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The Vatican Opinion on Gender Theory

Julio Tudela, Pharm, PhD[1], Enrique Burguete, PhD[1], and Justo Aznar, MD, PhD[1]

Abstract

This article is a reasoned response to the article by Timothy F. Murphy, recently published in the prestigious journal *Bioethics*, on the supposed opposition between the views of the Catholic Church and what he calls "contemporary science" in relation to certain anthropological issues linked to the gender perspective. To point to "the Vatican" as anchored in an unscientific and anachronistic position, using the term contemporary science to which he attributes a unanimous representation of current scientific thinking on the subject is, in our view, unfounded and completely unacceptable. In his reflection, he does not adequately distinguish between intersex and transgenderism, two clearly different realities with different needs. The author defends the obsolescence of the binary sex/gender model that, in his view, "betrays human sexuality." Furthermore, he does so without providing a plausible justification or a definition of human nature that is able to support the plurality and indeterminacy of sexual conditions, without falling back on untenable dualisms or relativism devoid of scientific objectivity. In our response, we highlight how the dialogue between Faith and Reason, as developed in the recent Magisterium of the Catholic Church, is essential to explain nature, the human being and, in general, all creations. Finally, contemporary science does not provide a monolithic and unquestionable view of the nature of human beings and their sexual identity, as the author claims, with many scientists confirming evidence of a binary human sexuality genetically and phenotypically determined.

Summary: This paper is a reasoned response to the supposed opposition between the views of the Catholic Church and "contemporary science" in relation to certain anthropological issues linked to the gender perspective.The dialogue between Faith and Reason, as developed in the recent Magisterium of the Catholic Church, is essential to explain nature, the human being and, in general, all creation, against the opinion of those who defend the obsolescence of the binary sex/gender model that, in their view, "betrays human sexuality".

Keywords

Binary sex/gender, Gender theory, Human sexuality, Transgenderism, Vatican opinion

Recently, an article signed by Murphy (2019) has been published in *Bioethics* in which he comments on the alleged opposition between the views of the Catholic Church ("the Vatican," according to the author) and what he calls "contemporary science" in relation to certain anthropological issues. In his opinion, contemporary science validates the postulates defended by gender ideology, namely, those relating to the relationship between sex and gender; human nature and the rights of people to decide on their identity, affectivity, and behavior. The author also warns about the implications of the Church's position on the implementation of interventions related to transgenderism or the approach to "intersex" people or those whose sex is ambiguous.

Sexual Identity and Nature

From the arguments presented by the author, it seems that the definition of human nature as binary sexed, that is, in the form of male and female sexes, is a philosophical–religious position defended by the

[1] Institute of Life Sciences, Catholic University of Valencia, Spain

Corresponding Author:
Justo Aznar, MD, PhD, Institute of Life Sciences, Catholic University of Valencia, Plaza de San Agustín 3, Esc A, Entresuelo 1, Valencia 46002, Spain.
Email: justo.aznar@ucv.es

Vatican (this should be construed as referring to the Magisterium of the Catholic Church) that is opposed to the one supported by contemporary science. The latter is far from recognizing the existence of two sexed forms of being, for, according to the author, human nature is expressed in a multitude of possibilities in terms of sexuality, possibilities that would range from exclusively male or female, at the ends of the spectrum, to a host of intermediate possibilities, which would also be fluid. Thus, it would not be possible to define a specific sexed nature for an individual as constitutive of his identity, but only as an occasional "state" or "way of being," dependent solely on how the individual interprets himself or herself at any given moment.

The author starts from two premises, in our view, erroneous: (a) that there is opposition between the postulates defended by the Magisterium of the Catholic Church (let's call it that—better than the Vatican referred to by the author) and contemporary science and (b) that it is correct to speak of contemporary science as a single and defined position.

With regard to the first postulate, it should be said that Faith and Reason, as it has been developed in the recent Magisterium of the Catholic Church, are not only nonantagonistic but complement each other to explain nature, the human being and, in general, all creation (John Paul II 1999; Benedict XVI 2012; Francis 2015; Congregation for Catholic Education 2019). Therefore, the author's position, suggesting that the Catholic Church holds dogmatic positions far from reason and the postulates of modern science, is not sufficiently proven.

Second, contemporary science does not provide a monolithic and unquestionable view of the nature of human beings and their sexual identity. Thus, even though there are scientists supportive of the postulates of the gender perspective,[1] who try to establish new parameters on sexual identity by moving it away from its binary male and female form, there are many others who confirm the evidence of a binary human sexuality, genetically and phenotypically determined from the chromosomal fusion that occurs in the fertilization of the male and female gametes. In fact, human life naturally needs the contribution of these two gametes (oocyte and sperm), from women and men, respectively, with no more possibilities or intersexes, to reproduce. That is, the existence of human life unavoidably requires the complementary contribution of two forms of human being: those determined by the binary sex, whether or not the author of the article likes it.

Intersex States

Intersex states, such as those in which, for genetic or nongenetic reasons, the sexual phenotype is ambiguous and cannot be identified with male or female forms, are referred to by contemporary science as "disorders of sex development" (DSD), that is, disorders of sexual development that present exceptionally to the predominant biological norm of binary sexuality. The exception also confirms the rule on this occasion, and these exceptional cases must be addressed with all the intensity and care necessary for the health of those affected, so that the rights arising from the inherent dignity of their personal condition are guaranteed. But to say that there are more than two sexes based on the existence of these DSD could be labeled as poor science, even if it is "contemporary."

It should be clarified that the frequency of occurrence of DSD, estimated at 4.5 cases per 100,000 according to the most rigorous estimates (Arcelus et al. 2015), does not explain the increasingly prevalent cases of transgenderism, generally not attributable to physiological or genetic causes but to others, of a complex nature.

Sex and Gender

The author, in his article, seems to defend the position on the absolute independence of the concepts of sex and gender, attributing to the Catholic Church a position identified with the necessary association between these two realities. They are without a doubt different things: sex should be related to the biological and gender to the cultural or behavioral. But although they are different it does not seem that they can be spoken of as absolutely independent because the biological constitution, genetically programmed and phenotypically expressed, has much to say about the conformation of brain connectivity, personality, and behavior, among other things. While it is not decisive, it does condition them, so it is not unscientific at all to speak not only of male and female sexes (biological component) but also of male and female genders (cultural–behavioral component). What does not seem scientific is to pretend to treat both realities—sex and gender—as independent and unrelated, ignoring that the human person is a unit of physical and psychological dynamisms, inevitably related.

A separate matter is the cultural definition of gender characteristics, which indeed is a questionable and changing issue, which includes the roles assigned in each cultural or historical context to the

male and female genders. They should not be confused because the legitimate redefinition of cultural gender roles does not imply their disintegration with respect to the biological sex traits that define the identity of each human being.

On the other hand, it should be noted that how each individual interprets his personal reality, which also includes his biological nature, is a different matter. Insofar as interpretation, "felt" identity is part of subjectivity and is influenced by numerous factors related to the psychological and the biological. But it must not be forgotten that identity does not refer to nature, which is given and has not been freely chosen, but to the personal interpretation of the individual in terms of his nature, that is, to subjective rather than objective aspects.

Good science, which is not subject to ideologies, easily understands that people are not an entelechy but that we are objective beings who inhabit a contingent and real world. Insofar as rational, it understands that people are and more than mere consciousness; a conscious human being is aware that he or she is more than conscience (Domingo 2016). We do not live, in fact, trapped in self-reflection, but we are constituted in a precise way and we are situated in a particular place in the world. Hence, consciousness necessarily includes the ability to rise above our subjectivity, so that we can see ourselves through the eyes of others. Both "who we are" and "what we are" are objective and real even before becoming the content of a consciousness that, in short, does not give us truthful information about ourselves when it is limited to being "self-consciousness" and is not accompanied by an exercise in self-expropriation.

Access to Health Services

The last aspect of the abovementioned article that deserves comment is the apparent discrimination to which the Catholic Church would submit people of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex collective (LGBTI), limiting or denying them certain health care because of their gender identity.

It seems very bold to claim that the people affected are disadvantaged in terms of their health care with respect to the rest of the population but even more so that this discrimination results from the imposition of the criteria defended by the Catholic Church.

It is obvious that no one should suffer discriminatory treatment in terms of health care on the grounds of gender identity, but exercise of the right to autonomy is not unlimited, so it is not discriminatory not to satisfy all the requests that citizens make about their health care, primarily for two reasons.

First, medical interventions should not be applied—even if the affected person requests them—when they may pose an unjustified risk to the patient himself or there is insufficient evidence for the indication of such an intervention. In contemporary science, there are conflicting voices about the opportunity to apply certain interventions in people requesting a sex change, including drug treatments and surgical interventions. Even though there are those who advocate such interventions and propose them even in children and adolescents, many scientists are warning about the risk of such interventions, in light of the poor long-term outcomes and the prevalence of serious complications that can seriously compromise their health (Dhejne et al. 2011; Hruz 2020).

Therefore, denying certain interventions in the case of transgender patients does not have to constitute discrimination cases, but the prudent application of the principles of beneficence and nonmaleficence bioethically required in any medical practice.

Second, allocating financial resources to medical interventions such as these, whose clinical benefits are highly controversial, means diverting them from other needs that may be more urgent, violating the bioethical principle of justice that seeks to accord to each fair, proportionate consideration and medical care, and thereby results in serving all patients well and with the necessary guarantees of safety and efficacy.

The Right to Parenthood

In the concluding paragraph of the article, the author introduces a controversial topic, which does not follow from his previous argument: what he calls "the right to parenthood." There is enough literature to conclude that the so-called queer reproductive rights generate considerable bioethical controversy due to their biocolonialist potential and the conceptualization of the child as a "product" (Kalender 2012; Leibetseder 2016, 2018; Mamo 2013; Preciado 2013; Richie 2016). Moreover because the justification for these alleged rights cannot be the same for intersex, transgender, and homosexual or bisexual people, it is not possible to consider them in the same way.

Conclusion

In our view, the author of the article makes an unacceptable oversimplification of a very complex problem, including biases and misinterpretations in many of his claims. The identification that he makes of the Vatican as anchored in an unscientific and anachronistic stance and the use of the term contemporary

science, attributing to it a unanimous representation of current scientific thinking on the subject, are totally unacceptable.

In his reflection, he does not adequately distinguish between intersex and transgender, two clearly different realities with different needs. Moreover, he implies that the only major cause of suffering for trans people lies in their social stigmatization, which is contradicted by recent studies in countries where transgenderism is socially accepted.

The author affirms the validity of what he calls "laissez-faire medical anthropology" and the obsolescence of the binary sex/gender model that, in his view, "betrays human sexuality." Furthermore, he does so without providing a plausible justification, or a definition of human nature that is capable of supporting the plurality and indeterminacy of sexual conditions, without falling back on untenable dualisms or relativism devoid of scientific objectivity.

Concerning "the right of parenthood," mentioned by the author, there is enough literature to conclude that the so-called queer reproductive rights generate considerable bioethical controversy due to their biocolonialist potential and the conceptualization of the child as a "product" as we have previously said. In addition, it is not possible to talk about this issue lightly because the justification for these alleged rights cannot be the same for intersex, transgender, and homosexual or bisexual people.

Finally, there is one issue that concerns the area of bioethical foundation rather than that of application: the author's emphatic appeal to healthcare professionals, "in the name of respecting the well-being of their patients as paramount," to seek counsel in authorities other than the Magisterium of the Church. This is not the place to dwell on the controversy between utilitarian, principlist, and personalist bioethics. But it is the place to say that the obligation of medical personnel is not limited to providing well-being to their patients, for which a thorough knowledge of the pharmacopoeia and full freedom of prescription may suffice; rather, insofar as a science for human health, medicine obeys the noble prerogative of bringing the human being closer to his own fullness and perfection, that is, to his personal fulfillment.

The doctrine of the Catholic Church on gender ideology and transgenderism little with what is stated in the *Bioethics* article that we comment on.

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ORCID iD

Justo Aznar, MD, PhD https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6899-4932

Note

1. This perspective has been viewed as an ideology due to its positioning in the discourse as the "last word" in relation to what the human being is, not admitting any opinion to the contrary and despising all criticism by labeling it as retrograde and already outdated.

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Biographical Notes

Julio Tudela, Pharm, PhD, is the head of the Julio Tudela Pharmacy Office since 1997, associate professor at the Catholic University of Valencia from 2008 to present, teaching the subjects school health (bachelor's degree in children), anthropology of gender (degree in anthropology), and bioethics (degree in medicine, degree in philosophy, degree in anthropology, master's degree in bioethics, master's degree in anthropology personalist, and master's in management of health centers); professor at the Distance University of Madrid (UDIMA); and professor at the International University of Valencia (VIU). He has given teaching sessions at the University of Navarra and the Catholic University of Avila. He is currently the director of the master in bioethics at the Catholic University of Valencia. In addition, he has participated as a teacher in different training courses for nonuniversity teachers in the areas of neuropedagogy, sexual education, and prevention of addictive behaviors. He is a member of the Observatory of Bioethics and the Institute of Life Sciences of the UCV, the Scientific Committee of the Tomas Moro Chair of the UCV, the Research Ethics Committee of the UCV and also a member of the Research Ethics Committee with Medicine of the Valencian Institute of Oncology (IVO). He is also the vice president of de Spanish Association of Social Pharmacy (AEFAS) and a member of different professional associations in the field of pharmacy and bioethics: AEFA, AEBC, AEFAS, AEFC, AEBI, SVB, and APLAC.

Enrique Burguete, PhD, has a diploma in teaching from the Humanities branch, a degree in social and cultural anthropology, and a PhD from the Catholic University of Valencia San Vicente Mártir (UCV). He is a member of the "Julián Marías" seminar, promoted by the UCV Fides et Ratio Chair, as well as a member of its Institute of Life Sciences and its Bioethics Observatory, in whose master's degree he teaches or has taught the subjects: "bioethics and politics"; "sex, gender and sexual identity"; "population and demographic policies"; "social problems of the elderly"; "the anthropological status of the human embryo"; "aesthetics & enhancement"; and "bioethics and the environment." He holds the position of academic manager/tutor of the first course in the degree in biotechnology, as well as the coordination of the modules "Legal and Social Aspects" and "Anthropology and Professional Deontology" in the degrees of veterinary science and marine sciences belonging to the Faculty of Experimental Sciences of the UCV. He has participated in different teaching innovation projects in competitive calls. He is a professor of "Philosophical and Theological Anthropology" in different degrees of the Catholic University, among others: biotechnology, marine sciences, veterinary medicine, dentistry, physiotherapy, social education, medicine, and podiatry. He is also a professor in the university master's degree in secondary education teachers in various specialties: "ADE, economics and political science," "natural sciences and biology," "health sciences," and "sciences of physical activity and sport," teaching the subject "society, education and family." Likewise, he has taught at the Faculty of Education Sciences and, in particular, the subjects: sociology of education; society and intercultural education. In the defunct Faculty of Sociology, he taught the subjects "family sociology," "sociology of religion," and "sociology of education." He has been a visiting professor in the master of bioethics at the Universidad del Azuay in Cuenca, Ecuador (2019), and has taught teachers, via telematics, at the National University of Villarrica del Espíritu Santo, Paraguay (2013). He has been a member of the organizing committee and speaker at different international conference and Conferences on Catholic Education and Bioethics, being invited to give a presentation in the European Parliament (Brussels), on the occasion of the VIII week for life organized by the European People's Group in March 2018.

Justo Aznar, MD, PhD, is the Director of the Institute of Life Sciences of the Catholic University of Valencia from December 2007 to the present and a member of the Sub-Commission on Family and Life of the Spanish Episcopal Conference. Since May 2005, he has been a member of the Pontifical Academy for Life until he turned eighty in March 2017. From its foundation in 1982 to June 1998, he was the President of the Spanish Federation of Pro-Life Associations. In 1979, he founded the "Group of Current Studies," an association dedicated to the dissemination of culture under a prism of Christian humanism, which at present has centers in more than thirty Spanish cities. He is a member of the Scientific Council of the Thomas More Chair of the Catholic University of Valencia. He has been awarded with the "III Milenio 2007" Prize by the International Academy of Sciences, Technology, Education and Humanities, in the area of Bioethics, on December 1, 2007.