

EDITOR'S NOTE

In the United States in recent months, advocates for gay rights and particularly for gay marriage have noted significant gains in various state legislatures. The topic, though, is clearly not without controversy, and serious, thoughtful people can have very different perspectives on these issues.

Conversations here presents two theologians who represent different points of view. Dr. Ennio P. Mastroianni of Georgetown University examines creation accounts in Scripture, particularly in light of Benedict XVI and canonical exegesis and of the irreducible male-female distinction in the human person. Dr. Patrick Hornbeck of Fordham University examines Church teaching on homosexuality in light of questions of justice rather than act-based morality. Both authors know and respect official teaching, even as they draw different conclusions.

The Issue of Same-sex Marriage

Defending the Tradition

By **Ennio Mastroianni**

I have been experiencing pressure to form a judgment about the issue of same-sex marriage. Residing in Maryland and working in the District of Columbia where same-sex marriage is legal, I find myself in a conflicted situation. Many of my neighbors, colleagues, and students are supportive of marriage between only a man and a woman while many others are supportive of same-sex marriage. Listening to people who are dear to me makes it hard to form a solid position on an issue. Many of my loved ones and respected colleagues can be heard to say: "Let the gays and lesbians marry. This issue is important to them and does it really make a difference if we pass laws to recognize their unions as marriage?" Here is a brief account about how I have come to decide about the issue of same-sex marriage.

I base my conviction that marriage is a lifelong partnership between only a man and a woman on two key sources, revelation and natural law. Both sources uphold that real marriage requires three essential dimensions: sexual difference, love, and fruitfulness (openness to procreation). Without all three dimensions, there is no

real marriage. It is the dimension of sexual difference, found in revelation and natural law, which emerged as the critical criterion in my decision-making.

While reading Pope Benedict XVI on the topic of finding an adequate biblical method for encountering Scripture as a living word to guide our living, I experienced insight about revelation. Because the historical critical method leaves the biblical word in the past, Benedict claims that it is in and of itself an inadequate tool for believers. To overcome this weakness, Benedict demonstrates how to complement the historical-critical method by reading individual biblical texts as a member of the Christian Community. Believers are to approach texts in the context of the unity of the bible and tradition with Jesus Christ serving as the interpretive key for unfolding the meaning of the text for our living.

Benedict's own words are helpful to

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apprehend this valuable method to break open the Word of God:

Older texts are reappropriated, reinterpreted, and read with new eyes in new contexts. They become scripture by being read anew; evolving in continuity with their original sense, tacitly corrected and given added depth and breadth of meaning. This is a process in which the word gradually unfolds its inner potentialities, already somehow present like seeds, but needing the challenge of new situations, new experiences, and new sufferings, in order to open up. (*Jesus of Nazareth, Book One, Forward*)

Benedict's inspiration has roots in the Second Vatican Council. Citing the *Constitution on Divine Revelation* (DV 12), Benedict writes that the reader's aim is to interpret "individual texts within the totality of the one Scripture, which then sheds new light on all the individual texts." He continues that within the unity of Old and New Testaments, it is the person of Jesus Christ that facilitates an encounter of the text as a living word. That is, presupposing an act of faith and the use of historical reason, the Christian "sees Jesus Christ as the key to the whole and learns from him how to understand the Bible as a unity." In short, Benedict echoes the Council by describing the connection between Scripture and Tradition: "For both of them, flowing from the same divine wellspring, in a certain way merge into a unity and tend toward the same end." (DV 9)

The Bible contains many examples of interpreting the Bible as Benedict proposes. One example is in Mt 19 when the Pharisees test Jesus on the topic of divorce. After the Pharisees ask: Is divorce lawful? Jesus responds: "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female...the two shall become one flesh?" Following Benedict, I examined together the two Genesis stories of the origin of persons and Jesus's pronouncement on marriage. Meditating on Jesus' words, I experienced an inner turning of my mind toward the living Word of God, the confluence of scripture and tradition. In short, I affirmed for myself Jesus' insight about marriage as a male-female union.

Why is the method that Benedict proposes important? Without it, I fear, Christians diminish their ability to discern how the Holy Spirit reveals to them the meaning of biblical texts as light for Christian living. Without the Holy Spirit's guidance through Scripture, we Christians may chase undiscerningly every spirit of the age that pulls at our heart strings. Given the perennial unjust treatment of gay men and lesbians, is the implication

that the larger community is obligated to identify the life-long partnerships of same-sex couples as marriage?

The magisterium's unequivocal response is "no," especially in light of the revealed truth in the Creation Stories of Genesis. The magisterium consistently teaches that this scriptural revelation cannot be read anew to allow for same-sex marriage. Although it is true that the understandings of marriage in Catholic tradition have evolved, they have consistently evolved as a male-female union that is open to procreation.

Natural law too makes evident the kind of union that is founded on male-female difference. Namely, human beings are irreducibly male or female, a biological fact necessary for reproduction. Father Earl Muller, S.J., advances this observation by the use of the Aristotelian category of first substances: "In concrete experiencing, bodiliness and sexuality are inseparable; they can be distinguished only by abstraction....There is no humanness apart from sexuality whereas there is humanness apart from any given color, ethnicity, age, social condition, and so forth. Destroying all Chinese or all the elderly does not destroy the human race. Destroying all males or all females very quickly does entail that destruction."

Effectively combining the insights from revelation and natural law, John Paul II affirms that male-female distinctiveness is an indispensable fact of reality upon which human beings are sacramental of the image of God and upon which marriage is built as a male-female communion of persons. Pope John Paul II writes: "Man, whom God created male and female, bears the divine image imprinted on his body 'from the beginning'. Man and woman constitute two different ways of the human 'being a body' in the unity of that image." In summary, "Man exists always and only as a masculine or feminine being. There is not a single man (or woman) who can by himself alone be the whole of man" (Angelo Scola).

In brief, the Creator purposely creates human beings as male persons and female persons. Revelation and natural law establish that male-female unions are ontologically different than same-sex unions, a necessary fact for the perpetuation of the human race. Naming same-sex unions as marriage eclipses real marriage as a male-female union, and consequently, veils revelation and possibly diminishes the heart's attentiveness to the voice of the Triune God mediated through scripture and tradition. The conviction that marriage is between only a man and a woman evolved from the correlation of the insights from Genesis with the natural law insights of the realness of human beings as male persons and female persons. ■