

The architects and critics of the Catholic Diocese of Jefferson City's recently implemented guidance on admission of students from "non-traditional" families can agree on at least one thing: the Catholic Church has deeply held convictions about human sexuality, gender and marriage.

How to guard those principles while acknowledging the complexities of the world has become the source of some division within the diocese, particularly when it comes to the role of Catholic schools as agents of spreading the church's teachings on sexuality and gender.

"We probably are in the lead," Sister Elizabeth Youngs, the diocese's superintendent of Catholic schools, told the News Tribune of how she views the diocese as a forerunner among other U.S. dioceses when it comes to crafting guidance on inclusion of students from families headed by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, unmarried or divorced parents.

The diocese's guidance, titled "A Pastoral Process of Accompaniment and Dialogue: Addressing Children and Youth in Relation to Gender Concerns and Non-traditional Families," was presented May 9 to priests who have schools in their parishes, then on May 11 to the principals of those schools.

The diocese oversees 37 Catholic elementary schools and three high schools, with about 7,000 students in communities throughout Central Missouri.

"We're following the same guidance that every diocese in the United States has followed," Young said.

The Catholic Church professes people should limit sexual relations to be within the bounds of marriage between a man and woman, as sex must be open to the possibility of the birth of a child, and the church believes marriage is the only way to absolutely support the wellbeing of children.

While the church teaches all people should be "accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity," the church believes neither non-heterosexual relationships nor permanent modifications of biological gender identity can be approved under any circumstances.

The goals of the local diocese's guidance are essentially two-fold. "Wherever possible, enrollment is the goal" for students from any kind of family.

However, "special needs" of students — which include being a member of the LGBT community or having parents who are — are to be evaluated in the same manner as learning, physical and psychiatric disabilities: A Catholic school is willing to make accommodations up to a point, but past that, students from non-traditional families are probably better served elsewhere. The documents provide frameworks for pastors and principals to lead those conversations with parents.

"We want families that are going to be a good fit, that they understand the purpose for our

schools to exist," Brandt said.

If a student in a non-traditional situation were to be enrolled, "at that point in time, we would make sure that the appropriate folks would be aware that we had made that decision."

To protect the child's privacy, there would not be wider meetings on the school or parish level, she added.

The diocese's plan is to have parents of all students sign two documents. The first is a "covenant of trust" that spells out a school's expectations regarding how parents are to validate the church's teachings at home.

"We are not going to change what it is that we teach in compliance with our church to make somebody else comfortable," Youngs said.

The second document, which parents already have to sign, is a school's handbook of rules.

Youngs said the covenant is a statement of philosophy and not an enforceable document; the handbook, however, outlines the "hierarchy of consequences" for infractions.

If it becomes clear through a student's conduct that the partnership parents agreed to in the covenant is not going to work out, Youngs said, schools may ask parents to withdraw their student. The same is already true of discipline issues and of students outgrowing the resources a school is able to provide for needs like learning disabilities.

The diocese's newly circulated guidance has drawn concerns from some critics.

"Who living in that state could possibly sign it with any integrity?" Scott Duncan questioned of whether an LGBT parent who was married or living with a partner could sign the documents in good faith. Duncan lives in Holts Summit and is a member of the parish of St. Peter in Jefferson City.

He is a child of a divorced household and a convert to the Catholic faith. Though his children have graduated and are no longer in local Catholic schools, he feels the diocese must rescind its admissions guidance completely.

In its place, he would like to see a policy that bars admission of an LGBT student or a student from an LGBT household to a Catholic school. In his eyes, the diocese's guidance threatens the spiritual and even physical wellbeing of students, as well as the spiritual wellbeing of the students he wouldn't want enrolled.

Duncan worries nothing has been learned from the sex abuse scandals that have rocked the Catholic Church since 2002. John Quinn, a parishioner of St. Stephen at Indian Creek, near Monroe City, said specifically the root of the scandals was gay priests, and he worries about the safety of schools if LGBT students who didn't conform to Catholic values were present.

