

TRANSGENDER IDENTITY

What the Church Teaches

A few years ago, I was sitting at the airport waiting to board my flight when I heard some television pundits discussing the North Carolina “bathroom bill.” It was so controversial that celebrities and even the NBA threatened to boycott the entire state. The California government went so far as to ban all taxpayer-funded travel there.

And just what was so controversial about the bill, which became law and was then partially repealed under political pressure? It required that citizens use public accommodations that correspond to their biological sex. In other words: women’s bathrooms, locker rooms, and showers are for women only, and men’s facilities are for men only. The law was passed to prevent situations like this one in Washington State: a biological male who claimed to be a “transgender woman” demanded to walk around—fully nude—in the women’s locker room where members of a girls’ high school swim team routinely undress.¹⁰⁶

As I listened to the pundits, my eyes were fixed straight ahead at the airport bathrooms with their usual “Men” and

“Women” signage. What had been an innocuous sight for the previous forty-nine years of my life now felt like a surreal piece of nostalgia. Would my granddaughters remember using bathrooms or locker rooms where males weren’t present? Would my younger sons eventually share high school showers with girls who claim they are boys? Would we even be legally *allowed* to have separate, private facilities?

It all felt so bizarre that day, and I wondered how an issue that was non-existent just a year or two before was now, according to powers-that-be, the most important “civil rights” issue of our time.

Understanding Transgender Ideology

In order to grasp this issue and how it affects our children, let’s examine two concepts: *sex* and *gender*.

The *sex* of a human being has been and continues to be determined *biologically*. Females have two X chromosomes (XX) from conception and develop female sex organs, whereas males have an X and a Y chromosome (XY) and develop male sex organs. There are cases of “intersex” people (also known as *hermaphrodites*) whose ambiguous genitalia and genetic abnormalities make it difficult to identify their sex. However, the overwhelming majority of people identifying as transgender don’t have physical or genetic disorders—a point on which even transgender activists agree—and are clearly one biological sex or the other. (And even in ambiguous cases, we can almost always use science to determine if a human being is male or female.)

So, if sex is about biology and can be determined scientifically, then what is gender?

Until the mid-twentieth century, *gender* was used, not in relation to human beings, but in relation to *words* (i.e., masculine or feminine nouns). However, in the 1960s an

infamous psychologist/sexologist named John Money attached the concept of “gender roles” to humans.¹⁰⁷ As a result, *gender* came to refer to one’s psychological state, social preferences, and behavior (both sexual and non-sexual). That brings us to today, where the profoundly politicized word “gender” is used by many to describe to how a person subjectively “identifies.”

Those who identify as *transgender* claim that their gender—their self-identification as a man or a woman—does not match their biological sex, or what they sometimes refer to as their “assigned sex.” A “transgender man” is a biological woman who now identifies as a man. A “transgender woman” is a biological man who now identifies as a woman.

Some people believe they are “gender fluid”—neither strictly male nor strictly female but falling somewhere on a spectrum between those two. In fact, the list of gender identities does not stop at three. In 2014, Facebook unveiled a list of *fifty-eight* “genders” to choose from, including twenty-six versions of being “trans,” “gender non-conforming,” and “other.” After some criticism, they expanded the list to include a free-form field so that people can add their own gender term.

This can be confusing, but a simple way to remember the difference between gender (modern cultural construct) and sex (timeless natural reality) is this: a person’s *gender* resides in the mind (subjective/psychological), whereas a person’s *sex* resides in the body (objective/biological).

Transgender people who say that their interior identification does not match their biological sex might wear clothes and makeup associated with the opposite sex, take hormones to change their appearance, or even undergo so-called *gender reassignment* surgery (a sex-change operation) so that their bodies more closely resemble their sense of gender

identity. Since changing one's sex is impossible, this is really just a surgical mutilation that includes amputating genitalia or building genitalia out of prosthetics or other body parts.

These "treatments" can be shocking, but we must take care not to mock or dehumanize people who have an identity disorder, or what psychologists call "body dysphoria." Those who suffer the feeling of being "trapped in the wrong body" carry a heavy cross. This type of dysphoria, like all others, deserves *appropriate* medical intervention, an empathetic ear, and authentic love.

