

Irresistible Promise of Happiness

The Catholic Review

This year, the Church's celebration of the miraculous and timeless story of Jesus' birth on Christmas Day coincided, just one day later, with our observation honoring the loving and powerful witness of the Holy Family of Jesus and his parents, Mary and Joseph.

At Masses throughout the Archdiocese that day after Christmas, our priests preached on the gift of marriage and the importance this holy sacrament holds for the most critical component of our society, today and always, the family.

In 2003, the Bishops of the United States said, "The family based on marriage is a fundamental and precious good for the whole society whose most solid fabric is built on the values that are developed in family relations and guaranteed by stable marriage."

A belief in the integral importance of marriage is not ours alone. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, children raised by parents in healthy marriages are:

- More likely to succeed academically
- Physically and emotionally healthier
- Less likely to attempt or commit suicide, be a victim of physical or sexual abuse and abuse drugs or alcohol
- Have a better relationship with their mothers and fathers

The government also notes these relationships hold benefits to society and cite similar studies showing healthy marriages lead to:

- Higher rates of physically and emotionally healthy citizens
- Higher rates of educated citizens
- Lower domestic violence, crime and teenage pregnancy rates

- Higher rates of home ownership, higher property values, and
- A decreased need for social services

The compelling evidence of the benefits of marriage to society has spurred our federal government to invest \$150,000,000 a year from 2006-2011 in efforts to promote healthy marriages. One visible example of the federally funded Healthy Marriage Initiative here in Maryland is the numerous billboards erected by the Cecil County Government. These signs, developed by the county's school children, reflect simple tips for a successful marriage.

Yet in spite of these obvious benefits and efforts to promote marriage, the eroding respect for it in our society today continues at an alarming rate.

Consider the Dec. 18, 2010 article in the hometown Sun indicating, based on 2010 Census data, that only 8.6 percent of Baltimore City households consist of a traditional family - a mother and father and their children - and 23 percent of families in Baltimore are headed by single women raising more than half the children in the city. Given these sobering statistics, it is clear we can ill afford further efforts to undermine marriage.

And yet that's exactly what is at stake in the controversy regarding efforts to change the legal definition of marriage to include same-sex partners. That controversy will be hotly debated this year by the Maryland General Assembly, which returns this week to Annapolis for the new legislative session. Despite media reports suggesting that Maryland's law defining marriage as between one man and woman could be overturned this year, that result is by no means certain. Catholics and all people of good faith will speak up in affirming the benefits and value of marriage to children and society, and communicating their support to their legislators.

By nature, marriage originates in the union of one man and one woman, who are uniquely capable of bringing children into the world, and nurturing them as mother and father. It is for this reason that government has always attached particular responsibilities and privileges to this relationship, in order to promote the best possible environment for raising our future generations. As the Maryland Court of Appeals, in its 2007 ruling upholding the state's marriage statute, said, "In light of

the fundamental nature of procreation, ... safeguarding an environment most conducive to the stable propagation and continuance of the human race is a legitimate government interest.”

In publicly affirming marriage, we must not allow our voices to be silenced by those who claim our message is based on bigotry or discrimination against women and men with same-sex attractions. To be sure, we must continue to proclaim our love and respect for every individual, and to address this issue carefully and compassionately. At the same time, however, we have a compelling moral responsibility, as bishops, pastors and parishioners, to uphold marriage at a time when our society’s foundational institution is facing such a critical challenge.

In coordination with the Maryland Catholic Conference, the Archdiocese will provide all parishes with information to help you remain informed and involved in our efforts to promote marriage, including our advocacy in Annapolis. I also encourage you to be sure to sign up for the Conference’s online Catholic Advocacy Network to receive e-mail updates and information on how to contact your legislators. (To join the MCC Catholic Advocacy Network and their online community of Maryland Catholics on Facebook, go to www.mdcathcon.org.) Pope Benedict XVI referred to marriage as a union “Where body and soul are inseparably joined and human beings glimpse an apparently irresistible promise of happiness.” May the loving example of the Holy Family of Jesus serve as a model for all families, and inspire more women and men to seek this “irresistible promise of happiness” and embrace this basic building block of human society.