

A culture in crisis.

THE TRUTH OF DIGNITY AND IDENTITY

MARY RICE HASSON

Our culture is in crisis. A crisis that, for too long, too few have recognized. But now, the trans revolution is in full speed and the abortion lobby is openly advocating for the unrestricted “right” to kill the unborn through all nine months of pregnancy. We see a growing group of children being raised without a father. Moral values are in steep decline. Observing Gallup’s most recent “Moral Values Survey,” the past 20 years have been astonishing.

We have also seen suicidality increasing, even among children, to unprecedented levels. We have seen religion and religious beliefs decline. It’s not an overstatement to

say that when you look at the trajectory, it's a free fall.

A human catastrophe is unfolding all around us. Our problem now is that, although we see the crisis, too few understand its source or its solution.

A recent article in the *Wall Street Journal* titled "A Sperm Donor Chases a Role in the Lives of the 96 Children He Fathered" focuses on a young man in his twenties named Dylan Stone-Miller. His life, in many respects, is the sexual revolution, writ large. He's a symbol of our anthropological crisis. Consider these:

His own parents divorced.

His college girlfriend had an abortion.

He picked up easy cash during college by regularly selling his sperm to a local sperm bank.

Dylan married, and then, a few years after that, got divorced.

He's a young, single man—adrift, struggling, and lonely. There are millions of Dylans in our communities across the country. Out of the blue, Dylan received an email from a woman, who tracked him down to say "thank you" for donating his sperm—for fathering a child that she now treasured. Dylan was curious. He started to probe, and he started to wonder how many children he had. He discovered that his college side job had produced 96 children. At that point, they did not know their father.

Dylan learned that a Facebook group had been organized around his donor ID, to put families in touch with their children's biological siblings who were

conceived in this manner. He arranged to meet some of his children. According to the article, to date, he's traveled 9,000 miles and met 25 of his children, many of whom are being raised by same-sex couples.

Truth is hard to silence in the human heart. Having met these children, Dylan had discovered some things about himself. He has grown attached, protective even. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, Dylan "tries to be fair about splitting his time with the children. He keeps a spreadsheet for their names, ages and birthdays and when he last saw or spoke with them." He is trying to figure out: How does he fit in? What does it mean? Who is he, really, to his children? Who is he, as a person? What

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struck me most about this article was how Dylan's own life, and the lives of his children, are shaped by the many lies of the sexual revolution:

His parents' divorce—"Kids are resilient, after all, and they want their parents to be happy, don't they?"

His girlfriend's abortion—"No big deal, it's just a choice, and it's her right to make it."

His own divorce—“Not happy? It’s time to move on.”

His cavalier “sperm banking” for money—“There’s no attachment, just ‘genetic material’ and easy cash!”

Consider also, the lies of same-sex couples who wanted to have children but needed a man (mostly lesbian couples). They believed the lie that they could conceive children with the help of strangers and technology and that everything would be fine because “kids don’t really need a dad, anyway.”

The children, groping to understand, ask, “Who is this person who has appeared in my life? Do I have a father? What does it mean to have a ‘donor dad’? Who am I? Who are they?” It turns out the truth isn’t so easily silenced. Even when disowned by law and culture, the truth has a way of making its presence felt.

Why? Because as human persons, we are built for the truth. We are built for what is good. We are yearning to know God and understand who we are. It’s built into who we are, to look for God and to look for the truth. As Pope John Paul II was so fond of saying, “Christ reveals man to himself.” Without God, it’s hard to know who we are. In a culture that has abandoned not just God but moral truth, and the truth about the human person, it’s very difficult to know who you are.

No matter how fiercely we deny it, despite our self-absorption and pursuit of fleeting pleasures, sooner or later we come face to face with the reality that,

as human beings, *we are made for more*. These children recognize their longing for more.

Dylan was ambushed, in a sense, by the profound fact that he *is* a father. He is a father. Deep down, he feels a connection. He wants to be in his children’s lives. But it’s not so easy. The mothers of his children, who welcomed him to meet the kids, are now a little defensive and not quite sure how he fits in. Of course, they fail to consider what their children need. They need a dad. The children embraced him even if they didn’t know how he quite fit in.

As one mom said, “I don’t want [my daughter] to feel like she can call him anything (like “dad”) . . . He is not her dad. Period.” The mom goes on to say she will correct their daughter saying, “Dylan is not your dad. He will never be your dad. You don’t have a dad. You have a donor.” Think of how impersonal that is, how depersonalizing that is. Yet that is where the culture has led us. There’s so much brokenness, heartache, and confusion. None of these parents know what to make of the situation they’ve created, having lost or never known the truth of who they are and the meaning of life. The mothers acknowledge the pull and reality of a biological father, but this isn’t a connection they envisioned.

