



The Call to Wed: *Why Catholics Should Celebrate Same Sex Marriage*

Introduction

The contemporary debate about same sex marriage has created a wonderful opportunity for all Christians – whether gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered or straight – to think about why we celebrate marriage. Only when we are clear about what it is that Christian couples do when they marry can we address the question of whether the church should continue to bless only heterosexual partnerships. Ultimately all decisions about the form(s) marriage should take hinge decisively on foundational judgments about the purpose(s) of marriage. For Christians, such normative claims about the purpose(s) of marriage are deeply embedded in our faith convictions about God’s designs for and work in the world. So at bottom our question is really quite clear: from a Christian theological perspective, what is marriage for?

I begin this inquiry by examining what Christians believe life in this world is really like. A review of the Christian outlook on human embodiment in general, and sexuality in particular, helps set the stage for understanding what is it that God is doing in the world. As God sanctifies what sin has rendered ambiguous, the faithful join in the work of transforming the world. The moral life from a Christian point of view amounts to sanctifying all our broken relationships by living in loving communion with each other and the earth with God’s gracious help. The model for these friendships is found in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Just like Christ, everyone is called to live chastely. Spouses sanctify the sexual dimensions of their relationship by promising to be steadfast and sexually exclusive, and thereby to give their beloved the attention he or she deserves. Such fidelity serves their efforts to learn how to love one another, to serve life, and to embody God’s love for the world. When the church’s long-standing emphasis on the significance of procreativity to marriage is critically analyzed, it becomes clear that both the church and society should encourage all those so called – whether queer or straight – to wed.

Setting the Stage

It is important to place our inquiry into the purposes of marriage in the context of its roots among Christian convictions about life overall. Basically, Christians believe that God is drawing all creation away from sin and death and toward the fullness of life. That is what God is doing in the world. Jesus put it this way: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). Christians believe that in Christ God inaugurated a “new creation,” wherein people are invited to enjoy a loving communion with God, with each other, and indeed, with all that is. The faithful are called to embody God’s sanctifying activity in the world by working here and now to transform their relationships with other people and the earth. The realities of sin and grace make the human existential experience of embodiment and sexuality ambiguous. Thus, the Christian tradition is ambivalent about the body in general and sexual desire in particular.

DignityUSA is the nation's foremost organization of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Catholics, their families, friends and supporters. Founded in 1969, it is an independent nonprofit organization with members and chapters across the country

The Ambiguity of the Body

Christians expect everything – including human bodies – to be transformed in the life of the world to come. For this reason, Christians are far from indifferent to bodily matters. Faithfulness includes a call to offer one’s body “as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God” (Romans 12:1). Our bodily life tangibly symbolizes a whole-hearted, passionate response to God’s work in the world. Christians believe that we should live here and now in anticipation of this new life and our resurrected destiny. It is precisely into such relationships with God and each other that Christians are baptized. This is Jesus’ prayer for us: that we “may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us” (John 17:20). In our life together here and now, we are called to enter into, partake of, and sacramentally embody this loving communion.

Nevertheless, much of ordinary daily life makes it all too clear that this new life is “not yet” fully realized. This is one reason why the church sends mixed messages about the body. Sometimes, the church celebrates human embodiment as sacramental, that is, as a good and gracious blessing, enabling God’s gracious presence to be made tangibly manifest in the world. At other times, church teachings treat the body with suspicion, even loathing.

This ambivalence about the body stems in part from the ambiguity of human embodiment itself. We are connected to each other and to the world through our bodies. Yet, the very body that enables us to make these connections is simultaneously a major source of desires that don’t respect the self or other, and that render us vulnerable to being violated. Diseases and death dramatize what is always true of the body: it can be at the root of our disconnection from each other and the world. A source of frailty and frustration, the body (no more or less than the mind) is also a locus of human fault. Broken visceral emotions – like cowardice, rage, addictive cravings of all kinds and despair – can reverberate through the body, inclining us toward vicious choices. In the ambiguity of the body we all – queer and straight alike – encounter not only finitude but also the mysteries of evil and death. This is the human condition; it is our common ground.

