

# 'Transgender' Baptisms? Sorting Out the Vatican's Recent Statement

COMMENTARY: It is critically important to carefully read the Dicastery of the Doctrine of the Faith's answers to Bishop Negri's questions in context — and to ignore silly headlines from media sources that do not understand Catholic teaching.



As Pope St. John Paul II beautifully put it in his theology of the body, “the body expresses the person.” (photo: Burkin Denis / Shutterstock)

If you’ve been watching the news, you were likely surprised to see clickbait headlines from mainstream outlets like *The Washington Post* proclaiming: “Vatican says transgender people can be baptized, serve as godparents.” After all, such a headline conflicts directly with Pope Francis’ many declarations about gender ideology.

For example, in his encyclical *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis explained that “valuing one’s own body in its femininity or masculinity is necessary if I am going to be able to recognize myself in an encounter with someone who is different.” And as

recently as 2019, the Vatican’s Congregation for Catholic Education reaffirmed that “human nature must be understood on the basis of the unity of body and soul” and condemned “the separation of sex from gender.”

The Vatican’s most recent guidance comes in response to several questions posed to the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, or DDF, by Brazilian Bishop Giuseppe (José) Negri regarding individuals who identify as transgender and whether they can be baptized or participate in a Baptism as godparents. The Dicastery dated its responses Oct. 31 and it was published on the Vatican website on Nov. 8; the document is available only in Italian and Portuguese for now, but multiple news agencies have translated it. The dicastery summarized the bishop’s three questions related to gender ideology as follows:

**1. Can a transgender person be baptized?**

**2. Can a transgender person be a godfather or godmother at baptism?**

**3. Can a transgender person be a witness at a wedding?**

In response to the first question, the DDF says that someone who identifies as transgender and has undergone surgery can receive the sacrament of baptism “*under the same conditions as other believers*, if there are no situations in which there is a risk of generating public scandal, or disorientation among the faithful.” Those “conditions” are obviously critical. So what are they?

Cardinal Gerhard Müller, the former prefect of the DDF, points to St. Thomas Aquinas and *Traditio Apostolica* — the oldest Church ordinance written in Rome and dating to approximately 200 AD — and explains that individuals can be

baptized if they have sinned in the past but only if they do so intending to abandon sinful conduct in the future. Those who plan to persist in sin resist God's plan and are unable to receive the grace of the sacrament. Baptizing those who intend to keep sinning generates public scandal because it undermines the Church's declaration that sacraments are signs of the grace they convey.

That context helps explain the dicastery's answer. The Church has long recognized that we are not merely disembodied souls residing in a meaningless vessel that happens to be the human body. That is, we are not souls trapped in a shell of a body. Rather, we are *embodied* souls, and who we are is inextricably linked to our bodies. As Pope St. John Paul II beautifully put it in his theology of the body, "the body expresses the person."

We all understand this body-soul unity intuitively. If someone slaps you in the face, you do not yell, "You hurt the body that I'm residing in!" Instead, you cry, "Your hurt *me!*" The body is so integral to our personhood that the body and soul are destined to live together forever, as we affirm every week at Mass in the Nicene Creed.

Putting this all together, the dicastery says that someone who identifies as transgender can be baptized only if doing so will not risk generating public scandal or disorientation among the faithful. Accordingly, the *only* situation where a baptism would not present such risks is if the individual has (1) acknowledged making a mistake, (2) started again identifying with their sex, and (3) taken steps to undo any surgery, to the extent possible. Like anyone seeking baptism, repentance and a sincere desire to not sin again opens the door to the sacrament and the graces that flow from it.

Relatedly, the dicastery says that children or adolescents with “problems of a transgender nature” could also receive baptism if they are well prepared and willing to be baptized. This, too, makes sense in context. There is nothing sinful about a child or adolescent who is experiencing gender dysphoria, a recognized mental-health diagnosis. Such a child or adolescent deserves our empathy and help; we need to accompany kids, no matter their struggle.

Accordingly, if a child or adolescent is experiencing gender dysphoria, baptism is appropriate if the child or adolescent is well prepared to acknowledge and identify with their sex despite struggling with dysphoria on an ongoing basis. No child or adolescent should be turned away from baptism because of a mental health struggle. At the same time, no child or adolescent should be encouraged to embrace an identity that rejects his or her sex. To do so encourages harm to the child, a subject we'll return to in a moment.

Responding to the second question, the dicastery says that transgender adults who had undergone surgery could serve as godfathers or godmothers “under certain conditions.” Again, however, “pastoral prudence demands that it *not* be permitted if there is a risk of scandal, undue legitimation or disorientation in the educational sphere of the ecclesial community.” As with the baptism itself, avoiding a risk of scandal or disorientation requires three conditions. The individual seeking to serve as a godparent must have (1) acknowledged making a mistake, (2) started again identifying with their sex, and (3) taken steps to undo any surgery, to the extent possible. That is the natural reading of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith's conditions.

Finally, on the third question, the dicastery says there is no prohibition in canon law on a transgender person acting as a witness at a Catholic wedding. But a priest or deacon, exercising pastoral prudence, would again want to avoid a risk of

scandal or disorientation and would presumably impose the same, three conditions as noted in response to the first two questions.

All of this is consistent with how Pope Francis has viewed the issue of gender ideology.

In a 2016 address to the Polish Bishops, he warned: “Today children — children! — are taught in school that everyone can choose his or her sex. Why are they teaching this?” In his apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis decried that promoting a “personal identity . . . radically separated from the biological difference between male and female” reduces human identity to “the choice of the individual” and undermines the “anthropological basis of the family.”

Again, in *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis emphasized that “[v]aluing one’s own body in its femininity or masculinity is necessary if I am going to be able to recognize myself in an encounter with someone who is different.” And on his 10th anniversary as pope, Pope Francis warned that “gender ideology” is “one of the most dangerous ideological colonizations.” Why? Because it “dilute[s] the differences” between male and female, which “goes against the human vocation” and asserts the self over God.

Pope Francis’ warnings about gender ideology are supported by science. There is a reason that it is standard medical and psychological practice to encourage a child with a persistent, mistaken belief that is inconsistent with reality — such as anorexia — to align their belief with reality, not the other way around. We cannot change reality. Unsurprisingly, eighty to 95% of children who experience gender dysphoria will reconcile their “gender identity” with their sex if there is no intervention to support or reinforce the dysphoria.

Conversely, there are no controlled, long-term studies that demonstrate the safety or efficacy of gender-affirming policies and treatments for gender dysphoria in the long term. Not one. And the best long-term study shows that once initial happiness wears off, gender-dysphoric individuals who undergo a surgical transition have *higher* rates of suicide death and psychiatric hospitalization than those who do not. Encouraging affirmation of gender dysphoria is not loving because it does not will the good of the other but results in severe, long-lasting harm. It is shameful for secular media outlets to suggest that the Church would do so.

All of this shows why it is critically important to carefully read the Dicastery of the Doctrine of the Faith's answers to Bishop Negri's questions in context and to ignore silly headlines from media sources that do not understand Catholic teaching. The Church does not — and would not — encourage individuals to pursue a path that contradicts God's plan, a path that harms the body he has gifted us.

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