



Catholic Diocese of Arlington

A CATECHESIS ON THE HUMAN PERSON & GENDER IDEOLOGY

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Introduction

In the past decade our culture has seen growing acceptance of transgender ideology—that is, the claim that that a person’s biological sex and personal identity have no necessary connection and could in fact contradict each another. According to this view, “human identity” is self-defined and “becomes the choice of the individual.”¹ Consequently, our culture is experiencing a rapid rise in the number of persons claiming an identity contrary to their biological sex. Attempts to accommodate such claims already have resulted in tremendous upheavals in our social, legal, and medical systems.

This situation presents a serious challenge for all members of the Church because it presents a view of the human person contrary to the truth. It is of particular concern for our young people, as Pope Francis has warned:

*Today children—children!—are taught in school that everyone can choose his or her sex. Why are they teaching this?*²

*Let us not play with truths. It’s true that behind all this we find gender ideology. In books, kids learn that it’s possible to change one’s sex. Could gender, to be a woman or to be a man, be an option and not a fact of nature? This leads to this error. Let us call things by their names.*³

“Gender dysphoria” is a psychological condition in which a biological male or female comes to feel that his or her emotional and/or psychological identity does not match his or her biological sex and “experiences clinically significant distress” as a result.⁴ Situations involving gender dysphoria must always be addressed with pastoral charity and compassion rooted in the truth. Any unjust discrimination or needless insensitivity in addressing such situations must be avoided and/or corrected.

At the same time, in responding to this question justly and charitably, one cannot deny or obscure the truth of our created nature and human sexuality. Indeed, charity always requires the clear presentation of the truth. As Pope Saint Paul VI observed, “[I]t is an outstanding manifestation of charity toward souls to omit nothing from the saving doctrine of Christ.”⁵ From medicine, natural law, and divine revelation, we know that each person is created either male or female, from the moment of conception. “It needs to be emphasized,” writes Pope Francis, that “biological sex and the socio-cultural role of sex (gender) can be distinguished but not separated ... It is one thing to be understanding of human weakness and the complexities of life, and another to accept ideologies that attempt to sunder what are inseparable aspects of reality.”⁶

This document presents the teaching of the Catholic Church on sexual identity and the transgender issue and offers some pastoral observations. It is not intended to anticipate or address every situation. Rather, it provides the principles of Catholic teaching to encourage the faithful and to guide them in responding to an increasingly difficult cultural situation.

Goodness/Gift of the Human Person and Human Sexuality

The human person, created in the image of God, is a being at once corporeal and spiritual. The biblical account expresses this reality in symbolic language when it affirms that "then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being." Man, whole and entire, is therefore willed by God.

The human body shares in the dignity of "the image of God": it is a human body precisely because it is animated by a spiritual soul, and it is the whole human person that is intended to become, in the body of Christ, a temple of the Spirit ...

The unity of soul and body is so profound that one has to consider the soul to be the "form" of the body: i.e., it is because of its spiritual soul that the body made of matter becomes a living, human body; spirit and matter, in man, are not two natures united, but rather their union forms a single nature.⁷

The Church's teaching rests on three principles, all knowable by way of human reason. First, the human person is an "embodied soul," the composite of the spiritual and physical. The human soul is created to animate one particular body. To be a human person means to be a unity of body and soul from the moment of conception. Thus, the body reveals not only the soul, but the person; the person, as a unity of body and soul, acts through the body. Thus, each person's body, given by God from the moment of conception, is neither foreign nor a burden, but an integral part of the person.

