

PROCLAIMING THE TRUTH OF GOD'S TRANSGENDER PEOPLE

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God has given me the precious gift of fifty-seven years as a Catholic sister and the surprise gift of ministering nationally among the transgender community for the last twenty years. I have spent thousands of hours with gender-expansive people all these years and count this ministry the most profound and privileged of my life. My ministry among them is twofold: I am a spiritual companion in their process of claiming their truth, and an ally in helping other people understand and respect them. There were times over the years when, hearing the passion in my voice to tell people about those in the transgender community I was coming to know, someone would ask me, “Who do you want to tell?” It was a sincere question, and there was genuine puzzlement on their face. The question meant, “Only a small percentage of the population is transgender so I can’t imagine there would be many for whom this issue would be relevant. Why do you feel such an urgency to tell people?”

Basically, I’d like to tell everyone. Anyone could potentially be directly affected. None of us knows when a child, parent, sister, brother, favorite teacher, best friend, lover, or grandparent will reveal to us that they are transgender. I’d like to tell parents because I’ve seen them struggle with knowing how to guide and protect their children who are transgender. I’d like for children who have transgender parents to have the guidance and support they need to process this new reality in their relationship with their parent. I’d like to tell educators who assume trans children are gay because they know something about that and know

nothing about children who are transgender. I'd like to tell employers in every category of life so they could better facilitate a person's transition on the job in the most informed, respectful, professional way possible for all concerned. I'd like to tell doctors and nurses so transgender people can get the medical care they need and deserve. Most of all, I'd like to tell religious professionals of all denominations that transgender people, like many of us, want nothing more than to live their lives in fidelity to God, but they can only do that by being honest with themselves and with God about their transgender identity.

I invite you into my experience of walking with transgender people for two decades so you can see why I have such a passion for giving testimony to their lives. Here are a couple of examples of where my passion comes from.

Those in the medical profession need to understand transgender people

One Sunday morning in early March 2008, my cell phone rang. The voice at the other end said, "Sister Luisa, this is Taylor. You probably don't remember me, but I met you at the last Dezert Boyz meeting the other night." This was the monthly meeting for transgender men which I often attended simply to support them.

I immediately responded, "Of course, I remember you. You were sitting next to me on the left." What he said next made me realize how important it was that I remembered him.

"I'm sorry to bother you, but I really need for you to come see me. I'm in the hospital because I tried to kill myself."

"You're not bothering me in the least! I'm VERY glad you called me, and I will be there as quickly as I can." Taylor was twenty-four and had recently made the decision to transition. Nikki was becoming Taylor.

When I got to the psychiatric unit of the hospital, Taylor was waiting for me. I was disappointed but not surprised to see that he was sharing a room with a woman. As far as the world of hospitals was concerned, he was female. I felt awkward since I had met him only once before at the support meeting and therefore had never spoken with him one on one. He began by telling me how providential it was for him that I was at that meeting. His mother was reared Catholic but did not rear her two children in any religion. As soon as he realized I was a Catholic sister at his first Dezert Boyz meeting, he felt an immediate connection with me. He

was convinced that it must have been in God's plan that the chair next to me was empty because he instinctively felt more secure near me.

I was amazed at how comfortable and comforted he felt by my presence in that hospital room and readily began to share his story. After a few minutes, he told me that his mother would be arriving soon, so I quickly offered to leave to give him private time with her. No, he very much wanted me to stay so she could meet me. I wondered how she would feel about coming to see her child in such a distressing situation and find a total stranger with him. When she arrived, she was visibly upset but was as gracious as anyone could be under the circumstances.

I went back on Monday to visit with him, and again on Tuesday. In the midst of our conversation, he suddenly announced that in about thirty minutes there would be a family consultation with the doctors and if it were possible for me, he would like me to stay for that. Initially, I didn't think that was a good idea at all. Did he have to ask the doctors about that first? How would his family feel about having a stranger in the room the first time they see him after a suicide attempt? No, he assured me, he didn't need to check with the doctors and he was sure his family would be okay with it. I wasn't so sure at all that I would be okay. In all my years of transgender ministry, I had never been in this situation before.

Taylor did not know his father well, and the minimal relationship they had was negative. However, Taylor was close to his paternal grandmother and aunt, both of whom were there for this family meeting. Also, there besides his mother from her side of the family were his brother, his uncle, his maternal grandmother and her husband, and unfortunately his grandfather. We were all seated along the walls of the room with the three doctors in front. I was sitting next to Taylor.

