



Transgender Realities Student Lives and Community Challenges

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Abstract: Transgendered students face a number of personal and social issues, a great deal of which emanate from people's ignorance about transgenderism. As an educational community, it is the duty of its members to create a safe and supportive environment for everyone. Seeing the relevance of gender in all its forms and across disciplines is one way to raise awareness and broaden people's perspectives on the complexity of living in a gendered society. Yet, a common misperception is that discussions about transgenderism are limited to specific disciplines or courses, such as Psychology, Human Sexuality, or Gender Studies. Even faculty open to such dialogs may not feel they understand enough to facilitate meaningful discussions in the classroom. In the current paper, scholars from Social Psychology, Religious Studies, and History, and a recent graduate in English and Secondary Education, provide a context for understanding how transgender issues can be addressed in the classroom and the larger college community. We share ideas, techniques, research, observations, and personal experiences. We also illustrate how transgenderism can be successfully integrated into a course by concluding with an example of the recent graduate's work in a Religious Studies course.

John S. left behind more than most students when he graduated from high school last year. The stares and jokes in the locker room. The sneaking into the bathrooms when no one else was around. The teachers who either re-

fused or forgot to call him John instead of Caroline. And a school administration he says not only misunderstood his needs, but also failed to try. "We have to get it out in the open and talk about this at an earlier age. Had that

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happened for me, I think I'd be farther along in this process," John said. "Maybe rather than just now feeling confident and okay with feeling like a boy, I would be on my way to feeling like a man." (Williams, 2005)

If issues of gender nonconformity had been talked about "at an earlier age," not only would John's experiences have vastly improved his sense of well-being, his classmates would also have had the opportunity to question their own gender assumptions and the gender essentialism that insists on stereotyped sets of behaviors and expectations that are traditionally attached to biological sex. So how do we go about addressing questions of gender identity in the classroom and on the college campus, especially in those courses that do not focus particularly in that area? Coming together from various disciplines and perspectives, members of the Emmanuel College faculty and student body discussed issues that face transgendered individuals and how all members of a college community can be aware and supportive. The result of this collaborative effort is the following dialog about how notions of gender and transgender play out in the classroom, the curriculum, and on campus.

I. HAVING A COMMON LANGUAGE

Most individuals use the terms 'sex' and 'gender' interchangeably. Whether they indeed believe that our gendered behavior derives directly from our genes and hormones, or the terms are used for convenience, the true relevance of these seemingly simple words is at the core of the present discussion. The dominant, or normative, view of gender is as a binary construct—we are male OR female. Even though most people are aware of the more contemporary arguments of gender as a continuum, that does not mean they know

the language that acknowledges and identifies the diverse ways that people can define themselves. As such, to have a meaningful discussion about transgender realities, we all should be on the same page.

Sex refers to our biological/genetic status, which itself is not binary; individuals may be male, female, or somewhere in between (i.e. inter-sexed). Gender, traditionally equated with sex, refers to the cultural expectations for male and female appearance, behavior, etc. Certainly one reason people 'confuse' sex and gender is that we don't necessarily know whether people's self-expressions are originating from something biological, something socialized, or (most likely) some combination of the two.

The distinctions of gender become more complicated as we introduce the distinctions between what we may physically be, how we view ourselves, and how we choose to express ourselves in public. Gender identity refers to our psychological sense of self as being a man, woman, or somewhere in between. In this case, people whose psychological sense of self does not 'match' with their biological self are considered transgendered. Transgender has been used as an umbrella construct to describe anyone who violates traditional gender roles (e.g., transsexuals, cross-dressers), but such an overgeneralization tends to confuse people and lead to stereotypes about those who do not fall into neat, binary categories of male or female. This raises an important issue with regards to the power of language to define and normalize. Johnson (2006) has argued that the dominant group is often invisible; for example, if an instructor states that the class will have a discussion about race, students do not assume they will talk about whites. The dominant group is the norm, and the non-dominant groups are 'other.' Sisgender describes someone whose gender identity is consistent with their biological status, yet it is a term rarely heard or even known by most. Recognizing and using this term reinforces

that everyone falls along the gender continuum, thus making gender relevant to everyone's lives.