The ambiguity of the body raises hard questions about the goodness of embodied life and even about the goodness of God. At the time of Christianity’s origins, dualistic forms of thought, disguised as “faithful” answers to these difficult questions, invaded church doctrines and contaminated many teachings about sexuality and marriage. Regrettably, many of these ideas became “traditional.” Happily, however, other voices in the Christian tradition continued to recognize the body as essential to human identity and a graceful source of joy and delight. They challenged the claim that salvation consisted in rescue from the body and this world. They proclaimed instead that in Christ we find not only salvation from sin and death, but also the promise of the resurrection of the body. While it is hard to overestimate the devastating effects of dualistic influences on Christian anthropology, it is important to remember that the church has condemned as heretical claims that the body *per se* is evil. Christianity has consistently proclaimed the goodness of creation and the resurrection of the body.

The Ambiguity of Sexuality

Christians believe that God is present in and active throughout the world, and that we can experience God through our fleshy connections to one another and the earth. The incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth revealed that God is embracing our finite, material world in general and humanity in particular. At least indirectly through its sacramental traditions, Catholics have been clear that people encounter God through, not in spite of, human sensuality. Indeed, we can encounter God in all that is bodily, including our sexuality. However, as with the body in general, the church sends mixed messages about human sexual desire.

The Ambiguity of Sexuality (*continued*)

On the one hand, Christians recognize that it is precisely our sexual desires that gracefully incline us toward forming passionate, intimate attachments. They draw us into one another's arms. Through desire's grace, we can literally taste the communion that we were made for and know ourselves to be significant and wanted. We can see ourselves as lover and as beloved, an occasion of joy and delight for another and ourselves. For this reason, Christianity has affirmed that passion for sensual pleasure and erotic intimacy is God's good handiwork. Since it is by God's design that people so love, many in the contemporary church affirm that expressions of human sexual desire – the ache of loneliness, the attraction of desire, the heat of arousal and the joy of genital pleasure – are good and gracious gifts from God. For this reason too, Christians have long associated sexuality with their overarching moral vocation to embrace one another and befriend the earth.

On the other hand, Christians recognize that sexual desire, like all that is human, is disordered by sin. Sexual passion can fuel lustful, as well as loving, relationships. Sexual contact is always boundary blurring, but when such contact is disordered by sin, it is boundary violating as well. Sexual passions sometimes seduce instead of serve people, fueling relationships that are abusive and destructive of human dignity. There are some sexual relationships wherein people only take or only give, rather than share, pleasure. Desire can pull and bind people into relationships that are marked by compulsion, possession, domination and/or inauthenticity.

The Christian ambivalence about sexuality is rooted in part in the ambiguity of sexual desire itself. Human sexual desire is ambiguous because the natural, relational structure of our sexuality has been broken by sin and it is threatened by the specter of death. Our yearning for companionship is fueled by sexual desire. It inclines people toward passionate attachments and empowers the maintenance of such bonds. It heats up our life together. It is by the power of the erotic that we graciously give, gratefully receive and share with another, body and soul. Couples can become so connected that their partners' concerns, interests and agendas – even their colds, giggles and hot flashes—can become their own. Lovers can become “one flesh.”

However, this is not all that is true about our experiences of desire. The same passions that make us available to one another in the flesh leave us vulnerable and mean as well. Though evil is in the end mysterious, it is important to understand what we can about the ambiguity of the human condition. Human sexual desire is inherently relational. When we desire others, we also want to be wanted in return, and not just physically. Deep down we all want to be really known and found attractive, not only physically but also as a person, in our entirety. Thus, by ourselves we are not able to satisfy fully our heart's desires.

Because of their inherently relational design, our sexual passions pose real threats for us. They incline us toward intimacies wherein we risk not only being abused but also becoming abusers. Sometimes both the realities and threats of rejection, neglect, abandonment and degradation cause us to harden our hearts against God's call to sanctify our connections with each other. At other times we are seduced by a perverse power that tempts us to manipulate, even reject, those who risk physical and emotional nakedness before us. Our experience of sexual desire can be corrupted, both by the shame we feel when we are rejected and by temptations to neglect, ignore or otherwise humiliate those who are vulnerable to us. This is why we gravitate toward and construct asymmetrical relationships in order to protect ourselves.

Again, this is our common human condition. Whether queer or straight, our sexual desires are potentially not only good and gracious but also hurtful and promiscuous, even abusive and violent.

