

Gay Marriage: Locating the Question

By H. Richard McCord



Gay marriage is a significant question that needs to be discussed and most important in the discussion is how the issue is framed.

The U.S. bishops in *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* urge people to study the issues before they vote in the coming elections.

Whether homosexual persons should be allowed to marry each other is one issue. The central issue is about the nature and purposes of marriage as fundamental social structure and civil institution. It is not first a question about civil rights or discrimination or achieving the full social enfranchisement of homosexual persons nor about stabilizing a lifestyle.

The Catholic position begins not with sacramental theology, moral teachings and biblical passages. It begins with what can be observed in human nature and behavior and what we can conclude using our reason. This is the natural law position.

You don't need religious faith to see that marriage is a unique relationship between a man and a woman. What defines this relationship is the fact that it is a partnership based on sexual complementarity. That makes possible the fulfillment of the two co-equal purposes of marriage: mutual love between the spouses and the procreation of children. No other human relationship, no matter how loving or caring or generative it might be, can make this claim or deliver on it.

Marriage is the union of a man and a woman. This is a truth discoverable by human reason. It is written in the law of nature and in the language of the human body and spirit. It is a truth enshrined from the beginning of time. Church teaching about marriage starts with this truth.

Since marriage is a fundamental social structure based on human nature, neither the church nor the state can change it at its core. Marriage, and the family it produces, is a society that precedes all other societies. It's an institution we don't own, but rather one that we receive. This does not mean that church and state cannot regulate marriage, for example, placing minimum age limits, but it does mean we are not free to alter its basic structure.

Marriage of a man and a woman makes a unique contribution to society. It is the fundamental pattern for male-female relationships. It models the way women and men live interdependently and commit, for the whole of life, to seek the good of each other. The union also serves the common good of society. It brings forth the next generation and does so by

providing the best conditions for raising children, namely, the stable, loving relationship of a mother and father present only in a marriage. Other relationships can and do build up the common good, but they don't do in a complete sense what marriage does.

Should there be same-sex marriage? The Catholic Church frames this question in terms of the nature of marriage and its contribution to the common good. As a result, the Church concludes that same-sex marriage is, by definition, an impossibility, a contradiction in terms.

Some people seek to locate the issue within the framework of individual rights and justice. Catholic teaching affirms the dignity of homosexual persons and demands that they be treated with respect. This means, among other things, that the state may fashion laws to protect the rights of these individuals and to provide social benefits. Examples include access to employment, housing, health care, joint ownership of property, and the ability to make medical decisions for another.

There are social benefits and rights to be guaranteed for every individual. But the remedy for specific cases involving injustice – the lack of benefits or rights – cannot be an even greater injustice, namely, to change the definition of marriage.

Marriage is oriented to serving the common good, not to providing rights and benefits to individuals within that relationship. It is not necessary or even desirable, therefore, to tamper with a fundamental social structure in order to protect individual rights and to grant all citizens their legitimate social benefits.

The issue of same-sex marriage must be understood as a question about marriage as it has been received from the Creator and subsequently received from each generation throughout history. To perceive it as a question of justice for homosexual persons starts the conversation on the wrong path.

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