

Toward a Proposal for Responding to the Transgender Movement

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In our time and cultural milieu, it appears that any engagement with the topic of gender and gender dysphoria is threatened to be shut down before it is allowed to begin. This is due in large part to the fact that proponents of gender theory are often unwilling to engage in dialogue; one's propositions are shut down before they are allowed to begin. In a moment of self-reflection, however, this shutdown can often be the case because the propositions proffered are "canned," reductive, and to be honest, uncharitable and insensitive. It is my hope to go deeper into the issue in a way that allows for a truly Christian proposal to a situation so often marked by confusion and frustration.

In its 2019 document on the subject, titled "*Male and Female He Created Them: Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education*," the Vatican's Congregation for Catholic Education (CCE) proposed a three-step method which it believes to be "best-suited to meet the needs of both individuals and communities: to *listen*, to *reason* and to *propose*" (§5). This threefold method mimics that employed by Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa theologiae*. One begins by *listening*: truly listening to one's interlocutor, so that one can make the opposing side's argument without making a straw man out of it, tell the other side of the story, and understand and represent the other's view. One then engages in a process of *reasoning*: providing a grounding and rationale for one's own position. Finally, one is then ready to *propose* a response: in light of one's listening and reasoning, a truly Christian proposition can be offered.

Why does the Vatican's CCE believe this method to be the path forward? The danger we face is to never truly listen to the experience of real people,

to remain in the realm of ideas and abstractions, and consequently to offer “canned” responses that sidestep reality. John Henry Newman, in his *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, is famous on this point. Newman points out against his “ghost interlocutor,” John Locke, that the “truth,” evidence, and mere facts are not enough to change minds and hearts. While Locke would argue that we assent to a certain proposition due to the degrees of evidence (see *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*), Newman points out that this is invalidated by our experience. There are many things we believe (and believe quite strongly) without much evidence at all. Furthermore, wonderful rational arguments and perfect syllogisms often fail to convince people. Why is this? Because, as Newman argues, assent to the truth is based on more than “the truth.” As Robert Barron explains Newman, “We rarely ever settle a matter based on formal, thorough, and clinching argumentation. We come to assent to the truth based on the totality of experience.”¹

This is all to say that giving a response to the transgender movement based on theological abstractions, canned answers, and “pull quotes,” such as Genesis 1:27, is insufficient and unhelpful. As others have made clear in this publication and others, the true issue is not a problem of science, biology, or medicine. The data and following conclusions from these sources seem relatively clear if one is intellectually honest.² What is important to this discussion, and to any Christian searching for a response, is the “issue” of our experience, the “totality of experience.” As it will hopefully be made clear in the course of this paper, the problem is not “man versus woman.” The “problem” is us—our common humanity.³ The cry of the person struggling with gender dysphoria or advocating for “new rights” for people who

¹ Bishop Robert Barron, “Bishop Barron’s Lecture from Oxford University: ‘Newman and the New Evangelization,’” October 23, 2019, video, 55:03, youtube.com/watch?v=cP_eL7FiIXk.

² For instance, see: Paul W. Hruz, “The Use of Cross-Sex Steroids in the Treatment of Gender Dysphoria,” *The National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 17, no. 4 (2017): 661–71; Thomas Heyne, Nancy Hernandez, and Lisa Gilbert, “A Catholic Approach to Adolescent Medicine,” *The National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 19, no. 1 (2019): 63–88; Hruz, “Experimental Approaches to Alleviating Gender Dysphoria in Children,” *The National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 19, no. 1 (2019): 89–104; Lawrence Mayer and Paul McHugh, *Sexuality and Gender: Findings from the Biological, Psychological, and Social Sciences*, special-report issue, *The New Atlantis* 50 (Fall 2016).

³ I use “problem” in its original Greek etymology, which refers to something that we need to hold before our eyes in order to make sense of the world. See Luigi Giussani, *The Risk of Education: Discovering Our Ultimate Destiny*, trans. Mariangela Sullivan (Montréal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2019), 70.

identify as transgender, gender fluid, gender queer, and so on—the cry of these persons, the cry of their heart, is the cry of our heart, our common humanity. Their cry is our cry.

