



THE PERSON AND IDENTITY PROJECT

# QUESTIONS & ANSWERS FOR PARISHES ON GENDER IDEOLOGY

# CONTENTS

QUESTION	PAGE
1. Why does the Church use the phrase sexual identity instead of gender identity?	3
2. How do I explain this distinction to members of my youth group or RCIA?	4
3. At what ages might it be appropriate for parish or diocesan programs to address topics related to sexual identity? What about specific issues related to the “LGBTQ” movement or persons who identify as transgender or nonbinary?	4
4. What kinds of situations may arise in diocesan programs or the parish setting?	5
5. If a situation involving sexual identity or “gender” arises in our parish youth group, religious education, or other parish ministry, how should I handle it?	6

The information in this document is provided as general information and does not constitute professional legal, medical, or counseling advice. Readers needing individual guidance in relation to their specific circumstances should seek personal advice from qualified legal, medical, or counseling professionals.

## **1. Why does the Church use the phrase sexual identity instead of gender identity?**

The Catholic Church teaches that the person is a profound and integrated unity of body and soul, created either male or female, and uses the term sexual identity to convey this unity. This truth is known not only through Revelation, but also through the witness of science and medicine. The Church uses the term sexual difference to convey that male and female are distinct ways of being human and uses the term complementarity to convey that men and women's sexual difference allows them to cooperate and mutually support each other in enriching and fruitful ways. The Church affirms the equal dignity of men and women, as both are created by God in his image and likeness. "Gender identity," on the other hand, is described as a person's feelings or internal self-perception of "who they are," regardless of the body and biological reality. Proponents of "gender identity" claim that identity is self-determined, and that a person may assert an "authentic" identity opposed to biological sex or sexual identity. Such claims of "gender identity" are incompatible with Catholic teaching.

## **2. How do I explain this distinction to members of my youth group or RCIA?**

Simply put, God creates each of us as a unity of body and soul and creates us as either male or female. Being male or female is a person's sexual identity. (The Catechism teaches that each person must accept his or her sexual identity as a gift from God.) A person's sex cannot change, as each cell in a person's body has a sex – male or female. Sex is determined at conception and acknowledged (not assigned) at birth, or even before, thanks to sonograms. "Gender identity," on the other hand, describes a feeling or self-perception, unrelated to bodily sex, that can change over time. It is not a stable basis for a person's identity.<sup>2</sup> In light of gender ideology, what "big picture" goals should school leaders keep in mind?

## **3. At what ages might it be appropriate for parish or diocesan programs to address topics related to sexual identity? What about specific issues related to the "LGBTQ" movement or persons who identify as transgender or nonbinary?**

Children naturally realize their sexual identity as they begin to take care of their bodies and learn the distinctions between boys and girls, brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers. As they grow older, discussions of modesty and chastity reinforce that distinction. Discussions of sexual difference should emphasize the equal dignity of males and females, while acknowledging differences. At the same time, acknowledging sexual difference should not enforce stereotypes or be interpreted to limit individual potential. Because gender ideology has saturated the culture, particularly public education, children are becoming familiar with—or even indoctrinated in—the basic tenets of gender ideology as early as kindergarten and elementary school. Parishes



and dioceses should consider implementing their own policies on these issues, with appropriate involvement of and deference to parents' authority and responsibility for their own children. In general, catechists should be trained and prepared to address questions related to LGBTQ issues and sexual identity, in age-appropriate and sensitive ways, when the issue is raised. For example, if a child mentions that a girl in her class "became" a boy, then the catechist might simply respond that even if a girl feels like she is a boy, or believes she is a boy, she is still a girl.

In middle school and high school, it is important to address these issues in the context of more comprehensive teaching about the human person and human sexuality. Some religious education programs have found that questions about sexual identity can be addressed, even indirectly, in classes that present the theology of the body, or through retreat programs that cover the person and sexual morality. Whenever parishes or dioceses implement programs addressing these issues for children and teens they might consider developing concurrent programs, or introductory presentations, for their parents as well.

#### **4. What kinds of situations may arise in diocesan programs or the parish setting?**

(Issues related to Catholic schools are treated separately under "Schools".) Today's culture—media, entertainment, business, education, medicine, and entertainment—increasingly promotes gender ideology in ways that inevitably affect Catholics of all ages. In addition, most Catholic youth attend public schools, which today promote gender ideology to students from kindergarten through high school graduation. Universities are among the environments most aggressively promoting gender ideology, often limiting countervailing arguments as well. Most students participating in parish or diocesan programs are likely to be familiar with the basic tenets of gender ideology, as this is the world in which they live. They and their families may have uncritically incorporated the language and definitions of gender ideology or absorbed erroneous beliefs that a person could "change" sex or "transition" towards an identity at odds with biological sex. Some may believe that such identity issues are simply a matter of choice and that tolerance, or even Christian charity, requires them to "accept" and affirm all identities. In addition, some students may have family members who identify as members of the "LGBTQ" community or assert an identity at odds with biological sex.

In determining how best to support Catholic families, parish and diocesan staff members need to understand as clearly as possible the impact of gender ideology in the lives of Catholics. Catholic youth ministers, for example, may find it helpful to be attentive to students' language, their use of pronouns, and their conversations, to understand the extent to which students have been exposed to or accept gender ideology. Topical discussions about catechetical concepts, such as Creation, Redemption, the human person, and the sacraments, may surface questions about Christian anthropology versus gender ideology. Sacramental preparation programs will necessitate discussion of related concepts in age-appropriate ways. In programs involving middle and high school students, a parish or diocese should anticipate that questions about identity and sexuality and Church teachings

may arise or that students may present with family circumstances involving these issues. Generally speaking, it is best not to presume that Catholics—adults or children—have an explicit understanding of Catholic anthropology or a clear understanding of why the Church rejects gender ideology. Thus, parishes or dioceses may consider incorporating explanations of Christian anthropology, and critiques of gender ideology, into parish and diocesan programs for all ages.

**5. If a situation involving sexual identity or “gender” arises in our parish youth group, religious education, or other parish ministry, how should I handle it?**

Person and Identity Project resources are offered as a support and resource for parish and diocesan personnel, subject to the directions of a bishop or pastor. Questions related to sexual identity are complicated and often situation-dependent, but nevertheless affect a wider audience, potentially including the whole parish community or diocese. Thus, it is important for these situations to be resolved by the pastor or bishop according to diocesan policy. Parents choose a Catholic religious education program to faithfully transmit the teachings of the Catholic faith. As successor to the Apostles, the Bishop has a responsibility to parents and their children to ensure that these teachings are faithfully handed on in parish religious education or other parish ministries, especially in complex situations. As a practical matter, it is important for the diocese to have a unified and consistent response and this requires clear direction from the local bishop.

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