

Roman Catholic Church/United Church of Canada Dialogue

Marriage: Report of the Roman Catholic/United Church Dialogue, October 2004—April 2012

Since establishment in 1975, the *Roman Catholic Church/United Church of Canada Dialogue* has discussed, and issued reports on, a number of topics. In 2004, following contrary briefs by their two churches to the Supreme Court of Canada on *same-sex marriage*, the Dialogue after deep reflection decided on Marriage as its next topic. Praying for the guidance of the Spirit, the Dialogue has wrestled the subject joyfully, and is now reporting consensually under the headings of Social Context, Theology of Marriage, Christian Wedding, Pastoral Care and Marriage in Society, as well as Conclusions and Recommendations. Appendix A contains a selected bibliography; and Appendix B the chronological list of persons involved in the dialogue on this subject from 2004 until 2012.

May 16, 2012

Roman Catholic Church/United Church of Canada Dialogue¹

REPORT

Introduction

In May 2004, at a moment of intense public focus on same-sex marriage, the General Council of The United Church of Canada and the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops presented opposing factums before the Supreme Court of Canada on the question of legalizing such marriage in Canada. Given the theological and methodological differences that have characterized these two churches throughout their histories, one might interpret the very public debate between them and before the Supreme Court as their final and mutually exclusive words on the subject of marriage.

Within the context of that debate, however, and in the immediate wake of this public manifestation of the differences between our two churches, the Roman Catholic/United Church of Canada Dialogue participants reflected deeply upon its mandate:

- *to increase understanding and appreciation between the Roman Catholic Church and The United Church of Canada;*
- *to explore pastoral, theological and ethical issues, including those which may divide our churches; and,*
- *to learn from and be challenged by one another and commit to countering misinformation, stereotypes and prejudices that may influence the members of our churches.*

Dialogue participants came to the view that the group could best honour both the letter and the spirit of this mandate by taking *marriage* as its next topic. Further, the group approached its consideration of marriage in the light of its commitment to ecumenical Christian fellowship, not in the winner-take-all debating method of the legal system. Instead, members of the dialogue began an exploration of scripture and history, theology and pastoral practice related to the respective understandings of the two churches concerning marriage. We wanted to understand the other's perspectives, to consider similarities and differences in terms of theological method, and to identify areas of convergence and divergence as these relate to a theology of marriage. We wanted to understand *how* each church came to its unique perspective and the reasons underlying each other's way of thinking about marriage. Most of all, while remaining honest about real differences, we wanted to discover ways to celebrate and to build upon our important commonalities, where we and others could work together in service to God's kingdom.

¹ Established in 1975 by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops and the General Council of the United Church of Canada, the Roman Catholic Church-United Church of Canada National Dialogue has considered a number of topics. Reports on the work have included: [In Whose Name? The Baptismal Formula in Contemporary Culture](#) (2000); and [Sin, Reconciliation and Ecclesial Identity](#) (2005). Publicly available documents can be found on the website of the Canadian Centre for Ecumenism: http://www.oikoumene.ca/faith_dialogues#faith_dialogue_9.

Since October 2004, this has been a journey in Christian love for dialogue participants, each truly seeking to hear and understand the other, to clarify misunderstandings and to move beyond the rhetoric surrounding the issue of marriage in Canada today. We hope to inspire the thousands of members who may think of our respective churches as deadlocked in a no win situation, to show that even our differences are not sufficient to destroy the love we have for one another as sisters and brothers in Christ.

What follows is a summary of our dialogue on marriage and a record of our journey thus far. It is not an authoritative declaration on marriage by either the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops or the General Council of The United Church of Canada. Rather, it represents a reflection by Roman Catholic and United Church members looking seriously at the question of marriage in Canada and the theological perspectives that inform our two church traditions on this topic. It is an invitation to other members of our churches to grow in appreciation of the riches that each tradition has to offer regarding marriage in the real, daily lives of women and men. Finally, it is a call for all Christians in Canada to continue to strive for the full and visible unity of the Church in spite of the real or apparent challenges that arise in everyday life.

We consider that the result of the dialogue as recorded here offers hope to both churches as they move forward in their relationship with one another within the Body of Christ. The report contains five parts, marking the various steps along the dialogue journey: (I) the Canadian social context, (II) our churches' theologies of marriage—including areas of agreement and of divergence, (III) the Christian wedding as celebrated in our congregations, (IV) issues regarding pastoral care for couples, and finally (V) conclusions and recommendations for our churches as they work, separately and together, as servants of God and the community.

There is, however, no assertion in this report of final answers. Rather, the reader will find thoughts and questions meant to invite reflection, discussion and revelation beyond what time or circumstance allowed in the national dialogue. As members of this dialogue we hope that readers will share our discovery: that members of the Roman Catholic and United Churches, despite continuing differences, do indeed have much in common in their understandings of marriage, and that they share many goals toward supporting marriage.

By the grace of the Holy Spirit, we who have participated in this dialogue have grown in our love of God and of one another. As with all of the other theological statements and resources issued by the national RC/UC dialogue group, we invite all people, especially members of the Roman Catholic Church and The United Church of Canada, to continue in their own communities this very important dialogue on marriage in Canada.

Part I: The Canadian Social Context

1. Setting

Marriage is celebrated and lived within a social context, today's being radically different from that of the Mediaeval period, the Reformation, or even the early 20th century. Twenty-first century Canada, in a post-Christendom world, presents many challenges to those of us who want to be the church—that is, gospel-bearing Christians in an increasingly secular society.

We observe modern marriage and family in a social context of profound philosophical disagreement, where competing visions of truth and values struggle in the marketplace of ideas. Tension exists over the roles and rights of parents and of children *vis-à-vis* those of legislators, schools, courts and other authorities. There are starkly different convictions regarding the role of churches and of religion itself. For some people, this cultural incoherence causes real pain at crucial moments, while others experience the lack of consensus as exhilarating for the human diversity it represents. Our two churches offer their ministries in the thick of this cultural incoherence, because our members live it every day.