Sanctifying our Life Together: The Call to Embodied Friendship

God is actively sanctifying all of creation. So Christians believe that God's people are called to join in and work toward the transformation of all their relationships. Jesus suggested that friendship is an important paradigm for our calling to embrace one another. Jesus said: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:12-13). Such friendships certainly make of life a delightful dance, but they are not without their demands. Such affections tie us to each other's agendas and concerns. While the need for total physical self-sacrifice may be comparatively rare, in fact genuine friends lay down their lives for one another every day. Quite literally, friends spend their lives – their time, energy, and resources – with and on behalf of one another.

Christians believe the joy we share here and now with our friends is in fact but a glimpse of our resurrection destiny. God's love is the wellspring for this new life. Jesus said: "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in me" (John 15:9). Jesus expressed our basic calling as Christians this way: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13: 34-35). The Christian vocation is to love God and, in union with God, to befriend each other and the earth. Christians are to live together in just, loving, merciful interpersonal communion, making our lives bodily gifts for the sake of the world. Within the broad parameters of this Christian understanding of the moral life, it makes sense to talk about sanctifying the sexual dimensions of our friendships.

Sexual Virtue

The church rightly commends sexual virtue (traditionally known as chastity) to all, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, whether married or celibate. Roman Catholics have for centuries seen marriage as one of three lifestyles wherein Christians might express their discipleship to Christ. Like the decision either to remain single (whether lay or ordained) or the decision to enter into communal life as a vowed religious, **the choice to marry is seen by Christians as but one way of embodying the general Christian call to loving friendship.** Though they differ dramatically from each other, each of these three domestic arrangements is recognized by the church as a way to live out the general call to sanctify our relationships.

Despite its connotations to the contrary, such sexual virtue (a.k.a. chastity) is not exclusively, or even primarily, about sexual suppression or the denial of desire. Rather, it is about the cultivation of our sexual passion. Of course, whether we are married or not, sometimes living chastely requires that a person practice sexual restraint. But chastity inclines us to do far more. It forms our sexual desires so that they promote human flourishing.

Sexual Authenticity

In the first place, chastity invites us to integrate our "thoughts, feelings and actions in the area of human sexuality in a way that values and respects one's own dignity and that of others" as children of God.¹² Whether married, vowed or single, whether queer or straight, sexual virtue requires that we be authentic. This is as much a matter of personal integrity, as it is of interpersonal honesty.

¹² U.S. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Always Our Children*.

Marriage Can Serve Love

Obviously in other respects the way we live chastely differs, depending upon whether we have been called to wed or not. Marriage is one way of homemaking through which God calls us to lay down our lives for one another. Like the paths associated with communal and single ways of life, the basic paradigm for marriage is friendship. **But Christian marriage is distinguished from other friendships by spousal promises to be steadfast and sexually exclusive.** Such faithful love is a tremendously powerful expression of God's love here and now, and it gives us a taste of the interpersonal communion we will enjoy in the life of the world to come.

The church blesses marriage because such fidelity can serve love. Given the stunning rates of divorce and family violence, it is clear that such promises do not guarantee that our marriages will be loving or even that they will last. And obviously, genuine love can exist apart from such promises. So, why does the church teach that such commitments serve sexual love? Why should Christians enter into such intense covenants?

Sexual desire draws us toward one another, and when we are open to it, it inclines us to know **all** about the beloved. We want them emotionally and intellectually as well as physically. In turn, we want to be wanted completely. We want to be touched in the same way. We want the full and undivided attention of our lover. Genuinely great sex is in this sense integrative. It sparks in us a wild desire to throw our whole selves into the other's arms with abandon. Passion's flame may be fleeting, but it heats us from head to toe.

The experience of desiring and being desired physically fires our desire to know and be known emotionally and intellectually as well. Ideally, our heart, mind and body will speak the same language; they will be in sync. To the degree that they lack this integrity, our relationships may be disingenuous. When we keep distant from one another, our hearts can harden. This is one, often unrecognized, consequence of keeping sexual encounters anonymous or "purely" recreational.

From a theological point of view, the whole-hearted nature of passion is what makes it graceful. However, it is also the root of our sexual vulnerability and viciousness as well. The relational structure of sexual desire sets us up for those very real threats of rejection, neglect and abandonment. Far from being deluded romantics, Christians are very realistic about the way sexual desire wanders and wanes. Christians are very hard-nosed about the human capacity to betray the flames that desire sparks. Precisely because desire wanders and wanes, the contemporary church encourages those who feel they are "in love" to marry each other, to promise to remain steadfast and exclusive. The church encourages such promises in order to provide couples with some protection in the midst of what is very risky business.

