

What We Believe about the Sacrament of Marriage



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Much has been written and broadcast of late concerning the movement to legalize same-sex marriages. Such attempts have recently reached New York state and stirred considerable debate. Naturally, questions have arisen among the Catholic faithful about the Roman Catholic Church's teachings on this issue. Therefore, I believe it will be helpful to you to communicate here what we believe and why we are strongly opposed to this movement.

I. We believe that marriage is a sacrament celebrated between a baptized man and a baptized woman, and so same-sex marriage is not possible. Roman Catholics cherish the institution of marriage between a man and a woman as divinely inspired, a sacred union that Scripture compares to Jesus Christ's divine love for his Church (Ephesians 5:25). The Catechism of the Catholic Church further instructs that "the matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life, is by its nature ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring; this covenant between baptized persons has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament... God himself is the author of marriage." (CCC 1601, 1603)

Likewise, in 2002, Pope John Paul II taught that, "through the sacrament of marriage, human love acquires a supernatural value, enabling the spouses to participate in the redeeming love of Christ itself, and to exist as a living portion of the Church's holiness. This love, in itself, takes on the responsibility of helping to bring forth new children of God." (Address to the Bishops of Brazil).

I joined my brother bishops of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in a public statement entitled *Between Man and Woman: Questions and Answers About Marriage and Same-Sex Unions*. In that statement, we explained that "a same-sex union contradicts the nature of marriage: It is not based on the natural complementarity of male and female; it cannot cooperate with God to create new life; and the natural purpose of sexual union cannot be achieved by a same-sex union. Persons in same-sex unions cannot enter into a true conjugal union. Therefore, it is wrong to equate their relationship to a marriage." (*Between Man and Woman*, Part 4)

II. We hold that the sacredness of the bond of marriage between a man and a woman is based on sacred Scripture. In Genesis, we read that the Creator fashioned man and woman in the divine image so that they would "be fertile and multiply" upon the earth. A man "leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body." (Gen 2:24) In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus re-affirms Genesis, saying, "But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." (Mk 10:6-8).

III. The Roman Catholic Church cannot support any movement to offer ceremonial blessings or civil legalization of same-sex marriages. “Laws,” the Bishops’ statement continued, “play an educational role insofar as they shape patterns of thought and behavior, particularly about what is socially permissible and acceptable. In effect, giving same-sex unions the legal status of marriage would grant official public approval to homosexual sexual activity and would treat it as if it were morally neutral when the Church teaches otherwise. Further, when other relationships re-define ‘marriage’ and become equivalent to it, the institution of marriage cherished by God and the Church is devalued and further weakened.” (Between Man and Woman, Part 5)

IV. Our beliefs about marriage are not, and should not, be viewed as discrimination against homosexual people. The Church teaches that we must treat our homosexual brothers and sisters in Christ with respect, dignity and love, as we would all people. The Catechism of the Catholic Church warns that any form of prejudice and hatred – “every sign of unjust discrimination” – against homosexual people should be avoided (CCC 2358). Moreover, the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, echoing the Catechism, has instructed, “the particular inclination of a homosexual person is not a sin.” Nevertheless, the Church teaches that sexual activity outside of marriage is “contrary to the dignity of persons and of human sexuality which is naturally ordered to the good of spouses and the generation and education of children.” (CCC 2353).

In our own Diocese, as you know, we have taken many measures to ensure that we live out the Church’s teachings on the issue of compassion and sensitivity toward homosexual people and their families. We have taken to heart the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith’s instruction asking bishops “to support with the means at their disposal the development of appropriate forms of pastoral care for homosexual persons.” (On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons, No. 17). Like many pastors, I have met with gay and lesbian groups and individuals, as well as supportive friends and concerned parents, offering to one and all a listening ear and Jesus’ own love and compassion. They are always in my prayers.

V. While we as Church uphold the basic human rights of homosexual people to exist peacefully, free from persecution in our society, we also must hold on to what we believe are basic moral truths. While Americans have become much more accepting of the idea that gay and lesbian people should not shamefully hide their sexual orientation, Roman Catholics must reaffirm our beliefs that all are called to chastity outside of marriage, despite the notion often promulgated in the popular media that such a view is obsolete or that promiscuity is to be celebrated.

Finally, in the months ahead, it is likely that efforts will continue in the courts and in the statehouses to legalize same-sex marriages. As Catholics, we must oppose such legalization and uphold the Church’s teachings, without anger or spite, always with that compassionate love which informs our faith.

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