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Battle in Canadian schools mirrors broader Catholic realities

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 25, 2012 All Things Catholic

Politics is the mother of irony, and there's a juicy one bubbling right now in Canada, in the province of Ontario, where a school system originally designed to protect one aggrieved minority -- namely Catholics -- is under mounting pressure in the name of defending another -- in this case, gays and lesbians.

Specifically, some political and social leaders in Ontario want to compel publicly funded Catholic schools to permit the creation of "gay-straight alliance" clubs for their students as part of an effort to combat bullying based on sexual orientation, despite concern from church leaders that such groups could become vehicles for promoting homosexuality.

Aside from the irony of playing one minority off another, the Ontario controversy illustrates two key questions about Catholic life in the 21st century:

- Will Catholic institutions be able to maintain both fidelity to church teaching and public funding in a time when some aspects of Catholic teaching are drawing ever greater legal and political blowback?
- Given that secular opinion is pulling Catholic institutions in one direction and church leaders in another, how will institutions navigate those tensions? How many of them might choose to walk away?

I was in Ontario this week for speaking gigs Wednesday at St. Peter's Seminary in London, marking its 100th anniversary, and at a meeting of Catholic educators in the province. I found that questions about the future of Catholic education and the church's relationship with an increasingly secular culture are very much in the air.

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Ontario is the most populous province in Canada, home to both Toronto and the national capital of Ottawa. It's also home to a fairly unique system of Catholic education, in which Catholic K-12 schools are fully funded by the state. About 600,000 students attend 1,300 Catholic schools in Ontario, roughly a third of the province's total student population, and the union for English-speaking teachers in these schools has 45,000 members.

The schools are not governed directly by the bishops, but by Boards of Trustees chosen by Catholic voters in civil elections. In Ontario, there are 29 such English Catholic boards and eight French Catholic boards.

Public funding for Catholic schools was part of the deal at the time of Canadian confederation in the mid-19th century. To over-simplify, the Catholic minority in Ontario wanted the same deal Protestants received in Quebec: a separate school system paid for by the state. Most historians believe that had such a guarantee not been issued, Canada might never have become a unified nation. (Debates over funding for Catholic schools in Manitoba in the late 19th century actually produced a papal encyclical, Leo XIII's *Affari Vos*.)

At the time, a strong Protestant majority resented the more recent horde of Irish Catholic immigrants. An 1850 editorial by the *Globe*, in what was then called York and would eventually become Toronto, was typical: "Irish

beggars are to be met everywhere, and they are as ignorant and vicious as they are poor. They are lazy, improvident and unthankful; they fill our poorhouses and our prisons, and are as brutish in their superstition as Hindoos."

As that sort of crude anti-Catholicism has ebbed, there have been periodic calls to revise the separate school system, usually on the grounds that it amounts to religious favoritism. Why pay for Catholic schools, the argument runs, if you're not also going to pay for yeshivas, madrasahs and so on? In 1999 and again in 2005, the United Nations Human Rights Committee charged Canada with discrimination on the basis of its preferential treatment for Catholic schools.

Quebec changed its school system in 1997 to one based on language, not religion, and Newfoundland and Labrador moved to a single public system in the same year. Supporters of the Catholic system in Ontario, however, argue that it's been doing great work for 170 years, so if it's not broken, why fix it?

A recent poll showed 53 percent of Ontario residents in favor of eliminating public funding for Catholic schools, with 40 percent supporting it and 6 percent unsure. Given the political and constitutional headaches involved, most observers doubt there will be a serious movement to absorb Catholic schools into a single system anytime soon, but it's nonetheless a popular rallying cry in some quarters.

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Against that backdrop, ferment around bullying in Ontario schools erupted last October when a 15-year-old gay freshman in an Ottawa high school (not a Catholic institution) committed suicide after chronicling his depression on a blog. His father, a city councilor in Ottawa, later said his son had been bullied in school, saying he believed the abuse was a factor in the suicide.

In response to public concern, two anti-bullying bills are currently before the provincial legislature. One, Bill 14, is fairly generic, while another, Bill 13, is more specifically targeted at bullying based on sexual orientation. Among its provisions is that school boards must permit "organizations with the name gay-straight alliance or another name" to address the needs of students who identity as gay, lesbian or transgendered.

Doubts about the legislation, it should be said, aren't coming exclusively from Catholics. On Tuesday, the father of the 15-year-old who committed suicide testified that he felt belonging to a "gay-straight alliance" might have made his son even more of a target and argued for a more all-inclusive approach.

