

Reflections on the Church's Response to Transgender Persons

By Tony Garascia – November 2015

Comments made by those who are uninformed about transgender persons are often misguided and harmful. For example, some believe that it's a clear biological fact that a human being is born either male or female. This suggests a lack of sensitivity to transgender people and no familiarity with gender dysphoria which mental health professionals treat not as a disorder, but as a profound experience of discomfort that an individual experiences with his or her assigned gender.



Such comments trivialize the true distress that some people feel when their inner experience of gender does not match their biology. Those in the Church hierarchy often seem to want to frame this issue in terms of “culture wars,” where so-called liberals have an anything goes attitude toward defining gender.

However, people do not wake up one day and decide to change their gender; being transgender is deeply rooted in who they are from an early age. There is simply a disconnect between the inner experience of the individual concerning how they identify as female or male and their biology.

One wonders if many Church officials have in fact ever met with members of the transgender community, listened to their stories, their pain, and their attempt to live authentically and integrate who they really are into how they function in the society. If they took the time to meet with the community and consult mainstream researchers and clinicians they would find that transgender people look to their faith and churches for acceptance, often feel alienated from friends, family, and from their churches, face great psychological distress, and are at a greater risk for suicide due to rejection.

In fact, every major mental health organization insists that gender dysphoria is a real experience of discomfort and that it should be taken seriously by parents and health care providers.

According to the American Psychiatric Association, the anguish that some transgender people experience with how they look on the outside and the gender they identify with can be so intense that they may take drastic measures, including teen girls binding their breasts and young teen boys pretending they don't have a penis (Source: DSM 5)

In my own counseling practice, I have worked with parents of transgender children as they work to accept and embrace their child's journey. These parents have come to understand that human sexuality, orientation and gender identification exists on a continuum and that their responsibility toward their children is to listen to their experience and to encourage them to fully accept who they are.

When Church officials have uniformed attitudes and flippant ways of disparaging transgender people and even the LGBT movement, it unfortunately gives Catholics who are struggling with acceptance of an LGBT son or daughter more freedom to minimize and disregard their own child's feelings. Caitlyn Ryan, the founder of The Family Acceptance Project at San Francisco University, points out that LGBT children who experience significant rejection by their families

are eight times as likely to attempt suicide as LGBT children who feel accepted, and are six times more likely to report high levels of depression.

What message does the trivialization of the transgender community convey to the Catholic faithful? What message do these attitudes toward the LGBT community send to parents who might be struggling with an adolescent who just came out to them as LGB or T? Do Church officials really want to encourage parents of LGBT children to respond to their coming out in flippant and dismissive ways?

One would hope that Church officials would truly consult doctors, psychologists, and mental health counselors who have worked with the transgender community to better understand this issue. Better yet, they would do well to actually listen to the experiences of transgender people who fight to be heard and be visible to the hierarchy. If they would only listen, they would understand that this is not about “gender politics” but about treating others with dignity and respect.