

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

July 10, 2010 at 10:50am

Marriage: sacraments and politics

by Mary E. Hunt



Friends gather around Holly Beatty, left, and Jessica Leshnoff March 17 at Dupont Circle in Washington, D.C., as officiant Todd Waymon, right, oversees the ceremony marrying the two legally. (MCT/Baltimore Sun/Christopher T. Assaf)

Viewpoint

Catholics have sacramental understandings of marriage and ordination to which they are entitled. But the institutional church is not entitled to foist those on the rest of the population. On ordination they do not even try. On marriage I suspect they will fail.

Marriage is a many-splendored thing. There are myriad definitions of what is a dynamic and changing phenomenon. It is not hard to recall when women were considered inferior partners in marriage, when marriage between persons of differing racial groups was not allowed, indeed when rape was permitted in marriage. Social institutions change, but the need for community and the imperative of finding loving, just and generous ways of organizing ourselves as a society remain constant. Marriage is one among several ways to do that.

The American Anthropological Association studied marriage. Its 2004 "Statement on Marriage and the Family" reported that "anthropological research supports the conclusion that a vast array of family types, including families built upon same-sex partnerships, can contribute to stable and humane societies."

From a feminist Catholic theological perspective, I consider marriage a way of lifting to public expression the love and commitment of those who choose one another as life partners. There are echoes of Catholic sacramentality in my description. But because marriage takes place in the public forum, my personal definition coheres in a wide context, not simply in a parochial one.

The world's governments respect marriage as a legal contract, and the world's religions, according to their various teachings, hold marriage up as one important, though not the only, way to live in a committed relationship.

Two examples illustrate the difference between legal and religious understandings of marriage. Welton Gaddy, a Baptist minister and president of the Interfaith Alliance, wrote, "In the United States marriage is a legal institution -- sanctioned by government and restricted by government in the number of partners allowed in a marital relationship and the minimum age of those partners." Catholic moral theologian Daniel C. Maguire offers this religious definition: "Marriage can be defined as the unique and special form of committed friendship between sexually attracted people."

The difference between their approaches is telling. Law is not religion, and vice versa. But together law and religion are useful building blocks for a common approach as same-sex marriage gradually becomes legal around the country and good people struggle to find ways to live with it.

The distinction between marriage as a legal contract that two persons of a certain age can enter into and marriage in the range of religious understandings that form part of our multireligious landscape is an important one. Separating the civil and religious aspects of marriage is a necessary first step in this contested arena, a fundamental of religious freedom in a democratic society.

By so doing, states, and eventually the federal government, can embrace same-sex marriage, as some do already, and thus offer equal benefits and responsibilities to their citizens. Religious institutions are free to carry out their own role -- to bless, sanctify, affirm spiritually, or not, those who wish to marry. This is how it is done in many other countries and it works just fine. It is society as a whole and not disparate religious groups that decide who will marry legally. No religious group is coerced against its will; no citizen who wishes to marry is barred from the privileges that marriage confers if she or he meets the state's criteria.

This approach reflects a 21st-century theopolitical awareness of what it means to live in a pluralistic society. Just as among committed Catholics there are a variety of views on marriage, so, too, are there many views among concerned citizens. We handle these matters differently among us as citizens, by making laws. The institutional Catholic church is a major player, funding efforts like Proposition 8 in California and preaching against same-sex marriage from its pulpits.

Catholic hierarchs are welcome to their opinions on the matter. They, too, each get one vote. But a look at another Catholic sacrament shows a model for how I think same-sex marriage ought to be adjudicated in the public forum.

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The parallel to the Catholic sacrament of ordination to the priesthood is the most telling one. Priestly ordination as understood in institutional Catholic theology, though I hasten to add not in Catholic theology at large, is reserved for men only. This is similar to limiting the sacrament of marriage to heterosexuals only. History demonstrates that no one can compel the institutional Roman Catholic church to ordain women even if nearly all other Christian denominations do so. But neither can the institutional Roman Catholic church, which -- I repeat -- represents only one among many Catholic views, impose its will in the public arena.

Ministers, rabbis and other religious professionals, both men and women, function as agents of the state when they witness marriages. They receive certain tax benefits because of their ordination. Institutional Roman Catholic opposition to women priests based on its sacramental theology does not equate to a ban on women in ministry in the world. To the contrary, almost every other Christian denomination ordains women. Neither should a sacramental theology of opposite-sex-only marriage equate to a ban on same-sex marriage in a democracy. Nor do I think it will in the long run.

There are good reasons to oppose same-sex marriage. They are the same reasons to look critically at opposite-sex marriage. The conferral of privilege on some and not others is suspect when it leads, for example, to health insurance being linked to a person's being in relationship with someone who has a job. That health care is a human right because we all have bodies is, in my view, more consistent with Catholic social teaching and worth debating. One might interrogate the concept of marriage because too much emphasis on couples leaves aside single people and those in community when it comes to social approval. Another ethical issue is the scandalous cost of many weddings and a marriage industry just waiting to take more people's money.

As the same-sex marriage debate continues, I hope it will turn to these issues. Otherwise, it will turn into an attempt to enforce one church's sacramental theology. Informed citizens would not accept that when it comes to ministry, so there is no reason to do so on marriage.

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