

“Speaking the truth in love”: Pastoral Guidelines for Educators Concerning Students Experiencing Gender Incongruence

Catholic education plays an important role in helping young people to develop a personal relationship with Christ. Among those entrusted to the care of Catholic educators are some students who experience difficulty identifying with their biological sex. Such individuals need to be reassured that they are loved and accepted in all of their complexity by God and by the Church. Our faith cares deeply about sexuality because she cares deeply about love; because God is love, and we are made in the image of God. Though this image has been obscured by the wounding effects of original sin, Jesus Christ came to restore and redeem this image within us. To gradually resonate ever more with this redeemed image of God in every part of our being and life is the very path to the joy and peace of heart we most desire.

Catholic educators seek to help and accompany all students who struggle in any way. They strive to do so by “speaking the truth in love.” (Ephesians 4:15) The phenomenon of gender incongruence, though rare, presents a particular challenge to Catholic educators, namely, how to accompany individuals who struggle with gender dysphoria (distress) while proclaiming the Church’s life enhancing understanding of human sexuality. It is recognized and appreciated that Catholic schools have been doing so quietly and effectively on a case by case basis. This resource is a response to requests from school administrators for pastoral guidance as they think about how to institutionalize approaches that are authentically Catholic. The Archdiocese recognizes that in our province, the task of developing guidelines and policies lies with school boards. This resource is offered to help inform the drafting of such documents from a Catholic perspective.

Catholic schools should keep in mind that Section 19 of the Ontario Human Rights Code contains provisions for the protection of the denominational character of Catholic schools. Section 19 of the Ontario *Human Rights Code* states, “This Act shall not be construed to adversely affect any right or privilege respecting separate schools enjoyed by separate school boards or their supporters under the *Constitution Act, 1867.*” The *Education Act* likewise contains a protection in section 1(4) which reads, “This Act does not adversely affect any right or privilege guaranteed by section 93 of the *Constitution Act, 1867 ...*” In addition, any requirements which might be imposed on Catholic schools by the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* are curtailed by s. 93(3) of the *Constitution Act, 1867* as specifically mentioned in s. 29 of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. Catholic schools therefore have the constitutional right to teach about gender from a Catholic perspective and otherwise govern their schools in accordance with the Catholic world-view.

This resource consists of two parts: the first part offers some guiding principles for responding to students in a pastoral way while the second part provides suggestions to assist with the school’s responsibility of providing clarity on the topic of sexual identity to all students. It is important that we get *both* of these aspects right. A compassionate response to individual students need not dilute a robust presentation of Catholic teaching on human sexuality to all students. Rather, it can be viewed as an opportunity to clarify and deepen our understanding and teaching of the faith. Failure to get this right runs the risk of alienating numbers of young people from the faith. As educators of the young, we always bear in mind the caution, “do not hinder them” (Matt 19:14). The Catholic school should always be a place where a student encounters the person of Christ.

PART I – RESPONDING TO INDIVIDUALS AND THEIR FAMILIES

Humility and Caution

Responding to the phenomenon of gender incongruence calls for humility. The causes of this phenomenon are not well understood, nor have effective interventions been thoroughly studied for those navigating this complex challenge. For some, the experience of gender incongruence can be a life-long challenge. Recent studies suggest that, for a significant number of young people, the experience of gender incongruence is transitory and resolves in adulthood.¹ Such information provides an important caution when considering interventions for children and adolescents.

Another reason for humility and caution is that gender incongruence can often be accompanied by other issues of an emotional/psychological nature. There is often more going on with the person than simply an experience of gender incongruence. In our rush to affirm gender identity, we can fail to respond to these other issues. Individual attentiveness is required as no two individuals present with the same challenges. We cannot assume that we understand everything about a student's situation simply because of a label.

We do know that gender incongruence is a reality for some students and that it is usually experienced as a struggle, at times involving dysphoria to the point of seriously threatening the well-being of the individual. Students who identify as transgender are at an elevated risk of self-harm, up to and including suicide. Some become estranged from their families and whatever social supports they have had previously. A school community should be a safe harbor for such individuals while supporting the student's family.

