

Pastoral Care amid Confusion about Sexual Identity

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Questions of sexual identity and gender identification are complex, to be sure, both in themselves and in the way that they affect individuals, families and communities. A full treatment of the topic must consider it from various angles – seeing it as a medical, psychological and social reality, and considering philosophical and ethical questions as well as theological foundations – but in the end the conversation must not forget about the actual persons for whom the experience of confusion about sexual identity is a lived experience. Thus a truly Catholic consideration of these issues must include a well-founded understanding of pastoral care: of the personal and institutional response that the Church gives to these individuals and their families. We will begin by defining the particularly *pastoral* nature of this response, and then the various contexts in which it is carried out.

INTRODUCTION: Defining Pastoral Care

Pastoral care means the care of a shepherd, imitating the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. Though a pastoral minister may not know what to do in every situation, we know what the Good Shepherd would do. The prophet Ezekiel addressing the Israelites exiled to Babylon in the sixth century before Christ, relates the warning of the Lord of Hosts:

“Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Thus says the Lord God: “Woe to the shepherds of Israel who have been pasturing themselves! ... You did not bring back the strayed nor seek the lost, but you lorded it over them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered for lack of a shepherd, and became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered and wandered over all the mountains and high hills; my sheep were scattered over the whole earth, with no one to look after them or to search for them. (Ezk 34:1,4–6)

As he has done several times before in salvation history, the Lord has decided on a solution to his people's plight:

Thus says the Lord GOD: I swear I am coming against these shepherds.... I myself will look after and tend my sheep. ... I myself will pasture my sheep; I myself will give them rest, says the Lord GOD. The lost I will seek out, the strayed I will bring back, the injured I will bind up, the sick I will heal ... shepherding them rightly. (Ezk 34:10–12, 15–16.)

The Lord takes the initiative to heal the most dramatic effect of suffering, the reality that links physical, emotional, and spiritual suffering to the mystery of evil and the consequence of Original Sin: the fact that suffering is *isolating*. The sick and suffering sheep were already in pain, and this reality in some degree set them apart from their family members and neighbors who were well and thus able to go about their regular duties. The prophet's rebuke, however, charges that the neglect of the leaders, who shirked their responsibility to lead and feed those unable to care for themselves, left the suffering sheep further scattered and more isolated. The Lord God steps in to both lead and feed his people. Throughout this passage, God is promising to care for and shepherd his people in his own name: to bring them back, to bind them up, and, by doing so, to heal them.

Of course, pastoral care takes for granted that there is a flock that needs pastoring, that needs seeking, healing and strengthening. This is not pessimism, but realism: Original Sin, G.K. Chesterton once wrote, is "a fact as practical as potatoes," and its consequences affect the world and everyone in it, every day. All of us grew up in imperfect families, had imperfect childhoods, formed imperfect friendships. We have an imperfect understanding of ourselves and an imperfect appreciation of God's gifts. We have imperfect control over our minds, hearts and bodies, and we make imperfect responses to God's will. But the Catholic Faith teaches another undeniable fact: No one needs to be perfect to be loved by God. Quite the contrary: "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Rm 5:8). The Perfect One suffered for the sake of the imperfect, "the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God" (1 Pt 3:18).

This reality, that happiness in this life and the next depends not on perfection but on redemption, is the foundation of pastoral care. "In life, God accompanies persons,"

Pope Francis advises, “and we must accompany them, starting from their situation.” By welcoming every person in the name of Christ, and sharing with them the Good News of salvation, we assist imperfect human beings to strive for the perfect happiness that has its origin and its destination in God.

The key word here is *striving*: the Christian life is a journey that proceeds in stages; the earliest Christians were known as those who were on “The Way” (Acts 9:2). A Christian is not a perfect being, but a work in progress; he progresses by pursuing virtues, good habits that point him in the right direction. God has a plan for human life that is not derailed or made irrelevant by sin or imperfection, and the virtues orient heart, mind, body and soul along the path marked out by this divine design.

Our pastoral care to those who are affected by gender ideology and by confusion over their sexual identity, then, needs to imitate the Good Shepherd who seeks out the lost, brings them back to the right road, and leads them along it. We are called to do this in various spheres of life, which we will consider in turn, from the flock entrusted to the pastor of the parish; to the “flock within the flock” which is the family, the domestic Church; to the individual member of the flock who turns to the shepherd for answers and for strength.

I. Caring for the Parish Community

I mentioned a moment ago that our pastoral ministry is to those who are affected by gender ideology and questions of sexual identity, and in reality this includes nearly every member of the Church. There is no denying that the question of gender identity forms a significant part of our cultural and social conversations, so naturally it is going to loom large in the life of any parish: the People of God live in the world, after all, and bring their concerns and needs with them to Church on Sunday. I would venture to say that most parish priests, and the religious and lay faithful who assist them in ministry, feel simultaneously compelled and unprepared to address these issues.

