

Theological Perspectives on Marriage

A Theological Perspective and Practical Guideline on Marriage in the Diocese of Long Island as New York State Law Allows Same-Gender Marriage

The following is given by the Bishop as a Charge to the Clergy and as a Pastoral Letter which is to be read at all services in every Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Long Island on Sunday, the 7th day of August, 2011.

In examining the present Rite in the Book of Common Prayer of “The Celebration and Blessings of a Marriage,” it strikes one immediately that the rubrics instruct that in the Episcopal Church one of the parties must be baptized; that the ceremony be attested by at least two witnesses; and that the marriage conform to the laws of the State and the canons of the Church. A priest or a bishop normally presides at the Celebration and blessing of a Marriage, because such ministers alone have the function of pronouncing the nuptial blessing, and of celebrating the Holy Eucharist.

It is clear by its obvious omission in the rubrics that the priest or bishop is never given instruction to marry the couple. In conformity with the timeless and universal theology of the Church concerning marriage, the couple administers the sacrament to each other. It is not the priest or bishop who marry the couple. The priest or bishop is present to witness and bless and, when included, celebrate the Holy Eucharist.

Given the allowances permitted in the 2009 General Convention Resolution C056, that of generous pastoral response in dioceses where civil union and marriage is permitted for same gender couples by law, the Diocese of Long Island will allow for the use of such rites that bless marriages between persons of the same gender and further permit the celebration of the Holy Eucharist in the midst of such blessing.

The function of the ordained person in the rite of Marriage is to bless the marriage and provide the appropriate words in the exchange of vows, which indicate within the vows the church’s call for permanence and fidelity on the part of those who marry each other. In many, if not all states, the ordained person acts also (and sometimes more exclusively) as an agent of the State preparing the legal documents to be signed to insure the legal arrangement of the civil agreement that is a by-product of marriage – little of which is the Church’s real concern or impinges on the sacramental nature of the marriage.

Theological Perspectives on Marriage (cont.)

Therefore, until further notice, all Clergy in the Diocese of Long Island are hereby Charged as follows: As has always been the practice, no priest will be required to officiate at any particular marriage. It will remain the obligation and pastoral duty of our priests who will officiate at marriages (either gay or straight) to fully prepare all couples, whether gay or straight, for marriage in similar fashion. No one is entitled to have his or her marriage blessed by a priest of the Church, unless he or she is willing to profess to holding true the teachings of the Church regarding marriage. Clergy wishing to bless and celebrate the marriage of those previously married and whose spouse is still living, whether gay or straight, will require the permission of the Bishop Diocesan for such marriages, as in the past.

For the gay and lesbian clergy of this Diocese who are living in domestic partnerships or civil unions, I hereby grant a grace period of nine months from the effective date of the New York State Law permitting same-gender marriages for those relationships to be regularized either by the exchange of vows in marriage or the living apart of said couples. I deem it to be honest and fair, and I do so direct and require, now that it is legal, that only married couples may live together, either in rectories or elsewhere as a clergy couple living in the midst of our faith community.

The Gospel reveals in the words and actions of Jesus Christ the divine desire for unity: unity between individual persons, and the union of humanity with God. As in all else we do together as the Body of Christ, we are called today and in the future to continue to celebrate and live the sacramental nature of marriage as a gift of unity and a share in divine love.

The Right Reverend Lawrence C. Provenzano

Bishop of Long Island

July 8, 2011