

# Gender, identity and the joy of fulfilment

by [Nicolete Burbach](#)

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*A trans theologian reflects that the well-rehearsed failings of the recent Vatican document on “gender ideology” remind us that a proper commitment to communicate and understand requires the willingness to reach out to the other actively, even if that might be unsettling.*

As a trans woman, I intimately know the importance of authentic dialogue. I was dismayed by the recent document on “gender ideology” from the Congregation for Catholic Education, “Male and Female He Created Them”, which makes frequent references to the need for “dialogue”, but has been widely criticised as lacking in it. Nevertheless, as a Catholic theologian, I find hope that the Church can recognise and meet this need.

“Gender dysphoria” is the technical term used to describe the dissatisfaction that trans people feel with our ascribed gender. A less used term is “gender euphoria”. This describes an intense joy that many trans people (including myself) feel with their acquired identity. This joy is deeply interpersonal: I feel gender euphoria most strongly when I think about how others have included me in activities and relationships as a woman, without making my identity into the subject of awkwardness or alienation.

The American philosopher Judith Butler argues that our social identities, including gendered ones, are performative, or constituted by acts that invite others to engage with us in certain ways. Social identities are a function of how we talk, think and behave towards things, and performative acts give rise to identities by initiating these processes. Under this conception, transitioning is an act that invites others to adopt different practices towards ourselves, and so recognise and help construct new social identities.

This includes transforming the body. Butler notes that language is not something that is merely imposed on the world by the human mind, as if from without. Rather, knowing itself is a process of using language. This means that the world as disclosed to human reason is always already inscribed into language, and cannot be separated out from its linguistic dimensions. In this context, the body is intrinsically bound up in processes of meaning-making, and to change it is another communicative act.

What Butler helps us to recognise is that transitioning is fundamentally communicative. It is an act of reaching out to others, and inviting them into a unity of thought and behaviour; one that we experience as better fulfilling our nature as specific kinds of social beings. This makes sense of “gender euphoria”: it is the joy of recognition, and of inclusion and participation. It is the joy of true relation to others, in which we find our fulfilment.

From this, trans people know the importance of dialogue in an intimate way: transitioning reveals our social identities to be constructed through shared participation in meaning-making, and its joys show how this participation and its products can lead to our fulfilment as social beings. Dialogue is vital in this context because it enables this participation at the level of discussion.

Pope Francis is not a radical re-interpreter of conventional Catholic teaching about sex and gender. However, he has a fresh insight on the vital importance of true dialogue for human flourishing that mirrors my experience. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis presents us with a picture of true “universality”. This evokes the “totality or integrity” of the Gospel’s embrace, which encompasses all people, in all their differences. He illustrates this with the image of a polyhedron, in which all the local elements are integrated into a whole, but preserved in their differences, just like the distinct faces of the shape.

He also calls us to pursue unity over conflict, where unity is a “resolution which takes place on a higher plane and preserves what is valid and useful on both sides”. This “higher plane” of resolution transcends the plane of conflict, but encompasses its elements. In both these images, the fulfilment of unity and true universality require the inclusion and participation of everybody, across differences – and therefore dialogue.

His encyclical *Laudato Si'* takes this insight further, outlining a cosmic vision in which all creatures participate in “a sublime communion”. Redemption consists in repairing this communion, which is ruptured by sin. This process of cosmic reconciliation finds its fulfilment in the Eucharist, which draws Creation back to God in a communion of “blessed and undivided adoration”. This in turn “cosmises” the Church itself: built up by the Eucharist, it is, in the words of the second Vatican Council, “the universal sacrament of salvation” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 45), prefiguring this future reconciliation.

I used to take a round, white brand of oestrogen tablets that I joked looked like communion wafers. The resemblance was more than superficial: in Francis’ vision, the whole of Creation participates in the redemptive movement of reconciliation. Similarly, in taking those tablets, I was transforming myself in a gesture of invitation, seeking the linguistic redemption and social fulfilment of my material body in and through a new communion. In this way, trans people could be thought of as “signs of the times”, which the Church is tasked with observing and interpreting in light of the Gospel (*Gaudium et Spes*, 4).

Moreover, this is not merely to be viewed from a place of distance and alienation: it is an invitation to reach out, encounter and participate. In order to perceive this invitation, it must be allowed to present itself. This means that the Church must encounter us as we truly are, in all our difference – that is, in authentic dialogue. In doing so, it will learn something about its own mission, and be able to participate in the cosmic work of grace. Indeed, Pope Francis indicates that it will find its own euphoria in this – the “joy of the Gospel” (*Evangelii Gaudium*) in which we are all redeemed.

Dialogue requires us to make space for the other, which involves surrendering our totalising grip on the present. This means that, for the powerful, dialogue is a fundamentally disempowering process. Francis recognises this when he notes that reconciling social tensions involves ceasing to try to “possess all the spaces of power and of self-assertion”.

Instead, we should give “priority” to time and the initiation of processes (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 223). This involves recognising that the “fullness” of the future appears as a “horizon”, beyond our knowledge and power in the “enclosure” or “limitation” of the present. Our end is not achieved in the certainty of control today, but in allowing the present to expand into the uncertain space of a future outside of ourselves.

The difficulty of this is shown by “Male and Female He Created Them”: even where it talks about dialogue, it does so with subtly transphobic qualifications: it affirms human dignity, but specifically “of men and women”; and it notes that human personhood must be respected, but only in its “legitimate expressions” (16). Combined with dogwhistle rhetoric around “family rights” (6, 37, 40, 55), this reveals its real concern for preserving the power to be hostile and to exclude. If the authors initially set out to seek dialogue in good faith, they succumbed to the false consolation of power in the present. The result was their truly sacrilegious corruption of redemptive dialogue into a rhetorical tool for political domination.

The Church has a keener sense for truth than this. This is shown, I suggest, by my having converted to Catholicism after my transition: by this point, I had been studying in the Centre for Catholic Studies at Durham University for several years, and its nurturing, dialogical community showed me the possibility for reconciliation with the ecclesial tradition that had nourished my theological imagination.

The attitudes of Catholic lay people and priests “on the ground” are both more diverse, and more welcoming of this diversity of attitude, than the authors of “Male and Female He Created Them” would have us think. And in my experience, even where they disagree with us, Catholics are often willing to listen to and learn from trans people in the uncertainty of authentic dialogue. And this is no “confusion”: as Pope Francis teaches us, it is precisely in this uncertainty that we are most open to the fullness of Truth.

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