A. Faith Formation and Preaching

Pastoral ministers will face these questions in a variety of ways, but few opportunities will be as significant as adult faith formation. This takes many forms – informal conversations, individual instruction, RCIA, workshops and seminars for parishioners, and liturgical preaching. In each of these spheres, the responsibility of the

pastoral minister is the same: to “speak the truth with love,” as Saint Paul says (Eph 4:15); to present the whole teaching of the Church with clarity and with charity.

It is fashionable among theologians of a certain mindset to claim that the Catholic Church has no settled teaching on issues of gender, that the whole notion of gender identity and gender fluidity is so new that philosophers and theologians are free to make prudential judgments about opposing views in an effort to work out a solution. It is difficult for me to think of a more definitive teaching than Genesis 1:27 – “Male and female he created them.” – so the notion that we are free to hold an opposing view in good conscience needs to be rejected. The Catechism likewise speaks in very certain terms about the issue:

“Being man” or “being woman” is a reality which is good and willed by God: man and woman possess an inalienable dignity which comes to them immediately from God their Creator.¹

Everyone, man and woman, should acknowledge and accept his [or her] sexual *identity*.²

The content of the faith that needs to be communicated regarding sex, gender and relationships, therefore, is a simple, direct and definitive one: That God has willed to create each individual as a man or as a woman; that this is a gift and a blessing; and that each person’s moral obligation is to respond to his or her sexual identity by accepting and cooperating with the plan of God.

This message is communicated in a variety of ways, but most frequently by means of liturgical preaching. The Sunday homily provides a privileged opportunity for communication between the pastor and the faithful who are entrusted to his care. In many cases, the ten or fifteen minutes of the homily are the pastor’s sole opportunity to catechize and exhort his flock, most of whom he encounters only at the Sunday liturgy.

Recent popes have written about the appropriate *context* of liturgical preaching. The Sunday homily ought to create “a dialogue between God and his People,”³ that convinces them “that God’s word is present and at work in their everyday lives.”⁴ Pope Francis calls this “the proposal of the Gospel, ... the proclamation of salvation.”⁵ Here he has in mind what is often called the *kerygma* or “kernel” of the Gospel: “that Christ died for our sins ... that he was raised ... that he appeared” to the disciples, a reality that Saint

Paul declares is “of first importance” (cf. 1 Cor 15:3-5). “There is nothing more solid, deep and sure than this proclamation,”⁶ Pope Francis writes.

The first responsibility of the preacher, then, is to engage the hearts of his audience, by making them aware of God’s saving action. “On the lips of the catechist the first proclamation must ring out over and over: ‘Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you.’”⁷ A congregation that has no relationship with the Divine Lawgiver will have no motivation or reason for keeping the Divine Law: the preacher must first propose this relationship to each of the faithful. “It is from this proposition that the moral consequences then flow,” Pope Francis notes.⁸ The proclamation of God’s saving love and the truth of the moral law are not opposed; rather, the first provides the necessary foundation for the second, in the history of salvation as well as in the structure of a homily.

The “first proclamation” must include an enthusiastic presentation of God’s plan for human beings and relationships, and in particular the complementarity of man and woman, as “a great treasure . . . not only an asset but also a thing of beauty.”⁹ The preacher making a proclamation of salvation must enthusiastically embrace and present this plan as good, beautiful and life-giving. Then, in light of this lofty proposal, he can talk about sexual morality, and identify things that are immoral *because they fall short of this ideal*. Seen in this way, not only transgender behavior and homosexual acts, but also adultery, fornication, pornography, masturbation and contraceptive sex reveal themselves to be lacking the inherent dignity and power of married love. When the preacher preaches against these things, he does so not as a harsh judgment, but in order to contrast them with what is truly fulfilling and meaningful. When the Church or the preacher must say “No,” it is always so that they may point to a more meaningful “Yes.”

B. Choice of Language

The preacher’s choice of words is of utmost importance, as so much of the discussion in this conference has revealed. On the one hand, the preacher ought to avoid simply picking up secular vocabulary, which is loaded with so much philosophical and political baggage that the congregation may end up hearing the opposite of what he is trying to convey. At the same time, he must be aware of the situation of his hearers, and the reality that they come, not only with varied levels of engagement with and

understanding of Church teaching, but also with diverse experience of the issue in their own families and circles of friends. To cede the rhetorical ground to the culture risks diluting or distorting the message; to insist too rigidly on technical theological terminology risks losing people whose primary connection with the topic is personal and primarily emotional.

I would suggest, then, that preachers and teachers get into the habit of speaking of “people who experience confusion regarding their sexual identity.” I realize that this phrase seems much more cumbersome than, for example, “a transgender person” or “a trans man” or “a trans woman.” There are several essential benefits to this terminology, however, which make it very useful.

Such a phrase puts the person at the forefront of the discussion, not the experience of gender dysphoria. This is a lesson our society has learned from the disabled community: it is much more respectful to speak of “people with hearing impairment” than “the deaf.” But more than mere human respect, such language highlights the dignity of the person, created in the image and likeness of God, and the solidarity that this identity creates among all human beings. To speak of “trans people” as if they were a different category of person with a different type of human nature creates the very isolation and “othering” that pastoral care is intended to repair.

