role in terms of steering all students away from scandal:

In the case of inappropriate moral conduct, the duty of Catholic schools is to guide students into morally acceptable paths. Permitting behaviour implies that the person in authority and the institution condone it. It is not sound or acceptable practice for Catholic schools to teach that certain behaviour is contrary to Catholic teaching, but then to take no action when it is exhibited openly in a school context. Inaction or indifference causes scandal and could persuade students that the teaching of the Church is not to be taken seriously. Teachers and administrators teach by their actions. Taking action removes an occasion of sin in the Catholic understanding, both for the ones acting inappropriately and for others and, therefore, is an expression of pastoral care for each individual person and for all members of the group. (OCCB, 2003, pp. 2-3)

This traditional view rests on problematic assumptions. The use of subjunctive mood in the phrase “could persuade students” shows how the OCCB depends upon extending the assumption that GSAs (a) in fact promote genital activity to (b) assuming that they possess sufficient intrinsic power to persuade students that Church teaching is not to be taken seriously. This view is quite problematic, since “promoting genital activity” has not been empirically demonstrated, and belief that condition (b) is true reflects an illogical causal argument, since students who do not take (some) Church teaching seriously have likely developed this attitude as a reflection of their family’s values prior to arrival at school (Myers 1996). Clearly, the Church hierarchy is placing much importance on *this* issue in sustaining its credibility, while at the same time saying much less about the fact that many Catholics routinely disregard other Church teachings like those on chastity<sup>7</sup> and contraception.<sup>8</sup> In this effort to prevent scandal, the Church hierarchy also notably removes the opportunity for students and parents to judge for themselves on how to navigate through this problematic territory. How else might one interpret the presence of GSAs in Catholic schools? Interestingly, it can be done by exploring a different interpretation of the same concept, which sees GSAs as scandalizing (some of) the faithful toward a desirable end.

### **A Non-Traditional View of Scandal**

Institutions based on revolution sometimes struggle with the hypocrisy of memorializing the events of change, while at the same time consolidating their own hegemony and so resisting continued transformation. The Catholic Church has its own version of this ambiguous, contradictory phenomenon in Jesus. Where doctrine, law, and authority in the Catholic Church is heavily institutionalized and codified, the scandal of Jesus rests on his challenge to the prevailing Jewish laws and cultural norms. He associated with sinners (Lk 7:36–50), confronted the Sabbath laws (Mk 2:23–3:6), and disrupted the Jerusalem temple by driving out the money changers and vendors (Mt 21:12). Interestingly, the OCCB echoes a similar list in its effort to contrast the desirable scandal of Jesus against the undesirable scandal of human weakness:

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<sup>7</sup> Catholicism proscribes any sexual genital activity outside the context of a heterosexual married couple (Catholic Church 1997, nos. 2337, 2390, & 2400).

<sup>8</sup> Jones and Drewke (2011) report that 98% of Catholic American women “have ever used a contraceptive method other than natural family planning” (p. 4).

A common problem is that some people appear to see scandal in anything, maliciously construing innocent actions as perverse. Jesus was a source of scandal for the Pharisees because he ate with prostitutes, tax collectors, and sinners, thus the term *pharisaical scandal*. Nevertheless, Jesus continued his mission, challenging those who were scandalized to realize that he came to call sinners, not the righteous. (OCCB, 2004, p. 44)

Jesus challenges people to see past strict adherence to institutional religious codes as an external test of one's holiness—as the Gospels depict the Pharisees doing—and to look for the inward test of one's faith in God. The example that one might take from Jesus's actions, therefore, seems to be that he or she should welcome all persons as bearing the image of God. Spiritual growth arises from this attitude, and not from attempts to protect the actor by hiding behind an excessive legalism: "Thus, for sufficient reason," the OCCB (2004) continues, "a Christian might rightly take some action though some members of the Church or community will be scandalized by it" (p. 44).

What is "scandalous", therefore, might in fact be what disrupts an immature faith and challenges it to grow into a new, more mature one. It is in this sense that theologian Enda McDonagh (1977) proposes that reasoning about scandal with too heavy an emphasis on avoiding failure by a moral code eclipses the primary task of growing closer to God's divine love: "Scandal is not primarily a question for morality but a question for faith," which means that some of those who rejected Jesus did so because they "settled for self-justification through the works of the law" (p. 90).<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, he maintains, the Church should aim to prevent "the scandal of human weakness from obscuring the scandal of divine love" (p. 93). Even if one adheres to the prevailing Catholic view of "disorder" and "grave depravity," the challenge for the Church would be to follow Jesus's example of not allowing an obsession with institutional (canon) law to disrupt a view of God's presence in that person.

