

## Crystallizing our Fears: The Catholic Church and the Future Struggle for Marriage

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Briefs

I recall sitting at a breakfast table at a large pro-life banquet years ago with Cardinal Bernardin of Chicago. Ten to fifteen times over the course of the meal, guests came over, with the same introduction: “Don’t want to disturb your breakfast, Your Eminence, just wanted to thank you for being here and tell you . . . .” Near the end of the “meal,” I noticed the Cardinal hadn’t even picked up his fork and I mentioned this. “I always eat before I come,” he replied, (and here, I’m paraphrasing, but accurately) because it’s so important to every person who comes to speak to me that I give them my full attention, and reply personally and kindly. If I don’t, they’ll leave this banquet -- this may be one opportunity to speak to a bishop directly -- believing that ‘the Church’ doesn’t care about them.”

His words struck me then and now as insightful. There *are* “signal moments,” signal encounters,” that define the Church for people. Now is such a moment, and it’s precipitating cause is the “marriage question.” Marchers in California angry over the success of Proposition 8 (which affirmed heterosexual marriage), are literally bringing the question to the doors of Catholic churches. Were it not for our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, whose death on the cross seemed “foolish” to the wise, we might be overwhelmed at the significance of this moment for the future of marriage and for the future of the Church. In what follows, I offer my small contribution to the question of how we as Church offer not only accurate, comprehensible answers, but also how we might “put on love,” in all that we do. I will make two points. First, the Church must face that it is operating under large “clouds of suspicion” effectively created by same-sex marriage proponents. Second, this debate threatens to obscure the great goods of the Church’s teachings and practices regarding marriage. Given space constraints, only the outlines of each point can be sketched.

First, with regard to the clouds of suspicion under which we are operating. Same-sex marriage proponents have effectively suggested that naysayers oppose the equal dignity of homosexual persons, their attempts to stabilize their relationships, and even love itself, including love as manifested in the care of adoptive children. The Church’s responses to these various charges overlap categories; therefore I will lay out all the charges first, and then suggest elements of the Catholic response.

Same-sex marriage advocates argue that the debate is simply about two people’s love for each other, love which ought to be recognizable and appealing to society. Love which does what love always does: moves people to remain together for a long time, and even to take care of each other. Like heterosexual couples, homosexual couples stress the support and encouragement provided when these feelings are solemnized publicly. They urge that marriage rights will produce greater stability and less promiscuity than is currently observed among homosexual



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pairs. They characterize institutional marriage as a social marker of maturity and responsibility, and demand to be given the opportunity to grab these brass rings. They claim further that institutionalizing same-sex unions will pave the way for interdependent caretaking, childrearing (via assisted reproductive technologies, “ARTs”) and even adoption of at-risk kids, including children who are ill or long in foster care.

Homosexual interest groups also claim that they are the new Black Americans struggling for equality (sample headline: “Is Gay the New Black?”) They appeal to Americans’ deserved and deeply-felt shame over our racial past.

Opponents of same-sex marriage are also taunted by leading academics as last-gasp defenders of an unjust marital model: patriarchal, heterosexual marriage (a phrase they regard as a redundancy). They don’t hide their suspicion that we’re “clinging” to heterosexual marriage as a nefarious proxy for maintaining past discrimination against and role-limitations for women.. Nor do they fail to highlight the tragedies played out in heterosexual marriages &ndash; violence, divorce, etc. &ndash; and to suggest that other couples ought to be given the chance to revitalize marriage.

Finally, homosexual activists assert that since their relationships will not in the least manner disrupt heterosexual unions, the only *animus* for opposing extended marriage rights, *must* be personal distaste for homosexual persons.

How does the Church &ndash; and individuals and groups who regard marriage as possible only between a man and a woman -- begin to speak in such a fusillade? Not merely with our own wisdom &ndash; obviously &ndash; but with nothing less than the love of God Himself? We begin, I would suggest, with God’s infinite love and concern for every person, and his creating each human person in his image and likeness. He loves each of us with equal sweetness, and with an equal commitment to “die” for each one. Being made in God’s image (God, who is Trinity), we are all also made for society, for communion with persons on earth, but always, also, for ultimate communion with God. For the vast majority of persons, it is marital communion with a spouse &ndash; including physical union &ndash; which provides the opportunity to glimpse God’s total, faithful, unconditional love.

Immediately, this account indicates the difficulties faced by homosexual persons who -- like all others -- seek union but face obstacles on the way. Whether their difficulties stem from their family of origin, or from inborn characteristics, they are uniquely frustrated in their ability to achieve what every human seeks. These difficulties are compounded if they are swept into the lifestyles of homosexual communities (*See, e.g.* Ronald G. Lee, *The Books Were a Front for the Porn*, *New Oxford Review*, Feb. 2006), which tend to undermine rather than confirm the meaning and importance of intimate union.

It’s probably true that same-sex marriage advocates are bringing attention to the human longing for life-long, loving partnerships. But by denying completely any significance for the properly engendered dimension of the human body &ndash; including the intrinsic relationship between sexual love and new life &ndash; they



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promote a truncated, intrinsically frustrated notion of such partnerships. They demand a union which is by its very nature is cut off from the possibility of a genuinely human union (which necessarily includes a unity of bodies) which moves toward and is crowned by the gift of a child begotten in the bodily act of marital union. To throw off this feature of marriage, by throwing away its heterosexual core “feels” like the dynamic at work at the moment when Adam and Eve effectively told God that their feelings, preferences and desires were wiser than His. Do our bodies, our history, our millennia of reasoning and practices about marriage, have any meaning? Of course they do. They contain received wisdom.