Gender expression and gender attribution further illustrate the complex relationships between internal and external concepts of gender. Gender expression refers to the behaviors we use to communicate our gender identity to others (e.g., clothing, hair, mannerisms, activities). Gender attributions are the judgments others make about our gender identity based upon our gender expression. The extent to which our expression reflects how we view ourselves versus how we want others to view us varies from person to person. The relevance of gender in most cultures differentially impacts how much we monitor and adjust our gender expressions within given situations. As such, gender is more than just a label. It is primary in how we define ourselves and interact with others. As educators and individuals, we should all be aware of how gender plays out in the classroom and on campus.

II. A SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE: NAVIGATING SOCIAL NORMS AND PRIVILEGE

While transgenderism has been at the forefront of discussions amongst academics, physicians, counselors, and members of the LGBT community for at least the last decade, the reality of how it is addressed in the classroom, the dormitory, and the larger college community is rarely the focus of frank, public dialog. There are those with expertise through their discipline and those with personal experiences at varying levels of their own; yet there are so many, including faculty, staff, administrators, and students, who are unaware of the realities that transgendered individuals face.

We understand social norms all too well when we violate them. We know when we have violated a given social group's ex-

pectations, whether by our appearance or behavior or some other way, because its members react with varying levels of surprise, disapproval, or rejection. In an Emmanuel College Social Psychology course, students are asked to violate a social norm, note how others react to them, and how that reaction makes them feel. Students select uncomplicated, often amusing behaviors (e.g., wearing odd clothing, facing the rear of an elevator, being a 'close talker'); what is most powerful is that their reports are quite similar—people look at them strangely, laugh at them, or even verbally express a negative reaction, and this inevitably makes the students feel odd, uncomfortable, out of place. This simple exercise effectively illustrates the power of the social group to influence our feelings about ourselves, and our subsequent behavior. Moving around in society involves a careful balance between expressing our individuality and meeting the expectations of those around us. The ability of transgendered individuals to strike this balance can mean the difference between approval and stigma, life and death.

Kroeger (2004) defined 'passing' as actions people take to present themselves as other than who they understand themselves to be. Here, people's gender expressions are consciously constructed with the purpose of having others make cisgender attributions to them. The need for people to 'pass' is just one example of how our lives are shaped by privilege. The unearned advantages that are the hallmark of privilege (McIntosh, 1988) are based upon group membership, or social perceptions of one's group membership, not on who we really are as individuals. People's motivation to pass is to simply gain access to the benefits and advantages afforded privileged groups and to avoid rejection or exclusion by the dominant culture (Kroeger, 2004). While campus culture is influenced by all of its members, those in power set the tone. Despite affirmations and aspirations to open-

ness to intellectual and individual diversity, higher education is still strongly shaped and influenced by the ideas of dominant culture. Raising awareness of privilege in relation to gender is key to transforming a culture that respects and embraces diversity.

III. A RELIGIOUS STUDIES PERSPECTIVE IN A ROMAN CATHOLIC COLLEGE

Many, if not most, of the students entering a Religious Studies classroom at a Catholic College, it is safe to assume, have a particular set of expectations. Those who come from and still adhere to a somewhat traditional faith background assume that what they hear will affirm and strengthen their preconceptions; those who have serious questions about traditional Christianity's perspectives on sex and gender often come expecting to have to defend and carve out a space for their exploration of alternative views. This may be a particular issue in the Religious Studies classroom of a Catholic College, yet we suggest it is not too far removed from what faces all of us every day as we attempt to incorporate issues of diversity, and particularly sexual and gender diversity, into our approach to education in general. Christian "values" continue to pervade the dominant cultural and social values in the U.S. Not one of us learning and/or teaching in this nation can afford to overlook that fact. As educators, it is a moral imperative, an ethical mandate, that we address this reality in our commitment to all of our students.

Religious Studies may not be a place where we ordinarily think to look for usable resources in addressing contemporary issues of sex and gender. However, courses on ethics and on women and religion are ideal fora for such issues. In these or in any courses, even if we cannot claim academic specialization—and who but the relatively

newly minted Ph.Ds can—or great or deep wisdom, our engagement with issues, texts and student responses suggest thoughts and possibilities for consideration and discussion.