At many points in our dialogue, participants observed that *on the ground* the differences between what Roman Catholic and United Church members think, feel and do are not so great (and certainly not so clear) as they are at the official, doctrinal level of our two churches. We all inhabit the same socio-cultural milieu, and the common experience of living in this media-saturated, secular culture means sharing many assumptions, values and dilemmas that may only loosely relate to our respective church's teachings, practices and beliefs. This may partially explain why many of the marriages in Canada today are denominationally mixed, with the Roman Catholic/United Church combination especially common (an unsurprising fact, however, given that our two denominations are also the largest in Canada.)

Statistics tell one part of the story.² In the period 2001—2006, Canada's population grew by 5.4%, but census families grew faster, at 6.3%. There were also ongoing changes in the make-up of those families. Numbers of married couples increased less rapidly, by 3.5%; the number of married couples rose in absolute terms, but declined as a proportion of all couples (to 69% compared to 89% twenty years earlier). The number of common-law couples increased by about 19%, up some nine percentage points from 1986, to almost 16% of census families. One-quarter of common-law couples lived in Montreal or Quebec City, with the province of Quebec on the leading edge of the trend away from traditional marriage. Families led by a single parent also grew faster than the population, at 8%, bringing them up to some 17% of census families. The number of never-married lone parents increased as well, with about 80% of these census families headed by women and including children.

²The statistics provided were taken from the official reports on the 2006 Canadian census. See in particular Statistics Canada. 2007. *Census Report Release No. 3. Marital Status* <http://www12.statcan.ca/census-recensement/2006/rt-td/ms-mat-eng.cfm>.

Among young adults, a smaller proportion than previously are now coupled, and of those couples more live as common-law than as married. For the first time in 2006, more than half the adult population was unmarried on the census date. As for same-sex couples, their number went up by 33% in five years, though they constituted only 0.6% of all couples. About half lived in Montreal, Toronto or Vancouver, and approximately 16% of same-sex couples were married. Clearly Canadians live in a time of major social transition.

So, in a context of change and flux on so many levels, how should the church respond and, especially, how should standards of pastoral care adapt and yet remain grounded in faith? What are the implications for the meaning of marriage, for our society and for the members of our churches? What does the church have to say to civil society as a whole, and especially to young Canadians who are living out their relationships in a free market of norms and values?

During one meeting, our dialogue spent some time reflecting on the changes that have emerged in Christian marriage and the family in the past few decades. To take one example, they noted that living together is for many couples a taken-for-granted stage on the way to getting married. In mainstream opinion, this is not considered unethical or sexually irresponsible. A pastor in the group remarked that of approximately 150 marriages at which he has officiated, only five couples were not already living together before the wedding. Although the proportion can vary in different communities, this trend, like other realities in pastoral practice, tends to be interdenominational.

Other changes were equally challenging. Below is a sampler of conversation among dialogue members as we grappled with some of the issues our churches routinely face in a multicultural, pluralistic society.

Conversations

As I observe the struggles of so many single mothers in the rent-geared-to-income co-op where I live, and as I watch the impact of current youth media on the children of my friends, it seems that the current “liberal” and permissive approach to sexual behaviour is causing a great deal of pain as the consequences play out in people’s lives. Perhaps, as churches, we need to sound the alarm!

Perhaps our churches should once again persuasively proclaim the importance of the old norm of no sex before (or outside) marriage. Perhaps we should again, and in new ways, champion chastity as a fundamental cultural value, teach the value of celibacy as the noble path for people who are not married, recommend modesty in dress and language as a social good in our public culture, and in general say “No!” to the confusing chaos in which so many young people live—and in which many of them worry and suffer. I also think we could learn useful lessons from Evangelical churches and movements that are challenging secular liberal norms in these matters.

Roman Catholic Member 12/04/10 14:21

Don’t forget the preferential option for the poor. What about the many young people for whom those conditions are simply unavailable? We have to be prepared to go out to people wherever they are. What we say must be based on our principles, and at the appropriate moment those principles, and their source, can be stated explicitly. But we cannot simply repeat traditional terminology if it meets with incomprehension or indifference. Like Jesus with his parables, we need to use language that can open a door to many people, even people whose imaginations and vocabulary are “unchurched”.

United Church Member 12/04/10 14:24

What about Revelation? It is right to emphasize the imperative to respect the neighbour and to see the neighbour as an equal, a brother or sister, someone called to become more and more like God. But, along with our respect, the best things we have to offer to that neighbour come from what we have learned from what God has revealed through salvation history and through the church, including scripture.

Roman Catholic Member 22/10/09 10:34

Because human life is fundamentally relational, we know God in relation, possibly *only* in relation. The concept of Jesus as the true measure of humanity is meaningful to us as Christians but not (or not necessarily) to our non-Christian neighbours. What is the neighbour’s measure of humanity? How can we be transformed by the neighbour?

United Church Member 22/10/09 10:36

Is “covenant” part of the language of our neighbours? Is covenant the place to begin as we engage with the life of our neighbours? What about “made in the image and likeness of God”? To many in the mainstream, that concept sounds like part of an old myth, not part of a modern person’s self-understanding. On the other hand: many people who have nothing to do with the church know that being “made in the image of God” carries with it a precious ethical heritage that has contributed immeasurably to our ideas about human dignity and rights.

Roman Catholic Member 22/10/09 10:39

2. Same-Sex Relationships

Among all of Canadian society's ethical differences, the issue of committed same-sex relationships is especially charged. The decision to include those relationships within the legal definition of marriage is recent, and is the basis for the best-known example of vigorous disagreement between our two churches. This is an issue that can quickly provoke tension between persons, churches and communities.

