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A solution to the marriage muddle?

by Robert McClory

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The approval of same-sex marriage in four states during the Nov. 6 elections calls for a "redoubling of efforts" to bar such unions, according to San Francisco Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone. But that will be no easy task because the church long ago painted itself into a corner by identifying the primary purpose of marriage as the procreation and education of children. At Vatican II, the bishops backed off just a step or two by acknowledging that mutual love and support is a co-equal purpose. This, however, has not shaken procreation from its front-and-central role. Because of this conviction, the teaching church further declares that any and every act of sexual union between a husband and wife must be "open" to the procreation of children, never closed by the use of artificial contraception.

Now comes civil society with an altogether different idea of marriage, namely the union of two persons, whether of the same or opposite sex, who love one another and are committed to a lifetime of faithfulness to one another. Furthermore, goes this position, a union of two persons of the same sex can be considered procreative, since such couples can, and often do, have children of their own through adoption, in vitro fertilization or other methods.

No, no, no, says the institutional church. "That's cheating. The procreative action must be biologically pure and in conformity with the 'natural law,' as defined by the church." This argument may be simple and clear to bishops and priests (though surely not all), but it is not self-evident to many millions of laypersons, including the vast majority of Catholics, as reliable polls of Catholic belief have testified since 1968.

So why can't the bishops accept two kinds of marriage, both founded on a commitment of love and fidelity by couples? One would be civil marriage open to both heterosexual and homosexual couples; the other would be religious, sacramental marriage available to heterosexual couples only. In both cases, the

partners get all the societal benefits to which married people are entitled, and the church gets to maintain its position that gay and lesbian unions are disordered and unnatural. There's really no reason for the church to keep pushing to outlaw gay and lesbian marriages. And isn't such pressure a meddling of religion in the affairs of secular society by insisting a church definition of true marriage must be adopted and enforced by secular governments?

No, no no, says the church: Accepting gay and lesbian marriage will undercut traditional marriage and further promote relativism and the secularization of society. It happens that there is no proof whatsoever that gay marriages sabotage heterosexual unions. In fact, the evidence indicates that heterosexual unions are more than adept at sabotaging themselves.

So can we have a truce here, living with two forms of marriage, thus relieving Cordileone of his crusade to impose traditional Catholic definitions on everyone? Perhaps such a compromise might work for a while, but for Catholics, it ignores the mastodon in the living room -- really, in the bedroom. As theologians have been saying (or trying to say) for decades, the whole church at some point must honestly face the fact that its moral teachings on marriage and sexuality are out of sync with reality and that Catholicism will continue its long slide into irrelevance until spirited discussion and debate move these matters out of the closet and into the center of the room.

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