

Intricately Woven by the Lord

*A pastoral reflection on gender
by the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales*

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

‘For you formed my inward parts;
You knitted me together in my mother’s womb,
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
My soul knows it very well.
My frame was not hidden from you,
When I was being made in secret,
Intricately woven in the depths of the earth.’ (Psalm 139: 13-15)

The Psalmist proclaims the wonder of the human person created in love by God. In the eye of the Lord, every person is infinitely loved and loveable. Every person has innate dignity. Every person is something of a mystery - to themselves, and to others - but not to God, who fashioned each of us in secret. God knows the intimate depths of who we are. It is God who ‘knit us together’ in our mother’s womb. Our body holds no secret from God, for God willed and created us in love.

It is with this in mind, that the Bishops of England and Wales, offer this pastoral reflection on questions of gender and identity. We do so in order:

- to accompany all Catholics, especially parents and families, seeking to guide their children and pass on the truth regarding the human person,
- to accompany those who struggle with their identity as male or female,
- to accompany fellow Christians, people of other faiths and all people of good will, who often question the diverse and confusing views that are put forward about the human person, gender and sex, in the educational, medical, legal and political fields.

We offer this reflection as pastors, seeking to accompany you all, and seeking together to allow the wonder of our creation by God to guide us more deeply in accepting the truth of our creation.¹

In this journey we are guided by these convictions: that in every human person, regardless of how they understand their identity, the image of God shines forth;² that every person is willed, necessary and loved;³ that all are welcome in the Church. Indeed, the love of Christ urges us to open wide the doors of the Church to all people, especially to those on the margins and to those who suffer.

In our time, many conflicting, divergent and often contradictory views of the human person have found wide acceptance and can easily dominate discourse. They have led to holders of traditional theories being cancelled or even losing their jobs. A new language has evolved to describe these diverse ideas, with words and phrases appearing in public discourse such as: ‘trans’, ‘transgender’, ‘gender identity theory’, ‘being born in the wrong body’, ‘gender fluidity’ or ‘gender being different from sex assigned at birth’.

¹ The Bishops of England and Wales first issued a ‘Statement on Gender’ in 2018. (20 April 2018)

² Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* 34

³ Homily of Pope Benedict XVI (24 April 2005)

In his Apostolic Exhortation *The Joy of Love (Amoris Laetitia)*, 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. This ideology leads to education programmes and legislative enactments that promote a personal identity and emotional intimacy radically separated from the biological difference between male and female. Consequently, human identity becomes a choice of the individual, one which can also change over time.’⁴

In line with the teaching of Pope Francis and the previous Pontiffs, most recently solidified in the Declaration “*Dignitas Infinita*” released by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, we see the importance of holding together the pastoral care of those experiencing gender dysphoria or identifying as transgender and the need to proclaim the truth of the human person. In fidelity to the example and teaching 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.⁵ We urge all Catholics to behave towards others in precisely these ways.

a. Gender Identity Theory

Gender identity theory suggests that everyone has an ‘inner’ gender identity which, for some people, fails to match the biological sex (male or female) that, it is argued, is assigned to them at birth by cultural convention. It is claimed that it is this ‘inner gender identity’ that makes a person a man or a woman (or neither) and not their biological sex. It is difficult to speak of a coherent movement in which all proponents of gender identity theory speak with a unified voice. Nevertheless, those who propose these ideas are generally at odds with a holistic understanding of the human person; they adopt a dualistic understanding, totally separating the material from the psychological and spiritual. Such a view of the human person is highly pervasive across sections of society, raising significant and pressing pastoral challenges for the Church, as well as challenges in the fields of law, medicine, education, business and religious freedom.

Following the example of Pope Francis in this sensitive area, we too distinguish between pastoral care of the person experiencing these struggles and ‘[trans]gender ideology’. We recognise echoes of our position in many people, across different spheres of society, such that there is a synergy between the Church and many other voices who through science, reason, philosophy and other approaches, highly value biological sex and affirm the importance of the human body as created.

For the Christian, leading people to the fullness of life in Christ must always be a journey rooted in truth as well as compassion, as only ‘charity in truth [can be]...the principal driving force behind the authentic development of every person and of all humanity.’⁶ A genuine and sincere accompaniment of people struggling with gender identity goes hand in hand with a holistic understanding of the human person. We will outline the Catholic vision of the human person which reason and faith both confirm. We will then consider the pastoral accompaniment of those experiencing gender dysphoria/incongruence. Here

⁴ Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* (2016) 56; see also Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith (DDF), *Declaration “Dignitas Infinita” on Human Dignity* (2024) 59

⁵ Cf Catechism of the Catholic Church 2358

⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (2009) 1

we recognise the need for careful discernment and delicate, compassionate pastoral accompaniment.

