

Human Sexuality, Marriage and Same-Sex Unions

Questions and Answers

PREFATORY NOTE

Today, attempts to redefine marriage and questions about same-sex unions have occasioned a national debate on the nature and purpose of marriage. This has also highlighted the need for legislation to regulate and protect marriage. What exactly are the issues and why should we be so concerned?

In these reflections we, the Bishops of Pennsylvania, want to talk with you about the Catholic vision of love and sexuality; the uninterrupted and universal understanding of marriage in human history; some of the challenges to marriage today, and why the Church is obliged to proclaim the truth about human sexuality, marriage and the good order of society.

We have addressed these important topics on numerous occasions. In 1999 we provided questions and answers regarding cohabitation and the Church's moral teaching under the title *Living Together*. More recently, in July 2003, the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published a document entitled *Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions between Homosexual Persons*. Another source for review of our Catholic faith is the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, a compendium of the Church's teaching in areas of faith and morals.

On November 12, 2003, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a statement, *Between Man and Woman: Questions and Answers About Marriage and Same-Sex Unions*. In preparing these questions and answers we have drawn generously on previously published material and present it in this format in the hope that it will be helpful as we respond to these concerns as faith-filled Catholics. The challenges to human sexuality and marriage have the potential to alter the way we have always lived. Our prayer is that we will have both the wisdom and courage to respond as God would have us do.

The Bishops of Pennsylvania
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1. Why should the Church be involved in the discussion of same-sex unions or same-sex marriages?

Our understanding of marriage as a life-long covenant between a husband and wife is not the exclusive teaching of any one church or religious communion. Rather we are dealing with a belief that is abundantly evident as a natural human reality. "The Church's teaching on marriage and on the complementarity of the sexes reiterates a truth that is evident to right reason and recognized as such by all the major cultures of the world" (*Considerations*, 2). Our teaching on marriage reflects the millennia-long human understanding of marriage that is rooted in our human nature and is directed by a moral order implanted in our hearts.

Precisely because the family is the primary cell of human society we all must be involved in the correct definition of marriage. But the Church has an additional reason to join in this debate. The truth about marriage is confirmed by God's word. What the Church teaches about marriage is "contained in the biblical accounts of creation, an expression also of the original human wisdom in which the voice of nature itself is heard" (*Considerations*, 3).

2. Does the principle of separation of Church and State exclude the voice of religious and moral conviction from public debate on something as significant as marriage?

All the members of the civil community have a right to express their views and to work together to assure that basic human values are preserved and supported by the laws of the land. One reason we have laws is precisely because we recognize that the community has an obligation to promote its most important values: the dignity of life, the right to property, to our good name, to our personal integrity and the right ordering of all human behavior including sexual activity. The voices that speak for these values should not be silent.

THE MEANING AND VALUE OF HUMAN SEXUALITY AND MARRIAGE

3. What exactly is the Catholic vision of love and human sexuality?

The Catholic vision of love finds its origin in the loving communion that God intended when he created man and woman. Deep in the heart of each human being, created in the image and likeness of God, is the call to love. The model of this love is God's own life, since we are created in God's image. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit enjoy a life of profound personal loving communion. Each of us is called to share in that love and manifest it in our world.

In creating man - male and female - God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1.28). God created man and woman as partners and as complementary members of a communion of life and love. Human sexuality, then, is a part of that wondrous creation of God which he finds so very good. Human sexuality is not incidental to life. The covenant of marriage is a way to accomplish, at a most profoundly human level, both the mutual support that love brings to a couple and the fruitfulness of that love in their children.

4. How does the Church understand sexuality?

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* speaks of sexuality as affecting "all aspects of the human person in the unity of his body and soul" (section 2332). Sexuality especially touches on the capacity to love and to procreate, and the aptitude for forming bonds of communion with others. Human sexuality brings with it physical, moral, and spiritual differences that are also complementary to man and woman and are "oriented toward the goods of marriage [*unity of the couple, marital fidelity, openness to children*] and the flourishing of family life" (section 2333).

Catholic teaching sees human sexuality as a great gift from God that should be respected and used in accordance with God's plan as reflected in human nature so that it can truly achieve its purpose.

5. Why should sexual activity take place only within marriage?

Human sexuality is directed to the marital love of man and woman. In marriage the physical intimacy of the spouses becomes a sign and pledge of their deeper personal relationship with each other. Sexual intimacy, because it is total and exclusive, is not intended to be casual but life-long and life-giving. It is an expression of a life-long commitment that allows the spouses to give themselves freely and completely to each other in a way that is both supportive of one another and open to the transmission of life.