Second, and in keeping with the authoritative witness of Scripture (cf. Gen 1:27), the human person is created male or female. The human soul is created to animate and be embodied by one particular, specifically male or female, body. A person's sex is an immutable biological reality, determined at conception. The sexed body reveals God's design not only for each individual person, but also for all human beings, by "establishing us in a relationship with other living beings."⁸

As Pope Francis reminds us, "valuing one's own body in its femininity or masculinity is necessary if I am going to be able to recognize myself in an encounter with someone who is different."⁹ Thus, realizing that human persons are part of "human ecology" reminds us that "man too has a nature that he must respect and that he cannot manipulate at will."^{10/11} The human body has intrinsic meaning. Through the body, we encounter not only other human beings but also "the moral law, which is inscribed in our nature."¹²

Sexuality affects all aspects of the human person in the unity of his body and soul. It especially concerns affectivity, the capacity to love and to procreate, and in a more general way the aptitude for forming bonds of communion with others. Everyone, man and woman, should acknowledge and accept his sexual identity.¹³

It is important to note that there may be a variety of ways in which a person may express his or her sexual identity as male or female, according to the norms and practices of a particular time or culture. Moreover, a person may have atypical interests, but this does not change the person's sexual identity as either male or female.

Third, the differences between man and woman are ordered towards their complementary union in marriage. Indeed, the differences between man and woman, male and female, are unintelligible apart from such a union.

Man and woman were made "for each other" — not that God left them half-made and incomplete: he created them to be a communion of persons, in which each can be "helpmate" to the other, for they are equal as persons ("bone of my bones ...") and complementary as masculine and feminine. In marriage, God unites them in such a way that, by forming "one flesh," they can transmit human life: "Be fruitful and

multiply, and fill the earth." By transmitting human life to their descendants, man and woman as spouses and parents co-operate in a unique way in the Creator's work. ¹⁴

Physical, moral, and spiritual difference and complementarity are oriented toward the goods of marriage and the flourishing of family life. The harmony of the couple and of society depends in part on the way in which the complementarity, needs, and mutual support between the sexes are lived out. ¹⁵

Sexual difference is at the heart of family life. Children need, and have a right to, a father and a mother.

Our Transcendent Purpose

These truths about the human person, accessible to natural reason, attain an extraordinary dignity and calling in the Christian view of the world. The body is not a limitation or confinement but one with the soul in the life of grace and glory to which the human person is called.

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been purchased at a price. Therefore, glorify God in your body (1 Cor 6:19-20).

Likewise, the relationship between man and woman as masculine and feminine has transcendent significance. Their complementary union serves as an icon of the marriage between Christ and the Church (cf. Eph 5:31-32). Through procreation, spouses welcome new life into the world and become a community of persons that images the Trinity.

Our Wounded Human Nature

Unfortunately, we experience our human nature not as the original harmony intended by the Creator but as fallen and wounded. One of the legacies of original sin is the disharmony and alienation between body and soul. Immediately after sinning, Adam and Eve “sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons” (Gen 3:7). They evidenced their sense of alienation from their own bodies by seeking to conceal them.

Everyone experiences this disharmony in various ways and to varying degrees. Nevertheless, it does not negate the profound oneness of the human person’s body and soul. The truth of Christ’s Church confirms us in the knowledge of this oneness so often obscured by our brokenness. The restoration of that original harmony, begun here by the action of Christ’s grace, realizes its fulfillment in the resurrection of the body on the last day.

Gender Dysphoria

A person may experience this tension and alienation between body and soul so profoundly that the person claims an “internal sense” of sexual identity different from his or her biological sex. This condition was labeled by the American Psychiatric Association in 2013 as “gender dysphoria.” ¹⁶ From a theological perspective, the experience of this interior conflict is not sinful in itself but must be understood as a disorder reflecting the broader disharmony caused by original sin. It is a particularly painful experience of the wounds we all suffer as a result of original sin. Every individual experiencing this condition should be treated with respect, justice, and charity.

What is new in our times, however, is the growing cultural acceptance of the erroneous claim that some people, including children and adolescents, are “in” the “wrong body” and therefore must undergo “gender transition,” either to relieve distress or as an expression of personal autonomy. Sometimes this involves psycho-social changes: The person asserts a new identity, reinforced by a different name, pronouns, and

wardrobe. At other times it involves a medical or surgical change: The person seeks chemical or surgical interventions that alter the body's function and appearance and even impair or destroy otherwise healthy reproductive organs.

