

Marriage – Who Defines It? Letter to the Montreal Gazette on Marriage

I feel the pain of pastor and chaplain Raymond Gravel quoted in front page column “Priest strikes a nerve” August 7 by Elisabeth Kalbfuss. It is the pain pastors accept to suffer with gays and lesbians trying to situate themselves in the current dialogue on the nature and purpose of marriage; as they try to accompany and guide them. The article gives prominence to personal experience and various responses to persons bearing the burden. Gazette and other reporters are contributing to a dialogue on marriage occasioned by the parliamentary initiative to attempt to grant homosexual and lesbian couples access to marriage, while public demonstrations support or question this demand. Undoubtedly, some readers are touched personally, if someone we know has declared their homosexuality or is related to someone who has. The dialogue touches me because of people I know.

Personal experiences are also related to society’s concern over the common good in general and the formation of the young in particular. We need to hear personal experiences and respect people, but we also need to examine as thoroughly as we can the social issues, for the sake of the common good of our whole society. While some resort to personal attacks on those entering the dialogue, I have no doubt that these are simply an attempt to defend one’s dignity in the face of what feels like a condemnation. Although some statements may hurt, we must continue the dialogue and not avoid probing all the underlying issues.

In an open society, people make the choices they want to make, as opposed to the more closed and protective societies of our ancestors that pressured compliance, or totalitarian or despotic states that violently imposed uniformity. Our own society allows tyrannical cultural trends that avoid discussing the issue by resorting to an attack on whoever attempts to widen the dialogue. Any time our Gazette and other columnists attempt to elevate the dialogue, they are eminently worthy of praise.

In his August 4th article “Priests’ Messages Mixed”, Phillip Todd gave fair treatment to those he interviewed, showing the complex issues involved and the different ways clergy and laity struggle to respond to the crisis precipitated by the federal government’s attempt to redefine marriage. The next day, Don MacPherson rightly brought attention to the troubled state of marriage as an institution today, especially in Quebec, where heterosexual couples are almost evenly split between stable married couples, divorced couples, and couples living in common law unions. As Don says, it is ironic that “the most Catholic of provinces” should have come to this, but I would add, quite understandable.

While 83% of Quebecers in 2001 identified themselves as Roman Catholics, it does not necessarily follow that popular behavior will reflect Christian tradition. The simple claim to religious affiliation does not of itself yield practical consequences for the outcome of a life. People who actively belong to major world cultures and who are practically acquainted with their tradition will admit that what does make a difference in the positive outcome of a life is not the knowledge one has of religious principles, but the degree to which one is willing to integrate those principles into daily living in a consistent discipline or practice. The actual implementation of any principle alone can achieve the natural outcome contained in it. It is no coincidence that the institution of Christian marriage has unraveled at about the same rate as the serious practice of the Roman Catholic and other traditions of the Christian faith in Quebec, as well as in other western nations.

If Pope John Paul II is a focus of reactions to the Church’s most recent declarations on eligibility to marriage, it is ostensibly due to the June Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith’s

Wilderness Reflections - 8 - Meaning and Purpose of Life and Human Sexuality

“Considerations on Unions Between Homosexual Persons.” This is no attempt, as it appears to be according to Don, to “close the church doors” in the manner of a barn or fence in order to keep the “sheep” (to use a Gospel image) penned or corralled. The bishop’s role is that of a pastor or shepherd: to point out to members and others interested in the common good of humanity where the parameters have always been for promoting the full well being and flowering of the human person and society – including married couples and families.

This being said, it is the normative teaching of the Roman Catholic Church that no one can or should coerce or hinder people from acting in accord with their conscience. This in turn implies individual responsibility to inform the conscience with access to the full truth on the matter to be decided. This is why pastors are responsible to help people have access to the full truth. Pope John Paul II has a very deep record of championing the cause of religious freedom and the dignity of the human person and civil society in all the nations he has visited these past 25 years, precisely as he had done in his homeland from his youth.

In our turn, we older generations would be remiss if we did not speak at this juncture. The young want to discover their full human destiny. They are entitled to actually hear the timeless witness of Jesus Christ to the full truth about woman and man, about God and his offer of abundant life. A life of profound meaning and deep intimacy for woman and man, and for both woman and man with others in society is deeply transformed by intimacy with God. It will not help our young adults, youth and children glimpse the full depth of what it means to be human and realize the full potential of their human destiny if we allow the Church to be slandered as a tyrant simply because it cannot, out of conviction, support certain choices people can and do make. It’s a question of integrity, for everyone.

Marriage and family are unique, with their own purpose for existing as the proven and United Nations sanctioned basic unit of civil society. The “Considerations” document states that marriage is universally recognized as profoundly rooted in the complementarity of the sexes, and is therefore perfectly suited to the rearing of children into a full development of the same complementarity in themselves. This makes marriage and the family fundamental institutions for the common good of humanity; which makes the state is duty bound to care for these perennial human institutions on which it stands and relies for its own stability.

Until recently, there was almost no research at all done on what the father contributes to this rearing and forming of the children born of a marriage. Mothers generally were the ones to stay home and spend the countless hours needed for the complex process of forming children from the raw material they are born with into creatures reasonably recognizable as civil, aware, human persons with a fully functioning and responsible conscience. In stable families, it was generally thought that the father acted only as a disciplinarian, the “enforcer” the mother could invoke in the course of the day as she had the most intimate and frequent contact with the children, both boys and girls. We can induce the contribution of the father as we see the consequences of his absence or weakness in unstable families. As serious studies begin to come in, there is general surprise that fathers contribute a great deal to this process in the ancient model of the family: a stable union of one mother and one father.

