Catholic Schools and the Gender Debate: Balancing Inclusivity and Catholic Identity

[1]Henry L. Bernardo, [2]Gerson R. Garcia

[1]De La Salle University-Dasmariñas, Dasmariñas City, Philippines
Email Address: hlbernardo@dlsud.edu.ph   ORCID Number: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4491-1995

[2]De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines
Email Address: gerson.garcia@dlsu.edu.ph

ABSTRACT
This article examines the current challenges that Catholic schools face in balancing adherence to Catholic teaching on gender and sexuality while responding to the call for social inclusion. Using a qualitative research methodology and drawing on the Catholic social doctrine and recent Vatican documents, particularly the document "Male and Female He Created Them," it clarifies the Catholic teaching on gender and sexuality and investigates how Catholic educational institutions can uphold their Catholic identity as purveyors of Catholic doctrine while fostering an inclusive school environment. The authors argue that social inclusion can be viewed in such a way that it aligns with the Catholic identity of Catholic schools and does not contradict Catholic teaching. This understanding of social inclusion is rooted in the Catholic social teaching and encourages Catholic schools to foster inclusivity through dialogue, pastoral care, and educational practices that balance doctrinal fidelity with compassion. Finally, this article provides practical recommendations for Catholic schools on navigating these complex issues, while ensuring that they remain true to their Catholic identity.

KEYWORDS
Catholic schools, gender theory, social inclusion, sexuality, Catholic teaching

1. Introduction

One of the hot-button topics in the world today is social inclusion. Social inclusion is broadly defined as "improving the terms of participation in society for people who are disadvantaged on the basis of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, or economic or other status, through enhanced opportunities, access to resources, voice and respect for rights" (DESA-UN, 2016). Ricee (2022) defines it as "making sure everyone feels welcome, valued, and respected, no matter who they are or where they come from." Around the world, it is evident that this call to welcome, value, and respect every individual, uphold human rights and dignity, and promote equal opportunities and social justice is becoming increasingly popular and intense. According to Silver (2015), this is a consequence of globalization, liberalization, and

democratization. The increased interaction, integration, and interdependence of different countries and societies, the widening gap between the rich and the poor members of the society and the heightened demand for equal opportunities and rights somehow contributed to an intensified worldwide call for a more socially inclusive society.

In the Catholic Church, the call for a more inclusive stance is also becoming more evident particularly with the leadership of the present pope, Pope Francis, who is regarded by many as more inclusive in his views as compared to his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI (Fox, 2013; Gregory, 2017). This shift to a heightened emphasis on inclusivity in the Catholic Church leadership has been particularly apparent in the Catholic Church today with the ongoing Synod on Synodality. This synod is a three-year dialogue on synodality and is part of Pope Francis' efforts to promote a more participatory and collaborative church. The dialogue and consultations started on October 3, 2020 and the synod will conclude in October, 2024. With its goal of promoting participation and collaboration, inclusivity is underscored as one of the major themes in the said synod. The synod's working document titled "Enlarge the Space of your Tent" published in 2022 states that "the vision of a church capable of radical inclusion, shared belonging and deep hospitality according to the teachings of Jesus is at the heart of the synodal process" (General Secretariat of the Synod, 2022). This emphasis on inclusivity is also evident in many papal statements and documents issued by Pope Francis such as the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* (Francis, 2020) and *Amoris Laetitia* (Francis, 2016).

However, there is an ongoing debate on how to properly understand inclusivity vis-a-vis maintaining the unique identity and doctrines of the Catholic Church. The problem springs from the contemporary notion of inclusivity specifically its tendency to gravitate towards "what contemporary woke culture means by being 'inclusive'" which considers 'inclusion' as a "code for accepting everyone's definition of self as if that self-definition obviously cohered with reality, was inherently unchallengeable, and thus commanded affirmation" (Weigel, 2023). This view can become problematic and controversial particularly when applied to specific contemporary concerns such as those issues related to LGBTQIA+ communities. It must be noted, as emphasized by Weigel (2023), that being inclusive is not one of the characteristics of the Catholic Church. Although one of the marks of the Catholic Church is "universal" (catholic), this characteristic cannot be deemed as the same as inclusive. Furthermore, Feser (2022) argues that inclusion (or inclusivity) is not good per se. It can be good or bad. It can be good in so far that it facilitates "the realization of fundamental and absolute values, such as justice and love". But it can also be bad when it hinders the realization of those values. He further states that

> Inclusion is always inclusion within some social order. But, again, any such order requires, for its very existence, commitment to common principles and a particular way of life defined by those principles. Any society must therefore exclude those who refuse to abide by those principles (Feser, 2022).