What is the way of faithfulness in this matter? In the public mind, issues of sexuality have become closely associated with the identity of churches. Each of our churches considers that a faithful response to the gospel of Jesus Christ underlies its doctrine and discipline on sexual norms and behaviour. For each church, this area is of great spiritual and practical importance.

There has been, however, a major change in the Canadian cultural context regarding this difference. Until recently, the gay community had an outsider status in public opinion. The early efforts by leaders in the United Church to affirm the ethical equality of same-sex and opposite-sex unions were seen by supporters as a pioneering and risky work of justice requiring great social courage. As the argument for same-sex equality gained acceptance in United Church circles, it was often spoken of as a *prophetic* stance—the implication being that this was a minority view in the broader social context. Now, culturally, the weight has shifted. As the equality of same-sex and opposite-sex partnership becomes more firmly entrenched in the Canadian mainstream, many of those who dissent from this view may feel like outsiders. As particular laws change in the wake of the Supreme Court decision of 2004, some Catholics have concern that public expressions and promotion of the Catholic understanding of the normative, divinely intended character of the man/woman sexual covenant could be declared illegal.

Thus, while we are all still finding our way within this tense social dynamic, the notion that our two churches need each other seems, at first glance, unrealistic or even contradictory. Will we ever be able to forge shared goals and methods to promote a high vision of marriage, family and self-transcending sexual responsibility?

Such questions are deep, delicate, and fraught with cultural consequences, which will only gradually come to light. Our culture's grasp of the full human reality of gender and of sexual ethics is in a chaotic state of change. Many, in and out of our churches, have welcomed new insights as exhilarating and liberating. However, some fear that the public opinion now developing may have lost touch with deep and healthy dimensions of traditional wisdom about the values embedded in life-giving relationships. We need to integrate with scripture and Christian tradition many fragments of evidence from history and from present-day human experience. There is so much to learn.

In the introduction to this report, we noted that legal debates tend to favour a winner-take-all outcome. Court actions enshrine one concept, and not another, in law. The "losing" concept can then become progressively delegitimized in society.

We in this dialogue do not want the Supreme Court decision on same-sex marriage to progressively delegitimize important values and truths contained in traditional teachings about marriage and family, gender and sexuality. Such values need social and legal space within which they can be experienced, lived and communicated. In these matters, we hope that our churches will resist the closing off of legal and social space for each other's conscientious convictions.

So, what does our Roman Catholic and United Church theology say on these matters?

Part II: Our Theology of Marriage

1. The United and Roman Catholic Churches Agree That Marriage Is Good³

Both churches have long held that marriage is good. Within just a few years of its inception in 1925, the United Church issued a statement on marriage entitled *The Meaning and Responsibility of Christian Marriage*, which asserted that “marriage is a union that allows humans to live out the Christian ideals of love and sacrifice.”⁴ In the decades that followed, another statement spoke of marriage both as a divine vocation and a social good, intended for comradeship.⁵ In a more recent statement, the church described marriage as “a gift from God” in which the couple “...offer one another the promise of lifelong companionship, rich expressions of human affections and sexuality, and nurture for the children.”⁶

Likewise, the Roman Catholic Church has for centuries taught the goodness of marriage⁷ and continues to do so right up to the present time. According to a 1940s manual for religious education, the purpose of marriage is for procreation and companionship, although the emphasis was clearly on the former.⁸ With the growth in social sciences and increased attention to the human person in the decades that followed, the importance of friendship, love and companionship moved from the periphery to the centre.⁹ Thus the church more recently describes marriage as, first, “a

³ The word *good* is used here in a theological sense similar to that found in the first chapter of Genesis.

⁴ Matthew Fillier and Christina Murray, *The History of the Discourse on Marriage and Human Sexuality in The United Church of Canada: An Annotated Reader of United Church Primary Sources*, (Unpublished paper prepared under the supervision of Philip G. Ziegler, Atlantic School of Theology, Halifax, 2005), p. 5, citing The United Church of Canada, “The Meaning and Responsibilities of Christian Marriage,” *Record of Proceedings of the Fifth General Council*, 1932, Hamilton, ON, 276-286.

⁵ The United Church of Canada, “Report of Commission on Christian Home and Social Order,” *Record of Proceedings of the Twelfth General Council*, Montreal, QC, 1946, pp. 109-110.

⁶ The United Church of Canada, *Gift, Dilemma and Promise: A Report and Affirmations on Human Sexuality*, (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1984), p. 36.

⁷ Cf. Council of Braga, 561; Profession of Faith Prescribed by Innocent III to the Waldensians, 1208; Council of Florence, Decree for Armenians, 1439.

⁸ Schumacher, M.A. *I Teach Catechism*, Vol. III (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1946), pp. 582-584.

⁹ Cahill, Lisa Sowle. “Marriage.” *The New Dictionary of Catholic Social Thought*, ed. Judith A. Dwyer and Elizabeth L. Montgomery (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994), pp. 565-570.

partnership of the whole of life,” which is “ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring.”¹⁰

2. The Two Churches Agree That Marriage Is a Theological Reality

Over the centuries, the theological tradition of both churches has reflected on marriage in a variety of ways: from anthropological, Christological, Trinitarian and sacramental perspectives.¹¹ For both churches the theology of marriage is rooted in scripture. The Bible as revelation is the point of departure and the source of our many common affirmations about the goodness of marriage.

3. Interpretation of Scripture Contributes to Differing Beliefs on Marriage

That which unites us as a source for reflecting on a theology of marriage also divides us: the crux of the matter is that our approaches to interpreting scripture differ. The science of interpreting texts is complex, and when applied to the Bible as a text of faith, the problems of interpretation are compounded. Furthermore, our churches differ on the issue of *who* is the authoritative interpreter of scripture.

