Opinion
Letters to the Editor

by NCR Staff

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Last month, NCR staff reporter Katie Collins Scott outlined the U.S. bishops' new document, which rejects gender-affirming medical treatments for transgender individuals and reasserts that Catholic providers must not perform such procedures. And NCR columnist Franciscan Fr. Daniel P. Horan says the bishops' doctrinal note not only denies the reality of transgender, nonbinary and intersex persons, but compounds the harm experienced by already very vulnerable people. NCR readers respond to these reports with letters that have been edited for length and clarity.

Bishop Daniel Flores of Brownsville, Texas, is a good man, so is there something fundamentally broken about the hierarchical church that would make him as a bishop feel that "On the Moral Limits to Technological Manipulation of the Human Body" was a good idea?

How about dialogue with the transgender community in the U.S. followed by an ecumenical style document instead?

JEFFREY JONES
Hamburg, New York



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I wonder what Fr. Daniel Horan is trying to do in his broadside against the U.S. bishops doctrinal note on transgender surgery.

His argument that the document is a theological, scientific and pastoral disaster completely misses the point, as the bishops were never intending to produce a scientific or pastoral document, and neither do they engage in theology. Even from the title, it is clear that this is a piece intended for specialists, a restatement of existing teaching on invasive surgeries. Any further move of Catholic teaching and pastoral practice will need to work with this body of teaching and engage it on its own terms, not those of the academy.

Perhaps Horan wishes this wasn't so and that one could just slap scientific and pastoral arguments over traditional arguments under the veneer of theology or some kind of sentimentalism, however, past experience suggests that this attitude leads only to ecclesial gridlock and dysfunction, for which obtuse academics bear a good share of responsibility.

Yes, the church always needs to practice compassion, solidarity, curiosity and intellectual courage towards transgender people, and the bishops' document does not exactly shine with those qualities. But it does show why the church is by no means ready to affirm transgender peoples' decisions. Only transgender people themselves can validate their choices and experiences in the light of their unique calling as Christians. Let us support them in doing that.

MATTHIJS KRONEMEIJER
Toronto, Ontario

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As a convert to Catholicism at a very young age, I continue to be amazed at the amount of hypocrisy that emanates from the church hierarchy. Sunday after Sunday, Jesus talks about the Pharisees and their lack of understanding and belief. Yet we see these bishops and cardinals strut around with all of the pomp and circumstance of the Pharisees of old.

When it comes to science, the church has a poor record of understanding and accepting the nature of our universe and the world we live in. Their preoccupation with sex, without fully understanding relationships, has caused so much heartache over the years.

Now, they want to define each person's sexuality without understanding the science behind it. Quite simply, God does not make mistakes. Each person is a representation of our creator. As a priest friend of mine once told me, "quit putting God in a box."

If only the church could throw out all of its preconceived notions of sexual relationships, which most celebite men will never understand, and concentrate on love, we would be much better off.

STEVE FILBERT
Wickenburg, Arizona

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When we study history to learn how our ecclesiastic forebears acted when faced with changing cultural conditions, which they did not understand, we find egregious examples of the church acting in a punitive way as if all the social changes they perceived were malignant.

We can look to the 15th century and the attempt to ban the printing press and to the more recent centuries' ban on medical research using cadavers as times when scientific progress would have been curtailed if the less enlightened members of the church had their way. Even the very recent COVID-19 pandemic brought out a narrow-minded reaction from some prelates against the vaccine. A posture which, if

embraced by the credulous, could have been the cause of unnecessary mortality.

Refusing to understand the nature of gender dysphoria and the impact it has on real people is another example of the church acting out of willful ignorance rather than becoming open-minded and trying to understand what is happening with an entire group of people. If the church really embraced the idea that all of us are God's creation, then they need to learn objectively why certain people find their biological sex in conflict with their psychological identity.

Years of philosophy and theology in an academic setting is a poor foundation for understanding neurophysiology, but some clerics seem to believe their own body of knowledge encompasses all they need to make medical decisions for other people.

CHARLES A. LE GUERN
Granger, Indiana

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Thank you to Fr. Daniel Horan for his thorough critique of the bishops' document. I had mixed emotions while reading it. I was justifiably angry at the lack of compassion and dialogue with transgender people that were nowhere to be found in the bishops' statement; and, at the same time, so grateful for Horan's strong rebuttal.

