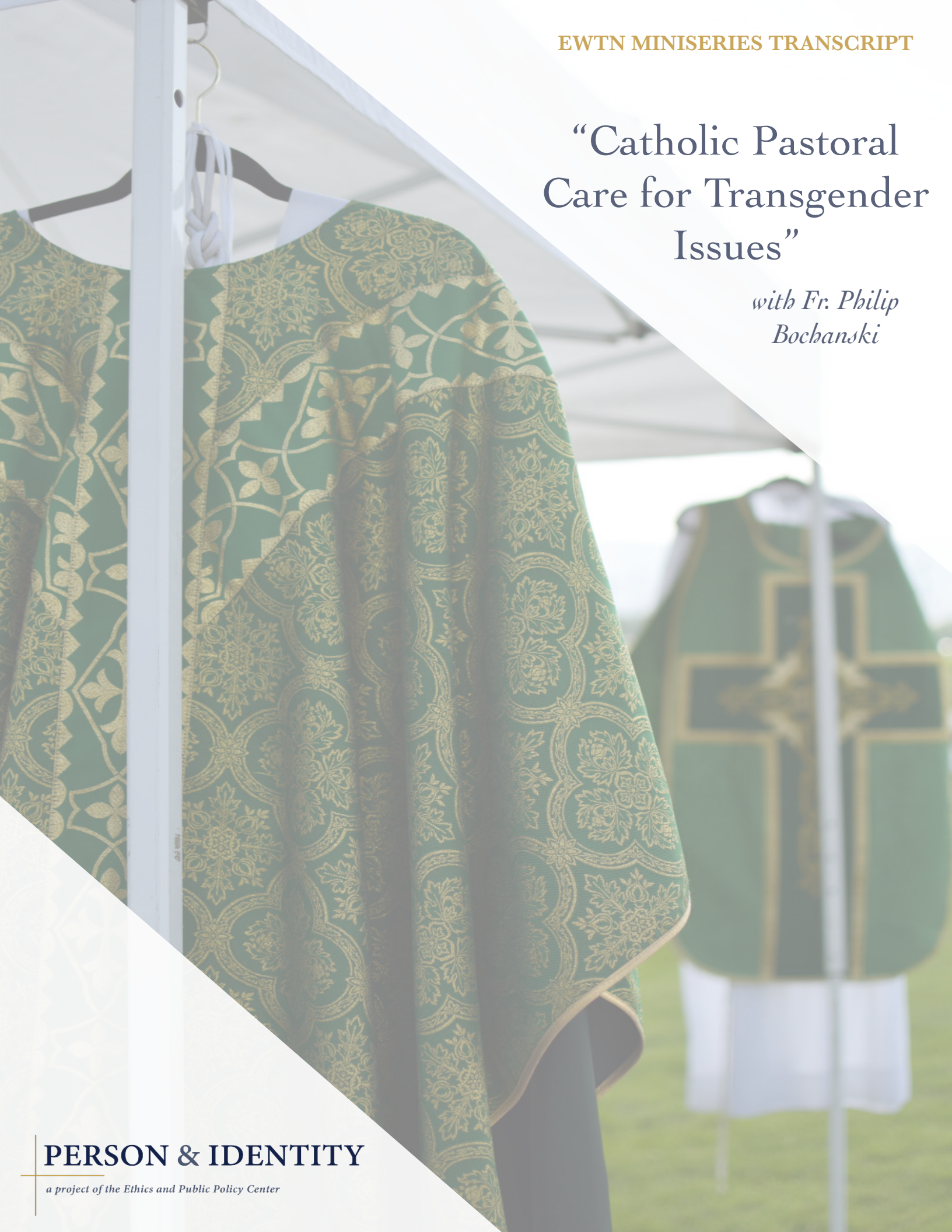
EWTN MINISERIES TRANSCRIPT

"Catholic Pastoral Care for Transgender Issues"

with Fr. Philip Bochanski



PERSON & IDENTITY

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Mary Hasson: I'm Mary Hasson, your guide to this series on "The Transgender Movement: What Catholics Need to Know." Join us for our discussion today with Father Philip Bochanski, the Executive Director of Courage International as we look at the pastoral concerns around guiding people who are experiencing gender dysphoria and other questions related to transgender issues. Join us.

Audio: Jesus answered, "He who made them from the beginning made them male and female."

Mary: Father Bochanski, welcome.

Fr. Philip: Thank you very much. It's great to be here.

