

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

May 22, 2012 at 8:45am

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## What gays and lesbians are teaching us about marriage

by Michael Leach

Soul Seeing

*Some people want to fill the world with silly love songs. And what's wrong with that?? -- Paul McCartney*

Twenty years ago my colleague Frank and I were having a smoke on the fire escape of our Crossroad offices in midtown Manhattan. Frank was challenging the arguments of churchmen who were fuming at the new phenomenon of gay couples trying to adopt children. "What's so bad about that?" he wanted to know. "Why can't gays have families like everybody else?"

"I don't know," I said. "But don't you think it's better for a kid to have a mother and father when they're growing up?"

Frank flicked an ash over the railing. "You straights have been getting divorced and screwing up kids for centuries," he said. "What makes you think we could do any worse?"

I had no answer.



Now 20 years later -- with thousands of children growing up healthy in

same-sex households and with more than 70 episodes of *Modern Family* in the bag, I no longer smoke and I stand with a majority of Americans who are beginning to understand that gay and lesbian marriage is not an aberration but an affirmation of traditional values (ABC News Poll, July 2011). Many gays and lesbians simply desire what their parents had, or could have had: fidelity, commitment, companionship, and mutual gratitude for their daily bread. They know that life is tough enough to get through alone. Like anyone who finds loving compatibility with another, gays want to partake in the good of God with a soul mate.

My friend Frank knew: Gays and lesbians just want what is good and beautiful and true. And Paul hit the right note when he sang, "What's wrong with that?"

Another Frank, Frank Bruni, adds this note in *The New York Times* (Feb. 21): "In the intensifying debate over same-sex marriage, what I sometimes find hardest to understand is why so many opponents don't see gay people's longing to be wedded as the fundamentally conservative, lavishly complimentary desire it is."

Equally old-fashioned is the desire of an adult couple to share the good of God with children of God, especially when so many children are born out of wedlock with no family at all. It is the nature of love to expand and spread like light across the universe. Love manifests itself in shining acts of compassion and generosity.

The debate over same-sex marriage leads us to examine the very meaning of marriage. When half of all straight unions end in divorce, gays and lesbians are in the process of teaching us something about the substance of marriage that we have forgotten or taken for granted. For sure their enthusiasm motivates us to better understand and appreciate what we already have.

So what is this thing called marriage? Politicians pontificate that "it is between a man and a woman" but never tell us what it is that is between them. Are they thinking of a penis? The dictionary says marriage is a union. But what kind of union? Sexual, legal, social, political, religious -- what? If we look at marriage with the eye of the soul, what do we see? We behold marriage as nothing more and nothing less than an outward sign of inward grace. It is sacramental: a promise two people make with all their hearts to participate as one in the life of God for all eternity. Mitch Finley, married to Kathy for 38 years, describes it beautifully for all of us, straight and gay, in the anthology *I Like Being Married*:

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Marriage is a promise made in the sight of God years ago and only yesterday. It is a promise kept day in, day out, for years and years, while two individuals become different people than when they first met, yet remain the same, until one of them takes their last breath. Before and after children, with and without children, even because of the children, marriage means they work together at everything from maximizing sexual joy to making the mortgage payments. They work hard at everything from doing the laundry to bringing home flowers in the middle of winter, whether the winter is seasonal or emotional. They make a promise, and marriage is a promise kept. Marriage is a couple who discovers a little bit more each day, to their surprise and delight and sometimes shock and chagrin, that in their togetherness and individuality they have an ongoing experience of intimacy with God. A God who is Love, and who inspires each of them to become much more than they are.

It begins with a silly little love song. It ends in a symphony. What's wrong with that?

[Michael Leach edits Soul Seeing for *NCR*. He has been married for 42 years to Vickie, who says he is heterosexual, not that there's anything wrong with that.]

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