Columns
Ministry
Spirituality



Sr. Luisa Derouen, right, with Scotty, who asserts, "I am of God and I have beauty in this world that can only be viewed by those who choose to see it." (Provided photo)



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I've known this about my friend for years, but recently over a wonderful steak dinner we talked about it again. She is a soft-spoken, very competent professional woman in her mid-60s. She is deeply immersed in the life of her church, and involved with several groups in her city to address the needs of the poor and marginalized. For her whole life, and still now, she knows she is both female and male. It has been a conundrum for decades, but she is increasingly at peace with this dimension of her graced life. She is far from alone in this experience and I have the privilege of knowing many gender-variant people.

That's why I felt such sadness and disappointment when I read Bishop Thomas Paprocki's document intended to guide Catholics in his Springfield, Illinois, Diocese in their understanding of and interactions with transgender people. In large part, he echoes the document from the Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education that states God created us male or female at birth and that identity is unchangeable and permanent.

I believe Paprocki is genuine in his desire to exercise responsible leadership for his people, but this is a complex reality, and is best addressed with nuance, humility, sensitivity and in dialogue with transgender people.

By invalidating their existence, leaders give religious sanction to the violence perpetrated against transgender people, and certainly raise the risk of suicide attempts, which are already at 40% among them.

This document gives no credence to a significant number of reputable medical and psychological national associations that support evidence-based data that sex and gender are not always linked. During fetal development our brain as well as our genitals are formed by the influence of hormones at various times during the period of gestation. For most of us, these are aligned, which means our genitals and how we identify match, but for a little less than 1% of the population they do not match.

The challenges transgender people face are not theoretical or academic to me. For the past 21 years, it has been my privilege to be invited into the sacred and often perilous journey of their lives. I have spent thousands of hours with them as a spiritual companion and have known many of them for years.

Transgender people are who they say they are. I have witnessed their incredible courage and faith in the pursuit of living an authentic life. It is what we call transformation in God, conversion of life.

It is a movement from integration to disintegration to reintegration. On the way to being whole and holy, we all go through these stages in some way. We spend many years making sense of who we are and how we live. But there are times when the narrative of our life is significantly challenged and we experience a crisis. What held before begins to crumble.

Gradually, we live into a more authentic life. A big difference between what we experience and what transgender people experience is that most of them know from an early age that the life narrative they are being pressured to live is false.

False Integration: What is reflected back to transgender people repeatedly is that others see them in one gender, and they experience themselves as another gender. They learn very quickly that their self-knowing is judged psychotic and sinful. It's no wonder, then, that they are tortured by self-doubt and self-loathing. They struggle to be in right relationship with God, and understandably so. It's difficult to be in communion with God pretending to be someone they are not. Try as they might, though, they cannot shake loose the mysterious knowing that this *is* who they are, and neither they nor anyone else can change it.

Dawn recalls,

> It was impressed upon me in first grade that the feelings I had of being a girl were wrong and not according to God's will for me. It was unnatural. I had not asked for nor cultivated these feelings. They were just there inside me, and they were evil. For decades, I prayed every day to want to be a man, but those prayers didn't help.

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Disintegration: They finally acknowledge that to live other than from a place of honesty is a pretense they can no longer maintain. A false life becomes unsustainable. There are so many with whom I have stood on the precipice of sweeping and profound loss as they made the courageous decision to live in the gender they know themselves to be. They risk losing their family of origin, spouse, children, job, friends and faith community. How many of us have paid that kind of price to live with integrity? This is what we call holiness. It is dying to a false self to live as one's true self. Jesus said "You will come to know the truth and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32).

Sara remembers,

> In the tumultuous two-and-a-half years that followed my decision to transition, I changed my name and wardrobe, grew out my hair, switched my hormonal make-up and way of living completely. ... Friends abandoned me, concert dates evaporated and I lost my teaching job. But within my body there was complete calm because the journey within was integral to myself, and it was a journey made not alone, but with God.

Reintegration: Gradually, usually over a period of years, as they make their way through the painful and complex stages of transition, self-hatred is replaced by self-love. Self-doubt is replaced by confidence in their perceptions and judgments. They are finally at home with themselves and with the world around them. They have made the passage from what was death-dealing to what can now be life-giving.

Scotty asserts,

> I am a photographer and light is central to my art. The best pictures are in the hours when light has nuance. I am twilight, I am a sunrise and a sunset. I am a physical living embodiment of that moment that allows for striking images, fleeting visions and perspectives that are not possible during the dullness of day or night. I am of God and I have beauty in this world that can only be viewed by those who choose to see it.

For 21 years, my mantra to the transgender community is that the truth always leads you to God, never away from God. And the truth does set you free. What holiness looks like is when you live your lives as honestly as you can, being faithful

to the person God calls you to be. This is what gives glory to God.

My mantra to those who are not transgender is that transgender people are God's beloved every bit as much as any of us. They, too, are God's dwelling place. With rare exception, they are closer to God after transition. They have been tried by fire in ways many of us cannot imagine. It has brought them to a place of truth, wisdom, compassion, forgiveness, joy, peace, generativity and immense gratitude.

They have so much to teach us, if only we would listen.

[Luisa Derouen, a member of the Dominican Sisters of Peace, began to minister among the transgender community in 1999 and has been a spiritual companion formally and informally to about 250 transgender people across the country. She is now semiretired at the St. Catharine Motherhouse in central Kentucky.]

This story appears in the **Sustainable Development Goal 5: Gender Equality** feature series. View the full series.