Regarding the “children’s well-being” argument for same sex marriage. Setting aside the rarity of homosexual adoption of troubled or needy children, despite the frequent appearance of such stories in the media, this strategy seems like the type of “adults first” argumentation that family law has labored recently to overcome. At best, the consequences for children of being reared in homosexual households are unknown, though we have some research indicating sex-identity confusion and greater toleration for promiscuity among such children. (*See, e.g.* an article in a leading sociological journal by open supporters of same-sex parenting, Judy Stacey and Timothy J. Biblarz, “How Does the Sexual Orientation of Parents Matter?” 66 *Amer. Soc. Rev.* 159, 170, 171 (2001), concluding that a “significantly greater” proportion of the young adult children raised by lesbian mothers...reported having had a homoerotic relationship.” They reported also that “[r]elative to their counterparts with heterosexual parents, the adolescent and young adult girls raised by lesbian mothers appear to have been more sexually adventurous and less chaste,” though the opposite was true by a small margin, of the males.) At worst, same-sex marriage would be harmful and unfair experimentation upon children. Further, same sex marriage would inevitably exacerbate the movement afoot to render motherhood or fatherhood unnecessary, in favor of androgynous parenthood. In sum, that a particular homosexual couple may rescue a particular child, doesn’t mean that this should become a general plan of action for children. We don’t know why God determined that children be created within an act of love between a man and a woman, or all the reasons why children reared without a parent of either sex have particular difficulties. There is some mystery at work here. So long as we operate with a “children first” mentality, we can negotiate the mystery fairly successfully. When children become either totally separated from the institution of marriage, from conception in an act of love, or when they are used as a means to an end, or viewed as a “right” not a gift, we easily tread on their totally dependent persons.

There are credible reasons, available to the Church and to all rational persons, for suspicion of the claims that institutionalizing same-sex marriage will strike a blow for equality, for dignity, or love. There is a vast black hole where the research should be concerning the origins of homosexuality and homosexual lifestyles. Some doctors’ accounts in the United States indicate a relationship between fatherhood failures and homosexuality. Some European accounts reveal a stunning lack of fidelity in gay relationships. There are also reports of greater mental and emotional difficulties associated with homosexual lifestyles. And of course, it is well known that professional medical groups fear to tread in this area, and that they come to



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conclusions about the health of homosexual lifestyles, based upon far less evidence than such groups would require respecting other serious medical questions. How can it be even responsible, let alone fair &ndash; to adults or to children &ndash; to make public policy, with the possible effect of promoting a life involving much suffering, with so little intellectual foundation?

A second and final point regarding the Church’s response to the same-sex marriage question. We watch in agony as this debate supplants a great deal of public discussion about the importance of marriage generally. We know what we have to offer &ndash; a theology long and deep, much admired inside and outside the Church for its emphasis on marriage’s centrality and its significance, and for our sacramental and pastoral insights and practices. (See, e.g. Max Rheinstein, a non-Catholic who has praised the essentials of Catholic teaching about marriage in his book, *Marriage Stability, Divorce and the Law*, pp, 409, 428). We watch as state and federal programs begin to employ strategies long-used by the Catholic Church to strengthen marriage -- marriage education, counseling, waiting periods &ndash; while newspapers headlines report only on Catholic opposition to same-sex marriage. It is up to us to communicate in any conversation about any aspect of marriage, what we have to offer. And to suggest openly that a record of this sort merits not only good will, but also the presumption that there is wisdom to offer.

In sum, Catholics need to offer what we have been “given,” on the subject of the love of God for each person, and the particular importance of marriage in manifesting such love. We offer our unshakeable belief in the equality, dignity, even beauty, of each person. We follow this closely by acknowledging our compassion for the struggles caused by the homosexual person’s disorientation in the essential human quest for complete, loving union. We seek credible, empirical information, as well as protection for children. At the same time, we instruct &ndash; whether invited or not &ndash; from our rich theological and pastoral traditions about marriage.

Post script:

Many are familiar with the series of audiences of pope John Paul II popularly entitled *Theology of the Body*. At the heart of this extraordinary corpus of ideas is the concept of the ‘spousal meaning of the body’. The term is not just for spouses but applies to everyone. By it the pope means that humanity—every person—has as it were written into his or her very physical/spiritual constitution a deep and primordial *meaning*, a “language”. If we fail to comprehend this meaning—if we fail to speak this ‘language of the body’—we fail at the meaning of life. It is the ‘language’ of self-giving. Marriage is the relationship par excellence in which this self-giving can be lived. Marital self-giving presupposes not only the giving of mind, will and affections to another, but also, and necessarily, the giving of one’s engendered body. In fact, it is only *in the body*, expressed in its masculinity and femininity, that humans *can* give themselves. The body by God’s design speaks the language of self-gift. And the child that emerges from the heart of this gift is herself or himself a superabundant gift witnessing to the fruitfulness of the unity of persons.



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I refer to this because I think this concept of the spousal meaning of the body provides a salient response to the ego-centered understanding of marriage common today.

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