

September 19, 2012

Dear Parish Family,

Love compels me to share with you my thoughts on marriage given all that is and isn't being said about it. To that end, I invite you to pause from your busy day either now or later to thoughtfully and prayerfully read this letter. It has taken me a long time to compose and I am grateful for the help I received from many intelligent and caring people just like you. So when you're ready...

Do you remember a few years ago when Pluto's classification as a celestial body was drawn into question? What gave rise to it was the discovery of two new celestial bodies beyond Pluto which compelled the International Astronomical Union (IAU) to provide an authoritative definition as to what a planet is and is not. When the IAU general assembly gathered in Prague in 2006, it accepted a proposal that resulted in Pluto being regarded no longer as a planet. Instead, the IAU reclassified it to be the largest member of the Kuiper belt that surrounds our solar system.

Still, there are professional and amateur astronomers who refuse to accept the IAU's decision, calling it insensitive, narrow-minded, and exclusionary. Some have even questioned the authority of the IAU to make this determination. But most people have just shrugged their shoulders with indifference, saying, "Who cares? Call it whatever you want. Pluto is still Pluto."

True. What people choose to call Pluto does not change its existence, but it does cause confusion and uncertainty as to what a planet is or is not. And there lies the problem. If the definition for the word "planet" is up for grabs, can we start calling any celestial object of our own choosing a planet? Who authoritatively decides and by what criteria do they make their determination?

More than being a purely academic exercise, I think this controversy can serve as an excellent starting point to analyze our state government's current attempt to redefine what the word "marriage" means and why redefinition is problematic for us and future generations. Furthermore, I hope a fresh approach will extract it from the emotionally charged rancor of the political arena and popular media. So let us consider it from the perspective of what the word "marriage" itself has meant and continues to mean in its essence versus what it has or has not looked like in practice.

Where does one find the first known definition of marriage within a cultural context? Or, for that matter, who originally defined its essential elements, and what are they? Now it would be easy for me to cite the Book of Genesis; but truthfully, marriage in its elemental form as a cultural institution pre-dates all sacred scriptures. And while the institution of marriage has experienced cultural diversity and change over several millennia, three essential elements remain that would be readily recognized as fundamental to its definition. First among them is the possibility for procreation. The other two are that the union must be life-long and exclusive.

Now when I say these three elements are *essential* to the definition of what is commonly meant by the term “marriage,” it necessarily follows that if any element is not present then whatever remains cannot be called “marriage” without confusing or diluting the institution of marriage beyond universal recognition. Furthermore, to declare a union *of any kind* “marriage” in the absence of one or more of its defining elements does not make it so any more than calling Pluto a planet would make it a planet regardless of how anyone *feels* about it.

This ought to be as self-evident for us today as it was for every generation before us, but that no longer appears to be so. And why not? That’s the question on the minds of many people. The answer is really quite simple. In fact, it’s been staring us in the face for 60+ years. Specifically, the problem with marriage today is not with its definition but its *practice*; or I should say, its *failure to practice* in some way, shape, or form its three defining elements. Let me explain.

When a couple decides to marry, most all of them intend a life-long commitment. But sadly, nearly half of all marriages in this country end in divorce. Although this rate has been in decline over the past few years, so has the marriage rate. By contrast, the rate of cohabitating couples has seen a significant rise over the past few years but so has the rate of breakups among them. For all the reasons cited to explain these trends, there is one underlining cause; namely, our culture no longer views marriage as a life-long institution. Instead, the general census seems to be that if it works out that way, great! If not, for whatever reason, that’s fine, too.

What about the practice of exclusivity in marriage? This, too, is showing signs of weakening. Furthermore, past and current studies reveal that there is a substantial disparity between committed heterosexual and homosexual couples in their respective understanding and practice of sexual fidelity. But don’t take my word for it, go online and check it for yourselves. What I found was both revealing and alarming. In fact, one is left to conclude that this essential element of marriage will soon be subject to cultural redefinition as well.

So finally, what we have left is arguably the core essential element of marriage: the possibility of procreation. In fact, some would say that this alone is the sole reason for the institution of marriage. King Henry VIII certainly did! But putting that aside, our post-modern culture supports only a qualified endorsement of procreation in marriage. By that I mean, one child is encouraged; a second child is approved; a third child is accepted; a fourth child is tolerated; a fifth child and more.... Well, you get the idea. But, speaking as the sixth of nine children, my younger siblings and I refuse to take the blame for global warming!

Beyond a married couple’s desire to conceive a child, the Western world now treats the conception of human life as a disease preventable with contraception and curable with abortion. Conversely, and yet just as debase, the bearing of children is treated as an inalienable right, often resulting in morally unacceptable practices such as in vitro fertilization (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2376-2379).