However, our compassion for those who struggle under such psychological distress should not lead us to go along with a lie, especially as it relates to who we are in God's creation.

Man and Woman He Created Them

As we've already seen, human beings are not "asexual souls." We are not ghosts that have no intrinsic connection to our bodies. Instead, human beings are a true *union* of body and soul. We are incomplete without our bodies, which is why St. Paul noted how unnatural it is to be separated from our bodies at death, and how joyful it will be when our souls are reunited with our resurrected bodies at the end of the world (2 Cor. 5:1-5). Since our body is essential to our human identity, it is not possible for a "female soul" to be trapped in a male body, or vice versa.

In a 2012 address, Pope Benedict XVI criticized the idea that "sex is no longer a given element of nature, [but one that] man has to accept and personally make sense of: it is a social role that we choose for ourselves." He said instead that, "According to the biblical creation account, being created by God as male and female pertains to the essence of the human creature. This duality is an essential aspect of what being human is all about, as ordained by God."¹⁰⁸

When Jesus spoke with the Pharisees, he made this duality perfectly clear by asking them, "Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female?" (Matt. 19:4).

Pope Francis also decried the "indoctrination of gender theory." In a 2016 discussion with the Polish bishops, he denounced "gender theory" as "ideological colonizing" saying: "We are living a moment of annihilation of man as image of God." He asked the bishops to reflect on what Pope Benedict had said to him earlier, that "we are living in an epoch of sin against God the Creator."¹⁰⁹ In 2017, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops released a letter signed by several other Christian leaders that read, in part:

The movement today to enforce the false idea—that a man can be or become a woman or vice versa—is deeply troubling. It compels people to either go against reason—that is, to agree with something that is not true—or face ridicule, marginalization, and other forms of retaliation.

We desire the health and happiness of all men, women, and children. Therefore, we call for policies that uphold the truth of a person's sexual identity as male or female, and the privacy and safety of all. We hope for renewed appreciation of the beauty of sexual difference in our culture and for authentic support of those who experience conflict with their God-given sexual identity.¹¹⁰

On Being Men and Women

In order to answer those who say the Church is hateful toward those who identify as transgender, we should steer the conversation back to this question: "To what do the words

'man' and 'woman' refer?" Even transgender advocates agree that the terms refer to two objectively different realities. If they didn't, there would be no point in choosing to identify as a woman instead of a man, because they would be the same thing.

So let's ask ourselves, "What do all women have in common that makes them women and not men? Likewise, what do all men have in common that makes them men and not women?"

Although some male celebrities who identify as transgender women like to show off their hair extensions or breast implants, we know that having breasts or long hair is not what makes someone a woman. Both of these things can be lost (through cancer, for example) without a person ceasing to be a woman. Instead, the difference between men and women is found in the design of the created order itself: DNA and sex organs that belong to either the male or female of our species.

Men and women are defined by how they are ordered toward procreating human life. Even if a male or female body cannot procreate through marital intercourse due to infertility, this ordering can still be seen in the very design of the body. A man who cannot gestate a baby is not an "infertile [transgender] woman," he is a male—who was never *made* to gestate. And a woman who gestates a baby, despite having had her breasts surgically removed and using hormones to grow a beard, is not a "man giving birth!" as the headlines scream. She's a woman giving birth, as she was *made* to do, like billions and billions of women who came before her.

If transgender ideology takes full root, the terms *man* and *woman* will lose their meaning. And when this happens, *father* and *mother*—and thus fatherhood and

motherhood—will become meaningless as well. There is a drive, already well underway (and quite advanced in some places), to replace *mother* and *father* with the androgynous, generic *parent*,* both socially and in legal documents. With the loss of men and women, we will also lose our understanding of sisters and daughters, brothers and sons. How can we raise well-adjusted men and women who interact with one another in a healthy way, and thus form the foundation of civilization, when no one has any idea what those words mean in the first place? This serious problem is why we must teach our children to uphold the truth about their innate masculinity and femininity, even as they reach out to those who struggle with the truth of who God made them to be.