The USCCB's report on the subject, "The Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse of Minors by

Catholic Priests in the United States, 1950-2010" does not support that fear. One of the report's conclusions is that "priests who had same-sex sexual experiences either before seminary or in seminary were more likely to have sexual behavior after ordination, but this behavior was most likely with adults. These men were not significantly more likely to abuse minors."

There are deeper theological concerns held by critics of the Jefferson City diocese's admissions guidance. Some people fear the presence of LGBT students will cause their peers to question their own faith.

"How do they deal with it other than compromise?" Duncan wondered of students encountering a transgender peer. He worries to suggest gender identity can be changed suggests "God got it wrong."

Quinn said neither God nor faith can be seen, yet he believes in them as objective truths. If gender — what his faith tells him is another objective truth — can become subjective, "then what else can be subjective? Anything could be subjective," including God and faith.

Duncan feels the diocese's plan is "a means to present to the most innocent among us ideas they could never conceive of on their own," as he believes children can't come to the idea of being transgender on their own.

"I just don't believe it works that way," Brandt said. "We will continue to teach the teachings of the Church. We will not water them down. We will not change them."

She added the diocese is "not going to support a child considering a change in gender." That means no support for surgical procedures or hormonal treatments.

She also doesn't expect discussions about gender or sexuality to happen outside of curriculum.

Youngs said the diocese hasn't had to respond much in the past to enrollment situations like those the new plan offers guidance for, and "we don't expect to have to deal with it much in the future."

"We are being forced to deal with that because it's so much in the public eye," she said.

As for fears of whether parents will abide by the agreements they sign on to, "how can we monitor anything that we ask parents to do?" Youngs said.

"We're not living in the houses with families," Brandt said. They do make observations of the students' actions, though, like a student saying, "Well, my mom says this isn't right."

Youngs said Bishop John Gaydos is "very pleased" with the new guidance and it has his full approval. "He was present when we presented this at a high level."

"From our constituency, the pastors and principals that deal with our Catholic schools" — the people who will use the guidance — responses have been mostly positive, Young said.

Duncan said he knows of about 100 people locally who have written, called or inquired at schools about **the** new guidance, noting concerns are not coming exclusively from Roman Catholic parents.

David Barton, a parishioner at Mary Immaculate **in** Kirksville, said he's aware of members from 18 Mid-Missouri cities who have asked **the diocese** to rescind **the** guidance. He named all 18 locations, including Jefferson City, Columbia, Monroe City, Macon, Moberly and Mexico.

"I know I'm going to fight until it's changed, until it's rescinded," he said. He said he has three granddaughters **in** Catholic schools.

Quinn said he has three elementary-age children **in** Catholic schools. "I bring my kids there for truth and salvation. I can't risk that."

"**The** reason we have Catholic schools is to teach Catholic kids how to live a Catholic life," Barton said. While he thinks there should be Catholic outreach to LGBT communities, he said that should not include schools.

"It's difficult to raise your own kids as it is," let alone ask them to act as evangelists, Duncan said. "It can't be our children."

This represents a divide from how diocesan officials view **the** role of Catholic schools **in the** church's relationship with **the** world.

"We are a community unto ourselves, but we can't keep that to ourselves," Youngs said.

She added, if any family wants to enroll their children **in** Catholic schools, **the diocese** wants to evangelize to them and "to bring them closer to what Jesus teaches."

"We've got a big church. At **the** core, all **the** people who are members of this church can agree on **the** core values" — **the** sacrament of **the** Eucharist, **the** church being founded on Jesus and **the** apostles, and **the** pope being **the** successor to that tradition, she explained.

Brandt said any bridges that can be built with opponents of **the diocese's** guidance can use **the** same processes **the** documents lay out: encouragement of dialogue and conversations about questions.

"By being able to engage **in** some civil conversation, and not just accusatory conversation, I think we all grow," she said.

"I really believe **the** Holy Spirit is active **in** our church," she added. Through prayer, "**the** Spirit is guiding us **in** this, even **in the** midst of what at times seems to be challenges and disagreements."