

Marriage Matters

By this time, most Canadians are well aware of the issue of changing the law to permit same-sex partners to marry. In the last year there have been decisions by two provincial appeal courts that radically redefined marriage, hearings before a parliamentary committee, and proposed federal legislation. Newspapers are full of articles, and talk shows are alive with debate on this subject. Canadians from many different backgrounds are talking about marriage with passion and conviction.

Such keen interest and intense debate is not surprising. The subject is serious, and the issues are vast. It is a topic that concerns all of us, and calls for thoughtful reflection. There is a lot at stake. Marriage matters.



Catholic Organization
for Life and Family

Marriage Matters

The Catholic Organization for Life and Family (COLF) hopes the following questions and answers will contribute to the debate, provoke further reflection and enrich your discussions with friends and family.

Q1 What is marriage?

Marriage is a loving, life-giving and faithful relationship between a man and a woman. It is a natural institution that predates all social, legal and religious systems; its existence extends back beyond the limits of human memory. Since marriage is the origin of the family, which is the basic unit of society, it is also vitally important for the future of humanity. These basic truths can be recognized through our human reason and experience.



What does the Catholic Church teach about marriage?

In the broadest sense, the heart of the Church's definition of marriage is the same as what has always existed across cultures and faiths: the union of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others. Marriage is also a sacrament, a sign of God's love for humanity and Christ's love for the Church.

Every sacrament gives a grace to assist us according to the circumstances of our lives. The grace of the sacrament of marriage strengthens and supports married couples. It is not a magic wand that takes away all difficulties, but a free gift from God that perfects the love of husbands and wives for each other so that it might more and more reflect the love Christ has for his Church.


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Q³

What is the purpose of marriage?


The basic purposes of marriage are the good of the couple, and the procreation and education of children. In turn, the fulfillment of these purposes contributes to the good of society. For this reason, society has always affirmed the fundamental purposes of marriage: the personal commitment of the couple, which is publicly declared, and the procreation of children, upon whom the future of society depends.



Q⁴

Since our understanding of marriage has evolved over the years, especially with the changing status of women, wouldn't allowing same-sex marriage simply be one more change?

Yes, there have been many developments within the institution of marriage, some of which reflect modern insights into the full equality of women and men. But such changes have never been in conflict with the basic purpose and nature of marriage. These changes have enhanced marriage, but not redefined it.



The biological fact remains that marriage between a man and a woman will usually result in children. This fact remains a powerful human reality even if some married couples, by choice or circumstances, do not have children.

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Since the future of humanity depends on the creation of children, society has a vital interest in recognizing and protecting the relationship that ensures its future.

Q⁵

If people of the same sex love each other, why can't they get married?

Love is a very important ingredient of marriage. But it is not the only one. Marriage recognizes not only love and commitment, but also the natural capacity of the couple to create children. There is a fundamental difference between a relationship that has the potential to create a child and one that does not. Since the future of humanity depends on the procreation of children, society has a vital interest in recognizing and protecting the relationship that ensures its future.

It is true that not all children are born within marriage and not all married couples have children. It is also true that same-sex partners can have children with the aid of a third person of the opposite sex and the use of new technologies. But exceptions and variations do not undo a rule, and individual practices do not redefine the purposes of an institution. The biological fact remains that marriage between a man and a woman will usually result in children. This fact remains a powerful human reality even if some married couples, by choice or circumstances, do not have children. It makes marriage between a man and a woman a unique institution.



Q⁶

Since same-sex partners have almost all of the same social benefits as married couples, isn't the debate merely about the meaning of a

word? What is so important about the word "marriage"?

Words are important. For example, one could say that our personal or family names are "just words." But, in fact, they are a sign of who we are, and capture our identity as unique persons and members of families. In the same way, the words we use for our institutions are a sign of their meaning. As an institution, marriage has enormous significance, and has existed for thousands of years. The word we use for this institution – marriage – is full of history, meaning and symbolism, and should be kept for this unique reality.

