

[Opinion](#)

[Culture](#)

[Guest Voices](#)

(Dreamstime/Iurii Golub)



by Jessica Gerhardt

[View Author Profile](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

September 9, 2022

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

My partner and I first met in April 2020, early in the pandemic, via Instagram of all places. We're both musicians, and we discovered a number of other things we had in common, including spirituality and faith. We felt drawn to contemplative Christian practices and the writings of the mystics. We cared about social justice, were feminist, and felt driven to grow in being anti-racist and supportive of our LGBTQ+ friends. We had come from families of divorce and had been in unhealthy previous relationships. We'd been single for several years and done a lot of inner work to be more in touch with our respective needs and boundaries, and to grow in personal accountability.

In a conversation about nine months into our relationship, I was wrestling with my theological and philosophical ideas about transgender people, questions that I assumed I was asking a fellow cisgender person. My partner became upset and shared that they had personally experienced gender dysphoria.

When they admitted this out loud, it began a new chapter in their life. As my partner researched others' experiences of gender dysphoria, and found stories of others for whom neither "woman" nor "man" felt like their identity, the term "nonbinary" felt like home. It was a definite curveball, as until that moment, I thought I had been in a straight relationship with a man.

Initially, I did my best to be supportive because I loved my partner, and I wanted to be a good ally. But I also struggled with fears and doubts. Even though I sensed consolation and invitation from the Holy Spirit with my partner, I experienced self-doubt in my discernment and I questioned whether God would be OK with me being in a relationship with a nonbinary partner.

I found a therapist to talk to, providing me with a safe space to process some of my own feelings. I was afraid that if my partner was just now discovering this that it might mean I hadn't really known them until now. I worried that they might become less attracted to me or that if they transitioned, I might become less attracted to them. This change also triggered some old abandonment wounds.

(Unsplash/Katie Rainbow)

My therapist told me those feelings, along with my grief, were understandable and normal. She connected me with [Empowered Partners](#), a community of partners of transgender and nonbinary people. In this online course, I learned about transgender and nonbinary experiences and relationships led by a licensed clinical social worker who was trained in an affirmative model of care. It was a safe space to ask questions, grieve, celebrate, explore and feel less alone.

While the course helped, I still wrestled with how to reconcile my newly-revealed-to-be-queer relationship with my Catholic identity, as well as my own sexual identity. I knew many Catholics were not affirming of queerness, let alone transgender and nonbinary people, denying their senses of themselves and pathologizing their experiences.

[Pope Francis](#) said that as far as he understands "gender ideology," it is "dangerous" due to being "abstract with respect to the concrete life of a person." He expanded on these concerns in [Amoris Laetitia](#).

And while mainstream Catholicism is generally not considered feminist, I was disappointed when I saw that [FemCatholic](#), a Catholic feminist blog and community, had recently promoted a webinar with Abigail Favale titled "What Does It Mean to Be a Woman," and made her recently released [book](#), *The Genesis of Gender: A Christian Theory*, its [July book club choice](#). Favale's definition of woman as having a body "organized around the potential to gestate new life" or a body that produces ova, explicitly excludes transwomen and many intersex women. She grounds much of her argument in a particular reading of the book of Genesis.

Yet in Genesis, according to [some Jewish interpretations](#), Adam was seen as nonbinary or intersex. The line "God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" ([Genesis 1:27](#)) is understood by some to mean that Adam (from the Hebrew *Adamah* meaning "of the earth") was both male and female. And while some translate the Hebrew word *tsela* in [Genesis 2:21-22](#) as "rib," [others see the word meaning "side,"](#) and understand that Eve was created by taking one side of Adam.

Without faith in God's abundance, a dualistic/all-or-nothing mindset leads the institutional church to cling to gender essentialism.

[Tweet this](#)

Favale also argues that if gender isn't grounded in the body, then gender identities are based on stereotypes, thus expressing a concern that transwomen are basing their identities on stereotypes of cisgender women. But don't all cisgender women observe and learn to express their gender based, at least in part, on other women's behaviors that may or may not uphold certain gender stereotypes? Is that really anyone's place to police?