McDonagh (1977) challenges the actor to move away from forms of judgment that avoid "repentance and a deeper commitment in faith," and in doing so "put up the barriers and exclude the world and its God" (p.91) concerning scandal. These actions, in his view, unrealistically deny the presence of sin in the world:

In endeavoring to understand the New Testament meaning of scandal as a test or crisis point [for faith], we have to pay more attention to the evil which is structured into our world. Traditional moral theology [tends] to analyze scandal and human behaviours in general without sufficient awareness of this evil and the ambiguity which it creates in all of us. (p. 91)

The traditional definition of scandal is, therefore, limited because of its narrow focus on the avoidance of occasions for sin and because it is "divorced in this tradition both from the scandal of Jesus himself, from an awareness of the wider evil, and ... its neglect of the eschatological faith risk" inherent in the challenge Jesus poses to his followers (p. 93).

This line of thinking leads to two problems. The first is to determine what evil is it that is structured into the world. For thinkers aligned with the Church's traditional teaching on scandal, it would be homosexual acts and the school's implied indifference to them that must be avoided. For those critical of these views, it would be the indifference, ostracism, and bullying which are inherent in a hetero-normative Church and society that would be the primary evil. Second, if one accepts Jesus as the paragon for faith-building scandal, the next problem would be to determine how he would judge and respond to this question, which is again a difficult task since all sides in any theological debate can easily appropriate his voice. The Catholic hierarchy already sees itself not conforming to the world in authoritatively carrying out the commission Jesus entrusted to his followers, and regards its teachings on homosexuality in congruence with this mission and with natural law. However, there is also a psychic risk for persons and organizations that hold contrary views simply for their own sake, including simply for not breaking with tradition. McDonagh states that "contradiction or discontinuity can too easily become a self-righteous defensive reaction against

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<sup>9</sup> In its *Declaration On The Relation Of The Church To Non-Christian Religions*, the Second Vatican Council maintains that "the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures" (1965, no. 4). One may observe religious law as a means toward achieving freedom and encountering the divine, and not merely for its own sake.

the God-given signs of the times and lead Church and Christian to rejection of the wider divine call embodied in current history in defense of narrower ecclesiastical interests” (p. 90).

While the Church is a religious institution, the fact remains that its offices, interpretations of scripture, and whole association<sup>10</sup> are human institutions, and thus not immune to error, scandal, and opportunities for renewal. McDonough is not shy to point out places where the Church has fallen short, and where the chance to learn from its own scandal is apparent:

In the prevention of participation by so many members in Church life, in the inadequacy of structures for communication and judgment, in the preference for power rather than truth or justice, in the need for a new life-style for clergy, religious, and laity, the scandal of [humanity’s] ways in the Church is frequently manifested. (p. 93)

In these words, McDonough’s view of the unavoidable structural nature of scandal embedded within the very institutions that even those who wish to avoid occasions of sin wish to protect, becomes clear. He is also emphatically clear in his recommendation that *engagement with*, rather than *avoidance of*, these institutionally disruptive encounters should be the preferred option. In his view, the Church should

...provide room for creative experiment and prophetic word and action that may to human weakness appear scandalous in the primary Christian sense. Its response to such experiment and prophecy must be one of faith, seeking to understand and discriminate between the gracious God-given and the sinful man-laden. It must be one of patience ... [which allows] the community through time to arrive at a considered judgment. It must be one of love because the experimenter and the prophet need the loving support of the community if they are not to be isolated socially and psychologically and be distorted in their role into cranks and eccentrics. (pp. 93-94)

Notably, McDonough extends the burden of judgment in the hands of lay persons in community beyond the hierarchy’s exclusive control. It is also remarkable that he recommends that the judgment of scandal be made on the basis of experience, rather than unproven anticipatory speculations. Fundamentally, this reconceptualization of scandal is well suited to welcoming persons who suffer rather than turning them aside.

Where the hierarchy upholds the appropriateness of Jesus associating with pariahs and breaking the Sabbath code, it does not transpose that attitude into permitting LGBTQ students to associate as an intramural organization of their peers. The OCCB’s own treatment of how something might be perceived as scandalous demonstrates the problematic of such judgment. After cautioning against the common misperceptions of scandal, the OCCB’s discussion swings firmly back to the traditional interpretation of how “charity might oblige a person to refrain from conduct foreseen to lead others to evil though the conduct in question might not be wrong in itself” (OCCB 2004, p.44). As a contemporary example, the OCCB proposes that a male and female university student cohabiting off campus could ensnare the weak minded (OCCB 2004, 44; cf. 1 Cor 8:9)—which itself cannot escape criticism as an existentially troublesome judgment based upon a fear of how unsubstantiated assumptions might influence what the neighbours think. In other words, it displaces these problems and makes them the burdens for virtuous actors, and there is not questioning whether those who are scandalized in this case might need “disruption” more than “protection”.

