

Vatican Declares Gender Theory, Transgender Surgeries and Surrogacy Violations of Human Dignity The Wired Word for the Week of April 21, 2024

In the News

In an April 8 document put forth from the Holy See Press Office, the Vatican declared that gender theory, transgender surgeries and surrogacy are threats to human dignity. Titled "Infinite Dignity," the declaration compared those practices on par with euthanasia and abortion as violations of God's plan for human life.

In talking about gender theory, the document first affirms that "every person, regardless of sexual orientation, ought to be respected in his or her dignity and treated with consideration, while 'every sign of unjust discrimination' is to be carefully avoided, particularly any form of aggression and violence."

Defining gender theory often seems circular because the explanation requires you to know the meaning of gender (which is sometimes defined as "an internal persona, the sense of being a man or a woman"), but Encyclopedia.com defines the theory as "looking at masculinity and femininity as sets of mutually created characteristics shaping the lives of men and women. It replaced or challenged ideas of masculinity and femininity and of men and women as operating in history according to fixed biological determinants." Bing's AI app says, "Gender theory proposes that the ideas we have about gender are shaped through the cultures in which we live. This theory has played a major role in our understanding of how gender expectations are socially and culturally constructed."

However we understand gender theory, the Vatican document labels it as "dangerous since it cancels differences in its claim to make everyone equal."

Further, the document said, "the Church recalls that human life in all its dimensions, both physical and spiritual, is a gift from God. This gift is to be accepted with gratitude ... Desiring a personal self-determination, as gender theory prescribes, apart from this fundamental truth that human life is a gift, amounts to a concession to the age-old temptation to make oneself God."

The document also declared that gender theory is an attempt to introduce new rights that are not among those given by God.

Regarding transgender surgeries, the declaration said, "any sex-change intervention, as a rule, risks threatening the unique dignity the person has received from the moment of conception." The document did go on to say that it is acceptable for "a person with genital abnormalities that are already evident at birth or that develop later" to "receive the assistance of healthcare professionals to resolve these abnormalities. However, in this case, such a medical procedure would not constitute a sex change in the sense intended here."

The Vatican takes its stand against surrogacy, "through which the immensely worthy child becomes a mere object," by citing Pope Francis' words: "The path to peace calls for respect for life, for every human life, starting with the life of the unborn child in the mother's womb, which cannot be suppressed or turned into an object of trafficking."

Also, said the document, surrogacy violates the child's "unalienable dignity," in that every child "has the right to have a fully human (and not artificially induced) origin and to receive the gift of a life that manifests both the dignity of the giver and that of the receiver."

Surrogacy also "violates the dignity of the woman," the Vatican said, "whether she is coerced into it or chooses to subject herself to it freely. For, in this practice, the woman is detached from the child growing in her and becomes a mere means subservient to the arbitrary gain or desire of others."

For their part, Catholics who consider themselves transgender say the Vatican statement is tone-deaf to the reality of their lives. Although the document restates long-standing Catholic teaching, it still came as a disappointment because recent actions by Pope Francis had encouraged some trans Catholics to hope the church might become more accepting.

The pope has welcomed some transgender women to his weekly general audiences and also said that under certain circumstances, trans people can be baptized as Catholics and serve as godparents.

Maxwell Kuzma, 32, a lifelong Catholic and transgender man living in Ohio, said, "A document like this is very hurtful to the larger LGBTQ+ community but especially to the trans community." He views the declaration as failing to show the "respect, love and support" that Pope Francis has personally extended to the trans community."

Noting the declaration's claim that attempting to change one's sex is trying to "make oneself God," Michael Sennett, a transgender man involved with an LGBTQ+ ministry at St. Ignatius of Loyola Church in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, said, "Trans people who take hormones or have surgeries are not playing God; we are respecting and accepting our authentic selves."

Surveying more broadly across the U.S. population, a 2022 poll by the Pew Research Center found that a majority favor laws that would protect transgender individuals from discrimination in jobs, housing and public spaces, but at the same time, 60% say a person's gender is determined by their sex assigned at birth, which is up from 56% in 2021 and 54% in 2017.

And perhaps surprisingly, even the LGBTQ community is not of one mind about transgender matters. This blog, published in and to the LGBTQ community, stated "trans women and men are often neglected by those who set political priorities of our community, if not treated with outright hostility and prejudice." However, the fact that the blog post is from 2018 and was the most recent statement we could find about transphobia in the U.S. LGBTQ community suggests that those attitudes are changing within that group.

