

Grace Builds on Nature: A Gay Catholic Theological Response to the Vatican's Statement on Gay Marriage

By Daniel A. Helminiak

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The Vatican's core argument against gay marriage or unions can be stated in an equation: marriage = sex = procreation.

Supposedly, the linkage between these three elements is inviolable, and, supposedly, this linkage expresses the nature of sexual relationship itself. Same-sex marriage cannot qualify.

Contemporary insight into the nature of human sexuality shows that the Vatican equation is wrong. The Vatican



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emphasizes the basest dimension of sex: the biological production of offspring; and it devalues the distinctively human dimension of sex: the bonding of hearts and minds in interpersonal relationship. In humans sex is first and foremost about personal bonding and only secondarily, incidentally, about procreation.

The official Catholic position needs to be challenged outright. However, this rejection of the official Catholic teaching is not a rejection of the Catholic presupposition. Natural law remains the basis of this whole discussion. But on the pivotal question—What is the nature of human sexuality?—the Vatican is wrong.

Of course, the Second Vatican Council weighted the procreative and the interpersonal (“unitive”) dimensions of sex equally, but insistence on procreation continues to define Catholic teaching and controls its every practical application. As is blatant in the document on gay marriage, the Vatican downplays the interpersonal meaning of human sexuality.

Inconclusive Religious Arguments against Same-Sex Relationships

Not only is the Vatican's basic teaching about sex off base. Everything the Vatican proclaims about homosexual relationships—except that they are not procreative—is wrong.

The Bible does not condemn same-sex relationships. In light of stunningly convergent biblical scholarship, an honest person today must, in the very least, admit that serious question surrounds the texts that

supposedly condemn homosexuality.

As Catholic scholars John Boswell and Mark Jordan have shown, Christian Tradition has simply not always condemned same-sex relationships.

In practice, Catholicism does not insist on procreative sex. The church continues to bless the marriages of known sterile couples and allows sex between couples who are beyond child-bearing age.

The argument about the supposed complementarity of man and woman is bogus. Psychologically any two people might valuably complement one another, so the touted complementarity must regard genital plumbing and is but another biological reductionism.

Research shows conclusively that homosexuality is in no way an

illness—or an “intrinsic disorder,” according to the Vatican. Rather, homosexuality is a natural variation, an aspect of the diversity that the Creator built into the universe.

Finally, gay and lesbian people are not godless or sinful in their relationships. In fact, they report their “coming out” as a moment of grace. Honest self-acceptance allows their lives to blossom in gratitude, love, generosity, and societal contribution.

Misrepresentation of Social-Science Findings about Same-Sex Families

It must constitute deliberate distortion of the documented evidence for the Vatican to suggest that gay and lesbian relationships enjoy no unitive or conjugal—that is, positive interpersonal—dimension. Like straight couples, gay couples find in each other affection, support, encouragement, companionship, spiritual enrichment, and meaning, purpose, and stability in the maelstrom of life. Gay and lesbian relationships clearly “express and promote the mutual assistance” of the couples.

Similarly, it must constitute deliberate distortion of the documented evidence to suggest that living in lesbian or gay families developmentally harms—and, thus, supposedly, victimizes—children. Research studies have followed such children through their teenage years, and these children fare at least as well as other children. The Vatican's accusation of harm and violence is outrageous. Many children would be happy to have any place to call home. Besides, the Catholic hierarchy has lost all credibility when preaching about concern for children.

Misguided Concern about the Social Order

It is glaringly untrue that stable lesbian and gay relationships contribute nothing to the good of society. How could mutually supportive and life-enhancing relationships not benefit the social order overall?

Likewise, how could the institutionalization of same-sex relationships devalue marriage? Husbands and wives are hardly likely to divorce en masse and find homosexual lovers. Neither are same-sex unions going to seduce young people away from heterosexual marriage: As the Vatican officially admits, homosexuality is not a choice. That lesbians and gays respect and desire marriage would seem only to bolster that institution.

Supposedly, to institutionalize gay marriage would be to institutionalize an evil. This argument begs the question. It remains to be shown that homosexual relationships are evil.

Unless lesbian and gay relationships are sinful, institutionalizing them could not give bad example to the young or obscure moral values. The Vatican again begs the question.

Beyond dispute, the civil recognition of gay marriage would imply a change in the organization of society. But whether that change would be good or bad is another question. Abolition of slavery, universal suffrage, racial integration, and women's rights also demanded the restructuring of society. Would the Vatican, on principle, turn back the clock on all social change?