In our culture weddings are often celebrations of how much couples already love each other. When Christians wed, we celebrate something else as well. We celebrate the willingness of the couple to promise to learn how to love each other over the course of their life together. Even if we hope we have found our "soul-mate," we promise to be/come "the one" for each other.

In and through such a steadfast partnership, Christians believe we can embody for each other and the world the enduring character of God's love for all that is. Next to their relationship to God, spouses promise to give each other "second" place in their lives. Such affective priority, signed by the promise of sexual exclusivity, is a largely practical rule necessitated by human finitude. The central problem with adultery, so-called "open" marriages and other forms of polygamy is that they short-change everyone. Even when we are monogamous, we are not able to give our spouses the full and complete attention they deserve as God's beloved children. Christian couples enter into such a covenant in the hope that such promise making will help them become better lovers. This is true for straight and same sex couples alike.

Marriage Serves Life

Marriage is most assuredly about love. Intimate companionship is a central purpose for which our desire to become “one flesh” was created. Love matches are both personally gratifying and individually edifying. In a good marriage we can be schooled in a variety of virtues: justice, kindness, courtesy, generosity, self-care, dutifulness, mercy, respect and loyalty. Couples help each other cope with life’s ups and downs. Spouses often help each other endure unemployment, accept loss, survive accidents or life threatening illnesses, live with a chronic disease, negotiate life with disabilities or growing diminishment, age gracefully, enjoy retirement, and (in the case of only one spouse) die well. Recently, scientific studies have confirmed what the traditional has long taught: marriage is good for most adults most of the time. It is on average a healthier, happier, safer way of life than being single.

But these interpersonal benefits are not the only reasons why civil society promotes and the church blesses marriage. Marriage is not simply a matter of mutual assistance. For this reason questions about the form(s) marriage should take are not purely private; marriage is both a personal vocation and a social concern. **Marriage also serves the common good in a variety of ways.**

First, the mutual assistance that spouses offer one another in times of trouble contributes to the commonweal. It serves the common good as well as each other. Such companionship helps to stabilize lives which otherwise might be shattered by these crises. The lifeline that is marriage strengthens the community as a whole. This is true for all committed couples, whether same sex or straight.

Second, because they have covenanted to take on one another’s “business,” spouses contribute as couples to society through their support of one another’s work and volunteer commitments. Consider the examples of the man who works while his partner finishes school, or the woman who watches their children while her partner volunteers at a Catholic Worker house. Again, this is true for all committed couples, queer and straight alike.

Third, marriage also weaves a couple into a network that extends beyond the biological ties established by their own extended families of origin. Humans are unique among animal species in their construction of that class of kin known as “in-laws.” Spouses often provide the lion’s share of the daily care that their parents-in-law need in their final years. There is nothing exclusively heterosexual about the generosity to “in-laws” that springs from committed love. One gay man I know spent his entire annual vacation helping the elderly parents of his partner of nearly thirty years to sell their house and dispose meaningfully of most of their belongings before moving into an assisted living facility. A lesbian friend co-signed the loan for the retirement home in which her partner’s parents live.

Marriage can bind spouses to “in-laws” of all sorts: to their partner’s grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, siblings, cousins, nieces, nephews, etc. These ties are often sustained beyond the marriage itself. Consider what one widowed daughter-in-law said to her mother-in-law long ago. “Do not ask me to abandon or forsake you! For wherever you go, I will go, wherever you lodge I will lodge, your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Wherever you die, I will die, and there be buried” (Ruth 1:16-17a). So powerful are such alliances that royal marriages have been known to tie the welfare of whole countries together, so that their respective rulers saw the maintenance of peace between their nations to be in their own best interest.

Admittedly few marriages today carry such political import. Nevertheless, it is important to understand that society extends to those who marry many legal and economic benefits precisely because marriage serves not only the individual spouses involved but also the community as a whole.¹³

¹³ To some extent the civil privileging of marriage is fair. When spouses marry, they take on many responsibilities and burdens not routinely carried by those who remain *de jure* single. For example, married couples are responsible for each other’s debts and, as divorce law makes clear, in some cases even for the their divorced partner’s ongoing economic welfare. Though spouses cannot be

Marriage Serves Life (*continued*)

Fourth, though there are many notable exceptions, scientific studies suggest that on average married parents are better able to create a stable environment for the nurture of children. Married parents can “spell” each other when the demands of childrearing become overwhelming and bring different, mutually enriching skills to the process. The nurture of children – whether through foster care, adoption or reproduction – is one very important way married couples can contribute to the well-being of society. It is a wondrous privilege to co-operate in this way with God in the transmission of new life.