Homosexuals and lesbians want, like every human being, to seek out paths of life, in response to the universally acknowledged deep human hunger for meaning, purpose, belonging, and happiness. However, their demand to redefine marriage would bring what they have a right to do in private out

Wilderness Reflections - 8 - Meaning and Purpose of Life and Human Sexuality

into the public domain, where it will drastically change society. The CDF rightly points out that this would do harm to children by misleading them to consider same-sex unions equivalent to marriage, which they cannot be because of marriage's essential, unique orientation to a sexually complementary communion of persons as a fertile ground for the procreation and complementary rearing of children.

Still, it would not be right to simply dismiss the fundamental human desires of those who seek same-sex marriage recognition. What is it that they really seek? Can it be had without disintegrating marriage and the family? Phillip Todd quoted pastor John Lyng who considers this a social justice issue. This issue has such radical implications for society that it should receive international treatment, with the benefit of expert jurists, philosophers, theologians, bishops, and other pastors. We must clearly define whether society can, without doing harm to the common good in marriage and family – already eroded due to increased individualism in modern society – grant homosexuals and lesbians enjoying their individual right to an alternative lifestyle public recognition for their union, what benefits they might be entitled to receive as equal citizens, and what limits there must be.

CDF issues a stern warning against equating same-sex unions with marriage because it would erode the influence of marriage with the young as the proven institution for them to realize their full potential for fertile, complementary human love. Children are particularly vulnerable and therefore need responsible protection against whatever could deprive them of access to the full truth about the human condition, our origins, our destiny, and our dignity.

A Ford is a car, but it's not a Pontiac. A same-sex union is a union, not a marriage. Nor is it a family, because for children to grow into their full destiny as human beings, they need to be raised by a set of parents representing both genders, precisely because the mother and father bring a unique quality and irreplaceable characteristics to the formation of the child's psyche, conscience, gender identity, socialization, and personhood. It is unfair for anyone to accuse society, the Church, or God of being unfair or of causing a prejudice against the Canadian Charter of Rights simply for observing that one man and one woman are not the same as one man and one man or one woman and one woman. They are not the same, and nothing can make them the same. Even the magical thinking of little children, who easily confuse reality and fantasy, can see what we refuse to.

Until somewhere around 1983 homosexuality and lesbianism were included in official lists of human health disorders, which was a true reflection of the cultures, laws, behaviors, and attitudes of societies the world over for millennia. One way that civil societies give shape to individual consciences and assure the common good is to spontaneously develop mores and taboos, generally accepted ways of thinking and behaving, with generally accepted norms for reward and punishment. Fundamentally, it is a question of the survival of the society.

Modern society prides itself on the dismantling and abolishing of mores and taboos and all restraints on human choice and behavior, based on the false premise that freedom is the ability to make unlimited choices with no external restraints. This modern trend, though common, is regrettable in that it is a rather arrogant wholesale rejection of the wisdom and experience of entire generations of those who have lived, struggled, achieved meaning and purpose, contributed to their society, and then died. These customs are rooted in the hard-earned wisdom through experience by a preponderant number of people and societies that certain acts and behaviors are simply wrong, dangerous, and

Wilderness Reflections - 8 - Meaning and Purpose of Life and Human Sexuality

harmful – in the short, medium, and long term – both to the one who commits the act or behavior and to those who suffer its consequences, directly or indirectly.

How and why has this happened to us? We've come to think that the past 500 years of empirical research and 300 years of philosophical "enlightenment" have made us a superior civilization. Why are we, as a society in constant change, suffering so much confusion? Until this period, human beings and societies generally accepted as self-evident that there were objective differences between good and evil. The struggle of tribes and nations, peoples and individuals was not over the definition of good and evil but over power, by which one could impose on others for one's benefit even what those others experienced as evil.

Thinkers came to define the contest as one of wills, and the contestants as God and humanity. The logical outcome of this trend was the 1960's declaration that "God is dead." In other words, humanity won because it has now decided to make its own will, in every case, dominant. The purpose of the judiciary has basically been reduced from the discernment of underlying principles to the litigation of contestants caught in a conflict of wills. What has been rejected is what has always been called the natural moral law, or those fundamental inner human parameters that have been accessible to people of all times and places.

For nations and governments, the solution has been to reduce the burden of governance expressed in the Greek ideal of the philosopher king through the principle of the separation of church and state. This principle can work well if governors retain a practical understanding and working knowledge of fundamental, perennial truths about the human person and civil society. What happens when the governors abandon or lose such wisdom, and the church is not allowed to remind governors and governed about the fundamental and perennial truths of their origins and their destiny, but is slandered as a tyrant to be stripped of public relevance or influence? The Church's record of service to the common good all over the world is unparalleled and is directly related to its moral Gospel principles. If all who make mistakes were to be condemned to silence, then not only the Church would be silenced because of its all too human membership and leadership, but we would all be silenced.

Our modern world is currently composed of nation states and populations attempting to become nation states or contesting their borders and demographic compositions. These nation states were preceded by city-states going back to the dawn of recorded history, as far back as Jericho 10,000 years ago. They were ruled by monarchs, royal families, conquerors, or small groups of influential people, who generally sought guidance from their religious leaders, such as they were. In times of uncertainty, they would tend to assert their sovereign will over such counselors, and go so far as to run rough-shod over the human rights and dignity of the population in the pursuit of their objectives.

It has taken a long time for western civilization to learn the truth that the separation of church and state is desirable, but in terms whereby each has proper jurisdiction over matters that pertain to its sphere of competence, but also has the freedom to have a favorable impact on the services offered by the other for the common good. When both church and state remain open to each other and are able to maintain a harmonious mode of collaboration, they can take into account the realities that require the other's particular services to the society and be better situated to offer the other the best of their particular expertise; so that the full truth of the human person's origins, destiny and dignity can be brought to bear on the overall effort of governance.