The meaning of marriage lies in the natural complementarity and mutuality that exists between a man and a woman. They are both fully human, and like all persons, need to live in relationship with others. They are fully equal, and yet they are

different. They complement each other, each bringing unique gifts to their relationship. They are drawn to each other by their sexual differences as male and female. Each gives and receives love and support from the other, and through this mutuality, they build a life together. Pope John Paul II offers this description: *Marital communion sinks its roots in the natural complementarity that exists between man and woman, and is nurtured through the personal willingness of the spouses to share their entire life project, what they have and what they are; for this reason such communion is the fruit and the sign of a profoundly human need.*

The symbolic value of the institution of marriage is deeply rooted in cultures. Marriage ceremonies are a public recognition of both the intimate bond between husband and wife and the vital contribution their life project makes to society. In different cultures over the centuries, this public recognition has strengthened not only the couple and the family, but also entire civilizations. Societies have always understood this basic human reality: marriage creates and strengthens bonds between men and women and allows the human family to flourish.

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What difference does it make to traditionally married couples if same-sex partners are allowed to marry?

There are two ways of looking at this question: first, from the perspective of individuals, and second, from the perspective of society. It is important to distinguish between these viewpoints.

From an individual perspective, the legal fact of a number of same-sex marriages in some areas of the country probably has very little impact on presently married men and women. But we are not simply individuals; we are also members of society, and are called to work together for the good of all.

If the federal government were to overturn the traditional understanding of marriage, the result would be a significant change for our society. Our laws are one of the ways we communicate our common values. With such a change, what we would be saying

as a society is that the primary purpose of marriage is to validate and protect a sexually intimate adult relationship, and that all else is secondary.

Exactly what the social impact of such a change would be cannot be measured at this time. But experiences of the past – changes to divorce laws, general acceptance of sexual relationships outside of marriage, the damage done to children as a result of unstable adult relationships – suggest that it would be negative. We would no longer have an institution that symbolizes our commitment as a society to the future: our children. Instead, we would have an institution that symbolizes our commitment to the present needs and desires of adults.



What is the point of trying to save an institution when fewer and fewer people are choosing it and when many couples do not live up to its ideals?

Despite the frequent negative news about marriage, it remains the choice of the majority of people. Here are just a few facts drawn from the Census of 2001 (Statistics Canada):

- Of the 8.4 million families in Canada, 5.9 million (70%) are headed by married couples, 1.3 million (16%) are headed by single parents, and 1.2 million (14%) by common-law couples. There are 34,200 households composed of same-sex partners; 0.5% of all couples.
- Of children ages 0 to 14, 68% live with their married parents, 13% live with common-law parents, and 19% do not live with both parents.
- Although younger Canadian men and women are more likely to start their life together within a common-law relationship, most (75%) will marry if the trends seen in 2001 continue.

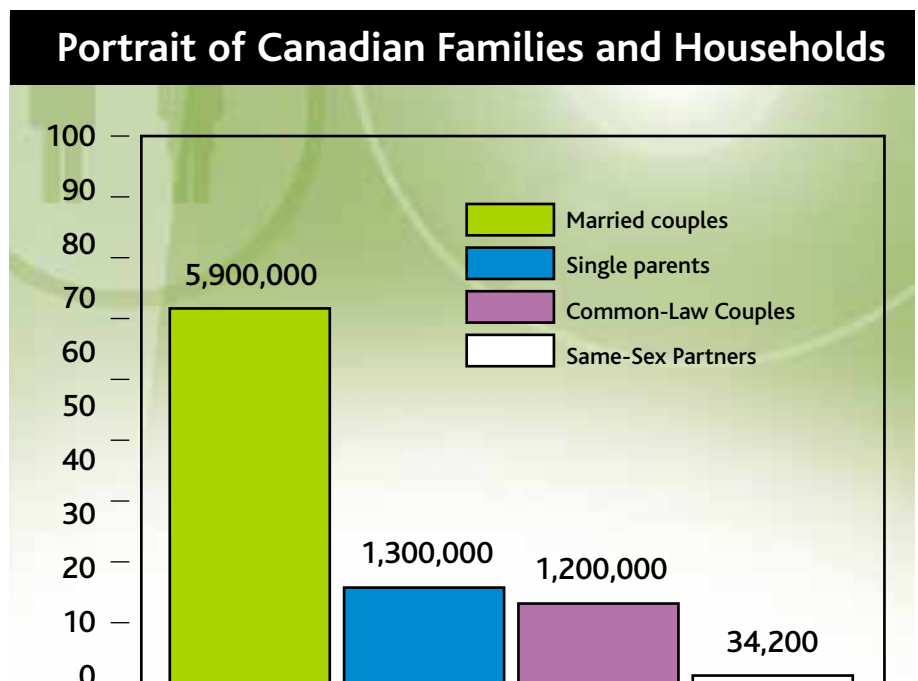
Information from The National Longitudinal Survey of Children