Next, to speak of the “experience” of confusion creates a much different context for the discussion than talking about “people who suffer from” or “people who struggle with” their sexual identity. Certainly, we can see that this experience is a struggle – indeed, a sharing in the Cross – and we anticipate that a person in this situation is suffering in many ways. But blanket statements about another person’s suffering most often provoke a defensive reaction: “You don’t even know me, Father. How can you possibly know whether I’m suffering or not?” The discussion is over before it’s even begun. So, we strive to pay heed to Pope Francis’s admonition that “in life God accompanies persons, and we must accompany them, starting from their situation. We must accompany them with mercy.”¹⁰ Speaking of a person’s “experience” rather than his “struggle” allows that person to share his own story, his own situation. When the preacher is willing to find that starting point with his listeners, the pope says, “the Holy Spirit inspires the priest to say the right thing.”¹¹

The choice to speak of “confusion” about identity, rather than “rejection” or “denial”, is a similar choice. It acknowledges that people come to experience gender

dysphoria for a multitude of reasons that are not under that person's control; that their situation is about wounds, not defiance. At the same time, it holds on to the objective truth of the situation. "Confusion" is a gentle term, but not a neutral one, and it acknowledges that transgender assumptions contradict the objective reality of God's creation of human beings, and of each individual, as male or female.

Finally, the reality about which the person is experiencing confusion is his or her "sexual identity." Rather than the often ambiguous and politically charged notion of "gender identity," which is founded on the false assumption that one's gender is fluid or disconnected from one's biological sex as male or female, "sexual identity" is the terminology used by the Catechism to identify one's identity as male or female,¹² and maintains the link between the body and the soul.

C. Participation in the Life of the Parish

Another responsibility of pastoral ministers, and particularly of parish priests, is to foster the participation of individuals in the life of the local community of faith, the parish. This begins, of course, with the welcome that we have already talked about, the pastor's willingness to start from the situation of the individual, and it continues with the long-term commitment to accompany the person in his or her life of faith. But the welcome and accompaniment that the Church extends is always in the context of a relationship: the welcome is for a purpose, and the accompaniment is leading somewhere; the Church welcomes the individual because it has something to offer to him or to her.

We see this welcome illustrated by the Lord Jesus himself, in the synagogue at Capernaum, on the day after he multiplied the loaves and fishes and walked on the water. As the people come to him to see another miracle, he reveals himself to them as the "true Bread from Heaven" (Jn 6:32). In response to their desire for this "living bread," he tells them that "Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away" (v. 37). The welcome that Jesus extends is absolute: "Come, you will not be rejected." A few verses later, he explains the purpose for that welcome. "No one can come to me," he says, "unless drawn by the Father. ... It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me" (vv. 44-45).

The role of the pastoral minister, then, is to welcome the individual in the name of Christ, and to share with him the saving Word of God; to “speak the truth in love” (Eph 4:15). The role of the parishioner, having received that welcome, is to enter fully into the life of the parish and the Church, which means receiving the Word of God, responding to it faithfully and generously, and sharing that faith with others by word and good example. The welcome that the good pastoral minister wants to extend is not facilitated by avoiding the subject, or pretending that one can take it or leave it and still be happy. “Departure from the Church’s teaching, or silence about it, in an effort to provide pastoral care is neither caring nor pastoral,” as the CDF advises. “Only what is true can ultimately be pastoral,” they continue. “The neglect of the Church’s position prevents homosexual men and women from receiving the care they need and deserve.”¹³

These basic principles should guide the decisions of pastoral ministers in regard to including people who experience confusion about their sexual identity in the life of the parish. In individual interactions, as well as parish gatherings, respect for the dignity of the person, and compassion for his or her situation, is of utmost importance. The teaching of the Church about people who experience same sex attractions is applicable here as well:

They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. These persons are called to fulfill God’s will in their lives and, if they are Christians, to unite to the sacrifice of the Lord’s Cross the difficulties they may encounter from their condition.¹⁴

And

It is deplorable that [such] persons have been and are the object of violent malice in speech or in action. Such treatment deserves condemnation from the Church’s pastors wherever it occurs. It reveals a kind of disregard for others which endangers the most fundamental principles of a healthy society. The intrinsic dignity of each person must always be respected in word, in action and in law.¹⁵

At the same time, participation in the social, liturgical and ministerial activities of the parish presupposes a willingness on the part of the individual to live in harmony with the teaching of the Church, both for his or her own sake, and in order to foster the faith of the whole community. If a person demonstrates by words or actions he is unwilling to “acknowledge and accept his sexual identity,” he is not in a position to give public witness to the teaching of the Church, and may very easily give others reasons to be confused about, or even to reject, those teachings. It is not discrimination to limit the participation of people living as transgender in liturgical roles and parish ministries, not as a rejection of the person, but as a realistic assessment of how their situation and decisions affect others.

