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Loretto Sr. Jeannine Gramick, seen in this 2001 file photo, and Pope Francis, are seen in this composite photo. (CNS composite; photos by Nancy Wiechec and Paul Haring)

by Sr. Jeannine Gramick

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May 1, 2024

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Editor's note: *Following is an article prepared by Loretto Sr. Jeannine Gramick, co-founder of the Maryland-based LGBTQ Catholic advocacy group New Ways Ministry. The article is being published jointly here and at the New Ways daily blog.*

I have been very sad since April 8, 2024, when the Vatican's Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith promulgated *Dignitas Infinita,* the Declaration on Human Dignity. I have felt the immense grief among LGBTQ people and their families and friends. This document states many beautiful and essential truths, but the section on Gender Theory, which condemns "gender ideology," is harming the transgender people I love.

I wrote a note to Pope Francis to tell him about my sadness and my disappointment with the use of the concept, "gender ideology." He responded by sharing his understanding of this idea—an understanding that I had not heard before.

Pope Francis wrote:

> Gender ideology is something other than homosexual or transsexual people. Gender ideology makes everyone equal without respect for personal history. I understand the concern about that paragraph in *Dignitas Infinita*, but it refers not to transgender people but to gender ideology, which nullifies differences. Transgender people must be accepted and integrated into society.

He then suggested that I read a novel by Robert Hugh Benson, entitled *Lord of the World* which, he said, depicts "this movement of canceling differences." Pope Francis had talked publicly about this 1907 British novel on a flight back from the Philippines in 2015. He told reporters about this futuristic tale which depicts a world where godless secularism is foisted upon those who believe in traditional morality.

Pope Francis calls this suppression of differences "ideological colonization" and believes that "gender ideology" is an example of it because differences among people are not respected. Repeating Pope Francis's 2016 apostolic exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*, *Dignitas Infinita,* asserts that gender ideology "envisages a society without sexual differences" (par. 59).

I wrote to our beloved pope again, telling him that, unfortunately in the U.S. (and elsewhere in the world), "gender ideology" has a different meaning. It does not mean nullifying or not respecting differences. Quite the opposite is true: Those who use that term do not consider or respect a person's history and experience of gender. I believe that people who use the term "gender ideology" have most likely never accompanied transgender persons.

I told Pope Francis that, many years ago, I could not understand why some transgender people seek "sex-change interventions," a term used by *Dignitas Infinita* to describe what health care professionals call "gender-affirming medical interventions." But I have not lived their lives, nor have I had their experiences. However, I *have* listened to their stories. And I ask myself, "How must it feel to live in a body with an identity contrary to how you believe God created you in your soul?"

Transgender people do not wantonly decide that their gender identity differs from their bodily appearances. They make this decision after much soul-searching, reflection, distress, and pain. The Church should aid in removing the pain so the person can become one in mind and body as God intends. If "it is in the body that each person recognizes himself or herself," as *Dignitas Infinita* (par. 60) asserts, what a serious burden the Church is placing on the person who does not recognize themselves in the body of their birth!

Transgender persons do not erase or deny sexual or gender differences. It is precisely because a transgender person knows that there *are* gender differences that the person realizes that their body does not match their soul. If "the body serves as the living context in which the interiority of the soul unfolds and manifests itself," (par. 60) as *Dignitas Infinita* states, then the Church needs to help people become one in mind and body to reflect their soul. The Church should support these interventions when they help the person to become one in mind, body, spirit, and soul.

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In summary, Pope Francis is rightly concerned that society not make "everyone equal without respect for personal history." But in our culture, those who use the term, "gender ideology," do just that by not accepting differences in how persons perceive their gender identity. People who use this term thus make everyone equal by not respecting people's individual, personal histories.

Oh, what a major problem we have when the same words mean different things to different people!

I continue to hope. I hope that thousands — no, millions — of Catholics who love their transgender relatives and friends will tell their loved ones, their parish priests, their bishop, and all who will listen that Pope Francis wants transgender people to be "accepted and integrated into society," as he wrote to me. Let's say it as loudly as we can: Pope Francis does not want us to "nullify differences." He wants us to "respect personal history."

Since the term "gender ideology" is being used in the opposite way from how Pope Francis understands it, let's just purge those words from our vocabulary and, instead, start honoring differences. In fact, while we're at it, let's work to eradicate those words and what they imply from all our church documents.