



# *The* FURROW

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## Unravelling the Transgender Dilemma

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In the 1980s when I worked as a paediatric psychologist, I remember an eight-year girl who in the course of play therapy imaged herself in drawings dressed as a boy and selected those toys/games usually identified with boys. There was no convincing otherwise, and insisted on giving herself a boy's name. Four decades on, psycho-biomedical science has advanced, and we are learning much more about human sexuality – but not enough to satisfy the inquiry into all its presenting variants. A recent documentary by Sebastien Lifshitz, *Petite Fille* (2020), illuminated the moving true-life story of seven-year-old 'Sasha', born male, but when she was barely three years of age knew she was really a girl. 'When I grow up, I'll be a girl', she started to tell her parents, but her mother told her that that dream of becoming a girl, was not within the realm of possibilities.

Misunderstanding surrounds transgender issues. The boy-girl binary way of thinking, and the sometimes-disturbing reactions of society and Church are being challenged today by personal testimonies and advocacy of LGBTQIA+<sup>1</sup> communities.

I argue that persons who live the trans reality are the ones conversant with the lived experience. They can help us to understand this complex human reality which we tend to shun or reluctantly acknowledge, if we have the will to listen.

I take my cue from the pope who reminds pastoral ministers and the Christian community that each person's life experience is unique, that there is no universal solution to complex human dilemmas. Welcome the person, study the situation, accompany

1 LGBTQIA+ – An acronym for 'lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual persons that is also used as shorthand for 'persons of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expressions or sex characteristics'. Sexual orientation describes an enduring pattern of romantic or sexual attraction (or a combination of these) to persons of the opposite sex or gender, the same sex or gender, or to both sexes or more than one gender.

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the person, and integrate him or her into the life of the community are warranted.

What follows is pastoral in intent, in the spirit of the all-encompassing watchful gaze of the Good Shepherd. (Ezekiel 34:11-31).

### DEFINITION

Transgender, often confused or interchanged with other sexual variants,<sup>2</sup> is an umbrella term describing individuals whose gender identity does not align with the restrictive duality of male/female assigned at birth (natal sex). Labelled *Gender Dysphoria* by the American Psychiatric Association in 2013<sup>3</sup>, the World Health Organisation (WHO) in 2019 assigned issues of gender incongruence under the umbrella of *sexual health*. No longer classified as mental or behavioural disorders, the way was cleared for appropriate medical assessments and interventions. Today there is considerable controversy surrounding the risks and benefits of conversion therapy, puberty suppressants, gender-affirming treatments and other forms of reparative intervention. Given that the aetiology of gender dysphoria is still largely unknown, and as research inquiry continues, attempts at more robust judgements are cautionary.

There are wider complex moral and ethical issues for Church and state. In so stating, nobody needs be in any doubt that the intense determination/driven-ness that powers transgender individuals is visceral and all-consuming (cf. Lukas Dhont's 2018 film, *The Girl*). The Church has not remained silent in voicing that transgender identities are considered aberrant, disordered, yet on the other hand states that every person is a beloved child of God. Trans families and individuals are left with a surge of more questions than answers as they struggle to reconcile the two positions.

- 2 A transvestite (crossdresser) refers to a male or female transgender person who wants to live a "dual role" and wears clothing, accessories, jewellery, or make-up not traditionally or stereotypically associated with their birth-assigned sex. A transsexual refers to a person who physically transitions from male to female or vice versa. A drag (queen) refers to a person, usually male, who uses drag clothing and makeup to imitate and often exaggerate female gender signifiers and gender roles for entertainment purposes. Hermaphrodite – in reproductive biology, refers to a person that has both kinds of reproductive organs/genitalia and can produce both gametes associated with male and female sexes.
- 3 Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5-TR), published in March 2022, updated problematic terminology to preferred terminology e.g., 'natal sex' to 'birth- assigned gender', 'desired gender' to 'experienced gender', 'gender-reassignment treatments' to 'gender- affirming treatments', etc.

## LATENCY AND FLUIDITY

*Gender identity* describes a person's inner sense of being male or female, some combination of both, or something else, including having no gender at all. This may not correspond to the birth-assigned gender – binary male or female.

*Gender expression*, i.e., how a person carries themselves – their dress, mannerisms etc., may or may not reflect their gender identity based on traditional biological binary expectations. Identity may also be fluid, delayed, or latent. One's birth-assigned gender, gender identity, and gender expression may not always align – by comparison with those for whom these three aspects coincide.

