

DignityUSA

FAQ on Gender Theology – Resource Section

Q What is the official Catholic Church's (Church) teaching about gender theology/identity?

A There is no official definitive Catholic teaching on gender theology/identity. There is also no explicit reference to transgender (a modern definition) persons or gender identity in the scriptures (Note: the Bible has many references to "eunuchs" (which, in certain circumstances, can be considered analogous¹ to gender non-conformity) and other potentially non-binary persons which is discussed later). However, over the last several years a number of documents and statements have been issued by Pope Francis, the Vatican and other high-ranking Church officials that have opposed the concept of gender theology/identity, labeling it wicked, demonic, diabolical and threatening to marriage and families and the "complementary" relationship between man and woman.

Q What is the basis for the Church's teaching about gender theology?

A The Church's recent teachings on the subject of gender theology are grounded in moral and ethical positions that are based on outdated anthropological studies. Specifically, the hierarchical Church continues to hold firm to the belief that "sex" and "gender" are synonymous and that "natural law" dictates that the innate biological differences between male and female need to be adhered to. Furthermore, the Church points to the "complementary" relationship between man and woman and that both the institution of marriage (the Church equally opposes same sex marital unions) and procreation are threatened by gender transitioning (deemed a "choice").

Q What are the biblical texts that are utilized to frame the Church's teaching on gender theology?

A Although not the sole basis for its stance on gender theology, the Church points to Deuteronomy 22:5 ("women must not wear men's clothes, and men must not wear women's clothes. Everyone who does those things is detestable to the Lord your God") and Deuteronomy 23:1 ("no one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord") as passages that condemn any form of gender transitioning or expression.

An argument against 22:5 is that the other directives are not generally followed (e.g. "you shall not wear cloth made from wool and linen woven together"; "you shall not sow your vineyard with two different kinds of seed"). As to 23:1, this would generally refer to "eunuchs" in the ancient world, for which, in contrast, there are a number of affirming passages in both the Old and New Testaments. Also, from a medical viewpoint, it would suggest the condemnation of others who have undergone sterilization (e.g. vasectomies, tubal ligations).

Q Are there Biblical passages that have been interpreted by Biblical scholars to suggest that gender non-conforming persons have existed throughout history, and that Jesus not only accepted such persons but beseeched others to accept them and invited them to join the kingdom of Heaven?

A There are a number of passages and stories, in both the Old and New Testaments, that contain affirming scriptures, using eunuchs and other gender variant persons, that speak to the diversity of gender identity in Biblical culture, and to Jesus' encouragement of inclusion and acceptance of those who live in gender diverse ways. Specifically, Isaiah 56: 1-5 cites God's extension of justice to unlikely persons, including foreigners, eunuchs, and barren women; in particular, to faithful eunuchs He promises an "everlasting name" and a "monument". Also in Wisdom 3:14 righteous eunuchs are promised blessings, special favors and great delight. In Acts 8: 25-39 the apostle Philip baptizes an Ethiopian eunuch. In Matthew 19: 11-12 Jesus counsels His followers to accept eunuchs, saying "let anyone accept this who can". Other "genderqueer" Biblical characters who are favorably described include Joseph (Genesis 37:13), loved by his father Israel; Rebekah (Genesis 24); and Deborah (Judges 4-5), a socially trans-masculine foremother, and a respected leader because of her virtue, strength, and wisdom.

Q The Church's teachings are based on the premise that there are only two distinct genders, and that one's gender is synonymous with one's biological sex assigned at birth- does this teaching comport with present day psychological and medical science?

A The Church's moral and ethical doctrine clings to an outdated anthropological position that there are only two mutually exclusive genders and that biological sex is the sole determinant of gender. However, present day science has challenged this precept. Specifically, the American Medical Association's current definition of gender, recognizing its increased complexity compared to previous assumptions, states that "It is essential to acknowledge that an individual's gender identity may not align with the sex assigned at birth – a narrow limit on the definition of sex (i.e. gender) would have public health consequences in the transgender population"². The American Psychological Association, in its current Dictionary of Psychology, concludes that "Sex usually refers to the biological aspects of maleness or femaleness, whereas gender implies the psychological, behavioral, social and cultural aspects of being male or female"³.

Q The Church's teachings are premised on the "complementarity" between men and women, and that the primary purpose of marriage is procreation. This position would seem to oppose any hormonal or surgical procedures that would effectively result in sterilization – is this premise ill-founded?

A Much of the Church's rejection of "gender theology" is premised on the "complementarity" of male and female sexual organs, combined with their role in procreation. This dominant view of human sexuality is based upon a presumption of a "natural" purpose of sexually grounded procreation. This view holds that any conflict between one's assigned sex and gender identity (i.e. gender dysphoria) is sinful and contrary to what God has ordained. It also suggests that marriage is primarily focused on the conjugal act to the detriment of all of the other ways that couples live together in faithful community. Thus the natural progression of this thinking is that any form of hormonal or surgical changes that effectively result in "sterilization" are contrary to the purpose of marriage and a threat to family life.

