I’m a husband, father, product of our Catholic schools and a practicing Catholic. I’m also the father of a gay son who is in a long time committed relationship. He’s not perfect, but he’s also not objectively disordered and he doesn’t do anything that is intrinsically evil.

I want to begin by addressing some of the questions of our critics. How can you ignore the unchangeable teachings of the Church in the Catechism? The answer is that not all the teachings of the Church are unchangeable. The Church no longer teaches that the earth is flat, that slavery is acceptable and that women are inferior to men, although they’re still working on that last one. How can you say that you follow your conscience if you are in conflict with the teaching magisterium of the Church? The answer is that the Church has always emphasized the primacy of conscience, and I’ll address that in my remarks. What’s wrong with a bishop wanting to emphasize Catholic teaching in a Catholic high school? There’s nothing wrong with that. It’s good for the spiritual leader of our local church to want to do that, especially in the secular society in which our schools function and in which our children are coming of age. But how a bishop teaches, how a bishop promotes Catholic identity is what is crucial, and that is the issue we face tonight.

The question is: How does a Catholic organization—a school that does not limit its hiring or its services to Catholics—manage the tension between what our church
teaches in the area of sexuality and how it is expected to carry out its mission, serve its students and support its staff in the pluralistic society in which it lives and operates? The answer: very carefully. It's an ongoing challenge, one not conducive to an ideological, non-collaborative, thought-police approach. Some years ago, Bishop Robert McElroy, who is moving on to San Diego, wrote: "It is the responsibility of the Church to proclaim the whole Gospel, but it is not the responsibility of each part of the Church to proclaim it the same way."

What if Archbishop Cordileone had not arrived here as a one-issue bishop riding on the wave of Proposition 8? What if he hadn’t spent so much time fighting civil gay marriage all over the country, fighting against workplace protection laws for gays and lesbians, fighting against health benefits for same sex military couples? And what if he had the same pastoral approach as our new pope, who is not changing church doctrine but who has moved the entire world with his compassion and his inclusiveness? There’s a man who knows how to teach. There’s a man with moral authority.

Instead we have Salvatore Cordileone, who with his imported crew of orthodox, smugly ideological and intentionally provocative zealots, is trying to force his sex-obsessed version of Catholic identity in Catholic high schools. Instead of a Pope Francis teaching moment we have a lost teaching opportunity—an opportunity to not only teach about the real message of the Gospel of Jesus, the message of love and justice—an opportunity that parents of our students, both Catholic and non Catholic would welcome, but also the opportunity to assist parents and teachers to inculcate a solid sense of morality and personal responsibility, an opportunity to assist parents and teachers in pointing out the destructiveness of casual sex, of relationships not based on maturity,
commitment and caring, an opportunity to highlight the power and grace of both the non-physical and physical intimacy of marriage.

The archbishop says he is not on a witch hunt, but all we have to do is look around the country to see multiple cases of teachers being fired, good and dedicated teachers, teachers who kept their private life separate from their work life, teachers who would never consider undermining their schools or in any way harming their students—a teacher in Cleveland where the chancery office read the obituary of her mother’s death and concluded the teacher was in a same sex relationship, a couple in St. Louis where someone got a hold of their mortgage agreement and sent it to the school, an assistant principal in Seattle who was told after he was fired that he could be reinstated if he divorced his partner.

It remains to be seen if the archbishop’s effort will be a witch-hunt or a scaled back, Catholic, hypocritical version of “don’t ask, don’t tell.” Regardless of the outcome, there is a cloud of uncertainty and fear over our high schools—the uncertainty and fear of parents about the education and formation of their children, the uncertainty and fear of teachers about their capacity to continue to serve the students they love, and the uncertainty and fear of students, some of whom are questioning their sexual orientation or questioning the acceptance of the world around them. The last thing they need is a bishop whose actions, not intentionally but nevertheless destructively add to their sense of isolation or rejection.

The archbishop comes across as affable; constantly reminding us that he loves gays and lesbians. But one of the reasons our church has so badly lost on the issue of civil gay marriage, is because many bishops continue to gloss over the infuriating, insulting,
wounding and chasm-like dichotomy between regularly expressing love and respect for gays and lesbians and at the same time condemning them for acting on their nature. Even if somehow their words are not hypocritical or disingenuous, their approach is so separated from Jesus’ message of love and inclusiveness that it is hollow and meaningless.

The archbishop constantly refers to confusion over church teaching about sexuality, implying that if we just understood the teaching, everything would be fine. But there is no confusion about contraception, in vitro fertilization and increasingly, same-sex civil marriage. Rather there is strong, thoughtful, conscience-driven opposition. And the primacy of conscience is a longstanding Catholic teaching that cannot be ignored or minimized. Thomas Aquinas taught, “It is better to perish in excommunication than to violate one’s conscience.” Cardinal John Henry Newman said, that with prayer and reflection, he would follow his conscience rather than statements of bishops or popes. Pope John Paul II declared, “If Newman places conscience over authority, he is not proclaiming anything new with respect to the constant teaching of the Church.”

And let’s remember this is the archbishop who hung out with documented bigots at the recent March For Marriage in Washington D.C. And this is the archbishop whose handpicked pastor at Star of the Sea has done so much damage in such a short time—banning girls from serving on the altar, banning non Catholic children from being blessed during the school Mass, and unbelievably—distributing a developmentally inappropriate pamphlet to grammar school children. Before he was stopped, Fr. Illo was apparently on a mission from God to root out all those second grade masturbators, fourth grade
fornicators and sixth grade same sex couples. And let’s not forget who the archbishop’s major sponsor has been over these years, the man who got Pope Benedict to appoint Cordileone to San Francisco—Cardinal Raymond Burke—the man who has argued that the church has become too feminized. After the Synod on the Family, Cardinal Burke offered this compassionate, pre-holiday advice: “Catholic families should not expose children to the evils of homosexuality by inviting a gay son home for Christmas dinner with his gay partner.”

The approach of Cordileone and Burke is driving young Catholics away and is substantially decreasing the influence of the Catholic Church as a voice for a value driven approach to sexuality, let alone a voice for social and economic justice. Not all in our community would listen to any message on this topic from a Catholic bishop, but it strikes me that everyone would be better off when church leaders who try to teach are perceived to have compassion, credibility and moral authority, rather than being seen as harsh, moralistic and authoritarian fanatics.

When I was at Catholic Charities, I worked with many non-Catholic colleagues and they enriched the atmosphere and the values of our agency. To you non-Catholic parents, teachers and students who have deliberatively chosen the structure and values of a Catholic high school, I want to say God bless you for enriching our schools.

For those of you who are Catholic, I want to recall the words of the German theologian Hans Kung from his great work, On Being a Christian: “Then why stay? Because, as members of this community, we ourselves are the Church and should not
confuse it with its machinery and administrators, still less leave the latter to shape the community."

The students, parents and teachers of our Catholic high schools have demonstrated by their conduct and their compassion that Catholic identity is alive and well in our schools, particularly in their sensitivity to LGBT issues.

I want to say to all of them and to all of you who are here tonight: Don’t let Salvatore Cordileone drive you away from your school or your Church. To the parents of children at Star of the Sea, don’t let Joseph Illo drive you away. These two have their own agenda. It’s not the agenda of our new pope, and it’s not consistent with the message of Jesus.