At present, there are very few clear policies around such participation. It is imperative that the bishops create and enforce such policies, not only on the diocesan level but for the whole country, lest we be thrown into perpetual conflict between “Nice Father X” at parish A, who insists that all are welcome, and “Mean Father Y” at parish B, who doesn’t like trans people. We have seen the devastating effect that such conflicts have on other moral issues over the last several decades. Although I don’t have the authority to issue such policies unilaterally, I would offer a few practical suggestions for situations that will come up in your parishes:

Candidates for Reception into the Catholic Church as adults are preparing to profess their faith, not only in the Trinity, but in all that the Catholic Church teaches and believes to be revealed by God. The catechesis given in RCIA must not shy away from an honest discussion of sexual complementarity as an intrinsic element of human identity, and the obligation of every person to “acknowledge and accept his sexual identity.” The experience of confusion about one’s sexual identity is not a sin in itself, but deliberately, persistently choosing to manifest a transgender identity is an obstacle to living out the faith fully. Coming to terms with one’s sexual identity, and adjusting one’s behavior and presentation to correspond to it, may be something that happens gradually, and the pastoral minister needs to be sensitive to the situation of each individual. But a firm refusal to try to live in accord with one’s sexual identity is an obstacle to being received into the Church; it is not possible to profess faith in what the Church teaches, and at the same time deny a fundamental teaching of the Church by one’s actions. Similar considerations would apply in the case of a youth or an adult who is seeking the sacrament of Confirmation.

Remember that here we are talking about *delaying* a person's initiation, not flatly *denying* it as a final word. As Pope Francis wrote in *Amoris Laetitia* (referring to a person who cannot participate in the sacraments because of his or her marital situation), "there can be some way of taking part in the life of community, whether in social service, prayer meetings or another way that his or her own initiative, together with the discernment of the parish priest, may suggest."¹⁶

Sponsors for the Sacraments of Initiation are accepting a public role in the Church, testifying to and supporting the faith of a loved one who is to be baptized and confirmed. Again, to deliberately manifest transgender attitudes and behaviors is to contradict the truth about oneself, and to contradict an important teaching of the Church. A person whose situation and actions are not in harmony with the Church's moral teaching may not be permitted to serve as a sponsor for Baptism or Confirmation. Blanket refusals of such persons, however, are not generally helpful to the individual or to the family. Rather, the request to be admitted as a sponsor can provide an opportunity to raise these important issues in a frank and honest discussion. Although it will probably be difficult at first, such a dialogue may be the start of a process of conversion and healing for the individual.

The proper recipients of the sacraments of Matrimony and Holy Orders are defined by Divine Law, not merely ecclesiastical law, and sexual identity is a matter of the validity of the sacrament. People are always regarded in canon law in terms of their natural sex, notwithstanding their gender expression or any mutilations of their bodies. There is no question that a so-called "trans man" may not be ordained, nor that two people of the same sex may not be married, even if one of them identifies as transgender.

Ecclesial ministry, whether in liturgical roles or in service to the parish or the community, is a call, not a right. As the USCCB has noted, "'Lay persons with a call to lay ecclesial ministry possess certain dispositions, which are further developed during the formal preparation process. These include: Being in full communion with the Catholic Church, able to minister joyfully and faithfully within the hierarchical communion that is the Church ... Zeal to live a Christian life, and willingness to live and teach as the magisterium teaches....'"¹⁷ "Lay ecclesial ministers," they continue, "serve publicly in the local church, so they need to accept this role with fidelity and loyalty and be able to fill it with integrity, fully versed in authentic Church teaching, supportive of it, able to defend it, and present it with clarity."¹⁸

As I have already mentioned, the experience of confusion over one's sexual identity is not itself a sin, and a person who confides to his pastor that he is dealing with gender dysphoria need not, for that reason alone, be denied roles of service in the life of the parish. But public manifestations of sexual confusion, such as cross-dressing and particularly undergoing hormonal or surgical interventions to change one's appearance, are themselves an occasion of scandal to others. As Pope Francis pointed out in *Amoris Laetitia*, "If someone flaunts an objective sin as if it were part of the Christian ideal, or wants to impose something other than what the Church teaches, he or she can in no way presume to teach or preach to others; this is a case of something which separates from the community (cf. Mt 18:17). Such a person needs to listen once more to the Gospel message and its call to conversion."¹⁹

Finally, Catholic schools have a special role to play in the life of the Church, in terms of sharing the faith and fostering the formation of children and youth. The apostolic mission of a Catholic school includes helping young people to understand themselves – their identity, their vocation, the nature of their bodies and souls, their relationships – in light of an authentic Christian anthropology. Every choice that a Catholic school makes needs to be in line with this mission, especially because of the impressionable nature of the young. A school community cannot advocate or celebrate relationships or conduct which contradict the Word of God and the teaching of the Church. Teachers and administrators need to take care not to tacitly approve of transgender attitudes or behavior in the context of promoting self-esteem or preventing bullying.

