

Saint Mary's Compromising its Identity as A Catholic Woman's College

Statement of Bishop Kevin C. Rhoades Regarding Change in Admission Policy at Saint Mary's College

I learned last week that the Board of Trustees of Saint Mary's College, a Catholic women's college in our diocese, has changed its admission policy and will now consider for admission not only applicants "whose sex is female," but also applicants "who consistently live and identify as women." In a letter to colleagues and students at Saint Mary's, the president explained that "Saint Mary's will consider undergraduate applicants whose "sex assigned at birth is female or who consistently live and identify as women."

The president's letter expressed a commitment to operate as "a Catholic women's college." It included a quote from Pope Francis about love for others and recognizing the value and worth of others. This was evidently part of the rationale for the change in admission policy. The letter states that Saint Mary's, "as an inclusive community leader," aims to continue to "create an environment where all women belong and thrive."

It is disappointing that I, as bishop of the diocese in which Saint Mary's College is located, was not included or consulted on a matter of important Catholic teaching. Bishops have a particular responsibility to "promote and assist in the preservation and strengthening" of the Catholic identity of the Catholic colleges and universities in their dioceses (cf. *Ex corde Ecclesiae* #28). For this reason, I am writing about this recent decision of Saint Mary's College.

One of the four essential characteristics of a Catholic college or university is "fidelity to the Christian message as it comes to us through the Church" (*Ex corde Ecclesiae* 13). This institutional fidelity includes "a recognition of and adherence to the teaching authority of the Church in matters of faith and morals" (*Ex corde Ecclesiae* 27). In this new admissions policy, Saint Mary's departs from fundamental Catholic teaching on the nature of woman and thus compromises its very identity as a Catholic woman's college.

To call itself a "women's college" and to admit male students who "consistently live and identify as women" suggests that the college affirms an

ideology of gender that separates sex from gender and claims that sexual identity is based on the subjective experience of the individual. This ideology is at odds with Catholic teaching. In his apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis wrote: “It needs to be emphasized that ‘biological sex and the socio-cultural role of sex (gender) can be distinguished but not separated.’... It is one thing to be understanding of human weakness and the complexities of life, and another to accept ideologies that attempt to sunder what are inseparable aspects of reality. Let us not fall into the sin of trying to replace the Creator. We are creatures, and not omnipotent. Creation is prior to us and must be received as a gift” (#56).

On many occasions, Pope Francis has re-affirmed the Church’s teaching on the sexual embodiment of the human person and has criticized various forms of gender ideology. The letter from the president of Saint Mary’s quotes Pope Francis on the importance of love but does not mention the Holy Father’s continual rejection of gender ideology – the same ideology behind this new policy. The Church has always rejected a dualistic anthropology that separates body and soul, and which consigns sexual identity to one’s individual self-declaration. The new admissions policy at Saint Mary’s College erroneously suggests that “woman” is a purely social category that anyone, regardless of sex, can inhabit.

The letter from the president also erroneously speaks of “sex assigned at birth,” a common expression that conveys the philosophical understanding that sex is not an innate and recognizable aspect of our embodied nature, but an arbitrary category that can be changed. A person’s sex can normally be ascertained long before birth. The sex of a person is discovered, not assigned. It is God who creates human beings as male or female. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches: “By creating the human being man and woman, God gives personal dignity equally to the one and the other. Each of them, man and woman, should acknowledge and accept his/her sexual identity” (#2393).

