

* Catholic Approach to Issues of Sex, Gender Roles, and Gender Identity

January 12, 2020

I read an article in the most recent issue of the *Atlantic* by Peggy Orenstein titled “The Miseducation of the American Boy.” Deliberately provocative—as *Atlantic* articles are designed to be—and based only on anecdotal accounts from interviews with about 100 young men, of various ethnicities but all college-bound, I think there is enough insights in it to create grounds for a discussion with our sons, nephews, and grandsons. As awkward as such conversations can be, the very act of talking seriously about the issues raised with a father, grandfather, mentor, or coach is the best way to ensure that young men do not equate manhood with a very narrow understanding of masculinity. I would encourage people to read the article and discuss it.

The premise of the article is that, by and large, American boys and young men are trained from an early age to restrict sharing their full range of emotions, to “*suck it up*” if faced with negative emotions and situations, and by and large “*don’t cry or be a wimp*.” They are often harped on and even yelled at to “*don’t do*” many negative behaviors but not much time is spent on giving them positive “*to do’s*” and talking through positive strategies. The result, the author suggests, is a culture of guys having to prove their manhood but without enough options or support on how to do that positively. This turns into a culture of put-downs, fear of being laughed at as weak (she calls it the “bro culture”), a narrow understanding of what it means to be a man, and proving oneself via risky behaviors (drugs, alcohol, sex, aggression and more). Such groups of young men, she says, “*even as they preach honor, pride, and integrity, they tend to condition young men to treat anyone who is not ‘on the team’ as the enemy...Loyalty is paramount, and masculinity is habitually established through misogynist language and homophobia.*”

Again, the author is using anecdotal evidence, not statistically backed data, and so her conclusions are more suggestive than necessarily descriptive or determinative. But I found myself reading it in light of the recent incidents at some of our local Catholic boys’ high schools—bomb threat hoax at one, physical hazing of football players at another, intentional and vicious fighting at a third, a suicide attempt of boy at a fourth—all within the past couple of months. We live in a global world where there is a resurgence of lack of empathy for and even violent language (and sometimes actions) toward those who are “not like us.” And this week we are in what seems an escalating cycle of violence in the Middle East, based on which leader will blink first. Loyalty is demanded by both sides. Put down language is used by both sides. Behaviors that will potentially risk the lives of tens of thousands are threatened as necessary and good actions. So maybe it is not just the miseducation of the American boy but of boys and young men throughout the world.

At the same time, I am also aware there is something amiss when we always negatively evaluate “typical” boy behaviors—getting into scuffs, fascination with pretending to shoot things, turning play times into “them vs. us” (“Cowboys and Indians” in my day which captured both the reality of boy behavior and the lack of awareness of marginalizing Native Americans), pushing boundaries. Another provocative read would be the Jordon Peterson book *12 Rules for Life*. He is a psychologist and social commentator who has gained some notoriety for pushing back against “political correctness” on campuses and in the media. His “Rule 11” applies here: “*Do not bother children when they are skateboarding.*” His argument is that we would not want to be in a world where risky behavior is done away with, boundaries are not pushed. It would be a sad world if the norm for decision-making were to allow only what everyone can do, in order to avoid creating what he calls “hierarchies of success.”

Children who take some risks can become competent adults who do not back down from the effort it takes to be successful in other endeavors, including challenges that will make for a better world for both men and women. He also points to the flaws he sees in many university level programs of study, when they embrace an approach that suggests there is no core understanding of human life and culture, as though everything can be re-interpreted as one sees fit and all interpretations have a similar claim to the truth. I agree with much of Peterson's critique. Unfortunately, from my way of thinking, Peterson's ideas have very often been used by narrow-minded groups who are afraid of a world where Western, white, male privilege is no longer in the driver's seat, almost confirming that there is a type of "toxic masculinity" that is unable to control itself. This in turns feeds the desire of those who try to minimize the difference between the sexes, seeing all behavior as just human behavior in general, and not emphasizing masculinity or femininity.

The reason I bring up the above is not to become a social or political commentator, but to raise a theological issue, which is my area of expertise. Is there a way, then, of being a man or woman, of living out one's humanity as a male human being or female human being, that is in tune with God's plan for creation of humanity, which nevertheless allows for a difference between the sexes? What is an approach to issues of sex, gender roles, and gender identity that is compatible with a Catholic theological understanding? Do we have anything to say persuasively as a Church, when it comes to issues of sex and gender?

