

En-Gendering Creation Anew: Rethinking Ecclesial Statements on Science, Gender, and Sexuality with William R. Stoeger, SJ

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Despite Pope John Paul II's call for "intense dialogue" between theology and science that excludes "unreasonable interpretations" of Scripture, ecclesial statements on gender and sexuality—including John Paul II's own works—deploy an interpretation of the literal meaning of Genesis to perpetuate a complementarian anthropology that contradicts scientific insights about the human body. After illustrating the implications of this hermeneutical inconsistency, this article presents Jesuit astronomer William Stoeger's theological method and hermeneutics of the full flourishing of life as an alternative approach, which fulfills John Paul II's vision for dialogue and paves a way toward reimagining church teachings on gender and sexuality.

Keywords: gender, sexuality, theology, science, William R. Stoeger, SJ, Pope John Paul II, complementarity, LGBTQ+, transgender, method, epistemology

IN *Sexual Ethics: A Theological Introduction*, Todd Salzman and Michael Lawler propose a multifaceted framework for fostering dialogue between the presuppositions about gender and sexuality that underpin ecclesial statements on these topics and efforts by academic theologians to rethink these presuppositions in light of critical reflection on Scripture, tradition, science, and experience. They write:

There is a presumption of truth in favor of magisterial teaching, but that teaching is to be critically reflected upon in light of theologically sound scriptural exegesis, the reasonable input of science in areas where it has competence, and the cultural, historical, and relational experiences of the faithful. When there is a conflict between these sources, a process of research, dialogue, and discernment must be undertaken to determine where truth resides.¹

¹ Todd A. Salzman and Michael G. Lawler, *Sexual Ethics: A Theological Introduction* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012), 156.

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In similar terms, the Congregation for Catholic Education's (CCE) 2019 instruction, "Male and Female He Created Them': Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education," states that a "path of dialogue, which involves listening, reasoning and proposing, appears the most effective way towards a positive transformation of concerns and misunderstandings, as well as a resource that in itself can help develop a network of relationships that is both more open and more human."² Fleshing out this approach, the instruction states that genuine, "constructive encounter" requires "an atmosphere of transparency where all parties constantly keep others informed of what each is doing, facilitating maximum involvement and thus avoiding the unnecessary tensions that arise through misunderstandings caused by lack of clarity, information or competency."³

The CCE's desire for "constructive encounter" sets a high bar for heeding insights from various ways of knowing and engaging reality. Further, the congregation's desire to avoid the "tensions" that arise from ambiguity, misinformation, and lack of competency parallels Salzman and Lawler's call for sound scriptural exegesis, critical engagement with science, and attention to the "relational experiences of the faithful." But are contemporary ecclesial statements on gender and sexuality faithful to their own methods and hermeneutics?

In conversation with the CCE, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), and John Paul II's writings on theology-science dialogue, this article argues that ecclesial statements on gender and sexuality manifest a troubling inconsistency in their interpretation of the Genesis creation narratives, which perpetuates the systematic suppression and oppression of women and LGBTQ+ persons in the church.⁴ After illustrating this point, I present Jesuit astronomer William Stoeger's writings on hermeneutics and theological method as an alternative model that fosters hermeneutical integrity and—in so doing—realizes the vision for theology-science dialogue set forth by John Paul II, while also opening a channel for the experience and suffering of women and LGBTQ+ persons to inform church teaching. My argument proceeds in four parts. First, I present John Paul II's statements on theology-science dialogue and evolutionary theory as a basis for rethinking the normative significance of the Genesis creation texts as explanations of cosmic origins.

² Congregation for Catholic Education (hereafter CCE), "Male and Female He Created Them': Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education," June 10, 2019, §52, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20190202_maschio-e-femmina_en.pdf.

³ CCE, "Male and Female He Created Them," §45.

⁴ I have chosen to engage John Paul II because of his writings on gender complementarity and theology-science dialogue; neither Benedict XVI nor Francis engages these issues in the same depth that John Paul II does.

Second, on this basis, I present two “case studies” to illustrate how ecclesial statements on gender and sexuality apply a “hermeneutics of convenience” to Genesis, employing unsound exegesis of the literal meaning of the text and ignoring contemporary science in order to uphold a predetermined anthropology—in direct contradiction to John Paul II’s stated approach.

Third, I present Stoeger’s writings on interdisciplinary dialogue and theological method as an alternative model that, by embracing the proper disciplinary limits of science and theology, possesses a unique capacity for allowing scientific, pastoral, and experiential concerns to inform and influence ecclesial views on gender and sexuality. Fourth, I apply Stoeger’s discernment-driven hermeneutics of the full flourishing of life—a contemporary appropriation of Thomas Aquinas’ notion of “proper perfection”—as a foundation for reevaluating interpretations of the tradition on the basis of their ability to promote each creature’s flourishing, according to its own kind. Finally, in keeping with Elena Procario-Foley and Susan Abraham’s observation that “We can only encounter horizons by venturing out,”⁵ I conclude by considering how—by actualizing John Paul II’s vision for theology-science dialogue—and in harmony with the aims of feminist and queer theology—Stoeger’s methodology can lead us to “venture out” toward reimagining the place of women and LGBTQ+ persons in the church today. At the outset, I wish to note that because I engage documents promulgated by popes and Vatican congregations, I use the terms “statements” and “teachings” broadly to refer to declarations on gender and sexuality.⁶ In addition, although this project moves toward theological anthropology and ethics, it is mainly a study in hermeneutics and theological method, which I hope will nourish future reflection on gender and sexuality in the church.

Darwin Goes to Rome: Evolution, the Senses of Scripture, and Theology-Science Dialogue

To establish a foundation for discussing how church teachings on gender and sexuality interpret the Genesis creation narratives, this section

⁵ Elena Procario-Foley and Susan Abraham, “Preface,” in *Frontiers in Catholic Feminist Theology: Shoulder to Shoulder*, eds. Susan Abraham and Elena Procario-Foley (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 1.

⁶ I use these terms, rather than “magisterium” or “magisterial,” in an effort to avoid terminological imprecision. For a comprehensive treatment of the exercise of ecclesial authority and the meaning of the “magisterium,” see Richard R. Gaillardetz, *By What Authority?: Foundations for Understanding Authority in the Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2018), esp. chap. 6 to 9.

assesses the significance of several papal statements on theology-science dialogue and evolutionary theory, with a focus on the writings of John Paul II. In his 1986 letter to George Coyne, then director of the Vatican Observatory, the pope calls for “intense dialogue” between theology and science. He writes that while “theology is not to incorporate indifferently each new philosophical or scientific theory ... theologians must understand them and test their value in bringing out from Christian belief some of the possibilities which have not yet been realized.”⁷ A remarkable passage illustrates what John Paul has in mind. He writes, “Just as Aristotelian philosophy ... ultimately came to shape some of the most profound expressions of theological doctrine, so can we not hope that the sciences of today, along with all forms of human knowing, may invigorate and inform those parts of the theological enterprise that bear on the relation of nature, humanity and God?”⁸ Two initial observations bear mention here. First, the pope clearly sees dialogue with the sciences as a resource for eliciting new possibilities for theological reflection and for “invigorating” Christian thought. Making this point clear, he writes that theology-science dialogue offers “the unprecedented opportunity ... for a *common interactive relationship* in which *each discipline retains its integrity* and yet *is radically open to the discoveries and insights of the other.*”⁹ As a result, second, he seems open to the idea that science may influence the development of tradition, as his well-known claim that “science can purify religion from error and superstition” makes clear.¹⁰

Seeds of these statements may appear in John Paul II’s earlier writings. In his 1960 book *Love and Responsibility*, Karol Wojtyła—the future pontiff—expounds the relationship between biology and nature in theological anthropology. A passage cited in the CCE instruction states:

The expressions “the order of nature” and “the order of biology” must not be confused or regarded as identical, the “biological order” does indeed mean the same as the order of nature *but only in so far as this is accessible to methods of empirical and descriptive natural science*, and not as a specific order of existence, with an obvious relationship to the First Cause, to God the Creator God.¹¹

⁷ Pope John Paul II, “Letter of His Holiness John Paul II to Reverend George V. Coyne, SJ, Director of the Vatican Observatory,” June 1, 1988, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_19880601_padre-coyne.html.

⁸ Pope John Paul II, “Letter of His Holiness John Paul II to Reverend George Coyne.”

⁹ Pope John Paul II, “Letter of His Holiness John Paul II to Reverend George Coyne.” Emphasis mine.

¹⁰ Pope John Paul II, “Letter of His Holiness John Paul II to Reverend George Coyne.”

¹¹ Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 56–57; quoted in CCE, “Male and Female He Created Them,” §23. Emphasis mine.

Here, Wojtyła carefully delineates the proper domain of biology—the study of the natural world using scientific methods—and the proper domain of theology and philosophy: the nature of the human person. In doing so, he insists that the meaning and significance of humanity does not lie in empirical biological data alone. Still, Wojtyła’s assertion of a connection between these two “orders” is significant, insofar as our understanding of the “order of nature” can be enriched by biological research, as long as biology stays faithful to its proper aims.

Similarly, John Paul II’s 1981 exhortation on the family, *Familiaris Consortio*, appears open to dialogue with sociological data, so long as such data does not simply replicate “majority opinion.” He explains, “The Church values sociological and statistical research when it proves helpful in understanding the historical context in which pastoral action has to be developed and when it leads to a better understanding of the truth.”¹² Noteworthy here is the pope’s invocation of the pastoral dimension of the faith. By synthesizing the concerns of the faithful in a particular context, sociological research enriches the church’s ability to apply the gospel to a given community’s pastoral needs.

The hermeneutical and theological implications of these statements come to greater clarity in John Paul II’s 1996 *Message to the Pontifical Academy of the Sciences*. There, he invokes Leo XIII’s statement, “the truth cannot contradict the truth,” to affirm the academy in its task of informing the magisterium about recent scientific insights.¹³ He calls for:

a rigorous hermeneutical approach in seeking a concrete interpretation of the inspired texts. It is important to set proper limits to the understanding of Scripture, excluding any unreasonable interpretations which would make it mean something which it is not intended to mean. In order to mark out the limits of their own proper fields, theologians and those working on the exegesis of Scripture need to be well informed regarding the results of the latest scientific research.¹⁴

On this basis, John Paul II concludes that there is “no conflict between evolution and the doctrine of the faith regarding man [*sic*] and his vocation,

¹² Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio*, November 22, 1981, §5.

