



ARCHDIOCESE OF BALTIMORE + ARCHDIOCESE OF WASHINGTON + DIOCESE OF WILMINGTON

Marriage in Maryland: Securing the Foundation of Family and Society

A Statement from the Bishops of Maryland
January 2008

The institution of marriage today faces unprecedented judicial and legislative challenges. While the Maryland Court of Appeals last fall upheld the existing state law defining marriage as the union of one man and one woman, it also noted that the state's elected lawmakers can change the definition of marriage if they wish to do so. Bills designed to do just that are now being considered in Annapolis. Between now and the April conclusion of the legislative session, it is imperative that the Catholic faithful and all those who value marriage speak out and affirm the essential role that marriage plays in our society.

No legislative debate should prevent us from recognizing profound truths about men and women: They have equal dignity as persons, and are mutually complementary as male and female. Nor should it keep us from grasping the truth about marriage: It comes about when a man and a woman make a mutual, exclusive, and lifelong gift of themselves to one another in order to bring about a union that is personally fulfilling, open to the procreation and upbringing of children, and necessary to the formation of a stable and secure foundation for our society.¹

The equality of men and women and the dignity of their coming together as husband and wife is not merely a fact of religious faith, but a fundamental reality rooted in our human nature and experience which everyone can acknowledge. Because "society owes its continued survival to the family, founded on marriage,"² the marriage relationship throughout history has been assigned protected status in all faiths and cultures. Marriage belongs by nature to the relationship between a man and a woman. That relationship is not formed by church or civil law, but rather has its foundation in the way in which we are created and must be protected as a treasured reality that has always existed between men and women.

Why does the state get involved in this question at all? The very basis of civil society rests on marriage and the family, that is, on the joining together of a man and a woman who become husband and wife to each other and mother and father to their children. Marriage assumes a public responsibility for the good of the spouses, the development of children, and the care of all family members. "The family based on marriage is a fundamental and precious good for the whole society whose most solid fabric is built on the values that are developed in family relations and guaranteed by stable marriage."³

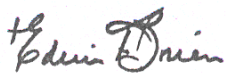
Society appropriately assigns the right to marry to heterosexual couples because of the uniqueness of the sexual relationship between a man and a woman. As the Maryland court stated in its recent decision, "In light of the fundamental nature of procreation, ... safeguarding an environment most conducive to the stable propagation and continuance of the human race is a legitimate government interest."⁴ Civil law considers other appropriate requirements for those couples who wish to marry, including their age, mental competence, and blood relationship.

The Church's support for marriage between a man and a woman does not mean that unmarried persons of any sex should be denied the right to enter into legal arrangements with one another regarding medical decision making, life insurance, the disposition of property, and other benefits, which often can be accomplished through a simple power of attorney. Nor should the recognition and promotion of marriage between a man and a woman – a relationship valued in church and civil law more highly than any other – imply discrimination against homosexual persons. “The Church’s teaching about the dignity of homosexual persons is clear. They must be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity. Our respect for them means we condemn all forms of unjust discrimination, harassment or abuse.”⁵

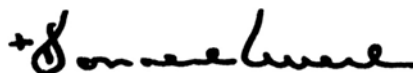
Nonetheless, neither our courts nor our State legislature should impose a different definition of marriage on our social order by assigning the legal status of marriage to any relationship other than the union of a man and a woman as husband and wife. They should not provide the same legal recognition to same-sex or other alternative relationships -- whether they are called marriages, or civil unions, or given some other designation -- as that which the law properly provides to the marriage of one man and one woman. To do so would undermine the institution of marriage, which has historically been the privileged setting for raising a child, whose optimum flourishing requires a stable relationship between father and mother. Even in marriages that do not yield children, the marital union provides powerful witness to the interdependence and complementarity of the sexes, a witness not duplicated by any other relationship.

In addition to publicly affirming our support for the legal protection of marriage, there is much more the Church and its people can and should do to help strengthen marriage and the family. One important new effort aimed at building a “culture of marriage” is a program created by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the *For Your Marriage* initiative. We encourage all Catholics to explore this new effort through which the Church draws on the resources of our faith, scientific findings, and the lived experience of married couples in order to promote, strengthen, heal, and sustain marriages.⁶

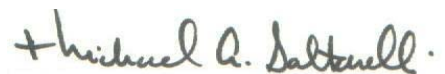
All those who value marriage must not allow the challenges facing this bedrock institution to go unanswered. We must exercise our right and our duty as Catholics and responsible citizens by urging our elected officials to oppose legislation that does not preserve marriage in Maryland as the union of one man and one woman. We commend to you the website of the Maryland Catholic Conference, www.mdcathcon.org, which has resources on marriage and information on how to contact state legislators. “At a time when family life is under significant stress, the principled defense of marriage is an urgent necessity to ensure the flourishing of persons, the wellbeing of children, and the common good of society.”⁷



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Most Rev. Donald W. Wuerl
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Most Rev. Michael A. Saltarelli
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¹ *Family, Marriage And “De Facto” Unions*, Pontifical Council for the Family, 2000.

² *Considerations Regarding Proposals To Give Legal Recognition To Unions Between Homosexual Persons*, Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, 2003.

³ *Between Man and Woman: Questions and Answers About Marriage and Same-Sex Unions*, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2003.

⁴ *Conaway v. Deane*, Court of Appeals of Maryland, September 2007.

⁵ *Promote, Preserve, Protect Marriage*, USCCB, 2003.

⁶ See National Pastoral Initiative for Marriage at foryourmarriage.org

⁷ *Promote, Preserve, Protect Marriage*, USCCB, 2003.