



Where Justice and Truth Meet

February 2023

“We...reject the societal barriers created by the misuse of power.”

– A Prayer for the Life of the World



TRANSGENDER PERSONS, THEIR FAMILIES AND THE CHURCH

The Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation Committee has received permission from the CHA (Catholic Health Association of the United States) to reprint five stories from their booklet: *Transgender Persons, Their Families and the Church*. We will be including one in each of the next editions of WTJM. Stories, real stories of other individuals and their families, invite us to share in another's world. When we enter open-hearted into the lives of others, we allow the Holy Spirit to assist us to come to new understandings and perspectives.

This is one of the perspectives used by the CHA to respond to a key question: *How can we provide the same quality, compassionate care for transgender persons as we do for all our patients and also respect Church teaching?* They approached the Committee on Doctrine of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). Members of that Committee asked the Catholic Health Association of the United States (CHA) for assistance in arranging for a meeting that would allow some bishops from the Committee to hear directly from people who identify as transgender or who care for transgender persons. A meeting was hosted that included Dominican Sister Luisa Derouen, who has worked with the transgender community for over 20 years; Maureen Cauffey, a transgender woman and business owner; Deacon Ray Dever, of the Diocese of Tampa-St. Petersburg, who has an adult transgender daughter; Kay, the mother of a transgender teenage son who asked to conceal details of her identity to protect her family's privacy; and Dr. Colt St. Amand, a transgender man and physician.

In this first edition – which we realize is longer than usual – we begin with our Dominican Sister's story, Sister Luisa Derouen.

Keep Your Life and Your Heart Close to God BY SR. LUISA DEROUEN, O.P.

Good morning! I am Sister Luisa Derouen, a member of the Dominican Sisters of Peace, and I'm speaking with you from St. Catharine, Kentucky. I've been a sister for 59 years. I have a master's degree in theology and am a trained spiritual director.

I've been ministering among the transgender community nationally for 21 years. For about 20 of those years, I have longed for and prayed for the day I would be able to speak about transgender people directly to you who are bishops. And now, after all these years, today is the day. Thank you for your willingness to listen to us today.

First, a bit about how I got into this ministry. After having served for several years as vocation director for my congregation, my leadership team gave me permission to minister among the lesbian and gay community. I have gay family members and have had gay friends my whole life and I felt God was calling me to minister among them.

— YOUR — Story MATTERS

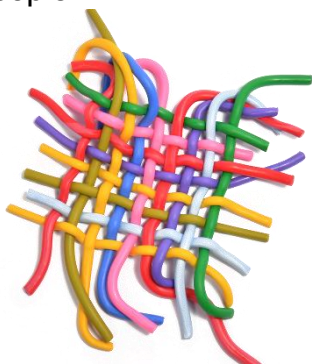
At one of the first meetings I attended, I met Courtney Sharp, a Catholic transgender woman with several degrees and a deep spiritual life. I had never met a transgender person before, so I asked her if we could get together so she could tell me her story because I wanted to learn from her. During our very first conversation she said to me, “You get this, and very few people do. For most of us this is a profoundly spiritual journey, but we don't have spiritual people who understand us and are willing to walk through

this with us.” That was April 1999. I was 55 years old and I was beginning the most powerful and graced ministry of my life.

Within a year and a half, I was being contacted by transgender people from all over the country and beyond. In these 21 years I have ministered one on one to close to 300 transgender people. That does not include many others I’ve known casually. Because of health limitations I no longer minister full-time, but I continue to be contacted by transgender people, their families, and other entities wanting to better understand this community of God’s people. From the beginning, I have had the total support of my congregational leadership.

I am increasingly distressed by the documents of several bishops offering directives for their dioceses regarding transgender people. I believe the bishops are well intentioned. All of them begin by stating how important it is that transgender people be respected and treated with compassion and sensitivity as children of God. But then, in short order, comes the foundational message that it is impossible for there to be transgender people because God does not make transgender people. Therefore, at best they are suffering from a psychological disorder and we must gently and respectfully help them understand that they are not who they say they are. At worst, they are putting themselves above God by believing they can change their bodies based on superficial feelings and selfish wants.

However well-meaning that may be, it is impossible to extend respect and compassion for people while declaring at the same time that they do not exist and ignoring the experience of their own lives. It is absolutely clear to me that bishops who write these documents do not know transgender people.