¹³ As Denis Edwards indicates, Augustine articulates a similar view, stating that the truths of faith and truths about the natural world “cannot ultimately be in opposition, because they spring from the one truth of God.” Denis Edwards, *Christian Understandings of Creation: The Historical Trajectory* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 71.

¹⁴ Pope John Paul II, *Message to the Pontifical Academy of the Sciences*, October 22, 1996, §3, <https://humanorigins.si.edu/sites/default/files/MESSAGE%20TO%20THE%20PONTIFICAL%20ACADEMY%20OF%20SCIENCES%20%28Pope%20John%20Paul%20II%29.pdf>. Pope John Paul II is citing Pope Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, November 18, 1893, §23, https://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_18111893_providentissimus-deus.html.

provided that we do not lose sight of certain fixed points,” such as the dignity of the human person.¹⁵ Similarly, Pope Benedict XVI states on the basis of methodological differences that while science cannot answer philosophical questions, the “clash” between religion and evolution is “an absurdity because on one hand there is much scientific proof in favor of evolution, which appears as a reality that we must see and which enriches our understanding of life and being as such.”¹⁶

Before assessing further the hermeneutical and theological impacts of these statements, I wish to note that while the details of evolutionary theory remain a topic of scientific debate, the popes speak of evolution *in general* and avoid endorsing any one account of evolution.¹⁷ This detail is

¹⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Message to the Pontifical Academy of the Sciences*, §3. See *Message to the Pontifical Academy of the Sciences*, §5, on dignity and other points of concern, such as the relationship between spirit and matter. As we shall see, these “fixed points” also appear to include the binary, complementarian anthropology found in ecclesial statements on the sexed human person.

¹⁶ “Pope Calls for Protection of Environment, Says Creation-Evolution Debate Is ‘Absurdity,’” July 26, 2007, https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/pope_calls_for_protection_of_environment_says_creationevolution_debate_is_absurdity. Likewise, Pope Francis’ *Laudato Si’* is premised on the possibility of constructive dialogue between science and faith. For an assessment of the treatment of evolution and ecology in *Laudato Si’*, see Paul J. Schutz, “Cultivating a ‘Cosmic Perspective’ in Theology: Reading William R. Stoeger with *Laudato Si’*,” *Theological Studies* 80, no. 4 (December 2019): 798–821. For a broader assessment of Francis’ engagement with science in *Laudato Si’*, see Celia Deane-Drummond, “Laudato Si’ and the Natural Sciences: An Assessment of Possibilities and Limits,” *Theological Studies* 77 (2016): 392–415.

¹⁷ Simon Conway Morris offers a tour of the evolutionary terrain and the philosophical and theological implications of various accounts of evolution in *Life’s Solution: Inevitable Humans in a Lonely Universe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). To be clear, however, with Ernan McMullin, William Stoeger, Elizabeth Johnson, and Dennis Edwards, I tend away from the more *convergence*-oriented views of evolution espoused by Conway Morris and those who follow in legacy of Teilhard de Chardin, preferring accounts of evolution that emphasize chance and *contingency*. In my opinion, Conway Morris’ position, which as McMullin notes is characterized by the “progressivist” or “necessitarian” idea that under the right conditions, “biological evolution will necessarily occur, and that in the course of time this evolution will necessarily progress towards higher and higher levels of intelligence,” makes claims that exceed what scientific accounts of evolution may tell us (note the word “inevitable” in Conway Morris’ title). For treatments of evolutionary theory more focused on contingency, see Francisco Ayala, “Darwin’s Devolution: Design without Designer,” in *Evolutionary and Molecular Biology*, eds. Robert John Russell, William R. Stoeger, SJ, and Francisco J. Ayala (Vatican Observatory and Berkeley: Center for Theology and Natural Sciences, 1998), 107–16; William R. Stoeger, SJ, “The Immanent Directionality of the Evolutionary Process, and Its Relationship to Teleology,” 163–90, also in *Evolutionary*

significant in light of John Paul II's view that dialogue with the sciences can prevent "unreasonable interpretations" of Scripture. For, although the details of particular accounts of evolution may shape the theory's impact on specific theological claims (i.e., the relationship of matter and spirit), where the interpretation of Scripture is concerned evolution's impact is more a matter of principle, insofar as acceptance of evolution *in general* reconfigures the hermeneutical context in which we interpret the Bible. This, in turn, limits the normative influence of the literal sense of texts like the Genesis creation narratives *as explanations of cosmic and human origins*, irrespective of which version of evolutionary theory one accepts. As such, if we take the pope's approach to its logical end, any conflict between interpretations of the literal meaning of Genesis and insights emerging from the natural and social sciences should raise the question of whether the hermeneutical method being applied can bear the weight of scientific perspectives on reality.

A closer look at the literal sense of Scripture illustrates this point. As John Cavadini states, in contrast to the "figurative sense," which assumes an "essentially *retrospective*" view, interpreting the Hebrew Bible in light of the Christ-event, the literal sense emerges from careful analysis of the text itself, reading its face-value meaning vis-à-vis the literary-historical context from which it emerged. To use an analogy employed by Cavadini, if the figurative sense is the treasure, then the literal sense is the field in which the treasure is hidden.¹⁸ Therefore, as Joseph Fitzmyer explains, although the literal sense must never be confused with *literalist* or fundamentalist interpretation, it is principally concerned with the text's face-value meaning: "It is the meaning expressed by the inspired human author, detected by a precise analysis of the text according to its literary form and historical context."¹⁹ Linking

and Molecular Biology; see also Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014). For more on these debates, see Ernan McMullin, "Cosmic Purpose and the Contingency of Human Evolution," *Theology Today* 55, no. 3 (1998): 389–414; William R. Stoeger, "Ernan McMullin, Cosmic Purpose, and Divine Timelessness," *Zygon* 48, no. 2 (June 2013): 329–37; and Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Does God Play Dice? Divine Providence and Chance," *Theological Studies* 57, no. 1 (January 1996): 3–18. With Conway Morris, Christian de Duve has been an influential proponent of more convergence-oriented philosophical views. See Christian de Duve, *Vital Dust: The Origin and Evolution of Life on Earth* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

¹⁸ John Cavadini, "From Letter to Spirit: The Multiple Senses of Scripture," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Biblical Interpretation*, eds. Paul M. Blowers and Peter W. Martens (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 128, 144.

¹⁹ Joseph Fitzmyer, SJ, "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church Today," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 62, no. 2–3 (1996): 91. The Pontifical Biblical Commission's 1993 instruction, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, explores these matters in

this definition to John Paul II's call for dialogue with science and his acceptance of evolutionary theory, if analysis of the literal sense takes stock of the historical context in which a text emerged, such analysis must *also* attend to the limitations that inhere in an author's sociohistorical situation.

Thus, given the epistemological gap that separates ancient and scientific cosmologies, to accept that there is no conflict between science and faith is to strip the literal meaning of Genesis of its normative power as *an explanation of physical origins* and to recognize it as what William Stoeger names a "cultural cosmology."²⁰ In contrast to scientific cosmologies, which employ carefully crafted experimental methods to model cosmic and biological entities and processes, cultural cosmologies offer experientially grounded, sociohistorically conditioned stories of origins—in a word, etiologies—that establish context for and reflect sociocultural and religious beliefs and institutions. As such, cultural cosmologies cannot, and are not intended to, explain the universe *as it is understood by the sciences*, which use methods and procedures constructed within a community of experts to study the natural world.

Of course, to approach Genesis in this way is not to say it is meaningless, or false; still, following John Paul II's call for "disciplinary integrity," it is to limit the kinds of claims science or theology may make about the reality they share. For example, while the sciences are equipped to describe and model what something is or how it works, disciplinary and methodological limits prevent the sciences from making theological claims. Likewise, although cultural cosmologies like Genesis do not offer scientific accounts of origins, they retain great significance as reflections on the relationship between the Creator and creation in the eyes of our forebears in faith. To be clear, this acceptance of disciplinary limits does not preclude theology-science dialogue, as in Stephen Jay Gould's account of "non-overlapping magisteria," or NOMA.²¹ Rather, as my analysis will show, such acceptance aims to empower each discipline to freely and fully explore its proper foci as a precondition for dialogue. This, in turn, provides a basis for putting John Paul II's caution against "unreasonable interpretations" into practice while also opening new horizons for interpretation in dialogue with diverse ways of experiencing and knowing reality.

greater depth: https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research_sites/cjl/texts/cjrelations/resources/documents/catholic/pbcinterpretation.htm.

²⁰ William R. Stoeger, SJ, "Biblical Creation Literature." Unpublished manuscript.

²¹ For Gould's original articulation of this position, see Stephen Jay Gould, "Nonoverlapping Magisteria," *Natural History* 106 (March 1997): 16–22.

Stretching “Proper Limits”? Genesis, Gender, and the “Hermeneutics of Convenience”

John Paul II’s call for hermeneutical rigor demands that any interpretive framework be applied holistically and consistently to the biblical text. Yet in ecclesial statements on gender and sexuality—including John Paul II’s own writings—the aforementioned implications of theology-science dialogue and attention to the “proper limits” of Scripture go notably absent. Instead, these documents employ an exegetical style that closely resembles patristic exegesis of the figurative sense. This mode of exegesis offers sophisticated theological interpretations rooted in the literal *meaning* of the text, but without giving sustained attention to historical-critical considerations or engaging with contemporary science—in direct contrast to Fitzmyer’s account of the literal sense and John Paul II’s writings on theology-science dialogue. Given this exegetical approach, in his writings on gender John Paul II deploys the literal, face-value meaning of the text to undergird a complementarian anthropology that—despite his efforts to the contrary—subordinates women and legitimizes their exclusion from the priesthood, validates the view that LGBTQ+ persons are “intrinsically disordered,”²² and denies both gender dysphoria and transgender experience. To illustrate the implications of this hermeneutical inconsistency, this section offers two case studies of the use of Genesis vis-à-vis contemporary science in John Paul II’s statements on gender complementarity and in CDF and CCE statements on homosexuality and transgender persons.

