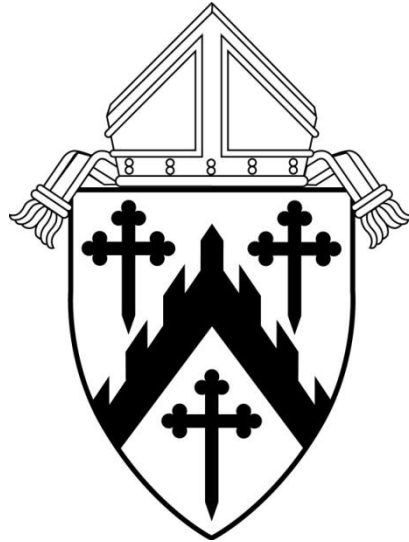


# DIOCESE OF DAVENPORT



## Guidelines for Pastoral Accompaniment of Sexual and Gender Minorities

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Effective October 4, 2023  
Memorial of St. Francis of Assisi

## INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, society and the Church have become increasingly aware of people who experience differences in sexual orientation or gender discordance. As Christian disciples, we cannot ignore these realities or cast aside people who experience sexual attraction to others of the same sex or a deep disassociation between their biological sex and expressed gender. The Gospel of Jesus Christ bids us to love such people who feel marginalized and even threatened. How we are called to love them most authentically in our parishes, faith formation programs, Catholic schools, and other institutions is where questions and challenges can arise. The pastoral response of the Church, both universally and locally, is still taking shape as we strive to live and proclaim the truth in love, and so better reflect the reign of God in our midst.

This document offers some basic guidance on how to accept sexual and gender minorities in a way that is pastorally sensitive, practical, and faithful to the Church's teachings on sexuality and the nature of the human person. This document does not provide all the answers, but rather a framework from which to approach these questions. It is important to be mindful that there is no "one size fits all" solution, especially to these kinds of delicate pastoral situations. Each person, family, and set of circumstances is unique and personal. Something that is appropriate in one place or situation may not be appropriate in another, but the approach must be intentional and compassionate. Otherwise, we risk doing greater harm not only to the people we seek to serve in these situations but also to the Church as a whole.

It is our hope that parishes and schools, in collaboration with the diocese, will find this document helpful in crafting the most suitable pastoral response to individuals and families who struggle with these issues. We ask the Holy Spirit to guide us in wisdom and love for the building up of the Body of Christ.

## PRINCIPLES FOR PASTORAL ACCOMPANIMENT OF SEXUAL AND GENDER MINORITIES

As we endeavor to better serve and accompany gender and sexual minorities within our parishes and schools, some basic principles guide our pastoral response in keeping with the teachings of the Church. These are: (1) a fundamental respect for the dignity of every human person, body and soul, created in the image and likeness of God; (2) a basic acknowledgement of people who experience differences in sexual orientation or gender discordance; (3) a commitment to loving people first and listening for deeper understanding; (4) a commitment to involving others in the discernment process, especially the individuals and families involved as well as other professionals and collaborators; (5) a case-by-case approach with a basic willingness to make reasonable and appropriate accommodations when possible.

### *Dignity of the Human Person*

The first principle that should guide any pastoral response is the fundamental dignity of every human person. When it comes to pastoral practice, we are not dealing simply with ideologies

or issues but with people who are created in the image and likeness of the Creator. They are beloved children of God and for that reason alone deserve to be treated with reverence. We may not always perfectly understand the people to whom we minister, or even agree with all of their viewpoints, but we must recognize and uphold their fundamental human dignity.

To this end, our first response should be one of welcome, love, and respect. We also should give them the benefit of the doubt in regard to their experiences and motivations. Most sexual minorities and their families who are seeking a relationship with the Church are not trying to sabotage our institutions or challenge all of our beliefs, but are simply looking for a safe, welcoming place to worship, learn, grow in their spiritual journey, and encounter Christ.

Integral to our respect for human dignity are the Church's beliefs about the nature of the human person, sexual difference, and gender. These are rooted not only in what the body reveals about itself, but also in history, culture, and the teachings of our Catholic tradition. At the heart of our Christian anthropology is the concept that the human person is both body and soul. In other words, we are not souls trapped in bodies, nor are we just our bodies. We are sacramental beings, at once physical and spiritual, intellectual and emotional. We cannot simply ignore one or the other of these aspects, much less pit them against each other. Any authentic pastoral response will avoid such a reductive approach and embrace the whole person – body, mind, and soul – in all of the person's complexity and uniqueness.