In the past, it was not even a question. "Of course, we do" would have been the response of nearly everyone. Men are to be men and live out their humanity be embracing male virtues. Women are to be women and are to be encouraged to embody all the female virtues. And when lived properly the two beautifully complement each other. That is how God intends it. Today the answer would not be as certain or as universal. We are very aware of how women were expected to be subordinate to men and denied access to certain professions, political positions and more. Complementarity, in other words, seemed to work best when there was a hierarchy between men and women, with women expected to serve the needs of the husband (boss, leader, etc.), because loving, compassionate service was said to be especially suited to women.

Now, with women embracing and doing well in all walks of life, including those traditionally reserved for men, it is not so easy to say what it is "especially suited" to women or to men. We are aware of how human attributes, even if seen as mostly feminine or masculine, are lived in concrete human lives on a spectrum, so that there is no human virtue that is exclusively the domain of one sex and not the other. We are aware that supporting a rigid distinction between masculine and feminine also included a view of God as male—something even the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us is a false view (#239. "We ought therefore to recall that God transcends the human distinction between the sexes. He is neither man nor woman"). I think there a wisdom that the Church can share on these issues of sex and gender that challenges all sides to be more careful in their thinking, language and actions, More next time.

Commented [BFD1]:

January 19, 2020

Last week I began this series of articles suggesting that the Catholic Church has a wisdom to share on the topics of sex and gender, which challenges all sides of the cultural debate on these issues. We are in a world that has moved from seeing everything in a neatly differentiated binary way (male/female, masculine/feminine, heterosexual/homosexual, etc.), based on an understanding that there is a clear

and definitive natural order to everything, to a world where some would suggest that there is no such thing as an objective natural order and all such distinctions are invented by humanity and are used to marginalize and oppress people. On all such issues, the core of our Catholic tradition has taken what might be called a “critical realist” approach to the world as opposed to a “naïve realist” approach. Naïve realist: what you see is objectively true as is. Critical realist: what you see can be limited or even distorted in any number of ways, but through careful methods of observation and interpretation you can make true judgments about what you see. This approach leads the Church to reject the notion that there is no such thing as a natural order and to oppose the idea that all distinctions are mere inventions and have no objective basis in reality. At the same time, the Church’s critical realism leads it to a willingness to develop its teaching, as the human community comes to more nuanced understandings of what the objective reality is. A prime example is the theory of evolution. Naïve Christian realist: God created humanity directly as the Bible says and evolutionary theory is false. Critical Christian realist: The Bible is to be read for its theological insights and not as a historical or scientific textbook. God created humanity in and through the process of evolutionary development and the emergence of the human species. Evolutionary theory that rejects the possibility of the distinctiveness of the human soul is false.

The Church’s critical realism means that on issues of vital concern to humanity, where human knowledge is unsettled or undergoing significant development, the Church will maintain its long established way of expressing its teaching, but will begin to incorporate some of the new realities, until it finds a way to present its teaching, which shows openness to the new but continuity with something core to the Tradition. For example, the teaching condemning slavery. The Church always condemned unjust treatment of slaves but for a long time accepted the morality of owning slaves, as long as masters treated them justly. Now it condemns all slavery. The continuity at the core of the Tradition? The concern for the intrinsic dignity of the human person. The change? A recognition that slavery by its very nature is incompatible with protecting that dignity. There can be more humane or less humane treatment of slaves, but there cannot be any just treatment, short of breaking the bond of slavery. A similar process can be seen in the Church’s coming to a new understanding of usury, of religious liberty, of organ donation, capital punishment, and more. The difficulty is that, when the Church is in the midst of struggling to find the right language to express the deepest core of the Tradition understood in light of changing events, the Church can sound either so antiquated as to be unbelievable or so new that it looks as though the core of the Tradition is changing. This is the situation the Church currently seems to be in with issues of sexuality, marriage and gender. Do not accept the civil recognition of same-sex marriages? How out of touch the Church is! Accept the civil recognition of same-sex marriages? If the Church can change on that issue, then is anything unchangeable?! You can apply that dilemma to many other current issues as well (birth control, in vitro fertilization, end of life treatments, sex reassignment surgery, and more).

