



A Method for Pastoral Care & Counseling with Transgender Emerging Adults in University Settings: Developing a Robust Understanding of *Imago Dei*

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Opinion

I work with and teach university students, emerging adults, 18-24-year old. Like all universities in the U.S., there are students here that are in the process of transitioning from their natal gender to a new gender. The process is complex and arduous. Unbelievably, there is still an incredible cultural and societal opposition to recognizing transgender people and other sexual and gender minorities as equals.

The term *transgender* is an encompassing and inclusive word that covers a wide-range of expressions and experiences; however, the term is certainly bound by culture and context Canales [1]. Transgender “describes a person whose gender identity does *not* match their natal sex or does not align with traditional notions of masculinity or femininity”. Transgender is not always so cut-and-dry; it may be a complex phenomenon for some people. People who self-identify as transgender may consider themselves homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual (having a sexual attraction to either both females or male, but usually has a greater affinity for one over the other).

My concern is the way pastoral care givers provide counseling with emerging adults in university settings. As a pastoral theologian and pastoral counselor, one of the ways to approach care giving to emerging adults is to develop a robust understanding of the theological principle, known as *imago Dei* or the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26-27; 2:21-22). Helping transgender (and all) emerging adults comprehend *imago Dei* is extremely important

work. “*Imago Dei* refers to all people being created in the image and likeness of God no matter if they are: black or white, female or male, poor or rich, born below the equator or above the equator, homosexual or heterosexual, or transgender or cisgender” Canales [2]. Megan K, DeFranza [3]. maintains that *imago Dei* needs to be liberated from a “normal,” two-sex, binary model of gender identity, as well as from a white, middle-class, evangelical and Roman Catholic, heterosexual, virgin-until-married, cisgender, female and male way for doing theology (p. 23 & xv). A theology of *imago Dei* has to involve love, justice, and equality as its binding virtues.

There are multiple ways of in which people experience God and connect with God, and love, justice, and equality are hallmarks that empower people to see the goodness and godliness in others. Loving the transgender young person is connecting with *imago Dei* of the other. Demonstrating justice to the vulnerable person is part of *imago Dei* because it establishes awareness of conscience. Expressing equality is part of *imago Dei* because it stands with God’s solidarity for the marginalized and oppressed [5].

There is an ethical imperative associated with *imago Dei* that is a central component to relational pastoral care and counseling with transgender young people. For pastoral care givers and counselors, Jesus of Nazareth (~4 BCE-28 CE) is the archetype and embodiment of *imago Dei*. Ultimately, *imago Dei* finds its fullest expression in the personhood of Jesus of Nazareth as he turned many of the societal rules and religious customs of his day upside down, such as inviting woman to follow him, hanging around questionable people, and

healing on the Sabbath. Acknowledging the interior sacredness of all human beings and is the cornerstone of *imago Dei*.

Larry Kent Graham [4] notes that there are five features regarding *imago Dei*, which characterize pastoral care & counselors' work with transgender emerging adults. Here are the five features:

1. Recognizing and respecting the sacred worth and dignity of every individual because to be *imago Dei* is to be created with unconditional goodness and value;
2. Reflecting *imago Dei* to the other person is to be co-creators of unique configurations of life-nourishing relationship possibilities because God creates the world for social and cultural possibilities;
3. Enjoying the *imago Dei* is a rich pleasure for all human beings and the extension of bodily existence of gratitude, care, kindness, empathy, and compassion to those other people who we share these pleasures;
4. Participating in relational justice echoes *imago Dei* because human relationships are to be cherished, called flourish, and embody mutual respect, which provides
 - Protection of the health and integrity of all sexual and gender minorities,
 - Overcomes suppressed heterosexism and homophobia,
 - Incapacitates internalized cisgenderism and transphobia.
5. Respecting the diversity and multiplicity reveals *imago Dei* because it represents dynamic wholeness of individuals and embraces love and compassion towards the other, which reconciles the estranged person (pp. 111-116).

Therefore, a robust theology of *imago Dei* concerned with doing pastoral care and counseling relationally, justice-oriented, and on the margins.

Consequently, understanding *imago Dei* as a pastoral care giver and counselor is significant in engaging with and empowering emerging adults who are transgender or who are transitioning. Having a robust theology of *imago Dei* means that as a pastoral counselor I can fiercely protect and tenderly cherish the uniqueness of each transgender person that I encounter. Moreover, a robust understanding of *imago Dei* allows pastoral care givers and counselors to stand in solidarity and actively welcome transgender folks as good, unique, and sacred.

To offer pastoral care and counseling to a transgender emerging adults, is to simply be human with them. Being human with transgender emerging adults is providing them with the very best of human characteristics: listening; empowering; guiding; liberating; healing; sustaining; reconciling; and nurturing a person toward the other, self, and God Canales [2]. Therefore, it is not surprising that pastoral care with transgender young people comes in a myriad of ways and in different forms.

Pope Francis recommends treating all people with tenderness because it reflects *imago Dei* perfectly. The pope writes, "[God] summons us to the revolution of *tenderness*. . . It is a fraternal love capable of seeing sacred grandeur of our neighbor, of finding God in every human being, of tolerating the nuisances of life in common by clinging to the love of God, of opening the heart to divine love and seeking the happiness of others just as [God] does" (*EG*, § 88 & 92). Pope Francis' words are at the very heart of seeing and treating the transgender emerging adult as *imago Dei* and treating and respecting that other person with love and dignity.

In sum, one method for helping transgender emerging adults flourish on university campuses is through pastoral care and counseling, and by developing a robust understanding of *imago Dei*, which reflects the dignity of the individual.

Acknowledgement

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Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.

References

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