



On the Sanctity of Marriage...

“As Christ and the Church become one body, so, too, because of their loving and total commitment to each other, husband and wife become one body and one spirit, a living sign of the love of Christ in the Church.”

*— His Eminence Adam Cardinal Maida
April 2004*

In the past year marriage has been at the forefront of public debate in the United States. This debate stems from the want of same-sex couples to formalize their commitments to each other legally, a want that has prompted state legislators, judicial branches of government and the federal government to evaluate the legality and definition of marriage and the question of same-sex unions.

Throughout this debate, a debate that promises to carry implications far into the future, the Catholic Church has spoken passionately about the importance of marriage as a sacred covenant between one man and one woman. The Church believes that marriage is a unique community defined by the union of the sexually different. What happens when a man and a woman unite is something far larger than either of them individually.

If we look to marriage as something different from the union of one man and one woman we essentially change the societal equation. It cuts out rationale for marriage altogether, turning it into just one more alternative lifestyle, one more partnership option, one more contract. To say otherwise is to say that

marriage and married couples do not make a unique contribution to the human community. Marriage is essential to the continuation of the human race and to the dignity, stability, peace and prosperity of family and society.

The facts are that neither the state nor religion, Catholic or otherwise, created the institution of marriage. It cannot simply be redefined beyond what we know has always been. Just as we have learned to respect the natural ecology of the state, we should respect its societal ecology as well. The Michigan Catholic Conference is steadfast in its belief that marriage between one man and one woman is the fundamental institution of civil society.

Recently, His Eminence Adam Cardinal Maida spoke on the societal and religious significance of the holy sacrament of marriage and its relationship to proposed same-sex unions. First published in the archdiocesan newspaper, *The Michigan Catholic*, FOCUS is proud to print Cardinal Maida's powerful column, "Marriage Between Man and Woman Manifests God's Love," and an abridged version of his essay "Celebrating Christian Marriage:"

Marriage Between Man & Woman Manifests God's Love

For a variety of reasons, over the last several months all around our nation, Canada, and other countries as well, the question of same-sex unions has been at the center of much media debate and discussion. As your Archbishop, I believe it is imperative and timely that I help you put the matter in proper theological and spiritual perspective, lest your consciences be confused or led astray by voices arguing in favor of publicly sanctioning so-called “same-sex unions” or calling them a “marriage.” I also wish to speak to the civic or social arguments invoked in this public debate.

I would first like to address this issue from a civic or social perspective. First of all, marriage is a natural, human institution which precedes any social or legal system; it is as old as human beings themselves because it flows from the natural complementarity and sexual differentiation and attraction of man and woman. Since marriage is the creation neither of the state nor the Church, neither the government nor the Church can redefine it. Marriage – the union of man and woman in a permanent and exclusive way – has been part of the natural reality of life from the beginning.

Secondly, marriage is not only about a personal commitment between two persons; it is also a social commitment with a specific contribution to society. Marriage between man and woman serves a unique place in society by allowing for the creation and education of children within the context of a family. While recognizing that many children find themselves in non-traditional family settings, studies and common sense indicate that the ideal environment in which to raise a child is in a family with both a mother and a father committed in a life long marriage. Without marriage as the union of man and woman, the family, a major building block of society, would be jeopardized.

In summary, human reason and the natural order over the centuries and in every culture have clearly

proclaimed that marriage is the union of man and woman.

Our theology and our Christian faith also provide a second set of arguments in support of marriage as the union of a man and a woman. As we see from the first two chapters of Genesis, we have been created “male and female” in the image and likeness of God.

Furthermore, God blessed the man and woman and told them “*to be fruitful, multiply the earth and subdue it...*”

Thanks to the Word and example of Jesus Christ, we see the marriage of a man and a woman as a sacrament,

a sign of the union of Christ and the Church, a means of holiness for the spouses by their complementarity and creativity.

One often hears as defense for calling same-sex unions a marriage that such couples need the protection of the law for social benefits. Such a view reduces marriage to a mere bundle of state benefits and loses sight of the deeper meaning of marriage. Moreover, many of these benefits can be provided for, and obtained for, persons – whether homosexual or otherwise – without their need of being in a “marriage” or a state sanctioned “civil union.”

Marriage as the union of a man and a woman is not just one “model” among other options! It is the very institution upon which our families, and in turn, our society, is built. Moreover, Christian marriage is a sacrament, and by the unity of their lives, husbands and wives are a living sign of the love of Christ and the Church. Christian marriage builds up the Church and manifests God's presence and creative love.

