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## Faithfully transgender

By David Albert Jones and Claire Jenkins

### *An absence of definitive Church teaching*

It is a mark of the Catholic Church, founded by Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit, that she teaches with authority all that is necessary for salvation. So familiar are Catholics with the idea that the Church speaks with authority that it is sometimes difficult to recognise that there are many areas of life where there is no authoritative Church teaching. The Church's teaching on faith and morals is constantly developing in response to doctrinal disputes, pastoral needs and the encounter with new scientific and philosophical insights. As a consequence, at any point there will be many questions where the Church has not yet come to a definitive view.

There is no authoritative teaching, for example, on whether gender reassignment surgery is, in principle, morally permissible. In the last seventy years many thousands of people have undergone such surgery and yet it was never mentioned by Pope Pius XII or any of his successors. The Church has long condemned sterilisation for contraceptive reasons. However, it has always allowed surgery for genuine therapeutic reasons even when this leads to loss of fertility. There is no consensus among Catholic moral theologians as to whether gender reassignment surgery is therapeutic in this sense and no official teaching.<sup>i</sup> It is a question the Church has hardly even begun to think about.

### *Pope Francis, 'gender theory' and pastoral accompaniment*

One area of papal teaching that has begun to emerge over the latter part of the twentieth century<sup>ii</sup> relates to 'gender theory'. Pope Francis has criticised as 'ideology' theories of gender that would seek to abolish all distinctions of sex or gender within society or that would make gender a matter of choice.<sup>iii</sup> The Pope warns Catholics to beware concepts of 'gender' that are incompatible with a Catholic understanding of creation, or which denigrate the significance of the body or the institution of marriage. However, the teaching of Pope Francis is not directed against *people* who have a discordant sense of gender identity. It is directed against *theories* that are promoted by governments or taught in schools. 'One thing is that a person has this tendency, this condition and even changes their sex, but it's another thing to teach this in line in schools in order to change the mentality.'<sup>iv</sup>

In recent years, society has become more aware of people who think or feel themselves to be the sex (or gender) opposite to the one they were assigned at birth. Numbers have risen rapidly, particularly among children and adolescents, and the issue is increasingly prominent in the media. Nevertheless, the absolute numbers are still very small, less than 1% of the total population. Such people would traditionally have been labelled 'transsexual' or as having 'gender dysphoria' but now are more commonly termed 'transgender' or, more simply, 'trans'. It has been said about those who transition that '[t]here are too many people, of too varied backgrounds, roles, experience, and education to permit it to be plausible that they are subject to a delusion.'<sup>v</sup>

In relation to trans people the Pope neither lays down rules nor offers uncritical affirmation, 'we must be careful not to say that everything is the same... but in every case I accept it, I accompany it, I study it, I discern it and I integrate it.'<sup>vi</sup> So there is a place for discernment and for critical reflection but this comes *after* accompanying and after listening. Discernment must be informed by lived human experience and speaking must be informed by listening.

Part of this process of listening is recognising the discrimination and violence that people suffer because they express their gender identity. Transgender issues are contested in the mainstream media and in social media. On occasion, the debate has become angry and hurtful to transgender people and has normalized discriminatory attitudes. In a recent survey of opinion in the United

Kingdom only 52% of people said that they would be comfortable to have a next-door neighbour who was transgender<sup>vii</sup> and over the last two years there has been an 81% increase in reported hate crimes against transgender people in England and Wales.<sup>viii</sup>

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales showed some appreciation of these realities when they posted the following a tweet in November last year:

Today is Transgender Day of Remembrance and we pray for all people who are ill at ease with their gender, seek to change it, suffer for it and have been persecuted, and also killed. All people are loved by God and valued in their inherent God-given dignity.<sup>ix</sup>

Many people reacted positively to this message (it received 3,300 'likes'). However, some Catholics criticised the bishops even for acknowledging of the suffering of transgender people.<sup>x</sup> Such an attitude is very far from that of Pope Francis. The Pope is clear that the Gospel requires us to acknowledge the dignity of every human person and demands that we accompany people in their suffering, not add to their suffering by our intolerance. Perhaps this is shown most clearly by the way Pope Francis consistently uses pronouns that reflect the person's sense of identity. The trans woman is 'she', the trans man is 'he' or even 'he that was she but is he'.<sup>xi</sup> It is inconsistent to invoke the teaching of Pope Francis on 'gender theory' but then reject the example of Pope Francis in how to accompany, listen to, and address people who are transgender.

