Opinion
Guest Voices



Participants hold signs opposing conversion therapy at a trans rights protest in London in April 2022. Twenty-two U.S. states ban the practice. (Unsplash/Karollyne Videira Hubert)



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In the wake of *Dignitas Infinita*, it is clear that the Vatican has offered a definitive "no" to "gender ideology," whatever that means.

It now has to answer a far more pivotal question, beyond that "no" — it needs a "yes." What positive vision does the church have for trans and nonbinary Catholics? If they are not to live according to "gender ideology," how exactly should they live an embodied, Christian experience of gender?

This question is more urgent than ever, because I worry that our church is repeating the deadly approach it has inflicted for decades upon gay Catholics — a mindset whose logical conclusion is conversion therapy.

Consider this: A few weeks ago, Word on Fire announced it was publishing a children's book called *Here I Am* by Abigail Favale. The book, per its description on the apostolate's website, purports to "Combat confusing gender ideology" and "explain that gender is rooted in the body, not in feelings, perceptions, or stereotypes."

Anyone familiar with right-wing doublespeak knows exactly what that means: This is an anti-trans children's book, published by a Catholic bishop's media company. In case you couldn't put together the "gender ideology" of the book's author and publisher, they've made it rather clear in their marketing choices: The book comes with two illustrated versions: one for "boys" and one for "girls."

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Setting aside the palpable irony here — that those who complain the loudest about "pushing gender ideology onto children" are now pushing their own gender ideology onto children — what are the use cases for such a book?

One such case goes as follows: A child tells their parents that they're not sure about their gender identity yet, that they want to explore different presentations, or that

maybe they want to try a new set of pronouns. The parents, in return, show their child this book, which insists on a trans-exclusionary worldview, where this type of exploration is both logically and morally impossible.

Consider another case: The parents, trying to be faithful to Catholic doctrine, enroll their child in a form of "gender exploratory therapy" with a Catholic psychiatrist, a form of conversion therapy that tries to psychoanalyze "the origin" of a child's dysphoria — usually on the assumption that the child couldn't possibly be transgender. In the course of that therapy, or maybe as a supplement to it, the child is provided this book, with the hopes that it will help them "understand [their] body as a good gift from God, not something to war against."

These feel like two obvious use cases for the book. In both scenarios, the goal is simple — convince a trans child to embrace a cisgender identity. To "convert" them, we might say.

In fact, what else does the church even have to say on this issue? Does it have any positive message for transgender folks, or is it only trying to create "ex-trans" people, who have rejected "ideology" and embraced their "biological gender?"



(Unsplash/Meg)

For decades, the church was deeply connected to conversion therapy against gay people, which experts believe often amounts to torture. Indeed, conversion therapy still happens in Catholic institutions. At the very least, however, it is not the logical conclusion of Catholic doctrine on LGBT issues. The church does not necessarily want gay people to be straight — it wants them to be *celibate*. I don't really buy this distinction, but at least it's logically possible.

To this end, there has been a meaningful movement against conversion therapy in recent decades: The practice is now banned in 22 states, remains unpopular among the U.S. public, and has been rejected by other major denominations. More attention has been paid to the issue in Catholic circles, too: For instance, one podcast describing a young Catholic's experience with religious conversion therapy hit No. 1 on Apple Podcasts last year. Even Pope Francis has expressed concern over the practice. But can the church credibly make such a move with trans people?

I don't think it can, at least not with the doctrine articulated by *Dignitas infinita*. For gay people, the church can say, "don't be straight; be celibate." It can draw a distinction between specific activities and general feelings, even if that distinction collapses under pressure.

But gender reaches far deeper. Every day of our lives, we present, speak, live, take up space, and identify ourselves in gendered ways. If the church says that one must not do these things in a "transgender way" — for that would be living out the dreaded "gender ideology" — what is the alternative? The alternative is to live the way cisgender people do. The church's moral metaphysics can at least countenance the existence of gay people; it cannot do the same for our trans and nonbinary siblings.

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We should not mince words here — a conversion mindset is just as detrimental for transgender people as it is for gay people. Just like gay conversion, trans conversion is a theology of death. Literally. I worry, though, that it will take the church another 20, maybe 50 years to realize that fact. In the meantime, countless transgender

people will suffer and even die because of our refusal to follow scientific and medical consensus.

I have full confidence in the ability of our church to eventually find life-giving paths in its ministry to transgender people. That is what it means to believe in a church guided by the Spirit. Even the synod report begrudgingly acknowledges this obvious reality when it writes that, "sometimes the anthropological categories we have developed are not able to grasp the complexity of the elements emerging from experience or knowledge in the sciences." Again, anyone familiar with the subtext of Vatican documents on gender and sexuality knows what this half-hearted statement means.

There *will* be a day when the church finds a new, life-giving, and authentically Christian path in its ministry to transgender people. It will be a day of celebration. But it will also be a day of mourning, because there are transgender children alive today who, in all likelihood, will never get to see it — in part because our church was more committed to a doctrine of exclusion than one of encounter.