Even though the Church’s wisdom in this area of sex and gender will exhibit that struggle, and needs to be interpreted in light of it, it does not mean the Church is without guidance. The Church’s wisdom is rooted in a theological understanding of the human person, the requirement of the common good, the practice of solidarity, the preferential option for the poor and marginal when dealing with access to basic goods, and the principle of subsidiarity which enables the fullest participation of those affected by any decisions made. These are the core principles of Catholic Social Teaching. In other words, the Church’s wisdom is rooted in its social doctrine. The articulation of these core principles has developed over the past 130 years. I have put a link on the stregis.org website for the Vatican’s *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2005), which lays out these principles in detail. They are applicable not just to these contentious issues but to any issue that has social, political, cultural or economic impact. They do not necessarily give us an absolute answer for all issues, but they do offer a valuable and

positive way for thinking through many moral issues. I will try to unpack the meaning of each of these principles of Catholic Social Teaching and suggest how they can give a wisdom toward dealing with issues of sex, gender roles, and gender identity. More next time.

January 26, 2020

The Catholic Church's approach to issues of sex and gender has been rooted in what is sometimes called a "theology of complementarity." God has created man and woman in his own image and both share equally in the dignity of being in that image. But God created male and female to be complements to each other, not identical. There are critical differences between men and women, even if we struggle to articulate how such differences are best embodied in society. We see these differences clearly in the human anatomy, but it is also true of how a person lives out his masculinity or her femininity. Men and women, as outlined by this traditional understanding, are not identical but complementary to each other. When lived out in this fashion, the union of male and female becomes the fullest expression of the human community in the image and likeness of God. This approach was expressed by Pope John Paul II, for example, in his Apostolic Letter "On the Dignity of Women" (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, 1988). He roots the dignity of women in those human resources that are particular to women: *The personal resources of femininity are certainly no less than the resources of masculinity: they are merely different. Hence a woman, as well as a man, must understand her "fulfilment" as a person, her dignity and vocation, on the basis of these resources, according to the richness of the femininity which she received on the day of creation and which she inherits as an expression of the "image and likeness of God" that is specifically hers. (#11)*. Because it is a woman's body that is receptive to bearing children, the theology of complementarity places a high value on the vocation and dignity of motherhood and the nurturing and raising of children. And it places a high value on the vocation and dignity of virginity, as a commitment to give up those acts and relationships which lead to motherhood. The reality of biological maleness or femaleness has social-cultural consequences that reflect, in this view, God's plan for humanity.

Traditionally this led to viewing the women's place to be within the home, or, alternatively, in a religious community or convent. This approach has a difficult time extolling the intrinsic dignity and value of women who choose to be single or who choose not to be mothers or have no desire to stay at home and raise children. This approach has almost no way to positively encourage women to become involved in government and business leadership, military, and other traditionally male professions. As a result, as the world has opened such roles to women in a wide-ranging way, the Church's teaching can appear quaint, out-of-touch, and of little value. The Church's teaching recognizes the changed situation but has not yet settled on how to properly evaluate it theologically. For example, in that same letter Pope John Paul II states early on that *"The dignity of every human being and the vocation corresponding to that dignity find their definitive measure in union with God." (#5)*. This is a recognition that the mystery of how God's presence, God's grace, works in specific persons is not fully definable. The main criterion for evaluating things like gender roles and identity is how well people are being led into communion with God, not how well they are living the cultural norm of masculinity or femininity. Or, Pope Francis in his 2015 Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, #286: *"Nor can we ignore the fact that the configuration of our own mode of being, whether as male or female, is not simply the result of biological or genetic factors, but of multiple elements having to do with temperament, family history, culture, experience, education, the influence of friends, family members and respected persons, as well as other formative situations. It is true that we cannot separate the masculine and the feminine from God's work of creation, which is prior to all our decisions and experiences, and where biological elements exist which*

are impossible to ignore. But it is also true that masculinity and femininity are not rigid categories.” If you read what Pope Francis has said or written, it is clear that he still champions a complementarity approach to these issues, but also recognizes that not every situation perfectly fits that approach.