Listen: The Battle Cry of the Transgender Movement, the Crying-Out of a Constrained Humanity: Identity, Freedom, and Belonging

Pope Francis recently exhorted, “How important it is to feel challenged by the questions of the men and women of today! Without . . . giving pre-packaged answers.”⁴ On the topic of gender dysphoria we often want to give the pre-packaged answer of Genesis 1:27, “God made them male and female.” We want answers that make this issue black and white, simple, and a non-issue. The challenge for us who think this way, then, is first and foremost to combat within ourselves this tendency to give pre-packaged answers, answers which do not truly respond to what is actually at issue. In other words, the challenge we face, before beginning to proffer our own ideology into the echo chamber of a like-minded audience, and before spouting reasons and responses to our own ideas of what we assume the issue to be, is to first *listen* to experience.

Listening to Personal Experiences

This section of listening begins with a disclaimer. I am taking for granted a general familiarity with current cultural, political, and medical debates surrounding gender, gender dysphoria, and people who identify as transgender or somewhere other than “male” or “female” along what is called the “gender spectrum.” It is beyond the scope of this discussion to lay out all of the background information.⁵ Rather, focus will be given to the testimony of actual people who identify as transgender. As I listened to hours of videos of people giving their testimony about their experience of identifying as transgender, three underlying elements of experience continued to stand out to me: identity, freedom, and belonging.⁶

With regard to the experience of *identity*, listen to these experiences as examples. One person (a biological female currently identifying as a male)

⁴ Pope Francis, Address to Participants in the International Meeting for Academic Centers and Schools of the New Evangelization, September 21, 2019.

⁵ I would refer readers to the book by Ryan T. Anderson, *When Harry Became Sally: Responding to the Transgender Moment* (New York: Encounter, 2018), which gives a helpful overview of the topic.

⁶ An integral part of this article came from spending close to fifteen hours listening to people who identify as transgender share their stories and experience. This was accomplished primarily through YouTube videos, but also through written testimonies.

says: “[My dad] needed me to be straight, Christian, and a woman, . . . and I’m none of those things. All my life I wanted his love and acceptance, but I didn’t feel like I could have it.”⁷ This person does not experience their identity as conforming to the categories supplied by their father. What is more, they express an experience of not feeling loved and accepted, but also far worse, the feeling of not being able to be loved or accepted by their own father. Another person says, “The problem was I never really felt like [a girl]. But in our society, gender isn’t about how you feel, it’s about how we look. It’s assigned to us . . . based solely on what’s between our legs.”⁸ In this testimony, you can almost feel the experience this person has of having an identity imposed on them, an identity which they experience as completely foreign. While more examples could be given, what these examples typify is the element of identity mentioned above. People who identify as transgender often feel that an aspect of their identity is being imposed on them from the outside based purely on how others view them, *and their own personal experience of this element of identity is being denied*. No one likes when their experience is denied, much less flippantly cast aside, and so this must be taken seriously regardless of one’s own position on the issue.

With regard to the experience of *freedom*, listen to these examples. One person says: “Our world is set-up to keep us in these two boxes [indicates the words “male” and “female” on a screen]. But why? . . . Imagine a world where gender isn’t left up to doctors or judges, one where we’re all able to claim our own gender based on what’s between our ears.”⁹ This person feels their freedom being constrained and limited; they are “boxed in” by others (specifically, by the categories given by others who do not seem to understand their experience in the first place). Another person says: “I refuse to identify myself as male or female, as man or woman. . . . Gender expression and gender identity are two separate things. . . . Isn’t everything subject to change?”¹⁰ This exemplifies a *very* common experience of people who identify as transgender, namely, that there is a great desire to have the freedom to choose one’s own identity, to determine one’s own path, and to

⁷ SoulPancake, “Trans Men Share What It’s Like to Come Out as Transgender | Tell A Stranger,” June 19, 2019, video, 12:06, youtube.com/watch?v=sBOOER0gPi4&t=537s.

⁸ The Columbus Foundation, “Hey Doc, Some Boys Are Born Girls: Decker Moss at TEDxColumbus [independently organized TED event],” December 11, 2013, video, 17:02, youtube.com/watch?v=nOmstbKVeBM&list=PLMIgW-CEtvcMsLB7gNTJl af12moWse-ShV.

⁹ Columbus Foundation, “Hey Doc.”

¹⁰ Good Morning Britain, “Should Piers Morgan Be Fired for His Views on Gender?,” October 15, 2019, video, 13:56, youtube.com/watch?v=C1roM98Dass&t=101s.

not be boxed in by others. It is a desire to feel a greater sense of freedom.

