

## What's Wrong with Gay Marriage? (Fr. Lawrence R. Farley)

[Ξένες γλώσσες](#) / [In English](#)



*Cake Demonstrating Homosexual Marriage*

The best place to access the views, questions, prejudices and challenges of the World is, I believe, the office water-cooler. The next best places would be the *Huffington Post* and (for Canadians), the CBC. The water-cooler however retains its pride of place as the site more often visited by the common man who, if he retains his common sense, tends to avoid the *Huffington Post* and the CBC. Anyway, it was at the office water-cooler that the common man (in this case, a woman) was expressing the common view on gay marriage, and asking with some anger, "If two guys love each other, why can't they get married?" The anger accompanying the question indicated that the speaker thought that the traditional prohibition of gay marriage was morally abhorrent (my phrase, not hers), and she was reacting angrily, I suspect, because she discerned in the opposition to gay marriage just one

more wretched example of how those wretched Christians are wretchedly imposing their narrow, irrational, bigoted and wretched views on the rest of us. In the old days, we wretched Christians were blamed for incestuous orgies (what else would all that secret talk about “the Kiss” and “brothers and sisters” mean?), and for cannibalism (“eating the Body and the Blood”? Eh what?) Now we wretched Christians are blamed for the sin—rapidly becoming the hate crime—of “homophobia”, which is apparently defined as any dissent from the secular view that homosexual orientation and life-style are equally on par with heterosexual orientation and life-style. The Secular Inquisition has made its ruling; such dissent is no longer allowed in polite society. Enthusiasm for Gay Rights is required, and marching in the Gay Pride Parade is acceptable as sufficient evidence of such enthusiasm for those aspiring to political office.

So, what *is* wrong with gay marriage? It’s a reasonable question for water-cooler philosophers: if two guys love each other, why can’t they get married? The question strikes us as reasonable only because we are modern. Ancient people (that is, earlier than 1960), be they Christian, Jewish, Muslim or pagan, would have regarded the phrase “homosexual marriage” as essentially oxymoronic, a contradiction in terms. Yes, pagans too. Pagans such as those living in the Roman Empire in the time of Christ generally had no problem with homosexuality (word had it that even Socrates could swing both ways), but they separated it entirely from marriage. Pagans, in other words, though not the slightest bit illiberal, could at least think. They had no problem with a man fornicating (or “hooking up” as we call it today) with any number of women, or with any number of men, or any number of boys. But all this sexual activity had nothing to do with marriage. Marriage, as ancient pagan, Jew, Christian, and Zoroastrian knew, involved man and woman, and resultant babies whose legitimacy was rooted in the legal obligations the biological parents owed to each other. Accordingly a pagan man might have a wife and legal heirs, as well as other women (and men or boys) on the side. Presumably he had the sense to keep them a reasonable distance from each other. (We think of the toast: “To our wives and sweet-hearts—may they never meet.”) For the ancients, marriage was the institution in which babies were produced and family happened.

It is therefore difficult to answer the question, “what’s wrong with gay marriage” because we have forgotten what marriage is, and we have forgotten this because we live in a culture of contraception, one which has pretty much sundered sexual activity from its usual result, which is procreation. For us moderns, love is a feeling, and marriage is simply one way of celebrating this feeling. Why shouldn’t gay men who have the feeling also be allowed to have its celebration? Marriage has nothing necessarily to do with children, but rather with this feeling of love.

Children are not necessarily a part of the package. They are considered optional, and not a part of marriage's essence.

Do not misunderstand the use of the phrase "culture of contraception". Like Fr. John Meyendorff (in his book *Marriage: an Orthodox Perspective*) and other contemporary Orthodox ethicists like him, I accept that artificial contraception can be used responsibly by devout Orthodox Christians. I do not agree with Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae Vitae* which famously outlawed artificial birth control for Roman Catholics, nor do I agree with his view that each sexual act must be open to the possibility of procreation. (I do not even think that this view is self-consistent, since it allows for Natural Family Planning, which precisely aims at allowing a sexual act without the possibility of procreation. It uses calendars more than rubber, but the goal is the same.) My problem is not with contraception as a *practice*, but as a *culture*. We now no longer assume that sex and babies go together, and if sex (or "hooking up") results in pregnancy, we are shocked. Our reigning culture, through countless movies, novels and popular songs, teaches us to expect that sexual activity is always: 1) free from emotional complexities; 2) expected of all adolescents and adults, so that a "Forty Year Old Virgin" is lamentable and a fit subject for a comedy, and 3) not likely ever to result in pregnancy. When any of these taught expectations are not fulfilled, we are surprised. You're pregnant? What's wrong with you? I wanted us to keep having sex. Who said anything about babies?

