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## Bringing rainbow families out of the shadows

**“Marriage presupposes a man and a woman”, “a child needs a mother and a father”. These are just two of the counterarguments that are put forward in the debates about the rights of homosexual couples with respect to marriage and parenthood. The latest issue of *Marriage, Families & Spirituality* (issue 25/2 (2019) explores this sensitive subject from an open perspective.**

### **Frederique Vanneuville**

In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality as a possible diagnosis, in 1990 the World Health Organization removed homosexuality from its classification of diseases, and in 2013, the World Medical Association confirmed that a large body of scientific research indicates that homosexuality is “a natural variation” of human sexuality, “without any intrinsically harmful health effects”. In other words, the medical world generally recognizes that homosexuality does not require a cure or conversion therapy. In broader society and communities of believers, however, opinions sometimes vary. The possibility for partners of the same sex to raise children is a more difficult question.

### **Complex**

*Marriage, Families & Spirituality*, the biannual journal of the International Academy for Marital Spirituality (INTAMS), which has conducted interdisciplinary and ecumenical research into a broad range of marital, family and social issues for more than thirty years, has devoted its most recent issue entirely to so-called rainbow families. From the perspectives of (moral) theology, social psychology, law and philosophy, and with testimonials from three rainbow families themselves, it offers a thoughtful exploration of the phenomenon and of social and ecclesiastical attitudes. More than anything, the complexity of the issues come to the fore here, including in the tradition. For example, in former times, it was customary for monastic communities to raise children. These abbeys were - for practical purposes - households consisting of adults of the same sex, which devoted themselves to the upbringing of children, and this practice was warmly endorsed by the church and society. Although of course this is very different from lesbian or gay parenting today, it does cast it in a new light.

### **Change in church teaching**

The Catholic Church recognizes that homosexuality occurs in all times and cultures and is not the result of voluntary choice, nor of an unnatural, sinful state. It recognizes that homosexuality is

imbedded at the deepest level of being human that the person has no power to change. This significant shift in church teaching began to occur in the 1970s. Catholic doctrine does still state that homosexual behaviour is under no circumstances to be approved. But does this disapproval also apply to durable loving relationships between partners of the same sex? Or does it only refer to fleeting sexual expressions that would also be considered inadequate in the context of heterosexual relationships? Ethically, this distinction makes a significant difference. An appeal to biblical texts that appear unambiguously to condemn homosexuality is not unproblematic in this regard. Closer reading of these texts indicates that they refer to homosexual behaviour practiced by heterosexuals. Due to their entirely different theological, historical and cultural context, it is not appropriate to use these passages as an argument in debates around homosexuality today.

### **Lifelong commitment**

The Church is still far from recognizing equal legal (marital) rights for partners of the same sex. Heterosexual marriage is and remains the cornerstone of society from the Church's perspective. To a significant extent, this is founded on the ability to procreate that was instituted in creation, which is a painful reality to infertile heterosexual couples. If the preponderance of the respect for marriage were to be placed more on the lifelong commitment that the partners make to each other, this pain would be somewhat alleviated. Such a shift would automatically imply the possibility of looking more positively on durable relationships between partners of the same sex. A degree of openness from the Church in this respect would likewise align with its commitment to foster a more just society, the author argues. And it would ease the untenable tension in pastoral care because how is one to provide pastoral care to couples whose relationship one is presumed to reject?

### **Procreation and hospitality**

Different contributions are devoted to medical assisted procreation and adoption. The former is by no means self-evident for any couple: conception in this case is not an intimate process and it can often take a long time and take a heavy toll, both emotionally and financially. With respect to homosexual couples, by definition only one partner can provide genetic material. Adoption presents a different set of challenges. Of all people, children are the most vulnerable and their protection is paramount. Adoption can ensure that childless couples are able to start a family nonetheless, which the Church encourages. But what makes a family a family: biological kinship or the emotional connection between parents and children? And is adopting children merely an alternative for biological procreation or might it also be seen as an institutional form of hospitality, and thus be extended to different social patterns between generations? Indeed, there are often children from earlier (heterosexual) relationships, and the question of adoption is also relevant here.

Whether children are raised in a single-parent family or have two parents, and whether those two parents are hetero- or homosexual, scientific research indicates that the decisive factors in the healthy development of children are the quality of family relationships, the support of the immediate environment, and the attitude of broader society. That is also the experience of the three rainbow families from the United States, the United Kingdom and Italy who have written

testimonials for this special issue, and who also emphasize the importance of a hospitable church community.

### **Amoris Laetitia**

The special issue concludes with the assessment that the exhortation *Amoris laetitia* by Pope Francis (2016) offers an impulse to value families on the basis of their inner qualities: their mutual commitment and responsibility, their care and support for children and their efforts to transmit the faith to the next generation. This impulse is understood as an encouragement to take the lived reality of rainbow families seriously, to treat them respectfully and to defend their dignity by condemning and combatting discrimination or injustice against them. With reviews of thirty-one (English, German, French and Italian) academic publications and a list of forty books concerning the broad field of homosexual relationships and parenting that were reviewed in *Marriage, Families & Spirituality* in the past, the reader is provided with plenty of material to become further acquainted with the subject. The next special issue will focus on sexual abuse in family constellations.

(translated from Dutch by John Arblaster)