But creating a stable environment for the nurture and raising children is not the only way that marriage strengthens society. The promise to welcome children that is part of the traditional Catholic wedding has never been understood to require that the couple have and/or raise children. This is not the only or even an essential reason for celebrating marriage. The church’s blessing has never been conditional upon the couple’s fertility or willingness to adopt because marriage helps to stabilize society and serves life in a host of other ways. Pair-bonding itself and the extension of kinship ties to “in-laws” are two other ways fidelity serves life.¹⁴ Marriage serves life by protecting the public health as well. All of this is true of committed partnerships, same sex and straight alike.

Official Roman Catholic Arguments against Same Sex Marriage

From the preceding review of some of the main Christian convictions about marriage, it would seem reasonable to encourage and bless same sex marriages. Indeed, there seem to be many good reasons to include them. Yet, the Roman Catholic Church vehemently condemns efforts to license and/or bless same sex marriage. Why? The Vatican argues that such conjugal forms of same-sex love should not be encouraged because same sex marriages will (1) negatively impact our sexual values, (2) harm the (heterosexual) institution of marriage, and (3) harm children raised in or near such unions. This is true, Rome argues, because same sex unions (4) lack the (heterosexual) gender complementarity requisite for “true” spousal and parental love. Though distinct, these four reasons are closely interrelated.

(1) Will same sex marriage prove corrosive of our sexual values?

When the Vatican predicts that children will suffer harm as a result of the blessing of same sex marriages, in part Rome is arguing that such celebrations will prove morally confusing to them. As the Vatican puts it, such a “scandalous” practice will give young people and others¹⁵ “erroneous ideas about sexuality and marriage that would deprive them of their necessary defenses and contribute to the spread of the phenomenon.”¹⁶ It will “modify the younger generation’s perception and evaluation of forms of behavior.”¹⁷

criminally prosecuted for their partner’s crimes, their (joint) estate can be civilly sued. This is not to say that the current socio-economic and political system that *de facto* ties many basic human rights to marriage is fair. It is unjust that many who are single, widowed or divorced often have no access to food, shelter, health insurance and/or a decent pension. It is vitally important to recognize that if our society continues to make access to such basic human goods a “benefit” linked to marriage, then marriage is not just civilly promoted. It is made “compulsory,” and this is wrong.

¹⁴ The claim here is not that only married couples can serve the commonweal. Obviously, both singles and people living in community can contribute greatly to society. Rather, the point is to identify a few of the characteristic, though not unique, ways that marriage serves the common good.

¹⁵ It is not clearly precisely who these others are, though it is implied that their sense of sexual identity may be “unstable” from the Vatican perspective. Thus, it is reasonable to presume Rome is referring here to those who are bisexual and/or transgendered.

¹⁶ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons,” July, 31, 2003: 5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

(1) Will same sex marriage prove corrosive of our sexual values? (*continued*)

Certainly the approval of same sex marriage will prove socially transformative. But Rome has begged the very question of whether this change would be good or bad. Far from morally corrosive, it could trigger a needed reform in our ideas about human sexuality and marriage. Consider some good that might come from such a policy change. Gay and lesbian adolescents might no longer be pressured to deny their attractions to persons of the same sex, or to closet their homosexuality in heterosexual marriages. This pattern of denial and closeting leads to a loss of personal integrity and often leaves their companionable, straight partner short-changed. When same sex marriage is celebrated by the church, people will not only find it safer to pursue a homosexual love interest, but will be encouraged to live with integrity and to form sexual bonds that are mutually enriching, exclusive and steadfast. The approval of just, loving and faithful gay and lesbian marriages implies far more than the mere toleration or decriminalization of such relationships. It will prove socially transformative. **The prospect of such developments can be judged harmful only if one takes it for granted that homosexuality *per se* is disordered, and/or that heterosexuality alone is normative. These assumptions beg the question.**

(2) Will same sex marriage prove harmful to heterosexual marriage?