Mary: I'm delighted that you're discussing this topic with us today - the pastoral care of people and families who are experiencing questions and struggles around issues of sexual identity. So, your background is that you're a priest from the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, and you're the Executive Director of Courage International, which I'm pleased to serve on the board of. With all that breadth of pastoral experience, we're delighted to have you here for this discussion.

Fr. Philip: Thanks very much.

Mary: Let's start with the word "welcome," because one of the things that I hear, and I'm sure you do as well, is people feel like the Church is not welcoming towards individuals or families who are struggling with questions of identity, just as with same-sex attraction. So, help us understand how the Church welcomes people and how we should look at it.

Fr. Philip: Sure. Well, I think, as always, the best place to start is with an example of the Lord himself. And I think one place where we can kind of understand the welcome that He's thinking of is what we call the Bread of Life discourse, which is His sermon at the synagogue in Capernaum. This is the day after He walked on the water and multiplied the loaves and the fish, and people came to Capernaum looking for Him because they had been fed the day before and He offers them, in place of physical bread and fish, Himself as the Bread of Life. And in the course of telling them who He is and why He's there, almost as an aside and almost because it's bubbling up in His heart, He says, "Everyone that the Father gives me will come to me and I will not reject anyone who comes to me." So, with the Lord, the welcome to those who come to Him looking for grace, for redemption, and for help, is always absolute. And our welcome has to be absolute as well. Come, you're welcome, you'll not be rejected.

But the welcome has a purpose. A few verses later, the Lord says, "It is written in the prophets, they shall all be taught by God. Everyone who listens to my Father and learns from Him comes to me." And in fact, He says, "No one can come to me unless my Father draws him." I think what that's teaching us is that the welcome we have to extend is absolute, and it has a purpose. He wants us to share the word. This is the definition of friendship that He uses

Fr. Philip (cont): in the Last Supper, "I call you my friends because I've told you everything I heard from my Father." You are welcome to come, you'll not be rejected and come close because we have something important to talk about. In this case, it's who is the human being and how should our morality reflect our identity?

Mary: That's excellent. I love that image. Welcome, come, we are accepted. But there is a purpose, to draw near to the Lord and have an open heart, receptivity.

Fr. Philip: And I think we always, as pastoral ministers or fellow parishioners, if someone shows up at the door of our parish, we have to assume and presume on their goodwill, right? They want to know. They want to live the faith. They may not know exactly how to do that, and that's why we're there. It reminds me of something that Cardinal Vincent Nichols, the Archbishop of Westminster in London once said when he was talking to a group of those who experience same-sex attraction and question their "gender identity" who had gathered for a mass. He said, "The Church loves us enough to meet us where we are. The Church loves us too much to leave us where we are, if where we ought to be is closer to understanding and living God's plan." So, again, we welcome people. That doesn't mean agreeing with every thought that they might have, or being able to approve every decision that they might make, but it means affirming the goodness of the person, welcoming them and sharing the truth with them, because we believe that the truth comes from God who is not only the way and the truth, but also the life and absolute love.

Mary: Great. So, let's unpack, then, the idea of pastoral care. At its broadest level, [for] the church, priest, and bishop, there's a pastoral concern not just for the individual in front of them, but for the Church at large. Perhaps you can unpack the idea of pastoral care on a larger, broader level, and then we'll talk about what that might look like in terms of the individual and the family.

Fr. Philip: Sure. Pastoral means shepherd, the role of a shepherd. And so, the first thing that a shepherd has to do is protect the flock, guide the flock to good pastures, and feed them with something substantial. And so, a priest or bishop who has an opportunity to teach, has to speak very clearly. As Jesus says, "He's the Bread of Life." The word of God is what feeds us. So, it's important for anyone who's in a pastoral role, especially those who preach and teach in the Church, to know what Church teaching is, where it comes from, how to understand it themselves, and how to explain it well so they can speak the truth in love. It's a topic [sexual or "gender identity"] that everybody in the pew is at least going to have heard before. I mean, certainly it's part of our discussion as a society. It's a topic that lots of people in the pew have questions about and probably don't know exactly where to turn for good resources. It's a topic we have to acknowledge that's affecting more and more people in our congregations, whether individually or in their families.