1. Theorists in the area of "privilege" have, over the past few years, helped us to realize, for example, that racism must be addressed as a matter of white privilege. Similarly, it is important that those whose gender identification adheres closely to society's norms recognize the unacknowledged and unearned privilege that they possess. First and foremost, this privilege lets such persons off the hook in terms of acknowledging gender at all. Just as "white" folks don't have to think of themselves as racially identified, when your gender is normative, you don't have to think about it either. Reconfiguring some questions from existing work on privilege by McIntosh (1988) and Rochlin (1972) can be useful in raising consciousness about the fact that everyone has gender, and that one whose biological sex is consistent with his/her gender identity (i.e., *sisgender*) experiences the world differently than someone who is transgendered (see the Appendix for links to the original privilege questionnaires and a list of other teaching resources). For example, Rochlin's "Heterosexuality Questionnaire" could be reworked to address gender identity:

- What do you think caused your identification as masculine/feminine?
- Do you think your femininity (or masculinity) is just a phase you might grow out of?
- Traditionally gendered persons are noted for assigning themselves and others to narrowly restricted, stereotyped sex roles. Why do you cling to such unhealthy role-playing?
- The great majority of child molesters are traditionally gendered persons. Do you really think it is safe to expose your children to traditionally gendered

teachers?

Such an exercise demonstrates that transgendered individuals can take for granted the benefits they are accorded simply because their gender identity fits with the accepted social norm.

2. Drawing from Religious Studies, and specifically the social justice tradition of the Roman Catholic Church, a foundational principle is the inviolable dignity of the human person. In light of such a moral imperative, does it not require that we accept the gender identity—as well as every other identity aspect—of every person as defined by that person? At the very least, this requires us to be attentive to language, to naming, to making every effort to respond to the needs of the person. The days when professors felt free to think women would just have to assume they were included when the pronoun “he” was used may be past, but that does not mean language violations no longer occur. The power of language to create and define experiences should not be ignored, and language that voids, evades or excludes the experience of even one individual is unacceptable.

3. We have to move beyond our own fears in addressing issues that make us feel uncomfortable. Frequently our discomfort is because of our perceived lack of knowledge, and fear of offending rather than including, because of our own inadequacies. Yet if we are serious when we tell our students that the only stupid question is the one they don't ask, we can apply that same logic to areas where we too need to ask more questions and find more adequate information. If we are lucky, we will have transgender friends and allies who have the courage to name and confront words and actions that they find objectionable, and who will work with us to seek helpful alternatives. A caution here: we compound the difficulties faced by gender nonconformists when we put them on the spot, or make them responsible for teaching the rest of us. Only by displaying an authentic will-

ingness to address such issues, including our own internalized assumptions and perceptions, do we earn the title of “ally.”

IV. TRANSGENDER ELSEWHERE ON THE SYLLABUS

A discussion of gender without transgender is bound to be simplistic. Therefore, anywhere on the syllabus where gender study is, inclusion of transgender terms and issues should be relatively easy. Here we offer some suggested sources and readings for those classes, and the many other places in the syllabus where the exclusion of transgender is limiting. For example, a readable and interesting study by Pagan Kennedy (2007), *The First Man-Made Man*, discusses early transgender surgery, in several scientific and social scientific contexts. The history of medicine, of plastic surgery, of paradigm shifts in concepts of disease and self-improvement; these are but a few of the class or course contexts in which *The First Man-Made Man* might be read and discussed. Fair inclusion of transgender (and gender, for that matter) in an undergraduate education comes not only when these are the prime focus of study, but also when they are related or inevitable aspects of discussion of another subject, such as hormones, or tabloid journalism, or social class, or many others.

In a course on childhood, at least sections of *The First Man-Made Man* might be read, and in such a course, or one on film, the 1997 Belgian movie, “*Ma Vie en Rose*” could be shown and discussed. “*Ma Vie en Rose*” is about Ludovic, a boy who feels he should be a girl, his attempts to express this, and the familial and social responses. Ludovic is initially innocent that his self-expression will be unacceptable. The thorns, and more than thorns, of individual and group policing of gender are well portrayed, as are the attempts of family members to be loving even when they are

ignorant and afraid.