Because it is the role of the Catholic school to impart the truth and to teach students to respond to the truth, students should always be treated according to their biological sex in all aspects of the life of the school, including situations where the sexes are normally separated, like bathrooms, locker rooms and accommodations on school trips. If a student identifies as transgender, the appropriate response of the school is to work together with the family and the student to help them to understand, acknowledge and accept their sexual identity. This includes making good referrals to counselors and health care providers who are faithful to an authentic Christian anthropology. This is becoming more difficult, of course, as professional organizations adopt so-called "trans-affirming" policies for their members, and as legislatures work to outlaw counseling for minors that seeks to help them be reconciled to their true sexual identity. It is not overstating the

case, I think, to assert that our efforts to provide authentic care for the young people entrusted to our schools may soon lead to the difficult but necessary choice to practice civil disobedience in regard to these unjust laws.

II. Care for Families Affected by Gender Confusion

In addition to caring for the parish, clergy and the religious and laity who assist them also have responsibility to care for the “domestic Church,” the “Church in the home,” which is the family. The announcement that a family member identifies as transgender has a profound impact on every relationship in the family, particularly between parents and the transgender son or daughter. Caring for families in this situation can be a particularly profound experience for the pastoral minister, and an opportunity for ministry that can be tremendously rewarding. But it also presents a number of unique challenges for which we all need to be prepared.

This aspect of pastoral care is the one with which I am most personally familiar, as the Courage apostolate, through our ministry to parents and loved ones called EnCourage, is already serving families of people with confusion over their sexual identity, in addition to our core constituency of people whose loved ones experience same sex attractions. Although gender confusion and same sex attractions are experienced rather differently by the individual, the impact on the family is similar in both cases.

I think it would be useful to consider the plan of the EnCourage apostolate as a framework for pastoral care of families whose loved ones identify as transgender. Like Courage members, EnCourage members meet together regularly to pursue Five Goals. The first goal is “to grow spiritually through spiritual reading, prayer, meditation, individual spiritual direction, frequent attendance at Mass, and the frequent reception of the Sacraments of Penance and Holy Eucharist.” The first reaction of parents to the news of a transgender family member is usually panic: all in an instant they realize that their plans for their children may not be realized, and that the assumptions that they had been making about their family life and the inner life of their child were wrong. At the heart of every parent is a desire for their children to be safe and happy, and perceiving a threat to this safety and happiness, they feel powerless. Their next reaction is what we might call the “emergency room mentality” – my child is in danger, is sick, is hurting ... where do I go to fix this? Often this initial reaction has the power to alienate the transgender-

identifying child, who is “claiming his truth,” from the parents whose concerns are interpreted as a rejection of the “real me.”

There is really only one remedy for the emotional pain of the parents: to lead them to entrust the situation, which they cannot control, fix or make go away, into the hands and providence of almighty God. This may seem like small comfort to parents who are turning to the parish priest for answers, but you and I know from experience that unless a deep relationship with God is in place, no amount of intellectual or relational effort will suffice. Pastoral ministers need to start with the parents’ own situation, assessing where their relationship with God and life of prayer has been thus far, and helping them to develop habits of prayer and devotion appropriate to the individual and the family. Particularly useful is teaching the parents to make a daily examen – a meditation on the course of the day that seeks to identify the presence and action of God, even amidst family stress and difficulties. Persevering efforts to recognize God in one’s daily life help the person to grow in the ability to trust and hope in divine providence.

The second goal is formation, that is, “to gain a deeper understanding of the needs, difficulties, and challenges experienced by” people who identify as transgender. We need to find ways to communicate the sorts of information that we have been considering throughout this conference, in forms appropriate to the culture, experience and understanding of the people we serve. We need to be honest about the risks and outcomes of hormone treatment and transgender surgeries, and frankly dissuade parents from the notion that the way to help their son or daughter is to facilitate such treatment. But there are more difficult truths to communicate: namely, that the experience of confusion over sexual identity is not as simple as biological predetermination, but also includes emotional and psychological issues that often includes wounds in self-image and fundamental relationships.

Leo Tolstoy opened his novel *Anna Karenina* with this profound insight: “All happy families are the same. Every unhappy family is unhappy for its own reasons.” It can be very painful for parents to consider the origins of their children’s confusion over sexual identity, when it seems that their family relationships may have contributed to the confusion. Some parents are devastated with shame and guilt; others flatly reject the notion that there is anything wrong with their family. So, the pastoral minister has to be very sensitive to how parents are reacting, and communicate with great charity that the

fact that a situation exists doesn't mean that it was anybody's fault or choice; that in reality they were doing the best that they could.

When they are able to peacefully accept this idea, they can continue to the third goal: "to establish and maintain a healthy and wholesome relationship with their loved ones" who identify as transgender. One of our EnCourage members expressed this step very beautifully:

I came to a realization, some years after he came out to us, that all my tears were mainly for me. That I, I hadn't understood the pain and the sorrow and the shame that [he] had experienced in his life. ...

