

Vatican II and the Year of Faith:  
Do Children Deserve a Mother and a Father?  
Insights from the "Gay Marriage" Debate in France

On May 18, 2013, a well-funded vocal minority in France managed to pass a law authorizing "Gay Marriage." The law passed with little public debate. Supporters of the law characterized its opponents as extremists. Police and government authorities have used brutality and intimidation to quash public demonstrations against the law. In some cases, police have arrested people simply for wearing sweatshirts with slogans opposing the law. They have gassed women, children, and the elderly for appearing in peaceful, public demonstrations.

In response to these strong-arm tactics, there is a new social movement in France that has united secular and religious, conservatives and liberals, Christians, Moslems, atheists and theists, even gay and straight. It is called *Manif pour tous*. (Their English website: <http://www.lamanifpourtous.fr/en/>) In addition to opposing the unjust, undemocratic tactics of the Gay Marriage forces in France, *Manif pour tous* has united people across the country under a simple but profound shared conviction: children deserve both a mother and a father.

*Manif pour tous* has managed to pinpoint an issue in the "gay marriage" debate that I have rarely seen in the United States. Americans overwhelmingly view marriage through a Romantic ideal. We think of marriage as the institution in which society solemnizes our love and affection. On this model, and for advocates of gay marriage, "marriage equality" means the right to choose my loves, my partner, and to have society affirm my choice. Ironically, it is the more socially liberal France that has called into question this essentially modern and Romantic view of marriage.

For *Manif pour tous*, and the French critics of gay marriage, marriage is not fundamentally about love and affection, but about the transmission of new life:

It is not the recognition of love between two people, but an institution which protects the dignity of parents and children, and which regulates parentage . . . That is why there are different advantages for married and other couples: married couples contribute to the replenishment of society and the education of its youngest members. (Website of *Manif pour tous*)

Liberal France has long recognized forms of civil union other than marriage. Many heterosexual couples in France choose not to marry, electing other legal arrangements that they find more to their social or economic advantage. Thus, marriage is not the only option for people in France "who love each other." The irony is that these liberal social experiments (which Catholics should not approve) have nevertheless carved out space for marriage as something special - not the simple recognition of love and affection, but as the social institution for the replenishment of society. This is something that Catholics do affirm: marriage is essentially about family.

Critics of Gay Marriage in France are not primarily concerned with opposing homosexual unions, but rather with protecting women and children from exploitation. The greatest danger in the "Romantic" view is that children become a "right" that the government ensures for necessarily sterile unions. Artificial insemination and surrogacy become government mandates.

Women are objectified as baby producers. ("Renting out wombs" is what critics fear.) Children, like pets, exist to gratify the desire of adults.

*Do children deserve a mother and a father?* Advocates of gay marriage must answer, "No." On their view, mother and father can have no intrinsic obligation to children. Parenthood becomes more of a contractual obligation - founded on my preference, affection, or desire. "Gay marriage" thus severs the essential link between biological generation and parenthood.

*Do children deserve a mother and a father?* Critics of "gay marriage" in France argue that the new law is profoundly discriminatory. It deprives children of at least half their origin and heritage. The law assigns parenthood according to sexual preference, not sexual generation. It envisions a social order in which *my choice, my will* become determinative, rather than the inherent dignity of the other, the human person.

Fifty years ago, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council may not have fully envisioned the assault on human dignity we are currently witnessing. They did, however, argue for a social order grounded in the exalted dignity of the human person. In the council document *Gaudium et Spes* we read:

The subject and the goal of all social institutions is and must be the human person which for its part and by its very nature stands completely in need of social life.

As Catholics, we affirm the dignity of homosexual persons. The Catechism teaches that homosexuals "must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided." (CCC 2358) But the dignity of homosexual persons does not justify assaults on the dignity of the child. Advocates of "gay marriage" do not even pretend that their primary interest is the dignity and wellbeing of children. They seek a social order founded not on the integrity of the human person, but on the primacy of preference, choice, desire, or inclination. In France, *Manif pour tous* has reminded us that marriage is not fundamentally about the inclination or preference of partners, but about the dignity of the child and the family as his origin and heritage.