

## **Some Reflections on the Current Discussion of Marriage**

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##### **I: A Contemporary Challenge to Marriage**

Christians (and many others) believe that marriage is a lifelong covenant between a man and a woman, faithful in love and open to the gift of life. In the Gospel, Jesus looks back to creation, specifically of man and woman, for the foundations of marriage (Mark 10:6-9). In the Old Testament, the image of married love was used by the prophets as a sign of the relationship between God and his people (Hosea 2:16-20; Isaiah 54: 5-10), and similar themes are present in the New Testament as well (Ephesians 5; Apocalypse 19:6-8). When seen within the perspective of faith, marriage is a covenant and a special kind of friendship, in which a man and a woman not only share a deep love for one another, but are invited to become partners with God in creating a new person of precious dignity destined for eternal life. For Christians, the nature of marriage as a covenant between a man and a woman is written in the words of divine revelation. For all people, even those without faith, it is also written in the law of nature and in the very language of the human body.

Even setting aside the perspective of religious faith, however, marriage and the family are the stable context within which new human persons come into this world, and are helped to grow to adulthood. There are many kinds of relationship in life, and each has its own characteristics. The specific characteristic of the marriage relationship is that it is the one in which a man and a woman not only are joined in mutual love, but through that love bring forth new life. Marriage provides the setting in society in which those children are nurtured within the family, protected by the covenant of marital fidelity.

Marriage and the family form a natural community which is more fundamental than the artificial community that is the state. The state has no authority to change a society more fundamental than itself.

It is rare for citizens to confront issues as significant as those raised in the current proposal to change the very definition of marriage. The proposal has been put on the public agenda by people who feel that their rights are being denied if they cannot bring about the change. It is being advanced by judges and legislators who share the widely held misconception that what is at issue is a question of human rights. I am sure that many Catholics believe this as well for they, like the judges and legislators, are daily immersed in a cultural environment which both subtly and overtly advances the cause of the proponents of the profound change which is represented by the attempt to redefine marriage.

Yet the proposed change in the definition of marriage would have been unthinkable only a few years ago, so radical is it, and so opposed to humanity's common understanding of marriage down through the ages. Although, sadly, particular marriages too often fall short in many ways (and that is a vitally important issue which needs to be addressed), marriage itself creates the foundational natural human society, through which we are brought into this world by our mothers and fathers and nurtured in a setting of committed parental love which prepares us for our life journey as adults. To attempt to alter radically the meaning of marriage itself is to undermine the family, which is already under great pressure in our society.

The current challenge of the proposed redefinition of marriage must be addressed. In such an issue in which emotions run strongly, and in which rhetoric can get out of hand, we as Christians must take special care to respond clearly and charitably in the light of both reason and faith. Only in that way, in this issue as in other controversial issues we face, can we be faithful to Jesus, and convince our fellow citizens of good will whose opinions have been shaped by the prevailing distorted cultural environment in which we live.

## **II: Some Arguments that need to be Addressed**

It is clear that many people in our country, including many Catholics, see no problem in changing the legal definition of marriage. This is astonishing, when one considers what is being proposed, but not really surprising, when one considers how over the past few decades public opinion has been prepared for this proposal.

People do not really think about what the proposal means, but go along because it feels like the fair and tolerant thing to do. The development of support for redefining marriage was not brought about by the presentation of solid reasons for doing so, but rather by the shaping of public opinion through rhetorical techniques which (like much advertising) cloud the powers of reason with a fog of emotion.

A rhetorical argument is a persuasive train of thought which may or may not be grounded in reality. It is vital that the misleading rhetorical arguments which are being used most effectively to sell the idea of redefining marriage be exposed to the light of reason and common sense.

### **1) The Argument from Injustice: “How can we be fair and tolerant, if we don't agree to changing the definition of marriage? No-one should be made into a second class citizen, by being denied their desire to be married.”**

The most powerful rhetorical argument in favour of changing the definition of marriage is an emotional appeal that can lead people of good will to lose sight of the reason why marriage is a covenant between a man and a woman.

This powerful but false argument basically involves framing the issue not within the proper context of the common good and the nature of marriage itself, but within the context of justice and individual human rights. Once that illegitimate switch in perspective is accomplished many people, without considering the implications, will want to support a move that seems to redress an injustice.

