NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

California bishop adds belief requirements to teacher contracts

Dan Morris-Young | Mar. 11, 2013

The Ides of March has taken on new meaning in the Santa Rosa, Calif., diocese, where teachers and administrators have until March 15 to sign a letter of intent to renew their contracts for the 2013-2014 school year. The contracts now include an addendum requiring they agree they are "a ministerial agent of the bishop" and that they reject "modern errors" that "gravely offend human dignity," including "but not limited to" contraception, abortion, same-sex marriage and euthanasia.

The roughly 400-word addendum requires all teachers and administrators -- Catholic and non-Catholic -- to "agree that it is my duty, to the best of my ability, to believe, teach/administer and live in accord with what the Catholic Church holds and professes."

Written by Santa Rosa Bishop Robert Vasa and added at his direction, the addendum is titled "Bearing Witness." In press reports, Vasa and Catholic school superintendent John Collins have described it as expansion and clarification of the standard faith and morals clause of the teacher contract.

"Bearing Witness" states teachers must live their lives "in conformity with the 10 Commandments" and Catholic teachers must "acknowledge" that attending Mass every Sunday and on holy days of obligation is "an especially important form of my duty to give witness to my faith."

The statement says Catholic school educators must see they are "called by God to a life of holiness" and that "this call orients me to heed God in my thoughts, words and deeds and even in my intentions."

About 25 percent of the 200 teachers in 11 schools under diocesan administration are not Catholic. Those schools enroll about 3,100 students. There are also four Catholic schools independent of diocesan corporate control. Teachers in the latter reportedly have not been asked or required to sign a statement affirming assent to specific church teachings.

Reaction to the addendum has been mixed. Letters to the editor in Santa Rosa's newspaper, *The Press Democrat* , have been running about 3-to-1 in opposition to the document. Critics say the bishop has overstepped his authority, encroached on freedom of conscience, and forced some educators into a position of signing a fiat they find troubling or else lose their jobs.

Supporters say they appreciate what they describe as Vasa's effort to make church teaching clear and uncompromising.

Collins told the *National Catholic Register* and *The Press Democrat* that the document is simply an effort by Vasa to clarify expectations of educators and that it was not corrective in nature.

Vasa has told media outlets he has received significant support and affirmation from across the country for his effort.

Vasa did not respond to *NCR* interview requests by Sunday. Collins declined to be interviewed.

In a March 5 *Press Democrat* commentary [1], Cynthia Vrooman said "at face value," the Vasa addendum "seems to be a legitimate employer's request," that teachers in Catholic schools follow church doctrine.

However, the former diocesan adult education director wrote, "these directives are imposed on teachers who may or may not be Catholics," and they demand assent to church doctrinal formulations that are open to change.

Vrooman criticized Vasa for no mention of Catechism of the Catholic Church exhortations on the supremacy of conscience, and added:

> No nuances here, which in the past meant you should have condemned Galileo, tolerated slavery, approved the use of torture, accepted the damnation of non-Catholics and protested most of the freedoms we take for granted, including freedom of religion, the press and the separation of church and state.

Vrooman said "the next shoe to drop" will be an "affirmation of faith" required to be signed by parish ministers, similar to the 2004 pledge required of parish ministers in the Baker, Ore., diocese, where Vasa was bishop from 2000 until being appointed Santa Rosa coadjutor bishop in January 2011.

Vasa's 2004 "Affirmation of Personal Faith" required full assent to a dozen doctrinal statements on topics including homosexuality, contraception, chastity, marriage, abortion, euthanasia, the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, Mary, hell, purgatory, and the authority of the church.

Objectors said the requirement was a thinly disguised loyalty oath devoid of room for individual conscience. Others questioned the choice of the stipulated teachings. Some pointed to what they said was a focus on "pelvic issues."

Supporters praised the move, calling it timely and undiluted doctrinal teaching.

Asked at the time of his appointment to Santa Rosa if he would require an "Affirmation of Personal Faith" there, Vasa told *NCR* [2], "I will have to see when I take over."

John Norris, a permanent deacon assigned to St. Vincent de Paul Parish in Petaluma, Calif., said he "would not be surprised if the bishop asks the same kind of formalized assent from parish catechists, liturgical ministers and so on," but called it "a reasonable approach."

Norris said some Catholics "get a little tense about the specificity of it," but he added, "I personally find it calls me to do some soul searching, to look at my own thinking on things, and do some reading on it. It has had a positive influence on me."

"I think he has best interest of the church and the diocese in mind, and he is doing his best to do what he has been asked to do," Norris said.

During Vasa's decade in the Baker diocese, the number of Catholics dropped from 39,853 in 2000 to 32,799 in 2010, according to the Official Catholic Directory, while the overall population of the area increased. The directory also recorded a similar 18 percent drop during that time in the "total students under Catholic instruction" in the Baker diocese, from 3,809 to 3,110.

