“The human capacity for truth is the opposite of autonomy. ... [R]eality reveals itself to us; we are on the receiving end of revelation. That is the origin of love and it may be refused.”

Last month, *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* ran an article by Stephen Adubato titled, “Understanding the Vatican’s Document on Gender Theory and Education.”  The document he refers to was released by the Congregation for Catholic Education last June under the title: “‘Male and Female He Created Them’: Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education.”  Adubato says that the Congregation’s document can raise confusion and
concern for people “commit[ed] to embracing both the truths taught by the Church as well as their transgender friends.” The purpose of his article is, he says, to “break down some of the key insights of the text and analyze them through the lens of pop culture, pastoral psychology, and personal experience” in order to determine “[what] the document [is] saying to those of us who live “on the ground.”

Much of Adubato’s article is both interesting and faithful to Catholic teaching. Towards the end of it, he expresses his agreement with the Congregation, saying, “young people ought not be told that their gender identity is arbitrary. The fact that your body is male means something. Your body, and all of the material world, is beautiful because it is a gift from God. It’s a gift that is full of meaning and purpose, in so far as it teaches you how to love others, and how to give to them in a particular mode.” He affirms that “gender theory” contradicts truths the church is obliged to uphold because “[it] encourages people to think that they have the agency to determine their own identity. It assumes that nature does not exist and that we are free to construct our own truth.”

Unfortunately, almost immediately after that passage, when he turns to a discussion of pastoral care for those who self-identify as transgender, Adubato does not offer a Catholic pastoral perspective. In fact, the only view he discusses is that of a Protestant psychologist, Mark Yarhouse, who published Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender

about the characterization of abortion as a “preeminent” concern, Pope Francis affirmed this view and then, according to Archbishop Robert J. Carlson, the pope added, added, “at the same time ... there's another significant issue and that would be 'transgender' — where we are trying to make all human beings the same, it makes no difference, you can be whoever you want to be.”

Issues in a Changing Culture in 2015. This is the book which Adubato cites as offering “a nuanced approach informed by an authentic Christian anthropology and sound psychological research.” Unfortunately, this is not an accurate description and allowing it to be presented as such constitutes, I believe, a serious error on the part of the editors of Homiletic and Pastoral Review.

In the book Adubato is citing, Yarhouse himself says, “As a psychological condition, Gender Dysphoria is such a rare condition that we have little good research from which to draw strong conclusions.” For Adubato to present Yarhouse’s views as informed by “sound psychological research” is simply incorrect. And in his book Yarhouse’s limits his reflection on the interface between Christianity and “gender” to interpretations of scripture and the experiences of particular people who suffer gender incongruence. It is odd the anyone in the Catholic tradition would cite it as bearing an “authentic Christian anthropology” when it is almost entirely innocent of the theological anthropology developed over two millennia by Catholic Christian thinkers. (The only person from the Catholic tradition who appears in the book’s index is St. Augustine who is listed exactly once and on the same page that Calvin and Luther make their appearances.)

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Let me be clear: my goal here is not to attack Mark Yarhouse. My quarrel is with his work being presented as pastoral psychology adequate for people working within the Catholic church. I agree with Yarhouse that it is wrong for gender dysphoric persons to be treated with anything other than compassion and respect and that “shaming” is absolutely never the right response to any person. But, due in part to the lack of a sound metaphysics and anthropology in his own intellectual/theological tradition, Yarhouse ends up articulating a false dilemma which is unnecessary and potentially very destructive to the persons he sincerely wishes to help. In what follows, I first want to work through the “three lens” approach Mark Yarhouse proposes and which Adubato recommends to the readers of \textit{HPR}, and explain why this approach is simply untenable for someone who wants to be faithful to Catholic teaching. Second, I will return to the document from the Congregation for Catholic Education which inspired Adubato’s article and explicitly respond to its call for a “reaffirm\[ation of\] the metaphysical roots of sexual difference.”\footnote{“Male and Female,” 34.} Finally, I would like to offer the outline of an authentically Catholic approach to pastoral care for those who experience gender incongruity.\footnote{A note on terminology: “Gender incongruity” is a catch all term for the situation of people who don’t feel comfortable with their biological sex. Some of these people describe themselves as “being in the wrong body” and believe they would feel more comfortable if their body were of the other sex. This is often referred to as being “transgender.” Another phenomenon is reported by people who don’t feel comfortable with being sexed as either female or male and wish to embrace a “non-binary” identity. “Gender Dysphoria” is listed in the DSM-5 as a diagnosis that may be applied when a person is distressed about their gender incongruity. It is important to know that not all people who experience gender incongruity will be comfortable being referred to as gender dysphoric because some see embrace of something other than their natal sex as a matter of autonomous choice, not a strategy to decrease distress. All of these situations are distinct from and not to be confused with Intersex Conditions, which are disorders of sexual development due to chromosomal or hormonal based anomalies.}
I. Yarhouse’s three lenses