“Ignorant and afraid” is the state of many individuals when confronting the phenomenon of transgender, especially before transgender emerged as a term or category. The perspectives and experiences of the marginalized must be given credence—often over the views of the “expert.” Certainly much in the history of transgendered persons reaffirms this fact. The individual’s experience is authoritative and often groundbreaking. This fact, especially when illustrated by autobiographical stories, is also a gateway to the discussion of expertise, authority, and the status of experience versus received knowledge, which is a pertinent topic in Philosophy, Sociology, and Political Theory, among others. Where do we get our maps of experience, and when and how do they change? Being transgendered has been one of the more dramatic and consequential experiences of feeling alien from many categories and practices that other people take for granted; but it will not be the last one. As a topic for study it provides an excellent vantage point to understand the differences, strengths, weaknesses, limits and uses of such forms of knowledge and information as wisdom, science, personal preference, law, evidence, tradition, and culture.

Transgender may be interpreted by contemporary readers as present in pre-modern culture; as a twentieth century term, it will not literally appear in ancient, Medieval, Renaissance or Enlightenment texts. Yet we have from these centuries a treasure trove of carnival, masquerade, transgressing dress, statements and laws against dress transgression, hermaphrodites, travel reports, monsters, and all manner of material which is illuminated when approached with knowledge of contemporary Transgender Studies. There are many and varied understandings we can come to of pre-modern gender dissonance. Thinking about transgender helps us see such texts and histories afresh, and avoid under-

estimating or interpreting them shallowly. A hermaphrodite, for example, is not a transsexual, or a made up being, but how the hermaphrodite is defined, received and portrayed tells us something about the limits and harshness of gender norms of a particular time and place. Feasts of Fools, Rites of Misrule, and other ceremonies of liberation, destruction and renewal have been interpreted differently by scholars. Are reversal ceremonies a respite and a consolation from known and presumably accepted social and political norms, or are they a real experience, if temporary, of a desired different world, different in power relations, in gender construction, or otherwise? How might we interpret today, for example, Gabriel de Foigny’s 1673 writing on the fictitious country of Australie, where there is one sex? Or the famous case of Chevalier D’Eon, born in 1728, a man (perhaps), he spent the first half of his life as a spy, military man and diplomat, and then she spent the second half as a woman. Was Joan of Arc transsexual? To go from a person to a category—the study of early modern monsters and monstrosity can tell us something about sexual identity and roles then. This paragraph only begins to suggest the vast amount of historical and cultural material that can be profitably interrogated from the perspective of transgender.

Transgender autobiographies may certainly be used in a course on autobiography or other types of personal writing. A beautifully written and engaging autobiography is Jennifer Finney Boylan’s (2003) *She’s Not There: A Life in Two Genders*. Professor Finney Boylan is a friend of the novelist Richard Russo, whose reactions to his friend’s gender change is included in the book. In a class on friendship, or on contemporary American culture, to name just two other topics, this text would work quite well. Jennifer Finney Boylan sometime updates her life story and her sons’ experiences, for example in a recent New York Times piece, “‘Maddy’ Might Just Work After All,” (2009).

The study of modern history and politics offers more direct evidence of transgender expression. Challenges to gender roles and rules, and movements for homosexual rights emerged at the turn of the century. Into the twentieth century, war and fascism had strong reactive effects on gender codes. Mary Louise Roberts' (1994) *Civilization without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Post-war France, 1917-1927*, is a well researched and substantial work with which students can engage with the possibilities and presence of transgender in the early twentieth century, even if the author does not focus on transgender *per se*. Students and instructors both will find a wealth of relevant material in connection with the rise of fascism and the world wars.

Less obvious perhaps but at least as rich would be a return to the ancients. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is replete with changes on all levels, including life form and gender transformation. Some are changed for punishment, some for reward, some by cruel caprice of the powerful. There is also a theme (among others) of the consistency of one's nature despite external transformation. Perhaps in dialog with the *Metamorphoses* is Jeffery Eugenides (2002) recent novel, *Middlesex*. This fiction portrays many matters of interest in the study of gender and transgender.