As mentioned last week, in such a situation of flux we should not expect the Church to quickly adjust its traditional language on these issues. There is a wisdom there that the Church will hold onto, even if it is not popular with the culture. At the same time the Church will look for ways to name the core wisdom of the Tradition that embraces new insights into the reality of the world, and over time, the teaching may show significant development. If a way forward can be found that better embraces the fullest understanding of the issues involved and is able to show how that new understanding is, at its core, continuous with the Tradition, then development can happen. Over the next few weeks I want to speculate on ways that development might take place on these issues of sex, gender identity and gender roles. At the heart of such speculation is a practical, pastoral reality. Many families struggle with these issues. It does no good to simply exclude or marginalize people who do not fit our current way of understanding. At the same time, we never need to be afraid to lay out the Church’s teaching as best we can. I believe Jesus wants parishes to be communities of welcome for all who are on the journey of discipleship and that includes accompanying people who do not fit neatly within that teaching. Taking what I called a “critical realist” approach and tying these issues to Catholic Social Teaching is one way to think through what is core to our Tradition and offer insights into what teaching might need to be developed. What I say is my own, so take it or leave it as that, but I hope it encourages us as a parish to accompany any and all who are trying to do the best they can to live their lives open to God. If it raises some questions and causes some constructive thinking about these issues, that would be a bonus. More next week.

February 2, 2020

Catholic Social Teaching is rooted in **the foundational principle of protecting and promoting the intrinsic, inviolable, and inalienable dignity of every human person**, from the first moment of conception to one’s natural end. That dignity is intrinsic to each human person. It is not earned or merited. It is not a consensus of society or defined by society or given to a person by society. It is intrinsic to each and every human being from the very first moment of life. At various times there have been and will be eugenics movements which want to define who is worthy of society’s resources—a certain IQ level, a particular racial make-up, a bearer of healthy genetic traits, a specific nationality, a specifically chosen embryo and so on. The Church’s core Tradition will reject such definitions because human dignity is an intrinsic value, not something bestowed by others. That dignity is also inviolable. A person cannot violate another person’s human dignity because they lose cognitive functions, commit a crime, become incapacitated, become a refugee, become impoverished, identify as transgender or any other reason. There is no justification for violating that dignity. And, thirdly, human dignity is inalienable. A person does not lose it, no matter who they are or what they do.

This foundational principal of human dignity intersects with a second core principal, **the principal of the common good**. The common good is not the greater good or the greatest good for the greatest number. It is the common good of every human person in a particular community. The key to promoting and protecting the common good is recognizing what level of access to a community’s “goods” is necessary to protect the dignity every person in that community. The principle of the common good names as unjust any community that does not provide a minimum level of access to those basic goods which guarantee human dignity. For example, education is a basic good necessary for

human dignity. What level of access to education is necessary in today's world to protect that dignity? In times past it was a basic level of literacy, then a level of education equivalent to middle school, then high school. Now, it seems like some college or post-high school training is the level needed to truly engage in economic and social goods of society. Or, health care. Access to which health care goods is necessary for every person's human dignity? Food, shelter, clothing, and so forth?

This principle does not claim that everyone has the same access and level of care. It is not a socialist principle. It is a moral principle. There can be large discrepancies in wealth, education, ability to feed, clothe and shelter, as long as no one is left below a basic minimum. And the basic minimum is guarded by what protects human dignity. This principle also does not state how such necessary access to goods is to be achieved, only that a community is morally deficient, if it fails to provide such access. In terms of education it can include public and private and home school options. For health it can include single payer or multiple payer insurance plans. For food, shelter and so on, it might be handled through unemployment and disability policies, minimum wage laws, guaranteed income laws, food stamps and other benefit programs. Theoretically, it could even be handled by charitable outreaches, although in practice these never have been enough to safeguard a basic level of care for all. The mix of policies is up to a particular nation or state or community. But the principle of the common good makes it clear that we all have a moral obligation, as a matter of basic justice, to create communities where the least among us have access to a minimum level of goods, sufficient to maintain human dignity.

The other principles that the Church's *Compendium of Catholic Social Doctrine* highlights all try to flesh out how that principle of the common good combined with the foundational principle of human dignity can be put into practice. The **principle of the preferential option for the poor and marginal** is grounded in the teaching that **all goods of society**, even if privately owned, **have a social claim or debt**. What is "mine" or "ours," over and above what we need for our welfare and dignity, is to be judged by how we treat the poorest and most marginal among us. The **principle of subsidiarity** is designed to **maximize the participation of all who are affected** by particular policies, so that there is a way for everyone to have a voice in what happens. Subsidiarity focuses on letting decisions be in the hands of those who can best guarantee human dignity and the common good. For basic education that means in the hands of parents and the local community. For health care it might need to be at the state or even national level. For access to food and water or for protection from terrorism and war, it might include the international level. Finally, the **principle of solidarity** recognizes there are divisions in all communities and that the only way to achieve the common good is to create mechanisms and policies that lessen those divisions and promote greater consensus.