A Position of Blind Faith

The Vatican has only one reason for opposing gay marriage: It entails a non-procreative use of sex. But whether sex does need to be procreative is debatable, to say the least. Other Christian churches have long abandoned opposition to the use of contraceptives, and Christian churches bless gay relationships. Nothing supports the Vatican position except unthinking acceptance of the Vatican's own teaching.

A Valid Consideration: Concern for the Children

Nonetheless, buried in the Catholic documents is one concern truly worthy of note: the place of the children. Historically, marriage, family, child-rearing, and procreative sex naturally fitted together. From our current perspective in which sex can be non-procreative, it becomes clear that child-rearing was the real but overshadowed meaning of marriage.

Today a new ideal has emerged: People marry for love, for psychological intimacy, not necessarily to sire offspring and to pass on property. The 12th-Century Troubadours, the Romantic poets and novelists, the liberation of women, and the invention of the pill changed the meaning of marriage in

Western civilization. Even Vatican annulments acknowledge the legitimacy of this novelty. The recognition of gay marriage is but the logical unfolding of a historical process long underway.

Many heterosexual couples today remain childless. Then, the case of two childless heterosexuals is an exact parallel to that of two childless gay men or lesbians who enter a long-term, committed relationship. That the heterosexual arrangement should be called *marriage* but not the homosexual one is a claim that cries to heaven for reasonable explanation. Consistency would require either

Same-Sex and the

that heterosexual relationships be granted the status of marriage only when children become part of the household or that any couple bonded for intimacy and mutual support be granted the status *married*.

Focus on the children recasts the discussion of gay marriage. The line should not be drawn between gay and straight relationships but between child-rearing and childless households, whether straight or gay. This arrangement would better preserve the telling feature in the traditional Western marriage, the feature that, it seems, rightly concerns the Vatican: the rearing of children.

Civil Union versus Sacred Marriage

A sane sorting-out of the issues requires recognition of the difference between religious and civil marriages. Justice demands that civil society grant equal rights and responsibilities to everyone. So civil authorities need to craft laws that treat all coupled relationships equally and that, in addition, privilege those relationships that involve the rearing of children. Perhaps the former should be called *unions* and only the latter, *marriage*.

The secular resolution need not be the same as the religious. The religions are free to define their sacred rites however they wish. But Catholic opposition to the legalization of gay marriage in whatever form is pure sectarianism; it is the attempted imposition of gratuitous religious beliefs on a pluralistic society. Apart from concern for the children, the Vatican's emphasis on procreative sex is wholly an in-house affair and has no valid relevance to the

continued on page 7

Canada's Two Biggest Faiths Battle Over Gay Marriage

By Ben Thompson
365Gay.com
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OTTAWA—As Canada's Prime Minister Paul Martin and Opposition leader Stephen Harper verbally spar over same-sex marriage, the country's two biggest denominations have come out swinging with one opposing gay marriage and the other endorsing it.

A letter by the Roman Catholic primate of Canada denouncing same-sex marriage was read Sunday in parish churches across the country.

"At the risk of being judged politically incorrect, we need to recall that the bill under

discussion is offensive to the moral and religious sensibility of a great number of citizens, both Catholic and non-Catholic," Marc Cardinal Ouellet writes in the letter.

"We therefore find ourselves at a turning point in the evolution of Canadian society, and the bill announced by the government threatens to unleash nothing less than a cultural upheaval whose negative consequences are still impossible to predict."

But, as the Catholic Church was mustering support to oppose the legislation to legalize gay marriage the country's largest Protestant denomination was sounding its support.

"Some will protest that we must have faith in the Bible, and that the Bible takes an unfavorable view of intimate same-sex relationship. But I would answer that Christian faith is not an uncritical repetition of a received text. It is a mindful commitment to the power of love, to which the text seeks to give witness. Every generation of the Christian faith must decide how they will honor that demand of love in the living of their days. Changing circumstances and changing ideas are not the enemy of faith," said the Right Rev. Dr. Peter Short, Moderator of the United Church of Canada in an open letter to all members of Parliament.

"It is wrong to invoke the love of God in

order that one person's 'values' might diminish another's value. Those who claim that homosexual people threaten to dismantle the value of heterosexual marriage would do well to remember that if anyone destroys marriage, it is married people, not gays and lesbians."

Dr. Short also invited MPs to a parliamentary breakfast that he will host on Parliament Hill on Thursday, February 24, to engage parliamentarians in further conversation on the subject of marriage.

In China, where he is leading a trade delegation, Prime Minister Martin Sunday repeated a threat he made on Friday that he could call a snap election over gay marriage.

Martin said that if his minority Liberals lose a free vote on same-sex marriage it would not necessarily lead to an election call, but, if the Conservatives attempt to invoke the notwithstanding clause of the Constitution he would see it as a confidence motion. If the Tories won that, Martin said, the government would fall.

