

August 31, 2023
Twenty-first Thursday in Ordinary Time

Dear Families of St. Joseph,

Earlier this month, I offered the strong encouragement that our parish families refrain from enrolling in the Lifewise Academy Program that is being allowed in our school districts. As I had mentioned, while the desire to infuse the Scriptures into daily life is one to be lauded, **how** these lessons are presented are of great importance to avoid confusion and misconceptions. Having shared my concerns that both the Statement of Faith and the curriculum utilized by Lifewise Academy are at odds with the teaching of the Catholic Church, I wanted to provide you with the background in how this decision was reached and an overview explaining some of the concerns that we have found.

Like many of you, I first heard of Lifewise Academy through an article in the News-Banner last September.¹ At that time, this program was already allowed for use in one of our three school districts and had formed steering committees to petition our other two school districts for similar allowance. Though familiar with time-released religious education, I had not heard of Lifewise Academy before and wanted to learn more about this program. This led me to the organization's website and contacting their headquarters, based in Hilliard, Ohio, to request more information about their organization and curriculum.

Over the next several months, this initial outreach provided me with the opportunity to speak with a number of Lifewise employees, from both their main office to local representatives from within our own community. On our part, I invited both Jonathan Kaltenbach, Director of our diocesan Office of Catechesis, and Carl Loesch, our diocesan Secretariat for Pastoral Ministries and Catechesis, to join in these conversations. Their input and participation in these discussions have proved invaluable to our continued and ongoing dialogue with Lifewise Academy.

Lifewise Academy describes itself as a program that seeks to “teach the Bible during school hours.”² It is presented as a non-denominational program in that it seeks “to avoid discussions about denominational differences in the classroom”³ and “to avoid teaching an official position on secondary issues.”⁴ At the same time, Lifewise Academy puts forward its own Statement of Faith. This Statement of Faith contains seventeen points of belief. According to this Statement of Faith, “Lifewise teachers and content reflect the following beliefs in all teaching.”⁵ Similarly, those who wish to volunteer as a Church Liaison between Lifewise Academy and their particular church must state that they are “in alignment with what we believe and what we teach”⁶ in the Statement of Faith.

¹ *SWCS board to consider religious instruction policy* - News-Banner - 22 September 2022

² *During School Hours* - LifeWise Academy Demo - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wVN0ff3c-AQ>

³ *What We Teach* - Statement of Faith - <https://lifewise.org/statementoffaith/>

⁴ *Church and Community* - Frequently Asked Questions - <https://lifewise.org/faq/>

⁵ *What We Teach* - Statement of Faith - <https://lifewise.org/statementoffaith/>

⁶ *Become a Church Liaison* - For Churches - <https://lifewise.org/forchurches/>

A thorough review of the Lifewise Academy Statement of Faith brought forth a number of concerns: Of the seventeen points presented, we found ten of the seventeen to be at odds with the Catholic Faith. It is worth noting that many of these statements can be found, oftentimes verbatim, among the Statement of Faiths professed by a large number of both Evangelical and Southern Baptist communities. For the sake of brevity, I've included a review highlighting concerns within two of the points from the Statement of Faith. (*If you would be interested in walking through the entire Statement of Faith, I would be happy to do so with you. If so, please contact me directly.*)

The first Statement of Belief defines Sacred Scripture as “God’s infallible written Word consisting of the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments.”⁷ The Catholic Church has, however, consistently held to the original canon of Sacred Scripture, which consists of the 73 books of the Old and New Testament. This was affirmed as the official canon by Pope Damasus I in AD 382 and reaffirmed at both the Councils of Hippo in AD 393 and Carthage in AD 397.⁸ This canon, still in use by the Catholic Church today, remained unchallenged until the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century led to the removal of seven books by Reformers from the historically-accepted canon.⁹

This same statement concludes that Sacred Scripture “is the supreme and final authority in all matters on which it speaks.”¹⁰ This concept, however, is in direct contradiction with our understanding of Sacred Scripture, Sacred Tradition, and the Magisterium (*which is the Teaching Office of the Church*). The concept that Sacred Scripture is its own sole-authority, sometimes referred to as *Sola Scriptura*, erroneously attempts to separate the very sources of Divine Revelation themselves. Instead, “in the supremely wise arrangement of God, Sacred Tradition, Sacred Scripture and the Magisterium of the Church are so connected and associated that one of them cannot stand without the others. Working together, each in its own way, under the action of the one Holy Spirit, they all contribute effectively to the salvation of souls.”¹¹

The eighth Statement of Faith defines man’s nature as being “corrupted”¹² as a result of Original Sin. This view, sometimes referred to as the Doctrine of Total Depravity, is in direct contradiction with our Catholic understanding of man’s fallen nature. While this may seem to be a semantic argument, its implications are of great importance as it directly speaks to man’s free will. If man’s nature is truly corrupted, then we are, as the Statement of Faith states, “totally unable to please God.”¹³ If this is the case, then “Original Sin has radically perverted man and destroyed his freedom... [and] the tendency to evil would be insurmountable.”¹⁴

The Catholic view of man’s fallen nature recognizes that Original Sin has wounded man and he is now inclined towards sin, “but human nature has not been totally corrupted.”¹⁵ This is itself a recognition that man, from the very beginning, is created in the image and

⁷ *What We Teach* - Statement of Faith - <https://lifewise.org/statementoffaith/>

⁸ cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, Paragraphs 120-127.

⁹ cf. <https://www.ncregister.com/blog/why-did-martin-luther-remove-books-from-bible>

¹⁰ *What We Teach* - Statement of Faith - <https://lifewise.org/statementoffaith/>

¹¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, Paragraph 95.

