

Vatican paper backs Dolan on sex ed

John L. Allen Jr. | Aug. 30, 2011 NCR Today

By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.

The Vatican newspaper has backed Archbishop Timothy Dolan in a debate over a new sex education curriculum in New York City, which is supported by Mayor Michael Bloomberg as a means of combating early and unintended pregnancies, especially among Black and Latino youth.

The initiative has been criticized by Dolan for, among other things, potentially usurping the role of parents in shaping the moral values of their children.

“What message are we giving our kids when we say, ‘We know you’re going to do this,’ we know you’re going to succumb to all the temptations around you, we know everybody’s doing it, we know you can’t be good, so be careful,” Dolan asked in a recent interview with New York television.

“I don’t know if that’s a wise message,” said Dolan, who also serves as president of the U.S. bishops’ conference.

In a front page essay in the August 31 edition of *L’Osservatore Romano*, Lucetta Scaraffia, the paper’s most prominent female columnist, applauds Dolan’s stance.

Whenever a church official criticizes a sex education program, Scaraffia writes, a familiar pattern emerges: “[The church] earns an image in the media as an obscurantist force, cruel in its indifference to the consequences that its refusal can have among youth, meaning unwanted pregnancies and disease.”

“However, that’s not how things are,” she asserts.

Scaraffia says that Western public institutions seem to have a “magical trust” in the efficacy of sex ed programs, despite what she says is abundant evidence that years of such courses in countries such as the United Kingdom have not brought down rates of either teen pregnancy or abortion.

“By now, it’s clear that it is absolutely not enough to explain how to use contraceptives and where to find them easily in order to avoid these tragedies,” she writes. “The problem is more upstream, in education and therefore in the family.”

Scaraffia asserts that Italy, which does not have a mandatory sex ed curriculum in its public schools, has comparatively low rates of sexually transmitted disease among adolescents and low rates of teen pregnancy. She attributes that not only to the role of Italian families, but also the Catholic church.

The church, she writes, “continues to teach that sexual relations are much more than a pleasant pastime that one can engage in recklessly without running risks.”

The church “teaches respect for one’s own body, which means attaching importance and weight to the acts one

commits with it, and not considering those acts as nothing more than opportunities for entertainment or narcissistic satisfaction.?

tThat position, Scaraffia charges, ?is precisely the opposite? of what the church?s critics generally claim.

t?Catholics cannot accept that the sexual life can be considered an education topic like any other, presented in terms of risks that it would be better to avoid,? she writes.

tThe new curriculum in New York represents the first time sex education will be taught in the city?s public schools in two decades. According to media reports, it includes lessons on how to use a condom and the appropriate age for sexual activity.

Students will be required to take one semester of sex education in 6th or 7th grade, and again in 9th or 10th grade. Parents will be able to have their children opt out of the lessons on birth-control methods.

Reportedly, the curriculum will also discuss chastity in addition to contraception, partly in an attempt to reflect the concerns of religious groups.

tScaraffia, the author of the *L'Osservatore* essay defending Dolan, is a member of Italy?s National Commission on Bioethics and the author of a 2008 book on the church and sexuality. A prominent feminist activist during the 1970s, Scaraffia had a daughter out of wedlock in 1982. She returned to active practice of the Catholic faith after what she has described as a conversion experience in Rome?s Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere.

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