It's concerning to me that Favale's ideas about transgender people were championed by FemCatholic, an influential publication for many Catholics looking for a place where faith and feminism intersect.

[Originating](#) in the late 2000s, the term "TERFs" (Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists), began as a helpful acronym for distinguishing a particular branch of feminist thinking [dating back to the 1970s](#). Over the years, it has become an emotionally charged insult, in response to the way TERF-ism harms and marginalizes

transgender people, especially as mainstream feminism has become more LGBTQ+ inclusive.

While the feminism being upheld by people like Favale and organizations like FemCatholic is seemingly trans-exclusionary, I don't know how helpful throwing the term "TERF" around is, for it may serve to deepen division, rather than to "[call in](#)," welcome dialogue and implore openness to consider alternative perspectives and understandings.

I believe transphobic and trans-exclusionary thinking stems from fear that one's own gender identity is under attack. Many trans-exclusionary feminists feel threatened by transwomen and trans-inclusive feminism or "transfeminism" and believe that transgender people somehow undermine the movement for women's liberation and equality.

My liberation from sex-based oppression as a ciswoman is bound up with transgender liberation.

[Tweet this](#)

In her book [*Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*](#), author and transwoman Susan Stryker unpacks the meaning and development of trans-inclusive feminism:

Intersectional feminism insists that there is no essential "Woman" who is universally oppressed. To understand the oppression of any particular woman or group of women means taking into account all of the things that intersect with their being women ... including having transgender or gender-nonconforming feelings or identities. ... Feminisms inclusive of trans people still fight to dismantle the structures that prop up gender hierarchy as a system of oppression, but they do so while recognizing that oppression can happen because of the consequences of changing gender or contesting gender categories as well as being categorized as a member of the "second sex."

Stryker presents a feminism that is not some women competing for title of "most oppressed" or taking attention away from other forms of discrimination that impact

some women and not others, but rather a collaborative movement of people along different aspects of identity all working together to make the world safer, more accessible and more inclusive. Stryker's presentation of transfeminism helped me recognize that my liberation from sex-based oppression as a ciswoman is bound up with transgender liberation.

I've also come to believe that transphobia may be less about transgender or queer people and more about an overall scarcity mindset and dualistic thinking. Alok Vaid-Menon, a nonbinary author, speaker, poet and comedian addresses these transphobic, dualistic concerns in a [recent Instagram post](#):

There a widespread misconception that moving #beyondthegenderbinary means that we are erasing people's "right to be men and women" or are judging people who are men or women. That's not true! We need a world without gender norms, not without men and women.

And in their book [*Beyond the Gender Binary*](#), Alok presents an image of how an abundance mindset helps to move beyond the either/or:

We want a world where boys can feel, girls can lead, and the rest of us can not only exist but thrive. This is not about erasing men and women but rather acknowledging that man and woman are two of many — stars in a constellation that do not compete but amplify one another's shine.

Alok invites their reader to consider expanding their imagination, to allow for new categories, while still holding space for people to identify with categories that work for them — both/and rather than either/or. Like Stryker, they point out that trans people are not competing with cisgender folks, but rather transgender, nonbinary and cisgender people are all beautifully diverse and complementary; there is an abundance of space for all genders and gender expressions.

Alok challenges us to expand and hold lightly our categories for gender and what roles differently gendered people may play in society. But those with a scarcity mindset believe in a limited supply of roles.

A few years ago, I was talking with a priest friend about [Bishop Robert Barron's review of "The Last Jedi"](#) in which Barron, the bishop of Winona, Minnesota, argues

that the film is "overwhelmed by an aggressively feminist ideology." My friend agreed and raised concerns that if more women keep taking men's roles, then what will be left for men?

Advertisement

I found it incredibly sad that a man who had devoted his life to God and the church would have such a limited imagination for how God's abundance could accommodate having unique vocations for each and every person God creates. And to see Catholic feminists embracing a similar mentality with regards to transwomen taking something from ciswomen is similarly antithetical to the call of our faith.

A scarcity mindset is contrary to a kingdom mindset: one in which every person, exactly as they are, has a seat at the table. Without faith in God's abundance, a dualistic/all-or-nothing mindset leads the institutional church to cling to gender essentialism, and therefore to uphold a male-only priesthood, prohibit same-sex marriage and invalidate transgender identities.