As that paternal sense stirs within, Dylan himself is at a loss. He’s caught in the culture’s voice that “people have the choice to choose what they want” and “people have autonomy.” Where does he fit in? He doesn’t quite know. He has forgotten, or perhaps never knew, that we

are made not just for something more, but in a particular manner to be mothers and fathers. Spiritually, at least, and many of us in a physical sense. Dylan is a prime example of what happens when a culture loses sight of what it means to be a person, to be a man or a woman, a father or a mother. He's not alone.

Over the past two years, it's been interesting to see a sequence of books written by young women, feminists, scholars, who are questioning the sexual revolution and even wondering whether it's been good for women. It's ironic. As a Catholic, I'm delighted to see people making these observations, but I also think "the truth has

meeting or dating is using porn, addicted to porn, and what does he think about it. First date? Second date? My, how things have changed. But that's a defensive reaction because they've seen how it impacts and even destroys relationships.

It turns out that the truth about the human person is *not* so easily silenced from the human heart. I spend much of my time fighting another assault on the human person: gender ideology. I've crisscrossed the country, presenting on the truth of the human person (Christian anthropology), critiquing gender ideology, and helping people understand how to love the person in front of them while simultaneously pulling them back from the precipice and showing them another way.

What I've found is that the devastating harm and exploitation that occurs when a culture abandons the truth about the human person is something that is hard to fathom. You see it in the faces of those

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been there. Why is it that our culture couldn't hear it?" They can't shut their eyes to the harm that has been caused through experiences, sight, and the difficulty of having human relationships when there's a large percentage of men in their generation addicted to porn.

In fact, I was meeting with a single, young woman who lives in New York, and she was telling me that she and her friends discuss when to ask the porn question: whether the person they're

who have been affected. When we, as a culture, turn away from the truth and dignity of the human person and instead try to fashion a new creature bound not by nature or moral laws but simply by desire and the limits of technology, it's a catastrophe. We can see the pain in the faces of the most vulnerable.

This issue has come home to Catholics, as some of you might be painfully familiar. In every parish, in every diocese, there are Catholics with loved

ones who are confused about the truth of who they are. They don't know how to deal with conflicting feelings. They don't know how to filter the messages they hear from the culture. They don't know how to make sense of it all. They are only hearing the lie. These families who are afflicted and drowning in the transgender tsunami need our prayers. They need them quite profoundly.

It's impossible to miss the impact that gender ideology is having not just on the culture but on the Church and families. In a sense, it's nothing new. Human beings have been rebelling against God and His design since Adam and Eve. We always think we "had a better idea." You'd think we'd learn.

Over the centuries, we've seen a variety of -isms. In a sense, gender ideology is nothing new because it reflects giving in of the temptation to think we've got a better idea than God. It draws on other toxic philosophies such as Marxism, nihilism, radical individualism, materialism, and more. Once we've abandoned the truth, we'll believe almost anything.

The rise of the transgender movement is particularly dangerous. In an attempt to seduce a generation, our children, with the belief that they can decide who they are, that there is no truth about who they are, and that their desires and feelings determine reality. It's a seduction and a powerful one, particularly when kids are hurting for different reasons. Make no mistake: It results in destruction, not just of the individual, but of their families.

I was listening to an interview with a well-known child psychiatrist who works in this area, who has moved significantly in his own practice. He still runs a program for adults who struggle with identity and want to transition, but he was talking about how psychology has made a mistake because it looks at the patient as a person with a symptom and a solution. He said that psychology, or psychiatry in his case, has forgotten that people are made for love. People are in relationship and all of the difficulties of life not only affect us as individuals, but they also affect our relationships. This is someone who is not Catholic and not Christian. He came to realize this in his empirical studies of the human person. We're made for relationship.

In the process of dismantling what the radical left considers to be systems of oppression—religion, the family, motherhood, fatherhood, and even our own bodies—we have seen powerful destruction.

Let me highlight a couple of things that are important to know about the lie that is gender ideology. It's atheistic at its core. This doesn't mean that the person who becomes confused or experiences gender dysphoria *is* an atheist. However, the ideology is absolutely atheistic.

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have spoken with people from a wide variety of backgrounds. People can't ride two horses at once for very long. There are people who believe that who I am is whoever I say I am, there is no human nature, there is no truth about who I am, my body is meaningless, I can do whatever I want with my body, families are chosen, and sex is simply about pleasure. If you take on board those beliefs, you're crowding out any receptivity towards the truth. Gender ideology tends to sweep people in that direction.