In *Understanding Gender Dysphoria*, Mark Yarhouse describes three “lenses” or “frameworks” through which people may view issues of gender incongruity. He labels these the “integrity lens,” the “disability lens,” and the “diversity lens” and rightly notes that in discussing these issues with people, we will have much more fruitful conversations if we understand which lens is primary for them.\(^8\) The integrity lens emphasizes Genesis 1 and 2 and God’s “creational intent,” and, according to Yarhouse, this “is the primary (or even exclusive) lens for most evangelical Christians.”\(^9\) Yarhouse cautions that people who see only through this lens may be overly rigid in their “scripts for gender identity and roles,”\(^10\) which will cause them to be extremely uncomfortable with and even condemnatory of any “gender incongruence” in themselves or another.

Next is the disability lens which emphasizes the account of the Fall in Genesis 3. According to Yarhouse, the person who privileges this lens is more able to see feelings and actions which deviate from God’s creational intent in nonmoral terms and therefore to see gender incongruence as a mental health issue and not a matter of personal sin. The person looking through this lens is likely to emphasis that gender incongruence is not “chosen” by the person experiencing it. Yarhouse notes repeatedly that in his experience counselling people experiencing gender incongruity, his explicitly saying that he does not think they have chosen this comes as a great relief to them.

\(^{8}\) Yarhouse, cf. 51, 140.
\(^{9}\) Yarhouse, 47.
\(^{10}\) Yarhouse, 52.
The diversity lens, finally, sees gender incongruity as “something to be celebrated, honored or revered.” According to Yarhouse, this lens is very attractive to people experiencing gender incongruity because it “provid[es] a meaning-making structure for identity that is not found in the other two frameworks.” This is clearly the lens of activists who promote “conversion bans” seeking to outlaw any counselling aimed toward or even open to a person experiencing gender incongruity coming to integrate their “gender” identity with their biological sex. And this is clearly the lens of the jurists in the UK who ruled last September that “[B]elief in Genesis 1:27 ... [is] incompatible with human dignity and conflict[s] with the fundamental rights of others, specifically here, transgender individuals.”

Yarhouse advocates for an “integrated framework” which “identif[i]es strengths” in the integrity, disability and diversity lenses. He recommends that we “look through all three” and so achieve the “cognitive complexity” required in order for Christians to respond adequately to gender incongruity. Adubato claims that Yarhouse “bring[s] together the best of these lenses, without compromising his commitment to the Truth of the person.”