These principles of Catholic Social Teaching have become part of the core doctrine of our Church and provide a framework for asking questions about and thinking through issues of sex and gender. For example, what about a community (such as a school or parish), which has members who identify as transgender? Any ostracizing or belittling or marginalizing is a violation of human dignity. As a Catholic community we should at St. Regis—and I hope we would—strongly protect that dignity. But what about more specific and complex issues? There is great debate over access to public restrooms. What type of access and who decides? The principles above offer some wisdom. Sufficient access needs to be provided for everyone without regard to their gender identity (principles of the common good, preferential option for the marginal), even if it requires some expenditure of resources. If that is done, then access to any restroom by personal choice is not a requirement of social justice according to these principles. The common good can be protected and a policy created by the community if necessary (principle of subsidiarity), which restricts some bathrooms to being unisex for those who are anatomically male or female. In developing that policy, dialogue with all parties concerned should occur

(participation) in such a way that all participants responsibly interact with people who do not agree with them (solidarity). If nothing else, Catholic Social Teaching forces us to be very attentive to the needs of more than just ourselves. More next time.

February 9, 2020

Last week I laid out the major principles of Catholic Social Teaching and applied them to one specific issue—access to public restrooms. It is not my intent to go through every issue relate to sex and gender, but to encourage people to approach such issues with those principles in mind and to be open to exploring the Church’s wisdom, even if it struggles to articulate it under changing social and cultural circumstances. The interplay of these moral principles will call into question any actions or policies or language that marginalize people or violate their human dignity; that demand young or old deny their sense of who they are at the core of their being; or that steer people into marital unions that cannot be mutually lived. At the same time these moral principles will critique actions, policies and laws that equate individual personal freedom on all matters as the only way to protect that dignity; that shift all decision making away from parents to a young child or teen in the midst of their growth in self-understanding; or that minimize the importance to the common good of helping young men and women create a stable gender identity as a male or female.

A ‘critical realist’ approach (see previous article) also offers some insights into how to evaluate the data on these issues. We now know, for example, that in nature all things fall within probability curves. Even the position of fundamental particles that make up reality can be described only via the language of probability. As a Church we have to learn to not tie “natural” into “the one and only way,” as though it is automatically against nature if one finds oneself in the areas of lesser probability. At the same time, these nature-based probability curves do have clear points of confluence which cannot simply be glossed over or dismissed as human-made and therefore able to re-made in any way possible. A critical realist approach does not end in relativism but in a more nuanced understanding of what it means to call something true and is willing to develop and deepen its understanding as we learn more about a given reality.

Thus, a critical realist approach would acknowledge that the view of nature which informed our teaching in the past was too simplistic. This, I would hope, would lead us beyond language such as “intrinsically disordered” or “against nature,” when dealing with concrete human beings who find themselves outside the statistical norm and trying to live in ways that are authentic to who there are at the deepest level. There will always be a percentage of people (even if small) who fall outside the binary distinction of male/female. It is very possible that many such people who struggle to come to terms with this in their life are following their conscience (and I would direct you to another series of articles on conscience at that same website mentioned above). Though their actions might fall outside the Church’s moral norms, we should not conclude that God’s grace is diminished or absent from their lives, because they do not fit within any clear category. However, a critical realist approach also refuses to ignore the reality that an overwhelming percentage of people have clear gender identities as a male or female that correspond to their anatomical sex. To help as many young people achieve that stable identity is not morally bad but a positive contribution to the common good.

These articles started with an insight from a writer who interviewed one hundred college-bound young men and found that too many of them had channeled “being a man” into smack talk or talk that degraded women, and risky personal behavior that was detrimental to their well-being. This led me to explore how we as a Church look at issues of sex, gender identity and gender roles. The Church’s

traditional approach, grounded in a theology of complementarity, is viewed by many as unhelpful or even detrimental to the well-being of many. I have suggested that the Church has not yet found the language to use and so is still in a process of development. What is at the heart of the Church's teaching on these issues, even in its theology of complementarity, is the promotion and protection of the dignity of each human being and the common good of the whole community, which are precisely the moral principles enshrined in Catholic Social Teaching. Tied to what I have termed a 'critical realist' understanding of nature and the world in which we live, the Church's teaching, I hope, will find a language which helps pastors and parishes accompany persons who are struggling with these issues and support people who are doing their best to raise strong and stable young men and women. Some concluding remarks next time.

Fr. Buersmeyer