News



(Dreamstime/Juan Moyano)



by Heidi Schlumpf

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In December, while the rest of the country was debating tax reform and net neutrality, four Catholic bishops and 16 other conservative religious leaders issued an "open letter" about transgender issues, firing a shot in what has become the next major culture war issue after same-sex marriage.

Not surprisingly, progressive Catholic groups — including New Ways Ministry, Call to Action and Dignity USA — denounced the document, while traditionalist Catholic websites and media supported it. Lost in the battle were transgender people themselves.

"It's like we're collateral damage in the culture war," said Hilary Howes, a Washington D.C.-area Catholic and founder of TransCatholic, a ministry to transgendered people. "It's painful to have people think of us in this way."

The open letter, titled "Created Male and Female," affirms the "inherent dignity" of all people, but warns that transgenderism is a "false idea" and "deeply troubling," and calls upon government to support "policies that uphold the scientific fact of human biology."

Transgenderism "compels people to either go against reason — that is, to agree with something that is not true — or face ridicule, marginalization, and other forms of retaliation," said the Dec. 15 document.

The bishops and other signers warn that children are harmed when told they can change their sex, "sowing confusion and self-doubt."

"Parents deserve better guidance on these important decisions, and we urge our medical institutions to honor the basic medical principle of 'first, do no harm,' " the letter said.

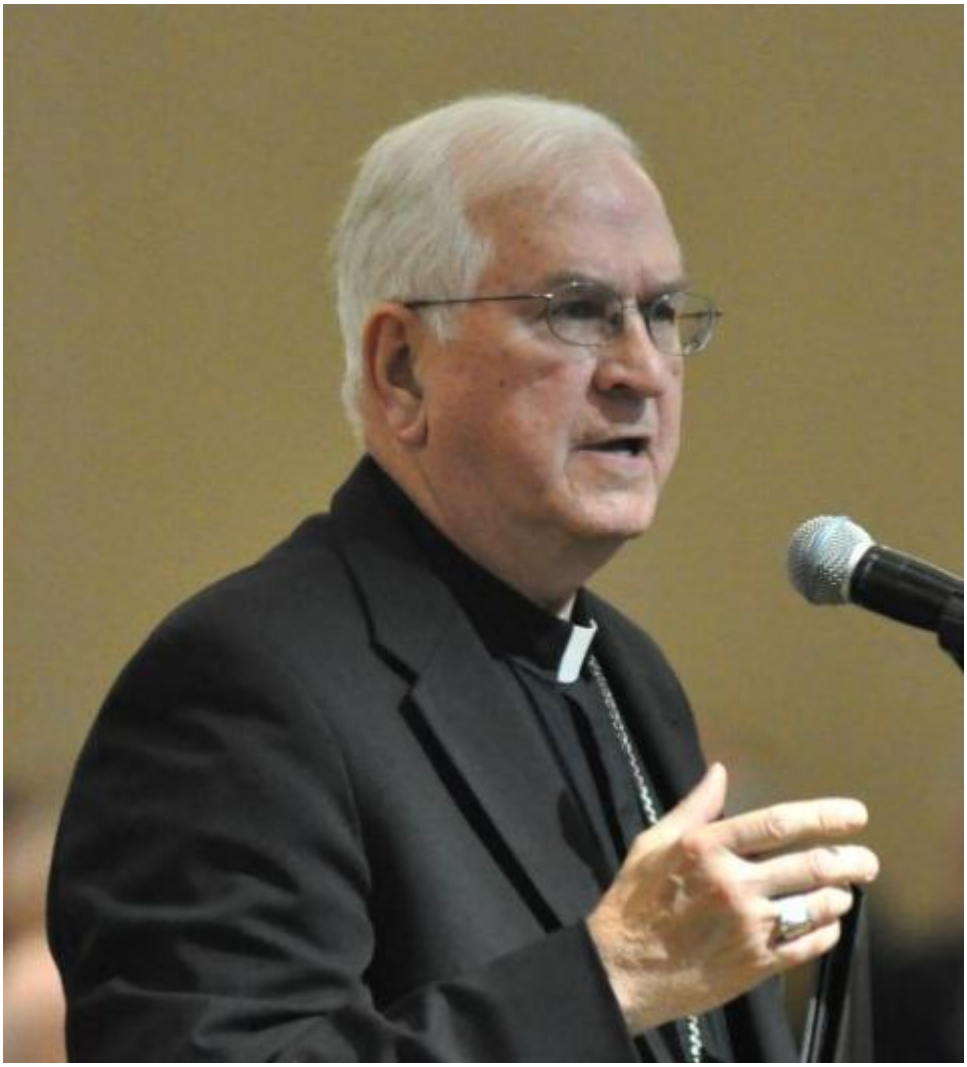
It was signed by Archbishop Charles Chaput of Philadelphia, chair of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth; Bishop James Conley of Lincoln, Nebraska, chair of the Subcommittee for the Promotion and Defense of Marriage; Archbishop Joseph Kurtz of Louisville, Kentucky, chair of the Committee for Religious Liberty; and Bishop Joseph Bambera of Scranton, Pennsylvania, chair of the Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs. Pittsburgh Bishop David Zubik told the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette he also supported the letter, though he was not a

signatory.

