

Couples: Britney Spears's annulment offers a twist on the sanctity of marriage

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [January 27, 2004](#) issue

My morning reading the other day included four texts on sex and marriage that I carefully pondered: Dennis O'Brien's thoughtful essay—which is published in this issue—expressing reservations about legalizing gay marriage; a *New York Times Magazine* analysis of the conflict in the Episcopal Diocese of Virginia resulting from Bishop Peter Lee's vote in favor of the consecration of Gene Robinson, an openly gay priest; a brave statement of conscience signed by 23 Roman Catholic priests in Chicago protesting the Vatican's condemnation of homosexual behavior; and, finally, a news item announcing that Britney Spears's 48-hour marriage had been annulled.

I suppose I elect to begin my day this way because I love the church, the whole church, belief in which I affirm every Sunday morning in the Apostles' Creed. I am vitally interested in church matters, and distressed when any part of the church is in trouble. In particular, I love the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) which continues its own struggles over homosexuality. I am also a pastor whose congregation includes people on all sides of this issue.

O'Brien patiently reasons his way through some of the complicated issues surrounding the legal recognition of gay marriages and civil unions, and he concludes that civil unions are preferable. I don't know whether I agree with him, but the article is strong, and it makes me think.

Bishop Lee's diocese includes leaders who are drawing a line in the sand between those who want a church broad enough to include a difference of conviction and biblical interpretation and those who regard truth as absolute and the tolerance of diversity as a bad postmodern idea. We are all going to have to argue over that one.

The Roman Catholic priests' statement moved me deeply, not only because I know and respect some of its signers, but also because it argues so eloquently that the

“Catholic church is most catholic when it is inclusive and embracing, and least reflective of the Gospel of Jesus when it is exclusive and rigid.”

The Britney Spears story came as an ironic twist on all of this. Those who argue for the sanctity of heterosexual marriage ought to be a little exercised about the actions of the wildly popular Ms. Spears. She and hometown friend Jason Alexander decided to get married after a weekend frolic in Las Vegas: “Let’s do something wild, crazy. Let’s go get married, just for the hell of it,” Alexander said later, describing their attitude. That strikes me as an attitude more worthy of concern from those who care about the sanctity of marriage than the decision of a same-sex couple to live together faithfully and to love each other “in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live.”