REMEMBER . . .

- Sex refers to observable, biological reality that one is a man or woman. *Gender* refers to the subjective belief that one is a man or woman (an "identity" that resides in the imagination).
- A person's belief or feeling cannot override his or her objective, biological reality.
- Male and female are objective categories God created. Those who are confused about their identity in this area need compassionate help, not further encouragement of a delusion.

* California law, for instance, now gives the option to replace *father* and *mother* with *parent* on birth certificates.



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Advice for Little Kids

One day, I took some of the younger boys to get haircuts (yes, another lesson at the salon), and the stylist who took the boys' names was clearly attempting to "transition" between the two sexes. This person was friendly and gave a great haircut. We did not say a word of judgment or derision, nor did we exchange glances that might have made this stylist uncomfortable, but simply went about our business as usual.

God Saw His Creation Was "Very Good"

When we got in the car, a discussion ensued. "Was that a boy or a girl?" "I couldn't tell at all!" "The name could've been for a boy or a girl." It can be unsettling not to recognize an adult person's sex, because that identification is so primordial in our psyches. Writer Anthony Esolen once noted that a person's sex is the first thing we notice and the last thing we remember.¹¹¹ Think about it: you may not remember the name or hair color of the clerk that helped you at the mall, but you will remember if that person was a man or a woman.

We reinforced to the children that this stylist was a child of God with inherent dignity, and how confused and troubled a person must be to want to change or reject one's very nature. As we do when we encounter anyone in grave confusion or sin (including ourselves!), we reminded the children to pray for that person, and we reiterated what we have taught from the start—and what you must teach: we cannot change objective truth, including the good and right way that God made his world.

I cannot stress enough that parents must form a child in objective truth from the youngest years. We don't get to determine what is true based on our feelings (me, me, me); rather, truth exists outside of ourselves (God's created order), and our job is to seek truth, to find it, and to conform our lives and our wills to it.

Teach your children that God made each of us a boy or a girl—and that's something so beautiful, so *purposeful*, that it's written into our physical being: "From before you were born, and even when you were just a microscopic embryo, science could already tell that you were a boy! God is such a thoughtful, masterful Creator!"

Mr. Mom and Mrs. Dad

When *National Geographic* produced its "Gender Revolution" special issue in 2017, the boy on the cover (proclaimed a "girl") was decked out in pink "girl" clothing and had long, pink hair. The "look" was stereotypical, cultural, superficial, and definitely not inherently representative of the female nature. Just like when Bruce Jenner donned long hair, nails, and a sexy lingerie teddy—stereotypical sex kitten attire—for his 2015 *Vanity Fair* shoot, it seemed more fetish than "female."

What can you tell your children about these displays? Well, if your household is like mine, it's easy to show that "nontraditional" roles and activities and colors and dress

have nothing to do with being a boy or a girl.

In our house, for example, Daddy is the main cook. He also cleans, organizes, and occasionally dons pink dress shirts. Mommy often takes the reins when it's time to assemble a cabinet, struggles in high heels, and loves football. These deviations from strict "gender roles" don't change our essence as male or female. Dean is 100 percent man, and I love being a woman!

A young boy desiring painted nails or pink clothes "like a girl," or a grown man donning a teddy, does not change him into a female. My six boys, when little, ranged from "all boy" to "Mom, I need more glitter, and watch me dance!" All of them are boys (or men now), and if they were tempted to think otherwise (as some little boys will be, *especially* given the messed-up cultural cues today), Dean and I gently reminded them, repeatedly if necessary, that they are male.

It's never been a problem to redirect and even be firm at times, which is why it shatters my heart when some parents, in the name of "compassion," *encourage* a delusion in their "feminine" sons or tomboy daughters. Some even seek out doctors to give their children puberty-blocking hormones, which could pave the way to "sex-change" operations later in life.

