

**Some Questions and Answers:
The Sacramental Blessing of a Sacred Union
Prepared by the Commission on Equality of
The Episcopal Diocese of San Joaquin
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An Introduction

The Provisional Bishop of San Joaquin is authorizing the use of a rite for the “Sacramental Blessing of a Sacred Union.” This sacramental rite maybe used to bless the union of a man and a woman or it may be used to sacramentally unite persons of the same gender.

At the present time the state of California has voted to ban same-gender marriage. While this ban may be reversed, this paper is written with the assumption that same-gender “marriage” is not legal in this state, and the diocese has no intention to violate the current marriage laws. This document is presented, not as a comprehensive theological treatise, nor as an official position paper of the Episcopal Church. It is written to provide some distinctions between marriage as a legal contract and the sacramental blessing of sacred unions. It is also written in order to provide a biblical, historical, and theological basis for this sacramental blessing, especially as applied to a same-gender union, but also to explain their introduction in this diocese

The document is presented in a question-answer format in which there is an attempt to use some everyday language that may be able to help with the everyday questions that people who are sitting in the pews may be asking (or may have been asked of them by friends from other faith traditions). Understandably, this document may raise a host of questions with regard to the more encompassing issue of our position on “homosexuality” and how this phenomenon is understood within the biblical and historic tradition of our Church. While some of the questions and answers offered here may indirectly address issues of homosexuality, the purview here is limited to questions about the Blessing of a Sacred Union, particularly as it pertains to same gender couples.

The thinking throughout the document proceeds from a fundamental reliance upon our core baptismal covenant: we are people committed to bringing about a just society and to respecting the dignity of every human being.

Question 1

What is meant by “Sacred Union”?

Answer

For purposes of this discussion and for their blessing, a Sacred Union is defined as a lifelong committed relationship characterized by fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful, honest communication, and the holy love which enables those in such relationships to see in each other the image of God.

Question 2

What is the difference between “marriage” as recognized by the state and Holy Matrimony or a Blessing of a Sacred Union?

Answer

Actually, there is a lot of cloudiness about the relationship between Church and state when it comes to marriage. If these matters are confusing to you, you are certainly not alone.

In the first instance, marriage is a civil or legal contract. In most states (including California), in order to get married a couple must first obtain an official marriage license from the state. This document testifies that they are legally able to contract a marriage under the laws of the state, and it gives them permission to legally enter into marriage. All couples, regardless of what kind of marriage ceremony they will have, must first obtain this marriage license.

The ceremony for officially legalizing the marriage can then be conducted by any number of persons with any number of wedding ceremonies. It can be conducted by a judge or other person recognized by the state in a garden, a home, a judge's chambers. After some sort of public exchange of marriage vows, the officially designated officer of the state signs the license and testifies that the two are now legally married. With the signing of the license, the couple is legally married in the eyes of the state of California.

Now, here is where the Church gets into it. In our country (which is not the case in many other countries), it is the custom that church weddings can also be one of the ways in which a marriage can be legalized. Thus at the end of the church ceremony, the clergy person (who is, in essence, an agent of the state for this purpose) signs the license stating that vows were exchanged and with the signing of the license the couple is legally married in the eyes of the state of California.

Since at present California has banned persons of the same gender from being legally married, clergy (as agents of the state) are not able to perform a “legal” marriage for persons of the same sex. However, when we get involved as a Church, some additional content, far beyond the legal recognition of the union, gets put on the table. While it is true that the priest is acting as an agent of the state in performing a marriage, a priest is also an agent of the Church. In this capacity, and in the name of the Church, she/he witnesses the vows of the couple (who are the actual ministers of the rite), and then blesses their union in the name of the God.

In essence, every church marriage is a sacramental Blessing of a Sacred Union. Thus, while persons of the same gender may not be “legally married” in the State of California, the Church can (and in this instance will) offer the sacramental and spiritual blessing to couples of the same gender.

