

The Difference Is the Difference:
Sexual Difference and the Defense of Marriage

By Rev. J. Brian Bransfield, S.T.D.

The marriage of one man and one woman is the most recognized institution in time and space. Sacred Scripture and the authentic teaching of the Church confirm what was present from the beginning of time, namely, that marriage is a relationship constructed on the basis of heterosexual difference.

The natural relation, man to woman and woman to man, that is made possible by sexual difference has always been the essential base for the permanent, faithful, fruitful bond between one man and one woman. This is easily recognized as the teaching of Divine Revelation, the truth revealed by God which is handed on through Sacred Scripture and Tradition. But this is also clearly recognized as the classical truth of natural reason: Marriage is not only a sacred institution; it is also a time-honored institution as recognized in the established, standard and traditional understanding of marriage as the permanent union of one man and one woman. This understanding of marriage is today under relentless attack from the attempt to redefine marriage to include same-sex unions, and thus exclude the essential meaning of sexual difference from the heart of marriage.

The Crisis

The attack we face today is based in the crisis of the identity of the human person inherited from yesterday. A misunderstanding of the nature of the human person has been advancing for centuries in prestigious universities and in seemingly mundane sociological trends.

What is your identity as a human person? Often, when we think of our identity we tend to think of our national origin, our life-history, our occupation, neighborhood, and commitments. But our identity is deeper. It was influenced by events that took place long before we were born. These events in particular, include the Industrial, Sexual, and Technological Revolutions.

The Industrial Revolution of the late 1800's, while positive in many ways, also had detrimental effects. Before the Industrial Revolution all economies were local. In the agrarian or mercantile society, the father was always relatively close to home, and the children interacted with their father regularly throughout the day. In such a setting the person was understood in terms of the relation to his or her family. The industrial society dragged the father away from the home to the factory. The long hours and demanding schedule led to a conception of the person as one who *produced, acquired, and consumed* things.

Fifty to sixty years later, the Sexual Revolution again changed the notion of the person. Ironically, women sought liberation in taking the exact same route men had taken only a few short years earlier in the Industrial Revolution: Away from the home. This move was not any more liberating for women than it was for men. Many women now find

themselves struggling to balance a full-time career with the full-time demands of raising a family.

With the advent of so called free-love, the pornography industry, the contraceptive pill, and no-fault divorce, the Sexual Revolution separated marriage from sexuality, and sexuality from love. The human person was understood as someone whose meaning came not just from acquiring things, but from *acquiring pleasure*. Commitment, especially that of marriage, was seen as the enemy of pleasure.

Forty years after the Sexual Revolution along came the Technological Revolution. With computers, cell phones, iPods, and instant messaging, the notion of personal identity again changed. Now, being a person meant not only that one acquired pleasure, but that one did so *quickly*.

To sum up, the Industrial, Sexual, and Technological Revolutions altered the popular understanding of identity of the human person. Instead of being grounded in marriage and family, the person's identity is grounded in acquiring pleasure quickly. One result is the popular misconception that the human person consists simply of "consciousness": A person is his or her internal, individual, subjective, rational and emotional consciousness. The emphasis on the inner psyche has led to a de-emphasis of the meaning of the body: the body is dismissed as an incidental and unimportant reality which surrounds the real self. The fact that human nature includes either male or female persons is deemed unimportant, and is even a restriction to be overcome.

The crisis we face today has deep roots. Abortion, divorce, euthanasia, human embryonic stem cell research, fatherlessness and same-sex "unions" all emerge out of the notion that being a person means acquiring pleasure quickly. This distortion of what it is to be human is tragic and devastating for individuals and society.

The Classical Sense of Marriage

The classical sense of the human person, developed from natural reason and Divine Revelation, is very different. The human person is a union of body and soul. The body is part of the full and complete personal reality of the human being. When a man and a woman become friends, date, become engaged and enter marriage they are entering something that is far more than a relationship between two individuals.

Human beings have discovered that the relationship of man to woman and woman to man in marriage is unlike any other relationship. Husband and wife share headaches and heart aches; laughter and tears; agreements and arguments about habits and finances; and form common memories and share their life together. But good friends can also do these things.

Husband and wife transform the ordinary tasks of life by making a unique gift of self one to another. There is one irreplaceable act that marks marriage out as an utterly unique relationship. This act brings all of the routine tasks of shared life to a new level.

Husband and wife in marriage make a total and complete gift of self in love, which culminates in the two-in-one flesh union. The two-in-one flesh union is an utterly unique action. Husband and wife take everything they are and make a gift of self in and through the full reality of their bodies one to another in an act of love: the conjugal, marital act.

The conjugal act is not simply a sexual act. Their persons truly become one in a total gift of self. This oneness is accomplished in and through the sexual difference male-to-female and female-to-male.

The love husband and wife express in the conjugal act leads them in this moment to overflow and become *ek-static*: outside themselves in love for this person—they have *become a gift of self* on every level of their being, including the physical and sexual. They are not meant to acquire pleasure quickly, but to give beauty contemplatively. Such a gift is, of its very nature, permanent, faithful, and open to life.

This act reveals the profound meaning of the body, sexuality and sexual difference. The basic biological and physiological realities are integral to the personal identity of man and woman. These realities express the personal communication of the reciprocal gift of self proper to marriage through the conjugal act. Sexual difference establishes an openness and mutual receptivity between persons of the opposite sex which allows them to truly become one on every level of their being in the marital act. This openness is simply not present for persons of the same sex. Sexual acts between persons of the same sex can never form a true union of persons.

Conclusion

Many of us, religious and non-religious, know people who experience same-sex attraction. We know the confusion and pain so often experienced by those who have a homosexual orientation. And we know this as friends. The Church longs to share pastoral resources that can assist all people to develop chaste friendships and a virtuous style of life.

It is not discrimination to treat different things differently: Marriage between persons of the opposite sex is completely and totally different from any type of relationship between persons of the same sex. Same-sex unions undermine not just procreation, but also the central element of sexual difference and its relation to the unitive good, the sanctity of human sexuality and the permanent and abiding meaning of marriage.

Rev. J. Brian Bransfield is a priest of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia and serves as Assistant General Secretary of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. He is the author of a forthcoming book on Pope John Paul II's vision of the human person and the theology of the body due out from Pauline Books and Media in Spring 2010.