Case Study #1: John Paul II on Gender Complementarity

Per Fitzmyer’s discussion of the literal sense, any discussion of the Genesis creation narratives must account for the fact that the text tells the story of creation twice: first in the priestly account of Genesis 1, and second in the Jahvist account of Genesis 2. Given this fact, it seems misguided from the start to assume that two distinct cultural cosmologies can offer a single anthropology, much less one from which we might derive gendered roles based in sexual difference. Rather, as Michele Saracino explains, a hermeneutical approach that recognizes the proper limits of Scripture must also acknowledge that “these narratives enrich and challenge one another and, as

²² Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (hereafter CDF), *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, §3, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia//congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19861001_homosexual-persons_en.html; on transgender experience, see CCE, “Male and Female He Created Them.”

a result, counter any commonsense notion that there is any ‘one true story’ about what it means to be human.”²³ Still, John Paul II employs Genesis in just this manner to support his complementarian anthropology.

In the first lecture from the series of addresses known as the *Theology of the Body*, the pope invokes Jesus’ intertextual response to the Pharisees in Matthew 19, which links Genesis 1:27 (“male and female he created them”) and 2:24 (“Therefore, a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body”) to argue that these passages—and the manner in which Jesus uses them—impart “even more explicit normative meaning” to the Genesis text, revealing “the principle of the unity and indissolubility of marriage as the very content of the Word of God, expressed in the most ancient revelation.”²⁴ In so doing, without acknowledging insights the sciences or historical-critical analysis might offer, the pope interprets Genesis 2 as offering a metaphysical account of humanity’s transition from “original solitude” to joyful fulfillment in equality-in-difference and “mutual subjection.”²⁵ On this basis, he concludes that Genesis provides a normative model of the sexed human person that comes to expression in the biological and social complementarity of men and women.

As his 1995 “Letter to Women” makes clear, this anthropology touches every aspect of human life, such that “Womanhood and manhood are complementary *not only from the physical and psychological points of view*, but also from the *ontological*.”²⁶ *Mulieris Dignitatem*’s explicit opposition to the “masculinization” of women—to women performing functions like priesthood, which contradicts their essential femininity—illustrates this point.²⁷ Further developing this claim, the pope reads Ephesians 5 together with Genesis 2:18 to argue that Ephesians’ rendering of the church as bride and Christ as bridegroom “indirectly confirms through this analogy the truth about woman as bride,” such that “The Bridegroom is the one who loves. The Bride is loved: it is she who receives love, in order to love in return.” As such, John Paul II’s

²³ Michele Saracino, “Moving Beyond the ‘One True Story,’” in *Frontiers in Catholic Feminist Theology: Shoulder to Shoulder*, eds. Susan Abraham and Elena Procario-Foley (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 12.

²⁴ Pope John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997), 26.

²⁵ Pope John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, 43–45. On “mutual subjection,” see Pope John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, August 15, 1988, §24, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19880815_mulieris-dignitatem.html.

²⁶ Pope John Paul II, “Letter to Women,” June 29, 1995, §9, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_29061995_women.html. Emphasis original.

²⁷ On “masculinization,” see Pope John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, §10.

account of femininity is characterized primarily by receptivity; only *after* being loved does the Bride show love in her own right. John Paul II concludes that this model of femininity does not apply only in marriage. Rather, he states, “It means something more universal, based on the very fact of her being a woman within all the interpersonal relationships which, in the most varied ways, shape society and structure the interactions of all persons—men and women.”²⁸

This ontological account of complementarity constitutes the basis from which the pope derives the meaning of sex and gender, imparting transcendent significance to sexual difference and sexual intercourse, as Katie Grimes explains:

Sexual intercourse both ratifies and reveals the active character of masculinity and the passively receptive character of femininity. The man penetrates. The woman’s vagina does not act on its own; it responds. These automated, anatomical characteristics symbolize the gendered person as a whole. Every aspect of a woman’s body is figured as geared toward making room for a man’s body. Every distinctly masculine aspect of a man’s body is figured as geared toward gaining access to and entry in a woman’s body.²⁹

As Grimes and Brianne Jacobs both observe, this conception of the human person closely reflects the physicalism of Thomas, who writes that “the active power of generation belongs to perfect animals according to the male sex, whereas the passive power belongs to them according to the female sex.”³⁰ On the basis of this biological schema, which he imports from Aristotle, Thomas concludes that because at the level of its universal nature every sperm aims to produce its “likeness”—a male—women are “something deficient and misproduced.”³¹ Thomas, it seems, did not know about eggs. Though John Paul II does not quote Thomas on this point, and

²⁸ Pope John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, §29; on Mary, see §3–5.

²⁹ Katie M. Grimes, “Theology of Whose Body? Sexual Complementarity, Intersex Conditions, and La Virgen de Guadalupe,” in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 32, no. 1 (2016): 80.

³⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica: Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Cincinnati, OH: Benziger, 1947), I.92.a.1c. Hereafter *ST*.

³¹ Aquinas, *ST*, I.91.1.1. Although he is defensive of Aquinas, Michael Nolan offers extensive summaries of Thomas’ position. For an additional commentary on Thomas’ view of gender, see Michael Nolan, “The Aristotelian Background to Aquinas’s Denial that ‘Woman Is a Defective Male,’” *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 64, no. 1 (January 2000): 21–69; and Michael Nolan, “The Defective Male: What Aquinas Really Said,” *New Blackfriars* 75, no. 880 (1994): 156–66.

despite his efforts to articulate a model of gender characterized by equality-in-difference, his reading of Genesis leads him to derive similar models of masculinity and femininity from sexual biology and the act of childbearing, with active, “generative” agency belonging to men and a receptive, “helping” function belonging to women.³² Brianne Jacobs explicates this link:

Commenting on Genesis he writes, similar to his theological predecessors, that women’s nature comes from being created as man’s helpmate in reproduction, and sex is the means of that dynamic. “The woman stands before the man as a mother, the subject of the new human life that is conceived and develops in her, and from her is born into the world. Likewise, the mystery of man’s masculinity, that is, the generative and fatherly meaning of his body, is also thoroughly revealed.” Here we see the original Aristotelian dynamic. A woman stands before man as the passive means of his reproduction, as mother-potentiality. Conversely, the male body is “generative.”³³

Further, as Tina Beattie has shown, this rendering of masculinity and femininity—and in particular John Paul II’s use of the bridal-spousal analogy—reflects the “profound” influence of Hans Urs von Balthasar on John Paul II.³⁴ For, as Natalia Imperatori-Lee observes, in parallel with John Paul II’s argument against the masculinization of women, Balthasar derives universal gender roles from sexual difference, ascribing “action, initiative, responsibility, and leadership to males, calling these masculine features, [while attributing] openness, availability, receptivity, and obedience to females, calling these traits feminine, or womanly.” As such, Elisabeth Vasko observes, “feminine creatures who engage in masculine activities (e.g., leadership, initiative) in relation to God are overreaching their place within the cosmos.”³⁵ Thus, John Paul II’s call for the performance of one’s gender in ways that correspond with his interpretation of biological sex—and his rejection of performances that might “masculinize” or “feminize”—have clear foundations in Balthasar’s theological anthropology. Moreover, and more simply, in terms

³² The complementarian dynamic also informs statements on women’s ordination. For a summary analysis of this topic, see Kessia Reyne Bennett, “Divided Anthropology: An Ontological Look at the Vatican’s Rejection of Women’s Ordination,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 52, no. 1 (2014): 101–15.

³³ Brianne Jacobs, “An Alternative to Gender Complementarity: The Body as Existential Category in the Catholic Tradition,” *Theological Studies* 80, no. 2 (June 2019): 330.

³⁴ Tina Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory* (London: Routledge, 2006), 92.

³⁵ Elisabeth Vasko, “The Difference Gender Makes: Nuptiality, Analogy, and the Limits of Appropriating Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Theology in the Context of Sexual Violence,” *The Journal of Religion* 94, no. 4 (October 2014): 512.

that mirror the pope's reading of the creation of woman in Genesis 2, Balthasar describes woman as "man's answer, the gaze that meets his in a responsive manner ... his helpmate and home."³⁶

In light of these connections, one might argue that although John Paul II's inspiration lies in Genesis, the substantial grounds for his theological claims lie in Thomas and Balthasar. If this is the case, it is worth noting the close correspondence of Balthasar's theological anthropology with Thomas' interpretation of Genesis. Reading Genesis, Thomas writes that although the "image of God," or "intellectual nature," is found in both men and women, "in a secondary sense the image of God is found in man, and not in woman: for man is the beginning and end of woman; as God is the beginning and end of every creature."³⁷ As in John Paul II and Balthasar, initiative belongs to the male alone. Furthermore, in a passage that could ground Balthasar's claim that femininity orients women toward receptivity and obedience and away from initiative and leadership, when Thomas moves from the meaning of the *imago Dei* to the punishment issued in Genesis 3:16—"and he shall rule over you"—he argues that "The subjection of the woman to her husband is to be understood as inflicted in punishment of the woman, *not as to his headship* (since even before sin the man was the 'head' and governor 'of the woman'), but as to her having now to obey her husband's will *even against her own*."³⁸ Here again, as in Balthasar, the subjection of woman begins at the level of *ontology*, and Thomas' claim that divine punishment places woman in a state of obedience to her husband—even against her own will—gives divine approval to the long history of violence against women.³⁹

Yet it is precisely in light of these influences that John Paul II's "rigorous hermeneutical approach" must enter the frame, providing a check on the hermeneutical method and the wildly inaccurate sexual biology that undergird his own claims. First, at the level of hermeneutics, as Phyllis Tribble observes, the punishment discourse of Genesis 3 contains the *only* reference to

³⁶ Natalia Imperatori-Lee, "Father Knows Best: Theological 'Mansplaining' and the Ecclesial War on Women," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 31, no. 2 (2015): 102.

³⁷ Aquinas, *ST* I.93.4. This passage also follows the logic of 1 Corinthians 11, which states that although men are in the image of God, women are in the image of man and created for men (1 Cor 11:7–10). Indeed, *Inter Insigniores*, the CDF declaration on women's inadmissibility to the priesthood, links this passage from 1 Corinthians 11 with the "divine plan of creation" found in Genesis 2 to argue that women cannot be priests. See CDF, "Declaration *Inter Insigniores*: On the Question of Admission of Women to Ministerial Priesthood, October 15, 1976, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19761015_inter-insigniores_en.html.

³⁸ Aquinas, *ST* 2.2.164.2 ad. 1. Emphasis mine.

