**Bishops' Conference of Scotland**
**Called to be Children of God**
**A Catholic Understanding of Gender Identity**

## Introduction

Today there is intense public debate about gender. While it causes some to raise questions over their identity and engenders suffering and discomfort in others, it raises profound questions for wider society about human nature itself and the truth and meaning of human sexuality, as well as the scope of human self-determination and how we are to understand ourselves and our relationship to self, to one another and to our world.

## Church Teaching on the Nature, Dignity and Identity of the Human Person

From our understanding of human nature available to rational investigation and common experience, and from Revelation that informs our faith, the Church's vision of the human person, of love and of sexuality emerges.

Building upon the affirmations of human reason, our faith further informs us that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God, body and soul, male and female[1], as affirmed by Sacred Scripture[2] [3],Tradition and the constant teaching of the Catholic Church.[4]

God chose to create each human being uniquely as a person, calling each person into loving communion with Him and all other persons. Both through the evidence of our natural capacity of reason and freedom, as well as from our creation in God's image, each person has an inherent dignity which is to be respected always and in all circumstances.

The truth is that only in the mystery of Jesus does the mystery of the human person take on its fullest light.[5] Only He fully reveals humanity to humankind itself and makes our supreme calling clear. It is not surprising, then, that in Him all the truths of human experience find their root and attain their crown.[6] Following Him, and with the help of His grace, we grow in the likeness of the One who is the Way, the Truth, and Life itself — Jesus Christ. He shared in the fulness of our humanity by means of His incarnation, in all things but sin, so as to show us what it means to be human and the path by which all human beings are called by God in the full realisation of our human nature and identity.

Knowledge and awareness of our personal identity is something that unfolds over our lifetimes. As we grow in self-consciousness, and especially at the onset of puberty, our sense of personal identity embraces our sexuality as an integral expression of our human dignity. Such self-awareness is also shaped and formed through our free choices, actions and habits. This holds at the deepest realms of our sense of who we are as a person, how we understand ourselves and relate to ourselves and others, and how we are called by God to love.

Our sexuality pervades our being and personality and is included in all other essential aspects of our dignity and identity as a human person. While this is true, the Church does not align itself with certain contemporary trends that seem to reduce the wonder and complexity of the human person exclusively to matters of sexuality and sexual orientation. The history of thought and the development of cultures have revealed manifold and rich dimensions to human beings and persons in society, as well as warning of the dangers inherent in the practical reduction of the human person to only one dimension of consideration, as if this alone mattered. Moreover, the Church proposes in the light of faith a further supernatural identity, opened up to Christians in grace, as that of sons and daughters of God and heirs of eternal life.

In the pursuit of our wellbeing in this life and our happiness in the next, our sexuality matters categorically because, as one of many human expressions of our authentic self-giving in relationships, it is integrally connected with how we love and how we understand love. The Church cares deeply about how we love precisely because our welfare and salvation are caught up in how we live our image and likeness of "*God (Who) is Love*"[7]. It is in loving as God loves, and means us to love, that we grow in His likeness and in our fulfilment as human persons.

In short, it is as persons defined in our communion of body and soul, and in the complementarity of our sexuality as male and female and called in our being by God to give ourselves in love as the fulfilment of our meaning, that our true and authentic identity is found.

The Church proposes this Christian vision of the human person and sexuality as the fullest and most satisfying understanding of the human person. From that perspective it is far from being closed-minded or exclusive, like other models that are reductive of the human person and is misunderstood if it should be portrayed as a mere set of rules and prohibitions.

**Sex and Gender as Given Realities**

That said, following the data of the life sciences, the Church holds that human life, from the moment of conception, has its sexual state fixed genetically, anatomically and physiologically, as a constitutive part of our personal identity. Moreover, the Church, aware of the evidence of both life and human sciences, is convinced that gender identity and sexual identity arise from one and the same real foundation and are inseparable from each other in principle.