Points of entry for transgender on the syllabus are many. It is a creative exercise to reconsider familiar texts and topics and to pick out new ones, in light of what we have learned from the experiences of transgendered individuals. Considering transgender on the syllabus underscores that inclusive teaching is not only about removing impediments to student learning, it is also about updating, improving and enriching our intellectual and academic work. The two efforts, happily and profoundly, go hand in hand. *Conclusion*

Scholars and students alike may not readily see the relevance of transgenderism to their disciplines, or not know how to ad-

dress it in their field of study. Yet, the experiences of the current authors demonstrate that conversations about transgenderism do not have to be relegated to a single course or discipline, and that scholarship and pedagogy offer multiple ways to engage all members of a college community in dialogs about transgendered realities, be they contemporary and personal or historical and global. We conclude this article with a paper written by Elijah Patterson for "Sexuality and Relationships in Christian Traditions," a course taught by Dr. Ann Wetherilt in which she asked students to present and evaluate a debate pertaining to sexuality or relationships from the standpoint of Christian ethics. The paper, "The Danger of Scandal: Gender Transgression and Silence in Catholicism," is a clear example of how transgenderism is thoughtfully addressed in a discipline typically assumed to avoid such matters. Student interest and faculty openness can help higher education break new frontiers in scholarship and community life.

V. "THE DANGER OF SCANDAL¹": GENDER TRANSGRESSION AND SILENCE IN CATHOLICISM—BY ELIJAH PATTERSON

Gender transgression is a central but often over-looked "problem" in Catholicism. Though discussions of gender in the Church often focus on female versus male and woman versus man, with much focus paid to the proper duties of either group, these discussions rarely acknowledge the struggles of people who do not fall neatly into either category. Historically, this was often played out in the image of a strong and empowered woman. The silence around this "basic" and now somewhat an-

¹ Donovan, Gill. "Norms to Bar Transsexuals from Religious Orders." *National Catholic Reporter*. 14 February 2003.39.15. p.7

tiquated viewpoint is further evidenced in the still controversial discussion of not merely coded gender roles being transgressed but gendered identities and bodies. As transgender and transsexual people fight for social and legal rights in society at large, so too they have begun to look at their churches for support. Herein, I examine the teachings and attitudes emerging from within the Catholic Church in the USA.

Throughout this paper, I use several terms that bear defining. First, "sex" is the physical state of the body, typically either female or male. Most people have their physical sex diagnosed visually upon birth based on the configuration of their genitalia. This paper is concerned mostly with gender, which is best defined as a person's sense of himself² as female, male, or something else entirely. Currently, society has a set of expectations for a person based on his perceived gender. For example, a woman might be expected to take care of the day-to-day functions of the family, while a man might be expected to provide for the family by working outside the home. Society generally expects that a person's gender and sex will be congruent; that is, that a female-bodied person will identify with femaleness and act in accordance to at least most of the gender roles her society prescribes for her. Of course, not everyone has this experience of concordance.

In this paper, I use the term "gender transgression" to refer to actions and self-concepts that move between the borders of

traditional gender roles and identities, or across prescribed expressions of gender or sex. Since these transgressions are rooted in a cultural context, what was once extremely transgressive (a female person wearing pants, for example) can become commonplace over time. Likewise, until fairly recently, there was an extremely limited vocabulary available to discuss gender role non-adherence and even now, the same actions may be read very differently by different people.

Therefore, I use the purposely-broad term "gender transgression" to describe any behaviors that might be regarded as going against expected gender roles or identities at a particular cultural time and space. These are markers that transgress society's ideas of "properly" gendered behavior, which call into question cultural ideas of gender performance. Some of the sources I reference refer to transgender people, people whose mental genders do not match up with their physical sexes, and transsexual people, whose genders and sexes do not mesh and who make changes to their bodies in an attempt to attain concordance. These terms can be understood simply as differently nuanced forms of gender transgression.

