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Community Dialogue on Transgender Phenomenon: A Reflection

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Introduction

In the summer of 2014, two members of the faculty at our Jesuit institution, the University of San Francisco, approached me to participate in a community dialogue on the transgender phenomenon, the lived experiences of transgender individuals. I participated in the event, which included several members of the transgender community. This paper is a reflective piece on my experience participating as a Jesuit Catholic priest, guided by Ignatian values.

My Story

I will address this topic as a Jesuit Catholic priest, and someone who last year discovered that he is cisgender. My reflections come from within the Jesuit Catholic tradition, and by doing this, the last thing I would want is to exclude anyone, as many of you belong to other traditions or none, it is just that this is the tradition I know, love, and understand best. And of course it is the one that informs the mission of our University as a Jesuit, Catholic institution. I invite you all to translate, or engage in dialogue about my comments, from within your own tradition, knowing that I will respect you wherever you are coming from.

I never heard this topic discussed as a Catholic growing up, and only encountered it occasionally in mostly less than positive or affirming ways. When I first came to San Francisco over 20 years ago I worked at the Peter Claver community, a Catholic Charities home for homeless people with HIV. At Claver I got to know for the first time a person who identified to me as transgender. And as I liked this person and got on with him, so a human face was put on being transgender for the first time in my life. And then around 1992 on Christmas Day I went to

the Irish film *The Crying Game*¹ and that was the first time I had seen a mainstream film treat transgender issues and people with dignity and respect.

A couple of years later I interviewed a transgender parishioner who became my friend, Lisa Middleton, at Most Holy Redeemer parish. I did this as part of a dissertation, which later formed the substance of my book: *Gays and Grays*.² At the time Lisa was the only out transgender parishioner at the parish, and I was impressed that the parish and pastor were very welcoming and supportive while she transitioned. I saw Most Holy Redeemer as a model of best practice for a parish.

Then, while I was living in Australia for a year on a spiritual sabbatical, a Roman Catholic sister introduced me to all her transgender friends in Sydney. This Catholic sister worked full time with transgender people and she was a model for me of someone who helped show the face of God to transgender people. I do not know if this sister is the same Australian sister, who does not give her real name in the article, but is quoted as Sr. Monica and as saying, “Many transgender people have been told there’s something wrong with them. They have come to believe that they cannot be true to themselves and be true to God. But there is no way we can pray, or be in communion with God, except in the truth of who we are.”³ However, despite these examples of good practice, the truth is that many transgender people do encounter hostility in the church.

Hilary Howes, a transgender Catholic, says: “I don’t officially exist. That is to say the Catholic Church does not have an official, public policy with regard to the range of gender expression, but considering the churches position on such issues as gays and lesbians, perhaps I should count myself

lucky!”⁴ Roman Catholic moral teaching of course can and does evolve. With regard to transgender people it needs to listen to their experience, allow this experience to dialogue with the best of the tradition, and let this bring forth teaching that is both life-giving and Gospel centered for transgender people.

In recent years I have come to know a number of transgender Catholics, and they have shared their spiritual journeys with me. Their experiences, within and outside the church, have been very mixed. As a gay man who has had to struggle with the positions taken by my church, I have always had a passionate desire to build the kind of Church Pope Francis speaks of: “May we become a church that knows how to open her arms and welcome everybody, that is not a house for the few, but a house for everybody. Where all can be renewed, transformed, sanctified by his love, the strongest and the weakest, sinners, the indifferent, those who feel discouraged, or lost.”⁵

I have come to believe in a God who not only crosses the boundaries of sexual orientation, but also those of gender. St Paul says in his letter to the Galatians that there “is no longer male or female in Christ Jesus.”⁶ For many transgender Christians, Jesus’s life experience parallels their own. A Methodist report puts it well: “We understand our gender diversity to be a gift of God, intended to add to the rich variety of human experience and perspectives. The problem is not in being different, but in living in a fearful, condemning world.”⁷

Many trans Christians feel a sense of resurrection in that one part of them dies and another is reborn in their new gender. Patrick Cheng says that like Jesus for Christians, post transition people are both the same and different. They do not die and return as a wholly different being; rather they are transfigured and resurrected in a way that defies categorization.⁸

Hilary Howes says, “My path of discarding the exterior and superficial life as a false man allowed my formerly invisible female true self to be reborn, present and ever deepening in

my relationship to God. Making my life a parable about the spiritual path we all walk. My path followed Christ, who as we would say, suffered, died and was buried. As a transgender person I suffered alienation, died of shame, and was buried in guilt. Through transition I rose again in accordance with God’s will for me and am now living my transfigured life.”⁹

The late Edward Kessle, a former professor of biology at the University of San Francisco where I work, is best known for his 1983 paper proposing parthenogenesis and phenotypic sex-reversal as a possible explanation for the virgin birth of Christ. While I am not a scientist, I think this means that Jesus would have had two X chromosomes, so he would have been chromosomally female yet phenotypically male. In such an understanding of Jesus, which to my mind is perfectly orthodox, Jesus does not only dissolve divine and social boundaries, but moves beyond the binary, and dissolves all sexual and gender boundaries.¹⁰

Certainly I believe that God who is, in a sense, transgender, one that crosses all boundaries and social constructs. And while God always remains a mystery, and in this sense is unknowable, nonetheless as a Christian I believe that I see the compassionate, unconditional love of God in a special way in the face and person of Jesus. And Jesus always loved and made his ministry in a special way with people on the margins of society.