Finally, with regard to the experience of *belonging*, listen to these experiences. One person shares: “Maybe you’ll get to the point someday that you’ll see that I’m a person, not a sexuality. . . . I have kinda found this small community of people that, they see me for *all of me* not just one part or the other.”¹¹ Another says: “Being trans is awkward because *everyone else gets awkward* when they’re around me.”¹² And finally: “Imagine a world where you walk up to the ticket agent, and instead of saying, ‘Enjoy the event, sir or ma’am,’ they say, ‘Enjoy the event, my friend.’”¹³ What do all of these experiences have in common? A deep, ineradicable yearning for belonging.

In summary, there is a sense among people who identify as transgender that their *identity* is under attack, their *freedom* is being constrained, and they have no sense of *belonging* in wider society (or even within their own families). And so what can we conclude from this? We have brothers and sisters who are suffering, profoundly suffering.

Listening Closely

The philosopher Charles Taylor points out that we live in the “age of authenticity.”¹⁴ We live in a time in which we see ourselves on a journey *to make meaning*, to be loyal to what speaks to us and to what engages us: to be our “authentic self.”¹⁵ Anecdotally, one of the most common (as well as the most damning) insults that young people give these days is the pejorative “fake”: “You’re fake,” or, “You’re a fake person.” In other words, they are calling the person out for a lack of integrity and authenticity. For example, if you say one thing to one person but another thing to another, you are “fake.” Or if you are my friend in front of me but my enemy behind me, you are “fake.”

So why are the people of this age, specifically those who identify as transgender, suffering? *It is because this authenticity they seek seems impossible to achieve.* “I can’t be authentically myself. I can’t really be free. I can’t

¹¹ SoulPancake, “LGBT People Share Their Experience Being Rejected by the Church | Tell A Stranger,” June 13, 2019, video, 7:59, youtube.com/watch?v=5TmqytFxsVY.

¹² TED, “How to talk (and listen) to transgender people | Jackson Bird,” December 5, 2017, video, 6:24, youtube.com/watch?v=HbQZ7jAvgoI.

¹³ Columbus Foundation, “Hey Doc.”

¹⁴ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007), 473–504 (ch. 13: “The Age of Authenticity”).

¹⁵ See Andrew Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age: Responding to the Church’s Obsession with Youthfulness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 3–15.

truly be accepted.” Many psychoanalysts believe that the greatest cause of anguish among youth today is the suffering brought on by *nihilism*, precisely because the places in which they are searching for meaning (and consequently lack an experience of meaning) are constantly threatened to collapse. “Young people today are not well. . . . They lack purpose. For them, the future has changed from promising to threatening.”¹⁶

As *I listen*, what strikes me is that *the problem here does not concern “gender” as such*, but the experience that, “I cannot truly be myself,” “I will never be fulfilled,” “there is no point,” “the future has nothing for me.” *The problem is this sense of nihilism*. What is the evidence for this? For example, in the past ten years, the suicide rate has risen 56% among youth.¹⁷ Among persons identifying as transgender, 40% of adults reported having made a suicide attempt at least once in their lifetime, and 92% of these individuals did so before the age of twenty-five.¹⁸ Within one year of beginning ministry as a diocesan priest, I had two children from my parish (of only eight hundred families) attempt suicide. One of them was successful.

It is into this “void of meaning” that the “secular religion” of ideology, in this instance gender ideology, has taken up residence.¹⁹ Pope Francis himself refers to “gender theory” as a form of “ideological colonization.”²⁰

¹⁶ Umberto Galimberti, “A 18 anni via da casa: ci vuole un servizio civile di 12 mesi [Out of the House at 18: What’s Needed Is Twelve Months of Civil Service],” interview by Stephano Lorenzetto, *Corriere della Sera*, September 15, 2019, corriere.it/cronache/19_settembre_13/a-18-anni-via-casa-ci-vuoleun-servizio-civile-12-mesi-5e8e05f0-d65b-11e9-8d78-c16bbb32544a.shtml.

¹⁷ Sally C. Curtin and Melanie Heron, *Death Rates Due to Suicide and Homicide among Persons Aged 10–24: United States, 2000–2017*, NCHS Data Brief no. 352 (October 2019), 1–2: “The suicide rate among persons aged 10–24 was stable from 2000 to 2007, and then increased 56% between 2007 (6.8 per 100,000) and 2017.”

¹⁸ S. E. James, J. L. Herman, S. Rankin, M. Keisling, L. Mottet, and M. Anafi, *The Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey* (Washington, DC: National Center for Transgender Equality, 2016), 5, 15.

