

September 26, 2023

My Dear Sons and Daughters in Christ:

I write to you today to discuss more fully the fourth basic truth that I spoke of in my first pastoral letter issued on August 22, 2023, and to ask that we reflect more deeply on this important truth of our faith: “Every human person is created in the image and likeness of God, male or female, and all people should be helped to discover their true identities as children of God, and not supported in a disordered attempt to reject their undeniable biological and God-given identity.”

The reality that the human community is losing this thread of truth is one of the most surprising and devastating trends of our time. The confusion and the harm that come from forsaking our biological and God-given identity are rooted in the modern tendency to deny the sovereignty of God, and for many, to deny even His very existence—thereby making ourselves into ‘gods’ in our own minds. This denial of the true God is demonstrated in dramatic ways as we begin to lose the thread of who we are. To answer the basic question of our identity, we must turn to God and to the truth He has revealed to us. When we attempt to answer this question of who we are without first seeking an answer from God, we find ourselves immersed in the chaos which we see around us today. Thankfully, God has revealed a beautiful picture of who we are, and Sacred Scripture and the Sacred Tradition of our Catholic faith offer much to help us paint the wondrous picture of the human person. “So, God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” (Gen 1:27).

The truth that God has created us in His own image and likeness takes us beyond the natural level to the supernatural destiny that we all share. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church states, “The human body shares in the dignity of ‘the image of God’: it is a human body precisely because it is animated by a spiritual soul, and it is the whole human person that is intended to become, in the body of Christ, a temple of the Spirit.” (CCC 364-365).

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, St. John Paul II wrote about an “anthropological foundation for masculinity and femininity.” He stated that this “is a plan that ‘from the beginning’ has been indelibly imprinted in the very being of the human person—men and women—and, therefore, in the make-up, meaning and deepest working of the individual.” (*Christifideles Laici*, December 30, 1988, para. 50).

In today’s culture there is a preoccupation with one’s own identity, which speaks to a deeply held longing in the heart and soul of each person to find meaning in his or her life. We try to express in some way, through the physical reality of our lives, the stirrings we feel within our souls. Although there is a wide diversity of human experience, and although every life offers something unique and unrepeatable, we all share one simple, clear, and yet inconceivably profound truth: we are the Beloved, which means we are in a relationship with the One Who Loves. This foundational truth is what actually gives our lives the

meaning we are truly seeking, if only we would embrace our true identity in God and enter into relationship with Him. We cannot and do not create our own identity—our identity comes from our Creator alone. The Catechism of the Catholic Church provides us a beautiful quotation from St. Catherine of Siena which gives us a glimpse of our identity in God’s eyes. St. Catherine writes: “What made you establish man in so great a dignity? Certainly, the incalculable love by which you have looked on your creature in yourself! You are taken with love for her; for by love indeed you created her, by love you have given her a being capable of tasting your eternal Good.” (CCC 356).

We see many agendas in the world today that relate to human identity, in particular “sexual identity.” One that is very much before our eyes in this time is the LGBTQ agenda. As I stated in my pastoral letter from September 12, 2023: “The Church teaches that those who experience feelings of same-sex attraction or gender dysphoria do not sin simply because they have such feelings, but freely acting upon these feelings is sinful and not in accordance with God’s design for His children.”

Prior to his election as Pope Benedict XVI, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger wrote: “In Genesis 3, we find that this truth about persons being an image of God has been obscured by original sin. There inevitably follows a loss of awareness of the covenantal character of the union these people had with God and with each other. The human body retains its ‘spousal significance’ but this is now clouded by sin. Thus, in Genesis 19:1-11, the deterioration due to sin continues in the story of the men of Sodom. There can be no doubt of the moral judgement made there against homosexual relations.” (Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, October 1986, para. 6).

Cardinal Ratzinger continued: “To choose someone of the same sex for one’s sexual activity is to annul the rich symbolism and meaning, not to mention the goals, of the Creator’s sexual design. Homosexual activity is not a complementary union, able to transmit life, and so it thwarts the call to a life of that form of self-giving which the Gospel says is the essence of Christian living. This does not mean that homosexual persons are not often generous and giving of themselves; but when they engage in homosexual activity, they confirm within themselves a disordered sexual inclination which is essentially self-indulgent.” (Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, October 1986, para. 7).

We must be loving but clear, therefore, that those who carry the burden of same-sex attraction must not act upon these inclinations because such activities are contrary to the biological and God-given identity of the individual, and therefore contrary to the will of God in all cases. We as their clergy, family, and friends must surround these individuals with love and support so they may embrace their crosses and live out their authentic, God-given identity.

The transgender movement is another face of the LGBTQ agenda, and it is also at odds with the Catholic understanding of the human being. This movement seeks to fundamentally alter the way our world views the biological and God-given identity of each person. A rapidly increasing number of young people are being caught up in the transgender movement in these times rather than being told the truth of who they are as a beloved child of God. We can certainly acknowledge that there are complex reasons why a person may have feelings of gender dysphoria, but it is important for each person to understand that regardless of feelings, a person’s biological identity is given by God, and it is unchangeable by man. Parents should not be afraid to address the falsehood of gender ideology with their children in an age-appropriate

manner, and parents should also reinforce the fact that although hormones and surgeries might change one's appearance, those medical procedures cannot change the sex of even one cell of the body.