The Role of Parents

Students are entrusted to the care of educators by parents. This is recognized in law when the teacher is described as acting *in loco parentis*. Our faith respects parents as the child's first educators, not just chronologically but, more significantly, as those entrusted by God with the rearing and ultimate well-being of their children. Parents should always be involved in any decision about exceptional responses to their child.

Pastoral Care

Helpful guidance for providing a pastoral response to students concerning matters of sexuality was recently provided by the Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario with the publication of *The Human Person, Love and Sexuality: A Resource for Catholic Educators* (2016). Educators are strongly encouraged to read this document. In it can be found a rich elaboration of the following four principles for authentic Christian pastoral care of students struggling with sexual identity:

- All authentic pastoral care begins with and is continually guided by the vision of the human person, love, and sexuality.
- The pastoral care of the Church must reach out to all with an unconditional love.

¹ T.D. Steensma, R. Biemond, F. deBoer and P.T. Cohen-Kettenis, "Desisting and Persisting Gender Dysphoria After Childhood: A Qualitative Study" *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry* (2010)

- Pastoral care must meet a person wherever they are along the path of their spiritual and moral life.
- For pastoral care to be effective, Jesus Christ, the true shepherd, must be known and his voice heard.

Identity

Our response to students experiencing gender incongruence is informed by how we frame our understanding of the phenomenon. Some have described ‘three lenses’ through which we approach this topic: an integrity lens, a disability lens and an identity lens.² Our faith is rich in teachings about how the complementarity of the two sexes points to God’s plan for us - the integrity lens. The Church attends to research about how to best remediate dysphoria - the disability lens.

The identity lens concerns how individuals understand themselves, their purpose and their sense of belonging. We are all created as relational beings. Catholic educators should strive to reassure each student that he or she is a valued member of the school community. Failure to address this need can lead a young person to seek and find identity and a sense of belonging elsewhere, often on-line in unsupervised ways. Some will self-identify in reductive terms of gender identity categories or labels rather than grounding their identity in an integral or whole vision of the person, created in the image of God.

Parental Requests for Specific Accommodations

While accompaniment involves listening and patience on the part of educators, sometimes schools are asked by parents to provide specific accommodations. Boards determine how such parental requests are registered and processed.

Teachers may need some guidance when responding to students experiencing gender incongruence. A team approach, with help from knowledgeable colleagues, in addition to the student’s parents, is a good practice. If an outside advocate is involved, there should be agreement concerning respect for the Catholic identity of the school and an agreement to adhere to the guidelines provided. In-servicing for staff members should occur as a particular need arises, rather than mounting a system-wide series of workshops. That way, professional learning is personally relevant and the extent of the phenomenon is not exaggerated.

Individuals navigating gender incongruence use a variety of strategies to cope. These strategies can range from accommodations related to language to physical alterations of the body. In the following sections, we offer guidance for different forms of accommodation that might be requested. In each case, it is important to remember that accommodations are offered in an attempt to meet a struggling student where they are, in the midst of an ongoing journey toward an ever deeper and fuller experience of the Catholic vision of the person and sexuality. As Part II of these guidelines will make clear, these accommodations do not imply a kind of endorsement of the underlying vision of the person often implied in some versions of gender theory.

² Yarhouse, Mark *Understanding Gender Dysphoria* 2015

Medical Intervention

In the Catholic vision of the person, the human body holds a place of central importance in reflecting the image of God³ and thus, also, the identity and vocation of the human person. Attempts to change the sex of the person are seriously in tension, indeed contradiction, with this image of God imprinted in the body.⁴

As noted above, the causes of gender incongruence are not fully understood, and the experience of gender incongruence can often be accompanied by other emotional and psychological realities. Any response must be guided by a sound and whole Catholic vision of the human person. The proper role of the family must be respected. Schools should not be involved in interventions proposing to change the sex of a person.