¹² *What We Teach* - Statement of Faith - <https://lifewise.org/statementoffaith/>

¹³ *What We Teach* - Statement of Faith - <https://lifewise.org/statementoffaith/>

¹⁴ Catechism of the Catholic Church, Paragraph 405

¹⁵ Catechism of the Catholic Church, Paragraph 405.

likeness of God (Genesis 1:27). Fallen man, though wounded as he is, has not been able to totally corrupt through sin that which is itself created good by God, or man's own human nature. Through Baptism, man receives Sanctifying Grace, which "erases Original Sin and turns him back towards God,"¹⁶ so that, with the acceptance of God's constant outpouring of grace and our free cooperation with His will, we participate in the Divine life of God.¹⁷

Just as this Statement of Faith is an essential element guiding their program, Lifewise Academy also utilizes a specific curriculum as the vehicle for their weekly lessons. This curriculum "is a Sunday School Curriculum"¹⁸ purchased for use from an outside organization, known as The Gospel Project. The Gospel Project is a part of Lifeway Christian Resources, which is itself "an entity of the Southern Baptist Convention."¹⁹ Given that this curriculum was produced as a Sunday School Curriculum by a specific denomination, there was initial concern that, understandably, the denominational beliefs of the publisher would be reflected in the curriculum itself.

With these concerns, we made several requests to review the program's curriculum. Due to the proprietary nature of the material, however, we were informed that the curriculum could not be openly shared. Instead, we were initially given the opportunity to review the Sample Lesson provided by Lifewise Academy as a part of their promotional material. After several more months of discussion, we were also eventually permitted to review a few additional lessons. Similar to the Statement of Faith, the few lessons we were permitted to review raised similar concerns regarding denominational differences present in the lessons.

As described by Lifewise Academy, an average lesson starts first with a biblical story and asks about "the information in the Bible Story. What does it say? What is that information?"²⁰ There is a desire to help the student "rightly understand how this story points to Jesus"²¹ as the program doesn't "want to just teach biblical morals or principles. [It wants] to teach the true foundational message of the Bible."²² How we 'rightly understand' the 'true foundational message of the Bible,' however, is a concept that necessarily requires interpretation of Sacred Scripture. It is in such interpretations where we found sources of confusion and misconceptions in the lessons that, though charitably assumed to be unintentional, emphasized particular denominational beliefs.

Summarizing one of the lessons we were permitted to review as an example, the Scriptural focus presented an emphasis on the concept of salvation. The lesson emphasized that we are saved by Jesus alone. While this statement is in agreement with the Catholic Faith, it is only 'half-right' and, therefore, misleading. The Catholic Faith professes that we are saved by Jesus alone through His visible Church, which is His Body here on earth, and the Sacraments, which are the means by which our Lord makes His grace present and by which

¹⁶ Catechism of the Catholic Church, Paragraph 405.

¹⁷ Cf. *Concupiscence* - <https://www.simplycatholic.com/concupiscence-our-inclination-to-sin/>

¹⁸ *Lifewise Basics Webinar* - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8y5Rj00h8JE>

¹⁹ *Who We Are* - Lifeway Christian Resources - <https://www.lifeway.com/en/about>

²⁰ *Lifewise Basics Webinar* - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8y5Rj00h8JE>

²¹ *Lifewise Basics Webinar* - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8y5Rj00h8JE>

²² *Lifewise Basics Webinar* - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8y5Rj00h8JE>

divine life is dispensed to us here on earth.²³ This distinction, left unrepresented, lays an incomplete foundation for embracing the fullness of the Gospel truth.

Amidst our discussions with various representatives of Lifewise Academy over the past several months, we have, as of yet, received little receptivity for actual dialogue to resolve the above-raised concerns. As shown above, these concerns seem to indicate that the program as presented is not actually non-denominational in its approach to Sacred Scripture and its overall teachings. Instead, the lessons as simplistic as they might seem, have shown themselves to be at odds with the teachings of the Catholic Church in issues that go beyond simply “secondary issues.”²⁴ While there are many things we hold in common with our brothers and sisters in Christ from differing ecclesial communities, there are also many important differences and distinctions as well that cannot be ignored even amidst our search for unity as Christians.

Our search for unity amongst one another as Christians cannot ignore these differences and distinctions. Instead, we must acknowledge that these various disagreements are not merely academic differences but can ultimately undermine our very life of worship as a Eucharistic community by presenting an incomplete foundation in regards to the Faith. It is for this very reason that we have, over this past year, sought out and engaged in dialogue with Lifewise Academy before reaching any conclusions or offering any guidance in regards to their program. I once again reiterate that, while the desire to infuse the Scriptures into daily life is one to be lauded, **how** these lessons are presented are of great importance to avoid confusion and misconceptions.

It was only after these discussions, much prayer, and discernment that I was able to peacefully come to the pastoral guidance that I have given regarding Lifewise Academy: That, as pastor of our parish, I would strongly encourage our parish families to refrain from enrolling in this specific program. It is my hope that this letter has helped to provide each of you with the context in which this decision was made and emphasizes the serious concern with which this matter was approached. We hope to continue the dialogue that was begun to one day reach an agreeable solution. Until that time, I remind each of you that our parish’s Religious Education Program already provides our children with biblical lessons centered in Jesus Christ. If you haven’t already registered for this year’s Religious Education session, beginning Sept. 10th, please contact the Parish Office to register.

Wishing you every blessing from God, I remain

Faithfully Yours in Christ,

Rev. David Violi
Pastor

²³ cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, Paragraphs 169 and 1131.

²⁴ *Church and Community* - Frequently Asked Questions - <https://lifewise.org/faq/>