¹⁹ On the topic of ideology inserting itself into our current void of meaning, see John Waters, “The Human Person: State of Emergency,” the Rimini Meeting, August 20, 2013, video, 1:27:02, youtube.com/watch?v=8u0sSc1NIeg.

²⁰ Pope Francis, Address to the Polish Bishops, July 27, 2016, “In Europe, America, Latin America, Africa, and in some countries of Asia, there are genuine forms of ideological colonization taking place. And one of these—I will call it clearly by its name—is [the ideology of] ‘gender.’ Today children—children!—are taught in school that everyone can choose his or her sex. Why are they teaching this? Because the books are provided by the persons and institutions that give you money. These forms of ideological colonization are also supported by influential countries.”

In a world marked by this nihilism, “ideology has a certain hypnotic charm,” claims John Waters. The reason being that, if you accept the ideology, life becomes calm, “meaning” seems restored, and unanswered mysteries, questions, and anxieties vanish.²¹ While we would love to believe that the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century are over, many of us have succumb to the new tyranny, the new dictatorship, of ideology.

The objection quickly raised is: “How, in a Western Democratic society, with all of our rights and freedoms, could we possibly be experiencing a dictatorship?”²² And the answer is that we have accepted a reduced form of freedom: we have accepted the idea of freedom as “rights.” The more “rights” I have, the more I am truly free. Julian Carrón explains it this way:

The multiplication of individual rights expresses the expectation that the juridical system can resolve these human dramas and ensure satisfaction of the infinite needs that dwell in the human heart. . . . This culture carries within itself the conviction that the attainment of more and more new rights constitutes the path to the fulfillment of the person. . . . [The contemporary world] proposes . . . the infinite multiplication of partial answers.²³

Listen to the arguments for abortion, euthanasia, gay marriage, and so on: they are all framed as the pursuit of “rights.”

On the surface, there appears to be no difference with those who promote granting new “rights” to people who identify as transgender. What the person who identifies as transgender has been told, implicitly and explicitly, is: you cannot be yourself, you cannot be free, and you do not belong. And so, along the same lines as the social movements before them, they have banded together as a group in search of their “rights.” As I listen, however, what I hear from the transgender movement is not really a cry for new “rights,” but *the cry of a suppressed and reduced humanity, a reduced and suppressed heart. But this is the cry of every human heart*—it is no different from the cry of your heart, of my heart. In essence, the transgender movement is revealing us to ourselves. While most of us do not struggle with the expression of our gender, we do share the same humanity, and thus the same cry in the depth of our heart.

This “transgender movement” is, then, not original. It is the issue of Adam and Eve: tired of dependence on the Creator, we seek to strike out

²¹ Waters, “The Human Person.”

²² Waters, “The Human Person.”

²³ Julián Carrón, *Disarming Beauty: Essays on Faith, Truth, and Freedom* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), 11–12.

alone.²⁴ Pope emeritus Benedict calls our time “the age of [rejection of] God the Creator,” and Pope Francis encourages us to think about the transgender issue in this way: a rejection of God as Creator.²⁵

**Reason: Christ Came as a Response to the Cry of the Human Heart:
A Christian Anthropology in the Transgender Movement²⁶**

A discussion of the Christian response to the transgender movement that claims as its frame of reference “God as Creator” would most likely be presumed to develop from the starting point of the creation texts of Genesis, and there from Genesis 1:27—“Male and female he created them.” And while that would be convenient, it would not be particularly helpful. It is unhelpful precisely because Christian anthropology does not begin with Genesis, *but with Jesus Christ*. In the beginning God created—male and female he created, true, but “in the beginning was the Word” (John 1:1).

In point of fact, Christianity makes the distinct claim that Jesus Christ “is the image [*eikon*] of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” (Colossians 1:5). While the whole Judeo-Christian tradition would calmly ascribe to the claim that mankind is created in the image of God (per Gen 1:26–27), it is only Christianity that makes the bold claim that mankind is created in the image of Jesus Christ.²⁷ Consequently, it is this claim that dictates that humanity must be, and in fact can only be, fully understood through the image (*eikon*) or “lens” of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, the claim continues: we not only are able to *understand* our humanity through

²⁴ Waters, “The Human Person.”

²⁵ Pope Francis, Address to the Polish Bishops.

