

The Marriage Debate: the nature of things



“Sexual relations between a man and a woman are naturally and necessarily different from sexual relations between same-sex partners. This truth is part of the common sense of the human race. It was true before the existence of either Church or State, and it will continue to be true when there is no state of Illinois and no United States of America. A proposal to change this truth about marriage in civil law is less a threat to religion than it is an affront to human reason and the common good of society. It means we are all to pretend to accept something we know is physically impossible. The Legislature might just as well repeal the law of gravity.”

The crucial term here is “naturally.” And if people were shocked by the cardinal’s suggestion that a same-sex “marriage” law would be as fatuous as a statute repealing the law of gravity, it’s because our philosophically-challenged culture has lost any grip on what “nature” means, beyond that physical world we venerate through such civic rituals as recycling.

There is little sense of the givenness of things, in the 21st-century postmodern West. And where there is no culturally-affirmed conviction that some realities simply are, there will be a parallel intuition that everything is fungible, plastic, malleable: anything can be changed by an act of will. The legal *ne plus ultra* of this cultural phenomenon came in 2007, when the Spanish government allowed Juan to become Juanita on his/her national identity card by simply declaring (absent any surgical alteration) that he was now she. Cardinal George was suggesting, correctly in my view, that same-sex “marriage” is the same, essentially incoherent denial of givenness manifest in Spain’s Law 3/2007.

In his Christmas address to the Roman Curia last December, Pope Benedict XVI raised similar issues. We deplore the “manipulation of nature” today “where our environment is concerned,” the pope noted; but when it comes to human affairs, human “nature” has become a matter of our “choice.” Which means that we no longer experience ourselves as unique composites of matter and spirit. The “matter” of our humanness is mere ephemera; we are merely, as Benedict put it, “spirit and will.”

Who are the big losers, the pope asked, when societies and cultures lose their grip on the reality that “man and women are complementary versions of what it means to be human”? The family is certainly a loser: for if there is no “duality of man and women” that is accepted as the Way Things Are, than “neither is the family any longer a reality” established by anything other than our willfulness.

The biggest losers, though, are children, the pope argued. If children are simply a lifestyle choice in a “family” that is nothing other than a willed arrangement for mutual convenience, children lose their rightful place and their rightful dignity. Citing the chief rabbi of France, Gilles Bernheim, Benedict argued that children are, in this bizarre new world, no longer the subject of rights. Rather, “the child has become an object to which people have a right and which they have a right to obtain.” The freedom to be creative, which finds its most awesome expression in procreation, has been reduced to the freedom to create myself, however I imagine myself to be.

The marriage debate is thus about more than the legal definition of marriage, although that is serious enough. It’s a debate about whether there are any givens in the human condition, or whether willfulness and self-assertion trump reality at every point. If they do, what happens to democracies built on self-evident truths?

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