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Gender Ideology and Pastoral Practice

**Book Review: Gender Ideology and Pastoral Practice.
A Handbook for Catholic Clergy, Counsellors,
and Ministerial Leaders (2024)**

Abstract: The article is a review of the book “Gender Ideology and Pastoral Practice. A Handbook for Catholic Clergy, Counsellors, and Ministerial Leaders” (2024). The author summarises the main themes of the book, which addresses the identity crisis of the early 21st century. The work is divided into seven parts, covering topics such as understanding sexual identity, ideological colonisation, pastoral principles, care for transitioners and detransitioners, legal considerations, and language. The book emphasises the problem of the spread of gender ideology in societies and provides guidance on how Catholics should respond in such conditions. The author highly rates the book, noting its comprehensive approach to the complex issue of gender ideology and its impact on personal, social and political life. The book underlines the importance of Christian anthropology in understanding and addressing these challenges.

Keywords: Gender ideology, pastoral practice, Catholic clergy, sexual identity, ideological colonisation, transitioners, detransitioners, cultural landscape, Christian anthropology.

The beginning of the 21st century can already be characterised as a period of great identity crisis. Never before have the traditional institutions responsible for human formation been so weak, namely the family, local, national, and state communities, as well as religion, which permeates them all to varying degrees. So, why now?

Looking at the past may be helpful. The previous identity crisis, which we experienced at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, is associated, among other things, with industrial development and large-scale migration. Torn from a world of certainties and traditional points of reference in values and the

institutions that upheld those values, people tried to find their place in large, collective identities. In this social, and in fact very personal, crisis, movements offering simple answers and false certainties that promised to satisfy the natural need for meaning and truth found their perfect niche. The consequences of this crisis are painfully familiar to us.

Nearly a century later, at the beginning of the 21st century, we are facing another turning point, also largely caused by technologies. The processes of globalisation and digitisation have led people, especially the young, to abandon their natural living spaces and abandon their traditional social forms. As a result, the sources of greatest influence that shape a person's personality and allow them to build their identity on strong, lasting foundations go beyond the sphere of traditional upbringing.

It is therefore no surprise that in such circumstances, when traditional institutions are failing to fulfil their function, for various reasons, primarily due to their decreasing presence in people's lives, movements offering simple and seemingly attractive answers have come to the fore. Their program is not new – what is new is the scale of its "success" and the viral manner in which it spreads and takes over institutions. This program is referred to as gender ideology and, like similar historical examples, is an attempt to pull people away from the truth about themselves. Social, moral, and political crises are either means to intentionally achieve this goal or consequences of its partial realisation.

The authors of *Gender Ideology and Pastoral Practice. A Handbook for Catholic Clergy, Counselors, and Ministerial Leaders*, published by En Route Books and Media in 2024, addressed the problem outlined above. Theresa Farnan, Susan Selner-Wright, and Robert L. Fastiggi were responsible for editing the publication.

As Theresa Farnan pointed out in her essay *Our World has Lost the Catholic Understanding of the Human Person*:

"Gender ideology is a destructive, harmful ideology that persuades young persons to reject their bodies in pursuit of the illusion that they can create a new identity for themselves, completely unfettered by the reality of the body. Like all ideologies, however, it contains within itself the seeds of its own destruction. Gender ideology promises happiness, but cannot deliver, as its adherents spend years seeking acceptance

for an identity that is built on a falsehood. Gender ideology promises liberation but cannot deliver the freedom that comes from accepting the gift of one's embodiment as male or female. In contrast, Christian anthropology offers a hopeful, beautiful, and true understanding of the person, rooted in the reality of human embodiment".

In essence, the book is a collection of relatively short essays devoted to particular aspects of the spread of gender ideology in Western culture, especially in the United States. The structure of the book corresponds to its problem coverage – it is divided into the following seven parts: 1) The Context: Understanding the Facts about Sexual Identity, 2) Ideological Colonisation, 3) Theological Principles: Thinking with a Catholic Mind, 4) Pastoral Principles: Loving with a Catholic Heart, 5) Pastoral Care for "Transitioners," Detransitioners, and Impacted Families, Parishes and Schools, 6) Pastoral Care in Light of Legal Considerations in the U.S., 7) Language Considerations. In total, there are 31 essays, written by people from various backgrounds – theologians, philosophers, lawyers, biologists, and doctors; Americans and people from other parts of the globe; clergy and laypeople.