When all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. When all you consider is the Charter of Rights, everything seems to be a question of individual rights, and that is why Canadian judges and politicians automatically interpret the proposal to reinvent the institution of marriage as a question of individual rights. For the same reason political parties deny their members a free vote, and provincial governments ride roughshod over the consciences of their employees, all because they automatically assume that the question at hand is a matter of human rights.

This issue, however, concerns not individual human rights, but the social structure which protects the procreation and nurturing of children in our society. That is why it is self-evident to most people on the planet, and has been to most people in history, that marriage is a relationship between a man and a woman.

In any case, there is no need to change this fundamental social structure in order to protect individual rights, and to assure all citizens of social benefits. The state certainly has the power to authorize social benefits for any of its citizens without redefining marriage.

One point relating to fairness should, however, be noted. If in the name of protecting rights the government proposes to change the definition of marriage itself in order to authorize social benefits for individuals, it is not only going beyond its legitimate authority, but is also discriminating against persons such as, for example, adult siblings or a parent and adult child, who are living in relationships which do not purport to be “marriage” and who certainly may have a right to such benefits. If benefits are extended beyond the traditional context of marriage, that can and should be done on the basis of need and justice for individuals, not on the basis of redefining marriage for those who claim that their relationship is the equivalent of marriage.

More fundamentally, the legitimate context within which to assess the proposal to redefine marriage is that of the common good, not individual rights. Marriage is a social structure with certain essential elements, needed to safeguard the procreation and education of children, a goal with civil as well as religious significance.

It is not unjust, or a limitation of anyone’s legitimate rights and freedoms, to insist that marriage is a covenant between a man and a woman. Although through circumstance a particular couple may not in fact have children, the procreative potential of marriage is a basic element of what marriage is, just as swimming is a basic element of being a lifeguard, and playing music is a basic element of being a musician in an orchestra. If one were refused such positions because of race, or religion, or ethnic background, or something not related to the nature of the reality at issue, then that would indeed be an injustice and a denial of individual rights. If, however, one were refused because one excludes a basic element of the role itself, that is not in any way an injustice. There are many kinds of friendship open to all; but that particular kind of friendship that is marriage has as one fundamental dimension (though not its only dimension) the life-creating potential that can be found only in the relationship between a man and a woman.

It is misleading to present the proposal to reinvent a fundamental social institution as a matter of protecting individual rights. What is at issue is not a question of individual rights, but rather a question of the common good served by the institution of marriage, in which husband and wife bring new life into the world, and in the resulting family form the fundamental community which is the foundation of society.

**2) The Argument from Development: “Times change. Marriage used to mean one thing, and now it means another. We simply need to adjust the definition of marriage to keep pace with changing social views.”**

The justices of the Supreme Court assert that they have the right to authorize the Government to change the definition of marriage since “our Constitution is a living tree which, by way of progressive interpretation, accommodates and addresses the realities of modern life.” The idea is that perhaps in the past marriage was for a man and a woman, but now the tree has grown, and society has changed, and so for us now marriage can be between persons of the same sex. Now more people can have the right to marriage.

Of course the law changes, and perhaps our constitution grows like a tree. Many things develop. But the fact of development is not the issue. The question is: is this particular proposed development legitimate? There must be some standard for determining that, some inner principle for discerning whether or not a development builds organically upon what is good, in a way that is consistent with what has gone before and, more importantly, with the nature of the organism. An acorn becomes an oak. It does not become a rose. There needs to be some limit to the “progressive interpretation” by the judges, or they can authorize anything that any group in society asks for, as long as the group phrases the request in the language of rights.

The definition of marriage as the union between a man and a woman is not unchangeable simply because it was that way in 1867, or has been that way for thousands of years. It is unchangeable because the stable reality of marriage and the family is the context for bringing into existence new human persons, and nurturing them as they grow to adulthood.

**3) The live and let live argument: “We won’t impose our definition of marriage on you, so don’t impose yours on us.”**

By adding a clause to protect religious officials, the Government seems to be recognizing the rights of those who oppose in conscience a change in the definition of marriage, while allowing for that change to satisfy those who want it, thus pleasing all sides. It can then be said to those who oppose a redefinition of marriage: we are not interfering with you, but simply accommodating the wishes of others. How can you object to that, as long as we do not force you to go against your conscience? In the recent response of the Supreme Court to the Government’s questions, the court does basically agree that religious officials are protected against being forced to perform marriages which they cannot in conscience accept. There are, however, serious questions of conscience raised by the actions of both the Court and the Government.