Two narratives might be instructive. One, is the true-life testimony of Phillipa, assigned male at birth, chronicling a 40-year journey of coming to own and embody the identity of a transgender woman within the course of his marriage to a woman, fathering a daughter<sup>4</sup>. Secondly, Tom Hooper's *Danish Girl* (2016), framed on the fictional novel by the same name, introduces viewers to an ordinary married man in an ordinary family asked to cover as a model for an artist. Here he is introduced to dressing up in female attire which awakened unexpectedly his latent drive towards being a woman.

## IDEOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

Ideologies as to what it is to be a man or woman also bear on the discussion. An anthropological view proffered by Simone de Beauvoir<sup>5</sup> and other social theorists opines that gender orientation is a social role that we choose for ourselves, while in the past it was chosen for us by society.

The Christian view, that “male and female He created them” (Genesis 1:27), pre-ordains the binary duality of man and woman in their created state as complementary and intrinsic to their nature.

Pope Benedict XVI has in the past denounced gender theory which, in his view, diverges from the ‘creational duality – male and female as grounded in the order of creation, and hence are fundamental to an integral ecology of man’.<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis strongly criticized modern theories that consider people's identity to exist along a spectrum, arguing against concepts/ideologies that regard gender orientation as something that you can choose, genetically manipulate, or a construct imposed by society.<sup>7</sup> The *Congregation*

4 Ryder, Phillipa. *My Name is Phillipa*, Cork: Mercier, 2021.

5 De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. London: Vintage Publishing, 2015.

6 Benedict XVI, Address to the Roman Curia, December 21, 2012.

7 Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* (AL), no.56.

for Catholic Education 2019 document<sup>8</sup> provides an algorithm for dialogue and engagement with questions of gender theory. In seeking to align practices with Christian values, Pope Francis has referenced modern views on gender identity using language such as ‘cultural colonisation or nuclear weaponry’.<sup>9</sup> His words imply a seeming naivety that may be received as hurtful or even harmful to those persons who are at risk of persecution and violence within particular countries and cultures.

We are learning that the experience of transgender persons and gender variant individuals do not fit the strict duality. Further, developmental theorists point out that one’s gender identity is *discovered* rather than *chosen*.

*Nonetheless*, Pope Francis has demonstrated immense compassion towards gender non-conforming people. Throughout the first months of 2015, Pope Francis had several encounters with LGBTQIA+ persons and groups, including a transgender man from Spain who faced hostility from his parish community and transgender prisoners in Naples. At the October 2015 meeting of Bishops in Rome, mindful of families that face complex difficulties posed by gender issues today, he asked for fervent prayers, even miracles. As recent as January 2022 in a weekly general audience, he addressed those parents who see their children with different gender orientations and are challenged with caring for them. He told them to avoid a condemning attitude and to do what Jesus would do today!

The pope is known to support the ministry of a Carmelite nun in Argentina in creating a safe home for transgender women in face of local community and diocesan opposition. The closeness and tenderness of the pope’s charity are palpable in his continuing outreach to a transgender community in the parish of Torvaianica. His noble sensitivity was applauded when he advised staff administering the covid vaccine: ‘ask their names not their sex’.

These *emboldened* steps to interface with difference and suffering indicate a change of heart and mind with a softening and reassuring attitude. That his remarks are less of a prejudice towards transgender persons, but rather a rejection of so-called gender ideology. Recent statements intimate Pope Francis is sliding towards a broader stance, reaching out to transgender people and telling them they are ‘children of God and part of the

8 The Congregation for Catholic Education: ‘*Male and Female He Created Them – Towards a Path of Dialogue on Questions of Gender Theory Education*’ (2019).

9 Joshua J. McElwee, ‘Francis strongly criticizes gender theory, comparing it to nuclear arms’, *National Catholic Reporter*, February 13, 2015, referencing his new book: Tornielli, Andrea and Giacomo Galeazzi. *This Economy Kills: Pope Francis on Capitalism and Social Justice*. Collegeville, MN, USA: Liturgical Press, 2015.

Church'<sup>10</sup> – the Church is the people – the people whoever they are, LGBTQIA+ or not. We cannot be selective. While the above events collectively signal a Church that is growing more open to recognising the diverse realities and challenges of modern-day families, progress is tardy.

#### PASTORAL CONSIDERATIONS

Transgender people have been part of humanity throughout history, across cultures, race, class, faith traditions etc. We discover that societies have always provided space for gender variants such as eunuchs. In contemporary times, there is a greater call from the Christian trans community and wider for the Church to recognise and provide sanctuary as they strive to embrace their identity as 'beloved child of God'. They want the right to their 'home', a place of belonging and a tangible sense of being 'belonged to' within the norms, structure and grace of the institutional Church.

