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THE USE OF PREFERRED GENDER PRONOUNS

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In 2017 Sacred Heart High School in London issued a letter to parents explaining that students and parents were to use persons' preferred gender pronouns. The school argued that this is in keeping with Catholic theology because it is a way of "recognizing their intent to live as the person they believe God created them to be." Whether stemming from Gospel or secular values, many other institutions, Catholic or otherwise, have fallen into similar lines of reasoning and would concur with what Sacred Heart describes as its duty to "respond to different situations for young people, whatever they may be, with compassion, dignity and respect."¹

But is this the best response? As a Catholic and as a priest, were I in a situation where one of these students asked me to use his or her preferred gender pronoun, how should I respond? When parents of a son or daughter who identifies as transgender comes seeking guidance, what should I tell them? Can a Catholic in good conscience use a person's preferred gender pronoun?

A Hermeneutic of Listening

The question of preferred gender pronoun usage does not exist in a vacuum. Issues rarely do. Rather, it is predicated on one's understanding of sex, gender, and sexual identity within Catholic theology. In order to promote the Church's active listening to transgender persons and their advocates, Fordham University assembled lectures and reflections from students, bishops, professors, and theologians titled *More than a Monologue: Sexual Diversity and the Catholic Church*. This 2014 collection holds valuable insights for one desiring to understand what some call the hermeneutic of listening.

There are three antecedents which the authors of these essays accept that allow them to draw the conclusion we observed in the Sacred Heart High School case. These are (1) that what in the past have been considered unnatural sexual appetites now constitute a development in the human understanding of sexuality, which doctrine should reflect, (2) that sexual identity is one's primary identity, and (3) that individual conscience determines the sinfulness of an act.

Proponents of the hermeneutic of listening assert that "Catholic theology also recognizes that in certain circumstances, departing

from a moral teaching may signal something other than ignorance, incapacity, or sin."² It may instead represent a development in human understanding which the faithful then have to integrate into their theological vision. If other aspects of our faith have developed over time, why not our vision of sexual morality and sexual identity?

Archbishop Thomas Gumbleton illustrates this point, explaining that the "Catholic Church's teachings about moral questions regarding marriage and sexuality—questions of intimacy, of one person loving another—have undergone enrichment over the centuries." For him a prime theological example is whether a couple needs to maintain a fast from sexual relations with their spouse before receiving Holy Communion. Citing Pope St. Gregory, Gumbleton asserts that in years past, "the sexual enjoyment of married persons was sinful and thus precluded participation in the Eucharist." This contrasts starkly, in his opinion, with the writings of Pope St. John Paul II and is an example of "how we Catholics have evolved substantially in what we understand and teach to be morally good and morally healthy when it comes to sexuality."³

Regis Scanlon provides a different explanation of this very same text. For Scanlon the misunderstanding begins with a mistranslation. He offers instead that Gregory should be read as saying, "The married must be admonished to bear in mind that they are united in wedlock for the purpose of procreation, and when they abandon themselves to 'immoderate intercourse,' they transfer the occasion of procreation to the service of pleasure. Let them realize that though they do 'not' then pass beyond the bonds of wedlock, yet in wedlock they exceed its rights. Wherefore, it is necessary that they should efface by frequent prayer what they befool in the fair form of intercourse by the admixture of pleasure."⁴ Thus, instead of criticizing the couple for sexual relations or even sexual pleasure, Scanlon shows that Gregory is "criticizing the act of making pleasure the 'primary' purpose in marital sexual intercourse by means of 'immoderate' copulation."⁵ Far from a development of doctrine, the history of the Church is seeking to balance the goods at stake.

When one studies biblical and patristic history, one can see different emphases in different periods. It is not development, but rather dialogue. Gregory's teaching represents a single line in a conversation proceeding from the Church's faithful reflection on human sexuality. In Genesis God creates man and woman and goes so far as to bless them with sexual intimacy which He found to be "very good" (Gen. 1:31).⁶ But as soon as God creates his ideal world replete with all his blessings, sin enters into creation. Yet even in the midst of sin and the fall, the blessing of sexual union perdures—even salves (Gen. 4:1).

The Old Testament especially becomes a battleground where God commands "thou shall not" in order to restore man to the dignity of "thou shall." Adultery is forbidden to allow for the original faithfulness that man was created to enjoy (Exod. 20:12–14). This is the hermeneutical key lacking in Gumbleton's argument. When this

key is applied, the full conversation is unlocked. Gregory, far from holding a lower view of marriage, urges couples to properly treasure and balance the unitive and procreative aspects of sexual union.

