

# **When someone we know and love announces that they want to become a person of the complementary sex**

## **A response to transgenderism**

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### **The Case of “John”**

It seems to almost be becoming a trend. More and more families today are being confronted with the challenge of how to respond to a family member or even a dear friend who announces that they are so-called ‘transgender.’ This is happening today even in families that may be trying to be faithful to all that they believe is right and good, in accord with traditional morality and the teachings of the Bible as communicated by the Church. At the revelation of such news by one member of the family the other members find themselves suddenly thrown into the very perplexing discernment of how to respond to the person who claims to be ‘transgendered.’ The other family members do not want to approve and enable any behavior or choices that they believe are morally wrong and psycho-spiritually disordered and self-destructive. Yet, at the same time the family members do not want to reject the family member in question, alienate that person, condemn them or judge them. The family wants that person to be happy.

In this essay I intend to offer some guidelines for discernment. This essay does not presume to be an exhaustive treatment of so complex an issue as transgenderism or of the challenging discernment of how others can and should best respond to the person who presents themselves as transgendered. The same guidelines presented here can also be applied to the discernment of other similar issues such as the announcement by a family member that they are so called, “gay” or “homosexual.”

I will use the name, “John” as a fictitious person in order to present a case that is nonetheless real. “John” is a married man with children. He is successful in his career and he has married siblings and parents who are still alive.

### **True Compassion as the operant dynamic and the “H-Zone”**

For anyone seeking the best way to process and respond to situations such as John’s revelation that he “wants to be a woman,” the quest is always for what is the most correct and compassionate response. Compassion, *true* compassion, therefore becomes the operant dynamic in this discernment. True compassion is a function of honesty and this must be applied particularly to the true, full and authentic meaning of words. We live in a time where the meaning of words is often commandeered and manipulated, redefined, used superficially, artificially and to mean whatever we want a word to mean. We often used words to fit an ideology rather than to use words in a way that is absolutely honest to their actual meaning and to the realities to which they point. Words are expressions of very concrete realities. If we change, modify, dilute or confuse the meaning of the word we are changing our understanding of the reality and this becomes an unreality and therefore a dishonesty which will always result in hurt.

So, in my search for true compassion I am inviting you into what I call the “**H-Zone**”—the “**Honesty zone**” which is very simply made up of ‘**H**’ words: **H**onesty brings about **H**oliness which is the only way to really be **H**appy. If we are **H**onest, **H**oly and **H**appy we then get the big ‘**H**’—**H**eaven. Conversely, if we ‘dis-**H**onesty’ we will always in some way, either immediately or in time, end up with some form of **H**urt to ourselves, to others and to society. Enough **H**urting can bring us to the other ‘**H**’ word—**H**ell. This is all admittedly very simple and perhaps a bit gimmicky. But I have found it to be very helpful for many people in their moral discernments as it provides us with one very handy word or standard that can indeed be easily applied to any moral discernment. That one handy word is “*honesty*.” By, “honesty,” I do not simply mean that someone is “telling us the truth.” In the “**H-Zone**” the word “*honesty*” means be to true, consistent or congruent to the absolute reality of things.

### **Being honest about what really works. The order of things and Jesus Christ--the only true Healer and Divine Physician**

An adequate foundation for moral discernment must go well beyond personal opinion, prejudices, sound bites, pseudo-science, personal feelings, popularly held opinions and ideologies. Almighty God has established the entire order of creation. There is a “why” behind everything in the created order and there is a definite way that things work. This is especially true in regard to the human person. All of life, including moral discernment, is about being able to perceive this order and then to live in a way that is honest to that vision.

The human person is made in the “image and likeness of God.” We are made of body, soul and Spirit. We have intellect and will. Furthermore, we function on multiple levels: physical, psychological, emotional, intellectual and spiritual. These levels have been designed by God to work in an ingenious and mysterious integration. Consequently we have legitimate needs as human persons that are specific to all of the levels upon which we as human persons function.