BE PREPARED

There is a disturbing scenario we have to be ready to confront: parents may be charged with child abuse if they don't consent to a child's "gender" therapy as recommended by health care professionals. A seventeen-year-old in Cincinnati was removed from the custody of her parents because they would not support treatment to make her a "him."¹¹² Imagine a child telling his teacher or counselor, even at the age of four or

five, "I'm not a boy, I'm a girl, but Mommy says that's not true." If a doctor, teacher, or government official tries to intimidate you to accept a "transgender" diagnosis of your child, I recommend contacting a faithful Catholic attorney. And be careful whom you elect to your school boards and legislatures.

Escaping Oneself

We hear more and more cases of parents who help their children "transition," even before the traditional age of reason, and even before the child can tie his own shoes. One famous case involves Thomas Lobel, an eleven-year-old boy who identifies as a girl named Tammy. His adoptive lesbian parents claim that Thomas has identified as a girl ever since he was three, and say they worried about suicide risks if he didn't use hormone blockers to stave off puberty.¹¹³

There should be protective alarm bells instinctively going off in our brains when we hear any adult say such novel and outrageous things!

These adults ignore the real mental health risks involved in trying to change a child's sex. Johns Hopkins University professor Paul McHugh points to a thirty-year study in transgender-friendly Sweden that found that, ten years after having reassignment surgery, the mortality rate of transgender people was twenty-fold higher than the non-transgender population.¹¹⁴ (Walt Heyer is one example of sex-change regret, and he has made it his mission to reach out to others who regret their operations, and to educate the public about the harm of such surgeries.¹¹⁵)

McHugh also noted that in a tracking study of children who "reported transgender feelings" but received no medical intervention, between seventy and eighty percent of

them lost those feelings.¹¹⁶ This debunks the idea that kids who show “gender-nonconforming” traits, or who imagine themselves as being the opposite sex, must be psychologically and medically steered toward being their “transition.”

Childhood Fantasies and Fables

Imagine how devastating it would be for a little boy or girl to have a growing, healthy body disrupted with hormones and eventually permanently mutilated (along with mind and spirit) because of the expression of a not-uncommon childish thought. Little kids who are still putting pencils up their noses and can't decide what to have for breakfast should never be given the “freedom” to let a fantasy dictate what biology clearly contradicts. In what other area do we allow tiny children to create their own reality and dictate it to adults?

Also, so what if a young boy is more feminine in his play, fashion sense, or affect? So what if a girl wants short hair, no girly clothes, and likes to eat bugs and fight? None of those things affect the truth of one's maleness or femaleness, as even “progressives” have been saying for decades (but who now seem to have amnesia!).

Many of us know little kids who believe they are cats or dogs—some for a very long time. As one mom said to me, “If we encouraged them to believe they were ponies, they would believe it.” The idea that a parent would feed this or any childish whimsy (like claims to be the opposite sex) is ludicrous. I'm with the Church and science on this, and I'd go so far as to say that to mess with a child's mind, body, and spirit by pushing a denial of the child's very nature constitutes child abuse.

Instead of fueling fantasy, let's teach truth through fables. One of the most effective tools for teaching children, one which we must bring back to popular use, is the telling

and retelling of classic morality tales. In a world of “transgender” conditioning, I strongly encourage every parent to read and reread “The Emperor's New Clothes” to their little ones, until it is known by heart. Unlike any other, this story uncannily reflects—and exposes as folly—our current acceptance of the “transgender” culture.

In the fable, the whole empire repeats and believes an obvious lie. Even the “smartest” adults, due to the power of suggestion and peer pressure, succumb to the madness. Ultimately, it's a little child who is still innocent and clear-thinking enough to speak the plain-to-see truth.¹¹⁷ Your children will delight in the story while you inoculate them against the illogical thinking of our day.

REMEMBER . . .

- We should model a compassionate witness to our children when this issue presents itself.
- Men and women, boys and girls can vary in their preferences and behaviors, but this does not change their objective identity as either a man or a woman.
- Teach your children that there is an objective created reality that God designed and set—for our good. When we let feelings dictate our truth, then our life becomes perpetually confused and unstable.

who is the head, into Christ" (Eph. 4:14-15). Your gracious *confidence* in these discussions is paramount, so ask the Holy Spirit to give you plenty of it! After all, Jesus said, "Ask and it will be given to you!" (Matt. 7:7).