#### *A recent document from the Congregation for Catholic Education*

The concern of Pope Francis about gender theory has been taken up by the Congregation for Catholic Education in a document entitled *Male and Female He made them*.<sup>xii</sup> The final proclamation in the document encourages educators

to stimulate in the pupils the openness to the other as a face, as a person, as a brother and sister to know and respect, with his or her history, merits and defects, riches and limits. The challenge is to cooperate to train young people to be open and interested in the reality that surrounds them, capable of care and tenderness.<sup>xiii</sup>

This is the most encouraging and positive statement in the document but sadly this sentiment is not adopted throughout the discussion. Furthermore, while the subtitle refers to '*a path of dialogue,*' the document is unclear who this dialogue is intended to engage with. The document is offered for use 'by parents, students, school leaders and personnel, bishops, priests, religious, ecclesial movements, associations of the lay faithful, and other relevant bodies'<sup>xiv</sup> but is notably lacking in a similar list of partners in dialogue.<sup>xv</sup>

The dialogical aim of the document is also diminished by the use of confused or convoluted language, for example, in several places the word 'sexuality' is used not to refer to human sexual desire but to refer to biological sex differentiation. The aim of dialogue is hampered by unreferenced and spurious appeals to scientific ideas such as that sex can be determined by chromosomal patterns. It also betrays a lack of understanding of intersex conditions.

On the other hand, there are excellent statements about the teaching of sex, gender, and relationships which should be undertaken with full consultation with the young person's family. Young people need to experience an environment which encourages them 'to overcome their individualism and discover, in the light of faith, their specific vocation to live responsibly in a community with others.'<sup>xvi</sup> The document highlights the overload of information facing young people and working against their ability to discern critically what it means to be male and female and

to love authentically.<sup>xvii</sup> Unfortunately, the congregation provide no suggestion how this situation might be resolved.

The congregation is clearly opposed to 'gender theory' which, following Pope Francis, it regards as an ideology. However, scientific evidence<sup>xviii</sup> suggests that the relationship between biological sex and social gender is more complex than acknowledged in this document.

### *Research and transgender experience*

A recent article promoting transgender acceptance at a Jesuit university argues that Catholics need to listen to the stories of transgender individuals.<sup>xix</sup> Compassionate listening will enable the Church to gain further knowledge of the complex matters involved and follow the example of Pope Francis in visiting issues deemed 'un-Catholic' with a renewed appreciation for conversation.

Transphobic violence may be motivated or reinforced by a perceived transgression of the societal norms of sex and gender. It needs to be realised that transgender people are part of contemporary families which are understood in social science as a loose pattern of different close relationships. In contrast, the Church refers too often only to an idealised conception of *The Family* which is far from many people's experience.

A personal reflection by Claire Jenkins: as a transsexual woman and practicing Catholic, I am keenly interested in transgenderism because in 1999 I was still married to my wife and was a father of four children. When I changed sex and gender, we became estranged. We were all distressed by this event which reflected nearly half of all adult transsexual transitions.<sup>xx</sup> The experience impelled me critically to investigate transition and its effect on close family members such as spouses, partners, siblings, parents and children. I have been powerfully persuaded by this research to try and dispel ignorance of transgenderism and to help people affected to avoid some of the pain and distress that my family and other families continue to experience.

Analysis of the research participants' transitional stories indicated that trans people learned when they were children that they were different from their non-trans peers and they invariably hid this difference because of fear and shame. However, maintaining this identity concealment often caused them to become distressed. Eventually the trans people were forced to choose between transitioning and the fear of losing the love of those close to them. When they eventually decided to come-out they managed this in many ways.

Simplistic naturalistic understandings of sex, gender and family are still powerfully enforced in contemporary society and in some presentations of church teaching. Consequently, family members may perceive the change in sex/gender identities as a loss of what they perceived the trans person to be - a partner; brother; girlfriend; son; or husband. This loss caused many family members to grieve.

Furthermore, research showed that preserving a close and caring relationship was important for the participants since it provides a sense of psychological stability during the unsettling experience of transition. Positive factors that helped with this included making sex/gender identities less important and foregrounding other personal characteristics or identities. Adopting a biological understanding of the cause of transsexuality helped family members accept transition as a medical treatment. Some religious people found transition very difficult to accept and this could increase the likelihood of alienation from home and family. This is illustrated by a recent report showing that, of young people who were homeless and who were gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, 50% were from a religious background.<sup>xxi</sup>

### *Concluding theological and pastoral reflections*

There are many questions in life which are not settled either as matter of Church teaching or as a matter of reason and evidence. To be faithful as a Catholic is often to live with uncertainty rather than accept false certainties.

