

**The Call to Marriage is Woven Deeply into the Human Spirit:
A Message on Marriage from the Catholic Bishops of New Jersey**

God who created man and woman out of love also calls him to love – the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being. For man is created in the image and likeness of God who is Himself love. Since God created him man and woman, their mutual love becomes an image of the absolute and unfailing love with which God loves man. It is good, very good, in the Creator’s eyes. [Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 1604]

A recent study issued by the National Marriage Project at Rutgers University identifies a broad cultural shift away from religion and social traditionalism and toward a belief in personal independence and tolerance for diverse life styles – otherwise known as "secular individualism." The same report also indicates that “more children each year are not living in families that include their married, biological parents, which by all available empirical evidence is the gold standard for insuring optimal outcomes in a child’s development.”

One expression of this cultural shift toward “secular individualism” is the recent authorization of “marriage” between individuals of the same sex in a few states and the call for passage of a same sex “marriage” law in New Jersey.

As Catholics, we must not stand by in silence in the face of the many challenges that threaten marriage and, in turn, children and the public good. We must not shirk our responsibility.

We must protect and promote marriage. We must not abandon the teaching of the Catholic Church on marriage and the complementarity of the sexes - a truth that is evident to right reason and recognized as such by the major cultures of the world. We must pledge our support to all family members, including those who choose to remain single. We must help those entering marriage to prepare for the challenges, sacrifices and joys to come. We must reach out with the special compassion of Christ to those married couples and families experiencing difficulties, anxiety, and illness.

In these troubled times, we, the Catholic Bishops of New Jersey, offer here some basic truths to assist people in understanding Catholic teaching about marriage and to enable them to promote and support marriage and families.

What is the Catholic Church’s Teaching on Marriage?

The Catholic Church teaches today and has always and everywhere taught for 2000 years that marriage is the union of one man and one woman as husband and wife.

“Marriage is not just any relationship between human beings. It was established by the Creator with its own nature, essential properties and purpose. No ideology can erase from the human spirit the certainty that marriage exists solely between a man and a woman, who by mutual personal gift, proper and exclusive to themselves,

tend toward the communion of their persons. In this way, they mutually perfect each other, in order to cooperate with God in the procreation and upbringing of new human lives.” [Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, June 3, 2003]

This great truth about marriage is not some obscure doctrinal fine point but a fact of human nature, recognized from time immemorial by people of virtually every faith and culture. God made us male and female; only men and women cooperating in marital love together can truly become one flesh, and only marital unions further God’s purpose of creating new life that is welcomed, loved, nurtured and educated by their mother and father.

The Church teaches that man and woman are equal. However, man and woman are *different from each other but created for each other*. This complementarity, including sexual difference, draws them together in a mutually loving union that always should be open to the procreation of children (see the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1602-1605).

These truths about marriage are present in the order of nature and can be perceived by the light of human reason and have been confirmed by divine Revelation in Sacred Scripture.

Why should the Church care about the state’s definition of marriage?

God Himself is the author of marriage. Marriage as a union of man and woman existed long before any nation, religion, or law was established. The marital union is the human and social institution upon which civilization has always been structured. It is a gift that our Creator bestowed on all of humanity through the first man and the first woman.

Governments, therefore, have a duty to reinforce and protect this permanent institution and to pass it on to future generations, rather than attempt to redefine it arbitrarily for transitory political or social reasons.

The Church asks Catholics to care about the government’s treatment of marriage because civil authorities are charged with protecting children and the common good, and marriage is indispensable to both purposes. As citizens, Catholics have the right and the responsibility to hold civil authorities accountable for their stewardship of the institution of marriage.

Catholics also have the right and responsibility to oppose laws and policies that unjustly target people as bigots or that subject them to charges of unlawful discrimination simply because they believe and teach that marriage is the union of man and a woman.

Why must marriages be treated differently than other voluntary relationships?

The marital union between a man and a woman is the foundation of the family and the family is the foundation of society. Marriage is singular in its importance as a public institution. No other voluntary relationship can be regarded as the equivalent of marriage, which is unique in its stability, the environment it provides for the development of families, and the protection it accords spouses and children. Marriage is not merely an article of the Catholic faith, but a foundational element of the common good.

Why should two individuals of the same sex be treated any differently than married couples who cannot conceive children?

Marriage benefits society by bringing men and women – the two complementary “halves” of the human race – together. Regardless of whether they can conceive children, a man and a woman united in marriage reinforce the importance of this ideal. By contrast, if the government insists that same-sex unions are “equal” to unions of husband and wife, the government will be teaching not only that mothers and fathers are no longer necessary for children, but also that uniting the sexes is no longer an important ideal.

Persons of same-sex orientation have the right to live as they choose but they do not have the right to redefine marriage for everyone by altering the civil law.

**Don’t single parents make a valuable contribution to family life?
If so, why should same-sex partners not be viewed the same way?**

All children are gifts from God and deserve our care and protection. The stable, life long loving relationship of a mother and father, found only in marriage, provides the ideal conditions for raising and socializing children. Marriage represents the way we teach and reinforce this ideal.