It was unclear if any transgender people were consulted in the drafting of the document. Repeated requests by NCR for comment from the United States Catholic Conference of Catholic Bishops, which released the statement, were declined.

However, a U.S. bishops' conference press release states that the letter is the result of a meeting, held after the U.S. bishops' fall general assembly in November in Baltimore, during which ecumenical and interfaith partners discussed gender ideology with members of the conference's Subcommittee for the Promotion and Defense of Marriage.

The press release also mentions previous letters on "religious freedom" and "defense of marriage," with similar groups of ecumenical partners.



Archbishop Joseph Kurtz, June 14, 2017 t the USCCB's annual spring assembly (CNS/ The Criterion/Sean Gallagher)

The transgender letter was signed by the Anglican Church in North America, which broke away from the Episcopal Church in 2009 over LGBT issues, and by the more conservative Presbyterian Church in America, North American Lutheran Church, and the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod.

It was not signed by those denominations' more liberal counterparts: the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, which have taken stances in favor of LGBT rights.

The open letter also follows a February 2017 statement from Chaput and Bishop George Murry of Youngstown, Ohio, praising the Trump administration's repeal of a previous instruction from the U.S Departments of Justice and Education that prohibited discrimination of students based on gender identity, including transgender status.

"I think this is the new front in the gender culture wars," said Mark Silk, professor of religion in public life at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, noting that both liberal and conservative advocacy organizations may have been surprised at how quickly Americans — including American Catholics — came to largely accept same-sex marriage.

"I don't mean to be overly cynical, but I think both sides thought they were in for a much longer struggle … and then they needed a new issue to keep them raising money," Silk said. "Same-sex marriage is no longer where you can get anybody's attention."

Yet the public policy issues — focused on bathroom accommodations or military service, so far — seem relatively minor, and the number of people affected relatively small, Silk said. "I don't see how it really affects people in terms of institutional behavior," he said. "What's the threat?"

But it is precisely the social and legal advances made by transgender people that have conservative Catholic and other religious leaders concerned, said Francis DeBernardo, executive director of New Ways Ministry, which advocates for LGBT people.

"I think it's going to become a big issue," DeBernardo said. "In the religious world, and in the Catholic world in particular, gender is so embedded in so many doctrinal

statements that any new understanding of gender is very threatening."

He noted critiques of transgender issues at a conference for bishops last year, sponsored by the Knights of Columbus and the National Catholic Bioethics Center, two organizations with a long track record of anti-LGBT efforts.

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In a statement, New Ways Ministry called the December open letter "dangerous because it distributes false information which can lead to attitudes, policies, and practices which will do physical and emotional harm to transgender people, a community already with a high risk of becoming victims of hate crimes."

New Ways Ministry now receives more requests for its programs about pastoral care for transgendered people than for ones about gay and lesbian issues, DeBernardo said.

"So many Catholic initiatives around the world are trying to understand transgender issues and people in sensitive and responsive ways," he said, "But [the open letter] just seems so insensitive and irresponsible."

A response from Call to Action said the letter "represents an outdated and harmful understanding of gender that is rejected by the majority of faithful U.S. Catholics."

One study has found that a majority of Catholics (56 percent) opposes laws that require transgender people to use bathrooms that align with their sex assigned at birth, while another shows Catholics divided about whether it is possible for someone to be a gender different from their sex at birth.

Dignity USA called the letter "heinous and immensely damaging" in its response and urged the U.S. bishops' conference to remove it from its website.

New Ways Ministry also signed a reaction from the National Religious Leadership Council's LGBTQ Task Force, which urged the religious leaders who signed the document to reach out and connect with transgender people.

"If Catholic leaders wanted to, they could avail themselves of the immense amount of scientific, theological, and spiritual research which supports transgender people in their quest to live as their authentic selves by various forms of gender transition,"

DeBernardo said. "Even more simply, Catholic leaders should listen to the personal experiences of transgender Catholics."

Howes, who converted to Catholicism after she transitioned, agrees. "They have a very poor understanding of what life is really like for transgender people," she said. "If they would listen to transgender people, it would be a step forward."

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