

To Be or Not to Be

A CATHOLIC TRANSEXUAL SPEAKS

by Hilary Howes



BLESSED” BY OUR CREATOR with male genitalia and a female brain I struggled to relate to a society that saw me as male until age 40 when I transitioned to live as a woman. It was an authentic mid-life transition to integrate my mind and body that many who knew me supported and even called courageous, inspiring and ethical. But this uniquely personal act though the eyes of the 99.5 percent of people who are blessed to have their gender and sex match has been seen as a political act, a psychological disorder, a character flaw, a weakness, a perversion and a sin.

In the Catholic church, as a transsexual woman, I don’t exist officially. Officially the Catholic church does not have a policy on the range of gender expression and considering its teachings on gay men, lesbian women, divorced women, women priests and women who abort I should count myself as lucky. But the popular assumption that I will be treated poorly by the institutional church hierarchy is born out in news reports of a secret docu-

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ment to bishops, and the pope’s own words. As Jeff Israely reports in *Time* magazine, “The Pope’s Christmas Condemnation of Transsexuals” (December 23, 2008):

Without actually using the word, Benedict took a subtle swipe at those who might undergo sex-change operations or otherwise attempt to alter their God-given gender. Defend “the nature of man against its manipulation,” “The Church speaks of the human being as man and woman, and asks that this order is respected.” The Pope again denounced the contemporary idea that gender is a malleable definition. That path, he said, leads to a “self-emancipation of man from creation and the Creator.”

Respecting the order of men and women is very important to an organization that is controlled solely by one sex. But the Creator does make transsexuals (mind/body incongruity) and inter-sexed (anatomic incongruity) people and the manipulation of medical science allows us to lead more normal lives with the 99.5 percent that have such trouble understanding this variation. Beyond anatomy, rigid gender stereotyping is important to a controlling patriarchy and so accepting any transgender expres-

sion (cross-dressers, transvestites, drag queens, drag kings, androgynous, bigendered and gender queer) is unacceptable for organizational reasons, not morality.

The problem with a secret position on transgender people is that the church hierarchy is empowered to follow the most reactionary course in their words and deeds on the subject. According to John Norton of the Catholic News Service in his January 14, 2003, article titled “Vatican says ‘sex-change’ operation does not change person’s gender”:

... the document instructs bishops never to alter the sex listed in parish baptismal records and says Catholics who have undergone “sex-change” procedures are not eligible to marry, be ordained to the priesthood or enter religious life, according to a source familiar with the text.

“The key point is that the (transsexual) surgical operation is so superficial and external that it does not change the personality. If the person was male, he remains male. If she was female, she remains female,” said the source.

Those familiar with transsexuals will see the irony of truth in the “key point” except in reverse. Transitioning allows

us to share with society the gender personality that we have been from the start. It avoids the false-selves we developed to live as others expected us to based on our external bodies. Any United States transsexual who gets a surgical procedure does so after psychological evaluation, much soul searching and living at least two years in their preferred gender. The vast majority of transsexuals never have surgery because the expense is only covered by a handful of healthcare policies. Surgery does not define one's gender for passports or many states' driver's licenses but a doctor's psychological evaluation can. Our brain's gender determines how we can best function in society and the church. Genitalia are relatively super-

Director Duncan Tucker soberly handles the sensitive subject matter with humanity and a fair degree of delicacy and humor. But the film's affirmative depiction of transsexualism is unequivocally incompatible with church teachings on human sexuality and gender identity. Furthermore, Stanley's sex-switching procedure conflicts with Catholic proscriptions against "directly intended amputations, mutilations or sterilizations" spelled out in the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

It is a hateful position that can twist this AMA-approved surgical intervention for a birth incongruity into a "mutilation." Like all the church policy that flows from the precept of "Natural Law," (sex

- Priests who undergo a sex change may continue to exercise their ministry privately if it does not cause scandal. (Women priests? Sounds scandalous.)
- Surgery could be morally acceptable in certain extreme cases if a medical probability exists that it will "cure" the patient's internal turmoil. (Far from extreme, transition is the only medically approved treatment for people diagnosed as transsexual. Reassignment surgery is the final step in the process and provides for a patient's social integration and personal safety.)
- An affirmation of the validity of marriages in which one partner later transitions. (A Catholic affirmation of a same sex marriage?)

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ficial except for intimate relations.

Church leaders, perhaps empowered by the secret document or their own transphobia, have expelled a music minister, a priest, a nun, a lay counselor, a college student, a parochial school student and even a church cleaning lady. They also have torn families apart by teaching that transsexualism is a psychic disorder. Parents are counseled to suppress transgender children and to reject transitioning adult children. Transsexuals are forbidden the sacrament of marriage (to anybody), religious life and priesthood. Some bishops even wrote to the US Congress to oppose the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) that would add gender identity and sexual attraction to the protected classes in employment law. This secret position may have emboldened the US Conference of Catholic Bishops' Office for Film and Broadcasting in its review of the film "TransAmerica" to state:

exists only within heterosexual marriage for procreation) we find that this policy follows neither nature (as science shows) nor law (as an equal protection).

It doesn't have to be this way. As readers of this magazine would know, our theology calls us to follow our consciences, accept mystery and love one another without exception. Reaching out to my marginalized extreme minority is not only possible but enriches our spiritual life. Re-constructionist Judaism, Reform Judaism and various Quaker groups openly welcome transgender worshippers in their congregations. Certain Christian denominations, including the Presbyterian Church (USA), Ecumenical Catholic Church, United Church of Christ, Metropolitan Community Church and the Unitarian Church openly accept transgender individuals.

Even the "secret Vatican document" (according to the 2003 CNS article referenced above) provides for:

I hope that Catholics would look at the body of scientific and medical evidence to develop a loving acceptance of those of us with this variation. The Intentional Eucharistic Community I belong to has. My priest has noted the unique perspective I have on gender issues that come from seeing life from both sides. He has noted how my path to my true gender has parallels in Ignatian discernment to understand God's desire for us.

I understand that my journey, though personal, touches that which is universal about gender for everyone. Perhaps your notions of father, mother, brother, sister, husband and wife get opened a little by meeting someone who has been all of those at different times in her life. Maybe you can take it from someone who has been there that looking at everything as us and them, black and white, male or female is limiting and dangerous. Ultimately, welcoming the mystery of diversity in God's plan is the healing for our church for which I most hope. ■