The primary doctor gave a brief introduction and then simply invited Taylor and his family to share how they were feeling about what had happened. Beginning at the other end of the room, each in turn struggled to express their shock, confusion, and deep sadness that Taylor would try to take his life. Each, with the exception of his grandfather, did the best they could to tell him they loved him and would support him, though they did not understand what was happening to him. After a loud and ugly exchange with his grandfather, the elder man stormed out of the

room and did not return. That was actually a good thing. Through all of this, none of the doctors said a word.

The elephant in the room was the reason Taylor had tried to take his life, and no one spoke directly of that. Though externally he passed remarkably well as male even prior to any hormones, the anguish of struggling to live life in that liminal place of being neither fully female nor fully male was a burden he decided he could no longer carry. He would prefer to simply leave this earth. He had screamed at his very unaccepting grandfather, (adding a few expletives for color) “Nobody can tell me what to do!”

When everyone in the family had spoken, they all looked at me. I took a deep breath, prayed for God’s Spirit to guide me and began. “Taylor, I’m going to take the huge risk and dare to rephrase your statement to your grandfather. There are people in our lives who *can* appropriately tell us what to do—parents, teachers, employers, etc. Would it maybe be more accurate to say that nobody can tell you who to *be*?” “YES, THAT’S REALLY WHAT I WAS TRYING TO SAY!! NOBODY CAN TELL ME WHO TO BE!!”

I breathed a huge sigh of relief and then spoke to the family. After introducing myself and telling them that I had been ministering in the transgender community for many years, I told them how deeply moved I was by their obvious and deep love for Taylor. Most transgender people did not have the kind of support they were struggling to offer him. I spoke for a few minutes about the reality of transgender people in our world and ended by assuring them that I was privileged to be able to companion Taylor as he began his transition. I encouraged them to contact me to express their concerns for Taylor and ask questions. When I finished speaking, the same doctor flatly and briefly stated that the meeting was now over and they would leave so Taylor and his family could continue their conversation. I announced that I would also leave to respect the privacy of the family.

I was eager to return the next day to see how Taylor was feeling and to find out what had happened after I left. The meeting had been cathartic for him, and he was more focused and calm. His family was grateful that I had been there. As we were talking, I noticed a staff person peek in a couple of times. The second time she stuck her head in the door I asked if they needed Taylor someplace else and should I come back later? “Oh no, you don’t need to leave. In fact, the doctor is about to come and

he wants to see you.” My immediate thought was that he was not happy that I had been at the meeting. I felt like a child being called into the principal’s office.

When he came into the room, there was no hint of any displeasure with me. He spent a few minutes talking with Taylor about the meeting and how he was feeling subsequent to the meeting. He told Taylor that he had prayed a lot before that meeting. He didn’t specifically say why, but the implication was that he knew nothing about transgender people and felt unsure about how to facilitate the family meeting. Then, he turned to me and said, “And God sent you to be with us and your presence made a huge difference. I want to thank you for being there.”

The next day, I returned with some basic resource materials for the doctor. I gave him my contact information and told him I would be available to him if ever he found himself in this situation again. He seemed genuinely and deeply grateful.

Several professional medical associations support the research confirming that transgender people are not experiencing a psychological pathology, but rather a neurobiological reality that begins in utero. Some of these organizations are The American Medical Association, the American Psychiatric Association, the American Psychological Association, the Academy of Pediatrics (not the *College* of Pediatrics), the World Professional Association for Transgender Health, Johns Hopkins, and the Mayo Clinic. Medical professionals need to be prepared to address medical issues of transgender people with competence and sensitivity. Gradually, medical schools are integrating transgender health into their curriculum, and hospitals are beginning to implement informed and pastoral care for transgender people. But we have a long way to go. Tragically, 41% of transgender people attempt suicide. At great risk to their health, many transgender people avoid all medical care of any kind because their legitimate medical needs have been ignored or they have been treated harshly and unprofessionally.

Religious professionals need to know about transgender people

After a few years of hearing the harrowing experiences of transgender people with clergy of various denominations, I began to use the term “spiritual rape.” That’s a strong descriptive, but I still believe it accurately

expresses the profound damage done by mostly well-meaning but culpably uninformed clergy.

Diane knew in first grade that she was a girl and resisted being placed with the boys. How did the pastor handle this? He told this six-year-old child that thinking evil thoughts of being a girl was a big sin and would go to hell if “he” did not straighten up! How would a six year old know how to “straighten up”? Again as a teenager and as an adult, she reached out for compassion and guidance from priests, only to be given the same damning threat. Predictably, she eventually stopped going to church. Over the decades, she often lamented that she was trans to her core and Catholic to her core, but could never reconcile the two. She continued to long for acceptance from clergy who represented “the Church.” She wanted to feel part of the Body of Christ, but at the same time she kept her distance for fear of being condemned yet again.