Nonetheless, Catholics are among the most important actors in the debate. Generally speaking, one can distinguish three currents in Catholic opinion:

- Those who fully support the anti-bullying initiatives, including the idea of "gay-straight alliances" in Catholic schools. That would include the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association, which has publicly endorsed the provisions of Bill 13 that protect gay, lesbian and transgendered students. (The statement was released May 17, promoted by an international coalition of gay rights groups as the "International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia," an effort the teachers also endorsed.)
- Those who oppose Bill 13 on the grounds that what's really at stake isn't so much prevention of bullying but compelling Catholic schools to water down their identity, especially on the teaching of sexual morality. A group called "Concerned Catholic Parents of Ontario" has made the argument that the bill violates both religious freedom and the rights of parents, backed by the pro-life website "LifeSiteNews" based in Toronto.
- Officialdom, including the Ontario bishops and the Catholic Schools Trustees' Association, which has been trying to strike a balance -- applauding the effort to fight bullying, but questioning the preferential

treatment for one vulnerable group at the expense of others, and also defending the distinctive identity of Catholic schools.

This week, an openly gay Cabinet minister in Ontario predicted that assuming Bill 13 is passed and Catholic schools don't permit "gay-straight alliances," the resulting church/state dispute will end up in court. Some legal experts in Canada believe that could be a test case for the extent to which Catholic schools can claim exemption from state norms in anything other than the actual teaching of the faith in specifically identified religion classes.

When the Ontario bishops, led by Cardinal Thomas Collins of Toronto, have been asked to comment on the anti-bullying bills, they generally offer some version of the following five talking points:

- The church is against bullying, and Catholic schools strive to create a respectful and welcoming environment for all.
- It's a mistake to focus on bullying for one reason (sexual orientation) at the expense of others (physical appearance, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, etc.). Deciding which to emphasize is best done on the local level.
- There are different pathways to promote respect, including a distinctively Catholic approach rooted in church teaching.
- Education is primary the responsibility of parents, and legislation needs to respect their role.
- Some language in the draft legislation, such as "incidents of homophobia," is overly broad and could open the door for sanctions not just against bullying, but even the presentation of church teaching on homosexuality.

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Politically speaking, the dust-up over the anti-bullying bill is almost certainly survivable for the church. The trustees have already said Catholic schools will permit the creation of "Respecting Difference" groups, including ones for students who identify as gay, lesbian or transgendered, just not under the title of a "gay-straight alliance." (The trustees published a 16-page document in January titled "Respecting Difference," outlining their approach to "promoting equity and respect for all students.")

A vote on the bill in the Ontario legislature is expected in early June. Many observers expect some kind of anti-bullying legislation will be adopted, but it's not yet clear in what form, with proposed amendments scheduled for debate next week.

Even if this dispute can be resolved, the broader questions it raises are not going away.

First, over the long haul, will it be possible to maintain institutions that are both fully Catholic and also fully supported by the state? School trustees I met this week in Ontario say they believe so, largely on the grounds that they've been doing it for 170 years. Certainly a powerful argument can be made that broad social interests are promoted when faith-based institutions are able to deliver services such as education, health care and poverty relief.

Yet in an environment in which some aspects of Catholic faith and practice -- especially, perhaps, its teaching on homosexuality -- is perceived as intolerant and bigoted, will that social compact be sustainable? The question is very much in the air, and not just in Ontario.

Second, regardless of what secular governments might do, are at least some Catholic institutions destined to move further and further out of the orbit of the institutional church?

In Ontario, there's long been an undercurrent of grumbling in some quarters about the religious identity of Catholic schools. A few cynics joke there's no need to dismantle the Catholic system -- just stand back, they say, and watch it collapse from within.

Last week, an Ottawa priest named Fr. Anthony Hannan urged about 900 Catholic youths at a March for Life conference, "It's up to you to transform the system from the inside."

"If we want to save the system, if we want to save the Catholic schools, we must make them Catholic," Hannan said, insisting that it's a real injustice that students who take the faith seriously feel "ostracized" in Catholic schools.

Hannan urged the youth to get a copy of the Catechism of the Catholic Church and bring it to class to ensure that the "the authentic teachings of the church" are presented in their classrooms.

If that happens, Hannan said, "please God, in the decades ahead we will have Catholic schools" -- implying, obviously, that those schools aren't particularly Catholic at the moment.

Whatever one makes of that analysis, there's no denying the contrast on the "gay-straight alliance" issue between the bishops/trustees and the teachers -- in other words, between the people who govern the schools and the people who actually work in them. In broad strokes, the teachers seem to embody a more conventionally "liberal" view.

That contrast reflects a broader Catholic reality of our times. Personnel who staff all manner of church-affiliated institutions these days -- charities, hospitals, schools, advocacy centers and so on -- often have a different theological and political outlook than their ecclesial overseers. We're passing through a moment in which church leaders are becoming increasingly vigilant about such gaps in the name of defending Catholic identity (witness the recent overhauls of Caritas Internationalis and the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, to cite two examples).

Hence the $64,000 question: As pressures around identity and authority intensify, what share of these institutions, or their personnel, will decide to cut their ties to the institutional church -- especially, of course, if they can bank on alternative means of support from the state?

Such a rupture seems unlikely to happen in Ontario over the anti-bullying fracas, at least anytime soon. Nonetheless, the controversy offers a reminder that the historical wheels are turning, and the church could be in for a bumpy ride.

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