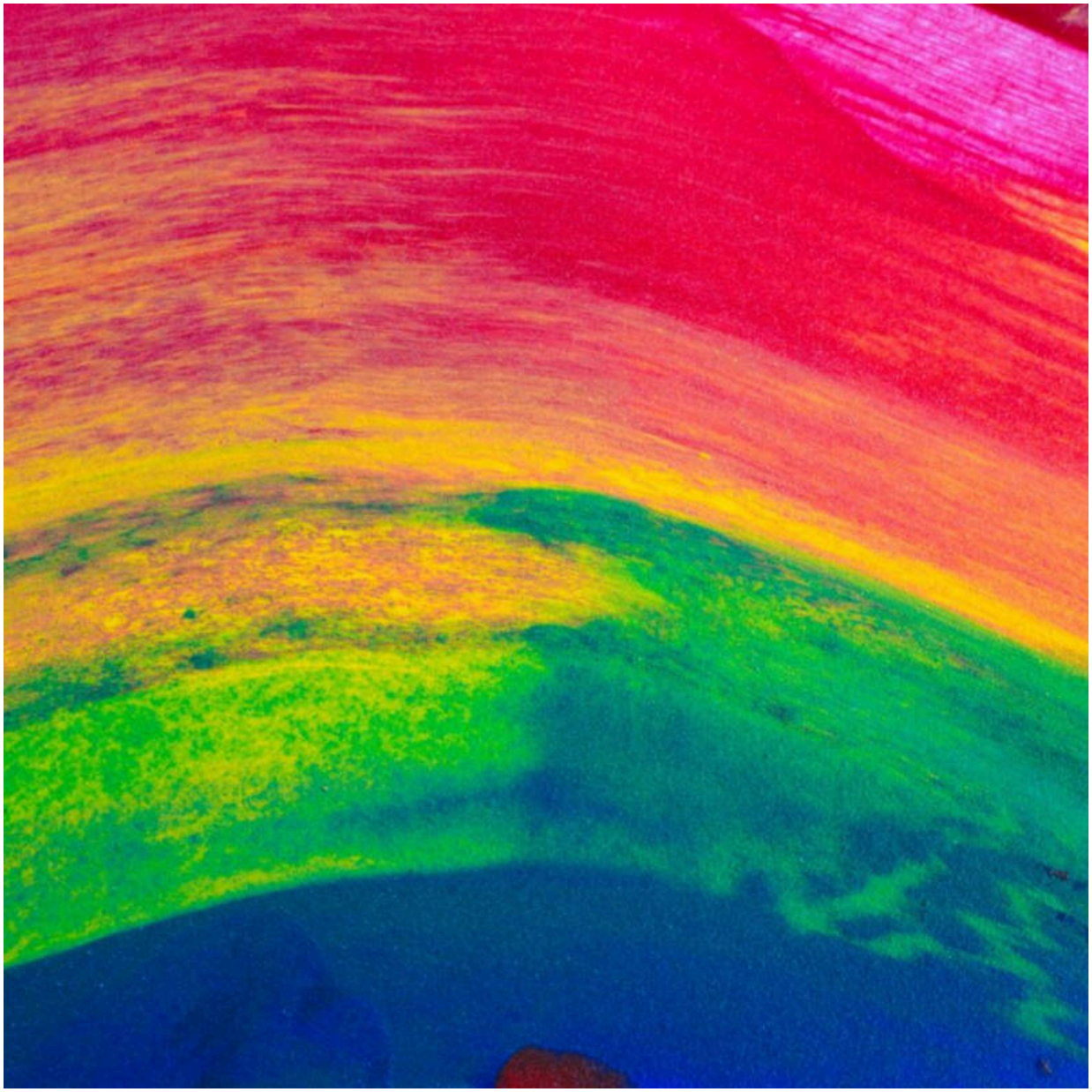
Understanding Human Sexuality and Gender with Mercy



We live in upheaval. Among the questions we must ask are, *what does it mean to be human, how should we act, and what is our vision for society*? Human sexuality and gender identity issues are among the questions our society must face with an

openness to new insights and with a commitment to lifelong learning.

The Sisters of Mercy, the religious order to which I belong, holds strongly to the belief in the inherent and inalienable dignity of every human being. For the last several years, we have dedicated ourselves to understanding this belief more deeply and with a more inclusive perspective towards the LGBTQ+ communities.

The Mercy family, which includes sisters, Mercy Associates, Companions in Mercy, and lay staff, as well as countless others in our schools, universities, and other ministries, are a diverse group of people. I do not speak for any of them. But I am encouraged by the fact that we converse about sexuality and gender and deal with challenges surrounding issues of our very nature, which is indicative of how we choose to care for other kinds of creatures and Earth itself.

As I reflect upon our society's current conversations and questions about sexuality, sexual orientation, and gender identity, I am reminded of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that was adopted in 1948 by the United Nations.

Eleanor Roosevelt, then first lady, headed the commission that worked with leaders and scholars worldwide to envision, argue, write, and negotiate the final document—an effort that was always on the brink of failure. Eleanor's committee was only partially successful, as it carried out just half of what was to be a much larger project. Their original mission was to produce one document on human rights and another one on human duties. But the work of naming our rights was so difficult that committee members simply stopped there and never moved to naming our duties.

A bishop named Angelo Roncalli saw this incomplete work as a tragedy for humankind and, as Pope John XXIII, issued *Pacem in Terris* (Peace on Earth) in April 1963. The full title is "On Establishing Universal Peace in Truth, Justice, Charity and Liberty." In it he describes both the rights and obligations of individuals and of states (countries), and proper relationships between the latter.

The work of advancing, and then protecting and improving, the rights of all people, including our LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters, and the rights of other species and Earth systems, is holy work. This sacred project speaks to the inherent dignity of each and of the whole, where we can live in right, fair, and even joyful relationships.

Included in advancing, protecting, and improving any right must be the work of

investigating and naming the responsibilities, obligations, and duties of persons and societies surrounding a right. For instance, I have a right to vote. And I have a duty to work for the due rights of others to vote, and to know the issues and the candidates so that I am a well-informed voter. But the "duties" that surround this right go deeper. We have a responsibility not only to be good citizens and to help further the common good, but also to examine what a "good citizen" is and what the "common good" means for society today. Simply put, we have obligations.

Similarly, as the social and physical sciences learn more and more about human sexuality and gender identity, we must listen with open hearts and minds. Along with philosophers, theologians, ethicists, and others pursue knowledge and wisdom. In addition, we must help ensure that dialogue, research, and learning around sexuality and gender relate to LGBTQ+ people's actual experiences and stories, as this work of dignity continues.

How this journey of LGBTQ+ rights filters into society, our customs, and laws is sometimes two steps forward and one or two steps backward, depending on where one lives. Take nothing for granted. A right gained, is not the same thing as a right sustained.

When it comes to human sexuality, sexual orientation, and gender identity, the steadfast work for greater understanding and inclusion continues, along with increased efforts for the recognition of the dignity of each person and the expansion and protection of human rights. In addition, let us continue to ponder: What are the responsibilities, obligations, and duties for how I live out my sexuality, sexual orientation, and gender identity and for how this dimension of who I am contributes to the common good?

We as a Mercy family—members, colleagues, friends—continue to grow in our understandings of this topic. We know there is more to learn at both the mind and heart level. I would encourage ongoing support for dialogue, especially if integrated with other topics of concern, and if we approach these matters through the lens of nonviolence, which is itself a central topic that begs for deeper understanding and practice.

The basic question remains: What does it mean to be human, and how are we to be and act in a suffering world as people of Mercy?

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