More on this story can be found at these links:

Vatican Declares Transgender Surgeries, Surrogacy, Gender Theory Threats to Human Dignity. National Review

Transgender Catholics Say New Vatican Document Shows No Understanding of Their Lives. AP News

Declaration of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith 'Dignitas Infinita' on Human Dignity. Holy See Press Office

Applying the News Story

We are presenting this news without pushing a position on the topics as an opportunity for discussion of gender theory, transgender surgeries and surrogacy. Since there are no Bible verses directly related to any of these three subjects, we will look for some that seem applicable to the general thinking and attitudes about these topics.

The Big Questions

1. Is human dignity a God-given quality? If so, what do you understand that to mean? If not, how is human dignity attained? What might the Catholic Church mean by calling human dignity "infinite"?
2. Is taking steps to change one's sex actually an attempt to "make oneself God," as the Vatican document claims? Is it "respecting and accepting [one's] authentic self," as Michael Sennett stated in the "In the News" section above? Could it be both ... or neither? Explain your answer.
3. Has your view about any of the three topics changed? If so, what has caused that change? If not, what has caused your view to remain unchanged?
4. Genesis 1:27 (see text below) says God made human beings "male and female." So if a person is born with genital abnormalities that make it unclear which sex they are, what should we assume about their personhood and human dignity? The Vatican declaration says such persons may "receive the assistance of healthcare professionals to resolve these abnormalities," but in the case of infants who cannot speak for themselves, how might healthcare professionals know which sex to resolve the abnormalities toward?

5. If a person is born with the "hardware" (genitals) of one sex but seems to have received the "software" (brain chemistry, sense of identity and personhood) of the opposite sex, how do they fit into God's scheme of things?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Genesis 1:27

So God created humans in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

(For context, read Genesis 1:26-31.)

This verse from the creation story summarizes God's creative act in making human beings.

And he made them -- us -- "in the image of God." Some theological interpretations of that phrase suggest that the "image of God" means a certain quality or characteristic granted to humans -- in short, the soul. Others argue that it means a role or task assigned to humanity. But still others see it as a definition of humankind that refers to the sanctity and inherent worth of every human being as a whole person. In other words, the value of the person is not just because of his or her soul, but because God has stamped his image in some way on the person's entire being.

Whatever the interpretation of the phrase, note that the passage containing this description of the creation of humanity ends with these words: "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good."

Questions: Which of the suggested interpretations of "the image of God" makes the most sense to you? Why?

In the comments below the National Review article about the Vatican document, one commenter said, "Problem starts right with the title. Man does not have 'infinite dignity'; he has 'inherent dignity' by virtue of being created in the image of God. Only God has infinite dignity." Do you agree or disagree? Why?

Psalms 139:13-14

For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.

(For context, read Psalm 139:13-18.)

The imagery in verses 13-18 provides a picture of God the Giver of Life, forming and shaping the psalmist while in utero, leading the psalmist to exclaim, "I am fearfully and wonderfully made." (By "fearfully" the psalmist means that the contemplation of God's life-giving act has filled the psalmist with awe.) This verse presents the biblical view that human life is not merely the result of biology, but the result of God's intentional will and work. By inference then, human life is of great worth to God.

Questions: If God is the one doing the formation of the individual in the womb, is God's participation in any way lessened if the uterus is a "borrowed" one (as in surrogacy) or if the conception itself occurred in a test tube?

How is the worth God has assigned you expressed in your everyday life?

John 3:16

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (For context, read John 3:14-21.)

The Greek word translated "world" in the verse above is kosmos, which in this context means "the human inhabitants of the earth." But the Greek of John's day included another word that can also mean "world" but specifically refers to the part of the earth that is inhabited. That word is oikoumene, but John did not use it in this verse, and here is probably why:

Although oikoumene could be used to refer to all the inhabitants of the earth, it was more commonly used to mean the Roman world, the lands inhabited by civilized people, excluding therefore the areas where "uncivilized" lived.

Thus, we can see why John did not write, "For God so loved the oikoumene that he gave his only Son ..." That could be taken by some to mean that God loves the cultured people of this planet but not those some label as unworthy or unimportant. No, John used kosmos instead of oikoumene because he wanted to be clear that no one anywhere was outside the realm of God's love.

Questions: If no one anywhere is outside the realm of God's love, what does that say about the value of every human being? What does that say about the thoughts or self-perceptions of every human being?

Jeremiah 1:5

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you ... (For context, read Jeremiah 1:4-10.)

