

Trans in the Eyes of God MSJC LGBT Initiative Podcast and Discussion Guide



What's the "T"?

As the Marianist Social Justice Collaborative's LGBT Initiative grows and reaches more people, folks who are aware of the "LG" and "B" may be curious to broaden their understanding of transgender (or simply trans) identities - the "T". The LGBT Initiative Issue Team has decided to highlight 3 podcast episodes of *Trans in the Eyes of God*, accompanied by two reflections each month. The podcast episodes are available at these links: [Episode 1](#), [Episode 2](#), [Episode 3](#).

We hope you enjoy these three trans-themed offerings and share them with others to help open conversation. Having a common frame of reference can help us think about and discuss trans identity with friends, family, and community members of faith.

These dialogues can also be a beacon of hope for our trans community members, holding space through education in an effort to foster a welcoming Marianist community they can be a part of.

Though trans identity may seem like a new conversation, diving into this series can begin to unlock the perspectives and gifts these identities have been contributing since time immemorial. For some these words may personally resonate, while for others they may simply open your heart to your trans brothers, sisters, and nonbinary siblings.



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'Trans in the Eyes of God' Podcast Episode 1

Please give the above podcast a close listen. Then, review and respond to the reflection questions below.

1. Toni Newman's mother told her, when she came out to her as trans, that "God doesn't make mistakes." Discuss this statement. Do you agree with it? You may also wish to reflect on the effect that it had on Toni.
2. There were two perspectives described in the podcast. One is held by many people in Mississippi, one of our country's most conservative states in relation to transgender issues. That state legislated that gender identity doesn't go beyond the binary biology of male and female. A second view is one held by others in a state such as Colorado, which passed legislation protecting residents not only based on their biological sex, but also their gender identity and gender expression. What are your thoughts about these two views?
3. In the podcast there was brief and provocative mention of pronouns. Have you discussed pronoun use with friends, family, or colleagues? What are some of the challenges around this new etiquette? What are ways we can help trans and cisgender people (whose gender identity matches the sex that they were assigned at birth) come to a better understanding of why pronouns are important?
4. Another question raised in the podcast is how religions are going to exist in the new cultural milieu. This implies the need to choose between maintaining traditional doctrine or being open to dialogue with trans people's understandings. How can we pivot to existing doctrine that can be interpreted as supportive and affirming of trans identity? How do you think Marianists (and other persons of various faith traditions) could respond to the new perspectives which transgender community members are beginning to feel safe sharing?



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'Trans in the Eyes of God' Podcast Episode 1

Guest Reflection on Episode 1 by Courtney Sharp

"Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!" - Psalm 139:23-24. During the interview, Toni Newman said, "Nobody's ready for me" and "I am only accountable to God." Eventually, if we listen closely, we learn that there are people of faith who are truly ready for transgender people. Spiritual serendipity, the work of the Spirit, occurs. In their despair, disenchantment and loneliness, they are not alone. We can see people of religious faith lending their voices and talking about their relationships with transgender persons. Relationships are at the center of the teachings of Christ. The only way we know someone is through deep, genuine relationship. People of faith have to be willing to be vulnerable and take the risk to have a relationship with those who are on the margins. At the same time, transgender persons are called to be open to those who have been called into relationship with them and take the risk of being vulnerable. Many people of faith are conflicted and wrestling with the natural law regarding the immutability of gender. They can learn much from transgender people's human testimony and the evidence in the biological variations that occur in nature. For some, the evidence will never be enough. It was like that in the time of Christ. It's the same today.

- A veteran activist fighting for legal protections for the LGBT community for more than two decades, Courtney's first foray into the legal arena began in the 1990's after experiencing employment discrimination. Extending her search for social justice beyond her own experience, she became integrally involved in efforts to extend legal protections for transgender people in the city of New Orleans, the state of Louisiana and federally. She was instrumental in successfully changing the policy at the national level as well. Other national nonprofits eventually followed suit in "putting the T" in LGBT. She worked with the New Orleans Human Relations Commission to pass an ordinance to add non-discrimination protections for gender identification to the City Code. She has served on the Mayor's Advisory Committee for LGBT Issues, the Louisiana Lesbian and Gay Political Action Caucus Board of Directors, and both the PFLAG National Board of Directors and the local chapter. She remains keenly interested in the intersection of all of our issues with communities of faith.



