

There is an urgent need for dialogue on gender identity. A document from the Vatican released this week is a missed opportunity to engage the Christian doctrine of creation with the complex realities of human experience / By DAVID ALBERT JONES

# Gender theory and gender reality

**T**HE DOCUMENT published this week by the Congregation for Catholic Education is entitled “Male and Female He Created Them: Towards a path of dialogue on the question of gender theory.”

The title invokes the doctrine of creation. It declares that the distinction of male and female is not only a cultural construct but is a constituent of human nature, created by God. The title also refers to “gender theory”. This is the name that Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis have given to what they see as a series of errors about sex and gender at work in modern culture.

The focus of the Congregation for Catholic Education is education. The document presupposes and quotes extensively from what popes Francis, Benedict XVI and John Paul II have written on sex and gender.

However, it does not seek to add to this body of teaching. Hence, while the document repeats statements about the “ideology” of “gender theory”, it is not aiming to say anything original on matters of doctrine. It is not a new condemnation of “transgenderism”, although that is how it is being reported in the media. The actual aim of the document is stated in the title. It hopes to stimulate “a path of dialogue”.

Such a dialogue is certainly needed. Indeed, it is long overdue. Furthermore, the document is structured by a method well suited

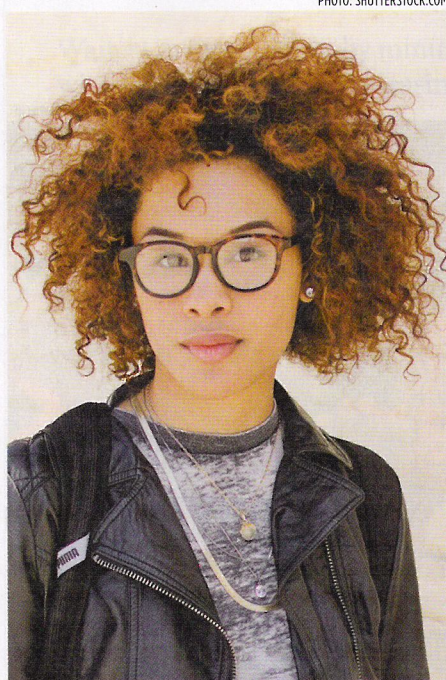


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to dialogue: first to listen, then to reason and then to propose. Dialogue must start with listening, but it can and should move beyond listening to critical reflection and then to engagement, although after this it should return to listen again. Had this method been followed more faithfully, this would have been a fresh and inspiring document. Unfortunately, this attempt at dialogue falters because of two fundamental problems.

**THE FIRST** problem is a consequence of the style of Vatican documents. To show that they are authentically Catholic they rarely cite any sources except the Scriptures, the doctors of the Church and other Vatican documents. Indeed, this document has only one Scriptural quotation, which is a reference to the verse that provides the title (Genesis 1:27). It contains no references to Augustine, Thomas Aquinas or any other doctor of the Church. It only cites popes, ecumenical councils and similar sources. If you say you wish to have dialogue but do not name, quote, or reference the person or people with whom you want to have dialogue with, it obviously creates a problem.

Consider, for example, the sentence: “In fact, around the middle of the last century, a whole series of studies were published which accentuated time and again the role of external conditioning, including its influence on determining personality.”

If this sentence occurred in a student essay, I would expect a reference. Is this a fact? Which studies? Published when and by whom? Pope Benedict XVI sometimes quoted non-Catholic thinkers; indeed, when discussing gender, he quoted Simone de Beauvoir: “One is not born a woman, one becomes so.” However, the Congregation for Catholic Education does not name, quote or reference any actual advocate of gender theory. Instead it states that this or that view “was suggested” or “was seen as” or “was applied to sexuality”, but never where, or by whom. This approach risks combining the views of people who in fact disagree with each other, and of attacking views that few, if any, actually holds.

**THIS BRINGS US** to the second and more fundamental problem. There is an urgent need for careful and respectful dialogue about gender identity, but this dialogue must begin with those most affected. It must begin by listening to those with a divergent sense of gender identity and those closest to them. It is impossible to know how someone understands himself or herself without listening to that person. There may be some people who think one can “choose one’s gender” or who wish to “annihilate the concept of ‘nature’” or to “negate the male-female duality of human nature, from which the family is generated”. But none of the transgender Catholics I have met have believed or wished these things. What is most needed is not dialogue about an abstract “gender theory” but dialogue with gender variant people – to discover what they experience and believe.

There are useful passages in this document about unjust discrimination; protection from bullying; the role of parents; and the principle of subsidiarity. There is an intriguing if obscure passage about “a way of accompanying” that is “capable of reaching out to those who are experiencing complex and painful situations”, and the need to create “an environment of trust, calmness and openness, particularly where there are cases that require time and careful discernment”.

But this document is not a path of well-informed dialogue. That dialogue has yet to begin.

**David Albert Jones** is professor of bioethics at St Mary’s University, Twickenham, Middlesex, and director of the Anscombe Bioethics Centre. The views expressed here are his own.

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