Over the past decade, new attention had been focused on these transgressive gender identities and expressions. As homosexuality becomes, at least theoretically, more accepted in the mainstream and feminism starts to work its way even into the Church, people whose identities might once have been stifled allow those parts of themselves to emerge. In turn, the Church has had to search its teachings to attempt to articulate a position on gender difference.

It can be difficult to identify a coherent Catholic message on gender transgression. Many documents contradict themselves and portray a very conflicted view of the status of gender transgressive people who complete gender confirmation surgeries (also called GCS or sexual reassignment

² Gender neutral pronouns, *ze* nominative-case and *hir* possessive, are an attempt to be as inclusive as possible of complex, non-traditional, or hypothetical peoples genders. When a person's gender is known, *ze* is referred to as hisself-chosen gendered pronoun. Likewise, a person who identifies as a woman is identified as a woman; a person who identifies as a man is identified as a man. When a source does not follow these conventions, their divergence will be pointed out and corrected as much as possible while maintaining clarity and cohesiveness between this essay and the source text.

surgery). In addition to the inconsistencies within documents, there is the problem of the limited number of documents that can be interpreted as speaking, however vaguely, to gender difference; the Church has authored only a few limited statements on gender transgression. Many of these documents remain secret and are not made available to non-priests. It is therefore difficult to know for sure what the Church is saying; when these documents are commented on, their content must be assumed to have been filtered through priests who have been allowed to read the document, who are allowed to speak of its content in only vague terms. Despite this impediment to a clear reading of the Church's attitudes, its views can often be noticed between the lines of non-Papal documents, such as "Always Our Children" and some statements from the Second Vatican Council. At any rate, the interpretations of priests is almost more important than the actual text of secret documents—when they make pronouncements in liturgy or counsel a member of their congregation, they speak to people who are unfamiliar with the actual documents from which they draw their ideas and attitudes. Therefore, the persuasive attitudes informed by these secret Vatican documents can and should be read as texts themselves.

In 2000, the Vatican circulated a confidential document outlining the Church's official view of transsexuality. This document, written by Jesuit priest Father Urbana Navarrete, was delivered *sub secretum* to the heads of religious orders the world over. The Church's conclusion is that a sex change procedure constitute "only superficial change and does not change a person's gender [sic] in the eyes of the church" ("Vatican Says Sex Changes Don't Change One's Gender" 2003). It reportedly goes on to say that a woman who was born and ordained as a male priest may retain her priesthood after coming out, while a man born female may never enter the priest-

hood. In 2002, it became clear that many church officials were still unaware of the document, so it was sent to bishops' conferences as well. The unnamed document "prohibits transsexuals from entering consecrated life and [requires] expulsion or suspension of religious [people] who undergo sex-change operations" (Donovan 2003), a confusing contradiction from the earlier statement that women with male histories may remain priests. It also urges leaders of religious groups to forward cases of transsexualism to the Vatican for review. While acknowledging that transsexuality represents a "'rare pathology'," it also claims that the degree to which issues of sexuality, sexual orientation, and gender difference are becoming more accepted in modern and secular cultures "raises important problems in the ecclesial ambient" (Donovan 2003). That is, the mainstream movement towards an acceptance of transsexuality or gender transgression should be looked upon very critically in order to fully appreciate the degree to which it constitutes a pollution of the atmosphere of the Church.

It is this permeation into the mainstream that becomes important to a further analysis of the Church's position on gender difference. Father William P. Saunders has written two documents for the "Catholic Herald" describing the Catholic Church's stance on gender transgression and gender confirmation surgeries. In 2001, he wrote in response to a reader's question about "sex change" operations outlining the Church's basic position on gender transgression. In 2005, he updates these remarks slightly to add an even more explicit admonition of gender transgression. These documents mark some of the only public statements by any member of the Church at *any* level. Because of their primacy and availability—and the *lack* of availability of other texts—his remarks constitute an important source of scholarship on the Church's conceptions of gender transgression in Catholicism pre-

cisely because they are among the only meditations offered to the Catholic community at large by an ordained priest.