Pope Francis’ important teachings on ecology are well-known, especially because of his beautiful encyclical *Laudato Si, On Care for our Common Home*. The Holy Father has called attention to the environmental crisis we face in the world today. He has appealed to everyone to care for creation. In that same encyclical, Pope Francis addressed the importance of human ecology and

respect for human nature. He writes: “The acceptance of our bodies as God’s gift is vital for welcoming and accepting the entire world as a gift from the Father and our common home, whereas thinking that we enjoy absolute power over our own bodies turns, often subtly, into thinking that we enjoy absolute power over creation. Learning to accept our body, to care for it and to respect its fullest meaning, is an essential element of any genuine human ecology. Also, valuing one’s own body in its femininity or masculinity is necessary if I am going to be able to recognize myself in an encounter with someone who is different. In this way we can joyfully accept the specific gifts of another man or woman, the work of God the Creator, and find mutual enrichment. It is not a healthy attitude which would seek ‘to cancel out sexual difference because it no longer knows how to confront it’” (#155).

No doubt Saint Mary’s College desires to promote love, inclusion, and acceptance within the community. But it does not do so authentically when it separates love from truth. In his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate (Charity in Truth)*, Pope Benedict XVI wrote: “Only in truth does charity shine forth, only in truth can charity be authentically lived. Truth is the light that gives meaning and value to charity... Without truth, charity degenerates into sentimentality. Love becomes an empty shell, to be filled in an arbitrary way. In a culture without truth, this is the fatal risk facing love. It falls prey to contingent subjective emotions and opinions, the word ‘love’ is abused and distorted, to the point where it comes to mean the opposite” (#3).

Pope Francis also teaches about the intimate connection between truth and love in his first encyclical, *Lumen Fidei (The Light of Faith)*. He writes: “Love requires truth. Only to the extent that love is grounded in truth can it endure over time, can it transcend the passing moment and be sufficiently solid to sustain a shared journey. If love is not tied to truth, it falls prey to fickle emotions and cannot stand the test of time. True love, on the other hand, unifies all the elements of our person and becomes a new light pointing the way to a great and fulfilled life” (#27).

At the Assembly of the Synod of Bishops this past October in which I was a delegate, we discussed the relationship between truth and love, especially in light of controversial matters in our culture (for example, issues regarding gender, sexuality, and marriage). We affirmed together in the Synthesis

Document that “Jesus brought to fulfillment the promise found in the psalms: ‘Love and truth shall meet, justice and peace shall embrace. Truth will sprout from the earth and justice will come forth from heaven’” (Psalm 85:11-12). Affirming that truth and love are inseparable, we recognized that “if we use doctrine harshly and with a judgmental attitude, we betray the Gospel; if we practice mercy ‘on the cheap’, we do not convey God’s love. The unity of truth and love implies bearing the difficulties of others, even making them our own, as happens between brothers and sisters. This unity can only be achieved, however, by patiently following the path of accompaniment.”

These statements from the Synod document are relevant to the issue at Saint Mary’s College and to the Church’s mission to “proclaim the truth in charity,” as Saint Paul wrote in his letter to the Ephesians. To be true to its Catholic identity and mission, every Catholic institution has the duty to uphold the truth of the Gospel and to accompany with love all who struggle to accept and live the Church’s teachings. This includes the truth about the human person created by God with a sexual identity, embodied as male or female, with a unity of body and soul. When people feel distress about their sexual identity or feel that their identity does not align with their body, or even declare a transgender identity, we must love and accompany them as our brothers and sisters.

Following the example of Pope Francis, we are called to love, respect, and show compassion for everyone, especially those who are marginalized or experience ridicule, rejection, or even threats of violence or harm. We must stand in loving solidarity with all our brothers and sisters, including those who identify as transgender. However, such solidarity in love does not mean affirming an understanding of sexual identity that is not true. It does mean affirming every person’s dignity as a human person created in the image and likeness of God and as a brother or sister in the family of the Church or in the human family.

The desire of Saint Mary’s College to show hospitality to people who identify as transgender is not the problem. The problem is a Catholic woman’s college embracing a definition of woman that is not Catholic.

I urge the Board of Trustees of Saint Mary’s College to correct its admissions policy in fidelity to the Catholic identity and mission it is charged to

protect and to reject ideologies of gender that contradict the authoritative teachings of the Catholic Church regarding the human person, sex and gender.