How is this latter scandal necessarily of the human weakness variety and not the positive disruptions of divine love? At first glance, there is a seeming double standard here. One might legitimately wonder upon what grounds Jesus’s scandalous disruptions differ from LGBTQ students requesting GSAs in Catholic schools. No reputable biblical scholar has suggested that Jesus’s association with prostitutes equals his endorsement of prostitution or the social structures which enable it, so the issue here seems to be an interpretive bias toward witnessing the scandal of divine love only when it is initiated by a divine actor. In addition, those who were blind to the kernel of goodness in Jesus’s actions were also notably those who were dependent upon the spiritual crutch of a legalistic mindset. This observation leads to the question of whether

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<sup>10</sup> As the entire People of God by virtue of their baptism, before considering distinctions between clergy, religious, and laity (Vatican Council II, 1964, Chapter II)

the hierarchy's current attitude possesses similar blind spots. So what is the kernel of truth that Catholic schools are missing by disallowing GSAs? Arguably, under the current regime, there is little opportunity for all persons in the school—non-heterosexuals and heterosexuals alike—to learn that there are dimensions of Christian love beyond the scope of a legalistic adherence to the *Catechism* and *Code of Canon Law*. Moreover, the current theory and practice restricts open, academically-informed discussions on how to be non-heterosexual and Catholic.

We can now ask whether characterizing GSAs as scandalous in the traditional sense is really fair. The Magisterium's view appears to rest upon casting the shadow of "human weakness" upon GSAs even before they can prove themselves otherwise. In shrinking away from the suggestion of scandal and misperceiving potentially good scandals as bad ones, the Magisterium truncates and even cauterizes prophetic voices in the Church—a practice that potentially impedes the growth of faith. In other words, should it not instead be the relegation of LGBTQ persons and their concerns to the ecclesiological and pedagogical basement that requires scandalizing?

Unfortunately, the GSA question in Catholic schools is laden with more than simply a concern with scandal. If it were exclusively scandal, then presumably interest in all students' sexual morality in Catholic schools would be even more amplified than it is currently. The reason for this is that Catholic schools currently provide special programs for pregnant and parenting students, which exposes a double standard between the treatment of LGBTQ students and their heterosexual peers. So one might wonder why Catholic schools do not apply the traditional definition of scandal in an attempt to hide and silence these persons as well. Does not the offer of these programs imply the school's tacit approval of heterosexual relationships outside the context of marriage, which is also contrary to Church teaching on chastity (Catholic Church 1997, nos. 2337, 2390, 2400)? Why does the school not suggest that *they* are scandalizing the impressionable faithful?

This disparity is obviously irreducible to the moral judgment of scandal and, in fact, relates to the greater political concern that the hierarchy has with LGBTQ persons being organized for criticizing Catholic teaching. The Church perceives LGBTQ organizations as a threat to their teaching and governing authority, while it perceives unchaste heterosexuals as simply persons in need of charitable attention. It is this political concern that I believe energizes the prevailing resistance to GSAs.

### The Perceived Threat of "Gay Culture"

Three-quarters of the way into the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops' (CCCB) 2011 *Pastoral Ministry to Young People with Same-Sex Attraction*, educators are asked to "help [students] avoid involvement in a 'gay culture' opposed to the Church's teaching, with its often aggressive and immoral lifestyle" (no. 16). No mention is made of what or who, in fact, constitutes this "gay culture," or how pervasive it is. Nor does the CCCB present any evidence to support the claims of aggression and immorality. It can be reasonably inferred, however, given the effort that the CCCB makes earlier in the same document to emphasize that "the human person 'can hardly be described by a reductionist reference to his or her sexual orientation'" (CCCB 2011, 2; cf. CDF 1986, no. 16) that there is some heightened concern about LGBTQ persons gathering with a common interest in their sexuality. If only for heuristic purposes one assumes that some of these groups genuinely *are* a problem, then the aroma of tainting GSAs with guilt by association wafts heavily through this statement. From where did the CCCB get this idea?

The hierarchy's perception of an LGBTQ threat has roots at least as far back as the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's (CDF) 1986 "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons":

[I]ncreasing numbers of people today, even within the Church, are bringing enormous pressure to bear on the Church to accept the homosexual condition as though it were not disordered and to condone homosexual activity.... The Church's ministers must ensure that homosexual persons in their care will not be misled by this point of view, so profoundly opposed to the teaching of the Church.



But the risk is great and there are many who seek to create confusion regarding the Church's position, and then to use that confusion to their own advantage. (no. 8)

The CDF continues by speaking specifically about this threat coming from formally organized groups opposed to Church teaching and authority, and not merely reflecting the momentum of aggregated individuals:

The movement within the Church, which takes the form of pressure groups of various names and sizes, attempts to give the impression that it represents all homosexual persons who are Catholics. As a matter of fact, its membership is by and large restricted to those who either ignore the teaching of the Church or seek somehow to undermine it. It brings together under the aegis of Catholicism homosexual persons who have no intention of abandoning their homosexual behaviour. (no. 9)

As the last line reveals, there is both a distrust of these groups, and even an attempt to discredit their Catholicity by implying it is incompatible with homosexuality. It is this perceived challenge to its power that apparently motivates the hierarchy to suspect *any* gathering of LGBTQ persons.