Many who support the agenda of "transgenderism" would state that when a biological male identifies as a female and has "gender reassignment," this is in actuality a "gender confirmation" as his anatomy now reflects his "true gender." The Catechism states, however, that: "The unity of soul and body is so profound that one has to consider the soul to be the 'form' of the body: i.e., it is because of its spiritual soul that the body made of matter becomes a living, human body; spirit and matter, in man, are not two natures united, but rather their union forms a single nature." (CCC 365). And also, "Man and woman have been created, which is to say, willed by God: on the one hand, in perfect equality as human persons; on the other, in their respective beings as man and woman. 'Being man' or 'being woman' is a reality which is good and willed by God ..." (CCC 369). Therefore, transition surgeries or elective medical treatment given for the purpose of attempting to "transition" a person to a gender other than his or her God-given biological sex are **gravely evil**. (Note: There are rare medical cases of intersex individuals who have been born with an unclear biological sex or both male and female characteristics. These cases are beyond the scope of this pastoral letter and should be addressed with your pastor and medical team.)

It is important to note here that we must ALWAYS, ALWAYS treat all people with respect, compassion, and recognition of their intrinsic dignity. Therefore, men and women with homosexual tendencies or with gender dysphoria must be treated with love and compassion and should always be respected as the precious children of God that they are. This includes telling them the truth in charity.

All of this brings us to the upcoming Synod on Synodality which is emerging as an attempt by some to change the focus of Catholicism from eternal salvation of souls in Christ, to making every person feel affirmed regardless of what choices they have made or will make in life. One of the topics that reportedly will be discussed during the Synod is the blessing of same-sex relationships. Archbishop Victor Manuel Fernandez, Prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, stated in July 2023, when asked about blessings for homosexual couples: "If a blessing is given in such a way that it does not cause that confusion, it will have to be analyzed and confirmed." However, we must look to the perennial and unchanging teaching of the Church—such a blessing would not be licit and, therefore, would undoubtedly cause confusion. In fact, the very same office, the Congregation (now Dicastery) for the Doctrine of the Faith, released a statement on March 15, 2021, entitled *Responsum of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to a dubium regarding the blessing of the unions of persons of the same sex*. In this Responsum, the previous Prefect of the Congregation, **Luis Cardinal Ladaria** stated that God "does not and cannot bless sin" and that, "For the above mentioned reasons, the Church does not have, and cannot have, the power to bless unions of persons of the same sex in the sense intended above." Because truth cannot change, we must acknowledge that the Dicastery cannot come to a different conclusion now which would overturn the original statement of truth from the same office. Truth is based on God's Divine Word as revealed in Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, and as guarded by the Magisterium of the Church. Therefore, any attempt to permit blessings of same-sex unions would be an attack upon the Sacred Deposit of Faith.

Additionally, the Responsum also stated the following: "Blessings belong to the category of the sacramentals, whereby the Church 'calls us to praise God, encourages us to implore his protection, and exhorts us to seek his mercy by our holiness of life.' In addition, they 'have been established as a kind of imitation of the sacraments, blessings are signs above all of spiritual effects that are achieved through the Church's intercession.' Consequently, in order to conform with the nature of sacramentals, when a



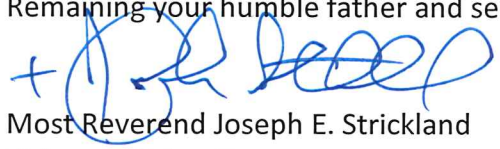
blessing is invoked on particular human relationships, in addition to the right intention of those who participate, it is necessary that what is blessed be objectively and positively ordered to receive and express grace, according to the designs of God inscribed in creation, and fully revealed by Christ the Lord. Therefore, only those realities which are in themselves ordered to serve those ends are congruent with the essence of the blessing imparted by the Church. For this reason, it is not licit to impart a blessing on relationships, or partnerships, even stable, that involve sexual activity outside of marriage (i.e., outside the indissoluble union of a man and a woman open in itself to the transmission of life), as is the case of the unions between persons of the same sex. The presence in such relationships of positive elements, which are in themselves to be valued and appreciated, cannot justify these relationships and render them legitimate objects of an ecclesial blessing, since the positive elements exist within the context of a union not ordered to the Creator's plan." (*Responsum of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to a dubium regarding the blessing of the unions of persons of the same sex, March 15, 2021*).

I want to reiterate that this is not an attempt in any way to discriminate against those who carry the burden of same-sex attraction, but rather it is a reminder of the truth of the liturgical rite and of the nature of the sacramentals. We cannot honor God who is truth by attempting to offer blessings which run counter to His truth.

In closing, I would like to say to those with same-sex attraction or gender dysphoria, Christ loves you and the Catholic Church welcomes you. We are all struggling to grow in holiness. I invite you to come and sit with us, pray with us, worship with us, and experience the overwhelming power of God's love and mercy with us. The truth is, at the core of our existence is Love, and there is no power in Heaven or on Earth that can keep the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit from loving us fully and completely. We are invited at every moment to embrace the love that God offers us, but in His infinite wisdom and goodness He does not force Himself upon us. Love is a choice, and it is always a sacrifice, but it is a sacrifice He first made for us, and it is a choice He is calling us to make for Him. Let the scales fall from our eyes that we may get a glimpse of how much Our Father loves us as His Beloved and run to Him always as the source of our ultimate fulfillment. "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine." (Isaiah 43:1).

May the Lord bless you and may you find your true identity in the abundance of His boundless love.

Remaining your humble father and servant,



Most Reverend Joseph E. Strickland
 Bishop of Tyler, Texas