The Vatican predicted in 2003 that the celebration of same sex love will “cause a devaluation of the institution of marriage”¹⁸ because “such unions are not able to contribute in a proper way to the procreation and survival of the human race.”¹⁹ And what is this “proper” way? The Vatican asserts that only sexual relationships “which express and promote the mutual assistance of the sexes in marriage and are open to the transmission of new life”²⁰ are humanizing. Thus, they alone are worthy of social promotion. Again, this is not self-evidently true. **There are many ways that same sex might serve life.**

(3) Will same sex marriage prove harmful to children?

As many as one out of four same sex couples are already raising children. Yet, according to Rome they are not contributing to the common good, at least not “properly.” According to the Vatican “the absence of sexual complementarity in these unions creates an obstacle in the normal development of children” and such an environment “is not conducive to their full human development.”²¹ Indeed, the Vatican concludes: “allowing children to be adopted by persons living in such unions would actually mean doing violence to these children.”²²

Were this true, this would indeed be a grave cause for concern. However, despite the Vatican’s assertion that experience has proven these claims, they are far from self-evident. We know that the children of single parents and in orphanages can be shown statistically to be “at risk.” But there is no evidence to support the church’s claim that the millions children living today in households headed by same sex couples face significant developmental obstacles. Indeed, a small but growing number of studies gives evidence to the contrary.²³

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

²² *Ibid.*, 7.

²³ See Bridget Fitzgerald, “Children of Lesbian and Gay Parents: A Review of the Literature,” *Marriage and Family Review* 29 (1999) 57-75. Note as well that the Vatican’s hypothesis about the welfare of these children is reasonable only if heterosexual parenting alone is presumed normative for childrearing. Historically and cross-culturally, childrearing has taken many forms, involving as care givers: grandparents and other members of extended families, wet nurses, nannies, boarding schools etc. In its wisdom the church has never pronounced as normative just one way of raising children.

(4) Are same sex couples not genuinely complementary?

Most couples – whether same sex or not – experience their relationship as sexually, intellectually, emotionally and parentally enhancing.²⁴ That is why they are drawn to and in partnership with each other. **It is clear however that the Vatican attributes the potential for spousal and parental enrichment exclusively to heterosexual relationships. Why? They alone can be reproductive fruitful.**²⁵ In fact, all four of these lines of argument rest decisively on the claim that sexual activity within marriage must always be open to the possibility of procreation. At base, the official case against same sex marriage rests decisively on the importance given to procreancy in the church's sexual ethic. Before analyzing this emphasis on procreancy, it is important to understand just how deep its roots are in our tradition.

Historical Background

As a result of both the ambiguity of sexual desire and the prevalence of dualistic forms of thought at the time of its origins, even moderate Christian theologians in the early church viewed sexual desire as profane, if not suspect. For Augustine, everything visceral was thought to exist only as a consequence of original sin. No distinction was made between sexual desire and lust. Jesus was perceived as like us in all things, "save sin," which meant (to many in the early church) "save sex." It was thought that in the new creation – in the heavenly city – there would be no sex. Virginity and celibacy, even sexual continence in marriage, were prized. All sexual activity, even in marriage, was thought to be defiling and in need of justification.

Historically, sexual activity in marriage was viewed at best as morally permissible. It was permitted largely because, as St. Paul put it, "it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion" (1 Cor. 7: 9b). Sex in marriage was thought to serve as a remedy for lust; it was thought at least to reduce, if not prevent altogether, the desire to fornicate and/or commit adultery. Even so, sex in marriage was taught to be permissible, if and only if it was also intentionally (if not factually) procreative. Given ancient understandings of reproductive biology, procreation was assumed to be the natural end of **all** sexual activity.

In ancient times theologians engaged in some very interesting arguments about why, if at all, having and raising children in Christian homes was valuable. While children are clearly welcomed and blessed, there is no longer a mandate to procreate in the new covenant established with Jesus. Indeed, there is little talk at all about procreation in the New Testament. John Chrysostom argued that raising children in Christian homes would prepare them better to bear witness to the fact that life is not all about the acquisition of power and wealth. They would be prepared to live simply and to share their resources with those in need. Many taught that procreation was valuable because a few of these children – by remaining virgins or at least practicing celibacy – might serve the mission of the church by offering (what was from their perspective) a perfect witness to the (asexual) life of the world to come.