In 2003, I was asked to do a breakout session on transgender ministry at the national conference of a Catholic LGBT organization. As I always did when I was invited to speak about transgender ministry, I asked if transgender people could be with me. They are the experts of their own lives after all. Diane and Melanie, both Catholic, agreed to present with me. By this time, I had known both of them several years. Both had struggled for years trying to find a way to reconcile being transgender and Catholic without trying to deny either dimension of who they were and could not change. Both were married and loved their wives deeply and adored their children. Both had achieved the American dream of wealth and success. Both had lost it all to live in the integrity of their true selves.

Because our flight was very early, they spent the previous night at my home. Diane lived in Alabama, and Melanie flew to New Orleans from Pennsylvania. One of my sister friends was to pick us up at 4:00 a.m. and take us to the airport. At 3:00, we were up and getting ourselves ready to leave. About 3:30, I realized Diane wasn’t around. I went from room to room and finally found her curled up in a corner of my chapel sitting in the dark.

She was in the midst of a full-blown panic attack and kept saying, “I can’t go to that conference. I just can’t! There will be priests there and they will reject me! They hate me!” I held her gently and said, “Diane, I would never, ever take you where you are not safe. It will be all right, I

promise.” But she kept saying, “I can just stay here! Please, just let me stay here!” I was beginning to panic because she clearly could not come with us nor could she remain in the house alone. We had to leave for the airport in less than half an hour. I frantically called another trans friend of ours asking her to come immediately and take Diane with her. We barely had enough time to get our own things together and help Diane get dressed and ready to leave.

Though still rattled after a few hours in the air, Melanie and I were as ready as we could be to help those at the conference open their minds and hearts to transgender people. There were about thirty people who attended our two repeat sessions. To make conversation easier, we arranged the chairs in a circle. I began the session telling them a bit about myself and how I got into transgender ministry. Then, I went over some basic terms that would facilitate our conversation. Then, Melanie did an excellent job telling her own story with relevant information interspersed. I ended the session by talking about the position of the Catholic Church and offering suggestions on how to minister pastorally and spiritually among this community.

There were indeed many priests at the conference, along with many others wanting to be the caring presence of Christ to this marginal community in our church. In 2003, not many people had much experience with transgender folks, but everyone we engaged with over the weekend was welcoming and interested in talking with Melanie. Our two sessions went well, and everyone was very attentive and had wonderful questions. But at one of the sessions, a most amazing thing happened. As we were nearing the end of our session, one of the priests came forward and knelt in front of Melanie and asked her to bless him. I could see that she was taken aback. She sat silently for a moment, then with her hands on his head, she prayed for him. What a powerful gift of God! What a grace it was for Melanie, the priest, and all of us present. I couldn’t help but think of Diane. If only she could have been part of this. It would have been so healing for her.

The integrity of transgender lives

So many transgender people struggle for years trying to reconcile being transgender and Christian, or Jewish, or Muslim, or any other religious tradition. We believe we are made to be in relationship with God, to live

in communion with God. We have all been taught and know from our own experience that we cannot be in an authentic relationship with someone if we are not honest with ourselves and the other. The same applies to God. We are taught that when we pray we must go to God as we are, not trying to be someone we are not. We cannot be in relationship with God pretending to be who we are told we should be. For twenty years, I have witnessed the profound grace that the freer transgender people become in claiming their own truth as a child of God who happens to be transgender, the more they can love God and allow God to love them.

How do I know their relationship with God is real and not pretense? This is what I have witnessed:

I experience in them a genuine and faithful desire to be who God wants them to be.

I've watched people gradually come alive as they allow the Self inside to come forth and blossom. And when that happens, I experience the gifts of the Spirit in them: peace, joy, compassion, forgiveness, deeper love of God, others, and themselves. Their own unique God-given creativity is released in very concrete and specific ways.

I've seen incredible moral courage among them to do the hard work of self-knowledge that leads to profoundly significant and risky life-changing decisions in order to live with integrity.

I have seen them go from fear to courage, self-doubt to self-confidence.

I would stand before God this moment in the firm conviction that transgender people *are* who they say they are. What can be more sacred than to be faithful to the truth of who they know themselves to be in God. They are who God made them.

You see, that's why I have such a passion to tell people about them.