A Mighty Prefix

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+++ *Please note that this essay was written, in large part, prior to the Vatican's Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith published its recent document entitled "Dignitas Infinita." I finished reading the document and found it to be a valuable reminder of the Church's efforts to bring to all people the rich treasury of the Church's teachings on the dignity of the human person. This reflection is shared in the hopes of helping all persons to appreciate not only the dignity of human persons, but also their mystery.* **+++**

The past few years have demonstrated that we live in times that find many long-standing institutions and commonly held beliefs about our world are no longer as stable and firm as we had thought. In our fast-paced world, it would appear that much is in flux and these changes are happening quickly. This brings about an understandable reaction that seeks to "go back to the old days" or to deny the opinions, if not the experiences of some individuals. Today we are subjected to the polarizing effects of these differing viewpoints and opinions.

Issues surrounding sexuality and gender stir up strong emotions in each of us. Perhaps this is so because they frequently and increasingly involve family members and friends. These realities also touch on the mystery of what it means to be human.

For a variety of reasons we are witnessing a rapid growth in the number of people who self-identify as *transgender* or non-binary or queer (the "Q" in LGBTQIA). This, coupled with the issue of educating children, i.e. what lessons in the arena of sexuality are appropriate for various age groups, have unsettled many hearts and minds. The fields of sexuality and gender identity seem way too complicated and are advancing way too fast for many people. I can appreciate those who think and feel this way. In preparing this reflection, I found it fascinating that the word *transgender* does not appear in my dictionary (Microsoft's Encarta Dictionary) that was published not all that long ago, in 1999!

Trans and its abbreviated cousin *tra* indicate a change and even a conversion of sorts. This prefix comes to us from the Latin *trans* meaning across, over, and through.

Trans has a significant role in our technical vocabulary, finding its place in scientific discoveries and inventions – think of the *transistor* radio, organ *transplants*, blood *transfusions,* and automobile *transmissions*.

In commerce we find *transactions*. In moving from one place to another we find ourselves *transported*, *transferred* and *transplanted*. And when we are relocated, we find ourselves to be in a time of *transition* – which never feels quite right as we have one figurative foot in our old "site" and one in our new place.

I believe this linguistic precedent offers us a window into the mystery of God and humanity, and it may help to facilitate dialogue among polarized parties.

To have such respect for the mystery of divinity, which is after all a study in matters that are transcendent, and not to respect the mystery we find in humanity seems a shame, especially as seen in persons who *transcend* easy categorization.

The prefix *trans* shows up quite a bit in the life of the Church. In the doctrinal arena of Church matters, we find our place in this world with the help of our Catholic *Tradition* (with a capital "T") and by our less weighty and numerous *traditions*. The *dictions* or teachings of the Church are handed across time and space, *traded* with new generations of believers.

Of course, our Church architecture would be incomplete without our *transepts* and *transoms*, which reflect the mystery of salvation achieved for us by Christ Jesus through his death on the cross.

We Catholics cherish this mighty prefix in our celebration of the Holy Eucharist. We hold to the teaching of *transubstantiation* in which we believe that the bread and wine upon the altar are changed into Christ's Body and Blood. Additionally, there are many *translations* of the Bible published each year. In the gospels we read how the three disciples, Peter, John and James were *transfixed* at the vision of Christ's *Transfiguration*.

The polarized state of our American Catholic parishes as well as our local cities and towns prompt us Paulist Fathers and those who belong to our ministerial foundations in the United States to be agents of reconciliation. We hear the appeal of our patron St. Paul, "…present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be *transformed* by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God…" (Rom. 12:1,2)

In the late Spring of 2022, the highest governing body of the Paulist Fathers, its General Assembly, encouraged Paulists to do what they could to help our nation overcome its current state of heightened polarization.

About one year ago, I got a first-hand experience of just how polarized our Church and nation are these days.