³⁹ Vasko likewise observes a strong parallel between Balthasar's theological anthropology and sexual violence.

subjection in the creation narratives, such that Thomas' claim that woman is subject to man before the fall and Balthasar's association of femininity with obedience are both unwarranted by the text; subjection is justifiable only against the backdrop of an *equitable original order*, such that patriarchy and subjugation are, as Tribble puts it, "perversions of creation."⁴⁰ Seen in this light, even if John Paul II's "gospel innovation" aims to overcome Thomas' hierarchical-dualist rendering of the created order, the hermeneutical and philosophical bases for his anthropology remain entrenched in the supposition that women are passive, receptive, and born into a "state of subjection." Yet acknowledgment of these historical-critical concerns and their implications is wholly absent in John Paul II's writings.

Second, at the level of engagement with the sciences, if biological sex matters so much for anthropology, we must look to emerging studies in sexual biology and sociological studies of gender to enrich our understanding of our bodies. And what we discover there calls into question the pope's complementarian claims. To elaborate on a point presented by Grimes, sexual biology shows that eggs emit progesterone during sex to attract the "strongest swimmers." When sperm make contact with these hormones, an infusion of calcium propels them toward the egg; as Ferris Jabr puts it, eggs "woo" sperm.⁴¹ In stark contrast to the models of masculinity and femininity presented by Thomas, Balthasar, and John Paul II, today's biology presents women as exercising substantive agency in the act of conception, posing a direct scientific challenge to a theological tradition that names them receptive, passive, and misproduced helpmates. Therefore, as Grimes explains,

⁴⁰ Phyllis Tribble, "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 41, no. 1 (March 1973), 41. Commenting on the threefold punishment of Genesis 3, Tribble writes, "They show how terrible human life has become as it stands between creation and grace. We misread if we assume that these judgments are mandates. They describe; they do not prescribe. They protest; they do not condone. Of special concern are the words telling the woman that her husband shall rule over her (3:16). This statement is not license for male supremacy, but rather it is condemnation of that very pattern. Subjugation and supremacy are perversions of creation." See also Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978).

⁴¹ These biological phenomena are widely attested in scientific literature. See, for example, Ferris Jabr, "How Human Eggs Woo Sperm," March 16, 2011, <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg20928043-400-how-human-eggs-woo-sperm/>. Drawing on the work of Emily Martin, Grimes makes a similar case in "Theology of Whose Body?" See Emily Martin, "The Egg and the Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles," *Signs* 16, no. 3 (April 1, 1991): 485-501.

“John Paul II’s attention to sexual science proved selective,” and “in the case of fertilization science at least, scientific data has been filtered through the prism of preexisting ideology” despite his call for dialogue with the sciences.⁴² Second, despite his openness to sociological inquiry, John Paul II’s use of Genesis as a basis for making biological sex an *ontological* determinant precludes the possibility of any reflection on the social construction and function of gender. Absent such reflection, complementarian anthropology assumes and tacitly reinscribes hierarchical models of sex and gender, such as those found in Thomas and Balthasar; saying that a gendered ontology promotes equality-in-difference does not dispel the fact that the foundations for this ontology emerged in an inherently patriarchal context and are governed by a system of patriarchal power relations and androcentric discourse that stretches into the forgotten depths of history. Thus, despite his efforts to overcome the hierarchical dualism of Thomas’ thought, and due to Balthasar’s influence, John Paul II ultimately reinscribes a hierarchical model of gender—the basis of patriarchy—in the very foundations of creation.⁴³ The male still acts, imaging God’s *actus purus*, while the receptive female does not image the divine act.

In light of this analysis, given John Paul II’s call for theology-science dialogue and the effect that acceptance of evolutionary theory has on the explanatory significance of the literal meaning of Genesis, it seems hermeneutically disingenuous to attribute “explicit normative meaning” to these creation narratives, much less to extrapolate a complementarian anthropology from ancient etiologies, especially when the philosophical, theological, and hermeneutical bases for this anthropology conflict with contemporary science. As such, one might ask whether John Paul II’s anthropology can stand on the basis of Genesis, Thomas, *or* Balthasar—both because cultural cosmologies say nothing about gender as the pope conceives it and because Thomas’ and Balthasar’s anthropologies have roots in accounts of sexual biology that are fundamentally flawed. In the end, despite his warning against “unreasonable interpretations,” John Paul II’s theology of the body rests on “claims that exceed the biblical witness,” as biblical scholar Gwen Saylor observes.⁴⁴ In so doing, the pope countermands his stated approach to theology-science dialogue, employing a “hermeneutics of convenience” that allows him to preserve and propagate an anthropology that, throughout history, has justified

⁴² Grimes, “Theology of Whose Body?” 81.

⁴³ Compare Imperatori-Lee, “Father Knows Best,” 93–96.

⁴⁴ Gwen Saylor, “Adam and Eve/Adam and Steve? A Challenge to the Hermeneutical ‘Complementarity’ Argument,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 33, no. 5 (October 2006): 410.

the oppression of women within and outside the church—including their exclusion from ordination.⁴⁵

Case Study #2: CDF and CCE Statements on Homosexuality and Transgender Experience

In parallel with the documents considered previously, the CDF's 1986 *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* appeals to "the theology of creation we find in Genesis" in order to argue that "cooperation with [God] in the transmission of life by a mutual donation of the self to the other" illustrates the theological significance of sexual intercourse and precludes the possibility of lifegiving sexual relationships among people of the same sex.⁴⁶ Within this paradigm, heteronormativity is a function of complementarity, as the procreative power of sexual intercourse validates a divinely appointed order of relationships, such that "the apotheosis of sexed personhood is licit reproductive heterosexual sex," as Jacobs explains.⁴⁷ On this basis, the *Letter* takes a strong stand on the moral standing of homosexual persons: "Although the particular inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin, it is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil; and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder."⁴⁸ In other words, because same-sex relationships transgress the complementarian order the CDF finds in Genesis, they are objectively contrary to God's will for creation. As *Amoris Laetitia* puts it, "Homosexual unions [are not] in any way similar or even remotely analogous to God's plan for marriage and family."⁴⁹

Yet once again the hermeneutical basis for the magisterium's claims about gender are, as Margaret Fraser puts it, "blinkered by literalism," exceeding

⁴⁵ See Aquinas, *ST Suppl.* 39.a. Following the logic of his Aristotelian anthropology, Thomas invokes 1 Timothy 2:12 to conclude that "since it is not possible in the female sex to signify eminence of degree, for a woman is in the state of subjection, it follows that she cannot receive the sacrament of Order." Although the absence of a connection with science places the topic of women's ordination outside the bounds of this article, there are ample hermeneutical reasons to question the CDF's claim that the inadmissibility of women to the priesthood is "bound up with the divine plan of creation." I will pursue this topic in future work.

⁴⁶ CDF, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, §6.

⁴⁷ Jacobs, "An Alternative to Gender Complementarity," 331.

⁴⁸ CDF, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, §3.

⁴⁹ Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* (Vatican City: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing, 2016), §25; CDF, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, §9.

what can be rightly construed as normative on the basis of ancient etiologies or philosophical anthropologies based in bygone biological claims.⁵⁰ Further, the CDF's argument employs a hermeneutics that predetermines theological outcomes on the basis of an established anthropology, in clear contrast to John Paul II's claim that engagement with science might elicit new horizons for theological reflection. Illustrating an alternative approach, Salzman and Lawler suggest that social scientific analysis of homosexual couples' contributions to society provide grounds for reimagining the CDF's claims. They write, "If one explores 'the gift of life' in metaphorical terms, however, where embodied sexual beings offer themselves to one another in interpersonal union that is a gift of relational life, one to another, then both homosexual and heterosexual couples can realize this gift in sexual acts."⁵¹ Accordingly, LGBTQ+ couples' capacity for raising children who contribute positively to society offers grounds for an alternative model of marital fruitfulness that—in keeping with Christianity's central virtue of love—expands the imagination to include the relationships that lie beyond the boundaries set by the CDF's reading of the literal meaning of the Genesis text.

Still, ecclesial teachings hold fast to such a reading, which comes even more clearly into focus in the CCE's "Male and Female He Created Them." Written for educational institutions wrestling with questions of gender diversity, the instruction takes Genesis 1:27 as an eponymous starting point for a wide-ranging critique of what it terms "gender theory" and the "ideology of gender," with a particular focus on transgender-identified persons. According to the instruction, transgender experience is neither biological nor psychological; it is a social and anthropological ideology that empowers a person to "choose a gender not corresponding to his or her biological sex."⁵² The instruction names this choice "transgenderism," with the suffix "-ism" providing a rhetorical association of transgender experience with a so-called "process of denaturalisation, that is a move away from nature and towards an absolute option for the decision of the feelings of the human subject."⁵³ "This," the instruction continues, "leads to educational programmes and legislative enactments that promote a personal identity and

⁵⁰ Margaret Fraser, "Language for God, Gender, and Authority," in *Authority in the Roman Catholic Church: Theory and Practice*, ed. Bernard Hoose (Burlington, VT: 2002), 194.

⁵¹ Salzman and Lawler, *Sexual Ethics*, 171. For a summary of the social contributions of homosexual couples and their contributions to child-raising, see Fraser, "Language for God, Gender, and Authority," 172–75. Margaret Farley makes a similar case for "fruitfulness" in *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2006).

⁵² CCE, "Male and Female He Created Them," §11.

⁵³ CCE, "Male and Female He Created Them," §§11, 19.

emotional intimacy radically separated from the biological difference between male and female.”⁵⁴ The instruction’s proposed strategies for addressing transgender experience fall along the same lines: medical interventions are appropriate in cases of undefined sexual identity, but “with purely therapeutic ends ... with a view to establishing the person’s constitutive identity” according to a binary male-female paradigm.⁵⁵ Weaving these threads together, the instruction adds, “Efforts to go beyond the constitutive male-female sexual difference, such as the ideas of ‘intersex’ or ‘transgender,’ lead to a masculinity or femininity that is ambiguous, even though (in a self-contradictory way), these concepts themselves actually presuppose the very sexual difference that they propose to negate or supersede.”⁵⁶ The CCE then concludes that denials of binary XX/XY sexual difference amount to “a ‘provocative’ display against so-called ‘traditional frameworks,’ and one which, in fact, ignores the suffering of those who have to live in situations of sexual indeterminacy.”⁵⁷

Despite its strong stance against the validity of transgender experience, as we have seen, the instruction also calls for dialogue, wherein involved parties listen, reason, and propose.⁵⁸ Yet the CCE simultaneously rejects science that contravenes complementarity and appears open only to research that aims “to achieve a deeper understanding of the ways in which sexual difference between men and women is lived out in a variety of cultures.” As the instruction puts it, “It is in relation to *this type of research* that we should be open to listen, to reason and to propose.”⁵⁹

Three observations arise from the congregation’s argument. First, because the instruction presupposes the binary anthropology elaborated previously, possibilities for dialogue are limited from the start. Second, like John Paul II, the instruction clearly views the sexed body as constitutive of human identity. This move attributes great significance to the correspondence of the body and the proper roles afforded a person. Third, this correspondence provides the basis on which the CCE can argue that “transgenderism” amounts to a rebellious attempt to “negate or supersede” the XX/XY chromosomal paradigm the instruction upholds as the only valid model of the human person afforded by biblical and scientific accounts of human sexuality, in direct

⁵⁴ CCE, “Male and Female He Created Them,” §2.