Pastors in the Santa Rosa diocese said they were not consulted in advance about the "Bearing Witness" addendum.

St. Vincent de Paul Parish is home of two schools: St. Vincent de Paul Elementary School and St. Vincent de Paul High School.

Fr. Gary Lombardi, pastor, said he would not comment on the addendum itself, but told *NCR*, "I think the teachers will sign it, and I am hoping that they will. I would not want to lose any of them."

Cardinal Newman High School in Santa Rosa will apparently lose at least one of its 50 faculty, according to Graham Rutherford, the school's principal. The school has about 650 students.

"I know of one teacher who will not return," Rutherford said, "and he cited the addendum as the reason."

"Others have expressed the view that they are surprised at how it was written or what its emphasis is," he said. "It is not that they necessarily disagree" with the content or purpose, "but they hoped for something more uplifting. They will have to decide if they can make this commitment."

"Some people are maybe trying to understand if there is more to the message or not," Rutherford said. "The only clarification I would add is what the bishop and superintendent explained to me, that these points are what he wanted emphasized and the commitment he was looking for. He did not say we are not doing these things. It's my sense that he wanted to clarify for everybody what his expectations are. And that is what he has done."

Rutherford said Vasa told principals during a retreat for them in September that he was "looking into putting together something for the teacher contracts to clarify what he expected of people teaching in a Catholic school. He wanted them to be clear on what they are committing to."

In December, the educator said, Collins told a gathering of principals the bishop wanted the school leaders to send in suggestions of things that ought to be included.

Rutherford said he "took it back to the faculty" and worked with a group of teachers to submit ideas. "In the end," he said, "the 'Bearing Witness' addendum is the bishop's words and choices."

Asked if the phrase "to the best of my ability" in the addendum might be viewed as a moral loophole, Rutherford said, "I don't think it was intended to be that. What I told the faculty is that something that the bishop did not want was for people to just wink at it or not take it seriously. He is asking people to sincerely -- to the best of their abilities -- make these promises."

Petaluma reporter Janelle Wetzstein quotes Vasa as saying he knows teachers could sign the statement without interior assent to it and the diocese would not know.

"If someone signs this without believing what's in it, I'll never know and their students would never know. But I'm hoping that it would at least twinge their conscience a bit," says Vasa in the March 7 *Argus-Courier* article [3].

Vasa told Wetzstein he prefers diocesan-managed schools hire Catholic teachers but sees "a reluctance on the part of Catholic school administrators to say the same thing. It's also a balance to try and get the best teachers available."

Perhaps responding to a question on how the diocese would enforce the addendum or if it planned to somehow monitor teachers' faith lives, Collins told the *National Catholic Register* the diocese does not envision "an inquisition" into the private lives of school employees.

"We're not sending out a checklist or anything like that. We don't have bad teachers, and the addendum

shouldn't be seen as a corrective to bad teachers," Collins is quoted in a March 7 *Register* story by Peter Jesserer Smith.

According to the *Argus-Courier* article, when teachers at St. Vincent High School heard Vasa was planning a morals addendum, a group wrote an alternative document. Wetzstein included an excerpt from the teachers' narrative:

> We accept and promote Catholic moral values and we agree to uphold the Gospel spirit of peace, brotherhood, love, patience and respect for others. ... We accept our responsibility to create an environment for our students and their families that reflects the virtues of love, respect, compassion, stewardship and humility, with the goal of fostering a school community that is ... a model of Jesus' instruction to act as witnesses for his message.

"Our document gives you the sense of what we see our school as being all about, as opposed to what someone in an office sees us as needing to be about," an unnamed St. Vincent teacher told the *Argus-Courier*. "Our primary motivation of how we should behave toward our students is to follow the model of Jesus and many (teachers) here don't believe that Jesus would call out people for being different. He would embrace them."

The addendum's condemnation of same-sex marriage has come under criticism for running the risk of branding its signers as homophobic or anti-gay.

The Santa Rosa diocese reports about 174,000 Catholics within its jurisdiction, which covers more than 11,700 square miles and includes six counties: Sonoma, Napa, Mendocino, Lake, Humboldt and Del Norte.

[Dan Morris-Young writes for *NCR* from Washington state. His email address is **dmyoung@ncronline.org**.]

Source URL (retrieved on *10/21/2014 - 03:54*): http://ncronline.org/news/california-bishop-adds-belief-requirements-teacher-contracts

Links:
[1] http://www.pressdemocrat.com/article/20130305/OPINION/130309793/1307/www.pressdemocrat.com
[2] http://ncronline.org/node/23445
[3] http://www.petaluma360.com/article/20130307/COMMUNITY/130309701/1362/community01?Title=Teachers-struggle-with-morals-edict