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'Trans in the Eyes of God' Podcast Episode 1

Guest Reflection on Episode 1 by Peggy E.

The world and the Church both expect us to see transgender people as "others". Transgender people are told they are "lucky" if they have parents that love and accept them, as if they are somehow harder to love than other children. Church leaders have sometimes encouraged parents to reject their transgender children outright. But I refused to upend the truer, older teaching of my Catholic faith - that all children are gifts, given to fortunate parents by a loving God. I could not see my son as "other" or as one "lucky" to be loved because that is surely not how God sees him. He was as easy to love as any child. The challenges of parenting him were not due to any flaw or lack or difference in him. Rather they are due to the flaws in our human understanding, the lack of unconditional love in human hearts, and the differences that we insist on judging and ranking. God, however, simply delights in them and sees all He has made as good. No, the reality is that my son has always been a gift, as all children are; a gift God expected (maybe even trusted) me to accept with open arms. I am the lucky one.

- Peggy is the mother of three children, happily married to their father for 27 years. She grew up in the Catholic Church with regular doses of Methodist worship thanks to her beloved grandfather who was a Methodist minister. Peggy and her husband are members of a small Catholic parish in the Los Angeles Archdiocese where their children all were baptized, attended grade school, and are welcomed "home" whenever they return to visit.



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'Trans in the Eyes of God' Podcast Episode 2

Please give the above podcast a close listen. Then, review and respond to the reflection questions below.

1. This episode's host highlighted congregations grappling with the question, "Do we change to accommodate these members of the community or stay the same?" How would you, as a member of your particular Church community, answer that question?
2. Yvonne mentions working with police who admittedly did not understand her yet offered protection and acceptance. Similarly, since many in the church probably do not fully understand the trans experience, is it important to move forward with inclusion despite this?
3. The [Guidance for Welcoming Transgender People](#) put out by the Church of England in 2018 exists in stark contrast with documents like [Male and Female He Created Them](#) put out by Catholic Bishops in 2000. How do you think each of these documents affects families with trans identified loved ones?
4. Toward the end of the episode it is noted that trans people have had a lot of time to think about their identity while extended family members often struggle to understand them. Do you think cisgender people (whose gender identity matches the sex that they were assigned at birth) would benefit from the church taking a more positive stance since their struggle to accept trans family members is often rooted in their faith?



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'Trans in the Eyes of God' Podcast Episode 2

Guest Reflection on Episode 2 by Sr. Luisa Derouen

Yvonne Taylor declares at the beginning of her beautiful and sacred story that her relationship with her church made her whole. **What does it mean to be whole?**

Transgender people make incredibly difficult decisions and take life-changing risks in order to be whole. In ways that are difficult for many of us to understand they have walked through life for years feeling alienated from themselves, their loved ones, and from God. Being whole means:

- Not having to be hidden and visible at the same time;
- Not being afraid to say to oneself and to others: "This is who I am, and I am good."
- Knowing that God gazes upon them with love and calls them by their true name.

Many transgender people experience that profound grace, but are still longing for what Yvonne experienced - that their truth can be confirmed and celebrated by a faith community who can put real arms around them and speak their name with reverence and welcome. Their spirit aches to belong and be seen as precious children of God. As communities of faith may we have courage to see as God sees.

- Sister Luisa, a member of the Dominican Sisters of Peace, began to minister among the transgender community in 1999 and has been a spiritual companion to transgender people across the country. She is now semi-retired and lives in central Kentucky.



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'Trans in the Eyes of God' Podcast Episode 2

Guest Reflection on Episode 2 by Christine Zuba

I respect the desire of some transgender Catholics for a second Baptism to confirm their new identity through a formal reaffirmation of their baptismal vows, a re-introduction to a congregation or parish. It's a way for them to say, "The person I am now is not the person I was then." Transitioning is a rebirth, reconciling the person we've always been on the inside, to what we, and others, now see on the outside.

Being transgender is not an ideology. It is not a choice. The Church renews marriage vows for anniversaries; congregations often re-affirm baptismal vows during Mass. This celebration of (new) life, a second baptismal affirmation, may not be so unreasonable, and would be an expression of our Church's welcome. As I transitioned, however, I would often explain, "The person you've always known is still here; I remain the same inside." My gender identity had changed, however, the person inside did not. Although my sex, gender, and name given at Baptism did not align with my body and exterior presentation for most of my life, I do believe that "God knew me from birth," that "God has a plan for me." This person, this soul, was baptized once, for always.