However, modern science has affirmed that gender dysphoria is an anxiety disorder and those afflicted are at increased risk of stress, isolation, anxiety, depression, poor self-esteem, and suicide. Treatment may include psychotherapy and support of one's preferred gender through hormone therapy, gender expression and role, or surgeries. Yet the Church says little about reproductive control, although opposed to them, in the form of birth control pills, male vasectomies and female tubal ligation. In sum, treatments to preserve one's mental and physical well-being should be favored over the desire for procreation.

Q Has the Pope or other Church officials made statements that are harmful to transgender and non-binary people?

A Yes. Over the last several years many Church officials, including Pope Francis, the Vatican and various bishops have issued documents and statements that point to the Church's moral and ethical view of the binary nature of sex and gender, that trans and non-binary persons should learn to accept their bodies, care for and respect them as essential elements of genuine human ecology, as opposed to thinking that trans/non-binary people enjoy absolute power over creation.

These communications include the Vatican's February 2019 document (released in June 2019) entitled Male and Female He Created Them: Toward a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education; the Diocese of Springfield, Illinois' Policy and Pastoral Guide of January 2020 (Policy 650); An open letter (signed by four U.S. Catholic Bishops) dated December 2017 entitled Created Male and Female: An Open Letter from Religious Leaders; the Pope's August 2016 "Ideology of Gender" remarks⁴; the Pope's April 2016 Amoris Laetitia Apostolic Exhortation; the Pope's May 2015 Laudato Si Encyclical; and numerous statements from bishops worldwide. They generally condemn gender theology; oppose education and legislation that promotes "person identity"; portray gender identity as a permissive sexual moral problem; and assert that it encourages children to "choose their gender" in a manner that might be termed frivolous. Obviously these rejections tear at the sensitive fabric of a person's self-image with all of the attendant adverse physical and psychological impacts.

Q What are some of the ways that Church teaching and practice negatively impact transgender and non-binary people?

A The aforementioned documents and statements from Church officials and institutions have a sobering, destructive impact on the self-image and health of trans and non-binary Catholics. Vatican guidance to the Catholic education systems denies these individuals the ability to dress, be acknowledged by their preferred names and pronouns, and restricts their access to bathrooms and locker rooms consonant with their gender identity. These systems are also authorized to discriminate in the employment of trans and non-binary persons, prohibit LGBTQI/Straight Cisgender alliances and the teaching of sex and gender except subject matter that reinforces the sex/gender binary.

Catholic churches feel empowered to discriminate in the participation of trans and non-binary persons in parish ministries (e.g. choir, Eucharistic ministers, lectors). In addition, the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey administered by the National Center for Transgender Equality reported that 39% of trans people left their church due to a fear of rejection and fully 18% were actually told to leave the congregation.

Catholic health care facilities are instructed by the “Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services” issued in July 2018 by the USCCB not to engage in material cooperation in actions that are deemed “intrinsically immoral” or “evil”, including any form of “direct sterilization”.

Q What response can a trans or non-binary person give to church officials who either recommend reparative therapy, exclude them from ministerial roles, or request that they not worship in their church?

A Under no circumstances should a trans or non-binary person agree to undergo “reparative therapy” to attempt to change their gender identity or expression to conform to society’s expectations. Experience demonstrates that such programs fail to achieve the desired outcome and have often lead to severe depression and suicide.

If an individual is asked not to worship in their local church, they should look to find a welcoming, affirming congregation. Of course DignityUSA’s chapters provide this environment. New Ways Ministry lists over 325 Catholic churches and faith communities that are LGBTQI inclusive.

If denied the opportunity to serve in a ministerial role, a person can serve initially in a non-ministerial role (e.g. greeter, usher) and be considered for a ministerial role in the future. Of course, if such rejection eats at the core of one’s self-worth, one should pursue another church as stated above.

Q What role can a trans or non-binary person’s family and other allies play to support and assure them that they are loved by God and worthy of God’s grace?

A The role of family is critically important in supporting a transgender or non-binary person’s acceptance and growth in their faith and authentic identity. PFLAG is a particularly good organization for parents, other family and allies to share support stories and work together to eliminate instances of discrimination faced by their trans and non-binary family members.

They should reinforce the positive passages in the Bible that support them, including Jesus’ encouragement of inclusion and acceptance of those who live in gender diverse ways. They should familiarize themselves with the UK Catholic Ethicist David Albert Jones, who argues for “discernment/pastoral accompaniment” and that gender identity may be seen as “something given by God” and not sinful nor objectively disordered.

Q What can churches do to make their houses of worship more accepting and welcoming for trans and non-binary individuals?

A See the attached recommendations.

¹ Reference the writings of Austen Hartke ([Transforming – The Bible & the Lives of Transgender Christians](#)) and Mx. Chris Paige ([OtherWise Christian – A Guidebook for Transgender Liberation](#))

² Press Release – AMA Adopts New Policies at 2018 Interim Meeting – November 13, 2018

³ APA Dictionary of Psychology – Second Edition – February 2015

⁴ In these remarks Pope Francis portrayed gender identity as a moral problem; called gender theory “wicked” and “a great enemy of marriage today”; and referred to “ideological colonization” – suggesting that the “West” required the teaching of “gender choice” in exchange for global funding support

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