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Male and female: Our identity in God's plan

Bishop John T. Folda

The phenomenon of people considering themselves to be “transgender” or “transsexual” has moved with surprising speed from the margins to the center of our society. While the vast majority of the population understands the basic science of human sexuality, the media is full of stories of those who have chosen a different “gender identity” as well as efforts to normalize this movement. And along with this effort comes the expectation that others will assent and support such a change.

Pope Francis vigorously denounces what he calls an “ideology of gender.” In *Amoris Laetitia* (“The Joy of Love”), his recent document on marriage, he warns that there is a growing ideology of gender that separates personal identity “from the biological difference between male and female.” In this view, “human identity becomes the choice of the individual, one which can also change over time” (56).

Gender ideology is based on the notion that biological sex distinctions should be meaningless and interchangeable. According to this line of thinking, gender is a fluid concept, something assigned at birth but not rooted in any unchanging reality. However, science tells us otherwise, and so does our faith.

In the Book of Genesis, we read that “in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them.” Each one of us—male or female—is created in God’s own image and likeness, and to deny this inherent part of our being is to deny the intention of God, who formed us out of love and with divine purpose.

Gender dysphoria or confusion is undoubtedly a heavy cross and calls for a response of compassion and support. There is no place for disparaging words or attitudes toward those who struggle with this disorder or any of the other physical, emotional or psychological consequences of living in a fallen world. But at the same time, one must acknowledge the facts of creation, the reality of God’s plan, and the limits of our power to change what we don’t like.

In the face of this cultural challenge, the Church reaffirms the beauty and sovereignty of God’s design in the life of each person, which includes their bodily integrity and gender. To put it quite simply, we must not presume to alter the biological sex God has given us. Pope Francis warns: “It is one thing to be understanding of human weakness and the complexities of life, and another to accept ideologies that attempt to sunder what are inseparable aspects of reality. Let us not fall into the sin of trying to replace the Creator. We are creatures, and not omnipotent. Creation is prior to us and must be received as a gift” (*Amoris Laetitia*, 56).

In 1992, Justice Anthony Kennedy wrote, “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life...” On the surface, this sounds like a great expression of freedom. But how can anyone reasonably say, “I can define the universe?” This exaggerated notion that each individual can define existence, meaning, the universe, and life in their own way is an underpinning to gender theory, which renders everything changeable and nothing stable, even our biological constitution. Furthermore, it assumes that no one can say otherwise, and those who disagree or hold to objective truths can be written off as closed-minded, bigoted and intolerant.

Gender theory has now worked its way into educational programs and public policy as well. In fact, during the past year, agencies of the federal government issued new regulations that redefine discrimination based on “sex” to include “gender identity” and even “termination of pregnancy.” Last year the U.S. Department of Education told public schools across the country receiving federal funds that they must provide services, restrooms and “equal access” to all students according to their stated gender identity. In other words, the government required that a boy, who now considers himself a girl, must be permitted to use girls’ restrooms, play on girls’ teams and change in locker rooms with girls. This is simply wrong, and fortunately, this rule was overturned in court, for now.

But there are also new rules concerning health care. As of January 1, 2017, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has effectively required most employers, medical providers, educational institutions and health insurers – including dioceses, parishes, schools and Catholic Charities – to cover transgender services in their health plans, or in certain cases to directly provide and perform those services. Thus, even Catholic dioceses, schools, hospitals or Catholic-owned private businesses would be required to pay for gender reassignment surgery, hormonal treatments and counseling, as well as coverage for abortion.

So, at the end of December the Diocese of Fargo, along with Catholic Charities of North Dakota, and the Catholic Benefits Association, which includes several hundred other Catholic institutions throughout the nation, filed a lawsuit in federal court to halt the implementation of these new rules. It is our hope that this suit will protect those institutions and individuals that cannot in conscience provide or cooperate with such services. We do not take this action lightly, but feel it is necessary to protect the religious liberty of those who cannot agree to the distortions and demands of gender ideology.

The Church holds to its constant belief in God's plan for his children, male and female, but we also acknowledge the call of our Lord to accompany those who are not at peace with their own identity. While the culture now tells us that gender is arbitrary and switching genders will solve all our problems, God tells us that only he can give us lasting joy and peace. As the poet Dante says, "In his will is our peace."

To those men and women who experience the pain of gender confusion, we must profess the unfailing love of God. By our friendship and pastoral care, we assure them that they are not alone on their journey. They are loved and cherished, and they are beautiful in God's eyes. Families that experience this challenge need the understanding and support of their brothers and sisters in faith, so they too will know that they are not alone. And, as always, we offer the support of prayer and penance so that the suffering of others might be lightened.

These events show us how wounded our culture is and how profoundly we need the healing of God. Let us entrust our nation once again to Jesus Christ and the Immaculate Virgin Mary, and be active, joyful missionary disciples of his truth and mercy.