What makes us most like God is in fact another dimension of our human makeup: We are created as gendered, sexual beings. Our sexuality allows us to be an image of the very interior life of the Holy Trinity. It allows us to love as God loves—in a spousal manner. This is precisely why all matters related to human sexuality have such power to them both in their glorious states and in their fallen states.

The key here is ‘integration.’ Our wholeness and happiness (holiness) as human persons grows to the degree that all of the levels upon which we function and the aspects of our makeup—sexuality, body, soul, spirit are congruent, *integrated*, true to their intended design. Achieving this integration is a lifelong process and struggle. The words, “Theosis” or “Divinization” are theological terms that describe this process. Life is a matter of our becoming more and more the truest and most authentic versions of the persons that God created us to be and for whom He has a specific plan.

Regrettably, this original and intrinsic integration that the human person had at the beginning and which was intended by God for all times became “*dis-integrated*” when

sin (Original Sin) entered the picture. The human person became fragmented. The different aspects of our nature and the levels upon which we function often times go in different directions, are dis-connected and disintegrated leaving us with the experience of confusion, pain, discontent. This is especially true of our sexuality. Precisely because our sexuality is the thing that makes us most like God it is the very thing that the Evil One went after the most. Through our own individual disintegration we in turn contribute toward the confusion, pain and discontent of others. Eastern Christian spirituality expresses sin and disintegration in terms of 'sickness.' We are in need of a physician.

Christ is the only one and true Divine Physician. Only when we are 'doing' Christ can there be any hope of real healing, divinization, real compassion and love. This is true even in the secular helping professions. While they may not admit to God or doing Jesus Christ, nonetheless when the secular sciences and secular helping professions are at their best they are in their own way, even unbeknownst to themselves, 'doing' Jesus Christ. As a pastor I see this all the time. It is always amusing to me as a trained counselor to watch the secular sciences and helping professions become excited after stumbling upon some great breakthrough they think they have made when all the while what they are really discovering is Jesus Christ and His form of compassion. They just do not make that connection. But the connection is clear, certainly to me and other faith-based counselors.

The Divine Physician Himself chose a way in which to be present to us for all times—the Church. What the Church has to offer; what the Church *really* says (not what people often claim it says) is the deepest, most healing, most compassionate, solid and effective reservoir out of which to build an adequate, healing and redemptive foundation for discernment in such difficult and sensitive issues as those of John and his family. Although composed of sinners in need of redemption, the Church Herself, what the Church really is, what the Church actually conveys and makes present, is essentially the most complete and comprehensive "delivery system" for the love of Christ and therefore for the only true healing and true compassion.

Yes, there are individuals who are representatives of the Church (priests, religious, lay leaders, etc.) who can and have at times caused great hurt to other members of the Church. But these representatives of the Church are not in and of themselves the great reservoir of truth, healing, compassion and Christ's presence that we are referring to here as "the Church." For those who have been hurt by representatives of the Church it can indeed be a very difficult task for them to make the distinction between the behavior of representatives of the Church and the Church's true, mystical, sacred and healing character.

### **Being Honest to the true meaning of Compassion:**

As we said earlier, "compassion" is the operant dynamic in this entire moral discernment about John's situation and situations like his. "Compassion" means to 'suffer with' someone, to endure and bear with someone. It is a willingness to walk with them every step of the way and share in their struggle but always with the intent of love. *True* love means seeking what is best for the other person regardless of the cost to oneself. Note

the word, “best”—not just “good,” or “good enough,” but what is “best” for them. The “best” for someone is that which enables them to become an ever more integrated person, the best version of their *authentic* self which ultimately leads toward their salvation (Theosis, divinization). The truly loving or compassionate person always asks the question: “What does this person really need me to be for them (for their own divinization) in this moment?” This is not to be confused with what this person *wants* me to be for them in this moment no matter how badly they might want it.

## **False Compassion**

In our day and age, compassion has come to be dishonestly defined as simply granting to someone whatever it is that they really want or feel; whatever they might think or feel will ‘make them happy.’ Just because a person really, really wants something or really, really feels something does not necessarily mean they should have that which they desire.