11 Yarhouse, 50.
12 Yarhouse, 54.
13 See paragraph 197 of the report on the Final Merits Hearing in the matter of Dr. David Mackereth v. The Department for Work and Pensions and Advanced Personnel Management Group (UK) Ltd. which was issued on September 26, 2019. Accessed 10.4.2019: https://christianconcern.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/CC-Resource-Judgment-Mackereth-DWP-Others-ET-191002.pdf. The tribunal found against the complainant, David Mackereth, a British physician who claimed he had been mistreated in the workplace due to his religious beliefs. As a bible-believing Christian, Dr. Mackereth was not able in good conscience to go along with the preferred pronouns and other forms of address desired by patients who were seeking medical assistance with “gender transition.” Dr. Mackereth complained that because of his refusal to speak to and about these patients in a way that he was convinced was untruthful, he was mistreated in three ways: first, he was subjected to pressure to renounce his own beliefs; second, he was suspended from work due to his refusal to speak in the way demanded; and finally, he was dismissed from his work for the same reason.
14 Yarhouse, 53.
15 Yarhouse, 52.
I would like to make three points about Yarhouse’s view. First, the most glaring problem with this “integrated approach” is that the three lenses are incompatible with each other—the diversity lens is simply contradictory to both the integrity and the disability lenses—and looking through all three at once generates not cognitive complexity but cognitive dissonance. Gender incongruence cannot simultaneously be a lack of conformity to “creational intent” and also something to be celebrated by a Christian. Yarhouse’s integrated approach violates the Principle of Non-Contradiction and therefore falls short not only of “the Truth of the person,” but the truth itself. Now, to be fair, Yarhouse is advocating for awareness of the different ways people think about gender incongruity, and that is surely a good thing, but to further advocate that we ourselves look through all three lenses at once begs the question at stake rather than answering it.

Secondly, given the speed with which gender incongruity has spread among young people, it is not at all surprising that they find the easiest welcome among those looking through the diversity lens. Gender incongruity is isolating and an online community or friend group prepared to unconditionally affirm this experience as unquestionable and constitutive of ones identity is naturally very attractive, at least at first. But it is misleading to claim that only the diversity lens “provid[es] a meaning-making structure for identity.” Identity as a matter of self-invention is itself a very new invention and we adopt this new-fangled idea at our peril! Christians have never been about “making” meaning, but about discovering it, and we have always rightly found our primary identity in our relationship to God, our identity as beloved children created by God, wounded by sin and redeemed by God himself in the person of Jesus Christ. If this fundamental identity is not being transmitted in the Church in a way that is
meaningful, that is a very serious problem, but it cannot be solved by adopting the diversity lens’s “invent your own identity” approach.\(^\text{16}\)

Finally, Yarhouse has fallen into a false dilemma that unnecessarily and unhelpfully pits the natural against the individual. In his description of the integrity lens (rooted in Genesis 1 and 2), Yarhouse argues that people who privilege this framework risk holding the view that “gender and sexuality were designed in a particular manner for particular purposes,” a view he thinks is dangerous because it “implies a universality and stability that discounts the constantly shifting diversity that we observe and experience.”\(^\text{17}\) Yarhouse here unjustifiably presupposes that our traditional understanding of formal and final causes must be jettisoned in order to do justice to the diversity of individual experience. That is, he makes the distinctively modern assumption that thinking in terms of stable “natures” (or formal causes) of things which intrinsically order them toward specific ends (final causes) has somehow been proved unnecessary and even dangerous to individuality.

But the problem is that it is impossible to make sense of individual experience except in terms of formality and finality. How can I make an accurate judgement about whether my subjective experience of flying through the air when I first fall asleep is actually true if I am not aware of the fact that human nature precludes independent flight (formal cause)? And how

\(^{16}\) John Paul II has a helpful observation: “‘Meaning’ is born in consciousness with the rereading of the (ontological) truth of the object. Through this rereading, the (ontological) truth enters, so to speak, into the cognitive, that is subjective and psychological dimension” (\textit{Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body}, trans. Michael Waldstein [Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006], 620).

\(^{17}\) Yarhouse is quoting Heather Looy, “Sex Differences: Evolved, Constructed and Designed,” \textit{Journal of Psychology and Theology} 29 (2001) 311. Here is the passage as it appears in Yarhouse: “A caution to those who adhere to the integrity framework is the risk of overstating the case – that is, to promote the view that ‘gender and sexuality were designed in a particular manner for particular purposes implies a universality and stability that discounts the constantly shifting diversity that we observe and experience’” (47).
can I make a well informed judgement about whether it would be good for me to disrupt my mental powers by regularly ingesting hallucinogenic drugs if I have no sense of what my mental powers are for, what role they have to play in my own flourishing and fulfillment (final cause)?

