

Intricately woven by the Lord:
A pastoral reflection on Gender by the bishops of England and Wales

Executive Summary

The human person, intricately woven in secret, by a loving God.

The wonder of the human person is grounded in the mystery of God who, as the psalmist relates, formed us and knows the depths of who we are. (Ps. 139:13-15). The image of God, shines forth in every person and is with this in mind that the Bishops, building on the statement issued in April 2018, offer this pastoral reflection.

Accompanying those who struggle with gender dysphoria is a complex but essential pastoral task. In every human person, regardless of how they understand their identity, the image of God shines forth. (*Evangelium vitae*, 34). Pope Francis warns against views that deny ‘the difference and reciprocity in nature of a man and a woman and envisages a society without sexual difference, thereby eliminating the anthropological basis of the family.’ (*Amoris laetitia*, 56).

All are welcome in the Church and, in fidelity to the example of Christ, the Church seeks always to walk respectfully, sensitively and compassionately alongside people in all the complexities of life, including people’s struggles with gender identity.

Gender Identity Theory proposes that it is ‘inner gender identity’ rather than biological sex that makes a person a man or a woman (or neither). This view leads to a dualistic understanding that separates the material from the spiritual and raises pastoral challenges for the Church, as well as the fields of law, medicine, education, business and religious freedom. With Pope Francis, we distinguish pastoral care of the person experiencing these struggles and ‘[trans]gender ideology’. For the Christian, leading people to the fullness of life in Christ must always be a journey rooted in truth as well as compassion. This accompaniment goes hand in hand with a holistic understanding of the human person.

Our understanding of the human person

Rooted in Scripture (Gen. 1:27 and 31), four dimensions provide the starting point for our understanding: the goodness of the created order, the human person created in the image and likeness of God, the importance of the body and the importance of sexual differentiation.

The natural world is a wondrous work of the Creator (*Caritas in veritate*, 48). Human beings are created in the image of God, possessing a dignity that is given by the Creator. The Christian is called, therefore, to respect the dignity of every individual and this obliges us to avoid every sign of unjust discrimination’. (CCC 2358).

The Fall and original sin leave our human nature wounded. As a result, we experience disharmony in ourselves, in our relationships with others and with creation. In this struggle and suffering, there is the light of hope, given by redemption in Jesus Christ. Those who

experience discomfort relating to sex and gender, are reassured that such confusion is an expression of our common humanity. We groan with the rest of creation and long to be free (Rm 8:23). Wholeness is ultimately restored in each of us as we find the fullness of life in Christ. Our bodies are animated by a spiritual soul. Our whole person – body, mind and spirit – is intended to become, in the body of Christ, a temple of the Spirit.’ (CCC 364).

Both soul and body determine what it means to be human. The body has meaning and importance now and into eternity. This reflects the wonder of the person of Jesus, who is put to death, rises from the dead in his body and ascends to the Father. Our body and soul find harmony through the saving work of Christ.

Since the body shares in the dignity of the image God and was created by God, we must regard the body as good. We honour it, resisting medical interventions, hormonal and surgical, to ‘reassign’ gender where these destroy the body’s fertility or sexual function. Especially ‘the young need to be helped to accept their own body as it was created.’ (*Amoris laetitia*, 285).

Being male or female is fundamental to the understanding of the human person. There is a fundamental equality and distinctiveness in being created man or woman. This is good and willed by God. (Gen 1:27). We must learn how to value our own body in its femininity or masculinity. (*Laudato si*, 155). The sexual identity of the person as man or woman is not purely cultural or social construction. It belongs to the specific manner in which the image of God exists. We cannot separate the masculine and feminine from God’s work of creation. (*Amoris laetitia*, 286).

Towards a genuine pastoral accompaniment

Jesus tells us that he has come that we have life, life in all its fullness (Jn. 10:10). In pastoral accompaniment, we find confidence in these words which enable us to understand the reality of gender within its relationship with sex and sexuality. To appreciate this mystery of created life is to practise a charity which truly enables a person to experience freedom.

Pastoral accompaniment should view the other as “sacred ground”, requiring a reverence towards each person’s situation before God. Thus, we refrain from “making judgements about their responsibility and culpability.” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 172). Whilst there are legal constraints within which many of our institutions operate, we are aware that currently the law is generous and supportive of Catholic life and mission in this particular area. The doors of the church are open to all and all should find, from all members of the Church, a welcome that is compassionate, sensitive and respectful.

Those who offer pastoral accompaniment to gender dysphoric persons should be trained in the Catholic vision and understanding of the human person and a holistic view of human sexuality. This is vital to ensure that the experiences of those struggling with gender identity are properly understood.

We cannot encourage support for reconstructive or drug based medical intervention that harms the body. Rather, our aim is to assist in the rediscovery and cherishing of humanity as created by God. This commands gentleness, respect, patience and love, for primacy always

lies with the grace of Christ. The divine plan is a 'source of objective inspiration for the deeply personal process of making decisions.' (*Amoris laetitia*, 305).

This pastoral accompaniment requires care in the choice of language. Sensitivity and a desire to show respect are important, yet care should be taken to resist the temptation to adopt the language of gender ideology in our institutions.

There are some children and young people who experience gender incongruence/dysphoria. Pastoral accompaniment must flow from an acceptance and celebration of the body as created, respect for parents as primary educators and uphold best practice in terms of safeguarding principles. Medical intervention for children should not be supported. Social 'transition' can have a formative effect on a child's development and this should be avoided with young children.

Following the example of the encounter of the two disciples with Jesus on the road to Emmaus (Lk. 24:13-35), an authentic pastoral accompaniment is one which walks alongside people with compassion, sensitivity and respect. As long and demanding as it might be, it becomes a 'pilgrimage with Christ to the Father'. (*Evangelii gaudium*, 170). Such pastoral accompaniment is not an assertion of the self, but a recognition that we are each wonderfully made by God.