Sexual identity is expressed in our biological organisation and reproductive functioning which are recognised at birth, rather than something which is assigned by social convention, or arbitrarily. That is to say, gender is innate through its biological and other components, and is thus unchangeable.

Biological differences between men and women also mean that male and female bodies react differently to diseases and to treatment and this distinction is acknowledged in medical practice.

## Recent Theories of Sex and Gender as Socially Constructed

This conviction of the Church, universally shared with society until lately, is now challenged by theories of social construction that affirm that gender identity has been imposed on individuals by established societal mores and that, left to itself, gender would show itself to be fluid and changeable. Such theories argue that gender is the subjective choice of the individual. They are an expression of the unrestricted autonomy of the individual which can be detrimental to the interests of society, communities and families.

The situation is further complicated by the use of the terms 'sex' and 'gender' interchangeably, suggesting that sex can also be a subjective choice, such that any person at any time should be free to change their sex.

## An Approach of Pastoral Sensitivity

The Church is pastorally sensitive to the experience of some who, even at certain moments in life, desire to have a body and identity other than their biological gender and may begin to behave in ways culturally associated with this orientation. They are to be met with compassion and a particular care and support in the challenges and distress that come with gender dysphoria.

At the same time, the findings of contemporary research encourage us, in the considered care we give to individuals, not to undermine any support they may receive to acknowledge and accept their given sexual identity.[8] This approach receives further endorsement from the evidence that most young people do not persist in gender dysphoria beyond adolescence, after which they reconcile with their biological sex.

Taking everything into consideration, then, the Church proposes a compassionate approach of accompaniment, discernment and integration as a model across the whole of society.

## Clinical Support

Gender dysphoria, the feeling that one's biological sex does not correspond with one's lived or experienced gender, is a condition that can cause significant distress and anxiety. It is a complex biomedical condition which, according to the official NHS website, may be identified by, for example, low self-esteem, becoming withdrawn or socially isolated, depression, and taking unnecessary risks.[9] It is essential that those experiencing gender dysphoria meet with a suitably qualified medical professional. Whilst some argue that these important protective measures are not necessary and ought to be removed, this view is not shared by all. It would be reckless to prioritise ideology over the health and wellbeing of vulnerable people.

Moving to a self-declaratory model and de-medicalising legal transition, as some have suggested, will inevitably reduce the opportunity for crucial support of healthcare professionals for those affected by gender dysphoria. In this regard, de-medicalisation removes a prudent protection for vulnerable individuals. Similarly, any reduction in the time a person is required to live in their acquired gender risks similar failure in practical

support for vulnerable people. Less politicisation and more caution is required, as well as sensitive analyses and treatment.

**Children**

Aware of their particular need of society's protection, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child defines children as those under eighteen years of age.

In that regard, there are good reasons to question sex reassignment surgery or other irreversible elective interventions to children. For the same reason they are protected from making permanent legal declarations about their gender. Nor can pharmacological interventions with unclear long-term effects be considered any less seriously.

In Scotland young people under eighteen years of age are restricted by law from buying cigarettes or alcohol in licensed premises, or from getting a tattoo - all for their own protection. So much more a permanent declaration on their gender with all its attendant consequences should not be permitted without similar safeguards.

**Women's Safety**

Women's organisations have recorded their own concern that the proposed reforms will increased risks to their safety. Their objections that a man self-declaring as female will have access to a women's refuge and safe house or gain access to a women-only prisons is to be taken seriously.[10] For example, in 2018, twenty-two male-to-female transgender prisoners were in custody in Scotland, none of whom had self-identified as female prior to their conviction. At the time this represented around 7% of the population of its female prisoners, compared to 0.02% in the general population, or three hundred and fifty times higher.

**Freedom**

The fundamental rights of freedom of conscience and speech, of expression, association and handing on of religious, moral and deeply held beliefs is the achievement of modern times. It was hard won against various threatening ideologies of the past century.