Mary: Yeah, so one thing that I've often heard from priests is, "Well, I don't know what to say." Or there's a definite sense that they're afraid that they're going to be turning people away and

Mary (cont): hurting people. How do they overcome that? What do they need to understand? And I'll just throw in one thought here from another priest. He said that when he talks about these sensitive issues, he'll explain what the Church teaches, but then he invites people to come, to bring their questions, to talk with him. In other words, it's not my way or the highway, it's this is the truth, but let's talk about it. Let's help you understand.

Fr. Philip: Absolutely. I think practically speaking, I wouldn't advise a priest to give a homily just on this topic. But there are plenty of opportunities, both in terms of the scripture and certain feast days through the year, where we can talk about the goodness of God's plan for the human person, for the human body, for complementarity, and for marriage. And in the context of that, that's a chance to mention things like sexual identity and questions about sexual identity, sexual attraction, and how the Church's teaching on that comes not from a desire to oppress or marginalize, but from an appreciation of the goodness of the person. When Pope Francis talked about the complementarity of man and woman, he said, it's something that's not just good, it's beautiful, right? Preach about that and be ready for follow-up conversations after mass with good resources that people can take home with them, but also with an availability to the parish. If a priest is going to bring this up in any kind of direct way, he should also be planning for adult faith formation, soon after he's going to preach on that.

Mary: That's a great idea.

Fr. Philip: As another practical step, I would say, whenever people have questions, especially if their questions are more in the form of criticisms, the thing to do is not to try and have that conversation in five minutes in the vestibule, but to say to someone, "Look, this is how we can get in touch about making some time to sit down. If you are more comfortable, I'll come to you, or you can come to the rectory. But this is a big topic and it obviously means a lot to you. Let's not try and figure it out right here. Let's make some time to sit down and talk about this." I think overarchingly, what we're always trying to do is affirm the dignity, and the humanity, and the goodness of the person in front of us. And if we affirm everything that we possibly can, then when we can't approve of something, that comes not as a judgment, but as an extension of the love that we've been demonstrating by treating the person with compassion.

Mary: So, let's get more particular. When someone comes to you, let's say they say, "I'm struggling with questions of identity and I've long felt like I'm born in the wrong body" and all of those things, where's the place to begin? How do you engage that conversation in a way that helps the person know that they're loved, but really helps to open the door towards a deeper look at both where they're going and what they need to know?

Fr. Philip: I think whenever we need to deliver a radical invitation that the Lord is looking for this response [critically examining an issue the person is deeply invested in], and I know it's going to require a lot from the person, again, we imitate Him. I think particularly of His encounter with the rich, young man. That was a big sacrifice He was calling that man to make. And

Fr. Philip (cont): Mark tells us that before Jesus gave him that invitation that Jesus looked at him and loved him, right? Everybody I think, at the heart of it, just wants to be seen, and known, and loved. And so, we need to find a way to do that.

And I think pastorally, I try to start each about every conversation with someone who I'm meeting for the first time with, tell me your story. People don't always like open-ended questions, so they'll say what do you want to know? Whatever you want to tell me. They'll say, where should I start? Wherever you think is important.

Mary: Right, right.

Fr. Philip: But that's one way to help people feel seen and heard. And it gives me a chance to respond to whatever particular question, or doubt, or fear they might have, because I can get a sense of where they're coming from. And I think once we've had a chance to talk about their story, not just about this one admittedly important topic, but who they are, and where they come from, and where they're going, and who they love, and who loves them, we're able to both hear their concerns and start to address them in that context. Starting with, "I know that you're expressing these questions, or concerns, or fears, but tell me what you like about who you are. Tell me how it affects your relationships." I think we tend to think of sexual identity and gender roles in terms of the externals, but there's something at the heart of each person.

St. Pope John Paul II, when he wrote about the dignity of woman, said that motherhood is linked to the personal structure of the woman and the personal dimension of the gift. In other words, there's something about being a man or a woman that we're kind of innately prepared for fatherhood or motherhood, and then the gift of ourselves that we have to give is shaped by that. He says, "The ability to be a mother just shapes a woman's personality, whether or not she has children of her own." I think what that means, and what I'm trying to get across, is that if a man is going to be happy as a man, it's because he's learned to love as a father has to love, and he's living spiritual fatherhood. And if a woman is going to be happy as a woman, it's because she's learned how to love as a mother and she's exercising at least spiritual motherhood.