Martin said that if Conservative leader Stephen Harper wants to ensure marriage in Canada remains between a man a woman, he would have to over-ride the Charter of Rights.

"The only way that that option can be realized is if, in fact, you use the notwithstanding clause. Stephen Harper has got to come

clean and tell Canadians the truth — there are no other options," Martin told reporters.

"I will not allow the rights of Canadians to be taken away and I will make that - the use of the notwithstanding clause - a motion of confidence," Martin said at a news conference in Hong Kong.

Harper remains coy on the use of the clause, which allows a government to opt out of any section of the Constitution with which it disagrees.

"The prime minister keeps talking about the notwithstanding clause and legal mumbo jumbo because he doesn't want to face the marriage issue," Harper from Vancouver.

But, if the government fell Harper said he would be comfortable campaigning on a traditional definition of marriage. Tory ads are already exploiting the wedge issue.

If the government's gay marriage bill were defeated in Parliament it would not affect the rights of same-sex couples to wed in areas of Canada where the courts have ruled in favor. But, gay couples in the other regions would have to go to court to challenge the existing law. In every area where gay marriage has come before the courts same-sex couples have won. ■

Marriage Church

A Gay Catholic Theological Response continued from page 6

secular debate about gay marriage. Secular society has long moved beyond sex-for-procreation-only.

Marriage as a Sacrament

Catholic belief in the sacramentality of marriage also plays into Vatican opposition to gay marriage. Supposedly, only heterosexual relationships provide the appropriate "matter" for a valid sacrament.

Since Augustine, sacraments have been defined as outward signs that give grace. If grace is seen as God's power and love working among us, any non-sinful human situation could be an occasion of grace. In contrast to others, some life events are deemed pivotal, and these are named *sacraments*—for example, marriage.

If lesbians and gays, as well as objective outside observers, can recognize same-sex relationships as blessings from God—for all the positive reasons noted above but denied out of hand by the Vatican—these relationships also qualify as means of grace. Then, for the same reasons as in a heterosexual relationship—mutual sanctification to the partners—a homosexual marriage could also qualify as a sacrament.

In the end, the religions must work out their particular understanding about the sacramentality of marriage. And secular forces that oppose same-sex marriage by naive appeal to the "sanctity" of marriage must acknowledge that gay marriage can be on a par with

straight marriage insofar as sanctity, grace, and sacramentality are concerned. Every wholesome relationship is an expression of the Holy Spirit's action in this world.

The Genius of Roman Catholicism and the Salvation of the Nations

A defining Catholic principle holds that "Grace builds on nature." So the argument here is actually Roman Catholic through and through. Far from being naturalist or secularist, it only highlights the earthly dimension in the

composite Catholic vision.

At this critical time in history, true concern for the common good is needed, not insistence on sectarian beliefs. The Vatican preoccupation with procreation opens onto one positive contribution: concern for the children. As for the rest, the Vatican's limply argued opposition to gay marriage must be embarrassing to any knowledgeable Catholic. It is unworthy of an institution that claims to speak of justice, for Jesus, and in the name of God. Perforce—and

what is more crucial at this point in history—the Vatican's argument is unworthy of humanity. ■

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Pontiff condemns same-sex marriage

By Jason Horowitz
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ROME—Pope John Paul II used his annual message to diplomats accredited to the Holy See to deliver an unequivocal condemnation on Monday of gay marriage in an exceptionally strongly worded message meant to define the position and agenda of the Roman Catholic Church at a time when the Vatican feels its values to be under fierce assault.

The 84-year-old pontiff addressed the 174 ambassadors of the diplomatic corps with an incisive account of the Vatican's stance on

family values.

"Today the family is often threatened by social and cultural pressures which tend to undermine its stability; but in some countries the family is also threatened by legislation which - at times directly - challenge its natural structure, which is and must necessarily be that of a union between a man and a woman founded on marriage," said the pope, who spoke in French.

Family, he said, "must never be undermined by laws based on a narrow and unnatural vision of man."

In recent months, senior Vatican officials have increasingly attacked what they see as the decaying of Christian values in Europe and beyond, and expressed a growing wariness that relativism and secularism have run

amok.

In October, the Vatican rallied behind Rocco Buttiglione, an Italian minister whose nomination to the European Commission was rejected after he espoused conservative Catholic views, like considering homosexuality a sin.

Cardinal Renato Raffaele Martino, president of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, said then that "a new holy Inquisition" threatened to persecute the Continent's faithful.

But Monday's message was perhaps an even stronger indictment of what the Catholic Church sees as loose secular values, both because it was delivered in the pope's own words and because it came during his so-

continued on page 9