Names and Pronouns

For the Catholic faith, the truthful use of language is of the highest value. Jesus Christ is truly the Word – the truth – become flesh. For this reason, it is of great importance that our language reflect the truth of the identity and vocation of the human person, created body and soul in the image of God.

Moreover, our faith recognizes that “everyone’s name is sacred. The name is the icon of the person. It demands respect as a sign of the dignity of the one who bears it.”⁵ While a name given at baptism is for eternity⁶, people sometimes ask to be addressed by another name. In order to meet a student in the midst of the difficult challenges facing them, accommodations concerning preferred names and even pronouns can, at times, be part of a Catholic response. Pastoral care has to begin where the person currently is. The use of a requested pronoun can be received by the student as a sincere gesture of good will. It can be a first step in an ongoing path of pastoral care, aimed at opening a relationship with the person. As already noted, such gestures do not imply an endorsement of any underlying vision of the human person implied in versions of gender theory. Decisions about pronouns and names need to be seen in a bigger picture of an ongoing path of pastoral care. They should never be seen as a once-and-for-all decision. It is a first step on a path, and is part of an ongoing relationship and dialogue with the student that will hopefully grow deeper as the relationships of trust and mutual respect grow deeper.

Non-conforming Expression

Following the pastoral logic presented above, accommodations concerning non-conforming styles of expression can be part of a compassionate Catholic response. This need not be seen as reinforcement of a misperception, but rather an effort to be respectful and patient.

Washrooms / Change Rooms

“Teaching modesty to children and adolescents means awakening in them respect for the human person”⁷. The provision of a universal single student washroom is an accommodation which is usually

³ Catechism of the Catholic Church 364

⁴ Catechism of the Catholic Church 2297

⁵ Catechism of the Catholic Church 2158

⁶ Catechism of the Catholic Church 2159

⁷ Catechism of the Catholic Church 2524

feasible for institutions. When such facilities are already available in all schools, this helps to reduce the stigmatization that can occur when a facilities accommodation is brought about in a school because of a particular student. Such washrooms may be labeled 'universal' or simply 'student washroom', but the term 'gender neutral' should be avoided. Symbols that present a third type of sexual identity should likewise not be used.

We have seen recently a move away from sex-specific washrooms and change rooms towards universal facilities with individual stalls in the design of public spaces. While this change might diminish the ability of a school to communicate the important physical difference between male and female, it does not prevent educators from teaching young people about this fundamental complementary distinction, created by God (Gen 1:27).

Athletics

The provision of female-only and male-only spaces and activities in a Catholic school is consistent with our understanding of the complementary differences between the sexes and the responsibility to provide for the safety and flourishing of all students.

In competitive sports, issues of safety, modesty, and fairness are of primary importance when considering which students should be allowed to participate in particular events. Male and female students should not be put in athletic situations that would threaten safety, modesty, and fairness.

School Clubs and Events

As schools strive to provide a sense of inclusion and belonging for all students, and because those experiencing gender incongruence are different from one another, educators should refrain from referring to those who experience gender incongruence as a separate 'community'.

Student leaders, usually well-informed about issues in the broader culture, often strive to help their fellow students. While campaigns to combat any type of bullying are commendable, student leaders may require adult mentoring about how to best support those experiencing gender incongruence without being drawn into types of 'gender activism' that implicitly contradict Catholic teaching.

PART II - PROVIDING CLARITY FOR ALL STUDENTS CONCERNING SEXUAL IDENTITY

The provision of appropriate accommodations to individuals experiencing gender incongruence does not prevent the school from teaching the Church's life enriching understanding of human sexuality. Any ambiguity arising from a particular accommodation can serve to remind us of the responsibility to proclaim the Church's understanding of human sexuality to all students in a manner that is clear, respectful and attractive.