He Said, She Said?

One source of conflict in your kids' culture might be which pronouns to use for those who identify as transgender. Your teen might be caught up in a discussion about a transgender celebrity, or have a biologically male classmate who now has a female appearance and a new name, and who demands to be addressed with "she" and "her."

These pronoun battles actually present an opportunity for Catholics to turn the tables on critics and point out how they are imposing *their* morality on *us*. After all, it's one thing for a person to claim to be transgender, but quite another to force others to go along with this claim against their will, even requiring them to speak words they don't believe.

If your teen gets cornered on this subject, or even challenges you on it, return to first principles: it's wrong to lie. Additionally, a lie becomes more serious when it is spoken about something significant. This shifts the focus from your child (or you) to the real issue. Here's how this might play out:

Tom: Why do you keep saying [man who claims he's a woman] is a he? That's really hurtful!

Mary: I'm not trying to hurt anyone, but please see where I'm coming from. It's wrong to lie, and if I say [man who claims he's a woman] is a woman, that would make me a liar.

Tom: But it's not a lie! If she says she is a woman then she is a woman.

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Advice for Big Kids

At my son's large public high school it is not uncommon to see kids in various states of "gender fluidity," but not simply in the sense of feminine boys and tomboy girls as I saw back in my own public high school in the 1980s. No, these kids are either formally "transitioning" or experimenting with opposite-sex alter egos, both of which have become trendy and faddish.

As parents, we are often lulled by a misguided compassion that keeps us from sharing the truth, even in a loving way. If your compassion (or, let's face it, cowardice) leads you to silence about or sympathy for sin, you are playing into the hands of a truth-denying culture that endangers many souls.

Kids *do not need* wishy-washiness. They need us to graciously, firmly, consistently stand up for the truth.

Remember the words of St. Paul, who hoped that "we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him

Mary: Wait, are you saying that merely *saying* or *believing* you're a woman makes you a woman? Why should I believe that? Can a person change his race or his species in the same way?

Tom: Well, it's her own *sense* of self that matters!

Mary: But that still doesn't make it true. There's no evidence, in science or in anything we can measure, that "gender" exists except in the imagination. Morally, I am not allowed to lie for anyone. I hope you can respect that my faith requires me to be honest and speak only what is true.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

I don't think it's morally problematic to refer to a person by a new, preferred name. Some girls have "male" names and some boys have "female" names. Such things are fluid across times and cultures. But incorrectly using sex-specific pronouns in order to accommodate someone's feelings forces us to lie. Lying is not only a sin, but in this case it denies the way God made a person, so the sin is great.

Identity or Reality?

When a person has a body dysphoria unrelated to sex or "gender," everyone understands that the person needs help. When an anorexic looks in the mirror, she might see someone who is obese, even if she weighs much less than everyone else her age. We don't tell that girl, "That's right, you are overweight, and we will help you reach the weight that's right for *you*."

Instead we say, "What you perceive yourself to be, well, that *isn't you*. In reality, you are dangerously underweight,

and because we love you, we aren't going to help you harm yourself." That is the loving response.

What about people who think they are a different race or ethnicity? In 2015, the head of the Spokane NAACP, Rachel Dolezal, was discovered to have two white parents. She was forced to resign from her position when some members claimed Dolezal misled them into thinking she was black. Yet Dolezal still maintained that she *is* black, even though her genetics say otherwise. She says, "I feel like the idea of being trans-black would be much more accurate than 'I'm white.' Because you know, I'm not white."¹¹⁸

You can see the irony that if Dolezal had claimed she was a black *man*, then her "progressive" critics would have said she was half right. Yet, how can we tell a person she's wrong about her sincere sense of her racial identity, but right about her sense of gender identity—when both exist only in the imagination? There is no logic to saying we *affirm* your "sense" of being a man but we *condemn* your "sense" of being black. Your teens will see the contradiction here.

Surgery or Mutilation?