The reason we often comply with what a person really wants or feels is because we are not really being compassionate but actually self-centered. We desire not so much what is best for the other person but rather our personal preference for a harmonious relationship with them. We want them to continue liking us, not get angry with us, not break communication with us, not call us names, etc. We do not want to endure the ‘messiness,’ the effort, the often unpleasantness of really walking with that person on their journey toward their authentic selves. It is much more convenient for us to simply adopt what so often passes today for compassion—label them and dismiss them with the popular pseudo compassion of our day: “Well that is how they are and that is what they want and who I am to deny them their happiness? Who am I to judge them or know what is best for them?”

Note how deterministic this supposed compassion is: It puts a psycho-spiritual glass ceiling onto a person and that conveniently exonerates us from really having to deal with them. Furthermore, it does not take into consideration the absolute honesty about the person. Instead the glass ceiling approach makes what a person feels, wants or thinks about them self as the standard, the default position. Even much of what passes for ‘counseling’ today is very deterministic in its character. It labels a person and basically just tries to help them cope within the confines of their label. This is very dehumanizing. Too often psychological and psychiatric (and regrettably) even pastoral counseling today operates from this deterministic view. The deterministic approach to a person is not only bad counseling it also strikes against the dignity and potential of that person precisely as a person and therefore it is not compassion. It may be convenient for us, popular, fashionable, ‘politically correct’ or what have you. But it is not compassion.

The diagnosis, labeling and categorizing of the health professions are necessary and helpful in their own way. However, they are limited. No matter what our malady (diagnosis) we always remain “persons” and all that the word “person” implies. We are greater than the sum of our parts, greater than any one category or diagnosis.

“Honesty” tells us that the truth about a person is just that. They are ‘persons’ and by nature a ‘person’ is someone who has limitless potentials and is always in process of their own becoming, their own divinization. This journey can be excruciating at times and the wounds of a person’s life can throw some major roadblocks into their process of divinization. But true compassion never speaks in finalities but is always open to the possibilities of any individual’s transfiguration, redemption, healing, etc.

### **Selective compassion versus true compassion**

There is a common tendency in our culture today to practice what I would call “selective” compassion. We feel for and focus on only one person or dimension of a situation and ignore or even insensitively indict everything and everyone else. It is never the case that only one person experiences hurt in situations such as John’s. Think of the pain of his wife and of their children, or the pain of John’s parents, his married siblings and their families. Think even of the pain of anyone who knows John and the burden of a very awkward and difficult moral discernment that John’s choice has thrust upon them. What is the impact and implication of all of this going to be for our children? This certainly compounds the discernment dilemma for parents.

It is the nature of certain maladies such as clinical depression and sexual disorders to have as part of their character a certain narcissistic dimension to them. The person struggling with these conditions has experienced so much pain and confusion for so long, as John himself testified when he first revealed some of his struggles, that there is a tendency for that individual to only know their own suffering and to be blind or unfeeling toward the suffering of others. As the expression of their own suffering is made palpable to other caring and sensitive family, relatives and friends, there is a vulnerability for these other people to want to concede, enable, or affirm the suffering person in whatever choices they presume will relieve their suffering and “make John happy.”

Another growing erroneous belief in our culture today is that no one should ever have to suffer and if they are suffering the compassionate thing to do is to relieve them of their suffering as soon as possible and by whatever means, even if that choice may ultimately be illusory or self-destructive. (The truth is we just do not want to witness or endure the other person’s suffering.)

The true compassion of Jesus Christ, on the other hand, sees that suffering can be healing and redemptive. It is not meaningless. True compassion seeks what is ultimately best (honest) for that person even though this may take time and involve suffering, even excruciating pain along the way. True compassion does not “put someone out of their misery.” Rather, true compassion dares to walk with the hurting person in their misery toward a greater integration of their personhood no matter how much it takes or how long it takes.