Understandably, the tension brought about by the diverse perspectives on gender and sexuality and the heightened call for social inclusion has inevitably

affected the Catholic schools. Catholic schools serve as one of the Catholic Church's instruments for new evangelization and specifically devoted to the formation of young people are expected to promote Christian values by "remaining a community whose aim is the transmission of values for living" (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977). Catholic schools generally define inclusive education as an education that responds to the "educational needs of students regardless of their abilities, backgrounds and aspirations" (Catholic Education Services, 2021). Until recently, the issue of inclusion or inclusive education in Catholic schools has been primarily focused on a meaningful integration of students with diverse cultural/religious background (Catholic Education, 2023) and those with disabilities within the general education curricula (Bonfiglio & Kroh, 2020; Faggella-Luby & Engel, 2020). But the current debate on social inclusion has gravitated the focus on the issue of gender identity. Thus, it has become imperative for Catholic schools to reflect on how to face the inevitable dilemma of remaining inclusive while at the same time adhering to Catholic teaching particularly on gender. Mcdonald (2022) succinctly highlighted it when he asked "What happens if a student at a Catholic school declares he is now a she or she is now a he? . . . . How are Catholic schools dealing with it, and how should they deal with it?" Appropriate responses to these questions are crucial as shown in the experiences of many Catholic schools around the world (Jong, 2023; Collins Scott, 2023;   Callaghan, et al., 2023; McDonald, 2022) but particularly in the Philippines with the promulgation of the Republic Act No. 11313 otherwise known as the Philippine Safe Spaces Act.

2. Objectives

Catholic schools face the challenge of responding to the demands of social inclusion while remaining faithful to Catholic doctrine on gender and sexuality.   In this paper, we examine and articulate the Catholic Church's teaching on gender and sexuality particularly as expressed in the recent Vatican documents and the implications and challenges it poses to Catholic educational institutions. Additionally, we argue that it is imperative for Catholic schools to maintain their Catholic identity by striking a balance between remaining steadfast to the Catholic teaching on gender and sexuality and accommodating everyone regardless of sexual orientation. We further underscore that social inclusion is not foreign to the identity of Catholic schools. In fact, social inclusion, properly understood, is central to the mission of Catholic schools. Finally, this paper provides suggestions on how Catholic schools can better respond to the demand for social inclusion while upholding its Catholic identity.

3. Methodology

We employed a qualitative research methodology grounded in a review of relevant Catholic Church documents and other related literature on Catholic education and social inclusion. Specifically, this methodological approach involves literature review, critical reflection, and providing proposals/recommendations. This approach is presented in Figure 1 below.
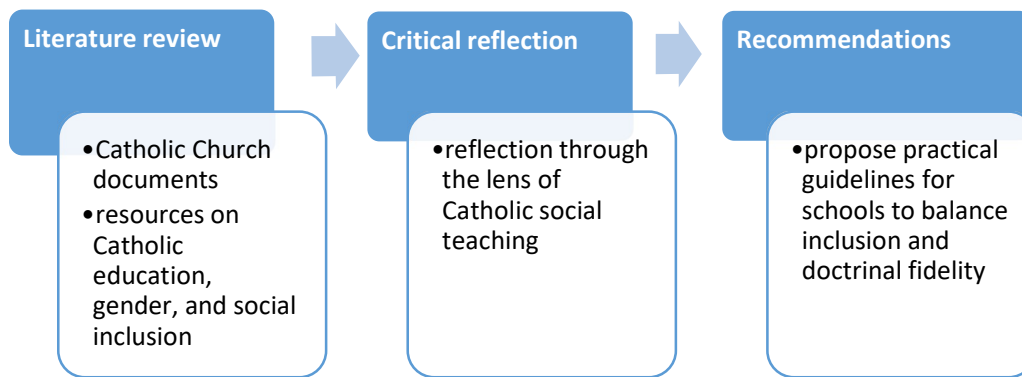
Figure 1: Methodological Approach

The literature review is focused mainly on selected official documents of the Catholic Church with particular emphasis on the Vatican document "Male and Female He Created Them" and supplemented by other relevant church documents and related literature. We also took into consideration the experiences of other Catholic schools in their effort to navigate the complexities of balancing social inclusion and Catholic education. Critical reflection focused on concepts in the Catholic social teaching such as human dignity, justice, and common good to provide a framework for understanding how Catholic schools can reconcile doctrinal integrity with inclusivity. Finally, this paper offers practical recommendations for Catholic schools.

4. Results and Discussion

The topic of social inclusion becomes extra problematic and contentious when it is linked to the issues of gender and sexuality, particularly on issues concerning LGBTQIA+ groups. To better understand how Catholic schools should respond to this issue, it is imperative that the Catholic teaching on gender and sexuality be clarified.

Catholic Teaching on Gender and Sexuality

It must be underscored that the Catholic Church has always affirmed her commitment to upholding the inherent dignity of every human person, regardless of gender or sexual orientation. The Catholic magisterium has always emphasized this as the foundation of Catholic social teaching. In his encyclical Fratelli Tutti, Pope Francis emphasized the fundamental equality of all individuals, rooted in their shared humanity and dignity as children of God (Francis, 2020, #22). This is rooted in the belief that all human beings are created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:27) and possess equal dignity. The Catholic Church teaches the complementarity of the sexes, and that gender is not merely a social construct but an essential aspect of human identity, reflecting God's design and intention as manifested and expressed in the Scriptures, natural law and tradition of the Church. This is highlighted in the Catechism of the Catholic Church where it is written that "everyone, man and woman, should acknowledge and accept his sexual identity" (#2333). Thus, all human beings

should embrace their gender identity as a gift from God and live in accordance with their biological sex.