2. Our understanding of the human person

Our understanding of the human person finds its foundations in the Book of Genesis, where we read:

‘So, God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.’ (Gen 1.27)

‘God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.’ (Gen 1.31)

Within these few words, four dimensions can be discerned: the goodness of the created order, the human person created in the image and likeness of God (called the *‘Imago Dei’* in Catholic tradition), the importance of the body, and the importance of sexual differentiation.⁷ In our faith, these dimensions act as key starting points for any engagement with the issue of gender identity theory.

a. The Created Order

‘God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.’ (Gen 1.31)

The natural world ‘is a wondrous work of the Creator’, which has an ‘inbuilt order’ and a ‘grammar.’⁸ The crown of the creation story is the human person so that within a Christian vision, the human person is an essential part of the goodness of creation.⁹ We are created; we are not the Creator. As such ‘creation is prior to us and must be received as a gift.’¹⁰ Within this created order, the human person also has a nature that we must respect and that we cannot manipulate at will.¹¹ Unless the essential order of human nature is respected, then there can be no true promotion of human dignity.¹² Therefore, ‘we are called to protect our humanity and this means, in the first place, accepting it and respecting it as it was created.’¹³

b. Imago Dei

‘In the image of God he created them’ (Gen 1.27)

Scripture and Tradition witness to and make clear that at the heart of Christian revelation is ‘the truth that human beings are created in the image of God.’¹⁴ As such, everyone

⁷ See also DDF, *Dignitas Infinita* (2024)

⁸ *Caritas in Veritate* 48

⁹ Cf CCC 343 and *Gaudium et Spes* 12

¹⁰ *Amoris Laetitia* 56

¹¹ Address of Pope Benedict XVI to the German Bundestag (22 September 2011).

¹² Cf Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Persona Humana: Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics* (1975) III.

¹³ *Amoris Laetitia* 56

¹⁴ International Theological Commission, *Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God* (2004) 6

possesses the dignity of being a person, who is not just a something, but someone.¹⁵ God's image shines forth in every human person.¹⁶ As Christians, we are therefore 'committed to respecting the dignity of every individual. No human person is to be diminished or devalued and all have an indispensable part to play in the human community, regardless of difference.'¹⁷ Recognition of this inherent and inviolable dignity in all human persons also obliges us to avoid 'every sign of unjust discrimination'.¹⁸

The realisation of this vision of the human person is marred and impeded by the reality of the Fall and original sin. This leaves our human nature wounded. Rather than living in the harmony intended by God the Creator, we can and do experience disharmony within ourselves, in our relationships with others and with creation. This can include varying degrees of alienation, or disharmony, with our body, soul and mind. As a result of this woundedness, we are often confused and confounded by conflicting desires.

The Good News is that Christ came to restore the original harmony intended for us. In the depths of struggle and suffering, there is the light of hope, given by redemption in Jesus Christ.¹⁹ In Christ, God is reconciling us to himself, and it is Jesus, 'the image of God, who enlightens fully and brings to completion the image and likeness of God' in the human person.²⁰

Those who experience discomfort around issues relating to sex and gender, are reassured that such confusion, although deeply painful, is an expression of our shared humanity. We all experience dissonance and dilemmas. As St Paul said, we groan with the rest of creation and long to be free, 'as we await eagerly our adoption as children, the redemption of our bodies' (Rom 8.23). Wholeness is only ultimately restored in each of us by finding the fullness of life in Christ. We cannot rely on human means alone to resolve internal tensions. To do so will only sow further doubt and distress.

It is also important to note that the whole of the human person is seen as being created in the image of God.²¹ A person cannot be reduced to one element of his or her being, such as his or her body or sex/gender. To do so would be to distort this image.²² We are invited to 'see each person holistically rather than seeking to define them by just one aspect of their identity.'²³ Our bodies are animated by a spiritual soul, and it is our whole person - body, mind and soul - that is intended to become, in the body of Christ, a temple of the Spirit.²⁴

¹⁵ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2004) 108 and *Gaudium et Spes* chapter 1

¹⁶ Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 34

¹⁷ Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference, *Created and Loved: A guide for Catholic schools on identity and gender* (2022) 4

¹⁸ CCC 2358; see also DDF, *Dignitas Infinita* (2024) 55

¹⁹ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2004) 121

²⁰ *Ibid*

²¹ International Theological Commission, *Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God* (2004) 9

