

Worthy of our Defense

The Catholic Review

Over the past several weeks, the public debate over proposed legislation that would drastically alter the definition of marriage has been heated and, in the case of the Catholic Church's position, often mischaracterized and dismissed as discriminatory.

With the fate of the bill still in limbo as of this writing, I want to take one more opportunity to exercise my teaching role as Bishop by providing further context for the Church's teaching on marriage.

I particularly wish to defend the Church (and other faith communities who have similarly been targeted for their views) from the vicious and baseless claims by some in our community—doubtless the same who make such claims in other states pondering such a radical legal and social change—whose only goal is to sideline people of faith by branding them religious zealots or anti-homosexual.

The human reality of marriage is among the most precious of human values. Some sense of the greatness and importance of the marital union exists in all cultures. It is vital to every human society. And through the ages and throughout the world, society recognizes marriage, promotes and protects it with law, and grants it privileges so that its contribution to society is enhanced, encouraged, and secured.

Marriage is unique among all forms of human relationships in many ways. It is a relationship between a man and a woman. It is characterized by stability, fidelity and permanence. It is a fertile relationship open to bearing and rearing children. It has a vital role in our society.

Marriage is a unique way that a man and woman unite with each other, and no other relationship is like it. There can be no doubt that our American culture has increasingly recognized and legally protected the fact that men and women are equal as persons. But it is also true the husband recognizes that his being a man is not just physical and biological, but who he is as a person. The wife recognizes that being a woman is not merely a description of her body or her biology, but of who she really is. And husband and wife realize that in marriage, they are made for each other in a unique way and give and receive a gift to and from each other. Only the union of man and woman can be complementary in this way.

In marriage, husband and wife give themselves to each other in mutual and reciprocal support, as male and female they complement each other as only man and woman can. Their marriage, furthermore, is by its very nature a stable, fertile and faithful union which seeks to bear children by marital acts exchanged exclusively with one another, and to raise the children which result with the love of father and mother. Only the union of man and woman can be fertile in this way.

The health of marriages and families is necessary for our survival as a society. It is the ideal we hope and pray for, that men and women will choose to make a marital commitment of life and love, that they live out this commitment faithfully to one another as husband and wife, and that it will be blessed with offspring. While not always the case—there are many parents admirably raising children alone— It is the ideal we must protect by our laws, the family where a man and a woman live as husband and wife and are blessed to become fathers and mothers of children.

Society does not stand idly by waiting passively for this to happen. It needs strong marriages and families. Nothing else can do the job. Marriage and family life are far too important to our society now and to future generations. To help this happen we need strong laws which preserve and protect marriage, laws which do not equate the marriage of men and women with any other relationship. We cannot pretend that

it doesn't matter to our society if we call relationships that lack a husband and a wife a marriage. We cannot pretend that our society will not be harmed if we do not affirm marriage between men and women as foundational. We cannot pretend that it doesn't matter whether children have both a mother and a father.

Laws exist to protect the values we hold, and marriage and family are among the most precious values of all. Marriage matters to us all. No other union is worthy of the name, nor the protection that we give to the marriage of one man and one woman.

Despite the claims of those in favor of making same-sex marriage a reality in Maryland—which would become only the sixth state in the country to do so—our belief that marriage should be reserved only for a man and woman is not bred out of prejudice. Just as our position on marriage is consistent with our social justice teaching and commitment to building up families and their communities, the Catholic Church is also consistent in teaching that every person deserves to be treated with justice, compassion, and respect. Unjust discrimination against any person is always wrong. The promotion of “traditional” marriage is not “unjust discrimination”; rather, it simply recognizes the time-tested and unalterable meaning of marriage. The suggestion that this definition amounts to “discrimination” is grossly false and represents an affront to countless citizens in Maryland, Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

It is deeply regrettable to witness those who profess to be Catholic or members of other faith communities promote this legislation in such fundamental opposition to the tenets of their religious beliefs. It is also unconscionable that leaders are pressuring members of the House of Delegates to move this bill through without sufficient time for proper deliberation or further amendment. Despite claims to the contrary, it is apparent that members of the legislature are not being granted the genuine freedom to vote their conscience on an issue of such deep moral

significance. The haste with which this issue has been addressed has, in fact, led many to believe that state leaders are hoping to prevent people of faith throughout Maryland from further mobilizing their communities in time to communicate with their legislators, and to have an impact on the outcome of their vote.

I urge you not to be silenced, and to continue to stand up for marriage by contacting your legislators while there is still time to make your voice heard.

Contact your legislators immediately by visiting the website of the Maryland Catholic Conference at www.mdathcon.org.