The Catholic Church also teaches that sexual acts should take place only within marriage which is only between a man and a woman (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2390, Francis, 2016, #122). It is only within the context of marriage that sexual intimacy finds its true meaning and purpose. The Catholic Church further teaches that "Sexuality is ordered to the conjugal love of man and woman. In marriage, the physical intimacy of the spouses becomes a sign and pledge of spiritual communion" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #2360). Furthermore, the official Catholic catechism teaches that "homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered. They are contrary to the natural law. . . Under no circumstances can they be approved" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #2357).

Diverse Perspectives on Gender and Sexuality within the Catholic Church

It is not uncommon to hear or read Catholics having debates over issues such as same-sex marriage, gender identity and reproductive rights. It must be underscored, however, that the Catholic Church has always maintained her official teaching that affirms the complementarity of male and female genders, and that sexual intimacy is a sacred expression of love and unity only within the context of marriage. This teaching remains the same despite diverse opinions inside the Catholic Church and Pope Francis' emphasis on pastoral charity in dealing with "irregular situations". Pope Francis suggests a more pastoral, understanding, and compassionate approach in dealing with issues on gender and sexuality and advised pastors to "avoid judgements which do not take into account the complexity of various situations" (Francis, 2016, #296). Furthermore, in the document *Fiducia Supplicans* (Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2023) the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith with the approval of Pope Francis formally provided instructions on blessing same-sex couples. These recent developments are seen as steps towards better inclusion in the Church. However, this should not be mistaken as a change in the Church's teaching on gender and sexuality.

But it must be acknowledged that there are also members of the Catholic Church who hold a more progressive perspective on sexuality and gender. They advocate for an understanding of gender and sexuality grounded on social justice and they demand for a renewed approach to gender and sexuality in the church. Some of these groups are: Fortunate Families, New Ways Ministry, and DignityUSA. All of them advocate for the rights of LGBTQ Catholics in the church (Fraga, 2023). Aside from these groups, there are also Catholic leaders and priests who advocate for LGBT rights and dignity. One of the best-known among them is the Jesuit priest James Martin, SJ (Davison, 2021) who wrote the book "Building a Bridge: How the Catholic Church and the LGBT Community Can Enter into a Relationship of Respect, Compassion, and Sensitivity". Although he explicitly denied that he is against any Catholic teaching on gender and sexuality, he has been viewed as someone who "sows confusion" when it comes to his opinions on homosexuality (Williams, 2017).

The opinion that being inclusive is subordinate to the promotion of "common principles and a particular way of life defined by those principles" is the root of the tension between promoting a more inclusive church and keeping the doctrinal

integrity within the church. On one hand, there are those who argue that the Church should accommodate diverse perspectives and identities to become truly inclusive while on the other hand, there are those who stress the necessity of excluding opposing view to maintain doctrinal integrity by preserving the core principles and teachings of the Church. Thus, amidst the call to be more inclusive, the questions are "How should inclusivity be understood in a church context? Up to what extent can the Church become inclusive?" and "Can the Catholic Church be truly inclusive while maintaining doctrinal integrity?" Understandably, the tension within the Church is becoming more evident. Cardinal Robert W. McElroy identifies the existing division within the Catholic Church caused by this renewed call for inclusion as the "friction between Catholics who emphasize inclusion and others who perceive doctrinal infidelity in that inclusion" (McElroy, 2023). The tension becomes more obvious in the different views on issues such as women ordination, rights and acceptance of the members of LGBTQIA+, divorce and remarriage, and other controversial issues. Both inside and outside the Catholic Church, there are those who claim that for a church to be truly faithful to the teaching of Jesus Christ, the church must not discriminate anyone and become an inclusive church. For them, an inclusive church is a church which "celebrates and affirms every person" and welcomes them in the name of Jesus Christ (Inclusive Church, 2023). It is a church that embraces everyone regardless of their background, perspectives, and identity. Here, inclusion is described as "much more than mere tolerance and welcome" but it is the belief that

> . . . . God wants us all to know that we actually belong. That means people of every race and ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender identity, age and background, HIV status, ability and disability, theological and political conviction are loved, invited, and fully included (Inclusive Gathering Birmingham, n.d.).

On the contrary, there are those who consider this "radical inclusion" (Camosy, 2023) as inherently problematic. Witton (2022), for instance, underscores the "internal incoherence" in such opinion. She points out that promoting acceptance of everyone's views and beliefs just because disagreeing with them is considered tantamount to rejecting or excluding them, would lead to the "untenable position that we need to equally embrace incompatible viewpoints" (Witton, 2022). In other words, the main dilemma is: How can mutually exclusive and opposing beliefs be both "fully included" in the same church?