The ancients stood outside this culture of contraception (partly perhaps because they lacked the technology for such a culture). For them, marriage, defined as the union and partnership between man and woman, had as one of its main goals the production and rearing of children. That is, marriage (or "family", to give it its other name) was the factory wherein the human race was manufactured. It was in the family that a child had the safety to grow and learn what it was to be a man or a woman, and how men and women were expected to behave, and to treat one another. Books were not often produced to teach that, nor were they really required. Children learned by watching. They watched Daddy and learned what it was to be a man, and a father, and how men should treat women, children, and other men. They watched Mommy and learned what it was to be a woman and a mother, and how women should treat men, and be treated by them. Just as according to Hilary Clinton, "it takes a village to raise a child", so according to the witness of human history, it takes both a dad and a mom to effectively transmit gender roles. A single gender alone cannot do the job, because gender roles are not concepts to be learned, but realities to be absorbed, and one needs to observe the complementarity of both genders interacting to absorb the differences properly.

Gender is basic to human nature, and its lessons, learned by watching, usually reinforced the basic way they were created. Thus nature and nurture alike contributed to their healthy adult functioning as men and women. That is how society replenished itself, and maintained stability and equilibrium throughout the centuries. (It is also why the State has a stake in the institution of marriage.) Sometimes nature slips up (though I suspect when one cuts through the barrage of propaganda one finds that instances of true sexual inversion are comparatively rare). Sometimes nurture slips up, the Daddy and/or Mommy do a supremely bad job of imaging healthy gender roles and of raising emotionally healthy children. But the general theory, which holds that both nature and nurture have a role to play, seems to have worked out in practice and produced generation after generation of stable and healthy children. If the theory were fundamentally unsound, the race would have lost its stability long ago, and we would not be here. Family as factory for the manufacture of the human being, I suggest, has been doing okay. And the transmission of gender roles is a major cog in the machine producing healthy men and women.

It is just here that the concept of gay marriage becomes problematic. The problem is not only that nature decrees that two gay men cannot reproduce and that their sexuality can never result in children. Our culture of contraception finds no problem with that, since it has already separated sex from procreation. Two gay men can have children by adoption[\[i\]](#). But though *nature* can be side-stepped like this, *nurture* cannot. Two gay men cannot image or transmit by example to the adopted children what it means to be a man or a father, because they do not know or experience it themselves. Two gay women cannot image or transmit by example what it means to be a woman or a mother for the same reason. To be sure, they can transmit many other worthy things—things like compassion, courage, a good sense of humor, and social conscience. But the crucial ingredient of gender role remains beyond them, and that lack makes it impossible for them to fulfill the historic role and task of being fathers and mothers, which is one of the purposes of marriage. Children raised in such an environment will retain a skewed understanding of human nature—one which sunders procreation from the essence of marriage and which remakes the concepts of masculinity and femininity according to utterly new (and untried) canons of the brave new homosexual world.

This does not mean, of course, that if society allows Gay Marriage, and a justice of the peace or some liberal clergy pronounce them “man and spouse” then the wheels will fall off western civilization by a week next Thursday. But it does mean that changes will have been put into place which will eventually work themselves out in many unforeseen ways in the generations to come. Gender is sufficiently

basic to human nature that messing with it and altering the nature of marriage so fundamentally will produce many far-reaching changes. The family factory is not that busted, and if we “fix” it or tamper with it, the resulting human product will be altered in many unforeseen ways. Obviously I cannot elaborate in which ways, or they would not be unforeseen. But fifty or a hundred years after putting the leaven of gay marriage into the lump of what it means to be a family, we may be confident that the lump will be pretty thoroughly leavened. And this resultant bread (to continue the metaphor) will not be Wonder Bread. It will not (as Wonder Bread originally advertised) build strong healthy bodies twelve ways, nor contribute to the health of our civilization. Why should Gay Marriage be disallowed? Because it eventually will alter what we mean by family, men, and women, and this alteration will not be for the better. If and when that happens, those gathering at the water-cooler generations hence will not look back on us with favor.

*[\[i\]](#) I note in passing that this means that child-rearing in a homosexual world must of necessity be culturally parasitical-or if you like, dependent upon others. That is, ‘gay’ couples can only rear children because ‘straight’ couples have them for them. This is not the case for adoption on the part of ‘straight’ couples; it is only accidentally dependent upon others, whereas in the case of homosexual couples it is dependent upon others necessarily and essentially.*

*Written by Fr. Lawrence*

*Fr. Lawrence is the author of the [Orthodox Bible Study Companion Series](#) from Conciliar Press, and of a number of other books and articles, and appears in regular weekday podcasts on [Ancient Faith Radio](#). Many more of Fr. Lawrence's articles and thoughts can be found on his blog, [Straight from the Heart](#).*