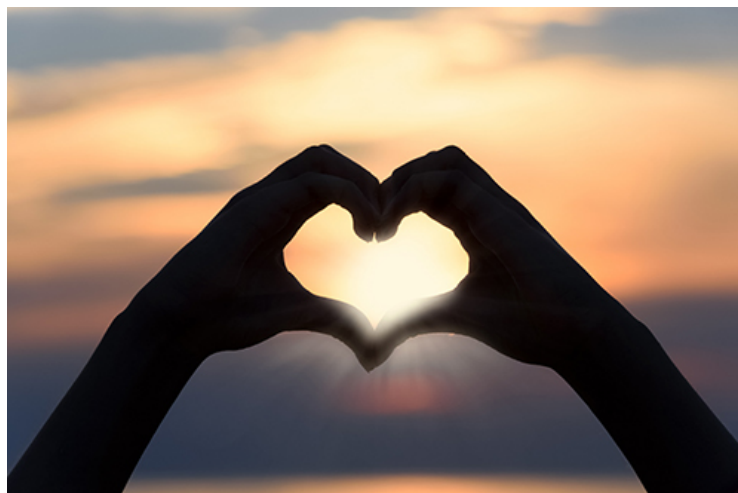


Sexual diversity: an evolving understanding

By Sister Lynn M. Levo C.S.J.

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What does gender mean? How do we express sexual identity? These are just a few areas undergoing social change. Photomix, Pixabay

TODAY THERE IS much discussion about various aspects of sexuality, including the impact of sexual abuse and areas of diversity such as orientation and gender identity. These complex issues require a context as well as study and dialogue in order to be able to accompany individuals in their ongoing psycho-sexual development. In a large part of the Western world, emerging adulthood presents a unique milieu in which many explore questions of attraction and sexual identity. Although this may be less likely for those in the developing world, young adults will face these questions in an international setting or as they have greater access to social media. It is important to realize that for all emerging adults this aspect of their development is complex, multidimensional, and uniquely personal.

Sexuality needs to be understood and explored within a broader fundamental understanding, seeing it as integral to being human, and recognizing it as centered in

relationship and presence. Vocation and formation personnel—as well as community leaders—need to understand these fundamentals and grasp the emerging understanding of sexual diversity. A broader understanding of sexuality will assist religious as they relate to current and new members, employees of sponsored ministries, and those with whom they minister, especially in their sponsored institutions.

Being human, our first vocation

Central to Jesus' life was his humanity and his continuous search for how best to live as an authentic human being before a loving God. He lived a relational life, both personal and ministerial. He loved and was loved. He had intimate friends and was committed to helping people become whole and holy. We, his companions, are called to nothing less. Pope Francis calls us to become fully human, to let God bring us beyond ourselves in order to attain the fullest truth of our being (*Evangelii gaudium*, The Joy of the Gospel, #8).

Fundamental to being human is our ability to love and be loved, to discover and give our gifts in service, and to be in relationship with a loving God. In this context we begin to answer the following adult human needs and questions about identity, achievement, intimacy, and generativity. Who am I called to be? How will I make a difference? With whom can I be mutually revealing? How am I called to give life throughout my life? These fundamental adult human needs must be addressed in every life choice, including a choice to live a celibate life in community, regardless of orientation and gender identity.

What does it mean to be sexual?

The origin of the word sexuality goes to the heart of the matter. Coming from the Latin (*sexus/secare*) which means to cut or divide, it suggests that as individuals we are incomplete and we seek wholeness in relationships, through and beyond difference or divisions.

Fundamentally, sexuality is the energy that moves us to relate with others, a fundamental grounding of our capacity to love. What if we understood that our sexual energy expresses God's intention that we find our authentic humanness not in isolation but in connection? And, this applies to all: gay and straight, genitally active and celibate, men and women, aged and young, able-bodied and disabled. (See the work of James B. Nelson.)

When we embrace sexuality as God's energy, we are invited to grow into communion and wholeness in and through

expression and embrace the more demanding and enlivening understanding that sexual integration is centered in the quality of presence to oneself and others that channels the energy of sexuality toward personal and communal wholeness.

Sexual energy is both personal and social. It is, as described by Father Ron Rolheiser, O.M.I., “the pulse to celebrate, to give and receive delight and culminates in our desire to be co-creators with God, co-responsible with God for the planet ... it is about giving oneself over to community, friendship, family, service, creativity, humor, delight, and even martyrdom.” This is God’s energy given to us to help bring life in the world.

An emerging understanding of sexuality that we face today may challenge what we were taught about what it means to be human and to be sexual. We are now invited, especially through younger potential members, to see what we behold, to see and understand what is right in front of us, to see with new eyes the diversity of attraction, identity, and expression that exists, including in religious life. We have an opportunity to understand and be respectful and compassionate toward difference and diversity, something with which God seems to be more comfortable than us, if God-given diversity is any indication.