While Father Saunders begins by affirming the personal dignity of all people, as is an essential foundation of Catholicism, the argument he explores does not appear to uphold this dignity. The first document to which Father Saunders points is the "Pastoral Constitution on the Church of the Modern World," item 14, which states that G-d made man in His divine image in a state of "highest perfection." Thus, a man is "obliged to regard his body as good and to hold it in honor since G-d has created it and will rise it up on the last day" (Vatican). Father Saunders indicates that this means that a person must see himself as a vessel of G-d, made exactly as G-d wanted him to be. To express disapproval of one's body or to attempt to change it is to meddle with G-d's divine plan. Citing 1 Corinthians 6:19, Saunders elaborates that "our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit" and that we must treat our bodies as holy and with great dignity. He argues that people should not harm their bodies by allowing them to participate in sin. Though he does not elaborate on or prove this statement, assumedly the act of altering one's body to align with one's mind is an act of sin. Father Saunders' only attempt to show the "sinful" effects of gender confirmation surgeries is through Catechism 2297.

This Catechism states that "except when performed for strictly therapeutic medical reason, directly intended amputations, mutilations, and sterilizations performed on innocent persons are against the moral law" (Catechism No. 2297). Father Saunders sees this passage as disallowing the removal and refashioning of a trans woman's penis and testicles or the removal of a trans man's reproductive organs. Father Saunders goes on to recount passages from twenty-five-year-old medical textbooks about gender confirmation surgeries to show that the purposeful removal of

healthy organs is "gross and lacks charity" (Saunders 2001).

This interpretation of this passage is predicated upon a prejudicial understanding of gender confirmation surgery as devoid of therapeutic value. It is equally possible to approach this Catechism recognizing gender confirmation surgeries as potentially life-saving³. Assuming the rightness of the body over the rightness of the spirit risks falling to the dangerous territory of biological determinism and predestination. At its core, it reinforces a dualistic mind/body split that has been present in Western thought for so long. This seems antithetical to the Church's strong position as a healer of the infirm. To assume that a transsexual person is meant to stay in a body with incorrect genitalia and sex markers would also tend to indicate that a person with a faulty heart should stay in such a body—or risk being condemned for having his chest "mutilated" and the malfunctioning organ removed and replaced. It assumes that a person's current physical state is absolute and fixed and the personal desire to change it is a form of pride, a re-making of G-d's work.

It is important to recognize that the above is not the only possible reading of the emotional struggle with the physical body. As Fraser Watts (2002) reflects in "Transsexuality and the Church," "seeing transsexuals' sense of their gender as purely psychological and contrasting it with the objective facts of sexual anatomy, conjure up a dualistic split in which body and mind are perceived to be in opposition to one another" (78). The problem with a dualistic reading of a person is that his body and mind must share the same space. It is, in fact, a blessing that they do so. If we are to

³ For further discussion, see Clements-Nolle, Kristin; Marx, Rani; and Katz, Mitchell. "Attempted Suicide Among Transgender Persons: The Influence of Gender-Based Discrimination and Victimization." 2006. *Journal of Homosexuality*. 51.3: 53-69.

believe that people are created in G-d's image, we must accept that G-d wished us to have bodies—and for our bodies to be part of “us.” Historical attempts by the Church to separate the body from the mind proved unsuccessful and ultimately undesirable—not to mention damaging. Watt's reading, while coming from a generally Christian rather than specifically Catholic point of view, is another step in looking at gender variance.

Many members of the Catholic community have looked upon the new, staunchly essentialist, teachings of their church with trepidation. They are weary of teachings that are explicitly exclusionist, lacking solid grounding in the historical teachings of the Church and, at a gut level, mean-spirited. In response to the lessened status of many out queer, same-gender-loving, and gender variant people, a number of groups have emerged that attempt to connect the Church and hir people—no matter what their bodies or attractions look like. One particularly well-known and effective group is Dignity USA.

Dignity USA's mission is to “celebrate the wholeness and holiness of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) Catholics. While Dignity USA has little original content on gender transgression, at this point in the Catholic discussion of sexual and gender variance, gender transgression is still nearly synonymous with homosexuality. The group argues that people, in all their diversity, reflect an embodiment of Christ and therefore have an “inherent dignity” that must be respected (Dignity USA 2008). Dignity USA stresses that it is possible to be faithful to one's sexual and gendered identity while still serving G-d. They see the need to be honest with oneself and one's G-d as essential to a faithful experience with religion. The need for wholeness is necessary to truly engage religion. Coming before G-d—and bringing your entire self when you do so—is powerful. Catholics are called to praise and follow G-d.

