



The Institution of Marriage and the Common Good: A Pastoral Letter of the Virginia Catholic Bishops

September 2006

Dear Friends in Christ:

On November 7th, Virginia voters will have an opportunity to decide whether to adopt a state constitutional amendment that would affirm marriage as “a union between one man and one woman” and draw a clear distinction between the public institution of marriage and other voluntary relationships. This ballot question has profound significance for the future of the family, the most fundamental social structure of our society. In light of this important opportunity, we wish to share with you, the faithful in our two dioceses, our Church’s teaching on the nature of marriage, especially as it relates to our laws and our responsibilities as faithful citizens.

Marriage, properly understood, was built into our nature right from the beginning. In fact, our understanding of marriage is bound up in our understanding of creation itself. In the Book of Genesis, we learn that God created men and women as equal and complementary (see Gn 1:27, 2:23), enabled male and female to become “one flesh” and thereby reflect His inner unity by their complementarity (see Gn 2:24), and told the first man and woman to “be fertile and multiply” (Gn 1:28), thus making them participants in His work of creation. Hence, man and woman are predisposed to form, in the words of Pope John Paul II, a “communion of spouses,” which in turn “gives rise to the community of the family” (Letter to Families, no. 7).

In our ever-changing and increasingly complex society, the Genesis story brings us “back to the basics” by reminding us that marriage had a design and purpose long before any nation, religion, or law was established. Even before Christ elevated marriage between the baptized to the dignity of a sacrament, it existed as the human and social institution upon which civilization is structured. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* captures the essence of this natural order: “The marriage covenant, by which a man and a woman form with each other an intimate communion of life and love, has been founded and endowed with its own special laws by the Creator” (no. 1660). *In other words, the founder and author of marriage is none other than God Himself!* Though regulated by civil laws and church laws, marriage did not originate from either church or state, but from God. The only authentic understanding of marriage, therefore, is the one that God inscribed in our human nature.

No religion, government, or individual has the right or the legitimate authority to alter the basic meaning and structure of marriage that has existed ever since the first man and woman were created. Because God designed the marital union as part of our intrinsic nature and established it as the foundation of our civilization, the proper role of both church and state is one of stewardship, to preserve our Creator's great gift of marriage from one generation to the next. With regard to government's responsibility in this matter, the Second Vatican Council affirmed, "All those . . . who exercise influence over communities and social groups should work efficiently for the welfare of marriage and the family. Public authority should regard it as a sacred duty to recognize, protect and promote their authentic nature, to shield public morality and to favor the prosperity of home life" (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 52).

Because marriage is properly understood as a gift from God for the common good of humanity, this essential social institution naturally possesses certain qualities that are of unique and irreplaceable benefit to society. God, after all, gives us only what is genuinely good for us. By weaving the design of marriage into the fabric of our being, He made it the structure upon which families – the basic communities of civilization – are built. Indeed, the marital bond is very different than any other voluntary relationship because of its stability, the environment it provides for the development of families, and the protection it accords spouses and children. Through marriage, two equal but sexually different persons give themselves and their complementarity to each other for a lifetime, for the benefit of each other and their family; by their pledge of lifelong fidelity, they provide the most stable conditions for bringing children into the world and raising them; by their sexual difference, they provide their children the full range of human nurturing that comes by being raised by a mother and a father.

These unique contributions to society show us why upholding the marital union of man and woman as a public institution, in a way that clearly distinguishes it from any other relationship, is necessary for the common good. Because governments and citizens have a compelling interest in supporting and promoting the best and most stable social structure for the well-being of families, no other relationship should be accorded a legal status equivalent to that of marriage. Those who would give non-marital unions the privileges and status enjoyed by husbands and wives contradict and devalue what is truly good for society. Put another way, marriage as the lifelong union of a man and a woman is not one "model" among many options of equal public significance. Rather, it is the very building block of the family and of society. Civil laws make a just and necessary distinction when they recognize the unique role the institution of marriage has in society, rather than reducing this institution to nothing more than one of many alternative kinds of voluntary relationships.

As citizens and voters, then, we face important questions: Will we affirm God's definition of marriage, or will we leave the door open for others to rewrite it whenever they see fit? Is the marital union – between a man and a woman who give themselves completely to each other – a unique bond that forms the basis of the family and society, or is it no different than any other voluntary relationship? Considering these questions within the context of important political decisions, and thereby helping to promote the

common good of our communities, is an essential part of what it means to be a follower of Christ in our Commonwealth today.

In light of assertions made by some who oppose the proposed marriage-protection amendment, we also wish to remind the faithful in our dioceses of the duty to analyze campaign rhetoric honestly and critically, and to avoid using erroneous claims as a pretext for disregarding Church teaching or encouraging others to do so. Factual information about what the proposed amendment would and would not do is available in a detailed question-and-answer piece prepared by the Virginia Catholic Conference and posted on its website (www.vacatholic.org). The piece notes, for example, that although opponents have said the amendment would interfere with certain property and end-of-life decisions made by unmarried individuals, those claims are squarely at odds with the official explanation of the ballot question that is available to all voters from the Virginia State Board of Elections. We encourage you to read the Conference's material as you prepare to cast your vote on this important question.

Preserving and promoting marriage is an integral component of our shared civic responsibility. As Pope John Paul II wrote, "The future of humanity passes by way of the family. It is therefore indispensable and urgent that every person of good will should endeavor to save and foster the values and requirements of the family" (*Familiaris Consortio*, no. 86). In the Catholic liturgy, one of the nuptial blessings speaks of married life as "the one blessing that was not forfeited by original sin or washed away in the flood." If God Himself values the institution of marriage so highly, can we do any less?

Faithfully in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Paul S. Loverde". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Most Reverend Paul S. Loverde
Bishop of Arlington

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Francis X. DiLorenzo". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Most Reverend Francis X. DiLorenzo
Bishop of Richmond