The United Church emphasizes the interpretation of scripture in the context of the whole believing community and for and by successive generations. The Christian relationship to scripture is thus not static but, according to the 1992 statement *Authority and Interpretation of Scripture (AIS)*, “[Each] interpretation is an invitation to ever new discoveries and insights into God’s covenant with life and the earth.”¹² The church’s 2006 statement *Song of Faith* calls scripture “the living word passed on from generation to generation to guide and inspire, that we might wrestle a holy revelation for our time and place from the human experiences and cultural assumptions of another era.”¹³

AIS emphasizes both the foundational authority of scripture and the importance of the Wesleyan quadrilateral of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience in the task of biblical interpretation: “As we engage the Bible... [we] also experience the sacred mystery in the connections between our personal and collective lives, the recorded and oral history of the church, recorded scripture and our understanding. This confirms our understanding that truth is rational and our conviction that God’s Spirit is active in all four sources of faith: heritage, understanding, experience, and the Bible.”¹⁴ While confessing that “engaging the Bible is not optional for the Christian community,” *AIS* also affirms that the community is aided in the interpretation of scripture by a variety of

¹⁰ “Sacrament of matrimony,” in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (Ottawa: Concacan, 1994), §1601.

¹¹ In the Roman Catholic Church, marriage is one of the seven sacraments. In the United Church, where baptism and Holy Communion are the only recognized sacraments, the sacramental nature of marriage connotes a sacred covenant and means of grace.

¹² The United Church of Canada, Theology and Faith Committee, *The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture: A Statement of The United Church of Canada* (Toronto: The United Church Publishing House, 1992), p. 26. (Hereafter referred to as *AIS*)

¹³ The United Church of Canada, *A Song of Faith: A Statement of Faith of The United Church of Canada/ L’Église Unie du Canada*, (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 2006), p. 5 <http://www.united-church.ca/beliefs/statements/songfaith>

¹⁴ *AIS*, p. 19

methods drawn from the work of biblical scholars. *A/S* acknowledges that historical-critical methods of interpretation have had particular weight in Reformed tradition, but recognizes as well a variety of other methods that for the United Church inform interpretation of scripture—such methods including literary, reader-response, materialist and feminist criticism.¹⁵

A/S states a number of convictions regarding interpretation of scripture and the spirit with which Christians should respond to God's call to engage the Bible as foundational authority as we seek to live the Christian life. The church is called to engage the Bible to seek God's community with all people, living creatures and the earth and to experience the liberating and transforming word of God. We engage scripture with an awareness of our theological, social, and cultural assumptions, with a sense of sacred mystery, in dynamic interaction with human experience, understanding and heritage, and we trust God's Spirit to enliven our understanding and empower our acting. Engaging with the text and being engaged by it, United Church members discern in community, in dynamic interaction with other sources of faith, recognizing that all Christians must struggle for revelation concerning how they are to embody/incarnate the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ, as others before them have done.¹⁶

Roman Catholic theology holds that the scriptures are given to the church as "the communal treasure of the entire body of believers" and that "all the members of the church have a role in the interpretation of scripture."¹⁷ However, the bishops as the living *magisterium* of the church bear the greatest responsibility for authentically interpreting the word of God, so that "in the last resort... should the occasion arise of pointing out instances where any particular interpretation is incompatible with the authentic Gospel ..." the *magisterium* is responsible for "guaranteeing the authenticity of interpretation."¹⁸

Like the United Church, contemporary Roman Catholic biblical scholars recognize a variety of both diachronic (across time) and synchronic (at the present time) methods and approaches for interpreting the scriptures: historical-critical; literary analysis, which includes rhetorical and narrative approaches; canonical; social scientific, including sociological, cultural, and psychological perspectives; and contextual approaches, such as liberationist—and feminist—interpretations.¹⁹ The Catholic approach is distinctive in that it "does not claim any particular scientific method as its own... [but] freely makes use of the scientific methods and approaches, which allow a better grasp of the meaning of the texts in their linguistic, literary, sociocultural, religious and historical contexts."²⁰

¹⁵ *A/S*, p. 21, pp. 28-30

¹⁶ *A/S*, pp. 16-20.

¹⁷ Pontifical Biblical Commission, "Roles of Various Members of the Church in Interpretation," in *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, III, B, 3. <http://www.ewtn.com/library/curia/pcbinter.htm>.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, § III, B, 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, Cf.

²⁰ *Ibid*, § III.

What characterizes the Catholic approach most of all is that it “deliberately places itself within the living tradition of the church, whose first concern is fidelity to the revelation attested by the Bible.” This manner of interpretation is one which “stands thereby in continuity with the dynamic pattern of interpretation that is found within the Bible itself and continues in the life of the Church.”²¹ Thus the Catholic approach holds the interpretations of each and every generation together in continuity, even in tension. For the Roman Catholic Church, the words of Jesus in the Gospel of John illustrate its approach to biblical interpretation: “[The] Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you” (Jn. 14:26).

4. Our Differences in Interpretation Bear Directly on Our Theological Differences in Marriage

In the 1960s, the focus on interpretation of scripture came to the fore as the United Church moved towards a theology of marriage emphasizing God’s grace and mercy over judgment. This shift in interpretation directly impacted the United Church’s response to divorce. A 1962 report on marriage breakdown recognized human beings’ imperfection and tendency to sin, as well as God’s forgiving power.²² In the 1970s, with ongoing work on human sexuality and marriage, the United Church moved away from positioning marriage against changes in society to seeking a faithful responsiveness to those changes. Over this period of time, church documents on marriage show a general shift away from the previous emphasis on gender roles and sexual differentiation toward a focus on friendship and trust.²³

As marriage and sexuality continued to be topics of discussion in the United Church, *justice* assumed a larger role in decision-making on these issues. The church was forced to examine its beliefs in all areas as questions were raised about justice in multiple dimensions of the church’s life. Noting critical historical/cultural analysis discounting biblical texts on homosexuality as well as the dominant trend in science showing differences in sexual orientation as biological and natural, church courts reasoned that treating people differently because of their sexual orientation was an injustice, inconsistent with biblical norms of justice and inclusivity. Thus the United Church moved towards a formal position that homosexual persons must be “accorded the same rights, privileges and responsibilities” as every other member, a decision much like earlier ones concerning the ordination of women.²⁴

This policy is consistent with United Church theology regarding scripture: members do not look to the Bible for confirmation of a revealed order, firm for all time and all places. The United Church affirms that scripture has a “unique and normative place” in the life

²¹ Ibid, § III.