The irony of what these bishops have proposed is not lost on transgender people. While they insist that body and soul cannot be separated, their argument for this relies totally on chromosomes and genitals, completely disregarding the working of God’s Spirit in their lives. Courtney, whom I spoke of earlier, wrote this to me a couple of weeks ago after reading the document on transgender people by Archbishop Carlson,

I’ve been thinking about how Christians can take a simplistic view of things and quickly reach harmful conclusions that support their predetermined concepts. In relation to gender identity, they only need to look at X and Y chromosomes and Genesis 1:27 to know what God intends for someone’s life. God created us male and female. That’s all we need to know. It’s that simple. Well, that’s way too simple. In some cases, it’s a lack of awareness and understanding and they need time to process things; in other cases, it may be spiritual blindness. If the person is in a position of authority, it leads to judgments that separate people from the Church and from God.

I have known transgender people for years *before* they transition, and for years *after* they transition. I have spent thousands of hours with them in their home, in my home, in their church, in my church, with their families, for birthdays and funerals. I’ve cried with them and I’ve rejoiced with them. They are far more attuned than most of us to the reality that we human beings are a complex, mysterious, body-spirit creation of God, and they want nothing more than to honor that reality.

In March, I wrote an article for *Global Sisters Report* about transgender people. In that article I described the process as a process of their growth into wholeness and holiness. What they experience is classic Christian conversion of life, of transformation into God.

For most of us, our own inner sense of who we are and how everyone else perceives us

Stories

*help us
understand...*

matches. We take that congruence for granted and we can't imagine that it could be otherwise for anybody. But for a fraction of the human family this congruence is elusive to a greater or lesser degree for reasons we do not yet fully understand. Those who are not transgender or don't personally know them can't begin to grasp the depth of suffering, confusion, and self-loathing, which too often leads to self-destructive behaviors, including suicide.

Dawn Wright transitioned many years ago and is a professor of business analytics for Western Governors University. But when I met her in 1999, she was still desperately trying to make herself not be transgender. She had attempted suicide several times and was extremely fragile.

It was impressed upon me in first grade that the feelings I had of being a girl were wrong and not according to God's will for me. I didn't ask for these feelings. They were just there inside me. For decades I prayed every day to want to be a man, but those prayers didn't help.

Dawn, like hundreds of others, made herculean efforts to be the person everyone told her she was. It didn't work for her, and it doesn't work for any transgender people.

After years of trying, when they can no longer pretend to be who they are not, they enter the second movement. They finally admit to themselves that to live from a place other than honesty is a pretense they can no longer maintain. That admission comes only after intense and extensive prayer, doing the hard work of self-knowledge in therapy, and making life-changing decisions toward living as their authentic selves. Many lose their family of origin, or their spouse, or children, or job, friends, and faith community, or all of that! How many of us have paid that kind of price to live with integrity?



Sara Buechner is a concert pianist and the recipient of several international awards. I've known her for 14 years. She is currently a master teacher at Temple University in Philadelphia.

In the tumultuous two and a half years that followed my decision to transition, friends abandoned me, concert dates evaporated, and I lost my teaching job. But within my body there was complete calm because the journey within was integral to myself and it was a journey made not alone, but with God.

Gradually, over a period of more years, as they make their way through the painful and complex stages of transition personally and publicly that is unique to each person, self-hatred is replaced by self-love. They are finally at home with themselves and with the world around them. And with God. They have made the passage from what was death-dealing to what can now be life-giving. This is what living the Paschal Mystery looks like. We Catholic Christians call it transformation in God.

Scotty Pignatella is a systems engineer in the aerospace industry. I have known him for 14 years, too. His avocation is photography, which gave him images for his own experience:

I am a photographer, and light is central to my art. The best pictures are in the hours when light has nuance. I am twilight. I am a physical, living embodiment of that moment that allows for striking images and perspectives that are not possible during the dullness of day or night. I am of God and I have beauty in this world that can only be viewed by those who choose to see it.

This sacred journey of living into their true selves in God doesn't look the same for everyone. We are not cookie cutter people. But I testify to you today that transgender people are who they say they are. I know this because when they live from the place of honesty and truth, God is there. I experience the gifts of the Holy Spirit in them. I see peace, joy,

compassion, wisdom, forgiveness and love. They are part of the Body of Christ. They deserve to be treated as the Body of Christ, whether in hospitals, Catholic schools and universities, retreat centers, elder care facilities, and everywhere. After transition, they struggle with life's issues the way all of us do, but now they navigate these challenges with their integrity intact.

If the bishops issue a statement on the care of transgender people, I ask them to remember: Words matter. YOUR words matter. Transgender people and their families are

directly and profoundly affected by what you say.

Transgender people are not delusional or trying to play God. They are who they say they are. For all these years my mantra to them has been, *"The truth always leads us to God and never away from God. Keep your heart and your life close to God and God will show you the truth of who you are and how to live from that place of truth."*

Reprint permission granted to Dominican Sisters of Springfield, IL. Copyright © 2021 The Catholic Health Association of the United States