⁵⁵ CCE, “Male and Female He Created Them,” §24.

⁵⁶ CCE, “Male and Female He Created Them,” §25.

⁵⁷ CCE, “Male and Female He Created Them,” §25.

⁵⁸ CCE, “Male and Female He Created Them,” §5.

⁵⁹ CCE, “Male and Female He Created Them,” §6. Emphasis mine.

contrast to well-validated studies of intersex persons and the statistical variability of sexual physiology.

In stark contrast to these claims, the last decade has seen marked shifts in psychiatric and medical literature on transgender persons. In the 2013 revision of its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) renamed “gender identity disorder” as “gender dysphoria.” This shift indicates that the experience of having a gender identity that conflicts with one’s assigned sex is not a disorder to be cured; it is a condition to be carefully treated with therapies and reassignment surgeries that facilitate the alignment of one’s body with one’s self-understanding.⁶⁰ In an effort to clarify its meaning and significance, the APA carefully distinguishes gender dysphoria from gender nonconformity:

Gender dysphoria is not the same as gender nonconformity, which refers to behaviors not matching the gender norms or stereotypes of the gender assigned at birth. Examples of gender nonconformity (also referred to as gender expansiveness or gender creativity) include girls behaving and dressing in ways more socially expected of boys or occasional cross-dressing in adult men. Gender nonconformity is not a mental disorder. Gender dysphoria is also not the same being gay/lesbian.⁶¹

Read alongside the CCE’s instruction, this clarification seems to indicate that the CCE simply but fundamentally misunderstands gender dysphoria and transgender experience, ignoring well-documented psychological and biological studies to posit an ideology based on a particular idea of gender *performance*. As such, the instruction’s definition of “transgenderism” as a rebellion against traditional frameworks corresponds to some degree with the APA’s account of gender nonconforming behaviors, which do not match the “norms and stereotypes” of one’s assigned sex. But this is not transgender experience as the psychiatric community understands it.

Likewise, a 2017 resolution of the American Medical Association (AMA) states that gender is “‘incompletely understood as a binary selection’ because gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, and genotypic and phenotypic sex are not always aligned.”⁶² Lest we dismiss this statement as purely political or ideological, we must note the careful language the AMA employs.

⁶⁰ For one application of this development, see the APA guidance, “Help with Gender Dysphoria,” <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/gender-dysphoria>.

⁶¹ American Psychiatric Association, “What Is Gender Dysphoria?,” <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/gender-dysphoria/what-is-gender-dysphoria>.

⁶² Robert Nagler Miller, “AMA Takes Several Actions Supporting Transgender Patients,” June 12, 2017, <https://www.ama-assn.org/delivering-care/population-care/ama-takes-several-actions-supporting-transgender-patients>.

To state that gender is “incompletely understood” as a binary does not deny that most humans experience their gender along the lines of an XX/XY division. This is no “provocative display.” Rather, the AMA emphasizes the limits of our *understanding* of gender, opening itself to dialogue about the mystery of human existence—to listening, reasoning, and proposing in the very manner the CCE seeks. These limits come clearly into focus in recent physiological studies, which demonstrate that every possible permutation of the six biochemical factors that constitute sexual identity “can and does exist biologically within the human population.”⁶³ Sexual identity is characterized first and foremost by diversity, not binarity, but this point goes unrecognized in ecclesial statements. Yet church teaching must account for this reality if it is to maintain integrity in dialogue with contemporary science. For, as Jonathan Heaps and Neil Ormerod’s application of Lonergan to gender shows, while “male-female gender duality and heterosexual attraction are highly probable, and so constitute the statistical norm,”⁶⁴ a reasonable, responsible—and I would add, pastoral—account of gender in ecclesial teaching must acknowledge that gender expressions that break the binary “are normal within the biological (and so statistical) heteronormativity of sexual differentiation.”⁶⁵ In this sense, transgender persons’ desire to transition through surgeries and therapies is hardly a matter of choice; it is a matter of discernment—a decision to which they are compelled by the trials they face as persons whose gender is “incompletely understood.” But the CCE makes statistical probabilities into anthropological absolutes.

Turning to pastoral considerations, it is vital to note the CCE’s stated agreement with programs that possess the “laudable desire to combat all expressions of unjust discrimination.”⁶⁶ Such agreement includes the rejection of a “masculinist mentality,” the need to respect all people “in their particularity and difference,” and an opposition to bullying.⁶⁷ Although this pastoral stance is praiseworthy, the reduction of transgender experience to

⁶³ Patricia Beattie Jung and Anna Marie Vigen, “Introduction,” in *God, Science, and Sex: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Christian Ethics* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 7–8.

⁶⁴ Jonathan Heaps and Neil Ormerod, “Statistically Ordered: Gender, Sexual Identity, and the Metaphysics of ‘Normal,’” *Theological Studies* 80, no. 2 (June 2019): 356. This article applies the writings of Bernard Lonergan to propose an interdisciplinary metaphysics for interpreting the “normal” in discussions of sexual identity. For a recent engagement with scientific perspectives on the statistical distribution of sexual identities, see the articles in Jung and Vigen, *God, Science, and Sex*.

⁶⁵ Heaps and Ormerod, “Statistically Ordered,” 359.

⁶⁶ CCE, “Male and Female He Created Them,” §15.

⁶⁷ CCE, “Male and Female He Created Them,” §16.

an “ism,” or ideology, demonstrates the CCE’s disregard for the actual struggles LGBTQ+ persons face every day—struggles that are unimaginable to the heterosexual, cisgender persons who hold sway in the world. As I have written elsewhere, these struggles include staggering violence.⁶⁸ Each year from 2007 to 2014, nearly 250 transgender people were murdered, and 369 transgender and nonbinary persons were killed between October 2017 and September 2018 worldwide.⁶⁹ Most are trans women of color. Other studies show that nearly 80 percent of transgender teenagers report having attempted suicide.⁷⁰

These statistics call into question the instruction’s most pastoral statements on gender. The dismissal of transgender experience as rebellion against nature serves only to end dialogue before it begins and again employs an anthropology that contradicts contemporary science and reaches well beyond what Genesis can provide, in correspondence with the statements on gender complementarity and homosexuality considered previously. Further, these statistics indicate indifference to violence, willful ignorance, and shocking insensitivity to people who desire to live genuine lives of faith in a church that refuses to recognize their unique humanity. In so doing, these teachings perpetuate injustice, especially given the church’s silence in countries that criminalize gender nonconformity and homosexuality. If church leadership is to exercise with integrity its responsibility to care for all God’s creatures, its circle of care must include and embrace gender expressions that lie beyond the limits of its presumed and ostensibly boundless knowledge of human personhood, which it derives from just six words: “male and female he created them.” In this way, as Craig Ford observes, given scientific studies of gender, statements like the CCE instruction fail to reflect “the actual world that God has created for us,”⁷¹ a world that is—as

⁶⁸ Paul J. Schutz, “A Response to the Vatican Document ‘Male and Female He Created Them,’” *National Catholic Reporter*, June 24, 2019, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/response-vatican-document-male-and-female-he-created-them>.

⁶⁹ Neela Ghoshal and Kyle Knight, “Rights in Transition: Making Legal Recognition for Transgender People a Global Reality,” <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2016/rights-in-transition>. Also see “Trans Day of Remembrance (TDoR) 2018 Press Release,” <https://transrespect.org/en/tmm-update-trans-day-of-remembrance-2018/>.

⁷⁰ “Violence Against the Transgender Community in 2019,” <https://www.hrc.org/resources/violence-against-the-transgender-community-in-2019>; Rokia Hassanein, “New Study Reveals Shocking Rates of Attempted Suicide among Trans Adolescents,” September 12, 2018, <https://www.hrc.org/news/new-study-reveals-shocking-rates-of-attempted-suicide-among-trans-adolescen>.

⁷¹ Craig A. Ford Jr., “LGBT Catholics Are a Reality,” *Commonweal* (December 19, 2018). Compare Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Revelatory Body: Theology as Inductive Art* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2015).

Psalm 139 imagines it—“knit together” by a loving Creator, who sees all people as “wonderfully made” (Ps 139:13-14).

In light of these case studies, it seems clear that gender and sexuality constitute one area in which science might “purify religion from error and superstition,” moving church authorities away from speaking as if the details of Genesis provide normative models for understanding the full meaning of the human person when science and experience say otherwise. Still, declarations on gender and sexuality consistently interpret the text in this way, employing a “hermeneutics of convenience” that sacrifices John Paul II’s quest for new possibilities in order to uphold using Genesis in a manner that suppresses and oppresses women and LGBTQ+ persons through the imposition of “truth.”⁷² But a hermeneutic that sees no conflict between Genesis 1:31, “God looked at everything he [*sic*] had made, and found it very good. Evening came, and morning followed—the sixth day,” and cosmic-biological evolution cannot ignore the vast conceptual distance between the literal meaning of the words “male and female he [*sic*] created them” and emerging scientific insights about gender and sexuality. Therefore, just as the acceptance of evolution strips Genesis of its *normative* power as an explanation of cosmic origins, magisterial theology cannot employ the very same text to *determinatively* uphold complementarity when science and the experience of the faithful say otherwise, lest truth contradict truth.

A “rigorous hermeneutical approach” cannot have it both ways.

