

Defining Marriage

Over a decade ago, I was involved in a campaign in the State of Alaska to constitutionally define marriage as solely between one man and one woman. The voters overwhelmingly voted to approve that constitutional amendment. There were a number of states around the same time that passed similar constitutional amendments or state statutes defining marriage as such. In a short time, there were 37 states that defined legal marriage as solely between one man and one woman. These states moved in this direction to safe guard the institution of marriage. In seemingly just as short a period of time, many states have changed their minds, mostly as a result of the Supreme Court decision to overturn the Defense of Marriage Act. As a result, Federal Judges in a number of states have judged that states regarding marriage as solely between one man and one woman are unconstitutional. Attitudes among the general population have likewise slowly been changing with regard to what marriage is all about. According to the last Gallop Poll I saw on this, 55% of the general population supported “same-sex marriages.”

The polls mentioned above as well as judicial decisions, as some might view them – including a significant number of Catholics – seem to indicate that Catholic teaching on marriage is becoming old-fashioned and out of touch with modern society. Given a sizable enough number of same-sex partners who desire to define their relationships as a marriage, those who oppose legalizing their relationships are seen as hard-hearted and lacking in compassion.

Why does the Church insist upon upholding its teaching on marriage as between one man and one woman? First of all, Church teaching is never based on trends in society but on truth. As many moral theologians note, “Morality is based on reality.” The truth and the reality which the Church teaches comes from what it has received through Divine Revelation (Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition). The Church also receives important insights that are drawn from Natural Law. As a teacher I had once noted, “The god of revelation is also the God of creation.” The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says this about marriage: “The vocation to marriage is written in the very nature of man and woman as they come from the hand of the Creator. Marriage is not a purely human institution despite the many variations it may have undergone through the centuries in different cultures, social structures, and spiritual attitudes” (CCC #1603).

From the perspective of Catholic teaching, marriage is an institution created by God. The Book of Genesis teaches that God created the man and the woman to be one and to be fruitful and multiply. Though marriage in itself is a natural institution, Catholics affirm that Christ elevated marriage to the level of a sacrament for those who are baptized in Christ. It is why the Church insists that couples have their marriages witnessed through the Church. When they marry, a man and a woman promise to be faithful to each other, marry for life and be open to the procreation of new life by having children. Marriage essential is both about the unity of the couple and the procreation of children that are born as a result of their relationship.

Arguing for a traditional understanding of marriage and against the possibility of “same-sex marriage” on the basis of Bible passages or Church teaching is not always effective though there are certainly strong arguments. Similarly, trying to convince a segment of society why couples with same-sex attractions should not be allowed to marry is difficult, especially when some segments do not readily prize traditional Christian values. It is why I believe it is important to understand what the very nature and purpose of marriage is based, not solely on Scripture and Church Tradition, but also on an understanding of natural law.

A same-sex union simply contradicts the nature and purpose of marriage. It neither corresponds with the physical nature of male and female and how they complement each other. Nor can the couple cooperate to achieve new life in their sexual union. Marriage entails not only a unitive dimension between the partners but also a procreative dimension. It is about more than the emotional attachment that two persons may have for each other. This has great implications for society as a whole. Pope Francis spoke strongly against same-sex marriage when he was Archbishop of Buenos Aires. He referred to it as an “anthropological regression.”

Marriage laws are enacted not solely with the desires of two partners in mind, but also for the wellbeing of children within society. Marriage is a personal relationship between two persons but has societal significance. Marriage between a husband/father and a wife/ mother provides the best conditions for raising children. While this certainly is not always what is found in society, a stable, loving relationship between a father and a mother is the best pattern for providing a stable and healthy society. For the common good of society, the bar for what constitutes marriage must be set high.

Laws play a role in this because they shape patterns of thought and behaviors of others in society. If marriage is redefined so as to make same-sex relationships equivalent to true marriage, marriage becomes devalued in society and is weakened. When weakened and devalued, it is not difficult to imagine other kinds of variations that will come such as polyamous marriages. It is not unjust to deny the legal status of marriage to those in same-sex relationships because marriage and same-sex unions are essentially different realities.

Marriage is both a human and a social institution. It is its social dimension that has led to it being regulated by civil law. Because of its very nature and purpose, the states should not change its definition. When they do, it has consequences to society that ultimately will be harmful to society. Standing firm that marriage can take place solely between a man and a woman makes an irreplaceable contribution to the common good of society.