Sexual Identity as Primary Identity

Whether in scholarly articles or in personal stories and testimonies, the idea that one's sexual identity is one's primary identity is ubiquitous. When taken at face value, one can easily see how the magisterium's rejection of the concept of transgenderism would be distressing even as she seeks to love and bring persons who identify as transgender to Christ. If this is "who I really am," then to use language that distorts my identity is dehumanizing. As Teresa Delgado puts it, "The primary norm in my scholarship as a Catholic heterosexual woman is that of love: loving others for who they are in all their being."⁷

There is much here with which to concur. The Church's mission is one of love (1 John 4:9), a love that ought to heal rather than harm, especially the downtrodden (Matt. 25:40). The Church owes guidance to all her faithful. But what do Gumbleton and proponents of the hermeneutic of listening mean by *guidance*?

Gumbleton recounts his own pastoral experience from early in his priesthood when he told men who confessed homosexual acts that "their behavior was wrong and they would have to stop it ... telling them to separate themselves from the places where it happened." But he later came to see this as a lack of guidance, stating, "No wonder people's lives—many gay lives—are unhappy or distraught or in dysfunction, because there is no guidance at all."⁸ While guidance should help relieve persons' fears and bring light to their darkness, it seems that for Gumbleton *guidance* really means capitulation to the concept that sexual identity is one's primary identity.

When taking up this question, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops writes that "one's total personhood is not reducible to sexual orientation or behavior." While it can be described as "a deep-seated dimension of one's personality," a reduction of the human person to his or her sexuality is not worthy of the dignity of being a child of God.⁹ Rather, Catholics have a duty to help all people root their identity primarily in their Baptism, which "not only purifies from all sins, but also makes the neophyte 'a new creature,' an adopted son of God, who has become a 'partaker of the divine nature.'"¹⁰ Moreover, "only from inside the Church's mystery of communion is the 'identity' of the lay faithful made known, and their fundamental dignity revealed. Only within the context of this dignity can their vocation and mission in the Church and in the world be defined."¹¹

To root one's identity anywhere else leads to a loss of identity rather than to a greater knowledge of it. As Pope Francis put it, to forget one's Baptism "means exposing oneself to the risk of losing the memory of what the Lord has done for us."¹² By forgetting our identity, we seek to fill a void by bringing other labels to bear to define who we are. Whether that label is our job, our relationship, our social class, or our sexual identity, all fall short of the gift of filial adoption given to us at Baptism.

Primacy of Conscience

A final argument offered by the Fordham participants concerning the question of preferred gender pronouns involves the place of conscience. Again, Gumbleton gives the sharpest teeth

to this argument, defining *conscience* as the "divine voice echoing in our own depths, within our own spirit, as a law written by God in human hearts." Gumbleton asserts that it is the individual's responsibility to form his or her conscience and "make judgments as to what is life giving and what is not. That means that the judgment I make in my conscience is the final arbiter of what is right or wrong for me."¹³ One makes this judgment by first reflecting on one's inner experience in the context of Scripture, the Tradition of the Church, and experience in prayer. Further clarity could also be gained through a relationship with a spiritual director.

From this, one easily draws the conclusion that being called by a preferred gender pronoun is life giving, as it affirms my subjective experience of self. One could also draw the conclusion that I might be similarly bound by my conscience to use another's preferred gender pronoun, as a refusal to do this could undermine the relationship and would not be life giving to either of us. For the sake of the whole relationship, I ought to do something that is life giving to another person even though I might find it morally questionable.

While the Second Vatican Council speaks of the primacy of conscience, it does not speak of it in the terms used by Gumbleton. The difference is the starting point. In *Gaudium et spes*, the starting point for the discernment of right and wrong is found outside the person, rather than in one's own experience: "Deep within their conscience individuals discover a law which they do not make for themselves." One's conscience specifically has a duty to "love and do what is good and to avoid what is evil."¹⁴ This discernment is directed toward the pursuit of truth which unites Christians to all other people. The Council fathers additionally warn of the weakness of an individual conscience, which at times "blinds one," abandons one to "whims," and "detracts from the objective moral order."¹⁵

When one begins moral inquiry with the objective moral order, the results differ from Gumbleton's. By starting outside my experience, I am brought into the splendor of truth according to which light I can begin to order my particular and subjective experience. In addition, this truth has the ability to unite me with the other. One might expect—especially in light of common experience—that the refusal to use preferred gender pronouns would lead to disunity. The Christian's prophetic vocation is directed toward the unity of all in the search for objective moral truth. The denial of so-called subjective truth is the affirmation of the objective truth, which binds human persons more closely together.

The arguments put forward by proponents of the hermeneutic of listening remain unconvincing. Although some of the proposals might be tempting for the sake of an immediate resolution of difficult personal or pastoral encounters, they fail to yield good results in the pursuit of moral truth. The first argument misunderstands the biblical and patristic tradition; the second reduces the person to his or her sexual identity; and the last sets the person on the wrong path toward a subjective truth that separates one from others.