The Imperative of Upholding Catholic Identity in Catholic Schools
One important aspect that separates the Catholic schools from other educational institutions is the "Catholic identity" that Catholic schools strive to uphold and promote. This Catholic identity is essentially found in the "educational climate" that is "permeated by the Gospel Spirit of freedom and love . . . It tries to relate all of human culture to the good news of salvation so that the light of faith will illumine everything that the students will gradually come to learn about the world, about life, and about the human person (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, #1). This climate is the leitmotif that runs through all Catholic schools, absence of which makes the "catholicity" of the school questionable. This Catholic identity is the

foundation of a Catholic school's mission and vision. This is critical because Catholic schools are not merely educational institutions. They are places where faith and Christian values are integrated in all school activities. Catholic schools also serve a crucial role in the Church's mission of evangelization. The Second Vatican Council's document *Gravissimum Educationis* states that Catholic schools are responsible for "the development of the whole person in the light of the Gospel," ensuring that students not only excel academically but are also formed in the faith and prepared for Christian life and service in the world (Vatican II, 1965, #3). Thus, it is the mission of Catholic schools to transmit the Christian faith to the present generation. Similarly, the documents *Veritatis Gaudium* (Francis, 2017), *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (John Paul II, 1990), and The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1997), emphasize that Catholic schools must create an environment where faith permeates culture and education, thus safeguarding their specific Catholic character while at the same time ensuring that students' moral and spiritual formation is prioritized alongside intellectual development. Thus, a Catholic school does not exist to simply transfer knowledge to students but most importantly, to form their conscience and character in accordance with the Catholic faith. Consequently, upholding Catholic identity must be viewed not as something that hinders academic excellence or inclusivity but rather as a path towards a holistic formation that serves both the individual and society. Furthermore, upholding doctrinal integrity and Catholic identity is not just about maintaining tradition. Rather, it involves ensuring that Catholic schools remain true to their God given mission as potent instruments of evangelization. Without this commitment, Catholic schools risk losing their identity as Catholic.

Challenges to Catholic Schools

Catholic schools face significant challenges brought about by increasing call for social inclusion. This demand is fueled by the upturn of the so called "woke" culture and the demand for respect for the rights of all including LGBTQIA+ individuals. Woke culture is considered to have originated in the United States of America as early 1940's and originally refers to "someone who is well-informed on issues of social injustice – particularly racism. In its original use, it meant being alert to the specific discrimination and systemic harm suffered by African Americans" (Luk, 2021). However, while the original call for justice aligns with Catholic social teaching, which emphasizes the dignity of every person and the promotion of the common good, there are certain aspects of the current understanding of woke culture (woke ideology or woke movement) that are in conflict with Catholic doctrine. One example of this is the relativistic understanding of truth where personal experiences and identities are seen as the ultimate authority. Thus, the ultimate victim of this woke movement is truth itself (Madrid Gil, 2023). On the contrary, the Catholic Church maintains that there are objective moral truths that are not subject to individual preferences. Nowadays, this woke movement is the foundation for a variety of social movements and ideologies including gender ideology. The Catholic Church defines gender ideology as a framework that seeks to separate gender from biological sex, treating them as two distinct entities (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2019). Catholic theology denies such distinction. This poses a great challenge to many Catholic

schools around the world. For instance, Collins Scott (2023) notes the existence of gender related policies in Catholic schools in at least 34 dioceses in the United States of America. Jong (2023) cites that the Archdiocese of Omaha in Nebraska was forced to change their admission policy for students that involved provisions on gender expression and identity after they received criticisms. Similarly the student admission policies in the Archdiocese of Denver Colorado and Diocese in South Dakota, Wisconsin received criticisms. Callaghan, et al (2023) cites other challenges in their comparative study of the experiences of transgender students in Canada and Australia. Based on several studies and published articles (Jong, 2023; Collins Scott, 2023; Callaghan, et al., 2023; McDonald, 2022; Palmieri, 2022; Huchting & Fisher, 2019; Zalot, 2019) the following are some of the challenges that Catholic schools face in relation to the issue of gender identity and expression:

a. Admission policies - Catholic schools face challenges in how they admit students who identify as LGBTQ+ or who are transitioning genders.

b. Curriculum and teaching - The curriculum, especially in religious education and health classes, may be under pressure to include discussions on gender identity and sexual orientation that align with secular standards of inclusivity, potentially clashing with Catholic doctrine.

c. School infrastructure - Facilities such as bathrooms, locker rooms, and dormitories might be impacted. For example, pressure to provide gender-neutral restrooms may arise from the call for inclusivity, but Catholic schools may struggle with whether this accommodation aligns with Church teachings on gender.

d. Dress codes - Dress codes, particularly in single-gender schools, may be challenged when students request to dress according to their gender identity rather than their biological sex.

e. Student organizations and extra-curricular activities - LGBTQ+ student groups which promote inclusivity and raise awareness about LGBTQ+ issues, may be seen as contrary to the Church's teachings on human sexuality.

f. Hiring practices and staff training - Hiring policies in Catholic schools may come under scrutiny, particularly when it comes to hiring staff who identify as LGBTQ+ or who may openly dissent from Church teachings on gender and sexuality.

g. Pastoral Care and Counselling - Schools may need to offer pastoral care and counseling services to LGBTQ+ students that align with the Church's teachings on love and compassion while not endorsing lifestyles or identities at odds with Catholic doctrine.

h. Public Relations and External Pressure - Catholic schools may face pressure from parents, activists, and media to conform to secular standards of gender inclusivity, which can lead to external scrutiny and internal conflict.

i. Parental Involvement and Collaboration - Catholic schools must navigate relationships with parents who may have different expectations regarding LGBTQ+ inclusion. Parents who support more progressive gender ideologies might clash with the schools' adherence to Catholic teachings.