and Youth also demonstrates the continuing importance of marriage for our society:

- Children born to a married couple who did not live together before marrying were the least likely (13.6%) to see their parents separate.
- The risk of family breakdown for the children of unmarried, common-law couples was immense (63.1%).

- Children whose parents had lived common-law but then married (either before or soon after starting a family) were in an intermediate category. About 25% of these children experienced family breakdown.

No one pretends that marriage between a man and a woman is a perfect institution. But the question remains: Where is the evidence that a radical redefinition of marriage would serve the common good of our society? The burden of proof rests on those who want this change.



Source: Canadian Census of 2001 (Statistics Canada)

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**Many decades of research have led to the following conclusion:
As a general rule, children do best in an environment that includes a mother and father.**



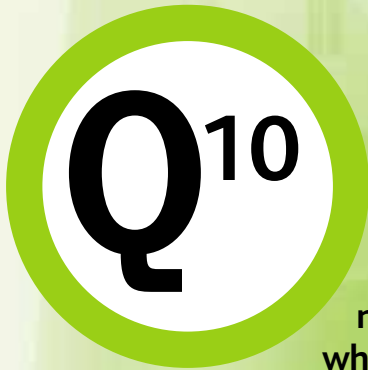
Q⁹

If marriage is beneficial to children, how can it be denied to same-sex partners who already have or intend to have children?

Some same-sex partners have children from other relationships or choose to have them with the assistance of reproductive technologies. But these circumstances or choices do not mean that a major social institution must be redefined to include same-sex unions.

Many decades of research have led to the following conclusion: As a general rule, children do best in an environment that includes a mother and father. There are, of course, exceptions to the rule, as well as examples of children who thrive despite difficult circumstances. Society will have to find ways to support the families of same-sex partners other than by changing the definition of marriage.

In fact, the argument for same-sex marriage is based primarily on the desire of adults to validate their relationships and affirm their dignity as persons. This argument does not seriously address the impact on generations of children.



Two provincial appeal courts (British Columbia and Ontario) have found the opposite-sex definition of marriage to be discriminatory. How can the Church, which claims to love and welcome all, support what the courts have described as discrimination?

Catholic teaching is clear: the dignity of all human beings must be respected because they are created in the image of God. What is in question here is not the dignity and equality of all persons, but whether it is for the good of society to change the definition of marriage to include same-sex partners. Such a change would mean that marriage would no longer reflect the reality known and lived by countless men and women, both in the distant past and in the present.

There are adult relationships other than marriage that involve commitment, caring, and mutual emotional and financial support – common-law unions, same-sex unions, and other adult non-sexual relationships, for example, elderly sisters who live together. Because the nature of these relationships is significantly different from marriage, valid distinctions can be made, even though the relationships have

some similar features. The Church has never suggested that such distinctions are or should be made because people in one type of relationship are more worthy of respect than others.

