

CATHOLIC STANDARD

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Editorial:

GW Gay Students' Protest Against Chaplain Threatens Religious Freedom on Campus

During an Easter Sunday appearance on a nationally televised news program, Cardinal Donald Wuerl was asked how the Catholic Church responds to Catholic homosexuals who attend Mass and seek to be part of the life of the Church. Cardinal Wuerl responded by saying that the Church welcomes everyone and tries to walk with them on life's journey while, at the same time, upholding a moral law by which we are all obligated to live. He also expressed his concern that, in light of efforts to change the definition of marriage, there will be pressure to label the Christian belief in marriage and sexual morality as bigotry or hate speech. He called for tolerance and respect among all people. "There has to be room enough in a society as large, as free and as pluralistic as America, to make space for all of us," he said.

Recent events on the campus of the George Washington University (GW) suggest that the Cardinal's concerns are well-founded.

According to reports in the student newspaper, *The Hatchet*, two students who identify themselves as homosexual have embarked on a campaign to silence and remove the Catholic chaplain, Father Greg Shaffer, for simply teaching the tenets of the Catholic faith on sexual morality and the right to life. Since 2009, Father Shaffer has served as chaplain at the Newman Center there, a place for Catholic students and those interested in learning more about the Catholic faith, to attend Mass and participate in other religious activities and discussions. Judging from multiple accounts – including those shared on a student-initiated blog, "The Chaplain We Know" – Father Shaffer is a welcoming presence on campus, and his ministry has inspired a deeper appreciation for the faith among the students, Catholic and non-Catholic alike.

In addition to their efforts to force Father Shaffer off campus, the two students who have filed a complaint against the Catholic priest with the university's administration have demanded that GW initiate an approval process for determining who may serve in Catholic ministry there. What they are essentially asking is for the university to sit in judgment of Catholic teaching.

The radical intolerance of this effort to dictate what a particular religious group may and may not teach – and how students of a particular denomination may practice their faith – should concern all of us. Any university worth the name should not engage in this style of thought control. Today, we face an increasingly aggressive movement in our culture which seeks to marginalize people

of faith and diminish the role of religion in society. This has become increasingly true for the Catholic Church, in particular, including individual Catholics who strive to live and express their faith in the public square.

It should never be acceptable – and certainly not at a university – to silence opposing views. The spurious claim that people who voice the Church's teachings on moral truth and the nature of the human person engage in hate speech should never be used as justification for attempts to silence and exclude from public life religious institutions and people of faith. Sadly, the GW case is only the latest example of this phenomenon. This type of censorship of religious ministers and their beliefs and teachings is contrary to the principles of fundamental liberty that our nation has historically valued and for which George Washington himself fought.

It is important to affirm that the Catholic Church is and always will be welcoming of any person who seeks a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ. We are called to live and to share the truths of our Catholic teaching, and to do so with love. According to the many students who have spoken out in Father Shaffer's defense – including those who do not embrace all of the Church's teachings – he has demonstrated this through his ministry. "Through Father Greg I met God's love and forgiveness," says one person who initially took exception to him defending the Church's teaching. "Father Greg's kindness changed my life. . . . I still don't fully agree with or understand all of the teachings from the Church, but I will always stand for Father Greg, because I know that he would never disrespect or discriminate against anyone based on his or her beliefs....[H]e is the most compassionate non-judgmental person that I have ever met." Another writes, "Father Greg is one of the holiest, kindest, most devoted priests I have had the privilege to meet." Indeed, there has been a marked increase in Catholic students' participation at the Newman Center during his tenure, and the sacramental life has been greatly expanded.

Those who are in positions of authority, including in higher education, should resist the increasing demands to silence the voices of faith or to otherwise assert control over the Church's ministries on campus and in the world. In our country, there should be room for all of us to live our faith freely. The Church not only has the fundamental religious liberty to engage in the public square, but by doing so, we contribute greatly to the common good – as Americans, and as people of faith.