The Philippine Safe Spaces Act

In the Philippines, the Philippine Safe Spaces Act (Republic Act No. 11313) was signed into law in 2019. This Republic Act ensures that every person, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, is protected against sexual harassment, gender-based discrimination, and bullying in public and private spaces, including schools. However, the implementation of this law can present challenges to Catholic schools. One of these challenges could be its view on gender fluidity. This view is different from the Catholic teaching that there are only two genders, male and female. Balancing the protection of LGBTQIA+ students while adhering to Catholic doctrine can create tension in developing policies that are both legally compliant and consistent with religious beliefs. The second possible challenge could be the need for the school to provide pastoral care that support and promote the rights of LGBTQIA+ as mandated by the law while at the same avoiding to be construed as endorsing practices and ideologies that conflict with the schools' Catholic identity. Third, it may encourage students to request accommodations such as gender-neutral bathrooms, or the option to wear clothing consistent with their gender identity, as part of a safe and inclusive environment. However, such accommodations may conflict with Catholic teaching on gender and sexuality.   Fourth, adhering strictly to Church teachings on gender and sexuality may have legal repercussions. The law mandates that schools implement programs and policies to ensure gender equality and safety, and failing to adhere could open schools to litigation or penalties. For example, denying a transgender student's request for accommodations, such as a gender-neutral bathroom, may be considered as a violation of the Safe Spaces Act.

Guidance from the Catholic Social Teaching

The social teaching of the Catholic Church "indicates the path to follow for a society reconciled and in harmony through justice and love (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004, #82). The basic tenets of Catholic social teaching (CST) could serve as guides in responding to the challenges brought about by this "educational crisis". Central to CST are teachings on the dignity of every human person, the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable, and the importance of common good. These tenets are essential for creating a balanced, compassionate and just environment in Catholic schools.

First, the principle of human dignity asserts that all human beings possess "an infinite dignity, inalienably grounded in his or her very being, which prevails in and beyond every circumstance, state, or situation the person may ever encounter" (Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2024, #1). This is rooted in the belief that every human person is created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:27) and deserves respect and care. Thus, Catholic schools need to emphasize and make it evident in all their programs and policies that all students, including those who struggle with gender identity, must be treated with compassion and respect. This respect, however, is rooted in the Catholic anthropology which holds that gender is connected to biological sex.

Second, the option for the poor and vulnerable calls for a society that prioritizes the needs and rights of the poor and vulnerable, recognizing their dignity and

ensuring they are not marginalized but empowered to participate fully in the society (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004, #182). Catholic schools, therefore, must provide proper pastoral care to all students while helping them to understand Church teachings on gender and sexuality in a supportive environment.

Lastly, the pursuit of common good encourages Catholic schools to create a "synodal community" within the school – a community of mutual respect and understanding. It calls for school policies that protect the dignity of all students and promotes inclusion while adhering to the Church's teaching on gender and sexuality.

The Vatican Document "Male and Female He Created Them"

To provide guidance and clarity on the issue of gender theory in Catholic education, the Congregation for Catholic Education (CCE) issued the document "Male and Female He Created Them" (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2019). The Congregation for Catholic Education, whose name was recently changed to Dicastery for Culture and Education, is the Vatican office responsible for the "deepening, developing and promoting the fundamental principles of Catholic education, as proposed by the Magisterium of the Church, both regarding the People of God, as well as society at large" (Ceraso, 2021). Prior to the publication of "Male and Female He Created Them", two important documents highlighted the Catholic Church's teaching on gender and sexuality, namely Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (Paul VI, 1968) and Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (John Paul II, 1993). Both encyclicals emphasized that sexuality is a gift from God and rooted in the intrinsic dignity of the human person. They highlighted the sanctity of marriage which is a union between a man and a woman and affirmed the complementarity of male and female genders within the context of marriage and family life. They also underscored the importance of chastity as a virtue for every Christian.

The document "Male and Female He Created Them" aims to respond to the confusion by providing clarifications on the Catholic teaching on gender theory in the field of education. This is evident in the document's subtitle "Towards a path of dialogue on the question of gender theory in education". As to be expected, this document received varied reactions both from inside and outside the Catholic Church. Though it was published in 2019, until now, many Catholic school teachers and personnel are unfamiliar with it and remain perplexed on how to appropriately respond to the challenge of understanding and communicating the official teaching of the Catholic Church on gender theory (McDonald, 2022). Consequently, they are confused on how to balance being inclusive while remaining faithful to Catholic teaching.

The whole document is divided into three major sections: *Listening*, *Reasoning*, and *Proposing*. The *Listening* part acknowledges the different experiences and perspectives on gender and sexuality but emphasizes that the fidelity to Catholic teaching is a constitutive characteristic of Catholic schools. It also emphasizes that the Church is open to addressing the difficulties people face in understanding gender identity however, it also maintains that the Church must listen without adopting ideologies that are incompatible with the Catholic faith. The second part, *Reasoning*, addresses the philosophical and theological reasons behind the Church's stance on gender. It makes use of the biblical, philosophical, and anthropological sources that

affirm the complementarity of men and women and highlights that gender is based on biological sex not on a fluid social construct.   It also holds that the view that detaches gender from biological realities is contrary to human dignity. The last major part, *Proposing*, provides proposals on how to realize an education and pastoral care that balance compassion with doctrinal fidelity in Catholic institutions. It suggests that Catholic schools, educators, and families reaffirm the Church's teaching on gender and sexuality while promoting an inclusive, respectful environment. It also encourages pastoral care and dialogue that does not compromise the Catholic doctrine.