And I remember, it hit me like a thunderbolt. I said, gee, what about *his* suffering? What is he going through? I know what I'm going through. He's killing me. But what does he go through? And when I came to that understanding, that he had all of these experiences, which were devastating to him as a sensitive, caring, artistic young man that he is. And I had neglected that grief that was in him. That shame that was in him. That hostility too, that was in him. I was too focused on myself and my grief and my disappointment.²⁰

When a pastoral minister can help a parent to come to terms with the experience of the transgender son or daughter, without being drowned in or fleeing from questions of fault, real healing can begin in the family. Even if the transgender son or daughter is still alienated from them, the parents are at least able to adapt their own reactions, and to express love, patience and compassion for the son or daughter.

The fourth goal of EnCourage is "to assist other family members and friends to reach out with compassion and truth, and not to reject, their loved ones." Keeping communication open in the family is not always an easy thing, but there is little hope for healing or assisting the transgender loved one apart from this effort. Some practical considerations are important here:

- "Keeping the faith" does not mean talking about sexual morality at every single opportunity. Sometimes parents experience the situation of their sons and daughters as a rejection of their work to catechize and rear their children in the

faith. They look for the right angle, the right pamphlet or website or Scripture verse that is going to convince their child to turn back to the faith. They need reassurance that their efforts at catechesis were not in vain, and that God is always at work in the hearts and minds of their children. They need to know that they are not betraying the faith if they are not talking about sexual morality all the time.

- Parents also need reassurance that it is not only possible but necessary to say to their child, “I love you very much, but I think that what you are doing is a bad decision.” Many parents are deeply afraid that if they tell the truth, their son or daughter will reject them. In such a case, reassurance is not easy, but the pastoral minister must honestly say that a relationship based on capitulation to ultimatums is not a healthy relationship.
- Transgender behavior has a particularly painful effect on parents and siblings when the son or daughter announces that he or she is now to be called by a new name and new pronouns. The first people to recognize the sex of the son or daughter were the parents, who considered that profound reality when making their first gift to their offspring: the gift of his or her name. Talking this out with the parents, giving them an opportunity to express this pain, and perhaps suggesting ways to find a middle ground with the son or daughter (an old nickname that is not connected with the given name, for example), can be of assistance in maintaining as close a relationship as possible.
- Pastoral ministers caring for a family member should keep in mind that not everyone in the family takes the same view. Pastoral care should strive to help the family member to understand and keep communication open, not only with the transgender loved one, but also with other members of the family. Sometimes family meetings will be helpful, especially when they are facilitated by people with experience in family dynamics and family therapy.

The fifth goal of EnCourage completes a link with the first: “to witness to their loved ones by their own lives that fulfillment is to be found in Jesus Christ through His Body, the Church.” Typically, parents are coming to the priest or pastoral minister to find out how to “fix” their son or daughter. But what the Church really offers is an opportunity for the conversion of the parents themselves: an invitation to see their situation and their own suffering through the lens of the Cross, and to grow in virtue. The model for parents

in these situations, I believe, is Our Lady at the foot of the Cross. She was his mother, and every maternal instinct in her Immaculate Heart must have cried out, “Not him; me. Let me take his suffering, let me carry it instead.” But she was also his first and most perfect disciple, and in the midst of her powerlessness to spare her Son from suffering, she found her strength in her hopeful submission of her own will to the Will of God the Father. Parents desperately want to save their children from suffering and pain, but are so often powerless to do so, especially with adult children. The invitation of Our Lady of Sorrows is to find peace, consolation and strength in the knowledge that God, too, has plans for their children, and in trustful surrender to God’s plan and God’s timing for their children’s conversion, healing and salvation.

Mutual support is very helpful in pursuit of these goals: the most important benefit of an EnCourage group, we have found, is that it brings parents and families together to share their experiences, to teach each other what they’ve learned through trial and error, and to come to a clearer understanding of their own struggles and challenges by talking them out.

Our parishes would do well to provide opportunities for families to get together, not just for socializing, but for real discussions about family dynamics, joys and challenges. This is especially important, I think, because the combination of smaller families, busier parents, and the way that people move so far and so often, leaves many new parents without any prior experience of helping to care for children, and without many family resources to draw on. The millennial generation, who are now becoming parents, are sometimes called the “tutorial generation” – when they don’t know how to do something, there is always a YouTube video to give advice. The problem is that if we leave new parents to learn parenting from online technocrats, they very easily go along with whatever the political or cultural trend is in regard to this or that. Providing opportunities for new parents to have “mentor couples” who have long experience with raising families would go a long way to heading off the misguided notions of gender fluidity that are having such a dangerous impact on today’s children.