I also believe that the Church needs to follow this example, beginning our pastoral practice from experience, from where people actually are, in an inductive process. In the past on such issues we have inappropriately begun with a deductive process, one that begins with church teaching and then imposes this on people, without any context or real understanding. This methodology has taken us in directions that do not follow the example of Jesus. Pope Francis is helping us to proceed in an inductive way. St. Ignatius’s spirituality involves discernment of spirits, and so a transgender person of faith can be

invited to engage in an Ignatian discernment, one that leads in the direction of life and love, where what Ignatius calls the good spirit, the Holy Spirit is present.

Transgender Catholics, using this inductive model can engage positively with all the positive dimensions of our tradition and teaching, and let go of those aspects within that would deny their dignity, consciences and who they are most authentically in the sight of God.

Over the years, as I have come to know transgender Catholics, I have found that they are teaching me how to find God in all things, for they are opening up to dimensions of God I had never imagined. As Greg Boyle, S.J. says, “Jesus was not a man *for* others. He was one *with* others. There is a world of difference in that. Jesus didn’t seek the rights of lepers. He *touch*ed the leper before he got around to curing him. He didn’t champion the cause of the outcast. He *was* the outcast. He didn’t fight for improved conditions for the prisoner. He simply said, ‘I was in prison.’ The strategy of Jesus is not centered in taking the right stand on issues, but rather in standing in the right place – with the outcast and those relegated to the margins.”¹¹


Like Fr. Greg Boyle, my role as a priest in this is humble. It is to be an ally and help transgender people realize they do not have to let go of their faith in order to be authentically themselves. That they do not have to lose intimacy with God as they struggle with our presently ambivalent religious tradition. Whether an individual transgender person remains Catholic, or not, is not so important. It is more important that a person find their worth before God as they walk their own authentic path. Ignatian spirituality is a wonderful support in helping trans people find their authentic path and way. One transgender person I will call Jacinta comes from a very traditional Catholic family. I have had to help her to ignore certain priests who told her it was God’s will to accept her biological gender. Such advice left her in a very precarious situation where suicide became a serious possibility. I have tried to

help Jacinta listen to a God of compassion who loves her as she is. Indeed Jacinta told me she experiences this love especially at the Eucharist. I encourage her also to listen to her therapist who supports her transition. I met her mother and father who are divided about her transition for religious reasons. In terms of Ignatian discernment I hope I have encouraged her to listen to those voices and energies within her that lead to life, authenticity, and love. And for her I believe this includes her transitioning. As Jesus says in the Gospel the truth shall set you free.¹² Certain voices, including those of well meaning but badly informed priests only lead her towards death, metaphorically or perhaps even literally.

Conclusion

In my own spiritual path I am discovering a God who celebrates all of my differing identities. Experiencing the love of God as a gay man has helped me to come to see and experience a God who also celebrates with transgender people all of their various identities.

Indeed I see this issue as part of a wider struggle for social justice, one that is a key component of our Jesuit mission at the University of San Francisco. Together we are invited to help bring about God’s dream for our world. God’s dream for a sustainable world with peace and justice for all. Indeed, until all of us are liberated, none of us are free.

As the transgender Catholic Hilary Howes says: “Perhaps your notions of father, mother, brother, sister, husband and wife will be opened a little by meeting someone who has been all of those at different times in her life. Maybe you can take it from someone who has been there that looking at everything in oppositional terms as us and them, black and white, male or female is limiting and dangerous. Ultimately welcoming the mystery of diversity in God’s plan is a starting point for healing in our church,” and I would personally add here our entire world.¹³ 

Notes

¹ *The Crying Game*, directed by Neil Jordan (1992; United Kingdom: Palace Pictures Four Films, 1992), Film.

² Donal Godfrey, S.J., *Gays and Grays: The Story of the Gay Community at Most Holy Redeemer Church* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007) 151.

³ Rennee K. Gadoua, "Sister Monica's Secret Ministry to Transgender People," *Religious News Service*, August 11, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/inside-sister-monicas-secret-ministry-to-transgender-people_55ca46c5e4b0f73b20bad786.

⁴ Hilary Howes, "Mother, Father, Brother, Sister, Husband, and Wife," in *More Than A Monologue: Sexual Diversity and the Catholic Church*, ed. Christine Firer Hinze and J. Patrick Hornbeck II (Fordham University Press: New York, 2014), 48.

⁵ General Audience of Pope Francis, Saint Peter's Square, 2nd October 2013, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20131002_udienza-generale.html.

⁶ Galatians 3:28. St Paul.

⁷ The United Methodist Church's *Made in God's Image*, <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/the-nurturing-community>.

⁸ Patrick S. Cheng, *An Introduction to Queer Theology: Radical Love* (Seabury Books: New York, 2011).

⁹ Howes, "Mother, Father, Brother, Sister."

¹⁰ Cheng, *An Introduction*, 84.

¹¹ Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* (Free Press, New York, 2010), 72.

¹² John 8:32

¹³ Howes, "Mother, Father, Brother, Sister," 50.