

THE NATAL Witness

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Features

The journey from Selwyn to Sally



February 25, 100



SALLY GROSS as priest

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The life of Sally Gross challenges many of our preconceptions about who we are, especially in a society that accepts only two genders, male and female. Born Jewish and classified male at birth, Gross later became a Christian and a Dominican priest. But Sally Gross is not transsexual, she is intersexed. This is the first of three articles in which she tells her story.

"SINCE the time I became conscious of myself as a very young child I had sense of something being awry in the area of gender, about my own bodiliness," says Sally Gross. "I didn't know what exactly what it was but there was a sense of things being awry, being different."

Gross now knows that her birth on August 22, 1953, in Wynberg, Cape Town, was cause not for celebration but alarm. Her mother was told there was something wrong and that her first born child was likely to die of dehydration. "Now a new born infant doesn't die of dehydration unless you don't feed it," the still very much alive Gross points out. "My suspicion is that back then in 1953 the reaction was: 'Oh my God! What do we do, let's let nature take its course.' But then someone relented."

Why such a reaction? "I now know that anatomically my body is exceedingly ambiguous and was clearly so when I was born," says Gross. Despite this ambiguity, the infant Gross was classified as male and brought up as a boy named Selwyn. In hindsight, according to medical protocols adopted in the mid-fifties, Gross would have been classified as female at birth.

Today, as a matter of routine, such "ambiguities" are "corrected" by surgical intervention. In Gross's case there was no attempt at what she calls "surgically enforced cosmetic conformity" but she was subjected to another form of surgery. "I was born Jewish and there was an attempt to circumcise me - scar tissue and something my father said to me about difficulties with the circumcision attest to an awkwardness about that."

The walls of Sally Gross's flat in Rosebank, Cape Town, attest to her Jewish heritage. They are lined with books: imposing volumes of philosophy and theology, many in Hebrew. They are also evidence of her background as a lecturer in philosophy when, as a Dominican priest, Sally was Father Selwyn Gross and taught at Blackfriars, Oxford, and St Joseph's Theological Institute, Cedara, just outside Pietermaritzburg.

The journey from Selwyn to Sally has taken Gross to the outer limits of human identity, both physically and psychologically, and incorporated every dimension of her life: political, social and religious. Her experience has implications for all of us and our institutions, both secular and religious, because our society insists on the existence of only two sexes, male and female.

Gross is a living challenge to this dualistic view of gender because she is not transsexual, she is intersexed. There is no neat definition of this state. One attempt defines it as "atypical congenital physical sexual differentiation". But intersex is really an umbrella term, which covers an enormous range of physical sexual permutations found in an estimated one in 2 000 births.

Gross is quick to point out that there is a distinction to be made between biological sex - one's anatomy - and sexual orientation. Some intersexed people are attracted to men, others to women, some don't have any sexual orientation at all.

"Sexual orientation is not an intrinsic part of the intersex package," says Gross. "When it comes to intersexuality, one's bodiliness is such that it's often exceedingly difficult to answer the question: is this person male or is this person female?"

Gross has no sexual orientation. "This came as a surprise as I expected things to happen when I got to my teens but they didn't," says Gross, who eventually accepted she was one of nature's celibates - not a condition which finds a ready home in orthodox Judaism. "One is expected to produce grandchildren. I did not believe at the time that Orthodox Judaism had religious symbols which could make sense of the way in which I was different, whatever it was."

This is an indication that religious loyalties were shifting; a shift inextricably bound up with her physical sexual identity. Unlike her parents, who were not religious, Gross grew up a committed orthodox Jew and as a teenager went to England "to do intensive rabbinical studies at a yeshiva, a traditional rabbinical college"; later returning to South Africa to complete her secular education.

Increasingly Gross felt alienated from her Jewish heritage which seemingly failed to accommodate her "ambiguity". She was further alienated by the response of official South African Jewish institutions to apartheid. "There was a policy of tacitly going along with apartheid. People from the Jewish community who challenged apartheid found themselves marginalised: the Joe Slovos, the Ronnie Kasrils and so on."

