

The Catholic Church and gay marriage



The Catholic Church does not oppose gay marriage. It considers it to be impossible. If it were possible, then we would have to support it since the Church tells that we must oppose all discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. The issue is not gay rights but a wonderful truth of our humanity which is that we are animals: rational animals according to the Medievals, spiritual animals open to sharing the life of God. In the sacraments, the fundamental dramas of our bodily life are blessed and become open to God's grace: birth and death, eating and drinking, sex and illness. St Thomas Aquinas says that grace perfects nature and does not destroy it.

Marriage is founded on the glorious fact of sexual difference and its potential fertility. Without this there would be no life on this planet, no evolution, no human beings, no future. Marriage is a plastic institution and takes all sorts of forms, from the alliance of clans through bride exchange to modern romantic love. We have come to see that it implies the equal love and dignity of man and woman. But everywhere and always it remains founded on the union in difference of male and female. Through ceremonies and sacrament, this is given a deeper meaning which for Christians includes the union of God and humanity in Christ.

This is not to denigrate committed love of people of the same sex. This too should be cherished and supported, which is why church leaders are slowly coming to support same sex civil unions. The God of love can be present in every true love. But "gay marriage" is impossible because it attempts to cut

loose marriage from its grounding in our biological life. If we do that, we deny our humanity. It would be like trying to make a cheese soufflé without the cheese, or wine without grapes.

From the beginning, Christianity has stood up for the beauty and dignity of our bodily life, blessed by our God who became flesh and blood like us. This has always seemed a little scandalous to "spiritual" people, who think that we should escape the messy realities of bodies. And so the Church had to oppose Gnosticism in the second century, Manichaeism in the fourth, Catharism in the thirteenth. These all either had contempt for the body or regarded it as unimportant.

We, too, influenced as we are by Cartesianism, tend to think of ourselves as minds trapped in bodies, ghosts in machines. A friend said to me the other day, "I am a soul, but I have a body." But the Catholic tradition has always insisted on the fundamental unity of the human person. Aquinas famously said "I am not my soul."

Lynne Featherstone, the Equalities Minister, is right to say the Churches do not have an exclusive right to determine who can marry - but nor does the State, because we cannot simply decide by some mental or legal act what it means to be a human being. Our civilisation will flourish only if it recognises the gift of our bodily existence, which includes the amazing creativity of sexual difference, lifted up into love. Giving formal recognition to this through the institution of marriage in no way disparages the blessings brought to us by gay people.

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