



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on August 8, 2013

Catholic School Fires Teacher After Same-Sex Marriage

A teacher at a high school in Southern California was fired after photos of his same-sex marriage ceremony were published in a local newspaper. The [San Bernardino Sun](#) reported that 45-year-old Ken Bencomo, who was head of the English department at St. Lucy's Priory High School in Glendora as well as the school's yearbook supervisor and a dance coach, was let go from his 17-year position even though school officials had been aware of his sexual orientation for several years.



The school said that it fired Bencomo because his same-sex partnership violated Catholic Church doctrine. Bencomo had lived with his homosexual partner for ten years, and the two were among the “the first gay couples to line up at the San Bernardino County Assessor-Recorder’s Office to get married July 1 following a Supreme Court decision allowing same-sex marriage,” reported the *Sun*.

Bencomo’s attorney, Patrick McGarrigle, said that the teacher’s gay relationship was not a secret to school officials. “St. Lucy’s has known of Mr. Bencomo’s orientation for years,” McGarrigle said. “Administrators had been introduced to his partner in the past, so the suggestion that Ken’s orientation is a surprise or that his lifestyle somehow violated doctrine is at odds with the school’s knowledge and what seemed to be acceptance of him until most recently.”

The school released a statement after Bencomo’s firing went public, explaining that as a Benedictine school, “St. Lucy’s is a community for those who wish to express Christian values in education and develop personal and academic excellence.”

Pressed on specifics of the case, school officials said in the statement that “we respect and protect privacy interests and, to be respectful of those involved, the school does not comment on confidential matters.” They added that “St. Lucy’s wishes to reassure all in our community that upholding its mission to educate students in the tradition of the Catholic faith is of paramount importance.”

James Wellman, a former board and executive committee member for the school, told the *Sun* that school officials may have continued to turn a blind eye to the teacher’s indiscretions had the “wedding” not been publicized in the local paper. Nonetheless, he added, “we should not forget that Ken has been teaching at a Catholic high school. Anyone who believes that St. Lucy’s operates in a totally independent fashion from the Catholic Church is gravely mistaken.”

John Andrews, a spokesman for the Diocese of San Bernardino, said that while schools within the diocese are prohibited from discriminating against teachers and employees based on state and county ordinances, “if a teacher or school employee makes a public display of behavior that is counter to church teaching — such as homosexuality, sex outside of marriage, having a child outside of marriage — that can impact their employment status.”

Since many state and local anti-discrimination measures include exemptions for churches, it remained unclear what legal options were open to Bencomo and his attorney.



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But Karl Manheim, a Loyola Law School professor, noted that in 2012 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that religious institutions could not be exempted from anti-discrimination laws. He said that increasingly, the convictions that drive Catholic and other Christian schools would collide with such laws. "To the extent that the church is involved in ordinary business operations, and running a school typically is, they're going to be subject to state and federal statutes," Manheim predicted.

Meanwhile, an online petition had garnered over 10,000 signatures of individuals demanding that the school relent and rehire Bencomo. "I believe that Mr. Bencomo deserves to keep his job, and that discrimination against teachers based on their sexual orientation must end," reads the petition, which was created by a former student, Brittany Littleton. "I am joined by many students and alumnae in saying that we believe this is a fight for love and equality, and as such we wish to display love and kindness, even while feeling hurt and shock."



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