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THE REACTION

Ireland: Catholic school stops state transgenderism

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Transgenderism and gender dysphoria are controversial subjects open to a great deal of debate in the western world. Though the Church's position is clear, secular society is confused and conflicted. Should they it treated with "affirmative care", involving

hormone blockers, transition surgery and so forth? Or is it a psychological illness like bulimia or anorexia, requiring therapy and gentle care?

This debate is coming to a head in Ireland. Already, questions have been raised about sending Irish people to the controversial Tavistock clinic in England, now embroiled in lawsuits by detransitioners highly critical of the rigour of the "affirmative care" provided to vulnerable boys and girls.

More recently, a statement by a Catholic schools' body has highlighted the divisions and tensions at play in Irish society on the 'transgender issue'. It was a brave move and a rare intervention by a Church body into a contentious debate, providing another opportunity for the Church's critics and enemies to launch another attack. But the statement also provoked a rare thoughtful response in which more than a few people wondered – could the Catholic schools' body be right on this?

Some months back, an Irish politician was quoted as saying he wanted children as young as five to be taught "what it means to be transgender". Children's Minister Roderick O'Gorman, who has long been a pro-LGBTQ+ advocate, was speaking to *The Irish Independent* newspaper when he made the statement. In response, the Catholic Primary Schools Management Association (CPSMA) – which represents 89% of Irish primary schools, attended by children from aged from 5-12-years-old – sent a carefully phrased letter arguing that students should not be taught what it means to be transgender.

The CPSMA did not appeal directly to Catholic teaching in its letter to Minister O'Gorman, but to the lack of "scientific nor social consensus" on "what it means to be transgender". It would be "counterproductive, generating unnecessary divisions in school communities where none now exist," the group warned, adding that "more seriously, it might add to a growing psychological contagion amongst young and vulnerable children," citing scientific studies from England as proof.

CPSMA general secretary Seamus Mulconry said that the association has worked with a significant number of schools "to ensure children who are gender questioning are treated with respect, consideration and support as they navigate these issues." Mr Mulconry added: "It is not, in general, a major issue or source of controversy in our schools. However, CPSMA believe that it is neither prudent, nor age-appropriate, to attempt to teach primary school children about 'what it means to be transgender'."

As Mr Mulconry later clarified, the Catholic group did not oppose teaching about the

reality of gender dysphoria, or respect for those going through what can be a very distressing experience. What the body – and the schools, teachers and parents it represents – opposed was teaching "what it means to be transgender".

In designing the statement in this way, the CPSMA maintained the Catholic position on the transgender issue; fighting the gender ideology of transgenderism, while maintaining the pastoral priority of treating respectfully the small number of people going through what can be a distressing experience, gender dysphoria. It was a subtle letter, not appealing to the Church's position overtly. Instead, it highlighted the fact that a government minister was proposing to teach something on which secular society itself is in two minds about.

Initially, the letter was taken as another opportunity to mock or attack the Church. In Ireland, any mention of the Church raises the hackles of politicians, activists and the media establishment. They would like nothing better than to kick the Church out of education and seize on every opportunity to batter it into submission. Politicians, activists and media commentators mockingly compared the statement on lack of scientific consensus to a variety of Church teachings, notably transubstantiation. Others simply attacked the statement as "bigoted" and "prejudiced" against trans rights. Ireland's most senior political figures, including the Taoiseach (Ireland's prime minister) and president (who holds a figurehead roll), weighed in on the debate. Schools should teach "the full meaning" of sexuality and acknowledged the existence of trans people and their rights, they said. It seemed that the 'transgender issue' would be another such stick to beat the Church with.

However, the CPSMA's letter did elicit thoughtful commentary from more typically critical quarters, such as *The Irish Times* and *The Sunday Independent*. It also reminded the Irish public that parents themselves are uncomfortable with the current trajectory towards unquestioning acceptance. There is a degree of unease around the transgender question and the subtle phrasing of the Catholic body's statement established some grounds for agreement. It's not the question of the existence of people experiencing gender dysphoria – the question hangs on the "meaning" of their experience.

Does their experience mean that gender norms are "oppressive"; or have the types of masculinity and femininity modelled for them in the likes of pornography, film, TV, etc. actually harmed them? Is gender experience "on a spectrum", as a draft curriculum for Irish students aged 12-15 proposed; or is it binary, open to growth through "the tension of differences", as Pope Francis puts it?

The Church is quite clear that transgenderism – the ideology – is a scourge, with Pope Francis describing gender ideology as "one of the most dangerous ideological colonizations" because "it blurs differences and the value of men and women". However, while the Church strongly pushes back against the ideology, it respects the inherent dignity of each person experiencing the psychological condition of gender dysphoria.

For once a Church-run body in Ireland stood its ground for the Church's position. And while it met the usual mocking response, it also opened the doors for proper debate. In a society so opposed to the Catholics, and where the Church has effectively lost its voice on contentious issues, it showed the value of fighting for our position. The Church can't use the opposition of society as an excuse to remain silent on important issues such as this.

**** The Irish Catholic***