First of all, the Court states that “absent unique circumstances with respect to which the Court will not speculate, the guarantee of religious freedom in s. 2(a) of the Charter is broad enough to protect religious officials from being compelled by the state to perform civil or religious same-sex marriages that are contrary to their religious beliefs.” This suggests that it is possible that particular circumstances might lead to some future court legitimately trying to force religious officials to perform these ceremonies against their conscience, though the justices decline to speculate on what those circumstances might be. In fact, there are no circumstances in which the state has the right to do this, and it is disquieting that the Court would even raise the possibility.

A further serious problem is that many people other than “religious officials” are potentially forced into a crisis of conscience, as is clear from the statements of some provincial governments. What of persons, of whatever faith or no faith, who work in government offices and may be forced to participate in something which in conscience they oppose? These low profile people are the most vulnerable, and the most likely to face pressure, not priests or ministers or rabbis. Obviously, Catholic priests will never perform these ceremonies. But the livelihood of lay people may be at risk, if they are pressured to act against their conscience, especially by governments that assume wrongly that this issue is a question of rights.

It is disturbing that the Prime Minister does not intend to make this truly a free vote. It will be free for backbenchers, but all cabinet ministers are expected to vote yes, whether such an action is against their conscience or not. That puts unacceptable pressure upon the members of the cabinet in a matter of conscience, and it certainly will force some to consider how much they value their political career when weighed in the balance against their principles. Other parties also plan to force their members to vote yes, whether or not they can do that in good conscience. When Henry VIII proposed what was actually a less fundamental attack upon marriage, politicians of his day had to make their decisions. Our legislators and judges should consider the example of Saint Thomas More, their patron saint. In those days politicians were called upon to sacrifice their life, not just their position in the cabinet. It is interesting that both very lowly and very exalted officials of the state are being subjected to unjustified pressure. If this matter is to be voted on in parliament, then every single member of parliament must be free to vote according to his or her conscience.

Why not just establish two kinds of marriage, and let those who object to the redefinition of marriage continue with their preferred form, while those who want the new version can have it? What harm does this cause to those who object to changing the legal definition of marriage, as long as they themselves are not disturbed?

Adding a category of “same sex marriage,” however, affects everyone in our country, not just those who directly enter into such arrangements. It changes the recognized legal concept of marriage for the whole of the society in which we all live, and in which we all try to sustain the basic reality of the family. Marriage, as a covenant between a man and a woman, ceases to be the unique and irreplaceable foundation of society, civil and religious, and is relegated to the status of being simply one variety of marriage. That reduction is a grievous injustice to the institution of marriage and the family, the fundamental community of our wider society, and the setting in which new life is brought into this world and nurtured. All of us suffer if marriage is so diminished in our civil community. No one has a right to do that. Family life is under enough destructive pressures already without the addition of another. All citizens should be concerned about that.

**4) The priorities argument: “Why is the Catholic Church fixated on this issue, when there is such poverty and suffering in the world? Those are the things that the Church should be dealing with.”**

In fact, the Catholic Church is committed to serving all people, and in Canada and elsewhere its agencies are in the forefront of the struggle for social justice. The Church is

deeply involved in helping the suffering. Catholic Hospitals daily serve countless sick people, and agencies of Catholic social services attend to the needs of all kinds of people. They provide help for immigrants, for those suffering from AIDS, for those who are going through psychological suffering, for those who have special needs, and for many other people who are struggling in our society. Through Development and Peace Canadian Catholics are helping the victims of tsunamis.

It is not the Catholic Church or any church that has taken the initiative to place this issue on the public agenda. The issue has, however, been forced upon us and we have a duty to respond, since the protection of marriage is a vitally important concern for us and for all citizens.

### **5) The Jesus argument: “Jesus was open to everyone, so why is the Church so narrow-minded in opposing the redefinition of marriage, and so intolerant of those who want this?”**

This argument is addressed specifically to believers, and deals with the religious dimension of the issue.

In the Gospels Jesus welcomes everyone with unconditional love, and so should we, His disciples. Everyone must be treated with reverence and love, and when individual Christians or Christian communities do not do that, they are surely rejecting Our Lord.