Matthew 10:30-31

... even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. (For context, read Matthew 10:26-31.)

These two verses, one from each testament, remind us that with God, none of us is ever an "unknown." With God there is never any confusion about our identity, and there is never any question about the great value he places upon each one of us.

These may seem obvious points, but compare them to some of the other world religions where the goal is thought to be to merge into a universal consciousness. Both Christianity and Judaism before it testify to the worth God gives to each individual.

Questions: How does the fact that you are personally known and valued by God affect how you live? How does it affect how you think about surrogacy? How does it affect how you think about gender theory? How does it affect how you think about transgender surgery?

For Further Discussion

1. Although the actual Vatican document runs several pages and covers more issues related to human dignity than the three we have focused on in this lesson, it is actually relatively easy to read. And because it includes appropriate subheads (e.g, surrogacy, gender theory, etc.), it is easy to locate the parts you may wish to read. (Alternatively, if you are reading it online, you can use the page word-search feature to zero in on the parts that interest you.)

So as a group, decide about which topics you'd like to know more of the Vatican's view on. Then read and discuss those.

2. In discussing issues related to gender theory and transgender surgeries, it is helpful to understand how the words involved are often medically and sociologically defined. The following explanations come from a version of the book *Walking the Bridgeless Canyon: Repairing the Breach Between the Church and the LGBT Community* by Kathy Baldock, and are used here with permission:

"Sex,'in the framework of this book, is not a shortened version of the term 'sexual intercourse'; it refers to the body and to biology. A person's sex is determined by the reproductive system, external genitalia, chromosomes, and hormones."

"Gender is more complicated than sex. You cannot know the gender of a person by examining the genitals, chromosomes, or reproductive system, because gender is an inborn knowledge that develops by the time a child is six years old. Gender refers to socially constructed roles, along with behaviors and activities, most often associated with biological sex. Gender refers to an internal persona, the sense of being a man or a woman. ... Sex and gender are two separate characteristics of a person; because this fact is widely misunderstood, this cannot be overstated, or repeated enough. The words sex and gender are not interchangeable and are commonly misused."

"Intersex: Infants born outside the XX and XY sex norms have existed throughout history. While these individuals were once called 'hermaphrodites' and 'pseudohermaphrodites,' those terms are not accurate, and are no longer acceptable. The correct term for this condition is 'intersex.' Shrouded in relative secrecy, this topic has only been publicly discussed or more widely acknowledged within the last [20] years. ... Intersex people are not unintended by nature, or unknown by God. ... Every person can claim Psalm 139:14, 'I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.' It is vexing to hear Christians claim this verse for their own lives and not be willing to extend the omniscience of God to others who are different."

"Transgender people are not the same as intersex. In the case of transgender people, the sex clearly indicated by the single sex alignment of genitalia, the reproductive system and the chromosomes does not match the internal sense of gender. ... 'Transgender' is a larger umbrella term for many groups that express a gender contrary to their biological sex. ... " Transgender, and 'trans' for our purposes, refer to those who experience a fulltime desire to change their outward appearance to achieve greater congruence with the gender they feel that they are. Often, this will include the use of hormones and perhaps surgery."

3. How does the belief in human dignity and worth help in cases where lives must be considered on both sides of the equation? In other words, when taking one life might prevent the loss of another life? What examples of life against life can you think of?

4. For more on the Pope's rejection of surrogacy and the costs involved in the procedure, read this.

5. Respond to this, from TWW team member Mary Sells: My father stopped talking for a while to my eldest sister in the mid-1960s when she moved in with her boyfriend. Today nobody would bat an eye at such a decision. Does timing matter -- those who go first suffer while those who follow do not face such obstacles?

Responding to the News

This is a good time to learn some facts about gender and transgender people so that you can develop informed opinions about these matters. Here are two books to consider. Be aware that each has a different theological perspective from the other:

Walking the Bridgeless Canyon: Repairing the Breach Between the Church and the LGBT Community, by Kathy Baldock

God and the Transgender Debate: What Does the Bible Actually Say about Gender Identity?, by Andrew Walker

Here is some information about surrogacy from the National Library of Medicine.

Prayer

O God, help us who are fearfully and wonderfully made not only to value the lives you have given us, but also to value the lives you have given others, even when we don't understand or don't approve of their situation. And when the latter is the case, don't let our disapproval be based on ignorance of facts. In our relationships with others, enable us to lead with kindness and a willingness to "walk a mile in their shoes." In Jesus' name. Amen.

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