While there are scientific uncertainties (about the origin and optimal treatment of gender dysphoria), and there are philosophical and theological uncertainties (about how to understand sex, gender and human nature), there are some things about which we can be certain. We can know that every human being possesses a unique dignity as made in the image of God and as someone for whom Christ died. We can know that as Christians we are commanded by Jesus to give priority to those who are rejected by society.

We are presented with an opportunity to explore and understand the lived experience of transgender people and the messy realities of family life. This is exactly where the Holy Spirit may become manifest, releasing a new vigour, life and wisdom to help us know what God is calling us to do in the concrete and complex situation of people who are transgender. The Church is presented with a situation in which it can follow Jesus in its pastoral care - radically developing its practice in a way that is merciful and that releases tenderness and love towards transgender people.

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<sup>i</sup> Jones, D.A. 'Gender Reassignment Surgery: A Catholic Bioethical Analysis,' *Theological Studies*, 79.2 (2018): 314–338; Camosy, C. 'Ethicist says Church teaching on gender "not incompatible" with accepting trans identity' *Crux* 26 July 2018

<https://cruxnow.com/interviews/2018/07/26/ethicist-says-church-teaching-on-gender-not-incompatible-with-accepting-trans-identity/>

<sup>ii</sup> Allen, P., 'Gender Reality vs Gender Ideology,' *Solidarity* 4.1 (2014): 1–36, cf. Case, M. A. 'The Role of the Popes in the Invention of Complementarity and the Vatican's Anathematization of Gender,' *Religion and Gender* 155 (2016): 6.

<sup>iii</sup> Francis *Laudato Si'* (24 March 2015), section 155. Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* (19 March 2016), section 56.

<sup>iv</sup> Francis, 'In-flight press conference of His Holiness Pope Francis from Azerbaijan to Rome' 2 October 2016,

<sup>v</sup> Overall, C. 'Sex/gender transitions and life changing aspirations'. In: Shrage, L. (ed.) *You've changed: Sex reassignment and personal identity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009 cf. Jones, D.A. 'One more way to be human' *Tablet* 6 April 2019.

<sup>vi</sup> Francis, 'In-flight press conference'

<sup>vii</sup> Abrams, D., Swift, H.J., and Houston, D., *Developing a national barometer of prejudice and discrimination in Britain* London: EHRC, 2018.

<sup>viii</sup> 'Transgender hate crimes recorded by police go up 81%' *BBC News* 27 June 2019

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-48756370>

<sup>ix</sup> <https://twitter.com/catholicew/status/1064798030090645505?lang=en>

<sup>x</sup> Hallett, N. 'Bishops' Transgender Day tweet criticised' *Catholic Herald* 22 November 2018; Cummings McLean, D. 'British bishops under fire for recognizing pro-transgender "day of remembrance"' *LifeSiteNews* 20 November 2018 <https://www.lifesitenews.com/news/catholic-bishops-of-england-and-wales-recognize-transgender-remembrance-day>

<sup>xi</sup> Francis, 'In-flight press conference'

<sup>xii</sup> *Male and Female He Created Them: Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education*, Vatican City: Congregation for Catholic Education, 2019.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Ibid*, 57.

<sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>xv</sup> Jones, D.A., 'Gender theology and gender reality' *Tablet* 15 June 2019.

<sup>xvi</sup> *Male and Female*, 40.

<sup>xvii</sup> *Ibid*, 42.

<sup>xviii</sup> Jenkins, C. 'Straddling the scalpel of identity' PhD thesis 2012 <http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/4196/>

<sup>xix</sup> Rowniak, S. and Ong-Flaherty, C., 'Promoting Transgender Understanding and Acceptance at a Jesuit University,' *Jesuit Higher Education* 4 (2015): 71-77.

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<sup>xx</sup> De Cuyperea, G. et al. 'Long-term follow-up: psychosocial outcome of Belgian transsexuals after sex reassignment surgery,' *Sexologies* 15 (2006): 126-133.

<sup>xxi</sup> Iqbal, N. and Parry, J. 'LGBT people are "being made homeless due to religion"' BBC News 30 July 2019  
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/newsbeat-49150753>