

Institute of Catholic Social Teaching

Position Paper on  
**Pronoun Usage in the Work Environment**

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The Catholic Church's teaching on gender is rooted in its Theology of the Body, which emphasizes the significance of biological sex as a divinely ordained aspect of human identity. The Church maintains that gender and biological sex are inseparable and that individuals should embrace the gender corresponding to their biological sex assigned at birth. In line with this, it insists on the use of pronouns that align with an individual's biological sex.

In the context of the workplace, the Church underscores the importance of treating all individuals with respect and dignity. It opposes unjust discrimination in all forms, including against transgender individuals. Although it might not explicitly address the issue of pronoun use in the workplace, the Church's emphasis on respect and dignity for all people implies the importance of creating a respectful and inclusive work environment. Employers and employees are encouraged to approach these matters with sensitivity, compassion, and a commitment to upholding the dignity of every individual, while also maintaining their own convictions and beliefs.

In recent years, the landscape regarding the use of preferred pronouns in the workplace has significantly shifted, aligning with increased societal acknowledgment and understanding of transgender and non-binary identities. Various jurisdictions are implementing laws and regulations that advocate for the rights of individuals to be identified by their chosen names and pronouns. Non-compliance, characterized by refusing to use preferred pronouns, is increasingly being viewed as a form of discrimination or harassment, leading to potential legal ramifications. This legal evolution reinforces the importance of respecting everyone's self-identified gender in the workplace and underscores the possible legal consequences of not doing so.

Furthermore, corporate entities are progressively adopting so called inclusive and diverse policies, further challenging the refusal to use preferred pronouns. These policies often

encompass guidelines on respecting individuals' self-identified genders and employing their chosen pronouns. Adherence to these policies is generally expected from all employees, fostering a culture of inclusivity and mutual respect within the workplace environment. This corporate shift amplifies the challenge of opting not to use preferred pronouns, as doing so can lead to repercussions including workplace disciplinary actions.

The growing societal awareness and acceptance of diverse gender identities also play a substantial role in this change. The public is becoming more educated about the importance of pronoun use in affirming individuals' gender identities, and many now see it as a fundamental aspect of respect and dignity. Advocacy and activism by the LGBTQ+ community have successfully highlighted the critical impact of using correct pronouns on the mental and emotional well-being of transgender and non-binary individuals, contributing to the broad societal move towards more inclusive language use in all settings, including the workplace.

In aligning with traditional Catholic teachings on gender and identity, Catholics cannot morally use preferred pronouns that do not correspond with an individual's biological sex at birth. This stance is rooted in the belief in the immutability of biological sex, which is a fundamental aspect of the Catholic understanding of human identity and creation. However, even within this framework, Catholic teaching emphasizes the inherent dignity and worth of every person. This instructs Catholics to approach all individuals, including those who are transgender, with profound respect, compassion, and love, recognizing their intrinsic value as human beings. The challenge for many is navigating these two aspects of Catholic teaching – adherence to traditional beliefs about gender and a commitment to respecting and honoring every individual's dignity.

The Catholic Church's position on gender identity and pronoun use, as it relates to transgender individuals, is fundamentally rooted in the Church's teachings about the human person, gender, and sexuality, as articulated in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. While the Catechism does not address the issue of pronoun use directly, its teachings provide a foundation for understanding the Church's general perspective on gender-related issues.

According to the Catechism, every human being is created in the image and likeness of God and is assigned a biological sex (Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC], 1997, pp. 2331–2336). The Church holds that this biological sex is a fundamental aspect of individual identity and purpose. “Male and female he created them” (Genesis 5:2, New American Version), illustrates the complementarity and difference of male and female as willed by God, which informs the Catholic understanding of gender as inherently linked to biological sex.

While acknowledging the dignity of every person, including transgender individuals, and the call to treat everyone with respect and compassion (CCC, 1997, p. 1706), the Church may advise adherents to avoid using pronouns that do not align with an individual's biological sex. This perspective is based on the belief in the unchangeable nature of sex as a divine gift and a fundamental aspect of human identity (CCC, 1997, p. 369). Despite this, the emphasis on respect and compassion means Catholics are called to approach all individuals with love and sensitivity, seeking to uphold their dignity and wellbeing in all interactions."

The Catholic Church's traditional viewpoint on gender and pronoun usage, based on theological teachings, faces differing opinions, especially regarding the workplace. Critics argue that recognizing individuals' chosen gender identities and pronouns is essential for ensuring equality and respect for everyone, including transgender or non-binary individuals. They believe

that everyone has the right to identify as they choose, and this includes the pronouns by which they are addressed.

From a legal standpoint, many places have laws protecting transgender and non-binary individuals from gender identity discrimination. This includes the right to be addressed by their selected names and pronouns. Advocates argue that not using preferred pronouns can create a hostile work environment, potentially amounting to harassment or discrimination. They push for workplace policies that support diversity and inclusion, creating an environment where all employees feel respected and valued.

Concerns are also raised about the mental and emotional well-being of transgender and non-binary individuals. Being referred to by incorrect pronouns can cause emotional distress and feelings of exclusion. Supporters of preferred pronoun use emphasize its role in affirming individuals' identities, promoting a sense of belonging, and supporting mental and emotional health. This debate involves balancing religious beliefs, legal rights, and the importance of respect, dignity, and well-being for all individuals in the workplace.

In responding to the arguments in favor of using preferred pronouns in the workplace, we, the adherents to the teachings of the Catholic Church, emphatically underscore the unyielding theological and philosophical principles that anchor our understanding of human identity and dignity. We steadfastly assert that every person, created as male or female, carries an intrinsic and unalterable identity that is beyond personal preference or societal changes. Upholding the use of pronouns that correspond with an individual's biological sex is for us a commitment to honoring this foundational human truth, reflecting the divinely designed complementarity of males and females. While we ardently affirm the dignity of every individual, including those identifying as transgender or non-binary, and advocate for the respectful and

compassionate treatment of all, we maintain the critical significance of biological sex in human identity. In our perspective, genuine respect and support for each individual do not necessitate the acceptance of pronoun usage that is in conflict with biological realities and our steadfast teachings on human sexuality and identity.

Navigating the sensitive landscape of pronoun usage and gender identity while adhering to the foundational teachings of the Catholic Church presents challenges, but a potential path forward is discernible. In this light, the consistent use of individuals' names in place of pronouns stands out as a considerate alternative. This practice honors each person's unique identity, allowing for dignified and respectful interactions that align with Catholic principles regarding the sacredness of biological sex and the imago Dei (image of God) in every individual. By respectfully using a person's chosen name, individuals can maintain honorable and kind communication, reaffirming each person's inherent dignity, while remaining steadfast in their religious convictions about gender and human identity.

Implementing this approach necessitates a heartfelt commitment to treating every person with the utmost respect and compassion, in alignment with the Catholic Church's teachings on the inestimable worth of every individual. Avoiding pronouns does not mean avoiding kindness and consideration. It is imperative to ensure that all interactions underscore the Catholic values of love, respect, and the affirmation of each person's God-given dignity. Even amid diverse views on gender identity and pronoun usage, the consistent and respectful use of names, coupled with a genuine commitment to upholding the dignity of every individual, fosters a pathway for engaging these complex issues within the framework of Catholic understanding and compassion.

## **References**

Catechism of the Catholic Church. (1997). 2nd Ed. Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

The Bible. (1970). New American Bible. Confraternity of Christian Doctrine.