## **The truth about sexual “dis”-integration**

No one asks to be dis-integrated on any level, let alone in their sexuality. The actual “why” behind John’s struggle is not for any family member to say even though they may have their own ideas about it. The actual origins particularly about sexual disorders can often have a certain mystery to them. What is important, however, are the choices a person makes to deal with their situation that they themselves did not ask for or deserve.

The truth about some sexual disorders is that their root is not really “sexual.” The real problem lies deeper in the area of self-image and what happened or did not happen during certain critical developmental stages in a person’s life including what messages the child was given or not given. We add to this certain biological factors that could be influential but they are not deterministic. The real issues that lie deeper simply get *translated* ‘sexually.’ But the truth is they are not really in and of themselves ‘sexual.’

## **Honesty about the word “Accepting” someone**

It is a popular but mistaken notion today to say that we have to “accept” someone for who or what they are. This may sound compassionate. But again, what does this term, “accept someone” really mean? Yes, of course, we can and must accept someone as a ‘person.’ A ‘person’, as Karol Wojtyla—(who later became Saint John Paul II) said in his book, “Love and Responsibility,” the only appropriate and *honest* response to a ‘person’ is love and responsibility. We have a responsibility to love that person by helping them become the most honest version of their most authentic selves. This means accepting them as a person but *precisely because we accept them as a person* we refuse to accept or affirm them in any behavior, choice or attitude that will interfere with their own authentic personal becoming or even be self-destructive to their authentic personhood and in turn cause hurt to others.

## **The lie about being ‘Tolerant’ of others**

‘Tolerance’ is another pseudo virtue that has become popular in our world today. But tolerance is actually not a virtue. It is not even in the Bible. Actually tolerance is an insult. Like determinism, it is dehumanizing. When we ‘tolerate’ it means we are just ‘putting up’ with someone or something, gritting our teeth and trying to bear it. Unlike true compassion we are not ‘walking’ with that person toward a greater honesty about their authentic selves. Compassion is ordered to a direction, movement, destiny—toward a person’s divinization. Compassion requires a self-donative investment on our part. Tolerance, on the other hand is ordered to being static. We give nothing to a person by being “tolerant.” There is no personal, self-donative investment in “tolerance” as there is in real compassion.

## **“Who am I to say what is good for someone else?”**

Compassion is not about our personal judgment and about ‘imposing’ what we personally think is good for someone else. True compassion is about knowing God’s order of things, being honest to that order and helping another person to get their lives into an ever greater congruency with that order for only therein will they find their true happiness.

The order of things is established by God, not by us. We only perceive that order and try to live in the “*H-Zone*,” to live in a way that is honest to that order. This, together with the Scriptures, is actually the basis of everything the Church teaches on moral issues. Morality is simply about whether any particular action is honest to the order of things. Being honest produces good and happiness for all. Being dishonest produces hurt. Since God, the Church and any of us do not want others or ourselves to hurt, we can therefore say what things are morally right (honest to the order of things) and what things are morally wrong (dishonest to the order of things.)

This is also how we come to understand what the Church means by the word, “disorder.” We often find this term, ‘disorder’ to be harsh or offensive but this is because of our constant misunderstanding of the real meaning of words. Something is “dis”-ordered” simply because it is not honest to the actual order of things as God has designed it. Something becomes “dis-ordered” for a myriad of reasons which can often always have a certain mystery about them. This is especially true with ‘dis-ordered’ conditions relative to human sexuality. The word, “disorder” is not a judgment about a person. It is simply being honest about the order of things. The truth is, unless you are the Blessed Virgin Mary, *every* human being is in some way and in varying degrees ‘dis-ordered’ in every area of our existence including our sexuality.

**“But if the person was born that way, they can’t help who they are.  
Who are we to judge and condemn them?”**

For true compassion to happen we have to debunk certain myths no matter how popular or widely held or ‘scientific’ they claim to be. Just as much of counseling today is flawed by being deterministically based, so too is much science today dishonest. Much science today begins from an ideology or agenda and then sets out to prove (manipulate data or conjecture) that the ideology is fact. Just because something is popular or widely held does not mean it is true.

