

Witness

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Shunned by the church



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This, the second of three articles, explores Sally Gross's search for an identity within the context of the Catholic priesthood which resulted in the 'biggest trauma' of her life.



SALLY GROSS as priest

Since childhood Sally Gross had always felt a sense of something being not quite right when it came to gender. "I didn't know exactly what it was but there was a sense of things being awry, being different." Now she knows why: she is intersexed.

"One way I had worked with this as a child was thinking I was actually female underneath it all. But it wasn't a case of a girl being trapped in a boy's body, more a sense of my gender not fitting."

At birth Gross had been classified male and subsequently named Selwyn Gross. As Selwyn, raised Jewish, she became a Christian and took ordination as a Roman Catholic priest in the Dominican preaching order. A member of the ANC, she had lived in exile since 1977. When, in 1992, her return to South Africa on a permanent basis looked likely, she felt that the "sense of things being awry" required serious investigation.

"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."

Though there was much about Gross at odds with a transsexual paradigm, that condition certainly provided an entry point for further inquiry.

A counsellor running an organisation which focused on transsexuality thought there might an issue of intersex and urged Gross to have her levels of testosterone tested, which she felt were likely to be suggestive of intersexuality. These tests showed that Gross's testosterone levels were in the middle of normal female range and less than an eighth of the bottom of male range. "The counsellor was absolutely spot on but nevertheless sought to regiment this in terms of transsexuality and a change of gender."

This use of transsexuality as a model was reinforced by a consultant who specialised in the treatment of transsexuality and who strongly advised a "real-life test" in a female gender role. The suggestion was that Gross had to grasp this nettle as part of a process of discernment and treatment.

Gross asked for a year's leave of absence from the Dominicans to "discern and explore what to do". Her major religious superior in England was reluctant at first but then grudgingly gave her permission to embark upon a "real-life test" hedged with various constraints. Gross had to move somewhere where she was not known and was forbidden to tell anyone of her condition who did not already know. "I had to lose contact with my brethren, most of my friends and even my parents."

She was further forbidden to contact her fellow religious by telephone or letter; she was denied employment references and forbidden to function as a priest, to write or give talks, although she could approach the sacraments. She was also denied moral and material support as a matter of principle.

One senior Dominican priest to whom Gross wrote before approaching the head of the English Dominicans responded more creatively. "He said that he saw this as precisely something which was priestly - maybe that in my bodiliness, God was working out a preaching of that passage in Paul: 'In Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female,' but all of them, all assimilated here."

Gross moved to Eastbourne on the south coast of England and from the outset adopted a female role. "I remember the first time I went shopping at a supermarket and coming back with a tension headache, feeling 'God! I can't cope'. Here I was, presenting a cheque book and a cheque guarantee card which gave my title as 'mister'. That was easily changed but I no longer knew how to read people's reactions and responses. This was a learning process, although I didn't have the experience to know how to respond. The only way I could get that experience was just by going out and being myself. This was the only way to learn and the tension disappeared. It felt more comfortable."

In Eastbourne, Gross's doctor showed her the detailed results of her testosterone test, which she had not previously been shown. He was clearly intrigued by them and noted that this was something with which Gross had been born. Evidence of congenitality, as it emerged, appeared to compound the embarrassment and her felony in the eyes of her major religious superior.



Sally Gross (left) when she was a Dominican priest in England, with fellow religious Peter Harries.

Part One:

- [The journey from Selwyn to Sally](#)

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"After all I was legitimately a woman who, albeit unwittingly, had been ordained a Catholic priest."

Given the Catholic Church's position on women priests, Gross had realised from the outset that her future as a priest was problematic. "But being a religious is a completely different matter, particularly in an order in which there are congregations of women and there are some mixed communities as well. Had there been a willingness to find a way of accommodating my religious vocation, a way could have been found without too great a difficulty, although it would have taken a lot of courage."

Instead the religious authorities played a cat-and-mouse game with Gross that looks to have been calculated to make her break under pressure.

"It was as if they hoped I would do the honourable thing." Instead of falling on her sword, Gross toughed it out but she makes no secret of her personal pain. "It was the biggest trauma of my life, one that was surely life-threatening and dragged on for a long time."

A year after she had been given leave from community, a Papal Rescript stripped Gross of clerical status and annulled her religious vows, again not without an element of subterfuge. Rumours had been circulating in Catholic circles that Gross had reverted to ultra-orthodox Judaism. This seemed to suggest that a dismissal was being prepared on the grounds that she had "notoriously defected from the faith" - a cause for immediate dismissal and excommunication without right of appeal. Gross pre-empted such a hostile dismissal on such false grounds by agreeing to co-operate in a laicisation process. It proved a one-way co-operation. Gross was laicised on the basis of a notional petition for dispensation from priestly celibacy but celibacy had never been the issue. "I am one of nature's celibates. It was not my petition, it was contrary to what I'd said."

Even with lay status, further prohibitions were placed on Gross, although without any canonical justification. "They effectively made it impossible for me to remain in communion."

It was suggested that she could not participate in church groups or parish organisations, except by applying, on an occasion by occasion basis, for permission from the bishop, who would in turn need to consult Gross's former major superior. "It seemed to me that it made a mockery of the very notion of fellowship if you couldn't join in the life of the parish."

"By this stage I no longer had the resilience to tough it out. The possible comeback from my former major religious superior would have been more than I could have coped with emotionally and I took the advice of a local priest and others to withdraw from communion."

For a short while Gross attended an Anglican church. "But this was in a diocese vehemently opposed to the ordination of women. I found it increasingly uncomfortable and eventually attended a Quaker meeting and found it spoke to my condition."

Now living in Cape Town, where she works for the Regional Land Claims commission and is an active member of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), the former Father Selwyn, now Sally, admits to missing the priesthood. "At some level I think I'll always see myself as a priest and a religious. I hanker for religious life and I hanker for the ministry."

Although the Catholic Church appears to have been either unwilling or unable to face the implications of Gross's intersex status, she doesn't condemn the church as a whole "but the few people who have exercised power in this situation and have done so in terms other than I would have wished or expected".

"I had expected that the attitude of the church would have been loving and supportive. I did not believe that at a time when I needed friendship and contact more than any other time in my life, these, specifically, were denied me."

While living in Eastbourne and still bound by vows of obedience to her religious superiors not to talk of her circumstances, Gross decided to tell her parents. "Both were supportive. I don't think it was a terrible surprise really."

When Gross visited them in Israel some three years later, it was clear there were some things her parents were still not prepared to discuss, particularly events surrounding her birth.

"I found that difficult," says Gross, "but felt, given their age and health, it was not prudent to push the matter. But whatever happened, I am profoundly grateful I was spared surgery and was brought up in a way which left me pretty unneurotic about my body, all things considered, and that, believe me, is quite an extraordinary achievement. And the one thing which I certainly never had any reason to doubt was my parents' love."

* Next, how Sally Gross's intersex status created difficulties when she tried to come back to South Africa.

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