Of course, some children are raised in situations other than the traditional two-parent family, and responsible loving single parents, and other family members make important and valuable contributions to the welfare of these children. But supporting single-parent families, as a just and compassionate society must do, is far different than deliberately creating motherless and fatherless families and holding them out to be the same as marriages.

But isn’t prohibiting same-sex “marriage” unjust discrimination?

No. We must always remember that every person has an inherent dignity because he or she is created in the image and likeness of God, and that God loves every person as a unique individual. Like all other human beings, our homosexual brothers and sisters are beloved children of God. As a result, the Catholic Church affirms that they “must be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in this regard should be avoided” [Catechism of the Catholic Church no. 2358].

Thus the teachings of the Church make it clear that the fundamental human rights of homosexual persons must be defended, and that all of us must strive to eliminate any forms of injustice, oppression, or violence against homosexual persons.

But it is not “unjust discrimination” to treat different things differently. Same-sex unions are not, in fact, the same thing as the union of one man and one woman in marriage. One type of union may ever generate children, the other may never; one type of union respects and expresses the inherent complementarity of man and woman; the other does not.

Therefore, treating one type of union as “marriage,” and the other not, is not only permitted, but required. Indeed, it is treating this differentiation as bigotry that constitutes an injustice.

Is same sex “marriage” a civil right?

In the Church’s view same-sex “marriage” is not a civil right. A strong desire does not make a civil right. Every man and every woman has a right to enter into marriage, but marriage as an institution can only be between a man and a woman. Governments do not have the power to define marriage otherwise, because it is a permanent human institution that does not owe its existence to governments. Same-sex “marriage” is not a civil right because same-sex couples cannot fulfill the core public purpose of marriage: protecting children by bringing men and women into the only kind of union that can make new life and give children mothers and fathers.

This is not only the Church’s view. Throughout all of human history marriage has been held to be a union of man and woman. Marriage has its roots in natural law, which transcends all man-made law. Marriage as a union of a man and a woman is a natural, universal human institution that unites mothers and fathers in the work of childrearing and family life. Same sex unions may represent a new and a different type of institution – but it is not marriage and should not be treated as marriage.

Would maintaining the definition of marriage as a union solely of one man and one woman deny hospital visitation privileges to civil union partners?

Would defining marriage as a union of one man and one woman take away any benefits currently provided to civil union partners by employers?

No. In New Jersey, the Civil Union Act already provides practical rights, benefits, and protections for persons who choose to establish non-marital unions. As clearly stated in the Act:

Civil union couples shall have all of the same benefits, protections and responsibilities under law, whether they derive from statute, administrative or court rule, public policy, common law or any other source of civil law, as are granted to spouses in a marriage. [N.J. Statutes 37:1-31(a)]

The Act also provides that civil union couples are entitled to the benefits and protections of “laws relating to insurance, health and pension benefits.” [N.J. Statutes 37:1-32(e)] In addition, the Act prohibits an array of unlawful employment practices by employers who do not fully implement the Act.

Civil Law, Church Law and Marriage

In their 2003 statement *Between Man and Woman: Questions and Answers about Marriage and Same-Sex Union*”, the Catholic Bishops of the United States addressed civil law, church law and marriage as follows:

Marriage is a basic human and social institution. Though it is regulated by civil laws and church laws, it did not originate from either the church or state, but from God. Therefore, neither church nor state can alter the basic meaning and structure of marriage.

Marriage, whose nature and purposes are established by God, can only be the union of a man and a woman and must remain such in law. In a manner unlike any other relationship, marriage makes a unique and irreplaceable contribution to the common good of society, especially through the procreation and education of children.

The union of husband and wife becomes, over a lifetime, a great good for themselves, their family, communities, and society. Marriage is a gift to be cherished and protected.

What Does All of This Mean?

In New Jersey, the debate about same sex marriage is not about benefits and rights. The Civil Union Act [N.J. Statutes 37:1-31(a)] settled that issue once and for all. In New Jersey, same sex couples have every benefit and right without exception that the State of New Jersey grants to heterosexual married couples. The same sex “marriage” initiative is an attempt to change the historic structure of marriage as a union only of a man and a woman. This initiative ignores human nature because throughout all of human history marriage has required the complementarity of man and woman.

Same sex civil unions may represent a new and a different type of institution, one in which government grants to same sex couples benefits and protections, *but* same sex unions are not marriage. Saint Paul in his letter to the Hebrews told us, “Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teaching.” In this time of strange teaching and conflict over the meaning of marriage, let us prayerfully reflect on the words of Jesus:

Have you not read that from the beginning the Creator '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?' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. [Matthew 19:5]

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August 22, 2009

*For additional information on the teaching of the Catholic Church on marriage, please visit **For Your Marriage, an initiative of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops at: <http://www.foryourmarriage.org/home.asp>***