²⁴ It is quite possible to affirm that humans are social by nature and that many human partnerships are mutually enriching without interpreting such realities through schemas that deny personal dignity by describing individuals as partial or not whole apart from such partnerships. Yet this is precisely what the notion of complementarity denotes.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

Historical Background (*continued*)

For our purposes what is important to understand is that the church taught for nearly nineteen hundred years that sexual activity, even in marriage, was justified **if and only if** it was intentionally procreative. Consequently, all contraceptive activity, including what we call today natural family planning, was forbidden as unnatural, as were intentionally childfree marriages, no matter how serious the motive. Only coitus (vaginal-penile intercourse) was permitted to spouses. Digital, oral and anal sexual activities, as well as masturbation, were all condemned as unnatural, because they could not attain the procreative purpose that legitimated all experiences of sexual desire. All these sexual activities were forbidden to married (as well as vowed or single), presumably heterosexual people. (NB: Today church teachings imply such activities are permitted to spouses, but only if they are not engaged in to the point of ejaculation and instead serve as foreplay to coitus.)

Other purposes – such as the desire to make and express love by sharing pleasure – were not really understood to justify sexual activity until modern times. Even then, it was argued that love-making justified sexual activity only so long as the couple also intended their sexual activity to be baby-making. It was not until the middle of the twentieth century that the church taught that couples, for serious reasons, might intentionally seek to avoid procreation through sexual abstinence.

During the Second Vatican Council the church officially recognized that sexual activity could be ennobling, that it shared in divine love, and that it could foster self-giving and enrich spouses with joy. Since Vatican II, various teachings from Rome have declared the procreative and unitive ends of sexuality to be inseparable. The Catholic Church today teaches that openness to life is inseparable from openness to love because sex should be love-making as well as baby-making.

According to Rome, homogenital activity is wrong because it cannot be reproductive. So, no matter how just, merciful, faithful or life-serving same sex relationship might be, it should not be blessed by the church or licensed by society because it is not open to the possibility of procreativity. From Rome's point of view, such relationships are not genuinely loving.

From the Vatican's perspective, the issue that disqualifies just, faithful and loving same sex couples from full communion is their genital activity. This judgment is not without analogy in church teaching. For example, the Church teaches something similar about heterosexual Catholics who civilly remarry following divorce without having their previous marriage annulled. From the Vatican's point of view, such couples are committing adultery; despite civil recognition to the contrary, they **cannot really** be married to each other. Similarly, committed same sex couples **cannot really** marry each other. Or again, the Church also teaches that heterosexual couples that practice "artificial" forms of contraception (rather than periodic abstinence) in order to avoid reproduction are engaged in "unnatural" genital activity. Similarly, from the Church's perspective committed same sex couples are engaged in unnatural genital activity. In all these cases the couple's "love-making" is judged immoral. The main difference is that the activities of heterosexual couples are presumed to be less scandalous and corrupting because few are likely to know of their contraceptive practices or previous marriages.

Wrestling with Church Teaching

Faithful Catholics are required to know, understand, and respectfully assess authoritative church teachings. Fidelity requires that we take our tradition seriously. This means we are obligated to study it, search for moral wisdom within it, and contribute creatively to its ongoing development. Ultimately for Catholics, the question at stake in the contemporary debate about same sex marriage is whether the official emphasis on procreativity with its concomitant emphasis on heterosexual complementarity makes good sense. Is this teaching (1) consistent, (2) comprehensive and (3) generative? To these questions we now turn.

(1) Consistent?

This traditional emphasis on procreativity is **not consistently upheld**. Each and every coital act of pregnant and post-menopausal married women is not open to procreativity. Indeed, no such acts are, at least not any more than non-coital activities. Yet, the church no longer teaches that these sexual activities are unnatural. Many Catholic heterosexual spouses engage with each other in digital, oral and/or anal sexual activity to the point of ejaculation, and they experience such activity as enhancing of their marital life.

(2) Comprehensive?

This emphasis on procreativity is **not comprehensive**. It does not take adequate account (a) of women's sexual physiology, (b) of heterosexual experience, (c) of the many ways couples can contribute to the common good, (d) of homosexual experience, or (e) of the value of sexual pleasure. Let us explore these criticisms in more detail.

In men's experience orgasm is usually linked to ejaculation. Much of the time in male physiology sexual and reproductive activities are closely tied together. However, the processes of ovulation, fertilization and implantation are not linked to female orgasm. Male sexual physiology alone should not define what is normative for human sexuality. Pregnancy makes it clear that there can be a dramatic link between coital activity and reproduction in women's experience. This connection is, however, periodic at most and lasts only for a season of a woman's life. Overall, even from a purely physiological perspective, the link between human sexual desire and reproductive activity is naturally quite diverse and serendipitous.