In its very first sentence, this document makes it clear that we are currently experiencing an "educational crisis, especially in the field of affectivity and sexuality" (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2019, #1). This crisis is brought about by what it calls "gender theory" which

> denies the difference and reciprocity in nature of a man and a woman and envisages a society without sexual differences, thereby eliminating the anthropological basis of the family. This ideology leads to educational programmes and legislative enactments that promote a personal identity and emotional intimacy radically separated from the biological difference between male and female. Consequently, human identity becomes the choice of the individual, one which can also change over time (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2019, #2).

The primary goal of this document is to address the growing influence of gender theory or gender ideology that affects almost all facets of our contemporary society, including education. It aims to guide Catholic schools to remain faithful to their identity as purveyors of Catholic faith while responding to the challenges brought about by gender theory. It underscores that Catholic schools must be steadfast in upholding their Catholic identity, standing up for the truth, while exposing the errors and alarming consequences of detaching gender identity from biological sex and distorting the true nature of human person and human family. However, it emphasized that the way out of this crisis is through dialogue, and the implementation of educational practices that balance pastoral care with doctrinal fidelity. Thus, the indispensability of listening and reasoning. Catholics must listen compassionately to individuals who struggle with gender identity and reason based on Catholic teaching.

Reconciling Inclusion and Catholic Identity
For Catholic schools, their mission to be inclusive while at the same time upholding their Catholic identity as purveyors of Catholic faith remains a big challenge. The document "Male and Female He Created Them" provides some proposals on how to better respond to this challenge. The table below presents a set of key points that summarize how Catholic schools can respond to gender theory and the demand for social inclusion while maintaining doctrinal integrity.

Table 1. Summary of Suggestions for Catholic Schools

Key Points	Explanations	Suggestions for Catholic Schools
1. Emphasize the Catholic Principle of Human Dignity	Catholic teaching holds that all individuals are made in the image of God and deserve respect.	Ensure that all students, including LGBTQ+ individuals, are treated with dignity and compassion.
Respect for All Individuals	Regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, every person deserves love and respect.	Create environments where students feel valued, without compromising Church teachings.
Pastoral Care	The Church distinguishes between individuals and behaviors, calling for respectful treatment of all people.	Offer pastoral care, listening to LGBTQ+ students' concerns while upholding Church teachings.
2. Clear Communication of Church Teachings	Catholic schools must be transparent in teaching the Church's view of gender and sexuality.	Teach that there are two genders based on biological sex, while fostering understanding of Church theology.
Teach the Church's Understanding of Gender	The Church teaches that gender is rooted in biological sex, and marriage is between a man and a woman.	Educate students about the theological reasons behind these beliefs.
Engage in Dialogue	Schools should facilitate respectful discussions on gender and sexuality.	Allow students to explore Church teachings while ensuring understanding and respect for different views.
3. Create Policies That Reflect Both Inclusion and Faith	Catholic schools should protect all students while remaining faithful to doctrine.	Adopt non-discriminatory policies that safeguard dignity without endorsing lifestyles contrary to Church teachings.
Non-Discriminatory Policies	Policies should protect students from harassment and bullying, including LGBTQ+ students.	Implement policies that ensure safety and respect without compromising Church beliefs.
Tailored Dress Codes and Accommodations	Schools can accommodate students (e.g., gender-neutral bathrooms) without changing their stance on gender.	Offer practical solutions like accommodations that respect human dignity while upholding Church teachings.
Compassionate Disciplinary Approaches	Schools should use pastoral approaches rather than punitive measures for	Provide counseling and guidance that reflects both respect and adherence to

Key Points	Explanations	Suggestions for Catholic Schools
	conflicts with Church teaching.	doctrine.
4. Formation of Teachers and Staff	Teachers must be trained in pastoral care and sensitivity on gender and sexuality issues.	Equip staff to handle LGBTQ+ issues with compassion, modeling the Church's teachings.
Training in Pastoral Care and Sensitivity	Training should help teachers approach LGBTQ+ issues with respect and pastoral care.	Ensure that teachers are equipped to handle gender and sexuality issues in line with Catholic doctrine.
Ongoing Theological and Ethical Formation	Regular formation programs will help teachers understand and communicate Church teachings clearly.	Provide ongoing theological training for staff to better address complex gender issues.
5. Promote Dialogue between Church and Society	Catholic schools should encourage dialogue between Church teachings and societal views on inclusion.	Foster discussions that allow for thoughtful engagement with different views while upholding doctrine.
Encourage Thoughtful Engagement	Schools should engage thoughtfully with social inclusion issues while maintaining doctrinal integrity.	Host forums for discussions about gender issues with Church leaders and theologians.
Partnership with Parents and the Local Church	Schools should work closely with parents and the Church to ensure policies align with Catholic teachings.	Involve parents and Church authorities in discussions on how to balance inclusivity and faithfulness.
6. Develop Inclusive Extracurricular Programs	Schools should offer activities that promote inclusivity without compromising Church teachings.	Develop clubs or activities that foster respect for all students, without endorsing contrary lifestyles.
Promote Inclusivity through Extracurricular Activities	Activities should encourage respect and understanding among all students, including LGBTQ+ individuals.	Create inclusive clubs that promote dignity and solidarity, aligned with Church teachings.
Service-Oriented Programs	Service programs can emphasize the value of each person, encouraging all students to contribute to the	Promote service opportunities that reflect Catholic social teaching and the dignity of every individual.