Gender or sexual variance is not seen as an impediment to this.

As is perhaps obvious by now, I tend to align myself with the second reading of gender transgression. With respect to the Catholic Church and its perceived duty to codify laws in a way that is absolute and most applicable to the majority of its members, the Church's policies unnecessarily strip gender variant people of their humanity. The reduction of a human being to the genitals ze does or does not display runs the risk of oversexualizing a person—the very thing the Church seems to be attempting to avoid. As discussed above, the Church has approached its canon with a clear idea that gender transgression is wrong and thereby sought out spaces within its teachings that might prove this, rather than approaching the body of teachings with an honest, open, and prayerful heart. The Church's expected stance on gender variance is easily anticipated, even without knowing the Catechism. The weak evidence proffered has all the markings of a reactionary filtering, rather than a prayerful and reflective meditation.

The discussion of gender transgression in Catholicism is deeply nuanced. The fear of the “danger of scandal” (Donovan 2003) often means such a discussion is the mindful interpretation of silence. In a way, it is not so much the few loud arguments against gender confirmation surgery or enactment of gender transgression that serve as the most eloquent text but rather the absolutely deafening lack of discussion surrounding these texts. The Vatican delivers a couple of pronouncements in secrecy and places a gag rule on the small group of people allowed to read it. The few religious figures willing to make any kind of statement on gender transgression do so to relatively limited audiences and bring very little new material to the discussion. Their played out and dated regurgitations go largely unchallenged and unquestioned. Even groups that claim to speak for gender variant peo-

ple remain mostly quiet on the subject of gender transgression. The Church's statement that the body is a vessel for the Holy Spirit is beautiful and should only reinforce the holiness of all people and their complicated, wonderful bodies. Instead, the Church's application of this idea is insulting. The attitudes that Fathers Saunders and Naverrete explore do *not* show respect for personhood. They are not reflective of the idea that every person is imbued with a spark of the divine—they instead seem to say that *some* bodies are blessed by G-d, while some bodies are flawed beyond repair. The hierarchy of correct and blessed bodies and incorrect and sinful bodies is both damaging and cruel.

In the silence, what strikes me most is not the wrongness of the points that have been articulated, though they should be obvious to even the untrained eye. No, it is instead the lack of the willingness to hold any sort of dialog on gender transgression. The shame implied in this silence is the *real* dangerous scandal. The lack of discussion is tantamount to the disenfranchisement of a huge segment of Catholics. And the lack of outrage may well amount to a silent death knell for many gender variant people.

APPENDIX: ON-LINE RESOURCES CONCERNING PRIVILEGE AND TRANSGENDERISM

Note: Each website provides activities and information on privilege and transgenderism. These are excellent educational resources from a variety of disciplines.

<http://www.gaylib.com/text/quiz6.htm> — The “Heterosexual Questionnaire” in its entirety: useful for raising awareness of unexamined privilege; adaptable to focus more specifically on transgender issue.

<http://www.vch.ca/transhealth/resources/library/index.html> — An excellent site out of British Columbia, Canada with resources for Transgender individuals and their families, supporters, and advocates.

<http://www.tolerance.org/teach/magazine/features.jsp?p=0&is=36&ar=564> — Useful article about a young man's journey, with tips for how schools at every level might offer a supportive environment. The “tolerance.org” site has many useful links to articles and resources.

<http://www.ifge.org/> — International Foundation for Gender Education.

<http://www.genderpsychology.org/> — Very useful reflections on a variety of issues by a transsexual psychologist.

<http://www.gender.org/> — Useful definitions of terms and other resources supporting education around the range of gender identity issues.

<http://www.gendercentre.org.au/22article4.htm> — Go to this Australian site to read Lois Gould's 1978 “X: A Fabulous Child's Story,” originally published in Ms magazine.

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