

Thoughts for Catholics impacted by the Boy Scouts of America membership policies

Two groups of Catholics are directly impacted by the decision of the Boy Scouts of America to not prohibit youth members who profess a same-sex orientation, namely, Catholic sponsoring organizations and Catholic scouts and their families. Please remember, as you read this, I write this with the approval of my bishop, and as Diocese of Phoenix Boy Scout Chaplain.

The Church teaches that of homosexual acts are objectively “disordered.” Second, the Church calls on persons who experience same-sex attraction “to fulfill God’s will in their lives” and to practice chastity which is the same for them as for all unmarried persons. Third, the Church warns society to avoid “every sign of unjust discrimination” against those who experience same-sex attraction.

The policy adopted by the Boy Scouts states: “No youth may be denied membership in the Boy Scouts of America on the basis of sexual orientation or preference alone.”

The policy applies only to youth members (aged 11 thru 17), not to adult leaders who, per the Supreme Court decision in *Boy Scouts v. Dale* in 2000 are excluded based a private organization’s right to set its own standards for membership. The new policy applies only to membership in the Boy Scouts. There are some details of participation in certain activities that still need to be addressed.

There is nothing in the new policy or in Boy Scout literature that endorses or advocates the gay life style; in fact all members are prohibited from using the Boy Scouts to promote “any social or political position or agenda”.

The non-discrimination principle is outlined in Catechism of the Catholic Church #2358. If the principle means anything, it means that the burden of proof lies on those who would discriminate against persons experiencing same-sex attraction to justify that discrimination. Discrimination (e.g., refusing to recognize “same-sex marriage”) can and should be defended among Catholics.

That same-sex attraction itself (which is the only factor addressed by the BSA policy) should bar membership in a secular organization seems difficult to argue; to propose further that maintaining such a bar is a litmus test for Catholic sponsorship of an organization is even less sound.

Consider this: same-sex attraction, standing alone, does not prohibit one from being a fully initiated Catholic. To argue, therefore, that, a Catholic parish must hold a sponsored organization to a higher membership standard than it holds itself to is inconsistent.

An official statement accompanying the new policy “reinforces that Scouting is a youth program, and any sexual conduct, whether heterosexual or homosexual, by youth of Scouting age is contrary to the virtues of Scouting.” Such a statement seems totally in-line with sound Catholic teaching against sexual activity outside of marriage and stands in contrast to the indifference toward premarital sex shown by some other youth organizations let alone to some group’s partnering with organizations like Planned Parenthood.

Indeed, aside from youth programs expressly oriented toward chastity, I know of no other secular organization that so clearly declares all sexual conduct by its youth members to be contrary to its values as does the Boy Scouts of America.

This is enough to relieve Catholic organizations from concerns that their sponsorship of the Boy Scouts is incompatible with Church teaching on human sexuality. Whether Catholic organizations or individuals may dissociate themselves from Boy Scouts without fear of giving bad example to others is another question. There is no obligation to sponsor or join Boy Scouts in the first place. My 50 plus years of experience in Scouting was and continues to be a healthy and entirely “sex-free” adventure.

Scouting requires serious commitments of time, talent, and treasure. If Catholic sponsoring organizations and/or member families can't agree that the Boy Scouts are able to deliver a youth program that actually operates within the parameters expressly asserted by the Boy Scouts, then they will likely decide that the challenges of Boy Scout affiliation exceed the benefits. I argue otherwise.

But, unless and until another conclusion is demonstrated on evidence and not largely on predictions or fears, I think that Catholics may, and should, take the Boy Scouts at their word and continue to enjoy the programs offered.

This new standard more closely aligns with Catholic Church teaching. Some had actually been concerned about the old standard for some time, because we have no other youth organizations in the diocese that would exclude youth struggling with same-sex attraction. We don't kick them out of our Catholic High Schools, Parish Youth Groups, or even our sports teams. We just challenge all unmarried persons of any age to live a life of chastity. We have our work cut out for us to hit this challenge head on, but if we are successful it will "bear good fruit."

When people have spoken to me about the change, I simply ask three simple questions. The practical question is "where do you send your kid to school? Do you realize that your child's school would not kick out a young man who claims same-sex attraction?"

The second question is more theological. "Which children should we throw away? Don't all of God's children deserve the Christian values of Scouting or do only those who are 'morally straight' in our eyes deserve this experience? Is it our right to chose who is deserving of Scouting's values or does God hold that in His hands?"

The third question asks them for an honest reflection. Will this policy make being a Scout leader more difficult? Perhaps, but isn't helping all of God's children our ministry? Does it make me uncomfortable? It may, but our job is to figure it out so every kid has a chance.

Jesus said "Feed my lambs." He didn't say anything about the lambs themselves, only that they needed to be fed. So it is with us and the Scouts, Scout Leaders, Parents, and even the Parish Leaderships that we care for. They need to be fed by good shepherds that set good examples and display moral discipline in the face of an otherwise amoral society. The sun will come up; the BSA and the Catholic Church will still be around, and then it'll be time for calmer heads to prevail.

Scouts and parents of this country need us and they need the Scouting movement, especially in light of the ever-increasing lapse of morals in America. Since they need us, let's keep meeting their needs.

What a wonderful opportunity that has been handed to us at this moment in the history of the Church to broadcast what the Catholic Church teaches on sexuality in general, and homosexuality in particular. How often do we get people calling wondering what the Catholic Church teaches? If we approach this moment in the spirit of the New Evangelization I'm confident we'll come up with communications that not only allay fears, but will convey the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Our mission with the BSA remains unchanged. Our God is much larger than all of this. He is in control, and will make something great out of this to glorify Him ~ as He usually does.

~Fr. Dennis O'Rourke, Diocese of Phoenix Scout Chaplain

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