Key Points	Explanations	Suggestions for Catholic Schools
	common good.	
7. Adopt a Christ-Centered Approach	Catholic schools should follow Christ's example of balancing compassion and truth.	Model compassion for all students while calling them to live according to the truth of Church teachings.
Following Christ's Example of Compassion and Truth	Jesus welcomed all with love and compassion while teaching them to live in truth.	Foster environments that are compassionate but remain loyal to the Church's moral framework.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we would like to reiterate the statement of the Congregation for Catholic Education that today "education is in crisis" and this situation calls for a deeper reflection. This paper articulates the crucial task of Catholic schools to respond to the call to remain steadfast to their mission as Church's instrument of evangelization. However, as expressed in key Vatican documents, Catholic schools also have the duty to foster a school environment that is welcoming to all students, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation. This is a big challenge, but Catholic schools must navigate this challenge while upholding their Catholic identity, which is grounded in the Gospel message of love, and guided by the Catholic social doctrine of respect for human dignity, option for the poor and vulnerable, and commitment to the common good. It must be underscored that in Catholic schools, adherence to the Catholic teaching on gender and emphasizing the complementarity of the sexes remains non-negotiable. But this does not mean exclusion, as true social inclusion is an essential part of the mission of Catholic education. The Catholic social teaching, and particularly the Vatican document "Male and Female He Created Them" propose ways to create a school environment that both respects Catholic doctrine and responds compassionately to the diverse needs of students. Dialogue, pastoral care, and educational practices rooted in compassion and justice can help Catholic schools maintain their Catholic identity while responding to the challenges of gender theory/ideology.

References:

[1] Bonfiglio, C. & Kroh, K. (2020). Inclusion in Catholic schools: From inception to implementation. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 23(2), 138-164. https://doi.org/10.15365/joce.2302122020

[2] Callaghan, T., Esterhuizen, A., Higham, L., & Jeffries, M. (2023). Religious reactions to gender identity: a comparative analysis of select Canadian and Australian Catholic schools. Gender & Education, 35(6/7), 572–588. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2023.2222128

[3] Catechism of the Catholic Church. (2003). Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana. http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM

[4] Catholic Education Services. (2021). *Inclusion in Catholic school communities.* https://www.cns.catholic.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Inclusion-in-Catholic-School-Communities.pdf

[5] Catholic Education. (2023, November 27). *Inclusive education in Catholic schools: Embracing cultural and religious diversity* https://catholiceducationarizona.org/articles/inclusive-education-in-catholic-schools-embracing-cultural-and-religious-diversity/

[6] Ceraso, G. (2021, November 22). The Congreation for Catholic Education. *Vatican News.* https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2021-11/congregation-for-catholic-education.html#:~:text=The%20Congregation%20has%20the%20task,well%20as%20society%20at%20large.

[7] Collins Scott, K. (2023, February 1). As Catholic dioceses release new gender policies, grassroots groups demand input. *National Catholic Reporter.* https://www.ncronline.org/news/catholic-diocesesrelease-new-gender-policies-grassroots-groups-demand-input

[8] Congregation for Catholic Education. (1977). The Catholic school [Church Document]. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_19770319_catholic-school_en.html

[9] Congregation for Catholic Education. (1988). The religious dimension of education in a Catholic school. [Church Document]. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_19880407_catholic-school_en.html

[10] Congregation for Catholic Education. (1997). The Catholic school on the threshold of the Third Millennium. [Church document]. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_27041998_school2000_en.html

[11] Congregation for Catholic Education. (2019). Male and female He created them: Towards a path of dialogue on the question of gender theory in education. [Church Document]. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20190202_maschio-e-femmina_en.pdf

[12] Congregation for Catholic Education. (2022). The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue [Church Document]. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20220125_istruzione-identita-scuola-cattolica_en.html

[13] Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) United Nations. (2016) Leaving no one behind: The imperative of inclusive development. p. 17 https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/rwss/2016/full-report.pdf

[14] Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith. (2023). *Fiducia supplicans.* [Church Document]. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddf_doc_20231218_fiducia-supplicans_en.html

[15]   Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith. (2023). *Fiducia Supplicans.* Vatican City. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddf_doc_20231218_fiducia-supplicans_en.html

[16]   Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith. (2024). *Dignitas Infinita.* Vatican City. https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2024/04/08/240408c.html#:~:text=(Dignitas%20infinita)%20Every%20human%20person,the%20person%20may%20ever%20encounter.