To reject the reality that things are “designed in a particular manner for particular purposes” is to adopt a modern presupposition that is without foundation or justification and is, I would argue, an important source of the ever increasing anxiety and depression in our time. And given that it is a fundamental Christian tenet that God is our creator, that he has designed us in a particular manner for a particular purpose – for a Christian to reject this reality is oxymoronic.

II. The Metaphysics of the Sex Binary

In the document that prompted Adubato’s article recommending Dr. Yarhouse’s approach, the Congregation for Catholic Education identifies several mistaken presuppositions of gender ideology including “denaturalization,” dualistic anthropology, absolutization of the will and the ethical relativism that flows from these. The Congregations cites “a need to reaffirm the metaphysical roots of sexual difference,” because all of the errors of gender ideology begin here. I do not think it is an accident that the devil has arranged for the one

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18 I highly recommend Edward Feser’s masterful treatment of the modern arbitrary exclusion of formal and final causality and consequent impoverishment of efficient and material causality in The Last Superstition: A Refutation of the New Atheism, South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2008.

19 In describing the spread of gender ideology as ideological colonization, Pope Francis aptly quoted Pope Benedict as saying, “[T]his is the age of sin against God the Creator” (Meeting with the Polish Bishops, 27 July 2016. https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/july/documents/papa-francesco_20160727_polonia-vescovi.html). This idea will be unpacked more fully in Part II.1 and 2 below.

20 “Male and Female,” 19-22.

21 “Male and Female,” 34.
institution that really roots itself in the metaphysical to be utterly discredited in the public sphere at the same time that gender ideology reaches its apogee. Satan is not stupid. Metaphysics will eventually win, reality will out, but in the meantime we need to redouble our efforts to reach those we can to affirm and explain the intuitive uneasiness so many have this ideology.

I’d like to contribute to that effort by reflecting on three truths which are vital to understanding human sexual difference, each of which must be grounded in a robust Aristotelian/Thomistic metaphysics in order to be properly understood. These truths are (1) God is the first cause of the existence and ordering of reality itself; (2) human causality is secondary to God’s; and (3) the sexed human body is essential to the human person.

II.1. God is the first cause of the existence and ordering of reality itself

This most basic fact is of course very unfashionable now when the default adult position in the West is one of functional atheism. It is crucial that it be recovered as the central fact of our reality if we are going to weather the storm breaking around us. We know by faith and by reason that nature, the universe, material reality itself is explicable only as the creation of an intelligent and free first cause whom we call God.22 I will not rehearse the arguments for this truth here but we must insist on its relevance and, when necessary, vigorously defend its rational coherence. We are creatures, ontologically indebted, radically dependent on God. Any

riches that we develop in this life are rooted in our radical poverty, our being given both existence and the reality in which we exist by God. But, as Josef Pieper points out, “there seems to be in man something like an aversion for receiving gifts.” We look on them with suspicion—what is the giver luring us into? We listen to the devil, who tells us that God is deceiving us, that we can be rich all on our own, that we need not be grateful receivers, that this is a humiliation God is imposing on us.

The devil’s whispering is very powerful in our time—our assumption that autonomy is the key to meaningful dignity makes it very difficult for us to process our creaturehood as a gift rather than a humiliation. The rejection of a normative human nature which we saw earlier in Yarhouse is directly linked to this difficulty. Pieper says, “man’s ‘nature’ can virtually be identified with his creaturely status: his being a creature – his coming into the world without his consent – defines his innermost essence.” Without an accompanying conviction that God does this out of sheer gratuitous love, our status as creatures seems an insult and being creatures with a defined nature only adds injury to that insult. A received and defined nature is perceived as a straitjacket, a constraint on the radical autonomy we fantasize is due to us.