6. What is marriage?

Marriage, as instituted by God and supported by the needs of human nature, is a faithful, exclusive, lifelong union of one man and one woman joined in an intimate communion of life and

love. The call to marriage is woven deeply into the human spirit. Man and woman are different from, yet created for, each other in all aspects of their being. This complementarity, including sexual difference and spousal configuration, draws them together in a mutually loving union that is always open to the procreation of children. (See USCCB, *Statement*, 1).

7. What does our faith tell us about marriage?

Marriage is both a natural institution and a sacred union because it is rooted in the divine plan for creation. In addition, the Church teaches that the valid marriage of baptized Christians is a sacrament - a saving reality. Jesus Christ made marriage a mystical symbol of his love for his Church (see Eph. 5.25-33). This means that a sacramental marriage lets the world see, in human terms, something of the faithful, creative, abundant and self-emptying love of God. A true marriage in the Lord will bring the spouses to holiness. Their love, manifested in fidelity, passion, fertility, generosity, sacrifice, forgiveness, and healing makes known God's love in their family, communities, and society. This Christian meaning confirms and strengthens the human value of a marital union. Spouses help each other to attain their eternal salvation through the grace of God. (See USCCB, *Statement*, 2).

8. Why can marriage exist only between a man and a woman?

Only the union of a male and female can express the full sexual complementarity willed by God for marriage. In knowing what God has created, we know His will. Man and woman are to give to each other their entire being in their masculinity and femininity. "They are equal as human beings but different as man and woman, fulfilling each other through this difference" (USCCB, *Statement*, 3). This makes possible the conjugal bond, which is the core of marriage.

9. What is the problem with calling a same-sex union a marriage?

A same-sex union cannot be the uniquely complementary, mutually loving, and procreative relationship that God intends marriage to be as reflected in the way he created human nature. By definition a marriage is something other than a same-sex union. Because persons of the same sex cannot enter into a true conjugal union with each other, it would be wrong to act as if their relationship were a marriage. Since the coming together in sexual activity of people of the same sex is essentially different from the sexual activity of a man and a woman, simply saying they are the same does not make them the same. When society tries to redefine marriage so as to make other relationships equivalent to it, marriage itself is devalued.

10. Why is it so important that marriage be preserved as the exclusive union of a man and a woman?

After millennia of human experience and ethical reflection, history has shown the family to be the foundation of society. The institution of marriage plays an essential role in the continuation of the human race, the full and proper development of each person and the establishment of a society rooted in personal dignity, social stability and mutual respect. Marriage is the foundation of the family. In turn the family is the basic unit of society. Thus while marriage is a personal relationship it also has public significance. (See USCCB, *Statement*, 5).

Society needs the presence and contribution of males and females. Marriage is the primary pattern for male-female relationships. It has social value insofar as it models the way in which women and men can live interdependently and commit, for the whole of life, to seek the good of each other.

"The marital union also provides conditions for raising children: namely, the stable, loving relationship of a mother and father present only in marriage. The state rightly recognizes this relationship as a public institution in its laws because the relationship makes a unique and essential contribution to the common good" (USCCB, *Statement*, 5).

THE IMPORTANCE OF LAW IN CONFIRMING SOCIETY'S MORAL AND HUMAN VALUES

11. Why should marriage even be a part of civil law?

The civil government has power to enact legislation because there is a human need for order as we live together with others. The ordering of our society must reflect our deepest and most abiding values.

Civil laws are intended not only to provide a structure within which we can live in harmony and peace, but also to support our most cherished values. In a religiously pluralistic society we find common ground for legislation in the created order and in the natural moral law that follows on that reality.

It is within the context of God's natural created order, human sexuality and marriage, that we can evaluate some of the current challenges to these values today. To propose a new definition of marriage is to present a completely different understanding of human sexuality and its purpose. Thus we see increasingly proposals made for same-sex "marriage" - the desire to legitimize a union of people of the same sex as if it were a relationship equal to marriage.

12. What would be wrong with civil laws defining same-sex unions as marriage?

Homosexual unions simply do not conform to the definition of marriage. Whatever such unions might be even if recognized in civil law, they are not true marriages. In God's plan, human history and experience, a man and a woman come together to form a permanent life-giving union and at the same time to become a family, the first cell of human society. Civil law cannot legitimately redefine this human reality.

13. Should we work to see that what we make legal is also moral?

We have an obligation to see that civil laws reflect the proper moral order. We have experienced in the history of our country the imposition of laws that were enacted by the legislature and confirmed by the Supreme Court which at the same time were clearly immoral and unjust. Slavery presents the most obvious example of a law that was simply unjust. It contradicted the truth of right reason about human dignity and the natural moral order. The same self-evident truth is present in legalized abortion. While abortion may be legal in the United States, it is still immoral to take the life of an unborn child.