*Real science, honest science, has **not** found any evidence or any gene that points to the fact that someone may be ‘born’ with a psycho-sexual ‘dis-ordered’ condition such as; they have a male body but should have been a female or believe they should have been a female. (I recommend [narth.com](http://narth.com) as a good source here, especially the work of Dr. Jeffery Satinover.)*

If, for instance, someone is born a male, and they grow to become a mature male, a man, then that is the established order of things. Holiness, (divinization) and Happiness will come about for that male to the degree that he lives every aspect of his life in a way that is honest to the established order that he is a male. However, this is actually a precarious journey particularly for males because their journey as men includes a journey away from the sex of their primary caregiver—their mother. The male must go on a journey in which he must ‘dis-identify’ with the sex of his mother and develop a body congruent sexual identity which of course is the same sex as his father.

The precariousness of the journey of sexual identity and development of males, (which is not as precarious for the female) explains why there are more incidences of 'disordered' development in males than in females. The journey is fraught with more risks for the male. No one asks to have a dis-ordered condition. It happens to them and that is precisely why compassion is the key element here. But, compassion must always be a function of truth. Otherwise it is not true compassion.

God is the supreme perfect creator and therefore His creations are always entirely consistent and integrated. A man has a male body and is designed by God to develop on every other level of his being in a way that is consistent with the order of his body. The fact that confusion or dis-integration can occur along the way of this precarious journey does not change this intentionality by God. The person born, for instance, with a male body is designed by God with a destiny to grow into a person that is integrated with his male body in every aspect of his personhood. A person's wholeness, and happiness will lie in the degree that they can grow and develop in a way that is honest and integrated to their body. Making a move that is in some way not integrated (not honest) with the body cannot bring about that ultimate fulfillment for the person no matter how much they think or feel that it might. And as we say in the "**H**-Zone," dishonesty ultimately brings hurt in some way for the person and for others.

### **Feelings and Honesty**

In saying all that we have said thus far, we are not being 'dishonest' about what a person like John really believes or really feels. In fact, we fully acknowledge that they really, really feel and may want to go down a path that is not honest to the order of their body. We do not for a minute deny what they feel or what they want. We do not deny the magnitude of their struggle, confusion and pain. But contrary to a major, major error of our world today, *feelings do not necessarily equate to reality or to what ought to be.*

Our culture erroneously makes a one-to-one connection between feelings and reality. In our culture today if we feel something then we think it must necessarily be so and that we must act upon our feelings. But the truth is that feelings are like the indicators on the dash board of our cars. They indicate or point to something. Feelings point to thought processes and belief systems which are influenced by life experience and messages we picked up during life, especially at certain critical developmental stages in our lives.

Just because we really, really feel something does not mean that is what we should do. How do we 'feel' during a road rage episode? We really, really feel angry and we really, really feel like getting even with "that jerk!" But if we all acted on our 'feelings' of road rage many of us would be in jail or perhaps serving a life sentence! The feelings during road rage point us to certain thought processes—"Hey! I am not to be disrespected on the road like that!! Who does that guy think he is!?" But, another thought process has to overrule our feelings and overrule the rage thoughts in order to prevent us from acting uncharitably, stupidly or violently. This happens all the time in life. But for some reason we think it is different when it comes to matters of human sexuality. When it comes to matters of human sexuality we think it is compassionate to allow (and

‘support’) anyone in doing whatever they ‘feel’ just because they really, really feel it strongly and they really, really believe it is what will ‘make them happy.’

Related to this, we sometimes think that if we do not act on our feelings that we are being dishonest or hypocritical. Once again our understanding of the meaning of words is flawed here because actually the opposite is true. In many cases, such as the road rage example, we are actually being more honest to our true humanness (and Christianity!) by *not* acting on how we feel. We would actually be hypocritical if we *did* act on our feelings, for instance, in the case of road rage.