At its core, this belief in a "transgender" identity rejects the significance of the sexed body and seeks cultural, medical, and legal validation of the person's self-defined identity—an approach called "gender affirmation." Culturally, these claims have brought challenges to law, medicine, education, business, and religious freedom. They also raise significant pastoral challenges for both the shepherds and the faithful of the Diocese.

The Witness of Science

We know from biology that a person's sex is genetically determined at conception and present in every cell of the body. Because the body tells us about ourselves, our biological sex does in fact indicate our inalienable identity as male or female. Thus, so-called "transitioning" might change a person's appearance and physical traits (hormones, breasts, genitalia, etc.) but does not in fact change the truth of the person's identity as male or female, a truth reflected in every cell of the body. Indeed, no amount of "masculinizing" or "feminizing" hormones or surgery can make a man into a woman, or a woman into a man.

The Christian Response

A disciple of Christ desires to love all people and to seek their good actively. Denigration or bullying of any person, including those struggling with gender dysphoria, is to be rejected as completely incompatible with the Gospel.

In this sensitive area of identity, however, there is a great danger of a misguided charity and false compassion. In this regard, we must recall, "Only what is true can ultimately be pastoral."¹⁷ Christians must always speak and act with both charity and truth. After the example of the Apostle Paul, they are to seek to speak the truth in love (cf. Eph 4:15).

The claim to "be transgender" or the desire to seek "transition" rests on a mistaken view of the human person, rejects the body as a gift from God, and leads to grave harm. To affirm someone in an identity at odds with biological sex or to affirm a person's desired "transition" is to mislead that person. It involves speaking and interacting with that person in an untruthful manner. Although the law of gradualness¹⁸ might prompt us to discern the best time to communicate the fullness of the truth, in no circumstances can we confirm a person in error.

Indeed, there is ample evidence that "gender affirmation" not only does not resolve a person's struggles but also can in fact exacerbate them. The acceptance and/or approval of a person's claimed transgender identity is particularly dangerous in the case of children, whose psychological development is both delicate and incomplete. First and foremost, a child needs to know the truth: He or she has been created male or female, forever. Affirming a child's distorted self-perception or supporting a child's desire to "be" someone other than the person (male or female) God created, gravely misleads and confuses the child about "who" he or she is.

In addition, "gender-affirming" medical or surgical interventions cause significant, even irreparable, bodily harm to children and adolescents. These include the use of puberty blockers (in effect, chemical castration) to arrest the natural psychological and physical development of a healthy child, cross-sex hormones to induce the development of opposite-sex, secondary sex characteristics, and surgery to remove an adolescent's healthy breasts, organs, and/or genitals. These kinds of interventions involve serious mutilations of the human body, and are morally unacceptable.

Although some advocates justify “gender affirmation” as necessary to reduce the risk of suicide, such measures appear to offer only temporary psychological relief, and suicidal risks remain significantly elevated following gender-transitioning measures.¹⁹

Adolescents are particularly vulnerable to claims that “gender transition” will resolve their difficulties. Long-term studies show “higher rates of mortality, suicidal behavior and psychiatric morbidity in gender-transitioned individuals compared to the general population.”^{20/21} In addition, studies show that children and adolescents diagnosed with gender dysphoria have high rates of comorbid mental health disorders, such as depression or anxiety, are three to four times more likely to be on the autism spectrum, and are more likely to have suffered from adverse childhood events, including unresolved loss or trauma or abuse.²² Psychotherapeutic treatments that incorporate “ongoing therapeutic work ... to address unresolved trauma and loss, the maintenance of subjective well-being, and the development of the self,” along with established treatments addressing suicidal ideation are appropriate interventions.²³ Gender transition is not the solution.