The mission (if I may say so) of this book is best reflected in the main issues related to the spread of gender ideology, as articulated by Mary Hasson in her essay The Impact of Gender Ideology. Shaping Culture Across the Globe:

"First, recognize that gender ideology is irreconcilable with Christian anthropology. Second, know that gender ideology is propelled through culture by a well-financed global network and delivered by "captured" cultural institutions, primarily education, social media, and healthcare, to young people and families ill-equipped to resist. Gender ideology will not be overcome easily. Third, as gender ideology permeates the culture, Catholics will need help discerning the clash of anthropologies, sifting the truth from the well-dressed lies, and navigating the cultural landscape wisely and faithfully. Finally, because the cultural challenges are so daunting, Catholics need hope, courage, and inspiration for the mission ahead".

The book can be seen in three ways: 1) as a tool to support pastoral and formative work, 2) as a resource to help all Catholics understand, in accordance with the Catholic faith, the highly complex and full of unobvious threats cultural reality

in which they live, and more subtly 3) as a problematisation of a phenomenon that appears to be a great threat to social and political order, not only from the Catholic perspective.

Regarding the first two, it is worth noting that the book is very practical in form. Specific problems are addressed in concise texts written in understandable language. Gender ideology is not solely a theoretical problem – in fact, as demonstrated in the book, it causes the most damage when it is not even consciously accepted. Its elements are often incorporated without awareness of its basic anthropological assumptions. In the first half of the 20th century in Central and Eastern Europe, many ordinary people often opportunistically declared their willingness to implement Marxist-Leninist ideology without understanding what it actually meant. The situation is different at the beginning of the 21st century – few openly declare their commitment to gender ideology, but many unconsciously do so every day by incorporating elements derived from it into their lives and minds.

In this regard, the greatest value of the work is that it provides the reader with a framework for thinking about culture in the broad sense and recognising elements within it that are dangerous to the proper formation of a person. These elements that have grown out of false anthropology and which often try to hide behind values traditionally respected in societies – freedom, justice, equality or compassion.

The continuity that exists between the true vision of humanity and its nature (anthropology), the social practices that should express it (social order), and the cultural reality (hierarchy of values) that is evidence of this vision finds its equally consistent contradiction in gender ideology. This false image of man is directly linked to the crisis of social order and the collapse of the hierarchy of values. Therefore, this book is of considerable value to those directly responsible for the formation of man in accordance with the Catholic faith. In a broader sense, it applies to every member of the Church.

Understanding this continuity reveals the importance of standing firm and remaining true in every field. The authors provide very practical guidelines on how to do so with the respect that every human being deserves. It should be emphasised that the aspect of dignity of the victims of gender ideology – children, parents, and entire families – comes to the fore in this work. In fact, it is present in all texts, even those referring to very abstract issues.

As already indicated, the work can also be viewed somewhat separately from its pastoral purpose – as an attempt to problematise the spread of gender ideology. Of course, this attempt is made from a clearly demarcated position: the Catholic one. However, the diagnosis itself, showing the complexity and interconnection of the problems caused by gender ideology, may also be helpful to people who do not consider themselves Catholic. In this sense, the work has an open dimension – it shows the mechanisms that led to the current crisis and the paths it is leading to. Whether one fully accepts Christian anthropology or only does so to some extent, the consequences of abandoning it are very clear thanks to this reading. In both the past and in the present, abandoning the Christian image of man has had fatal consequences.

In this sense, the work is strictly political. The social and political order, the crisis of which we are witnessing, is a matter of concern not only to Catholics. Therefore, if a book motivated by concern for people and pastoral support for them also reveals and convincingly explains one of the main problems of contemporary societies, this should be seen as further proof of the great value in standing by the truth.

T. Farnan, S. Selner-Wright, R. L. Fastiggi (eds.), *Gender Ideology and Pastoral Practice. A Handbook for Catholic Clergy, Counsellors, and Ministerial Leaders*, En Route Books and Media, Saint Louis 2024.