

A Reply to Monsignor Michael Henchal

Msgr. Henchal in his Last Word column (Harvest magazine; Sept/Oct; <http://www.portlanddiocese.org/lastword>) purports to make a rational argument about the definition of marriage. The argument is fallacious and wrong. That is intentionally a rational and a moral assertion on my part. He purports to find common factors in marriage “from the dawn of civilization.” These he says are permanency, faithfulness, man and woman, emotional support, resources and property, and procreation of children. He knows his anthropology is nonsense. It is that last attribute..... children... that most clearly gives the lie to the argument. Thousands of marriages are just not about children and not open to that possibility. But he knows that and himself proceeds to note the exceptions to all of the supposed definitional elements until he has left only “man and woman” standing as a candidate for giving us the true (Aristotelian) nature of the beast. The assumption is that something in the list has to be true. That is not an argument..... it is just his selection of the result he wants and is the perfect example of begging the question.

It is the State, the Msgr. says, that has diluted all his so-called definitional elements of marriage---procreation, faithfulness, permanency, and now man and woman. Since the state is doing this it must follow, he says, that what the State

does do can only be civil unions. Alas, the claim to find the truth in “every culture, from the dawn of human civilization” has been totally abandoned..... never mind that that was not marriage but only civil unions. This is not a rational argument at all, but just word play. The topic is too serious for that.

What is true is that “man and woman” is the least meaningful of the historical indicia of marriage. The Msgr. has noted some important characteristics often associated, more or less, with some marriages----faithfulness, support, permanency, material commonality, and what I would call future-building. None of these require a man and a woman. They require two humans and commitment. What is important are values and principles, and not, for example, sex. The truth is that the “definition” is a matter of value choices and social justice and architecture and those all evolve. Deal with it.

In a remarkable misunderstanding of what is at stake the Msgr. says: “But you do not claim your dignity by trying to adopt the ways or structures or titles or names or definitions of some other group or people.” No? Consider slaves, racial and ethnic minorities, the handicapped, and on and on. You do precisely claim your dignity in this way and such is the history of lifting the myriad forms of oppression and discrimination. The Msgr. slips “definition” into the list because he appears to really think he has found an immutable, God given definition of “man and woman” for marriage.

The Msgr. is incorrect. The claim is false, arbitrary and capricious both on the scale of human history and on the scale of individual marriages. But what is true is that the “definition” evolves and it should. The law, moral and statutory evolves. From a Christian perspective we are mandated to evolve. “In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greed, slave nor free, male nor female.” It is time to add gay and straight to that list of what is not a morally permissible basis of discrimination.

The Msgr. ends by saying that, “Gay men and women are entitled to their rightful dignity.” But he has tried to define “rightful” to exclude them from marriage by his failed definitional argument. At least we are in the correct universe of discourse here---a moral one where the focus should, I believe, be on “rightful” which is a moral term. And here the Msgr. looses the moral argument hands down. It is right that gays be granted the “title and name” of marriage. Shame on the Msgr. for the sophistry!

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(Harvest Magazine article: <http://www.portlanddiocese.org/lastword>)