²⁶ The Christological insights drawn out in this section are indebted to Robert Barron’s illumination and exposition of these key elements of Christian anthropology. See, for instance, “What is Faith,” DCC Lecture Series, March 20, 2015, video, 1:19:07, [youtube.com/watch?v=dp21zP50cSE&t=3046s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dp21zP50cSE&t=3046s), and *Exploring Catholic Theology: Essays on God, Liturgy, and Evangelization* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015). I would also highly recommend Paul O’Callaghan’s masterwork on Christian anthropology, *Children of God in the World* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2016).

²⁷ Far from being a “new” theological idea, this idea is rather ancient. Irenaeus of Lyons, a disciple of Polycarp, who was a student of John the Apostle and Evangelist, argues that we are created in the image of the Incarnate Son of God. As Matthew Steenberg notes, “Irenaeus called Christ ‘Adam’ because Christ *is* the image in which Adam was fashioned—he is ‘in person’ that which the whole race is as *eikon* [image]” (*Of God and Man: Theology as Anthropology from Irenaeus to Athanasius* [New York: T&T Clark, 2009], 29). And further, “It is in the incarnate and resurrected Christ that the fabric of humanity, the nature of the human person and the economy of human existence all are to be understood” (51).

Jesus Christ, but are capable of sharing and participating in the fullness of humanity which he embodies (see Col 2:9–10). Or, as the patristic dictum pithily yet profoundly states, “*Deus fit homo ut homo fieret Deus*” (“God became man so that man might become God”). These are the fundamental claims of Christian anthropology. And it was these claims that were in the mind of the Church at the Second Vatican Council when it proclaimed:

The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. For Adam, the first man, was a figure of Him Who was to come, namely Christ the Lord. Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear. It is not surprising, then, that in Him all the aforementioned truths find their root and attain their crown.²⁸

These central claims of Christianity concerning Jesus Christ form the foundation for all reasoning within the realm of Christian anthropology. In fact, Christian tradition continued time and again to affirm and bolster these claims, specifying and expounding on their significance. The Nicene-Constantinopolitan claim that Jesus Christ is true God and true man, fully divine and fully human, is not to be set aside as a mere doctrinal nicety that plays no role in reasoning on anthropology or modern moral issues.²⁹ The Chalcedonic claim that Jesus Christ “must be acknowledged in two natures without confusion or change, without division or separation,”³⁰ is not to be thought of as an abstract dogmatic formula that plays no part in our reasoning. Far from it. If Jesus Christ is who Christianity claims him to be, then he must be the *sine qua non* of reasoning on this pressing question of the transgender movement.

Thus, if the real matter at hand in the transgender movement is, as has been claimed, that “I cannot truly be myself, I cannot be authentically me, I cannot be authentically *human*,” then a helpful and specifically “Christian” response to these anthropological questions must propose Jesus Christ. It is Jesus Christ who reveals to us our *authentic* humanity, and it is Jesus Christ who gives us the ability to attain it. In keeping with this,

²⁸ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), §22.

²⁹ For this affirmation see the Constantinopolitan Creed (381) in *Enchiridion Symbolorum: Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, ed. Heinrich Denzinger and Peter Hünermann, 43rd ed. [DH], English ed. Robert Fastiggi and Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), pp. 65–66.

³⁰ The Chalcedonian Creed (DH, p. 109).

then, let us again use the three elements of *identity*, *freedom*, and *belonging* to examine what it is that Jesus Christ reveals about and makes possible for our human condition.

Identity

With regard to *identity*, Jesus Christ reveals that God is not in some type of competitive relationship with our humanity.³¹ In our experience, two things cannot exist in the same space, at the same time, and in the same respect. For example: I can sit in your chair, but only by supplanting you; I can become a physical adult, but only by first leaving childhood behind; the log can become ash, but only by being burned. There is, by necessity, a “competitiveness” between beings. But that is not the case with God. Think for a minute of the image of the burning bush in Exodus 3:2. When God comes close, the bush is on fire *but not consumed*. When God comes close, the natural is not consumed *but enflamed, made radiant, more fully alive*.³²

In Jesus Christ, God becomes man, humanity and divinity are united in a single person, God comes close. And as God “comes close,” we see the image (the icon, if you will) of one who is *fully human*. The divinity of Jesus does not *supplant* the humanity (i.e., Nestorianism), nor is Jesus a super-human specially blessed by God (i.e., Arianism). Rather, as orthodox Christianity claims, Jesus Christ is fully human and fully divine. Recall the affirmation of the Church at the Council of Chalcedon, that Jesus Christ is “perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity, . . . truly God and truly man, . . . acknowledged in two natures, without confusion or change, without division or separation.”³³

What this means is that God does not have to dominate, supplant, or “burn up” our humanity in order to bring it to its fullness; he does not exist in competition with us or our humanity. Rather, our identity, our *entire humanity*, is brought more fully to life *the closer God comes*. We become “more truly ourselves” when God comes close. Like the burning bush, our humanity is not burned up, but made radiant and brought fully to life. Thus, as we are made in the image of God and specifically the image of the Incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ reveals that our authentic iden-

³¹ See Robert Sokolowski’s concept of God’s “non-competitive transcendence” as explicated in Barron, *Exploring Catholic Theology*, 33–35 and 111.

