NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Why church disdain for gay marriage is dead wrong

Robert McClory | Jan. 11, 2013 NCR Today

Chicago Cardinal Francis George is leaving no stone unturned in his campaign to halt gay marriage as it sits on the runway awaiting clearance for takeoff by the Illinois legislature. This week, he devoted another lengthy, tortured column to the subject in the *Catholic New World*. I read this one very carefully, and though the cardinal deserves credit for perseverance, it seems to me he is clinging to both an outmoded concept of marriage that the church itself no longer holds and an understanding of homosexual relationships that is no longer valid.

For George, marriage is the permanent union of one man and one woman for the purpose of procreating and raising children; to call it anything else is a misuse of abuse of a definition enshrined in natural law. In fact, the current concept of marriage is the outcome of a long evolution. Over many eons, varieties of marriage (polygamy, for example) were practiced and were once considered normal, natural and acceptable.

At least since the late Middle Ages, the Catholic church has presented marriage as having two ends or purposes: a primary purpose, the procreation and education of children; and a secondary purpose, the mutual love, care and support of the spouses. In Catholic moral teaching, this secondary purpose tended to be taken lightly. It even got obscured by an overpowering obsession with the primary purpose. The most exacting details concerning the proper and improper uses of sex seized much of the attention of the people who wrote the manuals about such things, celibate priests with degrees in moral theology. The obsession was passed on to bishops and pastors.

But in the mid-20th century, a younger generation of moral theologians began criticizing this narrow focus, suggesting that love and companionship were anything but secondary characteristics of marriage, that they were in fact primary purposes. Their point was not difficult to see. In the real world, it is first of all love and companionship that attracts people to one another and leads them to commitment. Increasing and multiplying the race is usually a secondary consideration at best.

When the subject of Christian marriage was taken up by the bishops at the Second Vatican Council in its document on "The Church in the Modern World," they made a point of not repeating the old formula. In fact, they first discussed mutual self-giving and sharing as essential to marriage and only after spoke of its role in increasing and multiplying the human family. The bishops decided not to use any primary or secondary terminology in the document, and just to make the matter clear, insisted that "procreation does not make the other ends of marriage of less account" and that marriage was "not instituted solely for procreation."

So we have here an evolutionary step in the church's understanding at Vatican II. Although you may not have heard about it in a homily, love and mutual support now stand side-by-side with procreation as pillars of Catholic marriage. George takes no notice of this historic shift, and he therefore misses what has occurred.

Meanwhile, we are adjusting to an evolutionary shift in society: the recognition that sexual orientation is not exclusively what one chooses but what one is. For centuries, it was assumed (certainly by the church) that all males are sexually oriented to females and all females oriented to males, no exceptions; therefore, homosexual relationships and homosexual activity were seen as contrary to nature, disordered and sinful. Now society,

prompted by the research of psychologists, psychiatrists and other scientists vigorously questions those presumptions about orientation. And the questioning increases as LGBT people emerge from their closets. For the first time, straight people are seeing daughters, sons, uncles, co-workers, neighbors, teammates and others who are not only "out," but living happy lives, contributing to society, even contributing in creative ways to the multiplication of the race. That's why so many people react angrily and resentfully in the face of unremitting negativity from church leaders.

The question now is why these people in committed gay relationships should not be eligible for the same benefits society grants to those in committed straight relationships? And why should this relationship not be called marriage -- a different kind of marriage, for sure, but a union that serves society's needs in practical and useful ways? And why should the church be so uptight about what's happening? Gay Catholic couples are daily fulfilling that central requirement of Christian marriage, love and fidelity. Would it kill the hierarchy to at least acknowledge these facts? George and other prelates and priests who cling to a failing theology and an outmoded anthropology are only further degrading their authority

It will probably be some time before gay couples will be openly wedded in Catholic churches. But evolution in this matter is a Spirit-guided process, I believe. Look around and listen! The foundation is under construction.

You can read George's column here [1].

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[1] http://www.catholicnewworld.com/cnwonline/2013/0106/cardinal.aspx