[17]   Faggella-Luby, M. & Engel, M. (2020). Why inclusion isn't coming, it is already here: Catholic schools and inclusive special education. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 23(2), 30-54. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1286581.pdf

[18]   Feser, E. (2022). Diversity, equity, and inclusion: Good, bad, or indifferent? *The Catholic World Report.* https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2022/01/19/diversity-equity-and-inclusion-good-bad-or-indifferent/

[19]   Fox, T. (2013). Pope Francis envisions an inclusive church. *National Catholic Reporter.* https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/pope-francis-envisions-inclusive-church

[20]   Fraga, B. (2023, November 1). 'We will continue to be heard': Progressive Catholics react to synod report. National Catholic Reporter. https://www.ncronline.org/news/we-will-continue-be-heard-progressive-catholics-react-synod-report

[21]   Francis. (2016). *Amoris Laetitia* [Apostolic exhortation]. http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia.html

[22]   Francis, (2017). *Veritatis Gaudium.* Apostolic Constitution. https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2018/01/29/180129c.html

[23]   Francis. (2020). *Fratelli Tutti* [Encyclical letter]. http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html

[24]   General Secretariat of the Synod. (2022). Enlarge the space of your tent. https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/dcs/Documento-Tappa-Continentale-EN.pdf

[25]   Gregory, W. (2017). Mission shifts from Pope Benedict XVI to Pope Francis. *Asbury Theological Seminary.* https://place.asburyseminary.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1091&context=firstfruitspapers

[26]   Huchting, K., & Fisher, E. (2019). Introduction to the Special Issue: The Challenges and Opportunities of Including the LGBTQ Community in Catholic Education. Journal of Catholic Education, 22(3), 1+. http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.2203012019

[27]   Inclusive Church. (2023). The IC statement. https://www.inclusive-church.org/the-ic-statement/

[28]   Inclusive Gathering Birmingham. (n.d.). Welcome to inclusive gathering Birmingham. https://inclusivegathering.org.uk/

[29] John Paul II. (1990). *Ex corde ecclesiae.* Apostolic Constitution. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_15081990_ex-corde-ecclesiae.html

[30] John Paul II. (1993). Veritatis splendor [Encyclical letter]. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html

[31] Jong, D. (2023). Exploring the status of transgender students in Catholic high schools. *Journal of Catholic Education.* 26 (2). https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1411001.pdf

[32] Luk, J. (2021, June 24). Why woke became toxic. *Aljazeera.* *https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/6/24/what-is-woke-culture-and-why-has-it-become-so-toxic*

[33] Madrid Gil, S. (2023). Woke culture and the history of America: From colonisation to depersonalisation. Church, Communication and Culture, 8(1), 18–42. https://doi.org/10.1080/23753234.2023.2174890

[34] McDonald, M. (2022, November 2). Catholic schools tiptoeing the line on gender identity. *National Catholic Register.* https://www.ncregister.com/news/catholic-schools-tiptoeing-the-line-on-gender-identity

[35] McElroy, R. (2023). Cardinal McElroy on 'radical inclusion' for L.G.B.T. people, women and others in the Catholic Church. *America.* https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2023/01/24/mcelroy-synodality-inclusion-244587

[36] National Catholic Education Commission. (2024). The three worlds of the text. https://ncec.catholic.edu.au/faith/scripture-resources/foundations/the-three-worlds-of-the-text/

[37] Palmieri, D. (2022, June 17). LGBTQ students face obstacles in Catholic schools. *Outreach.* *https://outreach.faith/2022/06/lgbtq-students-face-obstacles-in-catholic-schools-heres-what-better-diocesan-policy-can-look-like/*

[38] Paul VI. (1968). Humanae vitae [Encyclical letter]. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana. https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae.html

[39] Piscos, J. (2021). Analyzing inclusivity in Pope Francis' Fratelli Tutti (On Fraternity and Social Friendship) and its Implications to Catholic education. *Bedan Research Journal*, 6, 240-262. https://www.sanbeda.edu.ph/uploads/files/1631156602_Analyzing_Inclusivity_in_Pope_Francis%E2%80%99_Fratelli_Tutti_(On_Fraternity_and_Social_Friendship)_and_its_Implications_to_Catholic_Education.pdf

[40] Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. (2004). *Compendium of the social doctrine of the Church.* Vatican City. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html

[41] Ricee, S. (2022). What is inclusivity? *Diversity for Social Impact.* https://diversity.social/inclusivity/

[42]   Silver, H. (2015). The contexts of social inclusion. *Department of Social Affairs, United Nations*. https://www.un.org/esa/desa/papers/2015/wp144_2015.pdf

[43]   Vatican Council II. (1965). Gravissimum educationis [Declaration on Christian education].   Vatican. http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_gravissimum-educationis_en.html

[44]   Weigel, G. (2023, February 1). "Inclusion" and Catholicism. *Denver Catholic.* *https://denvercatholic.org/inclusion-and-catholicism/*

[45]   Williams, B. (2017, June 14). Why bishops should condemn Fr. Martin's dangerous bridge. *OnePeterFive*. https://onepeterfive.com/bishops-condemn-fr-martins-dangerous-bridge/

[46]   Witton, A. (2023). What does it mean to be a truly inclusive church? *Living Out*. https://www.livingout.org/resources/articles/105/what-does-it-mean-to-be-a-truly-inclusive-church#footnote_0_1

[47]   Zalot, J. (2019). Transgender Policies and Catholic Schools. *Ethics and Medics.* 44(9). https://doi.org/10.5840/em201944913