³² The employment of this image of the burning bush in this topic was borrowed from Barron, “What is Faith.”

³³ The Chalcedonian Creed.

tity, the authentic flourishing of our humanity, is found only in relation, proximity, and adhesion to God.

Freedom

The topic of *freedom* is contentious, to say the least. As good Americans, we tend to think of freedom as our founding fathers did: the overthrowing of oppressive outside rule in exchange for autonomy and “government by the people,” the ability to choose without constraint and do what we want. Indebted in no small part to Immanuel Kant, this view holds that freedom *is* autonomy or self-determination and flows from the casting off of heteronomy (law imposed on one from the outside). Thus, in a common caricature of him, God is construed as an imposing lawgiver, and as such is necessarily a *threat* to one’s freedom. This argument, however, is good only if one subscribes to this typically American and Kantian understanding of freedom.

Throughout the tradition of Western and Christian thought, others have posited the concept of freedom not merely as unrestricted self-determination or the ability to choose between “option A” and “option B,” but as the ability for excellence: the ability to do the good with ease and without impediment. For example, take playing the cello. When I first picked up the instrument, I could not make any sound that resembled music. I had to submit myself to a teacher, long hours of study and practice, and learning all of the “rules” and “laws” of playing the cello. As I began to absorb those laws, I became more free to play the cello. In fact, these laws are now so deeply ingrained within me, playing the cello is “second nature” (a nature that is non-competitive to me). Did my teacher’s heteronomous methods impinge upon my freedom? No. Rather, they kindled and ignited my freedom! This is freedom understood in its proper context: not as the overthrowing of all rules and laws, but as clinging to and embodying these laws which (somewhat paradoxically) “freed” me to play the cello.³⁴

Sparing you the history of the seventh-century Christological controversy of Monothelitism, orthodox Christians hold to the belief that Jesus Christ possesses two wills or freedoms (*thelēma* in Greek and *voluntas* in Latin): one human and one divine. That is to say, in the person of Jesus Christ there is a play between a finite (human) freedom and an infinite (divine) freedom. In Jesus Christ, then, we see that human freedom is not limited, restricted, or “burnt up” by God coming close, but enhanced.

³⁴ For more on this see Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Mary Thomas Noble (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 354–56.

To reference an earlier point: the human will and the divine will are in a non-competitive relationship.³⁵

What this means for us is that when God comes close—when Jesus Christ, the Law incarnate comes close, and I participate in his life—I become more fully alive and my freedom is ignited (again, think of the burning bush). That is why Saint Paul calls himself the *doulos Christou Iēsu*, the “slave of Christ Jesus” (Rom 1:1). As humans created in the image of God, the full flourishing of our freedom comes not from autonomy (doing whatever we want), but adhesion to Jesus Christ.

Belonging

Finally, and briefly, we touch on the theme of *belonging*. One key element of Jesus’s ministry and mission as Messiah was to inaugurate the *gathering* of the tribes of Israel. Yet his ministry and mission did not end there. As the “new Adam” (see Rom 5), his mission extended to gathering *all the nations of the world, the whole of creation*. God’s plan, since the fall of man in the beginning, was a great rescue mission, a mission of “gathering in.” Notice how Jesus’s mission always involved seeking out and saving the lost (Luke 19:10). Jesus was always found welcoming sinners and eating with them (Luke 15:2). In Pope Francis’s words, Jesus constantly goes to the peripheries. Granted, the reason he does this is multi-layered, but suffice it to say that it is a prefiguration of the fact that his mission is for *all*. Again, it is Saint Paul who concludes, “Christ died for *all*” (2 Corinthians 5:15), and, “In Christ Jesus you are *all* sons of God. . . . In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, *male nor female*” (Galatians 3:26). Or as Saint John declares, “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are” (1 John 3:1).