Celebrating Christian Marriage

Marriage is a natural, human reality, an institution that precedes any social, legal or religious system. Throughout every century and in every place, there has always been a natural complementarity between the two sexes, drawing them toward intimacy with one another in body and spirit. In all cultures, marriage has proven itself as a healthy way for ordering and sustaining human relations, the best possible setting for fulfilling the desire to procreate and to pass on the gift of life. Where would we be without our families? Can you imagine a society without marriage?

Since marriage is the creation neither of the state nor the Church, neither the government nor the Church can redefine it.

As Christians, we see marriage not only as a natural and healthy way of expressing and sustaining human love; we also see it as a *covenant*, a sacramental sign of the bond of love between God and us, specifically, between Christ Jesus and the Church. In the civil society, marriage is considered a *contract*, that is, a partnership of free will by two parties in which there is a mutual exchange of promises and responsibilities. In contractual agreements, if one side fails to fulfill their commitment, the contract dissolves and obligations no longer continue. But in a covenant relationship, commitments endure, for a covenant brings into the picture a third party – the Lord Himself.

When we speak of marriage as a covenant, we are professing several things: first of all, that *God* is the one initiating this relationship; this decision is not just the choice of two human beings, but by the inspiration and providence of God Himself. By using “covenant” terminology, we are also saying that God wants to be a “third partner” with the man and the woman; even as they pledge to each other, He promises to be a permanent and abiding presence in their relationship. In a covenant perspective, we see God loving each of the partners in and through their lives together; we also say that each partner loves God as he or she expresses love to their human partner.

There is a beautiful complementarity between the sacrament of Christian marriage and the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. As Christ proclaimed the new covenant, He literally said “*This is my Body for you... This is my Blood poured out for you...*” His words are similar to what spouses say to each other on their wedding day in the midst of the faith community; these same words are lived out again and again as a couple share sexual intimacy, giving and receiving in all the joys and sorrows of human life together.

Declaring “same-sex unions” as the legal equivalent of marriage undermines the dignity of marriage and calls into question the building block of our society, the family. Indeed, homosexuals have legitimate

rights for just wages and health provisions, etc., in the civil society, but these can be conferred or recognized by means other than redefining “marriage.” My point here is simply to underscore the reason why the Church needs to maintain a strong advocacy for the dignity of marriage.

For Further Study

As long as public debate focuses on marriage and same-sex unions, the Michigan Catholic Conference will continue to speak for the sanctity of marriage that exists between one man and one woman. In addition to this issue of FOCUS, considerations from the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and questions and answers from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops can help explain Catholic teaching on marriage, same-sex unions and the “proper respect, compassion and sensitivity that must be afforded to the homosexual individual” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 2358). Both documents are available on the Michigan Catholic Conference’s Web site: www.micatholicconference.org, and also may be accessed at their respective web address listed below.

“*Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons*” is published by the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and theologically speaks to the institution of marriage, same-sex unions, and civil unions. The document, which draws language from the Catechism of the Catholic Church and encyclical letters developed by Pope John Paul II, includes four main topics: the nature of marriage and its unalienable characteristics, positions on the problems of homosexual unions, arguments from reason against legal recognition of homosexual unions, and positions of Catholic politicians with regard to legislation in favor of homosexual unions.

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“Between Man and Woman: Questions and Answers about Marriage and Same-Sex Unions” is published by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and features eight questions with answers on marriage and same-sex unions. Questions include: what does our faith tell us about marriage, why can marriage only exist between a man and a woman and why is a same-sex union not equivalent to a marriage?

The Michigan Catholic Conference presents this FOCUS and the above mentioned documents in order to provide a deeper understanding of the importance of marriage between one man and one woman and the societal and legal issues that arise from proposed same-sex unions. It is the hope of this organization that future public debate on the sanctity of marriage focuses on children, families and the common good of society.

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“Marriage Between Man and Woman Manifests God’s Love,”

The Michigan Catholic, March 19, 2004

“Celebrating Christian Marriage,” The Michigan Catholic, April 30, 2004

The Holy See 3 June 2003. “Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons”

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20030731_homosexual-unions_en.html

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 12 November 2003. “Between Man and Woman: Questions and Answers about Marriage and Same Sex Unions”

<http://www.usccb.org/laity/manandwoman.htm>

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