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The Theology of Marriage and Same Sex Unions

by

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I write this brief article in response to remarks made by Representative Patrick J. Kennedy concerning a recent document from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on the matter of the Catholic Church's moral opposition to homosexual unions. In his comments as reported in the August 8, 2003 edition of *The Providence Journal*, Mr. Kennedy characterized the Congregation's position as "bigotry or discrimination". This article seeks to dispel any confusion among the Catholic faithful that Kennedy's erroneous statements may have caused.

The purpose of the Vatican document is to restate the constant teaching of the Catholic Church on the nature and meaning of marriage both as a natural institution and as a sacrament. This moral theological doctrine is firmly anchored in the Word of God and the Church's authoritative magisterium (teaching office).

Sacred Scripture attests that marriage is an institution established by the Creator between a man and a woman to bring about the mutual growth and development of the couple in life and love. This naturally determined union also finds its complete fulfillment and enrichment in the begetting and raising of children within the context of exclusive and mutual fidelity. All major cultures have recognized marriage between a man and a woman as foundational to the very well being and stability of the tribe, clan or society. As such, the marital union of man and woman has been surrounded by traditional, sacral rituals and customs that have served to designate marriage as unique among other types of human relationships.

Jesus Christ raised the natural, human institution of marriage to the dignity of a sacrament. In doing so, the Lord established marriage as a human reflection of a divine reality, that is, the enduring and unbreakable love between Christ and his Bride, the Church. The unity, exclusivity,

fidelity and indissolubility of the sacrament of marriage are profoundly rooted in this recognition of Christ's special relationship to His Church.

We live in a society where traditional moral notions of right and wrong are frequently called into question. Many contemporary Americans find it difficult to accept that something can always be morally wrong despite one's challenging circumstances and best intentions. One reason for this ethical stance is that many people no longer accept as self-evident that things are as they are by nature and hence, cannot be other than what they are. A circle cannot be a square no matter how sincerely or passionately one may hold or argue to the contrary.

A well-founded philosophical principle has always maintained that someone or something acts the way it does because he or she or it is what it is and is not something else. For example, although an elephant may have ears bigger than some birds' wings, an elephant cannot fly. It is not in its nature to do so. Although both dogs and cats are animals and both can be enjoyed as pets, a dog cannot have kittens. It is not in the dog's nature to do so. Although people of the same gender may establish close relationships and even live together for years, they cannot marry because the nature of the marital relationship demands the establishment of a life-long commitment between one man and one woman that is fundamentally open to the procreation and upbringing of children within a bond of sexual complementarity.

The Catholic Church's moral tradition, established and supported by both human reason and supernatural faith, maintains as a basic principle that to work against or to thwart one's nature or one's natural inclinations is to act in a way that compromises the dignity of the human person and thus, is morally wrong. The Catholic Church stands unequivocally opposed to homosexual unions and their legal recognition not only because such unions are contrary to her moral teaching, a teaching, by the way, that has been supported by the Judaeo-Christian moral tradition until just recently.

The Church also objects to homosexual unions in order to defend and promote the common good of society, an essential element of which is the institution of marriage that gives rise to the family, the primary unit of society. It is with good reason that many astute analysts of society and culture have often opined, "As goes the family, so goes society."

Mr. Kennedy has asserted in his published remarks that the teaching of the Catholic Church articulated in the recent Vatican document is discriminatory and bigoted. Besides being insulting and demeaning to the Church, such comments could not be more uninformed. In order to live a balanced, humane and civil life together in society, people must discriminate all the time, particularly between what is true and false, right and wrong. In point of fact, it would be irresponsible and indeed, unjust for the Catholic Church as a moral voice in a pluralist society not to speak out

in defense of the institution of marriage. In fact, justice, that is, the establishment of the rationally right order of things, demands it. It may, at the moment, be politically correct to favor legal recognition of homosexual unions, but ultimately, such recognition will contribute to unraveling further the moral fabric of society.

A word also needs to be said about Catholics who claim that the Church's opposition to the legal recognition of homosexual unions is not what Jesus would do or is not a reflection of the love of Christ. Catholic identity cannot be facily or succinctly defined but its presence or absence is quite capable of being discerned through people's words and actions. One indication of a solid Catholic identity or sensibility is a type of intuitive grasp of the relationship between Jesus Christ and the Catholic Church. The Church is the Body of Christ in the world today. Her mission is to continue through the proclamation of the Word, the celebration of the sacrament and her apostolic service to those in greatest need the salvific ministry of Jesus Christ until the end of time.

A well-informed and committed Catholic realizes that the teaching responsibility of the Church, especially in the area of faith and morals, is not of her own making. The Church's teaching mission is derived from the very commission of the Lord Himself and is lived out in history under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In a word, to drive a wedge between Jesus and His Church, especially concerning a matter as fundamental to the moral teaching of the Scriptures and the Church as marriage, betrays a woeful lack of knowledge about the Church's nature. The Church is the Bride of Christ who, in the exercise of her teaching ministry, is well aware of the Lord's own words to His apostles, "He who hears you, hears me". In light of this, a constitutive part of a Catholic's moral identity is the conscientious acceptance of the Church's teaching on marriage and the nature and significance of married love.

All Catholics who wish to inform their consciences well must attend to the moral teaching of their Church. The recent document from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith contains much moral wisdom to guide Catholics and all people of good will in this regard. A "personally opposed but" stance on such basic moral realities as the legal protection of marriage understood as a covenant of life and love between a man and a woman is morally unacceptable for any Catholic to assume. It is especially unacceptable for those Catholics who in virtue of their public office can help in no small measure to craft laws and public policies that will contribute to the promotion of authentic human flourishing by supporting the proper legal protection of the institution of marriage in our society and culture.