In recent years, we have been learning that God and the cosmos are about two dynamics: differentiation and communion. In God’s great wisdom, all persons and things are to become their true selves. We are called to live into the fullness of our humanity and our unique identity. Communion challenges us to be one with others, without losing our individuality. Jesus’ desire that all may be one is an invitation not to wipe out differences but to respect, embrace, and learn from difference.

Language is personally understood

As I accompany candidates and newer members, many have explored what it means to be sexual and have adopted specific language to speak about themselves, to identify themselves. Others are in the process of self-discovery while discerning their call to religious life. The following terms are ones I have encountered when speaking with discerners. This list is neither comprehensive nor fixed in stone. I recommend that you trust the person who is using a particular self-descriptor and their understanding. Do not assume you know what a person means (e.g., “I am asexual”). A simple clear request, “Help me understand what you mean when you say...” is both respectful and helpful to you and the person you are trying to get to know.

LGBTQ+ is an acronym that groups lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer/questioning individuals into one group and is one way they express their sexual and gender freedom.

Sexual orientation is about relating to others and refers to attraction to another emotionally, physically and/or romantically. This includes: **lesbian** (females) and **gay** (males), the terms often preferred by homosexually oriented persons who are attracted to some members of their own sex, **bisexual** persons who have emotional, romantic, or sexual/erotic attractions to both men and women, and heterosexual persons who are attracted to some members of another gender. **Asexuality** is the lack of sexual attraction to others, or low or absent interest in or desire for sexual activity. It may be considered a sexual orientation.

Gender identity refers to a person’s internal sense of being male, female, or something else. **Gender expression** refers to the way a person communicates gender identity to others through behavior, clothing, hairstyles, voice, body characteristics, or use of preferred pronouns. **Transgender** is an umbrella term for persons whose gender identity, gender expression, or behavior does not conform to that typically associated with the sex to which they were assigned at birth. Many identities are under this umbrella term. **Cisgender** is a term used when someone’s gender identity/expression matches the gender they were assigned at birth.

Gender dysphoria is the feeling of discomfort or distress that might occur in someone whose gender identity differs from their gender assigned at birth. Not everyone is affected. **Gender non-conforming** describes someone who does not adhere to what they believe are societal pressures to conform to gender norms and rules. **Non-binary gender identity** is a term used to describe individuals who may experience a gender identity that is neither exclusively woman or man or is in between or beyond both genders. **Nonbinary** individuals may identify as **genderfluid**, **agender** (without gender), or **genderqueer**.

Queer serves as an umbrella term that encompasses many people as it intersects with sexual orientation and gender identity. It includes anyone who does not associate with heteronormativity as they have a non-binary or gender expansive identity.

Questioning describes a person who is in the process of understanding and exploring their sexual orientation or gender identity. They are often seeking information (e.g., How do I know what my orientation is?) and support during this stage of their sexual development.

Intersex refers to variety of conditions that lead to atypical development of physical sex characteristics. These conditions can involve abnormalities of the external genitals, internal reproductive organs, sex chromosomes or sex related hormones. Some advocates prefer using the term disorders of sexual development.

Pansexual refers to a person who is emotionally, physically and/or romantically attracted to some people, regardless of the person’s gender identity or biological sex.

It is significant to remember that persons exploring religious life come from diverse backgrounds and experiences with regard to sexuality. Familiarity with this terminology will be important in order to accompany emerging adults who are exploring their sexuality and a vocation to religious life. To ignore the diversity is to ignore reality.

Evolving notion of sexual orientation

Sexual orientation is about relating to others and includes diverse attraction patterns. Orientation is integral to a person's sense of identity, related behaviors, and membership in a community of others who share these attractions. Research over several decades has demonstrated that sexual orientation ranges along a continuum from exclusive attraction to the other sex to exclusive attraction to the same sex. Since the mid-1970s, psychologists have taken the lead in removing the stigma of mental illness long associated with lesbian, gay, and bisexual orientations.

Sexual orientation is distinct from other components of sex and gender, including biological sex (the anatomical, psychological, and genetic characteristics associated with being male or female), gender (the psychological sense of being male or female), and social gender roles (the cultural norms that define feminine and masculine). Sexual orientation is closely tied to the intimate personal relationships that meet deeply felt needs for love, attachment, and intimacy. These needs are not addressed without a significant opportunity to be in relationship.

No consensus exists among scientists about the reasons an individual develops a particular orientation. Many believe that nature and nurture both play complex roles, with most persons discovering, not choosing, their sexual orientation.

To whom am I attracted and who do I tell?

Every person, regardless of orientation, wants to know themselves and not be invisible to others. Questioning "how do I know my orientation?" is both important and necessary prior to making any relational life commitment. This can be a significant question in the early stages of discernment for men and women.

For those seeking to know their orientation, the interior journey might begin with the help of a trusted person. Answering questions in these areas helps a person to discover his or her orientation:

Thoughts, including fantasies. Who do I notice, think about or find in my fantasies?

Emotions. What feelings am I aware of when I think about or am with others?

Behaviors. Who do I seek out for conversation, make time for and enjoy being with?