Gender Theory Concerns

Recent Church documents have expressed serious concern about any ideology of gender that “denies the difference and reciprocity in nature of a man and a woman”⁸. To be clear, concern about philosophical and/or theological error is not the same as expressing disapproval of those who experience gender incongruence. Gender theory is not one system of thought but is an umbrella term that refers to various approaches. While some gender theories may be useful in examining the socially influenced roles that people play, there are five aspects commonly associated with gender theory which conflict with Catholic teaching:

- a suppression of complementarity between the sexes
- a suppression of the meaning and goodness of the body
- a view of the body and soul as being separate
- a radical separation of sex and gender
- a commitment to total self-determination

Catholic educators need to address these aspects and provide clarity to all students.

1) Concerning perspectives that suppress the complementary distinction between the sexes

“The human body itself - precisely in the complementarity of the male and female bodies - has been deeply imprinted by God with an image of Holy Trinity’s own communion of life-giving love, as well as the love of Jesus Christ for his Bride the Church. Moreover, it is by living in truth the ‘language’ of the image of God in our body that we cooperate in shaping this divine image of love within ourselves, which alone is the path to fulfillment and joy. It is only within this integral vision that the deepest identity of the human person can be discovered and questions of sexual identity most fully understood. Without this whole vision of the person and of human life, seen in light of our origin and destiny, and the integrity of our creation as a union of body and soul in the image of God who is an inseparable communion of life-giving love, it becomes difficult to understand the specific teachings of the Church on questions such as homosexuality and gender identity, let alone to see how those teachings might ultimately prove a path to joy and life.”⁹

The Challenge for Schools:

More than ever, students today need to be taught about the complementarity of the sexes. Educators are called to teach a Catholic understanding of human sexuality, without downplaying its integral procreative dimension. An understanding of the sacramental dimension of marriage can help young people to better understand sexual morality. Opportunities to teach about complementarity arise in Family Life studies, Religious studies and in health and physical education classes. Age-appropriate resources, inspired by Saint John Paul II’s reflections known as Theology of the Body, can be helpful with this task.

⁸ *Amoris Laetitia* 56

⁹ *The Human Person, Love and Sexuality* ACBO 2016 p.17

2) Concerning perspectives that suppress the meaning and goodness of the body

“The body is not something that we merely have - to be freely used and manipulated by the “real,” interior person. Rather, it is part of who we are. This reality of our creation takes on its fullest meaning and importance when we realize that into this very union of body and soul God has deeply imprinted something of himself. As the book of Genesis tells us, we have been made, male and female, in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-27) [...] what we do with our bodies matters greatly in God’s plan”¹⁰

The body reveals the person. Even more, it reveals and communicates something of the divine image itself in the person, “the body, in fact, and only the body is capable of making visible what is invisible: the spiritual and divine. It has been created to transfer into the visible reality of the world the mystery hidden from eternity in God, and thus to be a sign of it.”¹¹ The body is not a thing to be manipulated: “man 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.”¹² The human person, made in the image and likeness of God, is not an object to be used.

The Challenge for Schools:

Students need to be taught respect for the body. Such respect can be promoted through Family Life studies, in health and physical education and in science classes. Teaching about the incarnational, sacramental dimension of our faith in Religion class can help students appreciate the goodness of the body.

Respect for the body is demonstrated through the championing of various life issues and when explaining the evils of pornography, prostitution and substance abuse. Many adolescents, of both sexes, struggle to achieve a healthy body image and may benefit from media studies that examine how social media can distort and aggravate this aspect of growing into adulthood.

3) Concerning perspectives that view the body and soul as separate

We are integral beings, “body and soul but truly one.”¹³ “This integral vision of the human person stands in contrast to the view of the human body that underlies many approaches to sexuality in our time. Often, the human body is seen not as holding any meaning or purpose in itself, but rather, simply as one part of the “real” person whose interior experiences, thoughts, and desires offer the sole measure of how the body should or should not be used. As such, the human person is divided and reduced to one or more isolated aspects of their identity (e.g. sexual attractions or desires, gender expression, etc.), obscuring the vision of the whole person and the path to joy, often with serious consequences.” [...] “Our sexual identity can never be separated from the image of God deeply inscribed in the union of our body and soul.”¹⁴