A Hermeneutic of Love

The Congregation for Catholic Education offers a reply to arguments such as these in *Male and Female He Created Them*. One of the primary concerns of the congregation is that such arguments lead to a dualistic anthropology. While affirming that the "Christian vision of anthropology sees sexuality as a fundamental component of one's personhood," the congregation contends that an anthropology which separates body and person

is a serious misunderstanding. The separation makes the human will “an absolute that can manipulate the body as it pleases.”¹⁶ This dualism derives from the effort to view man and woman as fundamentally indistinguishable from each other and thus completely equal in every way.

The desire to prevent one part of society from dominating the other is naturally laudable. Ironically, however, by suppressing sexual differences in favor of the “utopia of the ‘neuter,’” man and woman in their uniqueness and complementarity are lost. Neutrality destroys the “unified totality” in which man and woman together reveal the image of the God after whom they are created. The end of this totality is to allow individuals to know themselves and to reveal themselves to the other. By denying the false dualism that separates the body and the will, one creates the consistency necessary to learn the meaning of one’s own body, which reveals the meaning of who one is.¹⁷

Although perhaps difficult to hear, this consistency presents the first steps of healing to one who is struggling to integrate his or her sexual identity with the body’s revelation.¹⁸ By embracing sexual difference, without affirming any attempt at undue power, one creates a place where “sexual identity can only fully emerge in the light of the synergetic comparison that sexual differentiation creates.”¹⁹ In a society that accepts the idea that gender is fluid, however, this becomes a point of contention. The congregation points out that the concept of gender fluidity is neither scientific nor logical: “Efforts to go beyond the constitutive male-female sexual difference, such as the ideas of ‘intersex’ or ‘transgender’ ... presuppose the very sexual difference that they propose to negate or supersede.”²⁰

The Church’s position is rooted firmly in a human anthropology which insists that the human body is not just an asset to the person, but something constitutive. The body is an integral part of who one is. This anchors the exploration of sexual identity and provides the context for integrating one’s bodily identity. The process of healing wounds can then begin.

Practical Application

How do these conclusions apply to basic principles in Catholic moral reasoning, specifically to questions of cooperation, toleration, and totality? The use of preferred gender pronouns would constitute formal cooperation in a falsehood about a person, as it would be “a direct participation in an [immoral] act ... or a sharing in the immoral intention of the person committing it.”²¹ The body is an integral part of the revelation of who the person is both to himself or herself and to the other. Thus, “procedures, surgeries, and therapies designed to assist a person in ‘transitioning’ his or her gender are morally prohibited.”²² This would include the use of preferred gender pronouns as part of gender adaptation.²³

At times Catholics are bound to tolerate certain evils. Two criteria from the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas guide questions of toleration. He says that “those who are in authority rightly tolerate certain evils, lest [1] certain goods be lost, or [2] certain greater evils be incurred.”²⁴ However, the principle of toleration does not allow someone to engage in a morally bad action. Rather, it allows one to tolerate bad actions by others under certain conditions.

Finally, the principle of totality also does not apply. Pope Pius XII defines the principle of totality as that which “asserts that the part exists for the whole and that, consequently, the good of the part remains subordinated to the good of the whole, that the whole is a

determining factor for the part and can dispose of it in its own interest.”²⁵ However, the principle of totality does not apply to gender transitioning, as it addresses neither the “source of the pathology [nor] an aggravating factor.”²⁶

An Image of God

The heart of this conversation is a human person created in the image and likeness of God. All deserve love and respect. We will be judged by how we love others. When it comes to pastoral care of transgender persons, the way of love is the way of the Christian. Sometimes, however, the way that Christ loves us and calls us to love others can be surprising. The Incarnation and the Most Holy Eucharist are themselves the greatest “plot twists” humanity has ever encountered. From what we have seen and considered, it seems that even if the world vehemently disagrees, truly pastoral care of transgender persons ought to seek to balance truth and respect of the human person in order to facilitate real friendship which leads to true healing. Only the truth will set us free, and each of us is loved infinitely by that God who desires us and gave his life so that we may have that freedom of the sons of God (Rom. 8:21).