Those who are promoting marriage for same-sex partners appeal to the principles of fairness, equality, autonomy and freedom of choice – values that are important in our society. But this appeal ignores, and is, in fact, designed to wipe out, the differences between heterosexual couples and same-sex partners in order to achieve the goal of legally recognized marriage. The government, however, must not confuse equal treatment with identical treatment. Equality is not the same as uniformity.

Non-discrimination does not require uniformity; it requires respect for diversity and differences. Society should value diversity. In the current situation,

refusing to establish necessary distinctions leads to confusion and to the devaluing of diversity. It is not discriminatory to treat different realities differently.

It is also incorrect to compare the exclusion of same-sex partners from marriage to previous laws that did not permit interracial marriage. Laws against marriage between people of different races were about keeping the races separate, not about the nature of marriage. Same-sex marriage would change the nature of marriage by making it into something it is not.



Q¹¹

Marriage has enormous importance for society because of its essential role in the procreation of children and the nurturing of future generations.

Why does the civil definition of marriage matter to the Church as long as it can celebrate the sacrament according to its teaching?

Supporters of same-sex marriage have said again and again that religious officials will not have to perform marriages that are contrary to their beliefs. So, why are Catholics so concerned about this issue? This argument misses the point. Clearly, marriage, one of the seven sacraments of the Church, has important religious meaning. But sacraments are not restricted to the supernatural realm; they also concern social realities because they are signs of God's love in the world. Marriage has enormous importance for society because of its essential role in the procreation of children and the nurturing of future generations.

Catholics are participating in this debate not just because they are concerned about the freedom of clergy to celebrate the sacrament of marriage. Above all, they believe that marriage between a man and a woman benefits society and serves the common good that all of us are called to promote. The small social unit of husband and wife – by its binding love, by its inherent capacity to create new life, by its acceptance of responsibility to care for children – not only enriches society, but is its very cornerstone.



Q¹²

What about same-sex partners who wish to have some formal protection for their relationships?

In a pastoral message released on September 10, 2003, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops said:

"Since the very beginnings of this debate, we have acknowledged that there is a desire to give formal protection to other forms of adult personal relationships which also involve commitment, mutual care, and emotional and financial interdependence. We remain convinced that solutions can be found without proceeding to a radical redefinition of marriage."

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We believe that the gift of love between husband and wife, passed on from generation to generation, communicated a thousand times over from one couple to another, from one family to another, is indisputable evidence of the greatness and grace of marriage. It deserves the support and protection of society and the Church.

We hope that the material in this leaflet will be a useful contribution to the current public discussions and will help members of the Catholic community to participate in the debate. We encourage you to discuss this vital question with your families, your friends, your colleagues and your members of Parliament. Catholics are called to be involved in the social and ethical issues of our time and to transform the world both by our compelling message and by the respect with which it is shared.

This leaflet has been prepared by the Catholic Organization for Life and Family (COLF). Copies are available from the COLF offices at 2500 Don Reid Drive, Ottawa, Ontario K1H 2J2, Tel: (613) 241-9461 ext. 161, Fax: (613) 241-9048, E-mail: ocvfcolf@cccb.ca, Web site: <http://colf.cccb.ca>

COLF was jointly founded by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCC) and the Knights of Columbus. It promotes respect for human life and dignity and the essential role of the family.

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The material in this leaflet has been drawn from a number of sources: the presentation made by the Canadian Bishops to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights (Feb. 13, 2003); *Marriage in the Present Day*, a pastoral message from the Canadian Bishops (Sept. 10, 2003); *In Love for Life*, a booklet published by © COLF, Concacan Inc., 2002; and other short documents (Backgrounders) published on the COLF Web site.

The quotation from Pope John Paul II in this leaflet is from *Familiaris Consortio* (1982, no. 19). The information about family breakdown in relation to the marital status of parents is based on data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth, and can be found in "Growing up with Mom and Dad" by Nicole Marcil-Gratton (*Transition*, the Vanier Institute of the Family, Spring, 1999).

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