²² The United Church of Canada, Board of Christian Education, *Marriage Breakdown, Divorce, Remarriage: A Christian Understanding* (Toronto, The United Church of Canada, 1962), pp. 25-26.

²³ Fillier and Murray, *Annotated Reader*, pp. 14-18.

²⁴ Ibid, pp. 20-25.

of the Christian faith.²⁵ United Church theology emphasizes the guiding vision of faith revealed in the text, including justice and mercy, liberation, and the grace of transformation. This understanding leads to the contemporary affirmation that our sexuality is a gift of God, and that as God-imaging beings created for relationship, all people, regardless of sexual orientation, have the potential to enter into committed, lifelong relationships that are creative, grace-filled, and expressive of our experience of the intimate God. “The covenant relationship begins with God’s love for us and God’s desire to be in relationship with us.... Marriage is a union in which the covenant relationship can be expressed and mutually experienced....” United Church theology of marriage also places emphasis on the *quality* of relationship: “God’s intention for all human relationships is that they be faithful, responsible, just, loving, health-giving, healing and sustaining of community and self.”²⁶

Roman Catholic theology, like that of the United Church, acknowledges that marriage, as God’s gift to human persons, is fundamental in the relationship of the spouses to God as well as to each other (and the whole human family). In fact, understanding marriage within the order of creation is perhaps the primary point of departure for Catholic theology of marriage.²⁷ The text of Genesis here is foundational: “God created humankind ... male and female... God blessed them... and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth...’” (1.27-28); and further “...a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife...” (2.24). In the New Testament, marriage for Jesus and the later apostolic church was always the joining of man and woman (for example: Mk. 10.11-12; Mt. 5.32, 19.4-9; Lk. 16.18; 1 Cor. 7.33ff; Eph. 22ff). Down through the ages, what was revealed in scripture was presupposed, namely that marriage is between a man and a woman.²⁸ In the twentieth century, the *Code of Canon Law*, following the Second Vatican Council’s *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (Art. 48) describes marriage as a “covenant by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life, [which] is by its nature ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring” (Can. 1055).

Just as marriage is revealed in scripture as a covenant between a man and a woman, in the view of Roman Catholic theology the natural order confirms the same. Man and woman are naturally configured to one another. *The Catechism* says that “man and woman were made for each other... to be a communion of persons... complementary as masculine and feminine.” In marriage they are united “in such a way that, by forming ‘one flesh’ they can transmit human life” (§372).

When the issue of same-sex marriage came before the courts, the Catholic Bishops in Canada upheld what they have always interpreted as revealed in scripture and in the

²⁵ *Song of Faith*, p. 5

²⁶ The United Church of Canada, *Marriage: A United Church of Canada Understanding* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 2005), pp. 5, 11.

²⁷ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Ottawa: Concacan, 1994), §1601 – 1607.

²⁸ Cf. Council of Braga, 561; *Profession of Faith Prescribed by Innocent III to the Waldensians*, 1208; Council of Florence, *Decree for Armenians*, 1439; Council of Trent, *Doctrine on the Sacrament of Matrimony*, 1563; Pope Leo XIII, *Arcanum Divinae Sapientiae* [Encyclical], 1880; Pope Pius XI, *Casti Connubii* [Encyclical], 1930.

natural order of creation and what has been continuously taught by the church: that marriage can only be between a man and a woman.

Thus fundamental differences in theology arise from our distinctive approaches to the interpretation of scripture. From them have developed our divergent norms for defining the boundaries of Christian marriage.

Theology is a much needed servant of faith; but it is prayer that awakens faith and keeps it alive. It is in our public prayer, particularly as crystallized in the liturgy of marriage, that we encounter again God's wisdom, revealed in scripture, about the vocation of marriage. Within the boundaries each church has proclaimed, there are strong similarities in the liturgical celebration for those entering into marriage.

Part III: The Christian Wedding

When Christians marry, their church invites them to express the commitment they are making to each other in a solemn public rite, rich with meaning rooted in God's revealed Word. Public ritual has an important function in any human community as an anchor of meaning in the flux of history. The church, by providing a sacred rite as a gateway to marriage, has preserved through the centuries a deep well of truth about marriage that might not otherwise have survived the vagaries of time. Christian churches have lived, and still live, in many cultures and in contact with many systems of law. In offering a Christian ritual of marriage, the church has sought to uphold and maintain the Christian vision and standard of marriage in the varied societies where believers dwell.

In the Roman Catholic tradition, marriage is celebrated as a sacrament of the church—one of seven sacred signs and instruments of God's saving action in Christ and continued throughout time in that Body of Christ which is the church (Eph. 1:23, Colossians 1:17-18). Because it is a sacrament, the form of the rite is decided at the highest and most universal level of ecclesial authority. Several options are offered, but in its shape and action, and in most of its language, the rite is clearly the same all over the Catholic world.

In the United Church, a conciliar church, the order of service in worship, including at a marriage, is a matter for the congregation to decide, in accordance with United Church policies and in consultation with the couple concerned. Accordingly there may be, and are, differences in the order of service used in different churches, or in the same church at different times. That said, there is also a deep understanding within the United Church of the elements that go into a marriage celebration, and of their scriptural, pastoral and social significance. Moreover there are forms and rules for accountability and oversight at all levels of the church.