The New Ways Ministry site also responds with counterpoints that, at the very least, should give all people pause as they consider the findings concerning sexuality. We need to open the dialogue, not shut it down.

(Sr.) SUSAN PAWESKI, SP
Chicago, Illinois

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Thank God for Fr. Daniel Horan and his response to the U.S. Bishop's document against transgender healthcare. His assessment is spot on throughout.

As a licensed mental health counselor, I can attest to the harm the bishops' irresponsible document could do to vulnerable people who don't fit their narrow minded definition of humanity.

My heart breaks for those kids who might take the bishops' words seriously. I hope instead they read Horan's response. Shame on the bishops who authored such a document. It only reveals their ignorance, arrogance and fear.

God bless transgendered kids and all the beautiful expressions of humanity.

(Sr.) MARGARET SHANNON, CSJP
Seattle, Washington

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Fr. Daniel Horan blasts the U.S. bishops' "Doctrinal Note on the Moral Limits to Technological Manipulation of the Human Body," and reduces it to rubble, an absolutely appropriate response given the life and death stakes for transgender people in our current cultural climate.

He exposes the glaring scientific and theological defects in their narrative. He points out that the bishops abandon any claim to a pastoral stance when they engage willfully in what constitutes an ecclesial pile-on of this group, a vulnerable target in the far-right's culture war.

Transgender people face violence, bullying, rejection and erasure everyday from family members, colleagues, teachers, pastors and elected officials. The rationales claimed for their censure and exclusion are always some toxic combination of outdated science, disinformation, myopic readings of Scripture, and outright deceit.

The data and narratives supporting transgender lives and care are plentiful and available to the bishops. Not only are recent, methodologically-sound scientific and theological studies a quick google search away, but transgender people themselves want to dialogue with the bishops and share their lived experiences!

It's a disgrace that the bishops do not avail themselves of the true authorities on transgender people: transgender people!

Shame on the bishops for not scrutinizing their research and purging it of malevolent junk data!

Congratulations to Dan Horan for a powerful, unflinching, courageous piece that should be read by every Catholic Christian!

ANNE KIEFER
Penn Yan, New York

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Kudos on a response to an atrocious situation that hits all the right notes: invocation of solid theology, sensitive reference to pastoral norms expected of bishops, reference to medical and scientific experts.

Thank you for being courageous enough to speak out about an issue central to the "culture wars" and calling the response what it is: a contribution to a "culture of death" in which compassion and love, the foundations of Christianity, are nowhere to be seen.

CELESTE CALABOTTA
Clinton, Connecticut

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I am writing to express my gratitude to our bishops for standing strong against the ideological colonization of gender ideology.

With the wave of evidence-based gender dysphoria treatment discoveries causing policy reversals to occur among early adopters of gender affirming care for minors across Europe, our bishops are once again ahead of the curve.

Only men of deeply prayerful lives could recognize such deep truths and stand against the cultural current to proclaim them.

God bless our faithful bishops!

ANTHONY ZANUSSI
Ottawa, Canada

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It is shocking our U.S. bishops remain so blind and seem to prefer their ignorance.

Our church leadership silenced and jailed Galileo Galileo, in 1616, as he used science to reveal a truth over misconception.

In 1926, Fr. Teilhard de Chardin expressed the insight we needed to join religion's historical tradition and devout seeking to know and love God with science's ever seeking more understanding. Teilhard realized God is not limited in perceptions revealed only in the past but also continues to reveal God's divine, infinite presence to us and for us that we may join in God's never ending evolutionary growth of us, the earth, the entire cosmic universe into the loving one unified body, blood and flesh, his cosmic Christ.

Teilhard would describe our U.S. bishops' letter as fossilized theology, philosophy, thinking.

Galileo is up there wondering when they will learn.

PAUL PIERLOTT
Pennsauken, New Jersey

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Fr. Daniel P. Horan is to be commended on his unequivocal condemnation of the statement on transgender medical care issued by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. It is a shameful document for a particular form of intellectual dishonesty and should be withdrawn immediately with an apology to the LGBTQ community.

The bishops' statement involves a set of beliefs concerning the relation between gender and biological sexual identity used to assess the merits of transgender medical care. Unless this is done with a rigorous respect for the differences between statements of belief and those of knowledge, the outcome can only be harmful, as in this case.

