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## California bishop temporarily withdraws belief requirement for school contracts

by Dan Morris-Young

In a March 19 letter to pastors, Catholic school principals and "especially teachers," Santa Rosa, Calif., Bishop Robert Vasa temporarily withdrew his requirement that they sign an addendum to their 2013-2014 contracts that would have required they agree they are "a ministerial agent of the bishop" and reject "modern errors" that "gravely offend human dignity," including contraception, abortion, same-sex marriage and euthanasia.

In the letter, Vasa:

- Wrote that his "most serious oversight ... was my failure to engage and consult the pastors of the diocese and especially those who are the local shepherds of our Catholic schools";
- Said his "degree of vigilance" in assuring "the greatest hope of finding the truths of Jesus in our Catholic schools" for students "can look like a lack of trust"; and
- Acknowledged "that I over looked proper engagement of the principals" and "erroneously chose a path of informing rather than mutual discernment."

Broad grass-roots reaction from parents, teachers, students and pastors had developed in the diocese following disclosure of the addendum, which had been inserted into the contracts as what Vasa and Catholic school superintendent John Collins described as an amplification and clarification of the standard faith and morals clause.

Teachers had been given a March 15 deadline to sign a letter of intent to renew their coming school-year contract and accept the language of the addendum, titled "Bearing Witness."

In the two-page letter, Vasa said he still plans to implement "in some form" the "goals which we

established for this year's teacher contract" in the spring of 2015.

Between then and now, Vasa wrote, "in conjunction with other theological educators, I will work to prepare presentations on matters of faith and morals" with principals and teachers as the "primary audience," though "hopefully parents also will find a way to participate."

The roughly 400-word addendum would have required 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."

About 25 percent of the 200 teachers in 11 schools under Santa Rosa diocesan administration are not Catholic. The schools enroll about 3,100 students.

Among events preceding Vasa's letter suspending the addendum were:

- An announcement that Vasa had granted the 11 teachers at St. Mary of the Angels elementary school in Ukiah a "temporary pastoral accommodation" relieving them of the obligation to sign the addendum as a stipulation for employment for 2013-2014. The decision was made following a meeting March 11 between Vasa and Fr. Alvin Villaruel, St. Mary pastor. Vasa later told the *Santa Rosa Press Democrat*, "It's a private matter between me and the pastor, and I won't discuss it."
- A full-page advertisement in the March 17 *Press Democrat* supporting teachers' rights to freedom of conscience. It was signed by almost 200 local supporters.
- A meeting last week between Vasa and 10 Catholic school principals.
- A gathering of pastors who have Catholic schools within their parishes, which the bishop convened March 19.

St. Vincent de Paul Parish in Petaluma supports a high school and grade school. Its pastor, Fr. Gary Lombardi, described the school pastors' meeting with Vasa as "very inviting and very open and very honest."

"It was refreshing and wonderful," Lombardi told *NCR* on Sunday. "He sincerely wanted to know what our reactions were, and he actively listened. He was creative in asking what we thought we should be doing here. I think he knows this should have been his first step. I found it very encouraging."

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"To me the mark of a good leader," Lombardi said, "is someone who can say, 'I did not do this right' and is open to changing. It was very impressive and a side of him I am delighted to know about ... And I told him so."

Lombardi said teachers "are delighted and relieved, and kind of celebrating and rejoicing."

In general, the pastor said, "we did not have a problem with the goal; it was the method."

Vasa has yet to respond to *NCR* emails and calls to his office. However, diocesan director of communications Deirdre Frontczak wrote in an email that "response has been overwhelmingly positive" to the bishop's March 19 letter.

"In general, people are responding that it is always possible to hear or learn something new, and that it takes a very big, generous person to write a letter like the one he delivered. ... As one person said, 'It

speaks volumes about his character.' "

Frontczak added, "One aspect that most people are glossing over is the educational component which for the bishop is central to the next two years' implementation plan. When I asked him about that, he smiled. Bishop was serious in saying that we will be conducting a campaign to make sure everyone in the schools fully comprehends the church's teachings in these areas, so they can make responsible and authentic choices in adhering to the policy rather than just reacting to it one way or the other."

She emphasized that "although the headlines suggest the bishop has withdrawn the policy, such is not the case. Rather, he is postponing implementation in order to give people time to study, reflect, and decide (whether) to get on board.

"He realizes there is widespread misunderstanding about church teaching, and believes people cannot make a free choice until they fully comprehend what is asked of them."

Frontczak said Vasa might address the addendum on his blog on the Santa Rosa diocesan website.

Here is a copy of Vasa's letter:

Letter from Bishop Robert Vasa by National Catholic Reporter

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