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My father, Charlie Rice, was a law professor at Notre Dame and did a lot of work in the pro-life movement. He was a constitutional lawyer, so he worked on the abortion issue. I remember him teaching a class on jurisprudence, which is the philosophy of law. At the age of 19, as an undergrad, I sat in his class, and he was talking about how once you lose sight of the fact that there is a meaning to sexual union—which brings the couple together but also creates life—and you say sex is only about pleasure, then *anything* is possible. He said you're going to end up with Freddy marrying Harry and people laughed. They mocked him. They said, "Ah, an extremist, how can that be? How radical. It can't happen."

Of course, here we are. How did we get here? We have spent decades as a culture trying to forget that sex has something to do with reproduction. As humans, we are *made* for more. There's a meaning to what we do with our

bodies, in our capacity for motherhood and fatherhood. As a culture (for decades), it has become much easier for our most vulnerable young people to accept the lie that their bodies are meaningless.

If sex is only about pleasure, there are a lot of ways to get pleasure. If reproduction has no meaning and our body parts, designed for reproduction, mean nothing, then what difference does it make if we cut off certain parts or alter our capacity to be mothers or fathers, to become sterilized in pursuit of a presentation of whatever we conceive ourselves to be. It's much easier for young people to accept that.

So, how is it pushed through the culture? Certainly, through the schools. I personally think that the future of the Church lies in Catholic education. Every Catholic kid needs to be receiving a Catholic education, not because there aren't good people in the public schools, of course there are, but because they aren't calling the shots.

This ideology has infected and indeed captured our cultural institutions from media to education—beginning in universities and now in K–12 classrooms—to medicine, psychology, and religion.

I work with people from a variety of faiths on this issue. They say they are always watching to see what the Catholic Church is doing because they have confidence that the Church is going to speak the truth. They aren't going to shift with the wind. Why? Because so many of their denominations have abandoned biblical truth and common sense and have gone down a path that they can see is causing harm.

It's partly by design, from my research, as many of the prominent philanthropists, who are funding this movement, have given hundreds of thousands, even millions of dollars, to non-profits where they have established a specific purpose to corrupt religions on this issue. They are helping religions believe that what is compassionate can't be what has traditionally been taught as the truth. The way of compassion lies in accommodating people's desires and validating whoever they believe themselves to be, regardless of the truth of the person. There is no truth according to this ideology. That's an intentional and wicked aspect of this that I think is, perhaps, underappreciated.

About a year and a half ago, I was speaking to a bishop and was working with the teachers in the diocese, and he said, "You know, the other side is not going to compromise." I wish that could be shouted aloud, because that is *absolutely* the truth. There is no middle way when talking about a conception of the human person; there is the truth and everything else that is not the truth. There is no possibility of compromise, and I can tell you that the other side is not going to compromise. This discussion is not moving toward a conversation about children or adolescents who have become confused about their identity and their bodies.

When you look at the international scale, what the United Nations is doing and what is being pushed across the globe, this is not a conversation about gender dysphoria. It's a conversation about autonomy, about the right

of human beings to self-determine an identity, to modify their bodies as they desire, and to enter relationships and have sexual activity as they desire. And they impose on everyone else an obligation to validate it and celebrate it. That's where this is going. It's not about compassion but about chewing up and destroying the lives of so many young people who are caught up in this.

This is why Pope Francis calls gender ideology "a dangerous ideology." It leads young people to believe things that simply aren't true.

In 2012, Pope Benedict stated, "When the freedom to be creative becomes the freedom to create oneself, then necessarily the Maker himself is denied and ultimately man too is stripped of his dignity as a creature of God, as the image of God at the core of his being."

That's the cost. When we lose sight of the person, no matter how much we discuss caring for others or the dignity of the person, we are no longer anchored in the truth of the person. When the truth of the human person is denied, human dignity is degraded, and it becomes very hard for law and culture to treat human beings with the dignity they ought to have.

We cannot hope to protect human dignity in a culture that no longer knows what it means to be a human person. We can see the impact in the numbers. The CDC released a study that found one in four high schoolers now identify as LG-BTQIA. One in four, that's 25 percent. In the same generation, 14 percent identify as Catholic. That peer pressure is coming from a very different direction.

At the same time, among high schoolers, we're seeing unprecedented numbers identifying as transgender. There was a study out of Pittsburgh that found 9.2 percent of high schoolers are identifying as transgender or gender diverse. To appreciate what a dramatic rise that is you have to look at the psychological literature. Until about 2013, the prevalence of gender dysphoria or transgender identification was reported as being a fraction of a fraction of a percent.

So, all of a sudden, we have a generation where it's around one in ten. What happened? Our children's hearts are being captured by a lie. But there's good

results when we live in a way that discards the truth of the human person. Unfortunately, that harm is very easy to see. But there's a positive trend here.

