

The teen pregnancy conundrum: Catholic schools struggle to reconcile doctrine, reality

By Emily Morrison

Like it or not, the volatile topic of teen pregnancy has entered uncharted territory. Since the advent of the sexual revolution, the stigma that traditionally accompanied unwed motherhood has largely vanished in an increasingly secular world. More teenagers are sexually active, and at an earlier age. Because of the 1973 Supreme Court ruling on abortion and more relaxed sexual mores across a broad spectrum of society, the "shotgun wedding" and the option of putting unwanted babies up for adoption lack the moral impetus they carried in earlier eras.

The phenomenon of "children having children," as a Time magazine cover story last December termed it, is characterized by staggering statistics. Although the adolescent birthrate was actually higher in 1957 than it is today, according to research cited in the Time article, the majority of teen births in the '50s were to married teenagers 17 and over. In 1950, fewer than 15 percent of adolescent births were illegitimate, wrote Time's Claudia Wallis, while in 1983, at least half of the babies born to teenaged mothers were delivered out of wedlock.

Today, some 45 percent of pregnant American teenagers choose to abort their pregnancies, while fewer than 5 percent of those who forgo abortion put their babies up for adoption (as opposed to some 35 percent in the early 1960s). Not only has unwed motherhood lost its social stigma, but many teenagers view it as a glamorous activity indulged in by celebrities or even as a way out of the crushing inertia of poverty that, ironically, becomes an inescapable cycle for many young mothers who abandon their schooling and then find they lack the educational resources they need to escape a life spent on the welfare rolls.

In less permissive times, pregnant high school students frequently found that the choice of continuing their educations in a public school setting was not theirs to make. Now, school-based health clinics (see C-J, August 7 issue), special public high schools for pregnant teenagers and teen mothers — including the Rochester City School District Young Mothers' Program — and the establishment of day-care facilities in certain urban school districts have begun to tackle the problem solved in previous decades by mandatory expulsion.

Changes in Catholic school policy toward teen pregnancy have been more gradual, on the whole, than public school adjustments to the issue, partly because the incidence of teen births among Catholic school students is reportedly lower. Given the special sensitivities and strictures of Church doctrine on this controversial subject, the problem of adolescent pregnancy becomes even more complicated in a Catholic school setting. Teen pregnancies are far more prevalent in public schools, yet the added complexities of sacramental, anti-contraceptive and pro-life beliefs make a Catholic school's administrative position on the matter even harder to define.

Still, the problem of premarital promiscuity and its all-too-frequent human costs refuses to stay in the closet. Many Catholic high school administrators who find themselves faced with it are swallowing hard, forming



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

as well as providing counseling and direction on sexuality issues for pregnant and non-pregnant students alike.

The preface to Aquinas Institute's pregnancy policy expresses eloquently the source of the conflict for conscientious Catholic educators. "Aquinas Institute upholds the traditional teaching of the Roman Catholic Church which states that sexual intercourse is a natural and integral privilege of the sacrament of marriage, and does not condone the widespread sex-

teenagers. "The school will maintain contact with her during this time to offer whatever assistance is needed, and to facilitate her return to Aquinas after the child is born," the policy statement continues.

Aquinas also addresses the often-ignored issue of the baby's father. Boys are similarly urged to confide in a trusted faculty member or counselor, so that they can be helped to understand and accept their responsibilities toward both mother and baby. Such counseling is also offered to help the father face the emotional difficulties that may ensue as a result of his situation.

"We've only had a pregnancy policy since girls came to Aquinas four years ago," says Father Stephen R. Martin, CSB, principal of Aquinas. "Last year, we set up a committee to review the policy we had. It was composed of parents, students, faculty, administrators and members of the board of trustees." The committee met at least six times during a period of two to three months to draft the new policy.

Aquinas has traditionally included a required, one-semester family-life education course in its senior-year theology course. The syllabus includes an introduction to high school life, a section on "our changing bodies, our changing selves," sexual maturation, and questions of sexual responsibility and Christian morality.

Father Martin recommended introduction of the freshman course because of prior experience at a Catholic school in Indiana. Although pregnancy was a relatively minor problem there, as it is at Aquinas, "we realized that the senior year was really too late for the kids who were becoming pregnant," according to Father Martin, who adds that most teen pregnancies were occurring during the summer of the girls' freshman or sophomore years.