²² Cf Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2004) 124-6

²³ Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference, *Created and Loved: A guide for Catholic schools on identity and gender* (2022) 4

²⁴ CCC 364

c. Body-Soul Unity

We believe that the human person ‘though made of body and soul, is a unity,’ wherein spirit and matter ‘are not two natures united, but rather their union forms a single nature.’²⁵ There might be a distinction between soul and body, but both together determine what it means to be human. The body has meaning and importance both in this present moment and into eternity.²⁶ Belief in the unity of the body and soul flows from the life-giving mysteries of the Christian faith. This belief also unfolds those same mysteries. In the Incarnation of Christ, the divine *logos* becomes flesh and assumes a human nature. Jesus’ body is crucified in obedience to the Father’s will and becomes a loving sacrifice for all. In the Resurrection, Jesus rises from the dead in his body and ascends to the Father. Jesus continues to abide with us in the Eucharist. In the Creed we profess our participation in these mysteries and our belief that our body and soul will then find the harmony intended for them from the beginning of creation and through the redemptive actions of Christ revealed to us in the Gospels.

This is why Pope Francis stresses that ‘the acceptance of our body as a gift from God is vital for welcoming and accepting the entire world as a gift from the Father...learning to accept your body, to care for it and to respect its fullest meaning.’²⁷ Since the body shares in the dignity of the image of God and it was created by God, we must not despise bodily life. Rather we are obliged to regard our body as good.²⁸ We are to honour our body²⁹ resisting medical interventions, intended to “reassign” gender where these destroy the body’s fertility or sexual function.³⁰ Views that promote a misleading view of the human body are deeply concerning as they foster such a limited and flawed view of the human person as to serve the detriment of the good of the individual. Whilst recognising with great love and compassion the difficulties individuals may experience with regards to gender variance, it is clear that all and especially ‘the young need to be helped to accept their own body as it was created.’³¹

d. Sexual Differentiation

‘Male and female, he created them’ (Gen 1.27)

From the very beginning, the human person is created male or female and the ‘life of all humanity... is marked by this primordial duality.’³² Being male or female is fundamental to understanding the human person. This may not be reduced to the solely physical or biological. Our sexuality contributes significantly to the psychological and the spiritual aspects of our human nature. Being male or female is therefore ‘a fundamental component of personality, one of its modes of being, of manifestation, of communicating with others, of feeling, of expressing and of living human love.’³³

²⁵ CCC 364 and 365

²⁶ CCC 364

²⁷ Catholic News Agency, *Pope Francis: Human ecology begins with accepting the body* (25 June 2018)

²⁸ see DDF, *Dignitas Infinita* (2024) 57

²⁹ Cf CCC 364

³⁰ see DDF, *Dignitas Infinita* (2024) 60

³¹ *Amoris Laetitia* 285

³² Pope John Paul II, *Grantissimam Sane* 6

³³ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World* (2004) 8

There is both a fundamental equality, and a distinctiveness, in being created man or woman.³⁴ This is good and willed by God'³⁵ We are therefore invited to 'acknowledge and accept' our sexual identity as woman or man.³⁶ As Pope Francis highlights, 'it is not a healthy attitude which would seek to cancel out sexual differences because it no longer knows how to confront it'.³⁷ Therefore, when we consider human sexuality and affectivity, we must learn how to value our own body in its femininity or masculinity.³⁸ This is necessary if we are going to be able to recognise ourselves in 'an encounter with someone who is different'³⁹, and if we are to 'joyfully accept the specific gifts of another man or woman, the work of God the Creator and find mutual enrichment.'⁴⁰

With regard to the matter of biological sex and the socio-cultural role of sex (or some might say gender), we are keen to emphasise that while these can be distinguished, they cannot be separated.⁴¹ We recognise that how we live out our roles as male or female 'is not simply the result of biological or genetic factors, but of multiple elements having to do with temperament, family history, culture, experience, education, the influence of friends, family members and respected persons as well as other formative situations.'⁴² We also recognise that roles attributed to the sexes may vary according to time and space.⁴³ Therefore, 'rigid cultural stereotypes of masculinity and femininity are... unfortunate and undesirable because they can create unreasonable pressure on children to present or behave in particular ways.'⁴⁴ However, it is clear that the sexual identity of the person as man or woman is not purely a cultural or social construction and that it belongs to the specific manner in which the image of God exists.⁴⁵ As Pope Francis highlights, 'we cannot separate the masculine and feminine from God's work of creation, which is prior to all our decisions and where biological elements exist which are impossible to ignore.'⁴⁶

3. Towards a genuine pastoral accompaniment

Our faith commits every follower of Christ to imitating the boundless mercy and compassion of God in the ways in which we listen and seek to understand each and every person in their complexity, including those struggling with gender identity. Jesus tells us he has come that we may have life, life in all its fullness (cf Jn 10.10). In this task of pastoral accompaniment, we find confidence in these words of the Lord, which may enable us to embrace the reality of gender within its relationship with sex and sexuality. To appreciate this mystery of created life is to practise a faithful charity which truly seeks to enable every person to experience freedom.