### **Real compassion never encourages someone in an illusion—There is no such thing as a “sex change.”**

As we mentioned earlier, the human person is made in the image and likeness of God but also as “male and female.” Our sex therefore, is part of our very definition. The fact that through no fault of our own, we can be very wounded and confused in this regard, (even in the case of hermaphrodites and similar conditions) does not change God’s original plan for us in terms of gender.

Our sex is replete through our entire being. It is impossible to “have a sex change.” What passes today as a “sex change” is merely a cosmetic mutilation of a person’s body. Our sex is in our DNA. It is in our bone structure, our brain structure. It is in our very soul. We would have to change our entire being, even our very soul, in order to have an actual “sex change.”

Furthermore, our Christian Faith teaches the final resurrection of our bodies at the Last Judgment. Yes, these same gendered bodies that we had on earth will be reunited with our souls **but** our bodies will be gloriously transfigured and totally integrated and be with God in Heaven forever at the “Wedding Feast of the Lamb.” We will actually be gendered in Heaven for all eternity but in some mysteriously transfigured way.

Therefore, to affirm or enable anyone in their decision toward transgenderism or transexualism is to affirm them in an illusion, in a major disconnect and disintegration of their personhood and this dishonesty can never result in their true holiness and happiness. It is therefore not compassion no matter how much that person may claim they are happy ‘becoming’ or masquerading as the complementary sex. Their real issues still remain unresolved.

### **How then do we actually engage John?**

As I said at the beginning, my thoughts here do not presume to be exhaustive on this topic. I only hope they have been in some way helpful for moral discernment. But based upon the “honesty” principle as the means toward true compassion we would need to be committed to the following three principles in relation to John. For me, the figure of the father in the Gospel story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-33) serves as my model:

1. Family members and friends who know and love John now find themselves in a position where there is an awkward chasm between them and John. The family members cannot blame themselves for feeling awkward and confused. They have to keep in mind it is John who has created that chasm by his current choices. The family and friends of John are like the father in the story of the Prodigal Son in the Bible. A chasm was created between the father and his youngest son by the choice that the son made to go to a 'far off land' away from his father's house. The father did not go out to where his son ended up and say to him, "Well, son if starving and slopping around with the pigs out here is what really makes you happy, then I accept that and I support you. After all, who am I to judge?" Rather, the father simply remained on his side of the chasm where his son's choice had left his father. He did not reject his son as a person nor did the father ever stop loving his son. But neither did the father affirm or support his son even though the son really, really "felt" that his choice to leave his father's house would 'make him happy.' The father knew that the choice his son made was not *honest* to his son's authentic self and heritage. The father knew the son would never find happiness or holiness in a choice that was not honest to the son's authentic self and heritage. So, the father simply waited with hope.
2. Family and friends should always refer to John as nothing other than the person (the man) "John" that God created him to be and to become. Family and friends ought never to call John by a woman's name no matter how much John may insist on it. Family and friends who truly care and who are truly compassionate in the sense that we have described here must categorically reject any presentation of John as a woman or anything other than the person and sex that God made him and called him to be. It is a true sense of compassion that will never affirm John (or anyone) in the illusion that he is a woman or that he was really supposed to be a woman. The truth about John is that he was made by God as a male and therefore called to become the fullness of a man. John seemed to be a good husband and father and he was successful and good at his career. The fact that John may believe or "feel" that he is now correcting some lifelong mistake and fulfilling some lifelong desire does not change the reality of who and how God made him. The Scriptures teach us, "A tree is known by its fruit." There has been a lot of hurt in the wake of John's current choices and it is the nature of John's condition that the hurt of others is not as consequential to him as the salving of his own pain. This is not good fruit and therefore not the right thing to do.
3. Family and friends who are truly caring and loving toward John must remain as the father did in the story of the Prodigal Son—maintain loving vigilance in hopes that John will make the right choices. Family and friends ought to remain available to John and to his family, to walk with them, suffer with them, in any way that they can for however long it takes. Perhaps the only way may be through prayers and remembrances offered privately or at the Eucharistic celebration. That is something of which John and his family must always be assured.

