Christians Need to Work on Their Reasoning When Defending Traditional Marriage

Jacob Rees-Mogg, a Catholic backbencher in the British Parliament who is being touted as a possible successor to Theresa May, touched off an explosion of indignation last week over his views on same-sex marriage and abortion.

If his stars align, the 48-year-old Rees-Mogg could become the first-ever "Papist" prime minister. [The Economist](#) has derided moves to elevate him to 10 Downing Street as "demented", but he has strong supporters within the Conservative Party. One young Tory is even sporting [a "MoggMentum" tattoo](#).

Mr Rees-Mogg's combination of qualities is unusual: the brains and imperturbability of Jeeves, the pedigree of Bertie Wooster and the religion of the Marchmain family. It's hard to imagine him as PM. But stranger things have happened in British politics. Just ask Jeremy Corbyn.

He denies that his aspirations reach as high as bumping off Theresa May. But the rumours landed him a spot on [Good Morning Britain](#) with Piers Morgan and Susanna Reid. Piers Morgan, one of Britain's best-known journalists, has the face of an overweight choirboy and the manners of a famished wolverine. He sniffed blood when Rees-Mogg declared forthrightly that he was not in favour of same-sex marriage — which is legal nowadays in England, Wales and Scotland. After a warm-up question on Brexit, Morgan dug his claws into Rees-Mogg's views on same-sex marriage, homosexuality and abortion.

Surprisingly, there was no fumbling and no waffle.

"I'm a Catholic and I take the teachings of the Catholic Church seriously. Marriage is a sacrament and the decision of what is a sacrament lies with the Church not with Parliament," Rees-Mogg responded with unflappable aplomb. "This is exactly the argument that Thomas More made in opposition to the marriage of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn."

While one must admire Rees-Mogg's unabashed conviction, his view that same-sex marriage is wrong because the Catholic Church says so is not the view of the Catholic Church.

This is a mistake made in Australia by several prominent Catholics and they have used the very same argument to *support* the legalisation of same-sex marriage.

Greg Sheridan, a senior columnist for The Australian, who takes "Christian teaching about marriage and the purpose of life very seriously" favours a Yes vote in Australia's postal plebiscite. He wrote

> *I will be voting Yes for straightforward reasons. The idea of marriage as a lifelong commitment between a man and a woman has lost social consensus and is honoured more in the breach than the practice. Therefore it is not reasonable for the state to enforce this ideal.*

The rector of Xavier College, a school in Melbourne, Fr Chris Middleton SJ, says that "the vote relates to marriage as a civil right, and is not in essence about the Catholic sacramental understanding of marriage." And another Jesuit, Fr Frank Brennan SJ, a prominent legal expert, argues that Catholics have no business imposing a religious view of marriage on the rest of Australia:

> *Those of us who are Catholic have multiple affiliations. We are members of the Catholic Church affirming the sacramentality of marriage as defined by our Church and we*

are citizens of a pluralistic democratic society under the rule of law affirming the legitimacy of committed relationships which are solemnised at law in the hope of contributing to the well-being of the couple and of their children.

With respect to the learned gentlemen, this is wrong, wrong, wrong.

Catholics defend a bond between one man and one woman because it is good for everyone, not just Catholics. It protects the dignity of the woman; it creates the best place to raise children; it expresses the human desire for a lasting, loving union. All times and all cultures, or nearly all cultures, hold this ideal in esteem.

The view of the Catholic Church is that marriage, the publicly recognised union between one man and one woman and their children, is a pre-political institution which the state can regulate but has no power to change. Marriage between Christians was given an additional dignity when Christ made it a sacrament. But marriages between Hindus, between Muslims, between Buddhists, and even between atheists are still marriages.

The view that the Catholic Church is defending predates Christianity. The Romans worshipped Jupiter and Venus and past emperors but they had the same idea. One of the great Roman jurists, Modestinus (a pagan), wrote in the 3rd Century AD, "Marriage is the union of male and female and the sharing of life together, involving both divine and human law" (*Digest* 23.2.1).

When Rees-Mogg and others defend a traditional view of marriage only because it is a sacrament and not because it is a natural good, they imply that it is a peculiar institution with rules and traditions binding on Catholics, but on no one

else. This view is well-intentioned but mistaken; it opens the door not only to same-sex marriage, but to polygamy and [polyamory](#), or to whatever modules future Parliaments wish to tack on to the definition of marriage.

Explanations based on analogies are always inadequate. But you could compare natural marriage to arithmetic and the sacramental dimension to mathematics. Everyone agrees that 2+2=4. But our intuitive grasp of that truth is enriched by the deeper understanding of mathematicians. As a friend told me:

> *Whenever we write any arithmetic expression, it only makes sense if it the "numbers" and the operations are defined by some algebraic structure. In this case, it could be a field, a ring, an additive group … Let's say that in this example we are working in the additive group generated by the number 1. This means that we are thinking of "numbers" as things of the form: 1+1+…+1 or -1-1-…-1, where these strings of addition and subtraction can be as long as we like. Then when we write 2, what we mean is the number 1+1, and 4 the number 1+1+1+1. Then the equality is obtained by a property of groups that you can redistribute the order of brackets: (1+1) + (1+1) = 1+1+1+1.*

Got it? Well, you're a sharper knife than I am — I didn't. But the important thing is that 2+2=4 is true always and everywhere, whether you are just in kindergarten or whether you have been enlightened by a lifetime of studying algebra. Similarly, a marriage is a marriage and a sacramental marriage is still a marriage.

The marriage of one man and one woman is worth defending because it creates families, which are the best environment for human flourishing. As Australia's Catholic bishops declared in their eloquent pamphlet, "[Don't Mess With Marriage](#)", traditional families — of whatever persuasion —

"provide the social stability necessary for the future by modelling love and communion, welcoming and raising new life, taking care of the weak, sick and aged. The principal 'public' significance of the marriage-based family is precisely in being the nursery for raising healthy, well-rounded, virtuous citizens."

That's why marriage must be defended and that's why Christians can defend it in the plebiscite campaign without fear of imposing their own theology on non-believers.

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Michael Cook is editor of MercatorNet. This MercatorNet article was republished with permission.

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