In our times such freedom should be upheld for those who, holding the reasonable view that sex and gender are given and immutable, therefore reject the idea of gender as fluid and separable from biological sex. This is particularly the case for those who work in education, healthcare, or as marriage celebrants who, from both reasonable and religious perspectives, hold an understanding of marriage as a union between one man and one woman, for prison staff and religious representatives. Likewise, the Church must be able to declare the marriages of its people in accordance with our own teaching.

Freedom of conscience and speech, of expression and association now constitutes a precious inheritance that must be preserved and passed on intact to future generations.

**The Sensible Parameters of the State and its Laws**

It is not the role of the State or Democracy to redefine the scientifically accepted facts of sexual difference and gender. Democratic deliberations should not contradict the truth concerning the dignity of the human person. These are part of the natural law and reason which express and promote the inherent dignity of the human person in society.

Attempts in civil law to redefine what it means to be male or female cannot be done without creating legal confusion, not least in implying there is nothing distinctive about womanhood or manhood, as well as spawning a plethora of unforeseen conundrums for society, and ultimately weakening the institution of marriage which has proved the surest foundation of family life and social stability. States will be aware of the profound and ongoing costs of forsaking principles that guide nature and human relationships. The climate crisis is a perilous example of the excesses that damage human dignity and our world when we redefine nature, human nature and relationships by unlimited individualism and so called "free choice" at the price of forsaking personal, community and societal responsibilities.

**Conclusion**

In the end, each generation, as it seeks to advance the common good, must ask anew: What are the requirements that governments may reasonably impose upon citizens, and how far do these extend? By appeal to what authority can moral dilemmas be resolved? These questions take us directly to the ethical foundations of civil discourse. If the moral principles underpinning the democratic process are themselves determined by nothing more solid than social consensus, then the fragility of the process becomes all too evident - herein lies the real challenge for democracy. The inadequacy of pragmatic, short-term solutions to complex social and ethical problems has been illustrated all too clearly.

The Catholic tradition maintains that the principles that uphold the dignity of the human person are accessible to all men and women through human reason. According to this understanding, the role of religion in political debate is not so much to supply these principles, as if they could not be known by non-believers - still less to propose concrete political solutions, which would lie altogether outside the competence of religion - but rather to help purify and shed light upon the application of reason to the discovery of these objective moral principles. Through our Catholic vision of human rights and responsibilities, of the common good and of the distinction and reciprocal relationship between male and female, the Church proposes a way forward in the current debate and looks forward to cooperation with civil authorities. As Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI said to parliamentarians on his UK visit in 2010:

*For such cooperation to be possible, religious bodies - including institutions linked to the Catholic Church - need to be free to act in accordance with their own principles and specific convictions based upon the faith and the official teaching of the Church. In this way, such basic rights as religious freedom, freedom of conscience and freedom of association are guaranteed*.'[11]

The Catholic Church, mindful of the overriding concern for the pastoral care of young persons and their families, looks forward to freely contributing to this important public

debate that has great significance for our understanding of the human person and sexuality.

[1] The Catechism of the Catholic Church, sections 1699 to 1715
[2] Gen 2:7: Then the LORD God formed a man[c] from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being
[3] Gen 1:27. So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them

[4] God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them" Man occupies a unique place in creation: (I) he is "in the image of God"; (II) in his own nature he unites the spiritual and material worlds; (III) he is created "male and female"; (IV) God established him in his friendship.

[5] GS 22
[6] *ibid*
[7] 1 John 4:8.
[8] CCC 2333.
[9] Gender dysphoria - NHS (www.nhs.uk)

[10] "the person in custody's gender identity and corresponding name and pronouns must be respected" so that the accommodation chosen "should reflect the gender in which the person in custody is currently living." Scottish Prison Service policy on transgender prisoners

[11] Pope Benedict, Address at Westminster Hall. 7 September 2010