III. Pastoral Care of the Individual Who is Confused about Sexual Identity

This particular aspect of pastoral care is, in many ways, the one that is done least. We have heard about how small a percentage of the population identifies as transgender, so the pool of potential recipients of pastoral care is small to begin with. It shouldn’t be

surprising to say, moreover, that people who are claiming a transgender identity, and considering or undergoing “transition” are generally not looking to the Church for approval or support; for now, at least, the Catholic approach to these issues is fairly clear, and typically a transgender person is somewhat alienated from the Church. Still, people who are in this situation will be present in our congregations, at least at holidays and sacramental moments that they attend with their families. All of what was said above -- about sensitivity in language in the context of the homily, about welcome that leads to dialogue and speaking the truth in love – applies even more to personal pastoral interactions with transgender individuals.

Where our pastoral imagination needs to reflect and develop strategies is in our interactions with individuals who, in the midst of feelings of confusion about their sexual identity, are coming to the Church to understand it more deeply, and to figure out how to “acknowledge and accept” their sexual identity. What do we have to say to them? How can we help? What does that acknowledgement and acceptance actually look like?

My pastoral experience and instincts convince me that the most consistent, effective way to approach this is through the lens of maternity and paternity, of motherhood and fatherhood. The cultural conversation, as we have seen, separates gender from sex, and assumes that gender roles are purely socially-conditioned ideas, stereotypes that are not only outdated but oppressive. Yet the faith tells us that complementarity of the sexes is not only a biological reality but also a metaphysical one; that there are differences between men and women – “physical, moral and spiritual” – that apply to every person regardless of place, time or culture.

Pope Saint John Paul II situates the reality of sexual complementarity in the reality of motherhood and fatherhood, with an analysis that is worth considering carefully:

Motherhood implies from the beginning a special openness to the new person: and this is precisely the woman's “part.” ... Scientific analysis fully confirms that the very physical constitution of women is naturally disposed to motherhood -- conception, pregnancy and giving birth -- which is a consequence of the marriage union with the man. At the same time, this also corresponds to the psycho-physical structure of women. ... Motherhood is linked to the personal structure of the woman and to the personal dimension of the gift.

Motherhood involves a special communion with the mystery of life, as it develops in the woman's womb. The mother is filled with wonder at this mystery of life, and “understands” with unique intuition what is happening inside her. This unique contact with the new human being developing within her gives rise to an attitude towards human beings — not only towards her own child, but every human being — which profoundly marks the woman's personality. It is commonly thought that women are more capable than men of paying attention to another person, and that motherhood develops this predisposition even more.²¹

Pope John Paul's insight that there is a specifically *maternal* way of loving, and that it is connected to the “physical and personal structure” of the woman demonstrates that there is an essential connection between sexuality and vocation – because every woman, by virtue of being a woman, is capable of becoming a mother, God gives every woman, by virtue of being a woman, the ability to love as a mother needs to love. In just the same way, we must say that every man, by virtue of being a man, and therefore potentially a father, has been given the ability to love as a father loves.

The first thing to tell a person who is confused about his sexual identity is the good news that God has not created him by accident, but with a purpose: he is made to love. Moreover, his sexual identity is not an accident either: if God has made him male, then he is made to love *as a father loves*, as a husband loves, as a man loves; if God has made her female, then she is made to love *as a mother loves*, as a wife loves, as a woman loves. Then comes the invitation, and the challenge: to realize and accept that one will never be happy trying to relate to others, and to love others, in a way different from the way one is created to love. Transitioning to the opposite gender in an effort to find love and acceptance will never reach its stated goal.

Of course, before the pastoral minister *tells* a person anything, he or she needs first to listen. We accompany a person starting from his situation, remember; so the first thing to do is to locate that starting point. Nearly every conversation I have in pastoral care situations begins the same way: “So, tell me your story.”

When the pastoral minister begins with openness to listening, several things happen. First, the individual who has been isolated by his confusion and suffering hears an invitation for reunion: the pastoral minister is genuinely interested in what he feels,

what he wants, where he's been, where he's going. It will take time for trust to grow enough that he can open up completely, though some people we encounter have been waiting for so long to tell somebody who might understand that they jump at the chance. The pastoral minister who is a careful listener, and has taken the time in prayer and study to imagine where a person experiencing gender confusion might be coming from, will be able to reflect back to the person the important parts of the story – to help the person listen to himself, and see his own story through a different lens. Sympathizing with situations that must have been painful sets a person free to acknowledge the pain; rejoicing in moments of strength helps a person to grow in confidence and in awareness of grace. Above all, the pastoral minister can help the person to reflect on where God was amid the panoply of life experiences, both good and bad, and teach him how to pray with memories of those situations and in so doing, communicate well with God about them.

Having heard, respected and responded to a person's relation of his own story, the pastoral minister can then help the person to evaluate it. Gentle but firm follow-up questions: "So, what are you looking for? Are you finding it? Are you happy? What's making you happy? Is there something that would make you happier?" can bring a person to an honest evaluation, from within, of his current situation. If he's on the wrong road, but he's able to discover that fact in his own time and his own process, he's more likely to want to know where the right road is, rather than defensively, stubbornly persisting on the wrong one. The pastoral minister then becomes a companion on the journey: having sympathized with pain, and mourned together for lost time and lost opportunity, the pair can now seek out the right road and walk it together.