Since the bishops' declaration that gender is confined to one of two biological sexes is a statement of belief, it must also acknowledge it may be false, despite its long history, both secular and sacred. And since this belief is now being challenged empirically in the experience of real people, intellectual honesty requires careful consideration of, not intolerance for the unfolding evidence, even though it may show the belief to be false.

In this situation, so consequential in the effort to arrive at the truth of the human condition, rather than defending beliefs about it, there is no ignoring that while what is true is not conditioned by any evidence for it, our knowing what is true is impossible without evidence. Regrettably, this is precisely what the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops is doing.

T. PATRICK HILL
Winchester, Virginia

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It is hardly a coincidence that part of the religious arm of the Republican Party, the U.S. Catholic bishops, have joined the significant number of Republican governors and others who feel it serves their political and religious interests to pile on the attacks on transgender youth and their families. High suicide rates among this population? Bullying and other forms of physical and emotional abuse directed towards them? See no evil, hear no evil.

We Catholics used to labor under the impression that these men (and of course, men only) were to be our leaders in the faith. They were to provide moral guidance and leadership in the difficult issues Christians face daily in our attempts to follow Jesus. Instead we get cowardly "me, tooism" that allows for no medical, scientific or personal input from those closest to the issue. The sun will seemingly always orbit the earth for the majority of this crew as things now stand.

I am having a very difficult time finding a single preacher of any Christian denomination who dares to even hint that this approach to transgender patients and their families may be sinful. We get hollow "respect the dignity" of this population statements that are mostly eclipsed by actions.

BILL KRISTOFCO
Parkville, Maryland

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I've been a subscriber to NCR since the early '70s. If not for NCR, I probably would have seriously considered leaving the Catholic Church many times. Thanks for being a beacon of hope for the church. All is not lost!

Nothing is more indicative of that than Fr. Daniel Horan's recent article about the bishops' misguided "Doctrinal Note on the Moral Limits to Technological Manipulation of the Human Body." Horan is one of my all time favorite NCR writers. Thank you for sharing his inspiring and hope inducing insights!

ALAN J. HARTMAN
Fort Thomas, Kentucky

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I cringe whenever the U.S. bishops' conference addresses topics that are science-oriented. In such instances, I echo the comment made by Fr. Daniel Horan: "nothing short of a disaster: theologically, scientifically and pastorally."

The document completely and utterly fails to address reality. Instead, it applies circular logic. The church posits that "the fundamental order of the human person as an intrinsic unity of body and soul, with a body that is sexually differentiated." They go on to insist that there are only two genders based on "scientists'' who lived at the time of Adam and Eve. The bishops' go on to reconfigure reality based on knowledge that is hopelessly antiquated.

As for the transparency of this document: could the U.S. bishops' conference kindly list the names of the "numerous parties, including medical ethicists, physicians, psychologists, and moral theologians" who contributed to this decision? Would they care to publish the insights they received in their 'consultation' process?

As I look around the world, every species boasts of vast diversity. Limitless possibility also exists within inanimate matter. There is an entire universe of untold types of God's creative genius. And yet the church feels certain that this same transcendent creator limits humanity to two precise genders. Science indicates that the brain is binary … but gender and sexual identity are diverse and complicated.

Look around. Talk to people. Feel the emotions. When will the church stop hiding behind absolute doctrines that contradict reality?

MIKE OSLANCE
St. Louis, Missouri

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First, the U.S. bishops' conference wrote guidelines concluding that Catholics of good conscience should vote for Donald Trump as compared to Hilary Clinton or Joe Biden because Trump's positions were morally superior to his opponents.

Then many bishops directed Catholic office holders to pass bills making the Catholic position on abortion law for every American even though many major religious authorities support abortion as appropriate medical care. So, the bishops want the government to determine which religious authority all citizens must obey.

Now the bishops write that individuals born with gender dysphoria resulting from ambiguous genital and reproductive organ configurations, chromosomal or other (often undetermined) genetic issues are sinful if they seek medical attention or social support for their special needs. Further, they instruct, no Catholic schools or healthcare facilities should treat or accommodate such people.

Jesus said, "By their fruits, you shall know them." These fruits are rotten.

BOB MATTHEWS
Cincinnati, Ohio