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26 See Pieper, On Love, 178. This conviction is, of course, compelled once one understands that a corollary of God’s capacity to create, God’s infinite power, is God’s infinite goodness—each rooted in God’s nature as infinite Act. Cf. Summa Theologiae I, q. 4, a. 1; q. 5, a.1. Robert Spaemann puts the point succinctly: “That God exists means: absolute power and absolute goodness are one and the same in their foundation and origin” (“The Undying Rumor,” in A Robert Spaemann Reader, translated and edited by D.C. Schindler and J. Heffernan Schindler, Oxford, 2015, 183).
Pieper speaks of “the meritoriously clarifying radicalism of JP Sartre,” who rightly sees only two choices: either we are creatures designed, defined, and continually held in being by God or there is no God and, therefore, “no human nature because there is no God to conceive of it.”

But atheism simply isn’t true and we who know this need to be sure that we are also vividly aware of all that follows from the existence of God. God is. Everything that is not God is God’s creation. God is the intelligent efficient cause of everything else that exists and, like every efficient cause, God acts in terms of defined ends and forms or defines his creatures in light of those ends. While our inner three-year-old may insist, “No one is the boss of me,” our faith and our reason make it very clear that God is so the boss of each one of us. He has called us into existence and into existence as creatures with a particular defined nature. The inner-three-year old may stamp his feet, but that will not alter the reality of the situation. And if we do not maturely accept our creatureliness and the definition of our natures, if we cannot acknowledge our radical poverty as children of God in this life, we run the very grave risk of refusing to accept God’s final offer to us at the beginning of the next life. The stakes could not be higher: As Cardinal Ratzinger warns, refusal of God as our first and ordering cause is a refusal of “that childlikeness without which we cannot enter the Kingdom.”

I am emphasizing the scary side of this situation because too many seem to have forgotten that there is anything to fear, seem to have forgotten that we are in fact capable of

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27 Pieper, Createdness, 24
30 Joseph Ratzinger, Journey to Easter: Spiritual Reflections for the Lenten Season (New York: Crossroad, 2005), 82.
distorting ourselves in such a way that we will not want a place in God’s kingdom. But those whose proper fear of the Lord is intact know also the fruit of that gift: the joy of realizing that we are integral parts of God’s grand design. A proper understanding of our participation in that design entails a second metaphysical fact that has faded from view:

II.2. Human causality is secondary to God’s

God’s desire that his creatures be efficacious is a central tenet of Catholicism. St. Thomas says that God wills it so “by reason of the abundance of His goodness; so that the dignity of causality is imparted even to creatures.” One of my favorite feasts is the Baptism of the Lord, because it shows that God wants John, a mere creature, to play a real role in the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. In his humility, John objects, but Jesus reassures him that this is what is right. A human being who is aware of his ontological poverty will be amazed that God should entrust meaningful work to him! But, from the very beginning, the devil has been turning this beautiful truth inside out, whispering to us that we need not see our own causal power as a gift from God, that this too is a humiliation. In our pride, we are all too willing to overlook the fact that our ontological poverty entails poverty on every level of our being, that the various powers we may employ are themselves gifts of God held in existence by God’s holding each of us in existence. Instead, we see ourselves as literally “entitled” to our powers, the sole “owners” and disposers thereof.

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31 ST I, 22.3. See also QD de Veritate 8.8; ST I, 105, esp. a. 5; QD de Potentia Dei 3.7; and SCG III 67.
Nowhere is this entitlement more obvious than in our culture’s attitude toward our generative powers. The conceptual separation of sexual activity from childbearing made possible by contraception and enforced by abortion has led many people to fall into the idea of sexual activity as purely a matter of personal autonomy. That view of sexual activity has in turn transformed attitudes toward sexual organs themselves. Far from having any inherent orientation toward the opposite sex or toward the generation of new human beings, we are now told that one’s sex organs have precisely the “meaning” that we assign to them. Sexual acts “mean” only what we want them to mean and as long as the various parties “consent” to them, nothing further is to be considered.