In Canada, as in most countries, marriage is also regulated by public law. The order of service for a church marriage must contain the minimum elements that are necessary in order for a marriage to be recognized and accepted as legal under the relevant laws of the civil jurisdiction concerned.

The outline of the liturgy for the sacrament of marriage in the Roman ritual, and the order of service for weddings as outlined in *Celebrate God's Presence* (UCC)²⁹, are both fairly brief, and follow essentially the same sequence. Thus we conclude that the public rite of marriage offered in each church bears witness to a common vision and a wealth of common teaching that both churches continue to proclaim. The following questions and answers emphasize those deep commonalities.

1. Why do our churches encourage the public and communal celebration of the marriage covenant?

Both our churches gather people together to solemnize a marriage in the presence of God. For the two individuals entering into it, nothing is more personal than marriage; their history, their circumstances, their personal beliefs about love and lifelong commitment are all unique. Yet there is an objective, common meaning to the human commitment being made. Scripture sees marriage as a sign in human life of the awesome love of God, revealed especially in the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. This vision of marriage is a treasure of faith and needs to be proclaimed and celebrated when we gather in faith.

Both our churches believe that it is a duty of the Christian community to witness, partly by gathering to celebrate the marriage ritual, to the depth of God-given meaning in marriage. It is also a duty of the Christian community to continue supporting and encouraging married couples, helping them to be happy, faithful and fruitful in the challenging vocation they have claimed as their own.

2. Why do our churches encourage *the proclamation of scripture* when marriage is celebrated?

Marriage means more than any particular couple or any one generation in history can articulate. From Genesis through to the Book of Revelation, biblical revelation abounds in stories, poetry, laws, reflections and exhortations that weave together a great tapestry of truths about marriage. Thus a pastoral practice common to both our churches is to offer the spouses a wide selection of biblical passages relevant to the mystery of marriage and to help them choose those passages expressive of their own understanding of the covenant they are entering. In this way their unique personal meaning and the eternal mystery of marriage as it reflects the mystery of God can be joined together and shared publicly as the spouses proclaim their commitment.

3. What *questions* do our churches ask the spouses as they stand on the threshold of marriage?

At the outset, before God and all the witnesses, both our churches ask a few crucial questions. In the United Church, the minister may ask the traditional question that invites those present to make known any impediment to the marriage. In a Roman Catholic wedding, this question is not asked as part of the public ceremony, since it is assumed that the presiding priest has investigated this point beforehand. In both

²⁹ The United Church of Canada, *Celebrate God's Presence: A Book of Services for The United Church of Canada* (Etobicoke: United Church of Canada, 2000),

churches, the celebrant asks about the freedom of the spouses and about their intention to make a lifelong commitment. In both churches, it is essential that the two persons are asked to state that they come “freely and without reservation” to enter into marriage with each other. And in both churches, the marriage covenant must be a promise to be faithful to each other “for the rest of [their] lives”...or “as long as [they] both live”...or “all the days of [their] life.” Any intention smaller or more tentative than that is not *marriage*.

The aspect of procreativity receives different emphasis in our marriage celebrations. It is part of the Roman Catholic rite of marriage to ask a question about the couple’s openness to becoming parents together: “Will you accept children lovingly from God, and bring them up according to the law of Christ and his Church?” As noted earlier, in Catholic doctrine the very nature of marriage is both *unitive* and *procreative*: it is the bond that joins a man and a woman into a unique intimacy that scripture refers to as “becoming one flesh” and includes the willing acceptance of responsibility for the possible outcome of such a union—a new generation of human beings. The United Church does not require such a question, although some liturgies include an explicit recognition of the importance of marriage as a means of ensuring stability, support and nurture for the children of couples who choose to become parents. While the decision to have children is understood to be a matter between the spouses, the United Church celebrates and encourages parenthood and greets with joy and support, in a variety of ways, the children the married couple may have.

4. Why are vows at the heart of every marriage ceremony?

A vow is a sacred, public promise that commits the two people to the covenant between them in spite of all foreseeable and unforeseeable changes of mood and of circumstance. A vow is a commitment to self-transcendence. In any human community, public vows are a valued source of stability and shared meaning. In the Christian community, vows are a sign of entrance into a sacred office which is recognized by all, as in ordination or vowed religious life. Thus our churches continue to insist on the public vow of faithful love until death, and we continue to beg God to give spouses grace to remain true to this vow. The Christian faith has always recognized that human nature as we have all received it is prone to inconstancy and sin. Faithful love of one’s spouse through whatever befalls is certainly not always easy; hence the conjoined need, in the wedding rituals of both our churches, for the vow and attendant prayer for God’s grace.

The actual wording of the vows, in each of our traditions, bears witness to the deep conviction that lives in the Christian faith about marriage as a permanent commitment, for “as long as we both shall live.” Although the wording may vary somewhat, the vows make clear and public what is being promised, as shown in the following passage from the Ecumenical Consultation on Common Texts, as found in *Celebrate God’s Presence*:

*N., I choose you to be my husband/wife/partner
In joy and in sorrow,
In plenty and in want,
In sickness and in health
to love and to cherish*

*as long as we both shall live.*³⁰

The same intention is clear in the Roman ritual:

*I, N., take you, N., to be my wife/husband.
I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad,
in sickness and in health.
I will love you and honour you
all the days of my life.*³¹

5. Is Communion/Eucharist always celebrated in the service?

While provision is made for the celebration of Holy Communion in some United Church marriage liturgies, this option is not commonly chosen. However, in a Catholic Church, when both spouses presenting themselves for marriage are Catholics, the rite of marriage is normally celebrated in the context of the Eucharist. For Catholics, the Eucharist expresses in a most perfect way God's love and desire for communion. All the sacraments celebrate a particular way in which we are drawn into the mystery of God who is love. Marriage was elevated to the level of a sacrament by Christ as an eternal gift to the church. It reflects the unique union of Christ with the church. In marriage the spouses are called to enter into the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ—into his life, death, and resurrection—and be for the world a sign of the mystery we call love. We know that this is not easy in a world where there is both sin and suffering. But in all sacraments God gives grace, and in marriage the spouses are given the grace to live the commitment they have made: to be faithful to their vows and remain in the embrace of God's love.