In [his critique of Favale's book](#), writer Chris Damian explores an alternative Catholic framework for how we can think about glorified bodies, outside of one clinging to Aristotelian natural law or gender essentialism:

Part of what the Resurrection of Christ provides is a view of the glorified and perfected body as one which has holes in it. The world of the Garden of Eden would have housed bodies in which their perfection aligned with the particular "natural law" vision. ... But the Fall, Incarnation, Passion of Christ, and Resurrection establish a reality where brokenness can paradoxically present a greater goodness than an Edenic ideal. The particular type of essentialist treatment of human perfection presented by Favale, even if not destroyed by it, is challenged and pushed upon by the reality of the Resurrected Christ and His followers.

Damian presents a Catholic case for trans-affirming care and medical transition, arguing that changing the body to better align with one's interior sense of self is not the "sin of trying to replace the Creator" (*Amoris Laetitia*), but perhaps a way of becoming a more integrated, whole person. Damian goes on to quote [Matthew 5:27-30](#) to further support the idea that Jesus believes it is better to modify your body if it

can help you avoid sin — sins such as self-harm.

Resources

Here is a list of other resources for anyone seeking support and community in navigating these issues:

LGBTQ+ affirming organizations

- [Outreach: An LGBTQ Catholic Resource](#)
- [New Ways Ministries](#) (Catholic)
- [DignityUSA](#) (Catholic)
- [PFLAG](#)

Further reading/listening

- "[Affirming Theology — The Genderqueer Adam](#)" from Robertson Wesley United Church
- "[The Female Aspect of Adam](#)" from Chabad.org
- "[Alok Vaid-Menon: The Urgent Need For Compassion](#)" from "The Man Enough Podcast"
- [Chris Damian writes](#) on Substack
- "[Why Catholics should use preferred gender pronouns and names](#)" from NCR
- "[The Catholic Church must listen to transgender and intersex people](#)" from NCR
- "[Why We Shouldn't Compare Transracial to Transgender Identity](#)" from Boston Review

According to [a 2020 study on suicidality in trans youth](#), bullying, microaggressions, whether one has a sense of belonging at school, emotional neglect from family, and internalizing self-stigma all significantly contribute to a greater likelihood of suicidality. For some transgender people, having surgeries to alter the appearance of their bodies is life-saving.

Furthermore, trans-exclusionary lines of thought, which seek to undermine, exclude and be leery of, and even vilify transwomen and trans people as a whole, as well as their understandings of themselves, have led to disproportionately [higher rates of violence](#) against transgender people.

So when it comes to discussing these issues, sensitivity isn't just about being politically correct or about performative "wokeness," but how Catholic (and non-Catholic) cisgendered people talk about and think about, relate to, and advocate for transgender people is a pro-life issue.

Some Catholics who approach the faith in a dualistic way, with an all-or-nothing line of thinking, may be less open to considering these alternative interpretations or to questioning certain current Catholic teachings. There may be an underlying concern that if one reexamines any of the teachings, then their entire faith might fall apart.

To offset this concern, a lot of theology becomes mental gymnastics to try to get inside the mind of God and understand and justify why certain teachings must be true. But if the teachings are really *catholic*, or universal, then why do they fail to account for so many people's experiences today? If God is mystery, why do we cling to certainty?

Could we make space to examine whether some teachings made sense in a different time and context, but are no longer relevant to us today, without asserting that no teachings are still relevant?

Can we lean into the mystery of the resurrected Christ whose appearance was changed, making him unrecognizable to his closest friends, except by the ways their hearts were set aflame when he spoke to them? Can we be open to listening to what our trans and nonbinary siblings say to us and find Christ there?

Ultimately, we see more examples in Scripture of Christ teaching through experiential knowledge and parables, through encountering, listening and meeting people where they're at rather than theologizing or pontificating, and he is most critical of those who do the latter.

In my experience, listening to my nonbinary partner share their experiences, and trusting their self-knowing and discernment have continued to open my heart to grow in love and drawn me deeper in my relationship with God. Leaning on my faith allows me to support my partner in their continued unfolding, as well as my own.