Indeed, to disregard or withhold information about the harms of pursuing “transition” or about the benefits of alternative, psychotherapeutic treatments constitutes a failure in both justice and charity.

Language

Those asserting a transgender identity and/or seeking to “transition” often adopt new names and pronouns that reflect their desired identity and insist that others must use the chosen names and pronouns. Such use might seem innocuous and even appear to be an innocent way of signaling love and acceptance of a person. In reality, however, it presents a profound crisis: We can never say something contrary to what we know to be true. To use names and pronouns that contradict the person’s God-given identity is to speak falsely.

The faithful should avoid using “gender-affirming” terms or pronouns that convey approval of or reinforce the person’s rejection of the truth. It is not harsh or judgmental to decline to use such language. In the broader culture, Catholics may experience significant pressure to adopt culturally—approved terminology. However, in no circumstances should anyone be compelled to use language contrary to the truth. The right to speak the truth inheres in the human person and cannot be taken away by any human institution. Attempts by the state, corporations, or employers to compel such language, particularly by threats of legal action or job loss, are unjust. We must love in the truth, and truth must be accurately conveyed by our words. At the same time, clarity must always be at the service of charity, as part of a broader desire to move people towards the fulness of the truth.

For Clergy, Catechists, and Teachers

The transgender issue presents a particular challenge to the handing on of the faith. So much of our faith rests on the natural truths of the human person, the body/soul unity, and the complementarity of man and woman. Jesus our Redeemer, the Son of God, assumes the body/soul unity of our human nature, sacrifices Himself and nourishes us by His Body, and is worshipped as the Bridegroom of the Church. The rejection of core natural truths regarding our humanity damages the “template” that God uses to reveal Himself to us and to manifest His salvific plan for us.

When teaching on this issue, it is essential to situate it within the broader context of the nature of the human person, the body/soul unity, and the sanctity of the body. Transgender ideology does not exist in isolation but is part of our culture’s broader confusion about the body, sexuality, man, woman, etc.

Further, it is always important to distinguish between a person’s subjective experience and his or her moral culpability. The Church teaches that a person is created male or female. No one “is” transgender. A person

who identifies as transgender may experience troubling feelings, confusion, or a mistaken belief that he or she is or can “become” someone different. The Church does not teach that people who experience gender dysphoria or confusion are immoral or bad. At the same time, a person who deliberately rejects his or her given identity or the sexed body and seeks harmful medical or surgical interventions is pursuing a path that is objectively wrong and harmful on many levels. The Church has a special solicitude for those who are suffering and desires to lead them to the truth and to healing.

Thus, when speaking with those who experience gender dysphoria or who claim a “transgender” identity, it is essential to listen and seek to understand their experiences. They need to know they are loved and valued, and that the Church hears their concerns and takes them seriously. In every case, the person’s dignity as a person beloved by God should be affirmed. Only in the context of an authentic dialogue will people be able to receive the truth, particularly truths that challenge their feelings or other beliefs.

Special care must be taken when interacting with children who experience gender dysphoria or who express a belief in an identity incongruent with biological sex. Authentic accompaniment requires remaining firm in the truth of the human person while patiently guiding children towards that truth. Parents must always, and immediately, be involved in any discussions with a child about such sensitive topics.

For Parents

You are the first and the best teachers of your children. They will believe, pray, and love according to what they see, hear, and experience in your home. From you they will learn the truth of who they are, the dignity of the human body, the meaning of human sexuality, and the glory of their being children of God. Nothing can substitute for the school of the family.

Still, you cannot fulfill this vocation by yourselves. The Church provides her teachings and pastoral care so that you can draw upon her wisdom and grace in teaching and caring for your children.

In addition to your good example and teaching, raising your children also requires vigilance against dangerous ideas and influences. This means the close monitoring of what your children receive via the internet and social media. Transgender ideology is being celebrated, promoted, and pushed out over all social media platforms and even children’s programming. Much of your good work and witness can be undone quickly by a child’s unsupervised or unrestricted internet access.