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Notes

1. Robert Shine, “Catholic School Encourages Students to Use ‘Preferred Pronouns’ of Classmates,” *New Ways Ministry*, October 5, 2017, <https://www.newwaysministry.org/2017/10/05/catholic-school-encourages-students-use-preferred-pronouns-classmates/>.
2. Christine Firer Hinze and J. Patrick Hornbeck II, “Introduction,” in *More Than a Monologue: Sexual Diversity and the Catholic Church*, vol. 1, *Voices of Our Times*, ed. Hinze and Hornbeck (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 3.
3. Thomas Gumbleton, “Response to Gays and Lesbians,” in Hinze and Hornbeck, *Voices of Our Times*, 64, 65.
4. Henry Davis, trans., *Ancient Christian Writers*, n. 11, *St. Gregory the Great: Pastoral Care* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1950), 188–189, emphasis added, cited in Regis Scanlon, “Papal Errors in the Ordinary Magisterium?,” *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* (June 1991), <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/errors-in-the-ordinary-magisterium-13693>.
5. Scanlon, “Papal Errors in the Ordinary Magisterium?”
6. See also J. Brian Bransfield, *The Human Person according to John Paul II* (Boston: Pauline, 2010), 76–77.
7. Teresa Delgado, “A Delicate Dance: Utilizing and Challenging the Sexual Doctrine of the Catholic Church in Support of LGBTIQ Persons,” in Hinze and Hornbeck, *Voices of Our Times*, 110.
8. Gumbleton, “Response to Gays and Lesbians,” 57–58.
9. US Conference of Catholic Bishops, Committee on Marriage and Family, *Always Our Children: A Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children and Suggestions for Pastoral Ministries* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1997), <https://www.bishop-accountability.org/resources/resource-files/churchdocs/AlwaysOurChildren.htm>. See also Congregation for Catholic Education, *Male and Female He Created Them: Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Identity in Education* (February 2, 2019), n. 4.
10. See also *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: US Conference of Catholic Bishops/Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016 update), n. 1265.
11. John Paul II, *Christifideles laici* (December 30, 1988), n. 8, emphasis original.
12. Francis, cited in Elise Harris, “Forgetting Our Baptism Is to Forget Our Identity, Pope Francis Says,” *Catholic News Agency*, January 7, 2018, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/forgetting-our-baptism-is-to-forget-our-identity-pope-francis-says-24798>.

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The views expressed here are those of the individual authors and may advance positions that have not yet been doctrinally settled. Ethics & Medics makes every effort to publish articles that are consonant with the magisterial teachings of the Catholic Church.

13. Gumbleton, "Response to Gays and Lesbians," 67, 68.
14. Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et spes*, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 2, ed. Norman P. Tanner (Washington DC, Georgetown University Press, 1990), n. 16, emphasis added.
15. Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et spes*, n. 16.
16. Congregation for Catholic Education, *Male and Female He Created Them*, nn. 4, 20; see also nn. 10, 15-16.
17. Congregation for Catholic Education, *Male and Female He Created Them*, nn. 21, 33; see nn. 18-19, 34-35. See also Bransfield, *Human Person*, 114. "Man is the image of God not only as male and female, but also because of the reciprocal relation of the two sexes."
18. It is worth noting that "healing in sexual identity" is in no way exclusive to those identifying as transgender. As Francis notes in *Amoris laetitia* (March 19, 2016), many peoples' sexual identity—whether homosexual or heterosexual—is wounded because of challenges arising within families because of divorce (n. 41), domestic violence (n. 54), fatherlessness (n. 55), sexual abuse (n. 204), infidelity (n. 229), pornography (n. 281), and so on. The use of the word *healing* should not be read in a way that singles transgender persons out. Rather, it should acknowledge that because of the Cerberian beast facing families, healing and integration—including in the affective and psychosexual dimensions—need greater attention across the board (see n. 67).
19. Congregation for Catholic Education, *Male and Female He Created Them*, n. 27.
20. Congregation for Catholic Education, *Male and Female He Created Them*, n. 25.
21. USCCB, *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services*, 6th ed. (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2018), part 6, intro., citing John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae* (March 25, 1995), n. 74.
22. Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, *Pastoral Guide regarding Policy §650 Gender Identity, Diocese of Springfield in Illinois* (January 13, 2020), n. 1, <https://www.dio.org/policy-book/77-650-gender-identity/file.html>.
23. See John A. Di Camillo, "Gender Transitioning and Catholic Health Care," *National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 17.2 (Summer 2017): 213-223, doi: 0.5840/ncbq201717221; and Ethicists of the NCBC, *Catholic Pastoral and Canonical Response to Transgenderism* (Philadelphia: NCBC, 2017), <https://nacn-usa.org/wp-content/uploads/NCBC-FAQ-Catholic-Pastoral-Canonical-Responses-to-Transgenderism.pdf>
24. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (1920; New Advent, 2017), II-II.11 corpus, <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3010.htm>.
25. Pius XII, "The Moral Limits of Medical Research and Treatment" (September 14, 1952), n. 34, <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/pius12/p12psych.htm>
26. John A. Di Camillo, "Gender Transitioning and Catholic Health Care," *National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 17.2 (Summer 2017): 221, doi: 10.5840/ncbq201717221.

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