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Aquinas policy is grounded in a concern for the pregnant teen's health and safety, says Father Martin, as well as sensitivity to her feelings. Comments or even ridicule from fellow students can be a formidable obstacle in a co-educational setting, he notes. If the girl wishes to return to school after the birth of her child, Aquinas, like other schools in the diocese, permits it.

At Notre Dame High School in Elmira, the official policy focuses on working with each individual student according to the circumstances of her case. Pregnant students are allowed to remain in school until they become uncomfortable, says principal Sister Mary Walter Hickey. After the student leaves classes, she normally pursues home study, sometimes with a Notre Dame teacher as a tutor and sometimes under the auspices of the public school district she resides in.

After the baby's birth, the young mother is allowed to return to school. "During the entire pregnancy, we encourage the youngster to get counseling," says Sister Mary Walter, who commends the counseling services provided by the Southern Tier Office of Social Ministry.

Notre Dame offers a senior-year course entitled "Christian Lifestyles," which emphasizes the sanctity of sexuality. A ninth-grade Christian sexuality course addresses the morality of sexuality as well as its physical aspects. This past year, Jean Swenney-Dunn, a Notre Dame parent who is also a nurse, taught the physiology section of the course, while Father Chris Linsler, assistant pastor at St. Patrick's in Elmira, took up questions of morality.

Kathleen Wisner, assistant principal at Our Lady of Mercy High School, reports that although Mercy's pregnancy policy is an unpublished one, the school has essentially followed Mercy philosophies in formulating its compassionate approach. "We treat each student as an individual," Wisner explains. "We counsel them individually and are very much in support of the pro-life position — so we encourage them to have their children."

Pregnancy at Mercy is hardly a common occurrence, yet the policy has served the school well. Students are encouraged to stay in school as long as they feel comfortable, and are welcome to complete their educations at Mercy after the birth of their babies. "Some students don't choose to do this, or to remain at Mercy once they are pregnant, but they are allowed to," says Wisner. The school also assists in placing pregnant students in such facilities as Melita House, a residential center operated by the Sisters of Mercy for young pregnant women who need housing.

Mercy also incorporates sexuality into existing theology and science programs such as health classes. "We have established a committee within our school system to begin to address these concerns and educate students in a better way," adds Wisner. "What we're trying to do is to address the issue and not hide from it, because our first and foremost concern is for the individual student."

"We just can't shut the door on these students," says Wisner, who points out that Mercy's policy also involves counseling pregnant students as well as teen mothers to ensure that adolescent pregnancy doesn't become a recurrent syndrome. "It's a very controversial issue," Wisner observes. "We're supporting them enough to allow them to be themselves. Our support doesn't mean condoning."

The fear that the community will misconstrue such support has led many Catholic

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'Our feeling is that we're giving a double message if we're not supportive of (pregnant) students. When you're talking about pro-life, you have to look at the whole picture ... We're not saying we want to make it easy for students to become pregnant. But if the situation arises, we want to give them the support that enhances the quality of their lives and those of their unborn children.'

Donna DelSanto, counselor, Nazareth Academy

committees to address the issues involved and adding pregnancy policy statements to school handbooks.

The matter-of-fact juxtaposition of "Pregnancy" with "Lockers," "Passes" and "Smoking" might seem scandalous to some parents, given Church teaching about premarital sex. Yet however liberal an individual school's policy may appear to traditionalists, the blatant fact that teenage pregnancies happen is no longer being ignored. School policies in the Rochester diocese range from unwritten to clearly stated, from quiet expulsion from classes during the term of the pregnancy to a state-funded program that fully supports keeping the pregnant teen in school,

ual promiscuity which seems to be a part of our modern society," state the policy's authors. "If, however, an Aquinas girl becomes pregnant, the greatest degree of Christian charity will be exercised by the school according to the following policy."

The pregnant girl, according to Aquinas policy, is strongly urged to contact a faculty member or counselor in whom she can confide, "so that support mechanisms can be brought into play as soon as possible." Before the pregnancy becomes obvious, the school offers the pregnant student assistance with the continuation of her education, by helping to arrange for tutoring or entry into one of a number of programs designed for pregnant