6. Why is a nuptial blessing given as the wedding is concluded?

In both our traditions the celebrant acts in the name of the church, blessing the new couple after they have proclaimed their vows. This solemn blessing is a prayer, a mandate, a teaching, and an act undertaken in the power of the Spirit in the church. It acknowledges the centrality of God's involvement in the vocation of marriage. The wording often reaches back into the depths of scripture, gathering millennia of meaning while expressing the hope with which this community of faith sends this couple forth into the life of married love within their various communities.

The nuptial blessing expresses the church's conviction that God is blessing the vows just taken. It also shifts the focus of attention from the event of the wedding itself to the lifelong marriage the couple is now entering. The prayer asks God's blessing on all aspects of their life together—not only on their mutual fidelity, but on their capacity to be a blessing to the wider human community through their life of love, through their children if any, through their stable and hospitable home, and through their transforming presence in the wider world. Thus it helps the spouses, and the congregation, to focus on the mandate they have received, as well as on their personal relationship.

³⁰ Ibid., p 383.

³¹ See Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Marriage: Ritual and Pastoral Notes* (CCCC Publications: Ottawa, 1979), p. 53

Part IV: Pastoral Care and Marriage in Society

Over the course of our meetings, many pastoral issues and questions arose that are related to the topic of marriage, often emerging from the changing social context described earlier in this report. Following is a list of these pastoral issues. We identify them as common ground in our life as Christians in Canada, though we acknowledge that our churches may (and do) take very different approaches when dealing with the pastoral realities of married life.

Pastoral Issue #1: Marriage Today

In an era characterized by dramatic shifts in language and practices, both churches must respond to challenges to traditional belief systems. Of particular note, some Christians find themselves at odds with the teachings of their church, for example with respect to contraception, premarital sex, and common-law or same-sex marriage. Others may have no clear idea why the church concerns itself with marriage at all. Thus deciding together to have a *religious* wedding can be a difficult discernment for the couple and pastor.

Two important questions arise. First, how can our two churches meet their obligation to speak effectively about marriage within society as a whole? Second, are there ways we can support each other's pastoral practices for the sake of our shared concern for the sacred character of marriage?

On the Roman Catholic side, many who are engaged in the pastoral life of the church labour to find a language of encouragement that can meet the mind-set of couples who find Catholic teaching on marriage too restrictive and demanding. To discover ways of educating couples without alienating them, pastors and teachers must combine a profound understanding of the doctrinal tradition with a gracious gift of respectful sympathy with people living in this culture.

Pastoral Issue #2: Co-habitation

Today people may decide very quickly, without much conscious preparation, to live together. For very many couples, living together is an accepted stage on the way to getting married.

Many questions arise on this topic. What should the churches be saying to people about living together? How can pastors help couples recognize when they are ready for marriage vows? Does the church have a responsibility to meet cohabiting couples where they are and offer alternatives to help them (and society) form a vision of living their relationship and their responsibilities in the fullest, most loving way available to them?

Pastoral Issue #3: Preparation for Marriage

Both of our churches are committed to providing extensive preparation to persons preparing to enter into married life. Marriage preparation courses are offered in a variety of formats within our congregations. These are usually obligatory for couples preparing either for a first marriage or subsequent marriage.

Marriage preparation provides an opportunity to raise expectations for believers by helping them to understand that marriage is more than participation in a social custom. It is a context blessed by God within which faithful discipleship can be expressed. It is a vocation to holiness. To that end, both denominations will continue to seek fruitful and realistic ways of preparing couples for marriage.

Our dialogue did not conduct a thorough survey of the contents of marriage preparation curricula. It was noted that United Church resources on marriage generally present items for discussion and reflection, whereas Catholic resources often present points of teaching as building blocks for a good marriage. Long before couples approach the church for marriage, they would ideally have been exposed to religious education emphasizing the sacredness and human/social importance of marriage and family life. Considering the complex realities of modern couples' lives, what kind of marriage preparation is needed in our churches today?

Pastoral Issue #4: Supporting Marriage and Family

Marriage is a means of grace for couples, their children, and the wider community. From the energy of a healthy marriage, love goes out into the community as a whole. For this reason support of marriage and family is a challenge in the life of many congregations and deserves greater attention.

Significant challenges for marriage partners come after the wedding. Meaningful personal supports can develop from current practices, such as calling on an older couple in the congregation to mentor a younger couple. Also, marriage enrichment programs assist couples to discover deeper dimensions of marriage through structured discussion, mutual sharing, prayer and follow-up opportunities.

However marriage enrichment is to be achieved, the church must hear attentively the voices of couples and families in order to respond to the specific pastoral concerns of Christian marriage. We do well to teach couples to reflect theologically about their marriage, not only in preparation for their wedding, but through all life's stages.

Pastoral Issue #5: Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation

It is important to note that while our churches differ on accepting same-sex marriage, members of both the Catholic and United Churches are committed to the care of all persons by affirming their dignity regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation. Given the gospel imperative to love our neighbour, and given the reality of same-sex attraction and its recognition in civil society, our churches must take seriously the call to respond pastorally to homosexual persons, couples and their families.

Pastoral Issue #6: Troubled Marriages, Divorce and Remarriage

Both churches affirm that marriage should reflect and uphold the human dignity of the spouses. For this reason, both churches take very seriously the responsibility to address any matter (e.g., spousal abuse, family violence, marital infidelity) that might violate the dignity of the person and, hence, the inherent dignity of the marriage itself.