Just because something is legal does not make it moral. The moral law has a higher claim on our conscience than does civil law. This becomes clear when we deal with homosexual unions. "Laws in favor of homosexual unions are contrary to right reason because they confer legal guarantees analogous to those granted to marriage to unions between persons of the same sex. Given the values at stake in this question, the state could not grant legal standing to such unions without failing in its duty to promote and defend marriage as an institution essential to the common good" (*Considerations*, 6).

14. Does denying marriage to homosexual persons demonstrate unjust discrimination or lack of respect for them as persons?

Because a marriage and a same-sex union are essentially different realities, it is not unjust to treat them differently. "In fact, justice requires society to do so" (USCCB, *Statement*, 6). Respecting the dignity of homosexual persons does not conflict with upholding God's intent for marriage in which sexual relations have their proper and exclusive place. Christians must give witness to the whole moral truth and also oppose as immoral both homosexual acts and unjust discrimination against homosexual persons.

"The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* urges that homosexual persons 'be treated with respect, compassion, and sensitivity' (No. 2358). It also encourages chaste friendships" (USCCB, *Statement*, 6). Such friendships, whether between homosexual or heterosexual persons, are a great good benefit to society (See *CCC*, 2347).

15. Is legal marriage among homosexuals a right to which they are entitled?

While some would frame the definition of marriage solely in terms of civil rights, the reality is far greater. Human rights are reflective of the natural moral order. We do not create new human rights. The state can make legal rights but must first recognize God's created natural moral order. Thus the state has an obligation to avoid anything that would confuse the proper definition of marriage but also to foster marriage and support it as an institution. "Because married couples ensure the succession of generations and are therefore eminently within the public interest, civil law grants them institutional recognition" (*Considerations*, 9). The State should not create legal rights that contradict the natural moral order.

16. Is the recognition of homosexual "marriages" or same-sex unions the only way in which two people of the same sex can obtain certain benefits?

Most if not all of the financial benefits that the State affords those who are married are readily available to unmarried people. Property can be held in the name of two people who are not married. State law recognizes the freedom of people to name whomever they want as beneficiaries of a will or a life insurance policy. A designee as an agent under a durable power of attorney or as a healthcare agent can be a person who is unmarried, and in fact, unrelated in any way. Presently, businesses can, if they choose, voluntarily extend employment benefits to individuals unrelated to employees. None of these benefits require marriage.

On the other hand because the State has an obligation to promote the family, which is rooted in marriage, it can justly give married couples benefits and rights it does not extend to others. It would be wrong to redefine marriage as a means of providing benefits to those who cannot rightly claim marriage (See USCCB, *Statement*, 7).

17. Is much of the argument about same-sex unions addressing something wider than simple personal benefits?

Much of the argument today that is presented to support so-called "same-sex unions" essentially calls for a redefinition of the social order. To accomplish this goal marriage must be redefined and the entire concept of family must be reordered. It is precisely because of the extremely far-reaching and radical dimensions of this type of legislation that we are obliged to speak up for the perennial human values that are at the core of social and community life.

18. In light of the Church's teaching about the truth and beauty of marriage what should Catholics do?

"There is no separation between one's faith and life either in public or private realms" (USCCB, *Statement*, 8). All Catholics should, with a well-formed conscience, act on their beliefs. They should be a community of conscience within society. "By their voice and their vote, they should contribute to society's welfare and test its public life by the standards of right reason and Gospel truth. Responsible citizenship is a virtue. Participation in the political process is a moral obligation" (USCCB, *Statement*, 8).

CONCLUSION

The Church's vision of family life includes the personal commitment of the spouses to each other. It also embraces the openness to the generation of new life if it is God's plan for the marriage - the joyful acceptance of the responsibility and privilege of raising children and helping them to grow in wisdom, age and grace.

In God's plan, marriage is a graced response to the love of God reflected in the love of the spouses for one another. God's grace elevated married life to the level of sacramental participation in Christ's own redeeming action, ordinarily allowing parents to participate in the building up of the body of Christ by bringing new life into the world and into the Church.

The Church's vision of human sexuality in marriage is a great truth entrusted to us by God as reflected in the way he created us. Jesus Christ also revealed to us what God's plan is for our sexuality and for marriage. We not only cherish this great truth but we must also speak up in its defense because we hold marriage to be a sacred reality.

This statement and many others are also available in booklet or pamphlet form at cost plus postage/shipping. To order, call 717-238-9613 or email name, shipping and billing address, document title, and quantity to info@pacatholic.org or download an order form and price list from www.pacatholic.org to print and fax your order.