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When I was contemplating coming out as transgender to my Catholic parents, I was paralyzed with fear. My mom, a physician and cradle Catholic, affirmed that although she didn't understand, she knew I was a good person and that God knew me and loved me more than anyone. My dad, a psychologist and Catholic convert, took longer, but assured me that no matter what, we would get through this together. —Dr. Colt St. Amand

In my recent essay in Global Sisters Report, I shared my disappointment with a document by Bishop Thomas Paprocki intended to guide Catholics in his Springfield, Illinois, Diocese in their understanding of and interactions with transgender people. I tried to explain the journey of self-acceptance that transgender persons move through in order to live a more authentic life. But in addition to self-acceptance, it is also crucial for transgender people to find acceptance from their parents, and for many that is difficult. —Dominican Sr. Luisa Derouen

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No one is spared the human experience of navigating through unexpected challenges. No matter the circumstance, the process of responding responsibly will involve three dynamic movements: to be present to the reality (to gather), to listen with openness, then to respond with love. These movements weave through all our relationships.

In Catholic liturgy, the dynamic of gathering, listening and responding is the fundamental action by which we surrender ourselves to become the body of Christ in our world. Since the rituals of liturgy are meant to help shape our dispositions of life, they may be instructive in reflecting on the relationship of parents with transgender children. When faced with a child coming out as transgender, a parent's process of responding responsibly will involve being present to the reality, listening with openness and respect, then responding with love.

Gather

In liturgy and in life, we must be ready to receive the truth, whether we like it or not, understand it or not. The truth always leads us to God and will lead parents and their child closer to God if they can stay present to the possibility that yes, their own child may well be transgender.

Learning their child is transgender can be overwhelming for parents. The temptation to deny and discredit this news can be strong. Parents may fear that the church and God are against their child. Some fear their child will be a target of violence, or will try to end their life. Some worry that they will not have enough emotional energy and spiritual strength to accompany their child. It is important for parents to name and process these fears.

Parents need to believe in the inherent sacredness of their child and trust God's love and their love for their child to sustain them in the journey, wherever it may lead. This helps them walk with their child and stay centered in their faith. Essential to the search for truth is the virtue of humility by which parents can acknowledge that they don't understand what being transgender means, but they want to learn.

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Listen

In liturgy and in life, we hear God's Word as it comes through the Scriptures, through other people and through life's experiences. To listen well is to allow ourselves to be changed by what we hear and experience, and that takes courage and compassion.

Tragically, religion may challenge parents' ability to nurture their transgender child. Though there are supportive faith leaders, many know little about transgender people. But worse than ignorance are clergy eager to offer guidance based on woefully outdated and harmful information. Parent's inability to support and accept their transgender child is often reinforced by inaccurate and harmful responses from religious leaders.

Rejecting their child because of religious beliefs traumatizes and moves the child closer to self-harm or even suicide. Transgender young people who are highly rejected by their parents are more likely to attempt suicide and to report high levels

of depression.

Listening is a skill and a grace. It's important that parents listen and ask questions in order to understand, not correct or judge. Listen to the pain, fears, hopes and dreams of their transgender child. Parents can listen respectfully even when they believe that being transgender is wrong.

Parents need their own trusted confidant to lean on and to process the grieving that accompanies their changing expectations, hopes and dreams for their child. This is part of the process of allowing their child to gradually live as the person they know themselves to be.

Seeking out other parents of transgender children and getting accurate and professional information are signs of a sincere effort to understand their child. Helpful resources are Family Acceptance Project, World Professional Association for Transgender Health, and the American Psychological Association.

Respond

In liturgy and in life, deeper living comes only through surrender in love. To be the *body of Christ* in our world is to allow God to love through our presence.

The cultural and religious context in our country is often divisive and complex. This makes it tempting to grasp for absolute certitudes that weaken our commitment to be inclusive of everyone, especially transgender people.

When parents disagree about how to respond to their child, the child is often caught in the middle trying to stay connected to both parents and make sense of conflicting reactions.

When parents succumb to pressure from others to alienate their child unless they conform to gender expectations, risk for suicide, depression and other serious health risks are significantly increased. The university-based Family Acceptance Project research shows how parental rejecting behaviors contribute to serious health risks in their children and informs evidence-based support work with racially and religiously diverse families.

God's presence in the love for their child is manifest when they make their best effort to use the name and pronouns that honor the truth of the child's gender identity. Parents show love when they require others to treat their child with respect.

Love is shown when they speak openly and proudly about their child and help them find positive transgender mentors.

Conclusion

Parents' inability or unwillingness to accept their transgender child has profound psychological and spiritual ramifications for the child. It erodes the confidence of their child to trust their own inner self-knowing. The child believes God does not and cannot love them. Constantly challenging and denying their human reality and their dignity is spiritual abuse. It undermines their sense of self-worth, erodes the parent-child bond and increases risks for health problems.

Everyone's life is a beautiful, mysterious, complex reflection of God in our world. Parents will surely not get it right all the time. No one gets it right all the time. Our final word of guidance is to acknowledge mistakes along the way and to ask for forgiveness. Far from being a sign of weakness, asking for forgiveness and a willingness to forgive is a most powerful expression of love.

[Dr. Colt St. Amand (he/they) is a transgender person, psychologist and physician, a family medicine resident at the Mayo Clinic. He is a WPATH GEI SOC7 certified member and co-founder of the Gender Infinity organization. Sr. Luisa Derouen (she), a member of the Dominican Sisters of Peace, began ministry among the transgender community in 1999. She has a master's degree in liturgical theology and is a trained spiritual director, particularly a spiritual companion to transgender people across the country.]