At the same time, the two churches present different approaches in addressing failed marriages. While being faithful to the teaching of Christ regarding the indissolubility of

marriage, the Catholic Church recognizes that for the good of the spouses and children, couples may need to separate and live apart. They do not cease being husband and wife and are not free to contract a new marriage. Although canon law recognizes the possibility that some marriages have from the beginning lacked some essential qualities for the marriage covenant and can therefore be *annulled* (officially declared to be not a valid marriage), the Catholic Church considers that it may not and indeed cannot dissolve the bond of a consummated sacramental marriage.

By contrast, the United Church has no procedure for annulling a marriage. While believing that marriage is intended to be lifelong, the church has recognized that there will be cases where, in the spirit of Christ, it is in the best interests of all the persons involved (including the children and society) that a marriage be dissolved by divorce. The United Church further believes that those whose marriage has been dissolved by divorce may remarry with the blessing of the church.

Catholic canon law states that divorced Catholics who have remarried may not receive Communion, even if they regularly attend the Eucharistic celebration. A significant pastoral challenge involves those who feel excluded because of their marital status and simply stop coming to church. The matter is more urgent because it initiates a cycle of loss of Christian affiliation.

In both churches, formal marriage counselling is available and promoted as a means of pastoral care to couples whose marriage is in distress. The United Church also offers resources for families going through divorce. What kind of pastoral care is required for divorced persons or for those seeking a second marriage after divorce? How do we embrace and support persons/families that are going through the emotional devastation that accompanies the end of such a consequential relationship?

Part V: Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

In the spring of 2005, when the Roman Catholic/United Church dialogue began to talk about marriage, there was no expectation that our conversation would change the teachings on marriage in our churches. After all, our two churches had just made opposing presentations to the Supreme Court of Canada. However, that very context gave a particular urgency to the matter of achieving clarification and a deeper understanding of each other's stance on the profoundly important matter of marriage.

Through the grace of God, we found that we have a great deal in common in our life as Christians, indeed more than what separates us. Tracing the history of our different developments *vis-à-vis* marriage has made us pay attention to profound differences between our two traditions: in theological method, in epistemology, in understandings of the authority of scripture and of the interpretation of scripture in the church, and in theological understanding of the human person. Perhaps the very real and public disagreements made us forget that we believe in the same God, follow the same Lord

Jesus Christ, and are gentled and encouraged by the same Spirit. We have been nourished by many of the same traditions, and live in the same world today. In the context of our work on marriage, the preceding pages illustrate that we both attach deep importance to Christian marriage, that our wedding services reflect a similar view on its crucial elements, and that we face most of the same issues and problems in wrestling with today's social issues and in offering pastoral care. As we move forward, there is clearly much that we can consider and, we hope, accomplish together.

We live in a time when understandings about gender, sexual ethics, marriage and family are in flux—and in conflict—all over the world. Both our churches are engaged globally. We cannot ignore the convictions and consciences of our brothers and sisters in other contexts as we strive to find ways of speaking that take our own society into careful account.

As dialogue participants, we are convinced that Roman Catholic and United Church members can, with God's help, learn from each other's strengths, even when they differ on issues held to be revealed truth. Our experience has renewed our conviction that ecumenical dialogue—with openness to new insights and in the presence of the Holy Spirit—is an important means by which God's Church can advance understanding and carry on the work of Jesus Christ.

Recommendations

Building on the trust that God's mercy helps us, even in the midst of our conscientious differences, to strengthen each other in the difficult task of Christian witness in the world, we offer the following recommendations:

1. That our churches—leaders, pastors and people—listen even more attentively to the experience and witness, pain and longing, of individuals and couples in our congregations and in our society in the face of wrenching challenges and conflicting demands.
2. That our churches renew their commitment to pastoral care of spouses and families as a sign of God's great love for us and for the world.
3. That in this pastoral context our churches speak together, courageously and publicly, not only on the many issues of agreement, such as war and poverty, but also on sensitive subjects, such as marriage.
4. That in their advocacy concerning legislation and social policies, both our churches respect the legal and social space needed for the living out of each other's conscientious convictions on marriage and family, gender and sexuality.
5. That the churches employ the increasingly varied means of communication available today to share the fruits of this Dialogue.

May it be so!

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APPENDIX B: Participants in the Roman Catholic Church/United Church of Canada Dialogue on Marriage (2004–2012)

Representing the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops:

Sr. Mary Jean Goulet	staff	Oct. 2004
Rev. Thomas Potvin	member	Oct. 2004
Bishop Luc Bouchard	member	Oct. 2004 to Nov. 2007
Mr. Julien Hammond	member	Oct. 2004 to April 2012
Ms. Janet Somerville	staff/member	Oct. 2006 to April 2012
Dr. Michael Attridge	member	Oct. 2006 to April 2012
Dr. Maureen McDonnell	member	Oct. 2007 to April 2012
Bishop Gerard Bergie	member	Oct. 2009 to April 2012
Mr. Jonas Abromaitis	staff	April 2012

Representing The United Church of Canada:

Dr. Gail Allan	staff	Oct. 2004 to April 2012
Rev. Angelika Piché	member	Oct. 2004 to May 2007
Ms. Laurie Smith	member	Oct. 2004 to May 2007
Dr. Philip Zeigler	member	April 2005 to Oct. 2005
Rev. Richard Bott	member	April 2005 to March 2009
Mr. David Lee	member	Nov. 2007 to April 2012
Rev. Gai Burns	member	Nov. 2007 to March 2009
Mr. Allan (Seal) Buckingham	member	Nov. 2007 to April 2012
Rev. Colin Peterson	member	Oct. 2009 to Sept. 2010
Rev. Donna Kerrigan	member	June 2011 to April 2012

Observer of the Anglican Church of Canada:

Rev. Pierre Voyer	observer	April 2005 to Oct. 2009
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