So, I think to talk to people about where that might already be present in their life and what it might look like in their future helps them to see, I have a vocation. It may not be what I thought about or what my parents want for me or whatever, but I really can find happiness even if my idea of how to live that out day to day [doesn't fit the stereotypes]. I don't necessarily like to dress how other people of my sex dress, or do what they do, or talk like they talk but spiritual fatherhood or spiritual motherhood appeals to me. And I think if we can help them to see that and to live it out, they experience it for themselves.

Mary: Yeah, I think that's tremendously significant, because one of the things that our culture has done is we've forgotten that our sexual identity has something to do with reproduction, with that call to be a mother or father. And I talk to a lot of young people who, as they're looking

Mary (cont): at their futures, they're thinking about careers or they may be thinking about a life partner, but only in a sort of sexual or companionate sense. And they haven't really even thought of themselves in that sense of being created for motherhood or fatherhood, which as you say, doesn't necessarily have to be physical. You're a father, you're a spiritual father. We all need to understand that dimension of ourselves.

Fr. Philip: Because then it's not just about, well, I can't do anything until I change everything.

Mary: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. Which can be paralyzing.

Fr. Philip: Yeah, absolutely. And I mean, so many people that I talk to about issues of sexual attraction or sexual identities say, "I just want a normal life. I want what everybody else has, and I don't know where to find that." And I think if we can see that God creates us different on purpose, He creates each of us specifically with our sexual identity on purpose, we can see that He's shaped our hearts to respond to this particular way of living it out.

Mary: What about families? Because I talk with many families, as I'm sure you do as well, who have been touched by this issue. Oftentimes there is alienation between parents and children, or sibling to sibling, especially when someone has identified as transgender because they've rejected their sexual identity - their given identity as male or female. And so, they've started down this path perhaps of medically altering their body. That's a huge source of pain and anxiety for parents about the wellbeing of their children. But there's also often alienation. So, how can families proceed if they're caught in that situation where there may be hostility or acrimony? What do they do?

Fr. Philip: Well, I think the first thing is not to panic. Right? I think parents often have that kind of emergency room mentality; Something is wrong and how do I fix it? And that's noble and good, but not really possible here. We have to remember St. Paul says all fatherhood is delegated from God the Father. Right? I think the primary role of parents is to be a source of stability, to be a source of affirmation whenever possible. Affirmation and approval are different. That's why you should be able to say, "I love you very much, but I think this is a bad decision."

Mary: Right. So, it's affirmation of the person.

Fr. Philip: Of the person.

Mary: Not of the expressed "transgender identity" per se.

Fr. Philip: Exactly. I think parents need to know that they're not betraying the faith by not talking about the Sixth Commandment all the time, or Genesis 2 all the time. They can have normal conversations with their loved ones and also [know] that all the work they've done to share the faith is not suddenly all meaningless or falling apart. That helps to get rid of defensiveness, the parent's fear that they're rejecting me by rejecting the Church.

Mary: I did something wrong.

Fr. Philip: Yeah, or blaming themselves. I think that'll help in their conversation to, because then their son or daughter doesn't get the message, "you're making this all about you," or "your love for me is contingent on me figuring this out and fixing it." To just be with them, be as normal as possible. And then when it comes to things that your son or daughter asks you to say or do, to distinguish the action from the person and to say, "I love you and I'm not asking you or expecting you to change everything about yourself so that I can love you, because that would go against your conscience. All I'm asking in return is that you don't expect me to say or do something that would violate my conscience so that you can believe that I love you."

Mary: Right.

Fr. Philip: I think to be able to say that calmly and cheerfully is important, and then to look to Our Lady at the foot of the cross. She was His mother. She wanted to take His suffering away. She would've liked to be up there instead of Him, but she was also His disciple, and she knew that she had to let His plan and the Father's plan unfold in their time, according to their way. And what she did was stand by Him, support and encourage Him, pray where He could hear her, and just be with Him so that He wouldn't be going through that alone.

Mary: Yeah. I think parents need to embrace the fact that we're not doing this by ourselves. We're not carrying this burden that we feel or even our child's pain by ourselves. The Lord has a much bigger plan, and will carry that burden for us. So, perhaps in our last minute here, you could just offer a word of encouragement to families or individuals who are experiencing problems in this area.

Fr. Philip: Certainly. There's a reason that we call God "Father." There's a reason that we call the Church "Mother." And as much as we want to help one another, to help our loved ones, to help ourselves, we really have to turn to the virtue of hope and trust in God's plan. God's either omnipotent or He's not. He's either omniscient or He's not. His love endures forever or it doesn't. But if those things are true, then, as St. Paul says, what are we worried about?