This is not the place to go into a detailed description of the pastoral relationship, but a few comments are important. First of all, this approach is not going to be vastly different from general pastoral practice – all the skills that make a priest a good confessor will be brought to bear here as well. In the particular realm of confusion over sexual identity, though, there will be some significant psychological issues to be faced, as we have discussed earlier in the conference. The pastoral minister has to be ready to make appropriate referrals to psychologists who are faithful to an authentic Christian anthropology to deal with these issues. Finally, the most poignant of these psychological issues, it seems, is what Dr Paul McHugh identifies as the underlying root of gender dysphoria: "Most young boys and girls who come seeking sex-reassignment," he says, "come with psychosocial issues – conflicts over the prospects, expectations and roles that

they sense are attached to their given sex – and presume that sex-reassignment will ease or resolve them.”²²

The pastoral minister cannot single-handedly address or resolve these conflicts over expectations and roles, but he or she can help the individual to reconsider his assumptions in light of his vocation, that is, the expectations that God has for the individual, and the role he wills that each son or daughter of his should play in the family, in the Church and in the world. Faith tells us that a capacity for loving like a father or like a mother is innate, and therefore that a desire to love in that way is likewise an inborn gift from God. Helping a person to consider and appreciate those capacities and desires, and to find ways to exercise them, can expand a person’s horizons and ability to imagine what life might be like, and what God has in mind. We need, therefore, to speak from experience about the goodness of spiritual fatherhood and spiritual motherhood, which are not consolation prizes but real, primordial, foundational relationships of love. Such a discussion is a challenge and an invitation to get to know oneself better, and to become more fully oneself by entering into loving relationships. We reveal a person’s strengths and abilities, and give them a reason to consider what they might *like* about their created sex, rather than simply obsessing on what they hate about themselves and their situation.

Perhaps this method of pastoral care seems daunting. The experience of the other is foreign to our own experience, and it is easier to fear the troublesome parts than to feel confident of finding a point of understanding. It is obvious that such an approach does not bear fruit overnight, and busy priests and pastoral ministers may wonder if they have the ministerial bandwidth to be able to accompany a person, or many such people, for the long term. One’s own woundedness – we are all wounded healers, after all – can provoke fear or discomfort at the thought of listening for long to the hurts and doubts of someone else.

I appreciate these objections, and I don’t have easy answers to any of them, except to speak from my own experience. If you had told me, as a seminarian or a new priest, that I would be involved in this type of pastoral care full-time, not only wouldn’t I have believed you: I wouldn’t have had a context in which to imagine it. But in these seven-plus years of Courage and EnCourage ministry, it has been perhaps the greatest privilege of my priesthood. The opportunity to be a real spiritual father to people who have made a choice to pursue chastity and sexual authenticity, often at the cost of being misunderstood and even losing friendships, has transformed my understanding of the

human heart, and my estimation of just what people are capable of when they are motivated and sustained by grace. I trust and pray that you will find your own pastoral ministry equally rewarding, as you humbly and compassionately welcome these brothers and sisters of ours and accompany them, side-by-side with the Lord Jesus, along their path to holiness

ENDNOTES

¹ Catechism, no. 369.

² *Ibid.*, no. 2333.

³ Pope St John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Dies Domini* on Keeping the Lord's Day Holy (31 May 1998), no. 41.

⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* on the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church (30 September 2010), no. 59.

⁵ Pope Francis, quoted in Antonio Spadaro, "A Big Heart Open to God," *America* 209:8 (30 September 2013).

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World (24 November 2013), no. 164.

⁸ Spadaro, *op. cit.*

⁹ Pope Francis, Address to Participants in the International Colloquium on the Complementarity Between Man and Woman Sponsored by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (17 November 2014), no. 1. Cf. also Canon 768, §2: "[Preachers] are to impart to the faithful the doctrine which the magisterium of the Church sets forth concerning the dignity and freedom of the human person, the unity and stability of the family and its duties, the obligations which people have from being joined together in society, and the ordering of temporal affairs according to the plan established by God."

¹⁰ Spadaro, *op. cit.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Cf. Catechism, nos. 2333 and 2393.

¹³ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* (1 October 1986), no. 15.

¹⁴ Catechism, no. 2358.

¹⁵ CDF, no. 10.

¹⁶ *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 297.

¹⁷ USCCB, *Coworkers in the Vineyard of the Lord* (2005), p. 30.

¹⁸ USCCB, *Coworkers in the Vineyard of the Lord* (2005), p. 41.

¹⁹ Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 297.

²⁰ Bob C., in *Invited to Courageous Love*, Part 4: "Same Sex Attraction and the Family" (video series), Courage International, Inc., 2016.

²¹ Pope St John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris dignitatem* on the Dignity and Vocation of Woman (___), no. 18.

²² Paul McHugh, "Transgenderism: A Pathogenic Meme", *Public Discourse*, 10 June 2015, www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2015/06/15145/. Accessed 15 May 2017.