Paul VI told us this was coming. I do not know how to overcome this madness except through the persistent witness of people living as though all of their powers, including their sexual powers, are gifts from God. Perhaps some day a social scientist will proclaim at just the right moment, “Hey—these people are happy and thriving in ways that the rest of us can only read about in books! What have they got that we don’t?” Because the fact is that, seen in the light of both faith and reason, our capacity to generate new human beings means that God has risked giving us a share in his plans that is given to no other creature: God has endowed us as embodied persons with both sexually generative powers and given us the capacity to cooperate with him in the propagation of persons. What a tremendous dignity! Blessed are we! But of course the culture sees procreation-as-cooperation as a fantasy (if they are atheists) or a humiliation (if their focus on autonomy has led them into rebellion against God.)
II.3. Matter is of the Essence of the Human Person

Though we don’t usually formulate it this way, this is in fact a fundamental teaching of our Church and it is eminently defensible from the standpoint of either faith or reason. We hold that it is of the essence of the human person to be a material being, a hylomorphic unity of body and soul. My body is “as essential” to me as my soul is. God has called me into being as this particular person with this particular body informed by this particular soul. The union of body and soul is not accidental but constitutive of the mode of personhood proper to human beings. The Catechism teaches, “The human body shares in the dignity of ‘the image of God’: it is a human body precisely because it is animated by a spiritual soul, and it is the whole human person that is intended to become, in the body of Christ, a temple of the Spirit.”

The Catechism continues, quoting from Gaudium et Spes, “Man, though made of body and soul, is a unity. . . . [M]an may not despise his bodily life. Rather he is obliged to regard his body as good and to hold it in honor since God has created it and will raise it up on the last day.”

As we all know, this view is entirely lost in the dualism of our day, which “regard[s] the human being as some sort of pure consciousness” and for which, therefore, “the personal and the bodily are separable,” the body having been rendered “merely an instrument of the human

32 Aristotle first argues for hylomorphic unity of body and soul in De Anima II, 1-4. St. Thomas articulates the unity of human soul and body as an essential feature of Christian anthropology in ST I 75 and 76, in QDdA, esp. q. 1, and in SCG II 68-72. The Council of Vienne defined the teaching that the human soul is the form of the human body as de fide in 1312. The Catechism reaffirms this teaching in ##362-365 which concludes, “spirit and matter, in man, are not two natures united, but rather their union forms a single nature.”

33 CCC 364.

34 GS 14 § 1.

But these ideas are based on the same unjustified modern presuppositions that we have seen Dr. Yarhouse fall into. Unfortunately it is not only non-Catholics who have fallen prey to the assumptions of dualism. Too many Catholics do not appreciate the necessity or the implications of soul/body unity and so are unable or unwilling to push back against transgender propaganda.37

Being sexed is something that happens to us at conception and it marks our lives from the very beginning.38 When God called each of us into existence, he did so knowing whether our one-cell body was to have XX or XY: he called us into existence as a male or female human being. In those rare cases where there was an anomaly which would lead to confusion in sexual development, God saw this as well and willed this person to exist even knowing this difficulty, just as he knows all the difficulties we each will face. The point is that it is of human nature to be sexed: this aspect of our nature came to each of us through the sexual difference of our fathers, whose gamete carried either an X or a Y chromosome; each of us was nourished and


38 Biology reveals that each of us is male or female depending on whether the sperm that fertilized our mother’s egg at our conception included a Y chromosome. The formed matter of the father’s gamete determined whether the body which God infused with a soul was that of a male or female human being. If that gamete included the Y chromosome, the zygote that began to be at conception had an XY chromosome pair and the Y carried with it a gene called Sry, the presence of which directed the physical development of the embryo as a male human being. If the father’s gamete carried the X chromosome, the zygote had an XX pair and developed as a female human being, with all the neurological, hormonal and genital differences that entails. The relation between God’s causation of the human soul and the human father’s causation of the sex of the body informed by the soul is not clear and would be an interesting question to investigate.
developed in our mothers’ wombs because of their sexual difference; and our own sexual difference enables each of us to continue the story of human generation in our turn.