³⁴ see DDF, *Dignitas Infinita* (2024) 58

³⁵ CCC 369

³⁶ Cf CCC 2393

³⁷ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* (2015) 155. See also Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* (2016) 285

³⁸ Pope Francis *Laudato Si'* 155

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Ibid. See also *Amoris Laetitia* 285

⁴¹ Cf *Amoris Laetitia* 286; see also DDF, *Dignitas Infinita* (2024) 59

⁴² *Amoris Laetitia* 286

⁴³ International Theological Commission, *Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God* (2004) 33

⁴⁴ Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference, *Created and Loved: A guide for Catholic schools on identity and gender* (2022) 4

⁴⁵ Cf ibid

⁴⁶ *Amoris Laetitia* 286; see also DDF, *Dignitas Infinita* (2024) 59

In his Apostolic Exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel (Evangelii Gaudium)*, Pope Francis frames the ‘art of accompaniment’ in these words, ‘[it] teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other... The pace of this accompaniment must be steady and reassuring, reflecting our closeness and our compassionate gaze which also heals, liberates, and encourages growth in Christian life.’⁴⁷

Flowing from this, our pastoral accompaniment should view the other as “sacred ground”, viewing every person as they are at this moment. The heart of accompaniment, then, requires a reverence towards each person’s situation before God and towards each person’s life of grace as ‘mysteries which no one can fully know from without’.⁴⁸ This, states Pope Francis, means we refrain from ‘making judgements about their responsibility and culpability’.⁴⁹

We recognise that such pastoral accompaniment is complex, encompassing legal, medical, psychological, theological, spiritual and pedagogical elements. It takes place within the context of ever-changing and polarising developments in the political, cultural and commercial spheres. Whilst mindful of the legal constraints within which many of our institutions operate, we are aware that currently the law is generous to and supportive of Catholic life and mission in this particular area. Whilst accompaniment must be tailored to the needs of each individual person, some broader practical principles for pastoral work in our parishes, workplaces, schools and other settings, can be discerned from the foundational Catholic understanding of the human person we have reflected on above.

Thus it is that we speak to those adult members in our Catholic communities who have chosen to transition socially and medically: ‘You are still our brothers and sisters. We cannot be indifferent to your struggle and the path you may have chosen. The doors of the Church are open to you, and you should find, from all members of the Church, a welcome that is compassionate, sensitive and respectful.’

Those who offer particular pastoral accompaniment to gender dysphoric persons need a clear understanding of the Catholic vision and understanding of the human person and a holistic view of human sexuality.⁵⁰ They need to be skilled in discernment and, through establishing safe and trusting relationships with those people and families experiencing gender dysphoria, their work should help young people ‘to discern how God is calling them to find true happiness’. This formation and competence is vital to ensure that the testimonies and lived experiences of those struggling with gender identity can be properly understood and responded to in a way which honours their perception of reality, particularly when painful. At the same time, we are encouraged by Pope Francis to accompany others to a complete appropriation of the mystery of our human nature.⁵¹

For all these reasons, we cannot encourage or give support to reconstructive or drug based medical intervention that harms the body.⁵² Nor can we legitimise or uphold a way of

⁴⁷ Pope Francis *Evangelii Gaudium* 169

⁴⁸ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* 172

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ A summary of Catholic Teaching on sexuality and gender can be found in DDF, *Dignitas Infinita* (2024) 55-60

⁴⁶ Ibid, 171

⁵² This does not apply to medical interventions aiming at resolving genital ambiguity, see DDF, *Dignitas Infinita* (2024) 60

living that is not respectful of the truth and vocation of each man and each woman, called to live according to the divine plan.

Rather, when a family or person experiencing these challenges seeks to be accompanied on their Christian journey, our aim is to help them rediscover and cherish their humanity as it was conceived and created by God, body and soul.⁵³ We know that this must be done with gentleness, respect, patience, and love. As Christ consistently demonstrated in his teaching ministry, and taking him as the only sure model of authentic pastoral accompaniment, we must first listen to and understand the situations of all those we meet, and then slowly and patiently invite them, as he did, to embrace a wider horizon, the horizon of God's love for each person.