The conventional emphasis on procreativity does not take adequate account of the fact that most heterosexual spouses find there is no necessary or exclusive connection between their being open to the possibility of procreation and their being fully self-giving in their partnership. Furthermore, many experience conventions about gender differences and roles as not foundational, or even significant, to their experience of either spousal or childrearing compatibility.

As noted earlier, this conventional emphasis on procreativity does not take adequate account of the many and various ways couples, queer and straight alike, can serve the good of one another, their extended families and friends and the common good. They offer each other mutual assistance and care for their elders as well as other kin and friends. They nurture children through reproduction, adoption and foster care programs.

Likewise, this emphasis on procreativity does not do justice to the many gay and lesbian couples. Studies show that they are just as emotionally intimate as their straight counterparts. In fact, some studies suggest that same sex couples are less deceitful overall with one another than many straight couples. Given the lack of religious and civil support for the practice of fidelity among same sex couples, they are remarkably faithful.

This conventional emphasis does not take adequate account of either the intrinsic value of sexual pleasure or of its instrumental value, that is, of its ability to engender love and further pair-bonding.

Generative?

While children are certainly one of life's great blessings, the church's overemphasis on procreativity **generates** much that is not good. For example, when followed to its logical conclusion, only total, lifelong sexual abstinence can be commended to all homosexual people, whether they have the gift of celibacy or not. Sadly, the prohibition of just, loving and faithful same-sex relationships sometimes leads either to promiscuity or to emotional isolation. Unrealistic counsel is unwise counsel. Such a teaching is dangerous in other ways as well. When procreativity trumps all other concerns, insight into and teachings about the harms done in abusive sexual relationships – whether queer or straight—are obscured.

Teachings that overemphasize procreativity also encourage closeting. Yet, because sexuality is so central to us, secrecy about one's sexual identity inhibits the development of a sense of self-worth. Such silence makes it practically impossible to live chastely. It can lead to despair about ever being truly known and beloved. Silence encourages dishonesty, if not deception, with oneself and with others. It values the appearance of heterosexuality over the truth of human sexual diversity. Instead of fostering a community of friends, closets isolate individuals and destroy friendships. Such teachings may even sanction, albeit indirectly, "hate crimes."

Conclusion

While Christians have always commended the welcoming and nurture of children, during the twentieth century the Roman Catholic Church recognized that married couples might have very good reasons for intentionally avoiding procreation, maybe for their whole marriage. Included among these good reasons are a concern to avoid the transmission of serious genetic defects and the like and also a concern about the possible impact of new life on the rest of life. The Church already prescribes responsible family planning. Heterosexual spouses seeking to avoid pregnancy are encouraged, and schooled in how, to take sexual advantage of natural periods of infertility.

Many Christians today believe that God's own design for human sexuality is pluriform rather than uniformly heterosexual. In such sexual diversity, our species has the natural potential for a healthy variation in the ways sexuality might be socially constructed. Through its sexual diversity, God has graciously provided the human species with a variety of ways to form pair-bonds and optimal reproductive and parental flexibility. Far from having a deleterious effect on the common good, all of life – indeed the survival of many species, including the human species – will be served when the church recognizes God's diverse design for human sexuality as natural. Then procreativity will take its rightful place as one of several possible ways conjugal love serves life, and both queer and straight marriage will be celebrated.

About the Author

Patricia Beattie Jung earned her M.A. and Ph.D. in Religion from Vanderbilt University. Dr. Jung teaches theology at Loyola/Chicago, specializing in sexual ethics and particularly the moral evaluation of pleasure and sexual diversity. She co-authored with the Rev. Ralph F. Smith *Heterosexism: An Ethical Challenge*, with Joseph Andrew Coray edited *Sexual Diversity and Catholicism* and with Mary Hunt and Radhika Balakrishnan co-edited *Good Sex: Feminist Perspectives from the World's Religions*. She and her husband, the Rev. Shannon Jung (PCUSA) celebrated their thirtieth wedding anniversary this year. They have three sons and one daughter-in-law.

About DignityUSA's Vision

DignityUSA envisions and works for a time when gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Catholics are affirmed and experience dignity through the integration of their spirituality with their sexuality and, as beloved persons of God, participate fully in all aspects of life within the Church and Society.



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