



# Where Justice and Truth Meet

February, 2024

*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

This edition of WJTM brings the fourth story from CHA (Catholic Health Association of the United States) booklet: *Transgender Persons, Their Families and the Church*.

During this season of Lent, we journey with Jesus and the apostles during a time of uncertainty, pain, and what seems to be an unknown future. With this story we read of the confusion, questioning, and the choice to love unconditionally as experienced by Deacon Ray Dever, his wife and their daughters.

### *It Was Like a Resurrection* By Deacon Ray Dever

Good morning. Let me first add my thanks to each of you on the Committee for agreeing to meet with us and to spend some time listening to us.

My name is Ray Dever, Deacon Ray, from Tampa, Florida. I'm a permanent deacon in the Diocese of St. Petersburg. My wife and I have been married for 27 years and we have three adult daughters, the oldest of whom is a 26-year-old transgender woman. Ten years ago when my wife and I began this totally unexpected journey with our daughter, we honestly didn't understand what the word transgender even meant. It's been a difficult road, with times when it looked like our family might break apart or we might lose our daughter. My wife and I eventually decided to accept, support, and love her unconditionally, a decision with which we are totally at peace.

That's who I am, and that's why I'm here. I'm going to use my time to share some of the details of our journey over the past decade. As I tell our story, I'll try to highlight some of the lessons that we've

learned. And finally, I'll conclude with some thoughts that I hope will be helpful to you.

Let me begin by sharing a little about our very Catholic family. My wife and I both are cradle Catholics and both have large extended families that are predominantly Catholic. Our three children have all attended Catholic schools, including Catholic colleges in the case of our two oldest. We have spent decades of active lay ministry in the Church, including various marriage and family enrichment programs. I was eventually called to the diaconate with my ordination in 2009 and completion of a master's degree in theology in 2011.

Our journey with our transgender daughter began about a year after my ordination, when she descended into a deep depression during her junior year in high school. Almost overnight we went from the usual parental worries about grades and college applications to just trying to get her through her junior year of high school alive, as she had two suicide attempts that semester.

As we engaged in therapy and working our way through that difficult time, it eventually surfaced that there were questions of gender identity that were intimately connected with her mental health struggles. We now understand that, like many who are struggling with the decision to come out, she was faced with what seemed like an unsolvable

dilemma — either continue to live denying who she really was, or to come out and risk losing her entire world of family, friends, and faith, a dilemma that drove her, and has driven so many others like her, to consider

suicide.

In spite of all that, she still managed to graduate summa cum laude from high school and to head off to Georgetown University. But she had still not fully

— YOUR —  
**Story**  
MATTERS

resolved her gender identity struggles and come out.

One weekday evening during her first semester, we saw something on social media that alarmed us, that indicated that she was leaving her dorm with suicidal thoughts. In fact, she had left campus and walked down the hill from Georgetown to the Francis Scott Key Bridge, from which she planned to jump into the Potomac River. There was a frantic scramble to find her that night, both by people on campus and by us on the phone almost a thousand miles away. And by the grace of God, a resident advisor from her dorm managed to get hold of her on her cell phone and to talk her back to campus.

So, she survived once again, praise God, and by the end of freshman year decided to fully come out and begin transitioning. When she embraced her gender identity and when our family decided to accept and support her, we got our child back, we got back the beautiful person that we had known and loved growing up, as she emerged from the depths of depression. It was like a resurrection.

We'll never be able to express how grateful and blessed we felt when she graduated from Georgetown in 2016 and began a career as a graphic artist in Washington, D.C., all with the support and love of her extended Catholic family.

As our daughter was struggling with all this, my wife and I had our own journey. We engaged in prayerful discernment and reflection on what the Church taught on all this, in counseling and therapy, and in educating ourselves on the science of this topic.

About six years ago, I was invited by one of the ministries to the Catholic LGBT community to share our experiences in a blog, which I did. Much to my surprise and chagrin, the blog went viral and I began to hear from people from across the country and even overseas. That led to invitations to write additional blogs, to publish articles, to speak to various groups across the country, and to minister to dozens of families in similar situations. The experiences of all those other individuals and families only reinforced what we had learned on our own journey.

One of the clear lessons of our journey, and the first point that I would like to make, is with respect to gender ideology. I understand the concern with gender ideology that has been expressed by the Church, but I have personally seen no evidence of any connection between gender ideology and authentically transgender individuals.

It became self-evident to us, from our experience, from the experience of others, and from the technical literature, that there clearly are biological and psychological factors at work that cause someone to be transgender. Being transgender is not the result of some arbitrary choice. Anyone with any significant firsthand knowledge of transgender individuals would be baffled by the suggestion that transgender people are somehow the result of an ideology of gender. And, of course, if this is not a choice, if there is no act of free will, then that has serious implications in the context of our moral theology.

**Sharing one's story**  
**is heart**  **work**

A second clear lesson we've learned is that the acceptance and support of transgender individuals is a pro-life issue. I understand and respect that you're dealing with difficult health care policy decisions that involve moral theology and

Christian anthropology. But I believe that there's a legitimate pro-life issue that must also be weighed with respect to transgender individuals, whose very lives are marginalized and devalued in so many ways.