In this accompaniment, we consistently recognise that this divine plan is a 'source of objective inspiration for the deeply personal process of making decisions.'⁵⁴ We acknowledge that these decisions will be achieved step by step, and gradually within 'the prudent exercise of free acts on the part of subjects who are not in a position to understand, appreciate or fully carry out the objective demands of the law'.⁵⁵

In the journey of discipleship, which constantly unfolds, primacy always lies with the grace of Christ. It is, then, the face of Christ which sets in motion each person's salvation history wherever that face may be glimpsed. Certainly, our task of pastoral accompaniment is expressed 'in an endless desire to show mercy, the fruit of our own experience of the power of the Father's infinite mercy'.⁵⁶

This pastoral accompaniment also requires care in the choice of language used. Our choice of words is always to be assessed in the complex situation of social interaction. Sensitivity and a desire to show respect are important. We should never seek to cause offence to another, including in situations where the other person advocates a view of reality that is different from or departs from the Church's vision of the human person. Yet care should be taken to resist the temptation to adopt the language of gender ideology in our institutions.⁵⁷ In the heat and confusion surrounding the 'gender issue', the Church is called to proclaim an authentic understanding of the human person with clarity, simplicity, love and respect.

With regard to children and young people, across society and within the Church, there are some who experience gender incongruence/dysphoria. From a pastoral perspective, accompaniment must have at its heart an acceptance and celebration of the body as created, respect for parents as primary educators, and should uphold best practice in terms of safeguarding principles. Medical intervention for children should not be supported. It should also be recognised that social 'transition' (living in the opposite gender role) can have a formative impact on a child's development and can set a child on a path towards later medical interventions. Care should be taken to avoid this especially with young children.

⁵³ Cf *Amoris Laetitia* 56, 285

⁵⁴ *Amoris Laetitia* 305

⁵⁵ *Ibid* 295

⁵⁶ Pope Francis *Evangelii Gaudium* 24

⁵⁷ see DDF, *Dignitas Infinita* (2024) 56

There are pressures in the spheres of education, healthcare, business, wider society and our own pastoral settings actively to affirm and encourage both adults and children to conform with the other gender to resolve their gender dysphoria. Many do not find ultimate happiness with this transition. What we are able to affirm in each and every pastoral situation is the truth that the individual person, no matter how distressed and disturbed in their own sense of self and reality, is known and loved by God in all their complexity, including confusion about their gender identity.

4. Conclusion

As disciples of Jesus Christ, we are called to live in imitation of his example of love and service. The Gospels are full of encounters Jesus had with people on the margins, those who struggle, those who suffer, those who seek truth.

The Road to Emmaus in Luke's Gospel, where Jesus meets two disciples after his resurrection (cf Lk 24.13-35), is a powerful model of how Christ's example can inspire us all in this delicate area. Jesus begins by walking alongside these two disciples in their pain and their confusion. Through questions, he strives to know what they are thinking and feeling. Jesus listens to them and does not force the truth upon them. He patiently awaits the invitation to stay with them. He reveals the truth gradually, leading them to understand the mystery of what has happened in his dying and rising. For these two disciples, Emmaus is not the end of their journey. From their meeting with Jesus they are sent forth again, on a new mission. They rush back to Jerusalem to share the good news with the other disciples.

An authentic pastoral accompaniment is one which always walks alongside people with compassion and sensitivity, treating each person with 'the maximum of respect'.⁵⁸ Accompaniment 'capable of reaching out to those who are experiencing complex and painful situations' is one which requires and nurtures trust, calmness, openness, time, careful discernment, and 'a patient and understanding ear, far removed from any unjust discrimination.'⁵⁹ Rooted in the truth of the human person, this accompaniment, as long and demanding as it might be, becomes 'a pilgrimage with Christ to the Father'.⁶⁰ This form of accompaniment is never an assertion of self, but a recognition that the revelation we have received, and reflected upon here, opens for all a joyful acceptance of self as a gift of God. Yes, we are all in need of God's healing. Only with this truth can we finally come to know and love ourselves, others and God and truly pray,

'I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.' (Ps 139.14)

⁵⁸ Cf CCC 2358 and Congregation for Catholic Education, *Male and Female He Created Them: Towards a path of dialogue on the question of gender theory in education* (2019) 56

⁵⁹ Ibid

⁶⁰ Pope Francis *Evangelii Gaudium* 170