

## Finding Irene

I am a practicing Catholic, a frequent confessor and daily Mass attendee. I begin each morning in quiet prayer, seeking direction from the Holy Spirit to live out my mission in life. I attended grade school with Dominican sisters, and high school and college with Jesuit priests and brothers. I've been married for twenty-three years. I own a very successful business. I love to travel and have been known to become a little upset when Notre Dame loses a football game.

I also am a closeted transgender woman. My years of silent suffering have dramatically impacted my health and wellbeing: consuming of my free time, tormenting my inner thoughts, frightening me, and causing serious illness. Physically, I can no longer hold it inside and I must do something about it!

Gender dysphoria has been with me all my life. As a child, my family was aghast when they saw me wearing my sister's pink skirt and asked if I was a homosexual. I quickly went to my bedroom, slit the sides of my hips with a razor blade, and returned to my family with a crazy story of how I fell in the rose bush and needed the skirt to keep pressure on my hips to relieve the pain. There were other incidents growing up when my siblings and friends caught me but no one ever said a word about it.

As an adult, I convinced myself that I could keep the dysphoria a secret and offer my suffering to God. Maybe this was my cross to bear in life? I thought it would be better for me to suffer than cause pain to those people the Lord had placed in my life: my wife, my family, co-workers, and friends. After all, Jesus showed us the ultimate gift of sacrifice by giving his life for our sins. After years of suffering in silence, one day I spent several hours quietly praying in my local church. I knew that I could no longer ignore my gender dysphoria. I heard a voice tell me to go out and find Irene. It's okay! I then felt freer to embrace my true self who is Irene. Thank God!

I began experiencing unusual extreme pain in my chest wall and the left side of my body. After numerous medical tests and doctor visits, doctors could not determine the cause for my pain. I started wondering if my suppressed gender dysphoria was causing the chest pain. I planned to take my gender dysphoria to the grave, and it was becoming a real possibility. But most interestingly, when I had time to be Irene my symptoms disappeared.

I prayed to God for direction for what I should do. I was not willing to compromise my faith. Previously, I met with a priest to confess my transgender condition. He

said two very powerful things to me. First, he asked me if I was comfortable in my own skin. I responded with a “yes.” Second, he said “God doesn’t make mistakes!” I should not be ashamed or afraid of my gender dysphoria. God made me this way for a reason. This was so freeing for me! It was time to play the hand that God dealt me, and it was okay!

After a great deal of prayer and consideration and help from a therapist, I began hormone therapy. Physically, I am much better: my health has improved and my symptoms have subsided. Emotionally, I am struggling with how I will tell my wife and everyone else. I believe my path is to transition and to present as the female that I am. I believe it’s the only way forward, even though I do not know where the path will lead. I keep reminding myself to be not afraid and trust in God!

In August of 2018 I reached out to Sister Luisa Derouen, a Catholic sister who has been ministering among the transgender community for 20 years. Her spiritual guidance continues to be most helpful to me. My greatest fear was that I could destroy my marriage by telling my wife who I really am. However, I’ve tried to endure the suffering of gender dysphoria on my own for decades and my body can no longer sustain it.

I am sure I am not alone. I am praying for everyone struggling with gender dysphoria, and praying for understanding from fellow Catholics and all people.

I believe that it is okay to be transgender and Catholic. Jesus’ life on earth centered on caring for the poor and marginalized. No one was and is outside his compassion. As he said, “It is mercy I desire, not sacrifice.”

God bless all who read this. Lord, please guide us. Jesus, I trust in you!