¹⁰ *The Human Person, Love and Sexuality* ACBO 2016 p.6

¹¹ St. John Paul II, *Theology of the Body* 19.4

¹² Catechism of the Catholic Church 364

¹³ Catechism of the Catholic Church 362-368

¹⁴ *The Human Person, Love and Sexuality* ACBO 2016 p.17

The Challenge for Schools:

By teaching about the integral nature of the person, educators provide an antidote to a mind-body dualism which is prevalent in secular culture, an attitude which is reinforced as students spend more time in discarnate activities on-line and with video games.

Christ teaches us the unity of body and soul through His Resurrection. In addition to the opportunities that arise across the curriculum to teach about the integral nature of the person, Religion class provides an opportunity to teach and joyfully proclaimed our belief in the resurrection of the body.

Engagement with physical reality, for example in the study of science, can lead to a deeper appreciation of our connectedness to creation through our own embodiment.

Teachers need to be clear when using metaphorical language. For example, while an expression such as 'a girl trapped in the body of a boy' might be used to describe a real feeling, students should understand that it does not describe a physical reality. Likewise, comparing a person to technology, implied in the expression 'hardwiring' and likening a person's essence to 'software' should be avoided.

4) Concerning perspectives that attempt to radically separate sex and gender

The Church rejects the radical separation of the concepts of sex and gender: "in this view of the human body, questions of gender and sexuality are often presented as pure social constructs, disconnected from any meaning in the human body, that can and should be manipulated by the individual based on his or her own experiences, attractions, and desires. In contrast, a full vision of the human person recognizes that sexual identity, gender expression, and gender roles do indeed have a social dimension to them to which a person and the surrounding culture contributes. However, it is precisely the work of human growth that sees the integration of these cultural and psychological factors with the total and integral vision of the human person's identity - a union of body and soul in the image of God, created male and female - recognizing that so often the social and cultural dimensions surrounding us are also marked by the obscuring and disintegrating effects of original sin. Understanding gender as a mere social construct, thus, proves deeply incomplete and dissatisfying. It is imprecise and misleading, and does not express accurately how the various dimensions of the human person are integrated in the work of human growth. In a Catholic vision of the person, sexual and gender expression is deeply connected to the meaning of the human body - for we are inherently a union of body, mind, and spirit."¹⁵

The Challenge for Schools:

Students hunger to know what is real. Catholic educators should reassure students that truth is not subjective, that truth can be known. Students need help knowing how to confront a pervasive relativism which arises from the view that reality is not discovered but socially constructed.

At an age-appropriate level, teachers can help students to understand the concept of gender for the purpose of examining how we function as a society, while taking care to teach the immutability of one's God-given sex. It needs to be emphasized that "biological sex and the socio-cultural role of sex (gender)

¹⁵ *The Human Person, Love and Sexuality* ACBO 2016 p.17

can be distinguished but not separated.”¹⁶ Caution is required so that discussions of gender do not sow confusion or anxiety in the minds of children concerning their own identity.

Ongoing vigilance is required to make sure that teaching materials used in the school support a Catholic understanding of human sexuality. This includes screening books made available in book fairs, materials in the library, and the provision of posters and pamphlets from outside agencies. Visual teaching aids designed for children, for example, with diagrams that separate and reduce a person’s identity and sexuality with arrows to the brain and genitals, should be avoided. Performances, both live and filmed, should also be screened for appropriateness in this regard.

Care is needed with the language we use to discuss human sexuality. For the sake of greater clarity, schools should consider using the term ‘sex’ instead of ‘gender’ on forms and when referring to sex-specific spaces, activities, programs and schools.

Educators should refrain from referring to students by using labels or group acronyms. As people are free to describe themselves, it is acceptable to refer to ‘a student who identifies as transgender’ rather than speaking about a student who is transgender.

The expressions ‘sex-change’ and ‘transitioning’ should be avoided as they reinforce the error of thinking that sex can be changed.

