

A Moral Theologian Looks at Transsexual Issues  
Fr. David O'Leary, S.T.L., D.Phil.

The story of Bruce Jenner to Caitlyn Jenner has been all over the news. But she is not the only person or family to go through this very difficult and painful transformation. All the cultural magazines and web sites have commented on her change and personal journey. But there has been very little theological reflection and insight from the Roman Catholic Church on transsexual issues. This small article is one Moral Theologian's attempt to start the conversation.

There are many sources to find the Roman Catholic Teaching on any subject under the sun. But it is very important to use proper hermeneutics, the principles of interpretation, to get the full understanding of any teaching from the Church's viewpoint. The fourfold approach of Sacred Scripture, Sacred Tradition, Reason and Experience is the best way of understanding any issue.

A) Sacred Scripture

From the Jewish Scriptures, the Book of Genesis is the starting point for many of the Church's positions on human nature and the human person.

And God said, "Let us make a human, in our image, according to our likeness, . . . .  
And God created the human in His image. He created it in the image of God; He created them male and female. And God blessed them . . . Gen 1:26-28.

The expression "in the image of God" can generate much argument on meaning; whether a physical, spiritual, or intellectual image of God. Whatever it means, though, it implies that humans are understood here to share in the divine in a way a lion or a cow does not. This is crucial to all that will follow. The paradox, inherent in the divine-human relationship, is that only humans have some element of the divine, and only humans would, by their very nature, aspire to the divine. Both men and women are created in the divine image. It is not only the first two humans but also the entire species that bears God's image.

Created in God's image and likeness means that all humans have an element of divine and are meant to be in a relationship with the Divine. To live up to one's fullest potential.

There is no mention of transgender issues in the Jewish or Christian Scriptures. But it is clear that all humans are meant to reflect a divine image to world and to crave a relationship with the Divine.

B) Sacred Tradition

Throughout the history of the Roman Catholic Church, Sacred Tradition has to be seen as how believers have lived out the meaning of Sacred Scriptures. But it is very important to

remember that there was Sacred Tradition long before there was Sacred Scripture. God did not come down and say; “Hey buddy, read this.” Sacred Scripture, divinely inspired, only came about after a community of believers was called into relationship with the divine. Sacred Tradition is the history of how believers have lived out their faith. Who decides what becomes part of Sacred Tradition is the community of believers themselves and guided by the official teachers of the Church, the Bishops. Sadly, in different centuries, Sacred Tradition has been determined by a very literal or fundamental way of reading the Sacred Scriptures. There is a danger of reading any sacred text out of context and reading the sacred text as history or science. The sacred texts are first and foremost a matter of Faith. To seek out the meaning of a sacred text is to do theology; “Faith seeking understanding” so said Saint Anselm.

All of the Jewish believers and all most all of the Christian believers see their sacred scripture as a book of faith first, not history or science. For Muslim believers, Islam is just starting to see their sacred text as a book of faith, which needs interpretation.

Sacred Tradition has been able to adapt its beliefs in light of how the community of believers has incorporated newer insights of who and what the human person is. This has been done by using the insights from reason, the collective knowledge of all those who aspire to be in relationship with the divine. Again, the issues of transgender are a very modern issue and the community of believers and the magisterium are just beginning to tackle the topic.

### C) Reason

The very long history of the Jewish and Christian faith, and just starting with the Islam faith, is how to incorporate new information about the human person into the faith. Religion and science are not mortal enemies. They both have insights to offer to one another. When they are both willing to learn from each other a greater good is achieved. When religion and science invade the others domain then nothing good is accomplished. The Jewish faith went through its dark chapter with certain branches of mystical Kabalism, trying to use religion to control nature and even create new life form, the Golem. Christianity painted itself into a corner by using the Bible as a book of science and not a book of faith. This debate was in regards to the Earth being at the center of the universe. But when old Galileo wrote about how the Earth goes around the Sun and is not at the center of the universe, a major controversy erupted. But reason won out. The same use of reason can be seen in regards to medical transplants. In certain centuries, cutting up the human body was condemned, it was seen as a form of mutilation of God’s creation. Desecrating the image of God.

The same change in opinion in the Roman Catholic Church can be seen in how suicide was and is now treated. First it was a grave sin, to destroy oneself. A mortal sin, where the family could not even have a funeral Mass celebrated for the deceased. Then slowly, through the insights of moral theologians and psychologists, it was seen that if a person committed suicide, then maybe they were depressed or had a chemical imbalance in their mind. And if that was so, would not be able to make a free decision or know fully the

seriousness and consequences of their actions. Yes suicide is very wrong, but the Catholic Church no longer condemns the individual.

The very same use of reason now needs to be applied to persons who seek transsexual operations.

#### D) Experience

The fourth insight of hermeneutics is experience. How has the community of believers incorporated the collective wisdom of science, psychology, anthropology and the lived reality of what it means to be human into its faith.

The Roman Catholic Church took many, many centuries to understand who and what the human person is. Always trying to get back to the ideal of Genesis, the person is created in God's image and likeness. There are two major types of cases in which sex-changing surgery is an issue. The first type concerns persons born with both testicular and ovarian tissue, hermaphrodites. And persons who are of one sex but in whom hormonal imbalances have produced characteristics of the opposite sex, pseudo hermaphrodites. In all such cases, the best Roman Catholic moral judgment has held that if medical science can find a means of correcting these problems through surgery, hormone therapy or mechanical aids, all is well and good.

The case of transsexuals seeking a sex change surgery when they have physically normal sex organs but wishes or believes that he or she is a member of the opposite sex is new. Today using the insights of modern medical and psychological opinion it can be argued that if all other means of dealing with transsexuals (counseling, etc.) have been exhausted, sex-changing surgery might be used as a last resort.

The medical and psychological notion that seems to underlie the argument for the morality of sex change operations for transsexuals is the notion that the human mind is an even more complex and mysterious reality than the human body. When there is major dissonance between the human mind and the human body, it may be easier and more moral to change the human body than to change the human mind.

#### Conclusion

By using the lessons of proper hermeneutics; Sacred Scripture, Sacred Tradition, Reason and Experience, Roman Catholic Moral Theology can come up with answers to new questions. I believe the issue of transsexual operations can be seen as allowable. **To be the image and likeness of God in the world means to have a body and mind that is in union with itself as well as with the Divine.** Caitlyn Jenner is welcomed to worship in my church any time.