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Can a Jesuit Campus Promote Sex Positivity?

Chloe Platt, Managing Editor

There is a long, convoluted history between the Catholic Church and sex. The purpose of sex for procreation is widely accepted within Catholic clerical leadership, but when the act of sex is separated from the goal of reproduction, a range of views emerge.

Seattle University is a Catholic institution. Its policies and values stem in part from Church tradition. This begs the question: can Seattle University students come to their own ethical conclusions regarding sex while still holding true to the university's Jesuit affiliation?

Theresa Earenfight, a professor of history and program director of Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies, believes Seattle U is falling short in regards to creating a sex-positive environment for its students.

"I think they are erring on the side of way more caution, in terms of toeing the mark for the archdiocese of Seattle and the larger Catholic institutions," Earenfight said. "I think Seattle U needs to remember that not all students are Catholic, and that, to me, is fundamentally the question here: are we an institution run by Catholics? Or are we an institution for Catholics?"

As part of its mission statement, Seattle U states that the institution is "dedicated to educating the whole person," as well as "be[ing] one of the most innovative and progressive Jesuit and Catholic universities in the world."

Some students and faculty are left wondering what role sexuality plays into Seattle U's concept of the whole person and how being an innovative and progressive Catholic university can translate into sex positivity. While many students and faculty's views fall within the accepted teachings of the Church, Earenfight feels that the university's concurrence with the Church on sexual morality is too confined considering the diversity of the student body.



Luca Del Carlo

“[By] putting aside all the things they personally or the [Catholic] order may feel. Just saying ‘These are human beings. We have needs.’ That, I think, would be the stance to take.” Earenfight said.

President Eduardo Peñalver reflected on the balance between Catholic teaching and the varying schools of thought regarding sex and sexuality among the Redhawk community.

“Our goal is not to impose Catholic teaching on our diverse student body. We seek to foster an intellectual community where people feel free to discuss, debate, learn and develop their own perspectives on these matters. Jesuit education is about teaching students how to think for themselves, discern what they believe is right and stand up for their conscientious principles,” Peñalver said in a written statement to the Spectator.

One of the organizations on campus working to educate students is Health and Wellness Promotion. Located in Student Center 380, they assist students with physical, mental and sexual well-being, as well as substance dependency. Chris Fiorello, director of Health and Wellness Promotion, is limited in his ability to distribute contraceptives, but is working to change campus conversation on the issue.

“[Being limited] doesn’t mean, however, that I can’t educate on sexual health practices,” Fiorello said. “I am fully allowed to tell any of our students ‘hey, within half a mile of Seattle U there are at least three places to get free condoms.’”

Fiorello outlined specifically Lifelong, King County Public Health and any place that will test for sexually transmitted diseases as good resources for contraceptives in the Seattle U area.

Church teaching on contraceptives is a controversial topic amongst Catholics. The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that the use of all artificial means of contraception are immoral. However, only eight percent of Catholics concur with the Church on this point, reflecting the chasm between clerical leaders in laypeople on the teaching of the Church in regards to reproductive politics.

As conversations about contraceptives and sex-positivity continue on campus, Earenfight encourages students to work with theologians at Seattle U to discuss these theological and moral issues.

“I think [progress] comes upward from places like Seattle U and from people who are theologically trained because they have a substance and an expertise that the Church is willing to listen to, so we can protest all we want, but that’s not going to have the same impact as if we work with theologians on campus to say ‘let’s make this work, let’s find logic for this,’” Earenfight said.

As the teaching of the Catholic Church and the opinions of practicing Catholics continue to play a role in campus discussions, varying theological perspectives are sought out for solutions to controversial issues. As for the future of sex positivity on campus, there is no definitive answer, but rather a history of ever-changing Catholic viewpoints that indicate growth potential, both within the university and Catholic culture at large.