Another strong source of misinformation about the nature of the person, and the meaning of the body is, regrettably, the public education system. Our region’s public schools provide an excellent education in many regards. However, many also aggressively promote a false understanding of the human person in their advocacy of gender ideology. Current policies compel the use of chosen names and/or pronouns. Staff in many schools are required to affirm a child’s declared “gender identity” and facilitate a child’s “transition,” even in the absence of parental notice or permission.²⁴ Parents with children in public school must therefore discuss specific Catholic teaching on these issues with their children and be even more vigilant and vocal against this false and harmful ideology.

The Church extends her pastoral care especially to those parents whose children suffer gender dysphoria or feel distress over their God-given identity as male or female. Parents in such situations experience a profound sorrow as they witness their children’s suffering. Their sorrow is deepened if their children pursue “gender affirming” therapy, a harmful and life-altering path. Parents are encouraged to find strength and wisdom through the grace of the Sacraments of Communion and Confession, and to seek pastoral support in the parish or diocese.

In difficult circumstances, parents are often tempted to think—or are made to feel—that their Catholic faith

is at odds with what is good for their child. In fact, authentic love for their children is always aligned with the truth. In the case of gender dysphoria, this means recognizing that happiness and peace will not be found in rejecting the truth of the human person and the human body. Thus parents must resist simplistic solutions presented by advocates of gender ideology and strive to discover and address the real reasons for their children's pain and unhappiness. They should seek out trustworthy clinicians for sound counsel. Meeting with other parents who have been through similar trials also can be a source of strength and support. Under no circumstances should parents seek "gender-affirming" therapy for their children, as it is fundamentally incompatible with the truth of the human person. They should not seek, encourage, or approve any counseling or medical procedures that would confirm mistaken understandings of human sexuality and identity, or lead to (often irreversible) bodily mutilation. Trusting God, parents need to be confident that a child's ultimate happiness lies in accepting the body as God's gift and discovering his or her true identity as a son or daughter of God.

For those struggling

Finally, a word to those struggling with gender dysphoria.

Every one of us has a struggle that is unique. But none of us should feel alone or abandoned in his or her struggles. Like many others, you may feel alienated from your body, as though you are supposed to have a different one. Please know that, although you may struggle with your body or self-image, God's unrelenting love for you means that He loves you in the totality of your body as well. Our basic obligation to respect and care for the body comes from the fact that your body is part of the person—you—whom God loves.

Be on guard against simplistic solutions that promise relief from your struggles by the change of name, pronouns, or even the appearance of your body. There are many who have walked that path before you only to regret it. The difficult but more promising path to joy and peace is to work with a trusted counselor, therapist, priest, and/or friend to come to an awareness of the goodness of your body and of your identity as male or female.

More than anything else, the Church desires to bring you the love of Jesus Christ Himself. That love is inseparable from the truth of who you are as one created in God's image, reborn as a child of God, and destined for His glory. Christ suffered for our sake, not to exempt us from all suffering but to be with us in the midst of those struggles. The Church is here to assist and accompany you on this journey, so that you will know the beauty of the body and soul that God gave you and come to enjoy "the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Rom 8:21).

Further resources

Support:

- Courage and EnCourage: <https://couragerc.org/>. EnCourage in the Diocese of Arlington – encourage@arlingtondiocese.org
- Partners for Ethical Care: <https://www.partnersforethicalcare.com/>.
- Person and Identity: <https://personandidentity.com/>.
- Sex Change Regret: <https://sexchangeregret.com/>.
- Society for Evidence-Based Gender Medicine: <https://segm.org/>.
- Truth and Love: <https://truthandlove.com/>.

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Endnotes:

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8. *Laudato Sí* (LS), no. 155. http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.
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Support, Gender Diversity, particularly Model Policies for the and the sample Name and Gender Change Request form. <https://>