Interpreting what is noticed and identifying any obstacles to an honest naming of one's orientation are important for self-knowledge. Vocation directors or formators may not be the best person with whom discerners need to do this work. Having a list of persons to whom you can refer those working out identity issues is particularly important for accompanying adolescents and emerging adults. This interior work is not optional because it is integral to discovering a vital aspect of one's true identity—to whom am I attracted?

Because we are relational beings, a second step of revealing a significant part of who I am is also critical so a person does not remain invisible and is able to experience intimacy. Fundamental to being human is the desire to know others and be known for who we really are. The ability to share this part of oneself with significant family, friends, and community members is part of addressing intimacy. For some being totally "out," sharing one's orientation openly, is part of the journey to authenticity. This is not true for all.

Gender and identity

Today, beliefs about gender are shifting rapidly and radically. We are surrounded by evolving notions of what it means to be woman or man and by an explosion of new terminology. We need to take into account the possibilities and limits that gender can place on women and men. For many, it can be hard, frustrating, confusing, and lonely to try to fit into the world and into expected roles. Still others are thriving as they break down gender barriers. Gender is bigger than gender identity and is shaping individual lives in every part of the world.

Gender identity refers to how one defines, understands, and experiences his or her gender. Some may not identify with the particular gender they were assigned at birth (transgender). For example, a transgender female was assigned male at birth, most likely based on having a male body, and now she identifies as female. Established by some as early as age five, each person identifies who they are as a gendered being. For some children, identifying with another gender may be temporary as they often take on roles regardless of which gender usually takes on that role. A trans male or trans female often will choose to have their outward behavior (clothing, hair, name, use of pronouns) express their gender identity.

Causes of gender identity are unknown and are likely biological and social, with no known links to trauma at this time. Despite shifts in attitudes and some policies, sexual minorities still face high rates of discrimination, harassment, violence, unjust treatment, and suicide.

We are challenged to support an environment that reflects biological and social diversity in gender roles, orientation, and

The Bible, our church, and diversity

There are no clear definitive statements in the Bible about orientation or gender identity. Scripture scholars do not agree that certain passages point to or condemn same-sex relating. Biblical scholars, for the most part, do not believe that the Bible is a single, timeless, internally consistent teaching on matters of morality, dictated by God. We are called to look at Scripture in the light of Jesus' teaching: a call for justice, respect, and equity, and a critique of domination in all forms. Jesus is about union with God, others, and with what is.

The church's teaching on homosexuality (Catechism of the Catholic Church #2357-2359) affirms the dignity of all persons and confirms that a significant number of people are homosexually oriented and deserve respect and just treatment. Because this teaching is based on an understanding of the natural law and the complementarity of the sexes, the church does not support same-sex unions. There is no official teaching about gender identity at this time. In both of these areas, Pope Francis' approach is consistently pastoral and complex as he calls for accompaniment, not judgment, and a theology of acceptance and dialogue.

Psychological and theological diversity

For the most part, psychology accepts that diversity exists both in gender identity and orientation and challenges us not to ignore the experiences of many who are trying to live authentically and who are faithfully covenanted. Some theologians today urge the church to read scripture within a complex conversation that includes the voices of tradition alongside the witness offered in the contemporary world by human experience and reason. They argue that the church should not be deaf to the voice of the living God and fail to ask what God might be up to in the sexual experience of actual humans and in the study of sexuality and gender offered by philosophy, anthropology, psychology, and biology. (See writing on this topic by New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson).

Accepting diversity in no way encourages or condones promiscuous, coercive, abusive, non-reciprocal, and/or violent behavior. Rather it calls for sexual ethics based on norms of justice which govern all human relationships and are derived in part from the concrete reality of persons. Freedom, wholeness, intimacy, and pleasure are values to be affirmed in all relationships marked by mutuality, equality, some form of commitment, and fruitfulness both within and beyond the relationship. (Sister Margaret Farley, R.S.M. has written on this topic.) This understanding is much more demanding than focusing on particular actions and seems to be much more in keeping with Jesus' message of being on a life-long journey toward a loving and merciful God, a journey that includes an ever-increasing capacity of becoming one's true self and loving one another. Who are we to deny this opportunity to anyone?

Diversity as God's invitation

Accompaniment requires being present, listening, learning, and hearing in non-judgmental ways. Diversity is about a rich mix of differences. It encompasses many dimensions that make a person unique: ethnicity, race, age, personal style, gender and gender identity, beliefs, sexual orientation, and more. Diversity invites us to embrace the psychological, physical, and social differences that occur among all individuals. In the face of diversity, Jesus calls us to inclusion so each person feels valued and connected and experiences a sense of belonging.

People thrive in an environment where their inherent worth is recognized, where they can be safe and can express their authentic selves. Supporting equity guarantees fairness, access, and opportunity and promotes an impartial justice. When we continue to open ourselves to learn about sexual diversity and the call to inclusion and equity, we join Pope Francis' call in *Fratelli tutti* (All Brothers) to embrace Jesus' fundamental desire that all may be one.

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