Given that the human body and human soul are both constitutive of the human essence, and that the human body is sexed from the moment of each human being’s conception, it is natural to ask how human sex or gender is related to the human essence. John Finley has an excellent 2015 article which discusses the relevant texts on this subject in the corpus of St. Thomas Aquinas and gives us a starting point.\(^{39}\) Finley leads us through Thomas’ articulation of three kinds of accident (proper, inseparable and separable) and Thomas’ location of maleness and femaleness among the inseparable accidents which are rooted not in the “principles of the species” but in the “principles of the individual through permanent causation.”\(^{40}\) Finley rightly observes that, unlike risibility in human beings, which is Thomas’ standard example of a proper accident or “property” flowing from the species, maleness and femaleness pertain “not to the species at large but to individual members of it.”\(^{41}\) However, I think this is a case where doctrine develops and what was inchoate is made explicit because it faces a challenge it had never previously faced. I think it is safe to say that St. Thomas could never have anticipated the utter separation of “gender” from sex or the multiplication of “gender identities” now on offer. Given the challenge being posed to the fundamental notion of humanity as sexed, I think Thomas would have no hesitation to say that, while male or female pertains to the individual, the binary “male OR female” applies to the species as a whole and characterizes all of its members.

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\(^{40}\) Finley, 589.  
\(^{41}\) Finley, 594.
Now of course in the parlor game of genus and species, a species is defined through what makes it different from other species within the genus. But this emphasis, it seems to me, is exactly the conceptual problem we are tangled up in. By focusing on what makes us different from other animals, we too easily fall into an over-emphasis on the rationality of the human soul at the expense of acknowledging what is equally essential to us: the animality of the human body and the implications of that animality for the human person. Of course, even the animality of the body is distinctively human because of the human soul. My point is that overemphasis on the soul at the expense of the body or vice versa leads to dualism and can culminate in a rejection of the givenness of the body and its nature as sexed and the illusion that individual freedom requires a construction of gender unfettered by any given biological structure. But rejection of the male-female binary as established in the body explodes the human in much the same way that rejecting the odd-even binary would explode number.\textsuperscript{42} There is no “universal humanity” apart from individual human beings and individual human beings are each conceived and born to be permanently male or female.\textsuperscript{43}

With this metaphysics in mind, let us turn to sketch of pastoral approach that is consistent with the mind and heart of the Catholic Church.

\textsuperscript{42} St. Thomas says, “the nature of number would not be known perfectly if the even and the odd were not known” (SCG I 65.4). I would argue that it is equally the case that the nature of humanity cannot be known without knowing the maleness and femaleness of human beings.

\textsuperscript{43} Intersex conditions are disorders of sexual development, disorders of the binary, not exceptions to it. People with intersex conditions manifest the “always or for the most part” that is always an aspect of the Aristotelian/Thomistic conception of nature.
III. God’s lens: a Catholic approach to pastoral care for people affected by gender incongruity

While Dr. Yarhouse’s three lenses are useful for understanding the perspectives of different people on gender incongruity, none of these can be the primary lens for a Catholic approach to pastoral care. The lens we are obliged to look through is God’s. The multiplicity of human lenses is a function of the limitations of any creaturely perspective. But we are called to put on the mind of Christ, who goes out of his way to echo the words of Genesis which, according to the diversity lens, constitute a violation of human rights. Jesus says, “From the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two but one flesh.”

The binary of male and female is not “negotiable” for the believing Christian. Good pastoral care will not, of course, lead with this fact, but any Catholic pastor or pastoral minister must, from the beginning, know and act in accord with this fact or their ministry is not, in fact, Catholic.

What authentically Catholic pastoral care will lead with is an affirmation of God’s absolute and unconditioned love for each human person, whatever their situation. Whatever else may be going on in particular persons, the first goal of Catholic pastoral ministry must be to communicate this truth. Arguably the most important way the minister will communicate God’s love and make it believable is by listening. Fr. Philip Bochanski says, “The pastoral minister who is a careful listener, and has taken the time in prayer and study to imagine where a person experiencing gender confusion might be coming from, will be able to reflect back to the person

44 Mark 10:6-8. Matthew’s version is at 19:4-6.
the important parts of the story – to help the person listen to himself, and see his own story
through a different lens.”

