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Sacramental marriage beyond anatomy

by Jamie Manson

Grace on the Margins

As I listen to the fallout from President Obama's announcement that he supports marriage equality, I have been struck particularly by the argument that marriage between a man and a woman is superior to committed relationships between same-sex partners.

Official Roman Catholic teaching bases this belief on the theory of natural law, arguing that all sex acts must take place within the state of marriage and must have the potential to create new life. This is why, according to the doctrine, sexual intercourse must always be involved in any sexual activity between a wife and husband.

Since same-sex couples do not have "complementing genders" and, therefore, cannot procreate, their relationships are by their very nature inferior. Having read Aristotle's and Aquinas's theory of natural law, I believe that the church has taken a very rich idea and reduced it to purely the level of biological function.

According to natural law, all living beings have a final purpose or goal. In the case of human beings, the goal is human flourishing. Catholic doctrine applies natural law to marriage and concludes that the final goal of marriage must be procreation. A couple's anatomy and their biological function, therefore, become the determining factor of whether a marriage is good, true, and holy.

In our post-Vatican II milieu, most of us have recognized that procreation alone does not lead to the flourishing of married couples. Many couples that choose not to reproduce or who are infertile have demonstrated that their relationships can be just as fruitful and life-giving as marriages that produce children. So why can't the doctrine extend to same-sex couples?

One can argue, I suppose, that my opinion is skewed on this issue. I have made no secret of the fact that I am in a committed, same-sex relationship. But what you don't know about me is that I grew up

surrounded by many straight, married couples who were profoundly unhappy.

My grandparents, who were immigrants from Italy, seemed basically happy, but even as a child I witnessed how their culture's strictly prescribed gender roles in some ways burdened and limited my grandmother.

My parents were divorced before I started kindergarten. The relationships of my aunts and uncles were fractured by alcoholism and untreated mental illness. No one seemed happy. I came away from my childhood convinced the state of being "happily married" was elusive, if not mythical.

It wasn't until I attended graduate school, where many of my classmates were married, that I began to see that two people could flourish in a relationship. I realized that the same couples share a love so deep it actually can inspire hope and faithfulness to their larger community.

Watching these couples, I began to understand what sacramental marriage means. If a sacrament is a sign of God's grace, it follows that relationships that are signs of God's love, mercy, forgiveness, and faithfulness are sacramental. These signs of grace are part of the new life that married couples are called to bring into the world, with or without children.

I was well into my graduate studies when I realized that I was not heterosexual. I was grateful to have had so many married friends to show me the marks of a good and holy marriage. It helped me to know what to aspire to in my own relationships with women. I also met many same-sex couples during my studies and through them I was able to see that God was present in their relationships in the same way God was manifest in the relationships of my straight friends.

What made my straight friends' marriages sacramental wasn't the fact that their anatomies matched up in a particular way or that they could procreate. As I learned from my childhood, complementing genders and an ability to reproduce in no way guarantees that a marriage will be graced or sacramental. Their marriage was good and holy because it helped both partners to grow in generosity, compassion, mercy, and faithfulness.

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There are far more ways to be fruitful than simply conceiving children. Some married couples are called to raise children. But *all* married couples are called to bring the life of God into the world by caring for one another, working to mend our broken world, and by being a sign of faithfulness to our community.

That many gay couples long for children bears witness to how fruitful their love is. The fact that most gay and lesbian couples endure extraordinary physical, emotional, and financial hardships to have children demonstrates how deep their desire and commitment is to widening their loving relationship by creating a family.

To make procreation and gender complementarity the criteria for marriage simply does not do justice to the Catholic sacramental imagination. To believe that a sacramental marriage cannot happen between two people of the same sex is to place limits on God's power to work within the relationships of God's beloved children.

If we take seriously the Catholic notion of sacramental love, then our concerns shouldn't be over the anatomies of a couple, but whether or not the couple, through their commitment, brings the life of God

more fully into our world. Is their relationship inspiring others to greater faithfulness? Are they a sign of the power of forgiveness and unconditional love? Are the sacrifices that they make for one another an incarnation of the selfless love to which Jesus calls us?

As we continue to explore the theological reality of same-sex marriage, we must do away with the compulsion to create hierarchies within our understandings of relationships. For centuries, the Roman Catholic church insisted that virginity was superior to the married state. Up until Vatican II, the church insisted that offspring was the primary purpose of marriage, with the secondary purpose being the union of spouses. Countless Catholic couples are grateful that those doctrines have changed in the past 50 years.

Now we must do away with the idea that some forms of marriage are superior to others. Rather, marriages must be evaluated based on whether they are good, just, and loving.

Rather than concern over the anatomical reality of a couple, the sacramental nature of marriage should be judged by whether there is equality and mutuality between spouses, whether the relationship helps both spouses to flourish individually and as a couple, and whether their relationship brings the love, mercy, and faithfulness of God more fully into our world.

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School, where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

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