In an environment where there are more questions than answers, coupled with the moral relativism of the age, parents of trans children face serious social, legal and ethical dilemmas. Incremental stress can test family life to breaking point, stretching the threshold of endurance. Lack of acceptance by peers further challenges mental wellbeing. Parents can be plagued by searching questions of self-blame and guilt, scrutinising themselves, scouring their actions, to ascertain personal fault e.g., could the desire for a girl have some bearing on having a trans gender son? The unique bond between a mother and child does not spare her the pain of self-searching.

The struggle to make existential meaning of their reality poses a particular faith dilemma for trans families and individuals. Why me/us? What did we do wrong? What does it mean to have a trans child or sibling? What does it mean to grow up and make a life for yourself outside of society's norms? Each family member tends to adopt their own unique way of coping, e.g., dad may be silent but present, absent but caring, mother more vocal, siblings ambivalent while supportive.

Some theological language has the potential to dehumanise or trigger self-abasement, self-hatred, and a conviction of worthlessness. While church teaching must wisely safeguard members and set benchmarks, it remains a challenge, as in past times, to find a level of temperate language that promotes integration. We

10 Mike McPhate, 'Pope Francis Remarks Disappoint Gay and Transgender Groups', *The New York Times*, August 03, 2016, referencing Ivereigh, Austen. *The Great Reformer: Francis and the making of a Radical Pope*. London: Allen & Unwin, 2012.

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are learning that where trans people are squeezed out of a place in society or Church, such actions have the potential to precipitate prejudice and hate crimes. Could it be that disproportionate emphasis on the structural sin of sexuality displaces due regard for the dignity and humanity of transgender persons?

Use of pronouns can be a contentious issue. Trans persons tell us how demeaning it can be when addressed as a *he*, or *she* that does not quite fit who they are. However, using gender-affirming names and pronouns that do not correspond to a person's birth-assigned gender contravenes the Church's stance.

Irrespective of wherever any of us find ourselves on the gender spectrum, we can all agree that each of us is marked in life by some imprint of 'disharmony' – which may be estranged, disowned, or unknowingly pinned onto others (for condemnation). The hermeneutic of grace and compassion applies, as modelled in Luke's woman caught in adultery (John 7:53–8:11) and brought before Jesus for condemnation. Will our action give life, allow the person to thrive, bring people together through love? Or will my attitude cause isolation, alienation?

Christians tend to find comfort in an understanding of their human nature as fallen in some way - the legacy of original sinfulness. Each one of us struggles with our unique mark of disharmony/woundedness – transgender persons are no different. For believers, the disharmony may be rendered more bearable through an appeal to grace and prayer as they strive to grow in inner freedom to live wholesome lives. As such, Pope Francis urges church leaders to be pastors rather than militant bureaucrats.

### PASTORAL PROMPTS

1. Use of the proper name, *gender dysphoria*, makes the situation more relatable.
2. Language that is sensitive and respectful avoids the unwitting use of words that may be received as negatively evocative, provocative, or even ridicule. We never know what is going on internally for people.
3. Patience is needed to accompany transgender persons in the daunting journey they must make – a journey fraught with ambivalence and challenges.
4. Coming out/disclosure is a very personal decision that trans persons have to face throughout their lives, and with every new person they meet ... to tell or not to tell? To feel safe and secure in doing so needs to be paced, not rushed. A plan of the 'how' supported by trusted significant others indispensable.

5. There may be searching questions for the pastoral team:
  - What can we do to nurture and nourish the spirit-lives of trans parents/families who rely on their Christian faith and God’s benevolence to bear them up at a time when they may be losing heart and hope?
  - What can we do to foster a culture that allows for authentic interfacing with difference and suffering to bring about a change of heart and attitude towards transgender people when lacking?
  - Is there an appropriately skilled cohort of support persons available to help the family make sense of their complex situation – local doctor, pastoral worker, priest, medical specialists etc.?

## CONCLUSION

How can we, as a Christian community, seek to identify and remove obstacles for trans persons to come within range of the Father’s voice: ‘You are my beloved child, I delight in you.’ (Mark 11:1; Psalm 2:7). A lack of adequate *empathy* remains common both in Church and society at large. The Church often portrays a sense of asexuality, or at least an unease with the paradoxes of *eros* (which may accord with accusations of misogyny or patronising?). Cancelling out what we fear or are unable to confront is very much part of our human condition.

Synod 2021-23 is founded on a spirit of *participation, communion, and mission*. We are sanctioned to create and co-create sabbath *listening* spaces to re-examine how we are as Church – how exactly the Christian faith is pressed into service of a different kingdom. A scrutiny that warrants deeper layers of unattended reality being sufficiently disturbed, even exposed. That we might draw closer to the compassionate and inclusive style of Jesus in respecting that human life is varied, precious and equal in worth.