Another Way Forward: William R. Stoeger’s Writings on Method and Theology-Science Dialogue

The theological and pastoral implications of the hermeneutical inconsistency considered previously demand a more honest and critically sensitive method that operates in open dialogue with scientific and experiential data. In my view, the writings of William Stoeger—who wrote nearly sixty articles in theology and served as an active member of the Catholic Theological Society of America during his career as a Vatican Observatory astronomer—offer a promising way forward for two reasons. First, Stoeger offers resources for realizing John Paul II’s vision for theology-science dialogue in ways that are rendered impossible by the presupposition of complementarity found in ecclesial statements on gender and sexuality. Second, by explicitly accounting for the possibility of

⁷² Many ecclesial documents, including *Fides et Ratio*, leverage “truth” in this way.

“blindnesses” and “misdiscernments” in the tradition, Stoeger offers resources for purifying and correcting church teachings in harmony with science, while also attending to the practical, pastoral impact these teachings have on the lives of the faithful—an expressed concern of both John Paul II and the CCE.

Like John Paul II, Stoeger sees both theology and science as “oriented towards truth.”⁷³ Within Stoeger’s epistemology, truth emerges from a threefold process, wherein our *experience* of the world—acquired in everyday life and reflected upon in scholarly disciplines—is encoded as *knowledge* and subjected to *validation* using criteria that correspond with the character of the knowledge in question. This process applies to all kinds of knowledge, even personal knowledge, which is validated through a process of individual and communal discernment by persons and communities in concrete experiential and epistemological contexts.⁷⁴

Applying this threefold process to scholarly discourse, Stoeger writes that criteria of validation emerge from a discipline’s “focus and experiential grounds.” A discipline’s “focus” is “the primary aspect or part of experienced reality to which it gives attention ... its primary point of reference.”⁷⁵ For example, the focus of cosmology—the universe as a whole—provides the basis on which cosmologists study the processes, entities, and relationships that constitute the cosmos. Given their distinctive foci, disciplines also have particular “experiential grounds” to which they appeal. Stoeger defines experiential grounds as “the type of data, of phenomena, or of experience to which the discipline appeals, which it analyzes, and on which it reflects, in arriving at and justifying its conclusions, and in testing and modifying its models.”⁷⁶ Put

⁷³ William R. Stoeger, SJ, “Reductionism and Emergence: Implications for the Interaction of Theology and the Natural Sciences,” in *Evolution and Emergence: Systems, Organisms, Persons*, eds. Nancey Murphy and William R. Stoeger, SJ (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 231. For an excellent treatment of how the concept of truth functions in science and theology, see Mary Hesse, “Cosmology as Myth,” *Concilium* 166 (June 1983): 49–54. Stoeger’s multidimensional conception of truth parallels Hesse’s notion of “non-objective” truth.

⁷⁴ See William R. Stoeger, SJ, “Our Experience of Knowing in Science and in Spirituality,” in *The Laws of Nature, the Range of Human Knowledge, and Divine Action* (Tarnow, Poland: Biblos, 1996). This article contains Stoeger’s most detailed statement on epistemology. For an analysis of Stoeger’s epistemology, see Schutz, “Cultivating a ‘Cosmic Perspective’ in Theology.”

⁷⁵ William R. Stoeger, SJ, “Contemporary Cosmology and Its Implications for the Contemporary Science-Religion Dialogue,” in *Physics, Philosophy, and Theology: A Common Quest for Understanding* (Vatican City: Vatican Observatory, 1988), 233.

⁷⁶ Stoeger, “Contemporary Cosmology and Its Implications for the Contemporary Science-Religion Dialogue,” 234.

simply, a field's focus is its object of inquiry, and its experiential grounds constitute its data set.

Stoeger's definitions of "foci" and "experiential grounds" have practical significance, as well, as these definitions establish each discipline's limits of competency. In words that reflect John Paul II's claim that science can purify religion, Stoeger illustrates the point:

The findings of the sciences are often used to clarify and purify—to give examples which rule out certain philosophical conclusions, for instance, to force philosophy to take all ranges of experience into account ... to test intuitions with clear, precisely understood examples, or to restrict philosophy from adjudicating an issue which is outside its sphere of demonstrated competency.⁷⁷

Thus, just as cosmologists might not study the carbon cycle (the realm of biologists) or specific quantum interactions (the realm of particle physics), theologians must maintain a clear focus on theological matters, appealing to the disciplines best suited to address other sorts of questions as needed. Within Stoeger's framework, then, empirical and experiential claims about the human body must be validated using studies that emerge from and are verified by the community of scientists, who possess the skills and expertise necessary to adjudicate claims about organisms and life systems, just as claims about the gospel are evaluated in the academy by theologians and in the church by the witness of the faithful. In this way, Stoeger's method—reflecting John Paul II's call for disciplinary integrity—ensures that truth does not contradict truth and illuminates an important conclusion: that in theology-science dialogue, "Conflict develops when either science or religion oversteps the boundaries of its competency and fails to recognize its own limits."⁷⁸

At first glance, Stoeger's emphasis on foci and experiential grounds may seem to imply that he believes theology and science should not interact, as in Gould's NOMA model. Despite his emphasis of disciplinary difference, however, Stoeger advocates strongly for critical dialogue between science and faith. In fact, rather than giving cause for their separation, Stoeger sees the cultivation of each discipline's distinctive methods and "data sets" as a precondition for effective dialogue. He explains:

One of the first requirements is that both the natural sciences and theology continue to develop their own methods of analysis, interpretation, and

⁷⁷ William R. Stoeger, SJ, "Theology and the Contemporary Challenge of the Natural Sciences," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 46 (1991): 29.

⁷⁸ "Interview with William Stoeger," *Revista de Estudos da Religiao* 1 (2003): 95. See also Stoeger, "Our Experience of Knowing in Science and in Spirituality," 4-8.

validation more fully, continuing to refine them in light of their long-term success and fruitfulness ... *this methodological maturation of the disciplines is essential to assuring their mutual creative interaction* ... this maturation itself only occurs as the disciplines interact with one another. This must also include the capacity to distil the central core of knowledge and understanding from the historical, cultural, and social perspectives and the linguistic limitations in which it is couched.⁷⁹

Seen in this light, Stoeger's account of foci and experiential grounds manifests great potential for advancing John Paul II's call for a model of dialogue in which theology and science retain their integrity while being "radically open" to the insights of the other. This radical openness provides a practical foundation for dialogue that is oriented toward the mutual enrichment of both fields. Although those seeking a synthesis or convergence of science and faith may find Stoeger's model too restrictive, his approach intends to orient each discipline toward its proper areas of inquiry, such that science may flourish as science and theology may flourish as theology to the fullest extent possible as a *precondition* for mutually critical engagement.

Here, Stoeger's framework first shows its promise for transforming teachings on gender and sexuality by realizing the potential of John Paul II's dialogical approach. In contrast to the ecclesial statements considered previously, which despite calls for dialogue do not interrogate the scientific or hermeneutical foundations of their claims, Stoeger calls theologians to acknowledge and embrace the limits imposed by theology's foci and experiential grounds. In so doing, he establishes a means by which—through dialogue—scientific knowledge can purify and enrich theological claims that intersect with scientific foci, and vice versa.⁸⁰

Developing this point, Stoeger explains that such interaction helps to clarify the limits of a discipline's area of inquiry, such that conclusions reached within different fields can "radically affect one another."⁸¹ Recognizing limits of competency is, then, both the reason that theology needs dialogue with the sciences and a primary outcome of such dialogue. He thus concludes that when theology and science seem to conflict, theologians "need to clarify the essential point of the theological doctrine with which science seems to be in conflict, recovering its fundamental significance

⁷⁹ William R. Stoeger, SJ, "Relating the Natural Sciences to Theology: Levels of Creative Mutual Interaction," in *God's Action in Nature's World: Essays in Honour of Robert John Russell*, eds. Ted Peters and Nathan Hallanger (Vermont: Ashgate, 2006), 33. Emphasis mine.

⁸⁰ William R. Stoeger, SJ, "Reflections on the Interaction of My Knowledge of Cosmology and My Christian Belief," *CTNS Bulletin* 21, no. 2 (March 1, 2001): 13.

⁸¹ Stoeger, "Our Experience of Knowing in Science and in Spirituality," 4.

and then reinterpreting it in light of our new knowledge and perspective provided by our deeper knowledge of physical and biological reality.”⁸² Within Stoeger’s framework, then, theology’s task is to attend to the “fundamental significance” of theological claims, clarifying their possible meaning *in conversation* with other ways of knowing. Assessing the fruits of such dialogue in terms that evoke Thomas’ faulty biological claims, Stoeger writes:

What once was considered a valid theological conclusion may no longer be so, due to all sorts of circumstances, as well as to the context within which the issue was originally presented. Often the question itself was either meaningless or mistaken—and so the answer given was meaningless or mistaken. Or the issue was considered to have a theological import it no longer is considered to have, for various reasons. Not least of which may have been the cosmological context out of which it was asked!⁸³

In view of this statement—and acknowledging that Stoeger’s writings place Thomas into dialogue with science—one can respectfully admit that due to the epistemological limitations of the context in which he worked, and despite his enormous contributions to theology, Thomas’ claims may sometimes be “meaningless or mistaken”; the same is true for all theological claims. Yet this acknowledgement of limitations does not hold for the explicit or implicit appropriation of Thomas’ anthropology in contemporary ecclesial statements. For if popes and congregations accept evolutionary theory, they must also be willing to accept and apply well-validated insights from modern biology and sociology in statements on gender and sexuality, lest a hermeneutical contradiction with devastating pastoral consequences persist in official teaching. In this way, Stoeger’s willingness to acknowledge the limitations of theological claims walks hand in hand with a radical openness to letting other ways of knowing challenge and transform theology—a position for which John Paul II and the CCE call, but which goes absent in their statements on gender and sexuality. But for Stoeger, such openness is indispensable to doing theology in a scientific age. He writes:

Certainly, we must insist on careful scholarship, but also, I believe, on a critical sensitivity and vulnerability to all those aspects of experience and endeavor which may have bearing on the theological issues being investigated (theology is radically interdisciplinary in the sense I described above), and on a continual striving to refine, reinvigorate and modify theological method so that it better and better fulfills its purposes. This is

⁸² Stoeger, “Reflections on the Interaction of My Knowledge of Cosmology and My Christian Belief,” 11fn1.