As the pastor of the Paulist Fathers' original and first Church, I agreed to allow an art exhibit created and curated in collaboration with *Fordham University's Center on Religion and Culture* and *Openings*, a ministry of the Paulist Fathers. Titled "Vessel: A Spiritual Art Experience," the exhibit was to showcase "how young people encounter spirituality through their own original art."

One display of art (with three paintings) among many displays in this art exhibit had as its title, "*God is Trans.*" If we could put aside the political overtones of such a phrase, there are many theologians who would argue that we cannot contain the mystery of divinity, that indeed God's existence and presence does go across and over (*trans)* all efforts to limit God.

However, given the number of vulgar and nasty emails and voicemails I received within a few weeks of the publicity it garnered, I can testify to the truth that pretty much everything gets politicized these days and sadly, we cannot simply put aside secular meanings and their political implications.

I propose that a greater appreciation for the *trans* prefix can help us *transcend* differences and help everyone grow in an appreciation of mystery that is present in both divinity as well as humanity. **We know the mystery of God cannot be contained. Mystery as it is found in divinity *transcends* our feeble efforts to label and define it. Are we not facing the same reality when it comes to the mystery of the human person?**

I had hoped that leadership in the Church would help lead the people of God in appreciating the mystery behind the *trans* prefix-turned-noun. But I have come to believe that some in Church leadership fear this prefix. Transparency is always a difficult value to achieve in corporate life. It is tragic to recall how past avoidance of *transparency* led to a horrific scandal that continues to inflict hurt on all parts of the body of Christ. The secrecy surrounding clergy abuse and its cover up was a *travesty** of justice. Many have pondered whether, if women, particularly mothers, had been more present in boardrooms and chancery offices, we might have experienced more *transparency* in matters of past clergy misbehavior and crimes.

In their effort to be honest about themselves, LGBTQIA folks are courageously coming into view, no longer living in the shadows, but giving us all an example of *transparency*. **We each owe it to them to likewise be *transparent* with them by sharing our concerns and questions as well as our love and respect.**

More often than not, Catholics who have come to accept themselves as *transgender* encounter many, many blocks that prevent them from feeling any sense of communion

with their fellow Catholics. We need not be disinclined to accept human nature (to paraphrase E.M. Forster).

While many in the Church are seen as fearful and unwilling to discuss issues surrounding sexuality and gender, our Paulist Center Community in Boston has long been a place of welcome to all people, including those who identify themselves to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, the LGB's if you will. But now we are welcoming more and more "T's".

We recognize, and listen to the experiences of those who identify as "*trans"* along with their parents, grandparents and other family members and friends. St. Paul the Apostle helps us in this important effort. We know the *transformed* Paul *traded* in his former beliefs and proceeded to work tirelessly on behalf of Christ. As with our spiritual father, so too with us: *openness to the Holy Spirit of God will transform our life.*

Our patron St. Paul said it best when addressing his church in Corinth. In trying to have the believers appreciate the presence of God in each of them, Paul used the familiar image of the church as the body of Christ: "Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ." (1 Cor. 12:12).

He went on to write, "God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it." (1 Cor. 12:24b-27).

In Christ's Body, that is, the Church, we *transcend* all divisions and labels. The people of God in greater Boston desperately need places like the Paulist Center Community to remind them of this truth. We need to be the bridge-builders that St. Paul was between the Jewish believers and the Gentile believers. And as it has been pointed out by civil engineers, bridges carry a lot of tension. Our mission is certainly not an easy one.

All who call themselves Catholic can be excused for feeling a bit overwhelmed by the rapid changes in our culture. But I believe that the younger generations are offering us hope that we can live in a world where St. Paul's vision of the Church as Christ's body will help us to each acknowledge the mystery of God's *transcendence* in each one of us.

*The word *travesty* is an interesting word that is related etymologically to *transvestite* as both refer to a "turning across" or mocking something in a distorted manner.