While gathering student data can provide helpful information, caution is needed concerning how this is done. Catholic schools should refrain from eliciting responses from children about their sexual identity and orientation. The asking, in itself, constitutes a teaching that may confuse children, pose problems about privacy and raises concern about parental involvement.

5) Concerning perspectives that advocate for total personal autonomy

“God created man a rational being, conferring on him the dignity of a person who can initiate and control his own actions.”¹⁷ We are made for freedom and “for freedom Christ set us free” (Galatians 5:1). Modern society has tended to equate freedom with license. Total self-determination, freedom from restraint, is thus valued as one of the highest goods. Freedom properly understood, however, is not license as, “the exercise of freedom does not imply a right to say or do everything.”¹⁸

True freedom is the freedom to do what is right, what is good. Made for love, our freedom lies in the ability to make a gift of ourselves. “God who created man out of love also calls him to love, the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being.”¹⁹ “Man only finds himself by making a sincere gift of himself.”²⁰ “The more one does what is good, the freer one becomes.”²¹ Doing good, doing what God wills, entails humility and sacrifice. Christ teaches us humility and acceptance when we hear him praying in the garden, “yet not my will but yours be done” (Mt 26:39, Mk 14:36, Lk 22:42, Jn 6:38). Our path to the fulfillment we seek is not to be found in total self-determination. We do not create

¹⁶ Synod 15 Relatio Finalis 58

¹⁷ Catechism of the Catholic Church 1730

¹⁸ Catechism of the Catholic Church 1740

¹⁹ Catechism of the Catholic Church 1604

²⁰ *Gaudium et Spes*, 24

²¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church 1733

ourselves nor we do we determine our identity. Our identity is given to us. Sex is not 'assigned' by society but rather is identified, often before birth. - "before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, before you were born I set you apart" (Jeremiah 1:5). Through a life-long process of discernment, we discover who we are called to be.

The Challenge for Schools:

An attitude of total personal autonomy is prevalent in secular culture and reinforced by personal choice made available by information technology. In light of this, the Christian virtues of humility and intentional sacrifice are counter-cultural. Students, trying to understand the world, often have an appetite for that which is counter-cultural. Teaching about our vocation to love as being the path to joy is a lesson which truly empowers students.

Teaching the art of self-gift entails teaching about self-mastery and sacrifice. Awareness of pride and humility will equip students to face the challenges of life. An understanding of the redemptive aspect of suffering will also help to prepare students for the crosses they will encounter in life. A healthy appreciation of our fallen state will help students to recognize the many and complex ways that original sin affects our lives and experiences, as well as the need for redemption, made available to all in Christ.

Addressing student concerns about the environment provides an opportunity to make connection between accepting our bodily givenness and stewardship - "thinking that we enjoy absolute power over our own bodies turns, often subtly, into thinking that we enjoy absolute power over creation. Learning to accept our body, to care for it and to respect its fullest meaning, is an essential element of any genuine human ecology."²² Discussion about the proper use of technology is another opportunity to help students identify the utilitarian impulse which seeks domination over all nature, including our own human nature.

Conclusion – Our Need of Christ

The role of the teacher is an increasingly complex one, yet remains a joyful opportunity to assist parents in bringing young people to personally encounter Christ, including those students who struggle with sexual identity. "Sexual and gender identity concerns remain complex and not fully understood. They are not experienced in exactly the same way by all who navigate such concerns. This can create a certain complexity even in the terminology that is used. It is critical to remember, however, that at the heart of these issues lie persons - loved by God, and desiring love whose experience of navigating gender identity questions can often be isolating, accompanied by fear and anxiety. Into this potentially painful reality, the Church's pastoral care must enter, meeting these persons in the midst of the difficult terrain they face, accompanying them with an understanding heart, accurate knowledge, and a sound and whole vision of the person on the path to holiness and fullness of life and joy that Christ promises and makes possible to all."²³

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²² *Laudato Si* 155

²³ *The Human Person, Love and Sexuality* ACBO 2016 p.17