⁸³ Stoeger, “Theology and the Contemporary Challenge of the Natural Sciences,” 32.

fostered by interaction, not by isolation—by a growing awareness of the strengths and limitations of a given discipline and of the methods it is currently using.⁸⁴

If this is so, the preservation of binary, complementarian anthropology ultimately depends on its isolation from well-validated scientific insights about the nature, composition, and function of the human body. On the other hand, if church leaders were to accept this vision, then they would also be called to account for the faulty biological bases of their claims about women and LGBTQ+ persons, insofar as a “critical sensitivity and vulnerability” to scientific insights would reshape the context for the magisterium’s adjudication of claims about the sexed human person.⁸⁵ Likewise, the CCE would need to accept scientific views about the makeup of human bodies, with all of nature’s possibilities in play—not just those that correspond with the XX/XY anthropology it sets forth. Stoeger’s approach seems well positioned to achieve these aims because it puts scientific perspectives on scientific matters first. Absent this orientation, trusting the Vatican’s gender science is akin to trusting a diabetes diagnosis from a parish priest. Taken together, these conclusions enliven Stoeger’s view that religion “must constantly be purified and challenged to be faithful to the revelation on which it is based” because “as a cultural and social structure [it] is in continual interaction

⁸⁴ Stoeger, “Theology and the Contemporary Challenge of the Natural Sciences,” 41.

⁸⁵ For one treatment of how the work of theologians interfaces with the magisterium’s responsibility for adjudicating the meaning of theological claims, see Terrence W. Tilley, “Academic Freedom, Divine Revelation and Catholic Universities,” *Fidelity & Freedom: “Ex Corde Ecclesiae” at Twenty-Five*, eds. Stephen M. Hildebrand and Sean O. Sheridan, TOR (Steubenville, OH: Franciscan University Press, 2018): 96–113, esp. 104–08. Tilley writes, “Such explorations require that theologians distinguish between what *makes* a claim true, how we *recognize* the truth of claims, how we *appraise* claims, and how claims are to be *adjudicated*. What *makes* a revelatory symbol true is that it expresses the self-manifestation of God. We *recognize* a revelatory symbol because it is reliably produced and received as properly expressing God’s self-revelation in and for a community of faith. But once we recognize that (1) what *constitutes* revelation differs from (2) how we *recognize* revelatory symbols, we still need to (3) *appraise* those symbols or sentences in the context of mutable human languages, we can see that debates about the formulations of revelation in doctrinal proposals and counter-proposals are proper subjects of truly free and faithful academic inquiry in Catholic theology. To be clear, when those symbols or sentences pertain to matters essential to the faith, the magisterium properly comes into play. Theologians may and must *appraise* symbols, propositions, and practices. Such appraisals may be diverse. The bishops (themselves theologians, as at Nicea, or in response to sophisticated theological disputations, as at the Council of Trent [1545–63]) have the responsibility of *adjudicating* theological appraisals.”

with other such components, and thus [is] often coopted and compromised by them.”⁸⁶

Indeed, the possibility of corruption within the Christian tradition is a central concern of Stoeger’s that never appears in official teaching. This concern originates in Stoeger’s awareness of the limits of scientific inquiry and the ways that science is shaped by dynamics of power and ideological bias: one need only recall the history of eugenics and the dominance of white male scientists (Stoeger included!) to understand this point. On analogy with this concern, Stoeger writes that theology must strive to uphold “truth in both word and action, in both doctrine and praxis, [as] a paramount ideal and aim ... We remember the continual challenge in ancient Israel to distinguish between true prophets and false prophets.”⁸⁷ Even more pointedly, he rejects “philosophical assumptions or agendas imposed from the top down” and writes that the meaning of the Christian faith is not “determined by age-old truths that never change,” a point he states may come as a surprise to some.⁸⁸ Weaving these threads together, Stoeger concludes that top-down approaches to theology can contribute to “the fossilization of beliefs and practices which no longer reflect the authentic faith experience of the community, and to the legitimation of ambiguous elements of other social and cultural institutions within the society.”⁸⁹ Although he does not name specific instances of this problem, his comments correspond well with the inconsistent interpretation of Genesis and unyielding application of binary, complementarian anthropology in ecclesial statements on gender and sexuality.

In light of these issues, and nourished by the Jesuit tradition in which he was formed, Stoeger proposes a theological method rooted in ongoing

⁸⁶ William R. Stoeger, “Is There Common Ground in Practice and Experience of Science and Religion?” panel presentation, *Science and the Spiritual Quest* (Berkeley, CA: Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, June 7–10, 1998), 2. I am working from Stoeger’s original manuscript.

⁸⁷ Stoeger, “Our Experience of Knowing in Science and in Spirituality,” 16. Making this same point with respect to the sciences, Stoeger writes, “There are inadequacies and failures, as there are in other areas of human endeavor, including the sciences (there is good theology and bad theology, just as there is good science and bad science) ... The complication can often be that religion is often coopted to serve other interests—political, economic, institutional. But that is not peculiar to them. Science is often similarly enslaved.”

⁸⁸ William R. Stoeger, “God and Time: The Action and Life of the Triune God in the World,” *Theology Today* 55, no. 3 (October 1998): 367; Stoeger, “Our Experience of Knowing in Science and in Spirituality,” 13.

⁸⁹ William R. Stoeger, “Relating the Natural Sciences to Theology: Levels of Creative Mutual Interaction,” in *God’s Action in Nature’s World*, 24.

discernment, wherein dialogue among diverse ways of experiencing and knowing reality provides a basis for robust self-critical reflection. A summary statement explains:

appropriation of tradition must always involve renewed personal and communal discernment in light of the new situations, contexts, understandings and experiences individuals and communities encounter including those triggered by new scientific knowledge, and those emanating from new political, economic and social circumstances. For mixed in with the tradition can be systematic blindnesses, misdiscernments, and socially and politically induced distortions.⁹⁰

When applied to the theological anthropologies that both ground and emerge from magisterial statements on sex and gender, Stoeger's approach elicits three critical conclusions. First, although John Paul II's claim that science can purify religion ostensibly opens theology to interdisciplinary engagement, church leaders consistently buffer official teaching against science that proves inconvenient to existing doctrinal positions—as evidenced by the CCE's carefully delimited model of dialogue and John Paul II's disregard of science. In contrast, by including the possibility of “blindness” and “distortion” in the tradition—a position never found in official teaching—Stoeger calls theologians to reflect critically, in dialogue with other ways of knowing, on how the Christian tradition may be distorted to warrant oppression, subjugation, and violence.

Such reflection demands the honest, humble recognition that theological claims are situated in networks of knowledge and discourse, and they are validated and invalidated in the lives of Christians around the world, who constitute a community of shared experience, knowledge, and expertise about the meaning of the gospel (we might consider this Stoeger's definition of the *sensus fidelium*). As such, each change in our knowledge of the world alters the context for theology, demanding renewed discernment. As Stoeger puts it, “There may be radically new models which alter the whole context of a question, along with new language or new categories in which the realities in question can be more precisely and more adequately described.”⁹¹

⁹⁰ William R. Stoeger, “Reflections on the Interaction of My Knowledge of Cosmology and My Christian Belief,” 14. This model of theology corresponds with Gaillardetz's analysis of the early Christian view of authority, wherein “active discernment by the Churches regarding the authenticity of what was being ‘received’” provided the principal measure of doctrinal authority, in Richard Gaillardetz, *Teaching with Authority: A Theology of the Magisterium in the Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997), 228.

⁹¹ Stoeger, ““Our Experience of Knowing in Science and in Spirituality,” 4.

Second, as a result, interdisciplinary engagement undertaken on Stoeger's terms would correct and purify ecclesial statements on gender. For, his distinctive emphasis on the limits of competency and his recognition that theological claims must be validated according to the proper foci and experiential grounds of *theology* means that theological claims about the sexed human person must account for insights emerging from those who are best equipped to study the human body. Viewed in this light, APA and AMA statements constitute authoritative milestones in an *ongoing quest* to understand gender and sexuality that is characterized by a humbled recognition that reality is always "incompletely understood."

Often lacking in ecclesial statements on gender, such humility counters claims to full knowledge of the human person and the top-down imposition of doctrinal claims with a genuine, radical openness to listening, discerning, and being transformed by the experience of the other as she, he, or they stands in relationship to the Creator. In my view, such a stance is a prerequisite for the model of listening, reasoning, and proposing for which the CCE calls and demonstrates a faithfulness to John Paul II's call for "intense dialogue" with an integrity not found in the pope's own writings. In practice, such integrity drives the theological imagination to venture out toward new horizons, finding signs of the Spirit at work in creatures of all types—and perhaps especially in those that official teachings cannot accommodate.

Third, in light of the harsh realities faced by women and LGBTQ+ persons throughout the world, the pastoral implications of the magisterium's seemingly comprehensive grasp of the sexed human person manifest as an insidious, unjust reduction of God's love of every creature to a concern for preserving and transmitting doctrine. Seen in this way, the suppression of women's voices, the oppression of LGBTQ+ persons, and the reduction of transgender experience to an ideology "[bear] the mark of great sinfulness," to use Elizabeth Johnson's turn of phrase.⁹² In contrast, Stoeger's method seems equipped to accept the experience of women and LGBTQ+ persons as foci of theological reflection in ways ecclesial statements do not. Further, his method manifests a crucial pastoral dimension, wherein *all* experience and *all* knowledge matter as the church discerns the meaning of the gospel in a given age. Making this dimension clear, Stoeger articulates his vision in terms of "practical care" and the practice of discernment. He writes:

Within Western spirituality, this critical and very practical care has been embodied in the practice of the discernment of spirits—applied to the

⁹² Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Turn to the Heavens and the Earth: Retrieval of the Cosmos in Theology," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 51 (1996): 9.

development of individual spiritual lives, to be sure, but to much more than this—to proper apostolic living out of the Christian gospel by individuals and communities in very practical terms, to an ever increasing openness to the presence of the Spirit of the Risen Jesus in the community and reliance upon her power, love, and wisdom.⁹³

From Application to Validation: Stoeger's Hermeneutics of the Full Flourishing of Life

In a preliminary application of his approach, Stoeger associates the ultimate purpose of theology with Thomas' claim that the *telos* of every creature—from humans to zebras to great oaks—is its “proper perfection.”⁹⁴ In Stoeger's terms, each creature's proper perfection emerges in relation “to its environment and to the situation within which it finds itself—and therefore to God—in different ways.”⁹⁵ Stoeger's emphasis on ongoing discernment and the particularity of perfection offers tools for reimagining what it means for creatures of all stripes—of all genders and gender expressions—to flourish according to their own kind.