#### *Acknowledging the Reality*

A second principle is the recognition that persons who experience differences in sexual orientation or gender discordance do not choose this. For some it is a heavy cross. Often this attraction or understanding of self emerges at a very early age, well before a person is significantly exposed to various cultural influences. It should not be assumed that this is a phase, the result of cultural brainwashing, a desire for attention, or a fad. At the same time, good judgment should be used. We know that adolescence is a time when young people seek to define and express themselves in unique ways that sometimes contrast with their family and cultural norms. This does not preclude the presence of underlying (i.e., genetic, psychological, and/or physiological) factors.

#### *Love First and Listen for Understanding*

To say that we should love first in any pastoral response may seem overly simple, and yet in practice this is often neglected. We all need to be aware of our various biases which, unwittingly, can temper or even put conditions on our love. We tend to love those who are most like us and to question, fear, and even exclude those who are more dissimilar. Once we are aware of this and embrace the summons of the Gospel to love all people as ourselves, we do not need to be ruled by our tendency to define people in terms of "us" versus "them." Treating all people, whatever their situation, as members of one human family will build trust and allow for a much more fruitful dialogue.

The most basic and first expression of our love should be to listen. This is not a listening to refute or with an agenda, but to truly understand people – their experiences, needs, and concerns.

This requires humility, patience, and self-control. The more we understand someone, the better we can accompany them.

### *Involving Others*

It is good pastoral and professional practice to seek the expertise and insight of others. None of us knows everything or sees every side of an issue clearly, especially in this highly sensitive and still-developing area of gender and sexual identity. We should listen first to people who experience differences in sexual orientation or gender discordance and their loved ones or caregivers. They know themselves and their loved ones – their thoughts, feelings, desires, and needs – more intimately than anyone else. This does not mean they always see themselves or their situations with perfect objectivity, but we should start by accepting their experiences as authentic.

As Catholic Christians we do not fear the truth. We can confidently turn to the best of what the medical, psychological, and social sciences have to offer. As a Church, we have a robust and longstanding intellectual tradition and have been highly invested in the sciences. We should listen especially, though not without question, to the recommendations of healthcare providers who work directly with people who experience these realities. Any scientific approach can and should be paired with a deep respect for the wholeness of our Catholic intellectual, moral, and social tradition.

The goal is to draw on collective wisdom and to build consensus about how best to faithfully and pastorally approach these delicate situations. Fuller understanding and a more complete picture will allow ministers, principals, parishes, and schools to develop the most informed, loving, and pastoral response and to propose appropriate action steps. These might include reasonable accommodations, outside professional referrals, or more direct intervention in cases of bullying or harassment.

Bringing more people into the dialogue creates a sense of solidarity and avoids placing the entire burden of these decisions on just one or a few people. No one should have to make these difficult pastoral decisions in isolation. There should be a strong sense of mutual support. We urge close collaboration with the diocesan bishop, as well as other diocesan leaders in the areas of human resources, faith formation, Catholic schools, and family life.

### *A Case-by-Case Approach*

The individual situations of people who experience differences in sexual orientation or gender discordance and their families can be greatly varied and nuanced. Blanket policies may prove ineffective and may risk doing greater harm. Pastoral approaches and/or policies may directly address only a minority of people, but they have the potential to affect many more people in a negative way. A policy that is too sweeping may hurt or disenfranchise people. Building trust and dialogue are essential. People are more likely to stay engaged if they believe parish and school leaders know their situation, even if they do not understand everything about their particular circumstances.

Given different needs, requests may be highly individualized. In recent decades, the evolving fields of medicine, psychology, and education have increasingly seen the value of person-centered, individualized care. This is good practice. A case-by-case approach may not always mean providing everything that is requested, especially when there are competing interests/needs. Some accommodations may not be reasonable or feasible, but every effort should be made to work with individuals and families, keeping paramount the well-being of the person.

Again, parishes and schools should consult with diocesan leaders. Any decision, approach, or local policy should clearly reflect the principles expressed in this document.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, a Catholic pastoral approach accompanying people who experience differences in sexual orientation or gender discordance will: show respect for the dignity of all people; acknowledge people and their difficult circumstances; listen for greater understanding; involve others in the decision-making process; and work with individuals, families, and caretakers on a case-by-case basis.

As the Church, we have a special responsibility to look out for the physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being of those entrusted to our care. When working with people who experience differences in sexual orientation or gender discordance, we must strive to protect lives and souls from harm.

As a diocese, we believe these guidelines, while not answering every question or providing simple solutions, will prove useful as local parish and school communities work together to develop the most appropriate response to these situations. What follows are some important questions to ask as we carefully and prayerfully engage this process.

## RECOMMENDED QUESTIONS

Who are the people involved? What is their situation?

What brings them to you? What is their concern and/or request?

What are your biases or blind spots? What experience or expertise do you bring to the table?

Who else should be consulted to help build understanding?

Looking at the full picture, what response is needed?

What accommodations could be made, if appropriate?

What professional resources (ex. counseling) may be helpful?