



TRANSGENDER AND INTERSEX INDIVIDUALS AND RELIGIOUS LIFE

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Currently the whole Catholic Church is engaged in the synodal process, a joint reflection of the people of God walking together. This reflection can not only be spiritual but must include an ethical dimension. As part of the synodal reflection, some suggestions are creating concern, including proposals to allow transgender individuals to be in religious and consecrated life and even present for priestly ordination.¹

A recent text from the German Synod titled “Dealing with Gender Diversity,” approved in the fifth synodal assembly, held from March 9–11, 2023, in Frankfurt, is problematic.² An overall reading of the six-page document shows a general concern for the pastoral care of intersex and transgender individuals. It underlines that each person needs to be treated with care, respect, and dignity and not be discriminated against. No one can argue against this, nor with the reminder that Jesus reached out to those who were marginalized. However, one notes the use of rather unscientific and vague arguments throughout the text.

The opening paragraph states, “The biological gender identity of a human being is initially based on the chromosomal code of XX or XY.” Here, we have a clear example of imprecise language which can generate confusion, as they are using the word *gender* when in fact it should be *sex*. This fits well with the general aversion towards the biological reality of sex for anyone immersed in gender ideology. The text then goes on to discuss *hormonal sex*, which is not a recognized medical concept but seems to have been invented by the authors of the document.

Throughout the document, the conditions of transgender and intersex are mentioned simultaneously, with some combination of the terms *intersex and transgender* used thirteen times in total in only a six-page document. The definitions given for these terms are incomplete and lack sound evidence to support their use. This creates various problems, such as when the authors write, “This also includes explicitly distancing ourselves as a Church from views which portray intersex and transgender realities as a pathological, negative or even sinful deviation.” It is misleading to suggest that the Church judges intersex as sinful; if we understand intersex properly as a medical condition that one is frequently born with, then it cannot be understood as sinful. But some conditions under the umbrella of intersex will have *pathological* considerations, such as the likelihood of developing gonadal cancer.

There are other phrases and statements which tend to be more emotional than rational and more hysterical than logical. The

document is peppered with various words such as *harm, hostility, discrimination, violence, hate, suffering, exclusion, persecution, abusive, precarious, depreciation, endanger, marginalized, and exclusion*. This is an all too familiar narrative, which is often unchallenged and uncritically accepted. It is not that one disagrees with the fundamental values at stake, but rather with the repeated script that results in unqualified statements such as saying that *Male and Female He Created Them*, a principal Church document on gender issues from the Congregation for Catholic Education, legitimizes and promotes exclusion, violence, and persecution. This conclusion is not backed up with any relevant data. Neither is the pronouncement in one paragraph that “this increasingly exposes them to abusive perpetrator strategies in church spaces, often targeting particularly vulnerable people. Their precarious position in family, social and church contexts also leads to minority stress, which has been shown to increase the risk of physical and mental illnesses such as depression.” The paragraph concludes, “Suicide rates are significantly higher among trans and intersex people.” In ordering the sentences this way, the impression is given that the Church is somehow to blame for this tragic reality. The authors would do well to be more precise and honest in exploring the reasons for transgender persons having high rates of suicide and not just blame the Church.

However, the most disconcerting proposals in the text are the following:

1. All ecclesial communities are recommended to allow intersex and transgender people to have equal access to or remain in an institute of consecrated life or in a society of apostolic life.
2. Access to the ecclesiastical ordination offices and pastoral professions must also be examined in each individual case for intersex and transsexual baptized and confirmed persons who sense a vocation for themselves and must not be excluded in general.
2. The determination of the state of external sexual characteristics is to be abolished where it should still be practiced in the course of accepting a man as a candidate for the priesthood.

Let us briefly examine some of these proposals and potential consequences.

Intersex and Consecrated Life with Priestly Ordination

From a medical perspective, the term *intersex* embraces a variety of conditions. Rev. Tad Pacholczyk of The National Catholic Bioethics Center in Philadelphia writes, “While the term ‘intersex’ is sometimes used to describe situations where an individual has non-standard genital anatomy, it typically has a broader range of meanings. . . . ‘Intersex’ is an imprecise term that can describe a range of situations in which a person is born with an internal reproductive anatomy or an external sexual anatomy that is not in accord with the typical expectations for femaleness or maleness.”³ Different conditions may come under the umbrella of intersex. For example, hypospadias, where the outlet of urine flow occurs from a hole on