It can sound idealistic, and at times it is undoubtedly difficult to see this lived out in practice, but the fact of the matter is that in and through Jesus Christ *all belong*. Thus, as humans created in the image of God, our belonging stems from the fact that we possess the capacity of sharing in the redeemed and renewed humanity of Jesus Christ, the New Adam.

All of this is to say that Christ comes as a response to the authentic cries of the human heart. In terms of *identity*, Jesus Christ proposes that our identity is found in relation to God and that we become more authentically human and “ourselves” the closer we are to him. In terms of *freedom*, Christ proposes that authentic human freedom is found in relation to divine freedom and that our finite human freedom is enhanced and brought alive by contact with the divine. In terms of *belonging*, Christ

³⁵ Barron, “What is Faith.”

proposes that, through him, with him, and in him, all of creation is gathered back into one, that we become children of God.

Propose: Crying with Them: The Compassionate Christian Response of Witness and Accompaniment

By way of review, the problem is not the issue of man versus woman, it is deeper than that. As we *listened*, we discovered that the youth in general, and the transgender person in particular, are having their “experience of living” called into question. Their identity, freedom, and sense of belonging are called into question. And more than that, they are suffering profoundly because of their inability to live the authenticity they seek. The issue presents itself as “gender dysphoria,” but upon closer examination it is the void created by an inability to be their “authentic selves.” It is into this void of meaning that the secular religion of ideology has inserted itself. Instead of the suffering leading them deeper into the mystery of themselves, it has led them instead to grasp for a reduced form of freedom, freedom as “rights.” The cry for “new rights” is thus discovered to be the cry of a suppressed and reduced humanity, a reduced and suppressed heart. In our *reasoning*, Benedict XVI made clear that all of that to which we listened must be understood in reference to rejecting God as “Creator.” And the “firstborn of all creation” is not Adam, but Christ. “In the beginning was the Word,” and the Word is himself the “image of the invisible God.” It is in his image that we are created. In his Incarnation, Christ reveals the profound truths about human *identity, freedom, and belonging*: “God became man so that man might become God.”

As we now seek to make a *proposal*, recall those initial words from Pope Francis: “How important it is to feel challenged by the questions of the men and women of today!” He continues this thought by saying, “Transmitting God[,] to proclaim the Lord is *to witness to the joy of knowing Him, it is to help live the beauty of encountering Him.*”³⁶ In other words, Pope Francis is telling us that our proposal for people who identify as transgender (and indeed all people) ought to be twofold. First, to be an authentic Christian witness (authority): by your very being and the way you live, be a witness (authority) to what it means to participate in the life of Jesus Christ. Second, to accompany: help others to live the beauty of encountering Christ and do not abandon them in their need for help in living this encounter.

Let me say clearly: the answer is *not* the imposition of values, rules, and

³⁶ Pope Francis, Address to Participants in the International Meeting for Academic Centers and Schools of the New Evangelization.

policies; it is *not* a “program” for middle-school students; and it is *not* a lecture (though these all have their proper place). The answer to *the person* who identifies as transgender is *living the life of a Christian witness who accompanies others*. Like the burning bush, we have to be an attractive and radiant presence, people who by our very being show that Jesus Christ and the Christian proposal responds to the cry of our heart—a cry that we all share.

Identity

As a recently ordained priest, I remember vividly the experience I had of struggling to assume the “identity” of “priest.” Growing up, I was determined to take on the identity of “doctor, husband, and dad.” I “identified” as a future doctor, husband, and dad, and was (self-) determined to take on this identity. Even when I eventually entered seminary, I continued to struggle (as many do) to accept this identity, an identity which seemed to have been forced on me from the outside and was alien to my experience. During one summer, though, everything changed, and it changed not by a lecture or rules or a perfect argument that was made to me. Everything changed through a friendship offered by a Christian witness. Through the witness he provided, and through the constant presence and accompaniment he offered, I was awakened to the fact that this “identity” to which I was called corresponded to the deepest needs of my heart, and was indeed the identity given to me “in the beginning.” I discovered that my identity did not come from self-determination or through “white knuckling” it. It was “given.”

We give persons who identify as transgender the proposal needed with regard to *identity* by living the Christian life, our identity as “little Christs,” in an authentic and attractive way. When we are magnetized to Christ, when we adhere to Christ, when we allow Christ to come close, and are radiant like the burning bush, then we become a living witness, a living question: “Who is this person? Why do they live a life of such authenticity? And what do they have that I do not?” We are tempted to impose an identity on them and make them fit into a category to appease our conscience, but forget that the Christian proposal begins with Jesus Christ and the life and identity he offers.