When a transgender person comes out, they know that they will likely have to face rejection, discrimination, bigotry, and even violence.

That's a very difficult path in life. It's heartbreaking as a parent to know that our daughter will have to face that for the rest of her life, and it seems obvious that it's just not a path in life that a person would freely choose. All that my daughter wants is to be able to live her life as the person that God created, with the same respect, value, dignity, and rights as any other person. And the same is true for every transgender individual I have ever met.

My wife and I live every day with the sobering knowledge of the risks that our daughter faces. Every year, dozens of transgender people are

murdered in the U.S. for the sole reason that they are transgender.

And, of course, the rate of suicide is significantly higher for the LGBT community than for the general populace, especially for those who do not receive the support and the care that they need. I can't help but think of the 10th Chapter of John's Gospel, where Jesus speaks of the Good Shepherd and says: "I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly." And no one was excluded from that life.

Before I conclude, I want to just touch briefly on a third point regarding the science. Now I'm definitely not a medical doctor or psychologist, but I do have a solid science background. My first vocation was engineering, which I practiced professionally for 40 years. I have graduate degrees from Cal Tech and Princeton. Why does any of that matter here? It matters because I know how to read technical literature with an open mind, I can separate the wheat from the chaff among scientific studies, and I know how to research the accepted body of knowledge on a particular technical topic.

When I was forced to start educating myself about gender identity issues, I readily found a clear and growing body of scientific and medical knowledge with respect to the reality of transgender individuals. I found an overwhelming consensus among major medical and psychiatric organizations that transgender people are real, that transition-related medical treatments are effective and medically necessary, and that these organizations support insurance coverage of transition-related care.

Now, my concern is that the Church has not fully engaged with this mainstream body of knowledge

and practice to date. I'm obviously not familiar with the ongoing work of this Committee, but at least in terms of public statements and documents from the Church on this topic, it seems to me that the Church has been relying on a small number of scientific sources that at best are outside the mainstream body of knowledge and, at worst, are biased or even junk science.

And I apologize if that sounds harsh, but it's my honest, objective assessment. So the third point that I want to make is that I think that we as the Church need to take the time and make the intentional effort to objectively evaluate all the medical and scientific information on this topic before we promulgate any policies that may end up doing more harm than good.

As I conclude, let me also share that as you deal with the complex issues associated with Catholic health care policies for transgender individuals, I am concerned that the impact of the decisions you make will likely extend to other Catholic institutions, such as schools and parishes. In recent years,

transgender children have increasingly been excluded from Catholic schools and from faith formation or sacramental preparation at their parishes. That is a tragic mistake.

*I hope and pray that we do not rush to any decisions that effectively exclude transgender people from Catholic institutions. I hope and pray that we can have the humility as a Church to cast a wider net as we discern, to listen objectively to other voices in the scientific community, and to allow our Christian anthropology, our understanding of male and female, to evolve to accept and respect the full diversity of all the lives that God has created in His image and likeness.*

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

**Stories**

*help us  
understand...*





### "Home" by Warsan Shire

no one leaves home unless  
home is the mouth of a shark  
you only run for the border  
when you see the whole city running as well

....

you have to understand,  
that no one puts their children in a boat  
unless the water is safer than the land  
no one burns their palms  
under trains  
beneath carriages  
no one spends days and nights  
in the stomach of a truck  
feeding on newspaper  
unless the miles travelled  
means something more than journey.

*Warsan Shire was born in Kenya to Somali parents and lives in London.*

We hear about immigrants every day in the news. Much of what we hear is statistics:

- 124,000 immigrants crossed the southern border in January 2024—an astounding number, but significantly less than the previous month.
- 35,000 individuals seeking asylum arriving via Texas buses in Chicago since September 2022.
- As of November 2023, the Immigration Court backlog is more than 3 million cases. The 682 immigration judges now average 4500 pending cases each.
- The average asylum case wait time is about 4.3 years, with up to a 6-year wait, depending on the state where the case is filed.

Statistics like this are important to know and news reports highlight them along with commentary about the visible reality. However, neither the statistics nor most news reports delve deeper into WHY so many people are forced to flee their homes and countries. “*No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark...No one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land,*” writes Warsan Shire.

Those who propose closing the borders or telling people to “wait their turn” probably don’t know (or don’t want to know) individuals’ stories—what the “mouth of a shark” and the miles travelled look and feel like:

- Safety for a young woman who arrives at Bethany House on her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday with her 3-year-old son—the one positive result of the abuse she endured for most of her life.
- A sense of justice that follows a guilty verdict when human traffickers were finally convicted seven years after a then-14-year-old girl escaped from traffickers who lured her from her home in Africa to the U.S. to sell her services.
- Starting over for a pediatrician, leader of a national medical association, who escaped with her children because her life and that of her unborn child were threatened for publicizing the scandal of maternal mortality in her country of origin.
- Teenage sisters fleeing being sold into marriage to older men to pay off a family member’s gambling debts—separated at the border and finally reunited with one another months later and now sharing an apartment together and supporting one another.

There are always compelling reasons why persons undertake a life-threatening journey. Hope is stronger than fear. As one asylum seeker said, “Here I am someone, and I can continue to dream.”



From *Justice for Immigrants* website, a campaign of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops.