

Transgender Kids Need Truth and Love

Courage and EnCourage conference tackles a tough issue.

by Tom Hoopes

There is good news for Catholic parents and others facing transgenderism in their family. That is what the leading Catholic voices on gender-identity discordance said at the international conference for Courage and EnCourage held this month on the campus of Benedictine College in Atchison, Kansas. “If you have just learned that your son or daughter identifies as LGBTQ+, you are not alone,” said the organization via Twitter as it began its three-day 2021 conference July 15.

Courage works with same-sex attracted men and women who share its five goals: chastity, prayer, fellowship, support and role models. EnCourage works with the families of “LGBT” persons, offering spirituality, information, relationship support, assistance and witness. Leaders of the 41-year-old organization and national speakers featured at its conference sat down with the Register to discuss exactly what families should do when a child questions his or her biological sex.

Their advice was echoed in talks to the more than 700 attendees of the conference, including 480 attending the conference online, representing five continents, more than 20 countries and nearly every state. Positive prevention is the first job of Catholic families, says Father Philip Bochanski, the executive director of Courage. “The culture has this idea that says you can be the sex that you’re not, primarily because we don’t understand what’s good about being the sex that you are,” he said. “Speak boldly about what it means to be a man and why it’s good to be a woman and the way the sexes are good for each other.”

The theme of this year’s conference, “St. Joseph: Model of Courageous Love,” gave its speakers the opportunity to talk about the complementarity of the sexes. Bishop Emeritus John LeVoir of New Ulm, Minnesota — one of four bishops at the conference — pointed out, “The bond between Joseph and Mary is what Our Lord saw. This is the formation he experienced. We can really appreciate that formation.”

Greg Bottaro expanded on the theme. The director of the Catholic-Psych Institute told attendees that every family needs a mother and a father. “We all need Jesus,” he said, “and we all need Jesus’ mom and dad.”

The theme connected with conferencegoers. “I go to the Courage conference each year for spiritual renewal and family reunion,” said Garrett (last name withheld), a member of the Washington, D.C., Courage chapter. “But at this year’s conference I also came to know my spiritual father, St. Joseph, better.”

What to Tell a Child

But what are a mom and dad to do when a child flirts with transgenderism? The conference’s panel of experts had incisive advice. “The starting point is what St. Paul said to the Ephesians: Speak the truth in love,” said Father Bochanski. “You don’t beat someone over the head with the truth,” he said. “Don’t become deliberately provocative or offensive. Keep communication open in the family, which includes not just communication with the loved one who is experiencing gender-identity discordance, but with the rest of the family.”

What you do say will mean a lot, said Deacon Patrick Lappert, M.D., Courage’s chaplain and a plastic and reconstructive surgeon in Decatur, Alabama. Deacon Lappert spent 24 years in the U.S. Navy as a reconstructive surgeon, and he practiced in that same capacity for 15 years as a civilian. With younger children, “if you show love while insisting on the truth, over 80% of them will get over it. If you give affirming messages, 100% of them will persist. What family says is crucially important.”

Mary Rice Hasson of the Ethics and Public Policy Center founded the Person and Identity Project in Washington, D.C., to help parents cope with just these kinds of questions. Hasson stressed that when speaking with a young son or daughter with gender-identity discordance, you need to be aware of who has the child’s ear on this topic. Sometimes it’s a counselor, sometimes it’s a teacher, but the child is likely being coached. “The kid has been given

this path that is supposed to be the route to their happiness,” she said. “The kids are being taught, and they will feel permission to say, ‘My parents are transphobic.’ One thing that is important for parents to do is to affirm for the child that you love them.”

But parents should expect an alarming and heavy-handed response from the voices promoting transgenderism, said the panel. “Do you want a live son or do you want a dead daughter?” is the kind of message sent to parents. Often, parents feel they need to respond with the same intensity. Don’t, said Hasson.

“Take the urgency out of the conversation. Say, ‘Let’s step back,’” she said. “Resist the plan they are being given. It’s like a script that many of these kids have. To break that dynamic, the parents who have been successful have said, ‘Wait a minute.’”

A great place to take the conversation is to talk about physical health, she said. That will take some effort in finding a pediatrician you can trust. But, Deacon Lappert said, “What you say to parents and loved ones has a lot to do with the age of the person you are talking to.”

“When the kid comes out in late adolescence and early adulthood,” the strategy is different, he explained. For instance, it may not be as necessary to point out what you believe. “Presumably, they know already. At that point, put all that aside and forge the relationship with them,” he said. “Research shows that when they maintain that relationship with their parents, their sexual acting out decreases.”

Know the Background

The Alabama deacon added that, for any age, it is important to know the science. “They will talk about having the science behind them, but what they have is the smallest level of scientific affirmation,” he said. “The world literature is showing the opposite. Karolinska University Hospital in Stockholm has abandoned puberty blockers,” for instance, he said, along with Finland, Holland and the High Court in London.

What is important is to address not just the symptoms — the gender-identity discordance — but the wound behind it, Hasson said. Transgenderism is “socially contagious to particular kids because they are vulnerable and have preexisting issues. They have inferiority issues already,” she said, citing a study showing that young people with gender dysphoria have experienced high rates of emotional trauma and sexual or physical abuse from someone in their life, at home or away. For these hurting individuals, the “LGBTQ” community offers a new chapter in a person’s life. “It’s not just a middle-school fad, though there is some of that,” Hasson said. “It’s something that really deeply appeals to a wounded heart — ‘I can have a future. I can get affirmation.’”

“People experience a radical isolation living in the world in which we live,” Deacon Lappert said. “There is this deep desire for community. The transgender treatment offers hope. We tell them that we are going to solve the pain of being socially isolated.” But then the whole program unfolds, with puberty blockers, then top surgery and then face alteration. “But within about five to seven years, the suicide rate is back at 40%, 19 times the rate of the world population.”

It all comes back to St. Joseph, said Father Bochanski. The saint found happiness not by seeking his personal desires, but by serving Jesus and Mary. “We become who we are only when we give ourselves away,” he said. “It’s the gift of self that shows us who we really are.”

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