In Europe, we now have five countries that have reversed course on the transitioning of minors: four Scandinavian countries and the United Kingdom. Why? Not because they believe in the truth of the human person, but because they saw the harm. They did substantive evidence reviews and realized the promised benefit was not being actualized. People were not less suicidal; they were more suicidal. It was not resolving their gender dysphoria and in fact, they

were sterilizing them and causing all sorts of health problems. Scandinavian countries are known for their progressive approach to sexuality. So, why are they reversing course? Because it's hard to silence the truth. Some-

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news. As it turns out, the truth is not so easily silenced from the human heart. When I speak on gender ideology, I try to open three lenses to the human heart for people, so they realize that even though we know the truth, often times you can't lead with it.

Think of Dylan. He's experiencing the harm of the lies that he believed. Very often with young people or when you're talking to someone who is not immediately receptive to the truth, we must lead by finding the common ground and finding the harm that

one said to me once, "Don't say 'no' to mother nature forever." People are seeing the evidence.

Another thing that is helping is that we're starting to have other voices of authority come forward. When you're talking about harm or science, what is the truth? We have many people who are in positions of authority who are no longer trustworthy and that's what we've seen with many of the large medical associations; they have backed things like contraception, abortion, assisted suicide, and "gender-affirming care" but at the same time

they represent this as being the truth of what's helpful to people.

But now, we have other voices coming forward, not necessarily people of faith but some of them are. There are new medical groups called Society for Evidence Based Gender Medicine (SEGM) and Do No Harm. They have clinicians coming forward from a medical perspective saying, "Whoa, look at the harm. Let's speak the truth and look at the evidence." That's progress.

Another thing that has helped change the game and awaken people to the truth is what we call lived experience. It used to be that you'd only hear from adults who were expressing a transgender identity who said, "This is the way to go, and this is why you need to transition kids because I would've been happier if I had been transitioned as a kid." For a long time, they were the only voices who claimed to have any experience.

But that has changed. We have seen hundreds of young people who went down that transition path and suffered greatly for it. They understand they were lied to and now their bodies are tremendously damaged. Those original wounds, interior wounds that they tried to fix with hormones and surgery, are still there.

We have an increasing number of what we call detransitioners who are coming out and sharing their experiences, appealing to people based on the reality and harm this lie has done.

The second window is science, emphasizing the truth about the human person. You can't change sex. You'd think this would be obvious, but it becomes very fuzzy, so much so that I've seen studies of young boys who actually believe that if you give them estrogen, they are going to grow a uterus. It's not true.

Unfortunately, we now have an attempt, by the administration, to redefine the meaning of sex, instead of the design of the body toward a reproductive role, to redefine it as a "grab bag," a cluster of traits. That is something that is more of a threat, but the good news

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is that there are so many scientists who are speaking out and saying, "Stop with the junk research. Stop trying to redefine sex which has a biological meaning. There is a truth to be defended."

The third window is anthropology and the truth. Everyone wants to be loved. Everyone wants to belong. They want to know why they are here and what's the purpose of life. Christian anthropology, the truth of who we are, answers the deepest longings of the human heart.

We need to represent that. When I was growing up, this was implicit in the culture. However, today, we have a culture that is explicitly hostile to that. It is all the more important.

So, what are we called to do? We are called to *know the truth*. We're called to be bold and to speak the truth. If we allow ourselves to be silenced, the culture will only be full of lies, and that is what the most vulnerable will hear. They'll hear those with the loudest voices. We need to be bold and speak the truth.

In closing, the culture is "mission territory." As you leave the parking lot of my parish, there is a sign that says

"entering mission territory" to serve as a reminder that we're supposed to carry it out in the world. That's what we're here for. Imagine how different Dylan's life would have been and the lives of those children, if someone had given him the truth initially. He wouldn't have to stumble upon it by experiencing all the harm that comes when you don't know who you are, and by listening to the lies of the culture.

We need to be bold in speaking the truth and creating a culture that is *truly* worthy of the human person. ♦

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PERSON AND IDENTITY

The mission of EPPC's Person and Identity Project is to assist the Catholic Church in promoting the Catholic vision of the human person and responding to the challenges of gender ideology. Gender ideology has permeated the culture with stunning speed, influencing medicine, business, media, entertainment, government, and education. Because it is sowing confusion and undermining the Church's mission of evangelization, the rise of gender ideology has created an urgent need for clarity, education, and compassionate guidance for Catholic families and young people. The Person and Identity Project is committed to assisting the Church in meeting these needs. PIP is a collaborative effort, coordinated by a leadership team that has decades of individual experiences in education, seminary formation, non-profit leadership, and apostolic service.