Question 3

Can we speak about the “Blessing of a Sacred Union” as sacramental?

Answer

Yes. We live in a sacramental world: “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows his handiwork” (Psalm 19:1). In the sacraments and in sacramental rites the reality of God and God’s presence is focused and consciously encountered. In them we experience something of God which is ultimately unspeakable and not completely knowable to the human mind; and we experience this through aspects of the created order, e.g. the self-giving life of Christ in the bread broken and wine out-poured at Holy Communion. The sacramental provides a doorway for helping us enter into the experience of God’s holy presence. It provides us with a place where the divine and the human can intersect, an entry into an encounter with the living God.

In the case of the blessing of a Sacred Union, the Church is recognizing something of God’s covenantal love already present in the life and love of the couple. The couple’s public vows express their intention to continue in this way of life, living together in a lifelong covenantal relationship. The Church blesses this decision, and gives thanks to God as something of God’s own steadfast love for us and for all creation is revealed in the couple’s own covenant. As the People of God witness the exchange of vows, they are invited into a glimpse into the love of the couple being joined, and hence into the circle of God’s own love. In this way, the blessing of such a covenant can be said to be sacramental.

Question 4

Traditionally, only a man and a woman could receive the Church’s blessing for their union. Why is it possible for persons of the same gender to receive the same blessing?

Answer

Baptism is the primary sacrament from which all other sacraments and all the rites of the Church flow. The standards for admission to the sacrament of Baptism should likewise apply to all other rites of the Church. With this in mind, no person should be disqualified from receiving any of the Church’s ministrations on the basis of who they are or how they are created. At baptism one is made a full member of the Body of Christ, the Church. If persons are not disqualified from baptism because of gender, age, race, sexual orientation, and so on, neither should they be denied the other rites of the Church.

Having said this, we also recognize that some sacraments and rites, like ordination, might not be made available to some persons under particular circumstances. For example, after a period of discernment, a bishop or Commission on Ministry may refuse to ordain or recommend a person seeking the Sacrament of Holy Orders because it is believed the person seeking ordination is doing so for personal gain (e.g., career advancement). When it comes to Matrimony or the Blessing of a Sacred Union, a priest may also refuse to offer the Church’s blessing to a couple because it is believed that the couple is incapable of entering into a relationship of lasting commitment as understood by our Church. However, these rites are never withheld because something basic to

the very nature of the person has disqualified them, e.g., being a man, a woman, a gay person, a white person, a black person.

With regard to the question of same-gender couples being able to receive the sacramental blessing of the Church focuses back upon our earlier definition about the nature of sacraments and the sacramental. As noted earlier, the Blessing of a Sacred Union involves the exchange of vows between two people who make a public declaration of unconditional, covenantal love. This God-type love draws us all into the experience of God.

Our common life and experience shows that two men or two women are just as capable of making such a covenantal commitment of lifelong, God-like love as are a man and a woman. Therefore, persons of the same gender are obviously able to receive the Church's ministrations by having the relationship blessed in the context of the whole people of God..

Question 5

Isn't the promise to have children necessary before a union may be sacramentally blessed by the Church?

Answer

On page 423 of the Book of Common Prayer are carefully articulated the purposes of Christian marriage. The idea that "bearing children" is a pre-requisite to the Church's blessing does not figure among them. The prayer book suggests that a sacred union has three purposes: first, the mutual joy that a couple can provide for one another; secondly, in order that the couple might help and comfort one another in prosperity and adversity; and finally, for "the procreation of children and their nurture in the knowledge and love of the Lord *when it is God's will*". (italics added).

The Church has traditionally offered the sacrament of Holy Matrimony to couples for whom the procreation of children was not even an option: for example, couples past child-bearing age, or couples in which one of the partners has a physical disability that precludes conceiving or bearing children. Moreover, couples may choose not to have children for a multitude of reasons.