Another body dysphoria concerns people who identify as being amputees or paraplegics even though they have all their limbs and can walk. Doctors call this Body Integrity Identity Disorder (BIID), but some who have this disorder say instead that they are "trans-abled." Like those who identify as transgender, these people feel disconnected from their own bodies; they seek out doctors to paralyze them or amputate their limbs so that they can be who they "truly are."

One researcher in Canada (who identifies as transgender but not trans-able) explains that the transgender community hasn't supported the trans-able community because the former doesn't want its recent momentum in the court of public

opinion to grind to a halt by association with the latter, which almost everyone still understands to be a serious pathology.¹⁹

Yet if we are rightly disgusted that a doctor would amputate the healthy limbs of a person who suffers from BIID, then why aren't we equally disgusted by doctors amputating the healthy genitals of persons who identify as transgender? This mental gymnastics of holding both positions at once (trans-able = bad; transgender = good) is not tenable, unless we completely obliterate in our own minds that *man* and *woman* mean something objectively, as we know that *healthy* and *disabled* do.

Issues vs. Individuals

The way we talk about issues generally is going to be different from the way we talk to people personally, especially those who are working through these issues. For example, although in a book, article, or on social media I might bluntly describe the horrors of abortion, I'll use different words and tone when speaking directly to a woman who has had an abortion. This does not mean I'm being inconsistent. It just means that we must meet each person where he is and as prudence dictates, while refusing to be silenced from speaking Christ's truth generally.

I wholeheartedly believe, as the Church teaches, that transgender ideology is unreasonable and dangerous; however, my heart breaks for those who are truly confused about their own nature and identity, and who struggle with any kind of body dysphoria or disorder. There is no hatred for these vulnerable people, only outrage that ideologues, activists, and (negligent) health care professionals aid and abet this disordered, tragic way of thinking and living.

Teach your older children that, when they talk with someone who identifies as transgender or loves someone who does, they should spend time listening and asking open-ended questions that allow the person to share his experience. This

builds rapport and goodwill, and will give them time to put their own thoughts together when sharing the truth that applies to all. Then, they can discuss our common identity as children of God, and stress that we don't want to lie about people or treat them with disrespect.

Your teen can express to the person that one's "sense of gender" is not what ultimately defines human identity. The goodness and fulfillment of each person can only be found in the God who loves us, created us, and who can even use the trials and sufferings in our lives to make us complete and *truly* happy.

A friend of mine, whom I'll call Josh, began to identify as a girl when he was young, after bullying and his own lack of confidence made him feel unworthy of being a man. He told me:

I realized I had been trying to fix matters of my heart and soul with transformations to my body. In doing that, I was only further running from facing my history. I had to accept that I was a man, and also learn to understand what it meant to be a man. And through that, I realized it is not the muscles that make the man, but the heart of sacrifice. And I realized that even though I didn't measure up in certain ways, there were no impediments to what I could offer in terms of a heart of sacrifice. Through this, I came to realize that, despite my stature and my lack of "manly" accomplishments, I was indeed man enough.

Why? Because I was created with the ability to sacrifice. And one of the things I realized that I had to sacrifice along my journey to greater self-honesty was my attachment to the idea that I was a girl. For me, that was nothing more than escapism . . . from myself. I just couldn't see it at the time. I have since come to realize that if I were ever to be

dug up after I die, they would find the body of a male. That is my nature. And nature is what nobody can outrun.

When your child's friends have been lied to and gone down dark paths that can never bring true or lasting happiness, when they are weary and broken and at the end of their rope, your well-formed child may be the only one left who has never lied to them. *This* is what we want our children to be for others—imitating Christ in both love and truth—and it's what a confused world needs them to be. As long as they are strong enough in their own interior faith life and in their understanding of natural-law truths, they will be the ones to help pick up the pieces for their friends and others who have been victims of a merciless culture.

REMEMBER . . .

- We should tell those who force transgender ideology that we cannot lie about people, biology, and human nature, and that it is unfair for them to demand that we do.
- People clearly recognize other body dysphoria and identity disorders related to race or disability. We should point out the double standard when those same symptoms in "gender" identity issues are ignored or denied.
- We must be compassionate with those who struggle with their identity, encouraging them to find their true identity in the loving God who created them in his image.