Still, one aspect of openness to procreation as an essential element of marriage has remained undisputed until now; namely, the anatomical and biological compatibility of both parents vis-à-vis their separate but uniquely complementary reproductive organs. Unlike any other part of the male and female body, they have their function and purpose fulfilled only in union with each other where the two become one flesh. (*See Genesis 2:1-24, Mark 10:6-9, and any textbook on human anatomy*).

With the erosion of its three essential elements, I hope you see how the cultural failure of marriage has put it at odds with its universal definition. Is it any wonder then, why some people see marriage as nothing more than a public expression of romantic love between two people? If that is all there is to marriage, then of course it would be unfair to “restrict” the institution to relationships between one man and one woman. If, however, marriage refers specifically to the life-long, exclusive union between a man and a woman that is open to procreation, then it is not only fair but **right** that we do not regard other kinds of human relationships as being the same. Otherwise, we would be denying the fundamental character and timelessness of marriage as a societal institution, making it culturally ambiguous and vulnerable to constant change.

Like it or not, marriage as defined by its three essential elements makes it truly unique. But does that give it an advantage over other kinds of human relationships? Yes and no. Legally married couples do enjoy certain rights and privileges that cohabitating couples do not. But that is not true for legally registered same-sex couples. In 2009, the state of Washington passed the “Everything But Marriage Law,” granting them ALL of the same rights and privileges as legally registered (i.e., married) opposite-sex couples. The reasoning behind this law favored both types of civil union as *equal-but-different* in light of the universally held definition of marriage.

So what is to be gained by overturning this law now in favor of a new definition of marriage? Will it do anything to strengthen institutional marriage for the greater good of all? No, because there is nothing wrong with the definition of marriage; just its cultural practice over the past 60+ years. So contrary to those who say they only seek to expand the definition of marriage for the sake of “fairness,” their misguided efforts will only do away with the very elements that make it not only unique but essential for shaping and maintaining the common good of society.

Does this understanding of the uniqueness of marriage make one an “intolerant bigot?” Some have said so, often with great malice and venomous threats, which only leaves me to question their understanding of those terms.

Opposing views and opinions about anything do not automatically make people intolerant. For example, I agree with the IAU decision to reclassify Pluto, but that does not make me intolerant of Pluto. Pluto is still Pluto! Its celestial status has no bearing on what I think about it; just how I understand what is and is not a planet. Similarly, many people disagree with the state government’s attempt to redefine marriage because of how we understand and value what

marriage is and is not for its own sake and that of the common good. That does not make us intolerant of those who think otherwise about legally redefining marriage to accommodate same-sex unions. Nor, for that matter, does it make us bigots.

Bigots, by definition, are haters of groups of people just for being different. Their intolerance goes way beyond any ideological disagreement. They hate for the sake of hating. This is ALWAYS, ALWAYS, ALWAYS wrong and must be denounced whenever and wherever encountered. Paradoxically, bigots expect others to hate them in return because hate feeds on hate. But that only fills the world with more hatred. So to end hatred and its ensuing violence, we must not hate but *love* those who are different than us. Furthermore, we must remember that true love can and does distinguish between a person and their opinions and/or actions.

So, to all those who call us intolerant bigots, threatening us and our businesses just because we don't share their views on redefining marriage, I am compelled to ask, "Who's being intolerant of whom? And what does your own hatred of us make you?"

In conclusion, I REJECT Referendum 74 not only because I firmly believe the word "marriage" refers to a unique reality in which a man and a woman freely commit to each other a life-long, exclusive union that is open to procreation, but also because no government has the authority to redefine the institution of marriage. Moreover, I am convinced this ill-conceived action by our state government would prove gravely harmful for our society as a whole with no corresponding benefit to those it is purporting to aid. Even so, I will continue to love everyone who disagrees with me and I encourage you to do the same because anything less is from the evil one.

Regardless of the outcome this November, my understanding of marriage as well as the authoritative teachings of the Catholic Church will not yield to governmental action or public opinion to the contrary. God alone will judge us by the choices we now make, either well or ill-informed, with future generations as witnesses to the consequences. Therefore, I entrust us all to the One whose judgment is true and just; the Author of marriage for the good of humanity. May our Lord Jesus, Blessed Mother Mary, and all the Heavenly Hosts come to our aid in this time when their guidance and intercession are so needed.

Faithfully yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Fr. Patrick Freitag". The signature is stylized with a large initial "F" and a long, sweeping underline.

Fr. Patrick Freitag
Pastor