

Statement of Des Moines Catholic Diocese Bishop William Joensen in response to Trans Visibility Announcement at Dowling Catholic High School, April 5, 2022

For more than a year, a dedicated task force in the Des Moines Diocese has been drafting policies, pastoral counsel and support strategies for accompanying persons presenting with gender dysphoria and other challenges relevant to sexual identity. The aim has been to demonstrate clear affirmation of personal dignity, to promote inclusion of individuals in our parishes, schools, and faith community at large, while also representing the truths of Catholic Christian faith reflecting God's providential design in creating humans as male and female beings in his image and likeness. It is my hope that in coming months these policies and pastoral resources will be made publically available to all the faithful and persons of good will.

Some of these draft policies and pastoral approaches were previewed in August 2021 when I presented an overview of Christian anthropology vis-à-vis issues of sexual orientation and gender identity along with prospective policies to two groups of our diocesan school faculty, staff, and administration. Consultation with current medical and human sciences, with philosophical and theological sources consonant with Christian tradition, and families who have members who self-identify as transgender or who seek gender affirmation procedures, has occurred. Progress has been made in terms of understanding and integration of natural and revealed sources in a manner that advances our mission to holistically educate and form young people and ourselves as disciples of Jesus Christ in communion with God and one another.

Unfortunately, while well-intentioned, a recent student announcement and prayer at Dowling Catholic High School noting transgender visibility day contained an open-ended reference to human rights and overall content that easily lent itself to a problematic interpretation. The point at issue blurs the distinction between Catholic Church teaching and a larger cultural ethos that is not friendly to the Catholic faith. This latter mindset often seeks to advance a social and political agenda that is antagonistic to our comprehensive understanding of the human person, and that further seeks to deny all sexual difference as a merely human construct. It is understandable that several members of the extended Dowling and diocesan community were seriously concerned that this brief occurrence was at cross-purposes with their well-founded hopes and expectations that our Catholic schools and other institutions will faithfully witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ that we want to announce and embody in every facet of our daily lives.

I have confidence that Dowling Catholic focuses on forming students within the teachings of the Catholic Church. As shepherd and pastor of the Catholic flock of Southwest Iowa, this experience prompts me to redouble my efforts to teach and guide the faithful as Christ and the Church has entrusted me to do. I look to continue to collaborate with our pastors, school administrators, staff and students, with our catechists and lay ministers, with parents and families to engage all the struggles and challenges familiar to our human condition with confidence and trust that God's truth sets us free. I pray that we will not fall prey to the forces of division and discord; may we learn from this event and grow wiser as we accompany one another in the Spirit of Jesus, who counsels and enlightens us as we make our pilgrim way to the Kingdom.