

**STATEMENT OF BISHOP WILLIAM S. SKYLSTAD OF SPOKANE,
PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS,
ON THE RECENT INSTRUCTION FROM THE CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC
EDUCATION**

November 29, 2005

The instruction of the Holy See on the admission of men with deeply-rooted homosexual tendencies to seminaries and to Holy Orders, which has been in preparation for almost five years, is a timely document.

We live in an era when the issue of sexual orientation is much discussed. The Church affirms both the dignity of all human beings and the respect that should be shown all people irrespective of sexual orientation. The Church also teaches God's revelation about the purpose of sexuality. God has given this gift to humanity to bring about a loving relationship between a man and a woman in the lifelong union of a marriage open to the creation of new life. As the Book of Genesis says, "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body" (Gen. 2.24). The Lord Jesus confirmed this in his own teaching (cf. Matt. 19.5). All sexual activity outside this marital covenant falls seriously short of God's plan and is objectively sinful.

A priest is called to teach these truths in their totality. He is also called, in the Latin Church, to forgo marriage and his own family life, after the example of Christ himself, as a witness to the Kingdom of God and to his complete commitment to the priesthood and to his undivided service of the Church. As a celibate man, it follows that he must abstain from all sexual activity.

This witness is contrary to the spirit of our times which often considers personal fulfillment to depend on expressing oneself sexually. In this environment, even men who sense a call to the priesthood can experience confusion about sexual matters.

In discerning priestly vocations, the Church seeks applicants who, at the time of their application and throughout the formation process, manifest emotional maturity, integrity of life, spiritual depth, and intellectual aptitude.

Formation is not a time for an applicant to begin to resolve serious issues in his life, whether they involve addictive behavior, personal finances, sexual matters, the ability to work collaboratively with others, or any other significant concern. A candidate still facing issues like these is not acceptable until they are resolved. A man who has a personal agenda that he might place ahead of the Gospel is also not an acceptable candidate. Like marriage, a priestly vocation is not centered on the search for one's individual, personal fulfillment.

In this instruction, the Congregation for Catholic Education is exercising a Christian realism about what is expected in candidates for the priesthood. This realism understands the challenges of our time. It expresses the valid concern that all candidates must display an

“affective maturity” which enables them to relate properly to others as chaste, celibate priests who can faithfully represent the teaching of the Church about sexuality, including the immorality of homosexual genital activity. This realism also makes it clear that it is certainly not acceptable if a candidate practices homosexuality or, whether active or not, if he identifies himself principally by a homosexual inclination or orientation. It is also not acceptable for a candidate to support the “gay culture” and to be so concerned with homosexual issues that he cannot sincerely represent the Church’s teaching on sexuality. In doing so, he limits his ability to minister pastorally to all those in his care.

However, if homosexual tendencies are indicative of a passing problem in the candidate’s life, he can be considered for Holy Orders if he has demonstrated that these tendencies have been overcome at least three years prior to ordination to the diaconate, which is the point at which a man becomes a cleric.

Since news of this document was first discussed in the media, the question has been asked whether a homosexually-inclined man can be a good priest. The answer lies in the lives of those men who, with God’s grace, have truly been dedicated priests, seeking each day not to be served but to serve their people, faithfully representing in word and example the teaching of the Church in its fullness, including God’s revelation that sexual expression is intended only to take place between a husband and a wife in a loving, faithful, and life-giving marriage.

When Jesus told his apostles how difficult it would be “for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven,” they responded with amazement. Jesus’ reply reminds us of the power of God’s grace: “For human beings this is impossible, but for God all things are possible.” (Cf. Matt. 19.23-26).

I urge all bishops and major superiors to make this Instruction the occasion for a comprehensive discussion with seminary rectors and vocation directors about the affective maturity which every priesthood candidate must manifest. I also urge a prayerful and honest discussion of the norms presented in the Instruction by bishops and major superiors with their presbyterates, religious communities, and seminary candidates.

In particular, bishops and major superiors should be available to speak directly with brother priests and seminarians who personally face the problem of homosexual inclinations. These discussions should manifest both fidelity to the truth about the priesthood expressed in the Instruction and also the respect, compassion, and sensitivity which the Catechism of the Catholic Church says should be extended to all those who face this struggle.

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