Counterpointing this growing disillusionment with institutional Judaism was a fascination with the figure of Jesus. "I had long had a great sadness that we as Jews could not own at least the human and prophetic figure of Jesus. This was someone who compelled respect."

Gross was drawn towards Roman Catholicism, impressed by the spirit of openness in the Catholic Church following the Second Vatican Council, and the willingness of some Catholic clergy to challenge apartheid. Jesus and Catholic Christianity also provided Gross with a way of coping with her sense of something being awry in the area of gender.

"The image of the cross seemed to be an icon of all manner of confusion and suffering. The Holocaust was there, the horror of apartheid was there, and my own personal confusion and pain - which I could never publicly admit - was there as well. And in the resurrection was a symbol that this was transcended. And at the back of my mind, there would have been an awareness that in Christianity there are strands of tradition in which celibacy is valued and turned to positive use."

Gross was baptised in the Roman Catholic Church in early 1976. "Then Soweto happened." Gross pondered on her response. "Was I to get on my knees and pray for Christian fellowship or was I to seek a Gestetner to put out seditious pamphlets." Gross prayed long and hard, and the answer was "Gestetner!"

Political involvement was nothing new - Gross had been politically active since schooldays and at one point, "wanting away from apartheid", she lived in Israel for two years. However, Israel wasn't the democratic paradise she envisaged. After a brief involvement in political activities in Israel while studying at the University of Haifa, Gross decided if she was to fight apartheid, "I would rather do it where I was born". Gross returned to study law at the University of Cape Town and became active in left-wing politics on and off campus.

"I wrote a draft programme which included an armed struggle clause - I had seen children being shot at on the streets of Cape Town - and it included a clause on co-operation with the ANC." When a copy of the document disappeared under mysterious circumstances Gross was instructed to flee the country by her comrades. "I skipped the country in May 1977."

Gross first went to Botswana then to Israel, where her parents had settled, and where, after being denied status for around a year, she eventually became an Israeli citizen. Having already made contact in South Africa with the Dominicans, a Catholic preaching order, Gross picked up the pieces overseas and in 1981 was accepted for the novitiate by the English Dominicans in Oxford, England. Following ordination in 1987, Gross taught moral theology and ethics at Blackfriars, Oxford, as well as giving philosophy tutorials at various other Oxford university colleges. She was then assigned to the Cambridge priory where she became sub-prior.

At the same time Gross was an active member of the ANC and served as a member of the ANC delegation, headed by Thabo Mbeki, which met with other South Africans at Dakar, Senegal, in 1987. In 1990, after the unbanning of the ANC, Gross was invited by the Dominicans to visit South Africa. Despite initial difficulties connected with her presumed loss of South African citizenship due to having been a refugee from South Africa, she finally came to teach for six months of each year in 1991 and 1992 at St Joseph's in Cedara and her citizenship was restored in 1991.

With South Africa's problems resolved, the time seemed ripe for Gross to address the tensions in her own life. "There were clearly two areas of tension: there was the issue of my Jewish/Christian identity and the issue of bodiliness and gender, although I thought that was secondary." When it became clear there was an expectation she would teach in South Africa on a permanent basis, Gross realised that "I owed it to myself, to the order and to the church not to let plans for me founder on unresolved conflicts".

"The decision to confront the issue of my bodiliness was a decision to confront what I feared the most and what I had tried to run away from in many different ways," says Gross. At Cedara in 1992 she did an "audit" of her life. "It became clear that the issue of gender - gender-identity - was much more prominent as a driving force in my life than I had realised and it was something I had to confront if it wasn't to pull my life to bits."

"At that stage I rather naively thought I'd see someone with some expertise in this area and after a couple of sessions I could get on with the rest of my priestly life, full stop." Gross laughs. "It wasn't as simple as that."

* Next: how Gross struggled for her gender identity in the context of the Catholic priesthood.

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Originally published on February 21 2000

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