Some may object that Stoeger's interpretation of Thomas canonizes relativism. But it is crucial to understand how particular perfection can be discerned within the normative limits of the tradition. Because flourishing is for Stoeger the theological consideration *par excellence*, the adequacy of theological knowledge depends on “the *life-giving character* living according to this knowledge manifests: ‘By their fruits you shall know them.’”⁹⁶ Oriented toward what he terms “performative holiness,”⁹⁷ Stoeger's concern for what promotes the greatest flourishing is grounded in a lifelong process of discerning “what is life-giving and what is deadening and demeaning ... what belief or way of acting or living is in harmony with *who we are and what reality is*.”⁹⁸ Applied in the concrete, discerning what is most life-giving for a particular creature is the key to understanding the perfection to which that creature is called.

Further, given his commitment to interdisciplinary dialogue, engagement with scientific knowledge is intrinsic to discernment as Stoeger conceives it,

⁹³ Stoeger, “Our Experience of Knowing in Science and in Spirituality,” 15.

⁹⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 3.16.3; 3.17.3.

⁹⁵ William R. Stoeger, SJ, “The Big Bang, Quantum Cosmology, and Creatio Ex Nihilo,” in *Creation and the God of Abraham*, eds. David B. Burrell, CSC, Janet M. Soskice, and William R. Stoeger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 173.

⁹⁶ Stoeger, “Our Experience of Knowing in Science and in Spirituality,” 10. Emphasis original.

⁹⁷ Stoeger, “Our Experience of Knowing in Science and in Spirituality,” 10.

⁹⁸ Stoeger, “Is There Common Ground in Practice and Experience of Science and Religion?” 3. Emphasis mine.

such that the sciences provide vital insights that enrich and empower a person's discernment of her, his, or their proper perfection. Imagine the struggles of a woman who experiences a call to the priesthood, a teenager who finds himself attracted to other men, or a young child wrestling with a gender identity that does not correspond with their parents' perceptions or expectations. In cases like these, Stoeger's method might guide the church to reinterpret the literal meaning of Genesis, revealing new ways of understanding "creation" in conversation with the sciences, and therefore realizing John Paul II's vision for theology-science dialogue in ways that the pope himself fails to do. To imagine the tradition in this way is, Stoeger writes, to "[seek] an ever greater openness to the divine in our experience—to the revelation of the absolute, and to what makes an absolute claim upon us and has ultimate significance for us, to what is ultimately life-giving."⁹⁹

Stoeger's commitment to discerning what promotes the greatest flourishing also provides a hermeneutical key for interpreting and validating theological claims. Because for Stoeger, the gospel always and inexhaustibly proclaims a message of life, theological claims are validated and invalidated on the basis of how they promote or fail to promote the attainment of proper perfection. Yet Stoeger adds a proviso to this claim. Because "the realm of the religious and the spiritual is indeed extremely vulnerable to delusion, exploitation and deception," he states that while "experiences which are recognized to be life-giving, integrating, freeing, expansive and putting us into concrete, reverent contact with reality ... are considered genuine and legitimate," so also "those that isolate, enslave, deaden, kill or detach us from the material world and its pain and suffering, its possibilities and its wonders, are to be rejected as dangerous and illusory."¹⁰⁰ As such, interpretations of the tradition that suppress one's ability to flourish in harmony with one's unique reality are rendered invalid by his approach. Applied to gender and sexuality, Stoeger's suspicion of theologies that "detach" us from the material world and the reality of suffering calls church leadership to account for how the imposition of binary complementarity intersects with the suffering of women and LGBTQ+ persons.

In this way, Stoeger's hermeneutics of the flourishing of life stands shoulder to shoulder with a dominant concern of feminist theology: to reject structures of oppression and to affirm the dignity of all creatures in reciprocal relationships of what Procaro-Foley and Abraham name "radical equality."¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Stoeger, "Our Experience of Knowing in Science and in Spirituality," 11.

¹⁰⁰ Stoeger, "Reflections on the Interaction of My Knowledge of Cosmology and My Christian Belief," 14.

¹⁰¹ Procaro-Foley and Abraham, "Preface," 3.

In Stoeger's view, this affirmation of creaturely dignity—the underlying basis for Thomas' notion of "proper perfection"—elicits an overarching question that functions as a criterion of adequacy for validating theological claims. He asks, "Is our self-engagement and our engagement with the larger reality of which we are a part ultimately fruitful and life-giving or not—for ourselves and others?"¹⁰² When applied to gender and sexuality, this question provides a starting point for understanding how, as Craig Ford writes, "living into one's sex and gender identity is part of the larger journey towards fulfillment in one's relationship with one's self, with others, with the world, and with God."¹⁰³

To be sure, Stoeger puts great stock in the inviolability of the conscience and in the liberation to seek understanding amid the complexities of the world, but in my estimation, that is precisely the point—to "seek God where S/he may be found" (Isa 55:6). And this commitment is not Stoeger's alone. In his commentary on *Gaudium et Spes*, Joseph Ratzinger speaks of the "non-arbitrary character and objectivity" of conscience, which operates as:

the inner complement and limit of the Church principle. Over the pope as the expression of the binding claim of ecclesiastical authority there still stands one's own conscience, which must be obeyed before all else, if necessary even against the requirement of ecclesiastical authority ... Genuine ecclesiastical obedience is distinguished from any totalitarian claim which cannot accept any ultimate obligation of this kind beyond the reach of its dominating will.¹⁰⁴

As a revelation of the Spirit at work among us, the call of conscience serves as the guardian and guide of Christian discernment and the agent of creation's flourishing, which leads the faithful to discover new possibilities for the church and world, even over and against magisterial claims. In this way, Stoeger's writings seem well equipped to empower the faithful in an ongoing journey of discovery, enabling people of all genders and gender expressions to seek flourishing in their lives of faith while countering interpretations of

¹⁰² William R. Stoeger, SJ, "Rationality and Wonder: From Scientific Cosmology to Philosophy and Theology," in *Astronomy and Civilization in the New Enlightenment: Passions of the Skies: Analecta Husserliana: The Yearbook of Phenomenological Research*, vol. CVII, eds. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka and Attila Grandpierre (New York: Springer, 2011), 260.

¹⁰³ Craig A. Ford Jr., "Transgender Bodies, Catholic Schools, and a Queer Natural Law Theology of Exploration," *The Journal of Moral Theology* 7, no. 1 (2018): 94.

¹⁰⁴ Herbert Vorgrimler, ed., *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. V, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, trans. Walter Abbott (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 134.

the tradition that oppress and suppress women and LGBTQ+ persons with confidence in the Spirit's power to make all things new.

Conclusion: A Tradition Evolving in the Spirit of the Living God

All told, and with a small measure of irony, by satisfying the criteria articulated in John Paul II's writings on theology-science dialogue, Stoeger's method seems to operate in converse to the magisterium, whose inconsistent interpretation of Genesis functions practically to truncate the Christian imagination and end dialogue before it begins, "shielding us from appearing or feeling vulnerable, and permitting us to avoid the responsibility of dealing with one another's stories," as Saracino states.¹⁰⁵ In this way, Stoeger challenges theology to reimagine the tradition in conversation with diverse voices, rejecting interpretations that quench the Spirit, suppress the voices of women who desire to preach the gospel to their community of faith, and invalidate the experience of LGBTQ+ persons who seek recognition in the church they love.

In so doing, his approach corresponds well with the aims of queer theology, which queer womanist theologian Pamela Lightsey explains, "is interested in transformation. It challenges us to be transformed in our hearts and minds as we reconsider what we have been taught about human sexuality ... this pursuit of God's truth for our lives, means a dedication to a process of transformation for the sake of gaining the ultimate liberation of our mind, bodies and soul."¹⁰⁶ Once again, to embrace this vision is not embrace subjectivism; texts like the Genesis creation narratives maintain great importance for Stoeger and Lightsey alike. But in contrast to ecclesial statements on sex and gender, which deploy Genesis to establish an unquestionable order from which the meaning of the human person derives, Stoeger centers theology on God's life-giving will, inviting theologians to think not "about the ultimate truth of scripture but about how one comes to declare what is true and what should be regarded as true,"¹⁰⁷ as Lightsey explains. As we have seen, to frame questions of meaning in this way is to seek a rigorous hermeneutical approach that engages in honest, humble dialogue with other ways of knowing in hopes of maximizing the tradition's ability to promote holiness among all God's creatures—to discern what Lightsey names the "lesson of creation ... learning to be in right relationship with one another."¹⁰⁸ This is the meaning of "proper perfection," which Stoeger longs to see realized.

¹⁰⁵ Saracino, "Moving Beyond the 'One True Story,'" 17.

¹⁰⁶ Pamela R. Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter: A Womanist Queer Theology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 67–68.

¹⁰⁷ Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter*, 48.

¹⁰⁸ Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter*, 73.

Thus, if as Lightsey states, “Just as God works in mysterious ways, so too are the ways of God’s creation,”¹⁰⁹ then perhaps the Spirit is calling the church to reimagine its notions of gender and sexuality, fostering new ways of embracing the wonderfully wild diversity of God’s good creation. For if as Stoeger says, “God and His revelation in Jesus is always revealing for us now something new, something fuller, something more lifegiving,”¹¹⁰ then the church must always seek the new, while also accounting for how claims to truth have wrought suffering in the lives of people of genuine faith who seek God in a tradition that has named them “deficient” and “disordered.” Moving in this direction would constitute a first step toward embracing Stoeger’s joyous vision: that “relishing the world as it really is—in all its richness, variety, and fragility, sometimes in its harshness, hostility, and absurdity—is more consonant with true religion than any other defensive, reluctant or controlling stance we could have taken.”¹¹¹ And in embracing this vision, we may hope to realize with new vigor the transformative power of the Spirit’s transformative work among us, which the sequence for Pentecost so beautifully proclaims:

Come, Holy Spirit ...
 ... Water that which is dry
 Heal that which is wounded.
 Bend that which is rigid ...
 Correct what goes astray ... Amen. Alleluia!

¹⁰⁹ Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter*, 69.

¹¹⁰ Stoeger, “Our Experience of Knowing in Science and in Spirituality,” 17.

¹¹¹ Stoeger, “Contemporary Cosmology and Its Implications for the Contemporary Science-Religion Dialogue,” 242.