It is a caricature, however, to equate the love shown by Jesus with the idea that He teaches that any behaviour is fine as long as someone wants it. The only Jesus who teaches that is the one we create to validate our own wishes, the one who says “If you feel like it, do it, and that’s fine with me”.

That is not what the actual Jesus of the Gospels says. All of the Gospels challenge us in our behaviour. The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) consists of many admonitions that call for moral conversion. The first message of the real Jesus is: “Repent.” (Mark 1:14) Jesus grants forgiveness to the woman caught in adultery, but his message to her is: “go your way, and from now on do not sin again.” (John 8:11) The father loves the prodigal son when the son is at home, and when far away, and when he returns. The point is, however, that the son does turn from the false path, and comes home to his father. (Luke 15:11-32) Obviously, Christians should never disdain anyone, or mock or hurt anyone. Each person is a child of God, of enormous worth, to be treated with reverence. Moreover, we are all sinners, and should not cast stones. It is a parody of love, however, to say: “it doesn’t matter what you do.” Jesus never says that, and in fact the whole Gospel shows us how what we do matters very much. True love means helping our brothers and sisters to escape a path that leads nowhere, and to do so through prayer, and example, and occasionally through direct encouragement.

In any case, on the question of marriage the actual Jesus says: “Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female’ and said, ‘for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’” (Matthew 19:4-5) Jesus here clearly indicates what marriage means, just as a few verses later he indicates what celibacy means, and it is no lack of love for His disciples to be faithful to that. It is not responsible to ignore the Gospels, and say that Jesus gives people a licence to do whatever they want. That is not what the love of Jesus means.

### **III: Reflections for our Catholic Community**

Although the current discussion of the redefinition of marriage needs to be seen primarily in terms of the effect on society, and so as a political and social issue affecting all citizens, it also should lead those who are Catholic Christians to consider more profoundly their own faith commitment. This is an opportune moment for us all to reflect thoughtfully and prayerfully on the meaning of marriage and the family in our lives of faith as disciples of Christ. It also calls us to reflect on the role of the virtue of chastity in our lives, whatever our state of life may be.

We must remember that the foundation of our efforts must be prayer: prayer for those who so forcefully are seeking to advance these views, that they may come to see the true meaning of marriage; prayer and compassion for those who find the false views attractive as a remedy for their own personal suffering; and prayer for all who are reflecting on the current debate, that they may see why the proposal to redefine marriage is misguided.

Although the family in its fullness involves a mother and father and children, our community of faith needs to give real loving support as well to those who are living in single parent families, and those who are facing life after the death of a spouse, or separation and divorce, and couples who do not have children. A measure of the spiritual life of our parishes and our diocese is the way in which we support all of the people in our family of faith, and wider society

We also need to welcome those who feel alienated from society and from the Church because they are personally dealing with the issue of same-sex attraction. Like everyone, they will find true inner peace by living according to the vision of chastity that comes from the Gospel and from our Catholic Christian faith. Each person, whatever his or her psychological dispositions might be, is supernaturally worthy, loved by God, and called to holiness. That holiness will be found when personal weaknesses and disordered inclinations are submitted to the guidance of reason and the grace of a loving God so that they no longer enslave. Only then will full freedom and dignity be attained.

We need to become involved in the current debate. This means examining the question clearly, and cutting through the rhetoric that so often obscures the real issues. We need to exercise our rights as citizens, and communicate with our political leaders. Those who seek to change the definition of marriage have not been hesitant about impressing their views upon society as a whole, and so also upon the politicians and judges who do respond to what they perceive to be public opinion and popular values.

All citizens need to let their members of parliament know what they think on this issue, and on so many others (especially those related to the right to life, and to social justice) that affect the true quality of life in our society. It is important to vote, to write and speak with legislators, and personally to become involved in the life of politics, in the spirit of the patron saint of politicians and judges, St. Thomas More.

We do need to be actively and positively engaged in our culture and in the life of our community, always promoting the common good. Ultimately, however, the proper stance of the Christian is a necessary detachment. As we confront the often distorted values of our society we need to have the spiritual maturity to keep our eyes focused on

the kingdom of God, so that we will be able to live rightly during our brief passage through this world, and not only seek to dispel the darkness, but through loving and faithful discipleship replace it with life-giving light.

! Thomas Collins, Archbishop of Edmonton