A blessing or ceremony re-introducing me to a congregation might not necessarily guarantee a welcoming embrace by the entire parish community. Only through dialogue and encountering will our lives and our unwavering faith be understood, embraced, and hopefully celebrated.

Personally I ask simply that I and every LGTBQ Catholic be considered important and valued parts of our parish communities, a reflection of the beauty of God's vast creativity, and treated like every other baptized Catholic, with the dignity inherent in every human being.

- Christine is a transgender (lifelong) Catholic and Eucharistic Minister at Saints Peter and Paul parish in Turnersville, NJ. She is a facilitator of her parish LGBTQ ministry, "Together in Prayer," and participates in similar ministries across New Jersey and Pennsylvania.



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'Trans in the Eyes of God' Podcast Episode 3

Please give the above podcast a close listen. Then, review and respond to the reflection questions below.

1. Joy Ladin, the trans Jewish professor of English whose journey to the South is told in this podcast, interprets the story in Genesis 12 of God telling Abram to leave his father's house. Joy states that in the culture at that time, Abram's role as a man would have been to take care of his father until his death and that God was asking him to violate his gender role. Comment on this interpretation of the story.
2. The second story told in the podcast was that of Mesma Balsare, the trans Hindu dancer who explains that Hindus are free to ask questions. She says that for her, there was never a state of conflict concerning her gender because of her religion. Her challenge was social. Do you think the challenges faced by Catholic trans people are more social or religious? Why?
3. Carol Anderson, the professor of religion at Kalamazoo College, states in the podcast that Buddhism offers stories which seem to accept the fluidity of gender. She tells the story of the Buddhist monk who wakes up with the sexual characteristics of a woman. The Buddha says, "Don't worry about the change in gender. Make sure you have a good teacher, make sure you have a good monastic home, and follow all the rules of the order." What do you think of the Buddha's advice?



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['Trans in the Eyes of God' Podcast Episode 3](#)

Guest Reflection on Episode 3 by James & Evelyn Whitehead

We enjoyed the discussion of part three of 'Transgender in the Eyes of God' from the points of view of the religious faiths of Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism. We especially appreciated a Jewish interpretation of the Abraham story. Abraham is an only son with all the cultural commitments to care for an aging father and then carry on that family's line. This is what a man does. Yet he responds to God's invitation to leave home and begin an utterly new family, believing that God is more important than family and gender.

Listening to the reflections of the Australian Buddhist we recalled how Buddhism migrated in the early centuries of the Common Era from India to China. One surprise during our study of this history was realizing that one of the most popular Bodhisattvas in China - Guan Yin, whose name means "to look on with compassion" - is female but previously in India this same saint-like figure was male named Avolokiteshvara (and you wonder why the Chinese changed the name). Westerners that we are, we remember wondering about this gender shift but sensed that any question about it would be met with the Buddhist response, "what difference does it make?"

- James and Evelyn Whitehead have taught at the University of Notre Dame and Loyola University in Chicago. They are now completing a trilogy on Enchantment and Christian spirituality.



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'Trans in the Eyes of God' Podcast Episode 3

Guest Reflection on Episode 3 by Deacon Ray Dever

I had a professor for Old Testament who often said the Hebrew Scriptures were written to answer for the Jewish people the fundamental questions of who we are, where did we come from, and why do we suffer. In many respects, every faith tradition seeks to answer some variation of these questions. For people of faith whose identity marginalizes them and causes them suffering, such as my transgender daughter, there is an existential struggle to reconcile their self-identity with their God and their religion.

While the great faith traditions differ in how they approach these questions of identity and of relationship to God and to all of creation, the belief in the inherent value and dignity of every human provides some common ground, especially in the Judeo-Christian tradition. As Rabbi Ari Lev Fornari says in this podcast: 'Each being is made in the image of the divine and each being is created unto themselves.' So as we contemplate and pray about who we are and why we were made the way we are, we should do so with confidence that above all else our Creator knows each of us by name and loves us just as we were created.

- Deacon Ray Dever has over 30 years of pastoral ministry experience, including 10 years as an ordained Catholic deacon. He and his wife have three adult children, including a transgender daughter who graduated from Georgetown U. in 2016. His life experiences have called him to active ministry to and advocacy for Catholic LGBTQ individuals and their families.