Question 6

How can "procreation" be understood for same-gender couples?

Answer

If one looks at the tradition of the Church over time, a widely accepted definition of "procreation" is cooperation with God in the creation of a new human person whose destiny is to share God's life forever. This definition of procreation is far broader than the actual physical conception and bearing of a child.

For example, a man and woman who adopt a child are certainly bringing the child into a new life in this world. As this man and woman raise this child in the knowledge and love of the Lord (as the Book of Common Prayer directs) they

nurture the child to share God's life forever. Although the child is not a physical product of their bodies, they are certainly procreators in every way in which procreation is understood.

The exact same reasoning can be applied to same-gender couples. Two men or two women might likewise adopt a child, nurture and guide the child in "the knowledge and love of the Lord" and nurture the child to share in "God's life forever." As such, they are procreating.

Question 7

If we offer the sacramental blessing for persons of the same gender, will we be abandoning our heritage and changing our biblical tradition?

Answer

We have to remember that, through the years, almost everything we understand about marriage has changed and evolved. In fact, if we were to base our current understanding and practice of marriage upon Old Testament principles and practice, every man in the Church would have a whole house full of wives to help carry on the family line. Gradually, the custom of marriage between one man and one woman evolved and became prevalent in most of the Christian West. However, even in the context of monogamous marriage, the understanding of the purpose of marriage in ages past was certainly different from our current understanding.

Throughout antiquity, including Christian antiquity, marriage was primarily viewed as a social vehicle, uniting families for various political and social gains, including increasing the size of a farm or business or even a nation. Women were commodities in this contract, who along with their dowry, were "sold" into a marital union. Such marital unions enabled the passing on of lineage and inheritance, but also protected the woman from harm lest she be left to fend for herself in a society that demanded and expected the protection of a man. Furthermore, our ancestors placed great stock in the necessity of physically consummating a marriage. A couple was not "wed" until the marriage was physically consummated. Thus, the conception and bearing of children enjoyed primary significance and was an absolute necessity for Christian marriage in the past, again, to shore-up the lineage and insure the continuation of the family.

The idea of marrying for love or the notion that marriage was a way for couples to express mutual joy was essentially a foreign concept in antiquity and not part of our Christian heritage. For the Book of Common Prayer to suggest that the primary purposes of marriage are "mutual joy" and "the help and comfort given to one another in prosperity and adversity" represents a serious and significant evolution from the ancient heritage and from the biblical tradition. It is a relatively modern idea.

More recently, our views on divorce have changed dramatically. As little as fifty years ago, divorce was reckoned to be a greater sin than, for example, staying in

a violent marriage that exposed a spouse and children to a great risk of harm at the hands of the other spouse. Most Christians no longer believe that. Divorced persons are permitted to remarry in most churches.

As humanity and divinity have danced together over the ages, we have evolved in our experience of God and have come to newer understanding as how best to be faithful and committed followers of Jesus. The Biblical tradition from the Old Testament through the Christian era to our very own time is marked by evolution and emergence. Throughout our evolution, we do not change for the sake of change, but rather we change in order to be live out the demands of the Gospel more faithfully

When we are caught up in the “flow of God” we will always be moving in the direction of love. As such, our evolutions over time may be judged according to whether or not they have led us to greater and greater love – to the love of God and the love of one's neighbor as one's self.

Certainly, the notion of blessing the covenant of persons of the same gender is a change from our historic heritage, and change is never easy. However, this is not an abandonment of our tradition, but rather an evolution and emergence from it.

Question 8

But even if we should and can bless the covenant of persons of the same sex, shouldn't we wait for someone in the “official Church” to develop such a service?