Freedom

As I previously mentioned, when I was growing up I learned to play the cello. While learning to play the cello, I had to submit myself to an authority, to my teacher. However, Quinn was not some tyrant, thrilled with the ability to control and dominate; I was not enslaved and suppressed

by her authority. Rather, as an authority (or what the Christian tradition calls a “witness” or “evangelist”), Quinn did not suppress my freedom, but ignited it! Although I was constantly frustrated at my inability to exercise my freedom and at times I felt shackled, Quinn was a sustained presence of authority, a witness, that accompanied me. I saw in her playing what I wanted to see in my own playing. The “need of my heart” to be free to play was responded to through her witness, authority, and presence. I became more free in playing the cello by adhering to her teaching.

We give persons who identify as transgender the proposal needed in terms of freedom by demonstrating the freedom Jesus Christ has first given to us. If our way of being and living as people conquered and “enslaved” by Christ is perceived as nothing more than oppressed people living under the heteronomous rule of God, who will listen? True adherence to Christ is marked by a freedom that attracts. Can people see the freedom Christ has brought you? Has Christ brought you freedom? Or do they only see an oppressed person “shackled” and embittered by a so-called faith? We can feel justified by imposing rules on others that we feel have also been imposed on us, but forget that these rules are meant to hone and ignite our freedom.

Belonging

There is a woman at one of the parishes I served at who stopped practicing her faith the day after the funeral of the pastor (who died suddenly and unexpectedly). As I began to speak with her about this, the reason became clear: he was the only one that made her feel welcome. She was from a situation for which the adjectives “irregular” and “complicated” do not do justice. What this priest was able to witness powerfully for this woman was the belonging given by Christ which she possessed.

People who identify as transgender feel alienated from the Church for the same reason: they do not feel like they belong. Instead, they only feel like they belong in the LGBTQ community, with people who can give them a community, affirmation, and a different narrative besides the one they find in the Church—the Church which has written them off as dirty, sinful, and unworthy.³⁷ As Christians, but especially as Catholics, we should take time for deep thought and self-reflection on this: by the fact that we are Catholics, we have *a priori* been labeled as a community that does not accept, love, or accompany people attracted to the same gender, who want to be the other gender, or do not conform to “gender.”

We give persons who identify as transgender the proposal needed in

³⁷ Private conversation with Fr. Ryan Adorjan, Diocese of Joliet.

terms of belonging by seeking them out, by welcoming them, by not keeping them in a “closet.” Once again, the accusation leveled against Jesus was, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:2). If, like Christ, we cannot welcome people and eat with them, how can we call ourselves Christians? Jesus ate with sinners—their conversion came later.

Responding to the Cry of the Heart

I conclude as I began. The problem is not “man” versus “woman.” The problem is us, our humanity: *the cry of a suppressed and reduced humanity, a reduced and suppressed heart, the cry of every human heart*. At its core, the cry of the person who identifies as transgender is no different from the cry of your heart, of my heart. Our tendency is to get into a battle over Christian culture, a defense of Christian values—and that is important and has its place. Yet, “in the Catholic world, the battle for the defense of values has become, over time, so important that it has ended up being more important than the communication of the newness of Christ and the witness of his humanity.”³⁸ When the creation of policies written under the guise of “upholding Catholic identity” and the retreat to certain truths as a “defense of Christian values” are prioritized over witness to the newness that Christ offers through an encounter with him and the accompaniment needed to live the beauty of this encounter, we are neither upholding Catholic identity nor defending Christian values, but entrenching ourselves in yet another self-defeating ideology which we have fortified against the other competing ideologies of our age.

This age in which we live “offers us the opportunity *to witness to everyone* concerning what happens in existence when man intercepts the Christian event along the road of life. Our experience, in the encounter with Christianity, has shown us that the lifeblood of the values of the person is not Christian laws or juridical structures and confessional politics, but the event of Christ.”³⁹ Just like the first Christians, this age offers us the opportunity *to bear witness to everyone* what a humanity that lives in relationship to Christ looks like. It is the burning bush: when we encounter Christ, when we live in relationship with him, our humanity is *enflamed, made radiant, and more fully alive*. Our response starts here. N:V

³⁸ Carrón, *Disarming Beauty*, 18.

³⁹ Carrón, *Disarming Beauty*, 16.