Mary: That's a good note to end on. So, thank you very much, Father, really appreciate it.

Fr. Philip: Thank you. My pleasure.

Mary: The Catholic Church is deeply engaged on the issue of gender ideology for two reasons. One, as we discussed in another episode, because gender ideology proposes a false understanding of the human person that can't be reconciled with Christian anthropology. The Church's mission is to evangelize, to bring the gospel to all, but hearts and minds shaped by the deceptive messages of the transgender movement will be resistant to the gospel and less receptive to Catholic teaching. Especially when it's promoted to children in their formative years, gender ideology undermines catechesis. It confuses young people and hinders their self-understanding, spiritual growth, and relationships with others.

Mary (cont): The Church also cares deeply about persons affected by the transgender movement. She recognizes that the lies at the heart of gender ideology undermine human flourishing and often lead vulnerable young people down the path of self-harm and irreversible consequences. So, how can the Church respond pastorally to those experiencing gender dysphoria or who express a "transgender identity?" Well, in pastoral care, truth and love are inseparable. Our hearts must be in the right place, filled with love, desiring the good of those we serve and confident in the truth of Christ. We have to know where we're going if we're going to lead others.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis reminds us that, "Spiritual accompaniment must lead others ever closer to God in whom we attain true freedom. Some people think they are free if they can avoid God; they fail to see that they remain existentially orphaned, helpless, homeless. They cease being pilgrims and become drifters...never getting anywhere. To accompany them would be counterproductive if it became a sort of therapy supporting their self-absorption and ceased to be a pilgrimage with Christ to the Father." Pastoral care begins with knowing the truth and being convinced of the goal. To help the other person move closer to Christ, freely integrating the truth with the practical circumstances of their lives.

It's important to emphasize from the outset that every person, regardless of expressed identity, is a beloved child of God who needs to know God's love and the welcome embrace of the Church. All persons must be treated with dignity and respect, but authentic pastoral care should not be confused with a false compassion which mistakenly validates erroneous beliefs or encourages harmful behavior in hopes of keeping the peace or building trust. An individual in psychological distress, because of gender dysphoria, experiences real pain and anguish, and they should be responded to with love, patience, and affirmation of their personal dignity and value as a human being. Although the person's body is healthy, their interior is wounded. Research shows that the expression of a transgender identity often arises for complicated reasons -- we don't understand them all. Some therapists believe it serves as a psychological defense or a maladaptive coping mechanism in response to adversity, trauma, loss, or abuse. Many detransitioners, those are young people who underwent medical or surgical transition and then reverted back to their true sexual identity, have shared that they pursued "gender transition" in the mistaken belief that it would solve their problems and relieve their pain. But transition only masked the underlying roots of their distress.

A person who is suffering may need the assistance of a Catholic therapist, not a gender therapist. Someone who can help them sort through complicated feelings in light of the truth. Young people who express a "transgender identity" or believe they are born in the wrong body need the truth. No one is born in the wrong body. Sex cannot change, but feelings can. It's important to understand the why behind these feelings and to see if there are other influences at work.

Children and adolescents rely on the adults in their lives to help them make sense of confusing feelings or situations, not to lie to them, or facilitate their pursuit of an unattainable goal,

Mary (cont): to change sex. These issues are complicated, and seeking expert guidance is important. At the same time, all Catholics need to know that it is unjust to validate a person's false beliefs about who they are, or to encourage the person to pursue hormones or surgery which alter the person's appearance while destroying the natural functions of a healthy body. These interventions can lead to sterility, loss of sexual function, and have unknown long-term health risks, and they ultimately fail to achieve what the person wants. No transition can ever make the person's body actually function like the opposite sex. So the solution to this pain is not to reject one's given sexual identity as male or female, or to undergo a "gender transition." Only one path leads to true healing and wholeness, the eventual integration of the person's feelings with the reality of their given sex.

Please know that if you or someone you love is experiencing pain or difficulties because of transgender issues, many, many people are praying for you. So please do reach out to the resources listed along with this episode. And remember, you are beautifully and wonderfully made. God loves you and wants to show you the amazing plan He has for your life. Trust in Him.

This transcript has been slightly modified for clarity and readability. While some adjustments have been made to improve text flow, the original meaning and conversation from the episode has been preserved.

Fr. Bochanski's episode is available on EWTN's On Demand. To watch, view here.