

The Erosion of Marriage: Rejecting the objective form of marriage, rooted in nature, opens the door to arbitrary redefinitions.

by DON DeMARCO 09/28/2014

It has been widely assumed that the issue of same-sex marriage is essentially a civil-rights issue. Therefore, any objection to it, no matter how reasonable, is construed as a form of discrimination or even bigotry.

The fundamental issue, however, has nothing to do with civil rights, but with whether a same-sex arrangement is truly a marriage. What has been summarily set aside is the nature of marriage.

Those looking for a clear, reasonable and objective presentation of the nature of marriage could do little better than read Robert George *et al.*'s "What Is Marriage" that appears in the *Harvard Journal of Law & Public Policy*. The authors state, "Marriage is the union of a man and a woman who make a permanent and exclusive commitment to each other of the type that is naturally (inherently) fulfilled by bearing and rearing children together. The spouses seal (consummate) and renew their union by conjugal acts — acts that constitute the behavioral part of the process of reproduction, thus uniting them as a reproductive unit."



– Shutterstock/Peter Hermes Furian

This working definition contains several elements that have been rejected, not by the Catholic Church, but by many individual Catholics and the secular world in general. The notion of a "permanent" union has been rejected by the widespread acceptance of divorce. That the union should be "exclusive" is violated in our permissive society by the frequency of marital infidelity.

Abortion is inimical to the "bearing" of children. Finally, contraception and sterilization are inconsistent with the conjugal act by which the spouses "seal" or "consummate" their union.

Divorce, infidelity, abortion, contraception and sterilization have carved out a sizeable hole in the nature of marriage, leaving it a relatively empty shell and making it susceptible to being taken over by an arrangement that is not marriage. By analogy, it is very much like the hermit crab, which occupies a vacant shell to provide itself with a

protective home. The crab has no natural home of its own and seizes the opportunity to occupy the former home of an animal whose home has become hollow. When Rome lost its inner moral strength, it was invaded and occupied by barbarians.

Society has lost a sense of what marriage is in its essence, having misinterpreted it according to how it is commonly practiced. Thus, the misrepresentation has beclouded the authentic representation. It is a phenomenon akin to Gresham's Law in economics, where bad money drives out good money. A particular Christian may be a poor example of Christ, but he should not be seen as his adequate representative.

An essential way to restore the authentic image of marriage is through the example of spouses who truly reflect its nature. The Catholic Church realizes both the importance and the difficulty involved in helping to bring this about. Trying to make marriage "easier" for spouses by emulating secular values, however, will prove to be counterproductive. Yet there is hardly anything more important to the good of society than restoring what is basic to it — marriage and the family, in their authenticity.

Marriage is something that a man and a woman *enter* into. It is something that precedes them. It is not an arrangement that proceeds from them, according to their private preferences. It is a covenant more than a contract.

Two prevailing philosophies are pernicious to marriage in its authenticity. One is relativism, which holds that the value of anything is not inherent in the object but consists in how it relates to me. Hence, marriage can be re-conceptualized to suit how it relates to my preferences. The second is deconstructionism, which maintains that notions such as "man," "woman" and "marriage" have been arbitrarily constructed and therefore can just as easily be deconstructed and re-constructed.

These two philosophies, however, have much broader implications than how they negatively affect marriage. Losing sight of the objective nature of things, and tearing everything down on the mistaken belief that they were falsely constructed in the first place, has dire implications for society as a whole. These twin philosophies pave a two-lane highway to nihilism.

The importance of authentic marriage to society is well expressed by Edmund Burke: "The Christian religion, by confining marriage to pairs, and rendering the relation indissoluble, has by these two things done more toward the peace, happiness, settlement and civilization of the world than by any other part in this whole scheme of divine wisdom."

Donald DeMarco is a senior fellow of Human Life International, professor emeritus at St. Jerome's University in Waterloo, Ontario, and an adjunct professor at Holy Apostles College and Seminary in Cromwell, Connecticut.