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A leader of the U.S. bishops' conference has written to Catholic prelates throughout the country, alleging that an unspecified number of transgender men have been "unknowingly admitted" to diocesan seminaries and houses of formation for religious orders.

Milwaukee Archbishop Jerome Listecki, who serves as the chairman of the bishops' Committee on Canonical Affairs and Church Governance, told the nation's bishops in a Sept. 22 memo that they might consider "various options" to ensure that only people assigned male at birth are ordained to the Catholic priesthood.

Among the recommendations are DNA testing and certification from a medical expert of the bishop's choosing.

Rocco Palmo, who writes the blog Whispers in the Loggia, first reported the memo, titled "Transgenderism and Seminary Formation," via Twitter on Sept. 23. Palmo's initial tweet sparked a range of incredulous replies, with some people comparing the memo to medieval practices that involved physically checking priesthood candidates.

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A spokeswoman for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee referred questions from NCR about the memo to the bishops' conference. Chieko Noguchi, a spokesman for the conference, declined to comment.

While mainline Protestant and nondenominational Christian seminaries have increasingly welcomed transgender students, the Catholic Church has taken an unbending stance on transgender issues.

Pope Francis has often spoken out against what he refers to as "gender ideology." In 2019, the Vatican's Congregation for Catholic Education released an extensive statement in which it asserted that gender theory seeks to "annihilate the concept of nature."

In his recent memo, Listecki says his committee had been made aware of "instances where it had been discovered that a woman living under a transgendered identity" had been admitted to a seminary or a religious institute's house of formation.

In one instance, Listecki wrote, an individual's "sacramental records had been fraudulently obtained to reflect her new identity. In all instances, nothing in these individuals' medical or psychological reports had signaled past treatments or pertinent surgeries."

The archbishop also wrote that "luckily" each case of a transgender seminarian or religious in training had been discovered before they received the sacrament of Holy Orders.

The memo cites the 1983 Code of Canon Law, which requires the diocesan bishop to admit to major seminary and to ordain "only men who possess the requisite physical and psychological qualities."

"Moreover, a diocesan bishop can require various means to establish moral certitude in this regard," Listecki also wrote, adding that the committee encouraged him to write the bishops about those occurrences so that they would "exercise special vigilance" as a new year of seminary formation begins.