Answer

The 76th General Convention passed Resolution C056, which directed the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music to “collect and develop theological and liturgical resources” as they relate to the blessing of same gender relationships. That task is in progress and the results are to be reported to the 77th General Convention in 2012. In the interim, Resolution C056 stated that, “bishops, particularly those in dioceses within civil jurisdictions where same-gender marriage, civil unions, or domestic partnerships are legal, may provide generous pastoral response to meet the needs of members of this Church.” This resolution was affirmed by the Convention of this diocese in 2009. Following the Diocesan Convention of 2010, this diocese’s Commission on Equality, along with Bishop Lamb, hosted a forum on the issue of blessing same gender unions. The forum was well attended and the sense of the forum was that the Diocese is ready to bless these unions.

Therefore, the present decisions are in accordance with the mind and decisions of the Episcopal Church and the of the Diocese of San Joaquin.

Question 9

Will there be a liturgy and guidelines provided for the blessing of Sacred Unions?

Answer

Yes. A liturgy will very soon be authorized by the bishop and the following guidelines are to be put in place. As with couples seeking marriage, same gender couples seeking the blessing of their union must meet the following criteria:

- a) Each must be free to enter into such a covenant. That is, they must not be in an existing covenantal relationship, including marriage.
- b) Both understand that a Sacred Union is a physical and spiritual union of two persons, entered into within the community of faith, by mutual consent of heart, mind, and will, and with intent that it be lifelong.
- c) Both receive instruction as to the nature, meaning, and purpose of Sacred Union by the Member of the Clergy, or that they have both received such instruction from persons known by the Member of the Clergy to be competent and responsible.
- d) At least one of the parties has received Holy Baptism.
- e) The Member of the Clergy shall be satisfied by appropriate evidence that any prior marriage has been annulled or dissolved by a final judgment or decree of a civil court of competent jurisdiction.
- f) If either person was party to a prior marriage, the Member of the Clergy shall consult with and obtain the consent of the Bishop in which the Member of the Clergy is canonically resident.
- g) The Member of the Clergy shall have instructed the parties that continuing concern must be shown for the well-being of the former spouse, and of any children of the prior marriage.

Moreover, it is expected that the use of liturgies of Blessing of Sacred Unions occur in the context of the Christian community and with the community's understanding of its role in fostering godly relationships. Every effort should be made, therefore, to fulfil the hopes that the on-going relationship of the couple would be supported by the community both before and after the service, and in turn enrich the life of the community. It is particularly appropriate that the blessing take place in the context of a Eucharist in which the members of the community participate.

Finally, as it is currently with the celebration and blessing of a marriage, no clergy person will be required to officiate at any rite of union in contravention of their beliefs and conscience.

Conclusion

In the beginning of this document, we mentioned that we had no intention of answering every possible question that may arise regarding the subject of the blessing of unions, especially as applied to the union of persons of the same sex. In fact, even our "answers" to these questions are not so much definitive answers as they are guidelines to help formulate ideas leading to further dialogue.

Perhaps, though, the best and most convincing way for individuals to move forward in their understanding about whether they can embrace same-gender blessings within the Christian tradition and in our own Episcopal Church is one which is far more “incarnational” and far less theological or rational.

So here is a final thought: if you want to discover whether or not the love of God can be experienced and expressed in a lifelong God-centered committed relationship between couples of the same-gender, have some conversation with people of the same gender who have been in lifelong committed relationships with each other. Interact with them. Look at the fruit of their life together. Many of our church communities are graced and gifted with the presence and ministry of such couples. Spend some time together. Share your stories with one another: go have dinner, get a cup of coffee or have a glass of wine together.

When we are able to see and interact with real loving people who share the same joys and the same struggles and are on the same journey of faith, we come to the heart of real theological thinking – the challenge to speak about God from our lived experience. When we encounter the living God and meet the risen Christ in fellow human beings, we are immersed in the mystery of our all belonging to God; we no longer need to debate who deserves more or who deserves. Living in the reality that we all belong to God, we realize that everyone has been given everything. That is the nature of amazing grace.

This document was originally prepared by a writing group of the Diocese of Los Angeles. It has been considerably adapted for the Diocese of San Joaquin.