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Church holds line on sex

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The Rochester City School District is currently debating Monroe County Health Director Dr. Andrew S. Doniger's proposal to make condoms available to students in Rochester's public high schools.

Yet the proposal already has opened a Pandora's box of controversy about the implications of supplying youths with contraceptives, and about other aspects of human sexuality as well.

The Diocese of Rochester responded to Doniger's June proposal by issuing a statement that said it is committed "to encourage youth to abstain from non-marital sex."

The June 18 diocesan statement also stated, "Programs which promote contraceptives in the cause of 'safe' or 'safer' sex, or which place such practices on the same level as marital fidelity, abstinence or the avoidance of promiscuous sexual behavior, will inevitably weaken and distort the message that teenagers urgently need to hear."

The church continues to sanction sexual activity only within the sacrament of marriage.

But society in the 1990s confronts single people of all ages with many choices — and consequences — about their sexual behavior. These choices lead some to ask what the church is going to counter society's empty promises.

Although most Catholics continue to uphold chastity and abstinence as absolutes, others point to alarming statistics as a call for other measures.

According to a Rochester City School District report, for example, 214 female students became pregnant during the 1990-1991 school year. Moreover, 389 students were already raising children during that period.

In addition, the Monroe County Department of Health's most recent figures indicate that 3,959 cases of gonorrhea and 259 cases of syphilis were reported in Monroe County in 1988.

To date, 252 Monroe County residents have been diagnosed with AIDS, acquired immune deficiency syndrome. Two of these cases were among teens between the ages of 15-19.

Considering the high teen-pregnancy rates and the prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases, Father Paul R. Schnacky asserts that the church must more actively teach sexual abstinence.

"People are hungry for some kind of direction and some standard, and I think it is time to take a stand," said Father Schnacky, pastor of St. Joseph's parish in Wayland.

Before the church can take a stand, it must define the problem more narrowly, Father Schnacky said. And according to the Wayland priest, the crux of the problem is "bad philosophy."

"There is no agreement in our modern culture that there is any objective standard of morality that binds everyone," he commented.

Father Schnacky said misunderstandings have resulted because people — including theologians and philosophers — disagree about the complicated issues of human sexuality.

"It all goes back to the idea of establishing an objective, a standard of morality for all human beings because we are all struggling together under the same set of rules," Father Schnacky remarked.

Father Schnacky's contention resounds with Richard Doerflinger, associate director of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities.

"Society as a whole is confused, and that's why our kids are confused," Doerflinger observed. "Society is communicating its own ambivalence to our kids."

Doerflinger says that society's ambivalence while telling them to abstain from sex only magnifies that sense of ambivalence, he said. "We tell them sex is for marriage and they shouldn't do these things. Then we tell them since they are going to do it, here is how to do it safely."

Although Doerflinger said providing contraceptives to teenagers is not the answer, he acknowledged that the church cannot simply ignore issues of sexuality. Society as a whole has to agree on and promote only one vision of sexuality, he said.

"We can either tell young people, 'Go ahead and play, and here are the toys,' or we can educate first ourselves and then our kids, that sex is more than that," Doerflinger remarked.

But education may fail to dissuade young people from pre-marital sex, noted Father Charles Bouchard, Dominican priest and president of the Aquinas Institute of Theology in St. Louis, Mo.

Father Bouchard asserted that AIDS has propelled society into a state of crisis. "It is similar to the case of war when we have to look at which is the lesser of two evils. There is no other way to control the damage at the moment," he said.

"We catechize as well as we can about abstinence, but until that becomes effective, we may have to take more radical measures," Father Bouchard added.

Among those radical measures may be the use of contraceptives to prevent diseases, he said.

"Handing out contraceptives seems to be promoting sex, but by terms of public health, we may have to do it," said the St. Louis priest. "The use of condoms to prevent disease is not immoral — pre-marital sex makes it immoral."

Sister of St. Joseph Janice Morgan, on the other hand, believes the church should teach young people about moral behavior — not "the easy way out." Sister Morgan, director of religious education at Fair Church of St. Ann, said she should find a way to solve its problems.

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