In the midst of this journey of pastoral care, the minister must know and help others to
know that, given God’s absolute love for each of us, it is simply not possible that God has made a
“mistake” and put a woman’s soul or mind or brain into a man’s body or vice versa. Nor is it
possible that he has intended for a person to be non-binary. God would not put us in a situation
where we had to disguise or mutilate our own bodies in order for them to “match” our souls or
minds or brains. To think that God would accidentally or intentionally “mismatch” our given
bodies and souls is to say something no Catholic can agree with on either metaphysical or
theological grounds. We have looked at the metaphysical reasoning in Part II, but even a
pastoral minister who has not studied metaphysics ought to be convinced on the basis of God’s
omnipotence and goodness that it is impossible that a human person’s soul, which the Church
teaches is immediately created by God, is not a good “fit” for that person’s body. It can never be
right for people offering Catholic pastoral care to encourage or even maintain long term
neutrality before a person under their pastoral care who takes steps to reject the sex of their
natal body because these actions are not just a rejection of that body but of God as their loving
creator.

Catholic pastoral care acknowledges and helps people to recognize that we sometimes
don’t understand ourselves or our actions very well. Because we are complicated creatures and

Fr. Philip Bochanski, “Welcoming and Accompanying Catholics Experiencing Confusion About Sexual Identity,”
PDF, p. 19. PDF available from SC Selner-Wright on request. video: https://catholicwomensforum.org/st-john-vianney-conference/
because we are from our very first moments dependent on other human beings, the reality of human weakness and sin, our own or very often the weakness and sin of others, can cause situations that obscure our understanding of ourselves. This lack of understanding can lead us to act in ways that are objectively harmful to us and to others. No Christian can forget that fact. But it must always be held in light of the equally important distinction between subjective culpability for our acts and the objective nature of those acts. Only God is able to judge the distinction between an act and my culpability for it – only God has full knowledge of my circumstances and what is in my heart and God looks at these through the eyes of infinite love.

This means that in the case of people who have already taken steps to “transition,” good pastoral care will assure them and the people who love them that God understands what lead them to these choices, that God forgives whatever needs forgiveness without our necessarily having to tease out what precisely should be “blamed” on whom or whether there is anyone at all who should be blamed or ashamed. The divine physician offers healing that requires only our receptivity to it.

Christians are called to love one another as God has loved us. Such love entails the capacity and willingness to recognize that sometimes those we love are in situations which may lead them to harm themselves and we can never encourage or cooperate in their self-harm. While we must always affirm the person, we cannot affirm their disordered or disorted or misinformed thinking about themselves under the guise of “loving” them. It is not loving to let children play in traffic because they “really want to.” It could never be loving to calmly accompany a person with anorexia to an appointment for liposuction.
It is not easy for a limited human being to offer effective guidance to another. We all are (or should be) vividly aware of our own limitations and blind spots. But that can never cause a Christian to despair of offering good guidance to another. Our humility is false if it leads us to refuse to see self-harm as objectively wrong. Of course we must always be aware that our guidance of others can take forms which are not consistent with the truth of God’s infinite love. Any mother of young children who has found herself screaming at them knows that our guidance sometimes is precisely not in a form which assures them of God’s love much less our own. We must ask the forgiveness of those we have “guided” in this inept way. But our consciousness of our own failures can never justify a decision to fail to offer guidance to those in our charge.

Finally, because of the profound confusion of our culture and the demonstrable contagiousness of self-identification of gender incongruence among young people, it is imperative that those in pastoral ministry work proactively to prevent the spread of these distorted ideas and actions to those not yet directly impacted by them. We must recognize that children are being subjected to propaganda through media and entertainment, celebrity messengers, and—most effectively—through the public schools. Professional medical and psychological associations have joined the ideological effort to promote autonomy of “gender identity and expression” as a matter of human rights. The words of Genesis and of Jesus, “male and female he created them,” have been designated by jurists as an affront to human dignity. We cannot hope that this will “blow over.” It is blowing people over and it is our job to help them back to their feet and shelter those whom the gale has not yet reached.
Recommended Sources


