

Marriage Crossroads

The Catholic Review

Last Sunday, at a mostly-full Cathedral of Mary Our Queen, hundreds of couples from throughout the Archdiocese of Baltimore came together to celebrate the sacred call that is the vocation to married life.

The special liturgy, occurring the same Sunday each February, marks our Church's celebration of World Marriage Day and is an opportunity to recognize all married couples, from the newly-wed to the more seasoned married veterans among us!

It was my fourth time celebrating World Marriage Day here in the Archdiocese and the most important to date, given the many threats to marriage that exist in our society today.

Anyone who has paid attention to the news this past week realizes how much the media, politicians and others in our state are focusing on the institution of marriage. And it's not just a local preoccupation, as the eyes of the nation are focused squarely on Maryland to see if it will become the sixth state in our nation, along with the District of Columbia, to redefine the most fundamental social institution our society knows.

I first wrote about the Church's serious concerns about such a change to our state's law about a month ago, just after the start of the 2011 General Assembly session. Since then, the first of several bills has been heard and a committee vote is expected imminently. Given that six of 11 committee members are sponsors of the bill, it is expected to reach the full Senate floor, where the fate of the bill is uncertain. Thus, our defense of traditional marriage must be vigorous and urgent.

It is precisely because of its importance to society that the Church and others of good will are working tirelessly in defending marriage.

Maryland's law defining marriage as the union of one man and one woman is not an arbitrary recognition of one relationship with many possibilities. This recognition –

bestowed on marriage by societies throughout human history – originates in a simple biological fact. The union of one man and one woman is the only relationship capable of creating children and nurturing them together as father and mother.

In the view of the American Catholic bishops, marriage between one man and one woman, with a view toward family, is a basic human and social institution ... indeed, the most basic of such institutions. True, the institution of marriage is regulated by civil law and Church law, but it preceded them both. It originated from neither, but from God. Therefore, neither the Church nor state can alter its basic meaning and structure.

Marriage, whose nature and purpose are established by God, can only be the union of a man and woman. The law should not have it otherwise.

Indeed, that marriage is a joining of man and woman, involving the gift of offspring, has been the cherished standard of Western culture, time immemorial. Of all human relationships, Western law has always regarded marriage with special significance and accorded it special privileges. In doing so, it has reflected the universally accepted understanding that healthy marriages require the protection of law if our culture is to promote the welfare of its future generations.

Pope Benedict XVI recently said passing legislation or adopting policies that recognize “forms of unions, which distort the essence and purpose of the family end up penalizing those who, with much effort, commit themselves to living a life whose bonds are marked by stable intimacy ... ”

Stripping marriage of its unique connection to parenthood erases from law the right of a child to a mother and father, and ignores an essential question of why government favors marriage between one man and one woman over all other relationships.

As I pointed out in my earlier column, the benefits of healthy marriages to children and society are above reproach. Some of the statistics bear repeating. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, children raised by parents in healthy marriages are:

- More likely to succeed academically; and
- Physically and emotionally healthier.

The Department also cites studies which show healthy marriages lead to:

- Higher rates of physically and emotionally healthy citizens; and
- Higher rates of educated citizens.

Those in favor of redefining marriage have cleverly marketed their position to depict anyone opposing the re-defining of marriage as a religious zealot or, worse, a bigot.

The well-funded and well-organized supporters of the measure have also been effective in soliciting support for the bill by likening it to the causes of the Civil Rights Era. While it may be an effective label for gathering support, it is simply untrue. The fact is that in Maryland, as a result of many recent changes to the law, same-sex partners do not need marriage to receive rights and benefits. Two pieces of legislation were passed in 2008 that grant domestic partners health care facility visitation and medical decision-making rights, as well as exemptions from recordation taxes and state and county transfer taxes. An additional law was passed in 2009 granting them an exemption from inheritance taxes.

Furthermore, while we are opposed to same-sex marriage, we must unconditionally condemn unjust discrimination against homosexual persons whose dignity as daughters and sons of God we accept, respect and defend. In short, treating heterosexual and same-sex relationships differently is not unjust discrimination and upholding the truth of marriage does not ignore the rights or the equal dignity of all human persons.

Unfortunately, such sweeping characterizations took on additional meaning last week when Senator James Brochin (whose district encompasses the parishes of Immaculate Heart of Mary, Church of the Nativity, St. Pius X and Immaculate Conception, Towson) cited the tone of testimony offered by some who spoke against the bill at the hearing as the reason he was changing his publicly-stated position in support of traditional marriage, to now vote in support of redefining marriage. In spite of Senator Brochin's claim that he only "heard hate and venom coming out of

that hearing,” witness after witness voiced their opposition, offering no such judgments or invective, including members of our Maryland Catholic Conference and an Archdiocesan parish. Their testimonies can be viewed at catholicreview.org/matysekblog. The notion that anyone opposed to same-sex marriage is a bigot or “hate monger” is not only unfair and insulting, it also ignores the very belief system that underpins our support for marriage.

To redefine marriage would be to drastically alter a social institution that derives from our very nature as men and women. Our focus on society should be on strengthening marriage, not dismantling it altogether.

I urge you once again to speak out in defense of marriage at this critical time. I pray the witness of so many committed married women and men in our Archdiocese, whom we recognized in a special way this past week, will serve as a powerful witness to the vocation of marriage and the blessing it is for our faith, our children, and our society.