By contrast, consider the response pregnant and parenting students receive in the Catholic school. Edmonton Catholic Schools' Our Lady of Grace school "provides mobile and individualized services for pregnant or parenting teens (female and male)" (Edmonton Catholic Schools, 2013), while the Toronto Catholic District School Board's policy emphasizes "respect, compassion, and love" (1993, SM14), and its regulations stipulate that a "loving, affirming environment" shall be provided for pregnant students (SM14, no. 4). Moreover, the Board emphasizes its commitment to inclusivity by providing maternity uniforms for its pregnant students (*Catholic Register*, 2012). Neither school division approaches pregnant and parenting students with admonitions that unchaste behaviour is contrary to Church teaching and scandalous. However, pregnant and parenting teens nonetheless still face great challenges, and some may experience moral disapproval (or worse) from family members and others in the community, but should this be the case they always have recourse to the structures of school programs like these. The same cannot be said for LGBTQ students who, in addition to any prevailing homophobia at home and in the school community, are also left doubly exposed by the non-acknowledgement of their concerns in policy.

How does the Catholic school justify support for pregnant and parenting students? I can imagine a few criteria within the Catholic tradition by which this is possible. Service of this sort supports their intrinsic dignity as persons, and meets their emotional, material, and pedagogical requirements in congruence with Catholic social justice. Supporting these needs is consistent with the school's orientation to respect all life, ostensibly also reducing the chance that abortion, which the Church opposes, may be considered. Somewhat cynically, we might wonder to what extent Catholic school policy makers believe the presence of pregnant and parenting students presents a disincentive that dissuades their peers from engaging in sexual acts. In summary, it appears as though the hierarchy and community trusts that these policies and programs are not organized to promote unchaste heterosexual behavior, but to respond to some of its consequences.

Would the same criteria hold for the LGBTQ students requesting GSAs? There are some remarkable similarities, but also one important difference. Their intrinsic personal dignity equals that of their heterosexual peers, and they also possess analogous psychological needs regarding the pressures of publicizing their sexuality, the question of how to be Catholic and LGBTQ, the possibility of bullying in and outside the school, and the increased statistical possibility of self-harm (Bostwick et al, 2014). Addressing these concerns falls under the Church's mission to respect all life and promote the dignity of persons. Scandal, if it applies, is also no more pertinent to LGBTQ students than the pregnant and parenting students the school supports. So the key difference seems to rest on the hierarchy's perception that the presence of LGBTQ groups challenges its teachings and authority. Unfortunately, given the needs of LGBTQ students, and the way in which their solidarity could enhance their efforts to meet them, the hierarchy seems more preoccupied with protecting its authority than exposing itself to risk for the protection of persons.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Shields (2012) arrives at a congruent conclusion through another means. He finds that the Ontario Catholic School Trustees Association 2012 document *Respecting Difference* "fails to adequately weigh and balance the legal constitutional interests of Catholic school boards with the needs of the victims of bullying" (p. 317), and that when the trustees

## Conclusion

While this approach to justifying and permitting GSAs in Catholic schools will not represent all voices in the Church, and should not be mistaken for a “triumphalist” perspective that would bluntly impose its view on GSA resisters, it nonetheless shows that the current rationale and practice is internally problematic. Clearly there is need to overcome the fallacious hasty generalizations and guilt-by-association type of logic which currently resists and proscribes GSAs to at least allow experimentation with them *from a Catholic point of view*, and not simply to demonstrate compliance with secular law. However, so long as the hierarchy distrusts the ecclesial-political motives of LGBTQ organizations, permitting the kind of service that would enable their self-determined liberation in the school gets sacrificed to a fearful consolidation of their authority to teach and govern. Failure to address this issue as an internal question of scandal’s theology and ecclesial authority will invariably result in the continued alienation of LGBTQ persons from the institutional Church, and doctrinal and pastoral narrowness within the Catholic community as a whole.

By maintaining that the whole Church will respond best to a Catholic criticism of this issue, I do not mean to diminish the validity or importance of other criticisms, but until the Church’s institutional climate shifts away from resisting non-Catholic thought and secular culture, it will only be the concerns expressed from within Catholic thought and in language the Church understands that gain traction.

## Acknowledgments

A version of this paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Philosophy of Education Society, Victoria, BC, June, 2013.

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“[frame] their response to Bill 13 as an expression of religious freedom and institutional rights”, they “[direct] attention away from the care of students and toward issues of institutional identity” (p. 319).

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