11 August 2015

To Parents and Caregivers who have enrolled their children in Catholic schools of the Diocese of Lismore

Dear Parents and Caregivers,

The campaign to redefine marriage continues daily to occupy a prominent place in the news media. It appears to be a very well organised and resourced campaign. Some of its public proponents have even claimed the high ground of making same-sex ‘marriage’ the hallmark of progress, equality and freedom, consigning anyone daring to hold a different view to deserted lowlands ‘on the wrong side of history.’

With this letter I attach a copy of the Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Bishops of Australia, Don’t Mess with Marriage. In booklet form it has already been circulated widely through the 22 parishes of the Diocese. However, I would like to ensure that our carefully considered response to the current debate is widely available to those like yourselves who are related to the Church by entrusting the education of your children to a Catholic school.

In commending the Pastoral Letter to your reading and reflection, I would make two points. First, that marriage is not the invention of either the State or the Church. The marriage of a man and woman and all that this union implies for procreation and family is as old as the human race. All human societies and their religions have understood its nature and over many centuries both the Church and civil legal systems have protected and upheld marriage as a unique relationship existing for clearly understood purposes. For individual states to attempt to redefine what has been obvious over millennia to every generation until the last twenty or so years of western European culture is to risk enormous consequences for the common good.

Secondly, as the Pastoral Letter makes clear right at its beginning, the Catholic Church opposes all forms of unjust discrimination, including towards those who experience same–sex attraction. They must be treated with respect, sensitivity and love. Many such adults and teenagers are members of our families and within the circles of valued friends, as well as in the wider community. It is our belief as Christians, however, that everyone, including those with same–sex attraction is called by God to live chastely and to find their value and dignity in fulfilling His plan for them. This is a demanding challenge and possible only with the help of a power beyond ourselves, in unlimited supply to those who seek it with faith and trust.

I thank you for the confidence which you have in the quality of the whole-of-life approach to the education of your sons and daughters offered in our Catholic schools. I thank so many parents for the generous cooperation with which they engage in the support of the daily life and objectives of the schools attended by their children, not least in the education of their children in the goodness, beauty and truth of the teachings of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and in the way of life and witness which He enjoins upon His followers.

With every good wish and blessing,

Yours sincerely,

Most Revd Geoffrey H Jarrett, Bishop of Lismore

Most Revd Geoffrey H Jarrett, Bishop of Lismore
As the debate about ‘same-sex marriage’ gains momentum nationally, the Australian Catholic Bishops believe it is important to highlight the meaning of marriage.

Given the implications of redefining marriage, today we are issuing a pastoral letter to the Catholic community.

You will be aware this week, in the context of the Irish referendum, both the Labor Party and the Greens have announced they will introduce draft legislation to allow two people of the same sex to marry.

Marriage is both a personal relationship between a man and a woman, and the protective institution for their children. Marriage includes an emotional union, but it goes further than that. It involves a comprehensive bodily and spiritual union of a man and a woman.

This union of a man and woman is the natural reproductive and protective environment for raising children. Marriage is the foundation of the family unit, which is in turn the first cell of society.

If the union of a man and a woman is different – not the same - as other unions, then justice demands that we treat that union accordingly. If marriage is an institution designed to support people of the opposite sex to be faithful to each other and to the children of their union it is not discrimination to reserve it to them.

The Christian tradition teaches that every human being is a unique and irreplaceable person, created in the image of God and loved by Him. Because of this, every man, woman and child has great dignity and worth which can never be taken away. This includes those who experience same-sex attraction. They must be treated with respect, sensitivity and love.

Redefining marriage in the way now proposed would see marriage reduced to a committed, affectionate sexual relationship between any two people. All marriages would come to be defined by intensity of emotion rather than a union founded on sexual complementarity and potential fertility. Husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, will be seen to be wholly interchangeable social constructs, as gender would no longer matter.

Chair of the Bishops Commission for Family, Youth and Life, Archbishop Anthony Fisher OP said, “It is unjust, gravely unjust, to legitimise the false assertion that there is nothing distinctive about a man and a woman, a father or a mother; to ignore the particular values that real marriage serves; to ignore the importance for children of having a mum and a dad, committed to them and to each other for the long haul.
Children have a right to grow up with their natural mother and father, where possible. We should not be redefining marriage so as deliberately to exclude a child growing up with either their mother, their father, or both their parents.

“If the civil law ceases to define marriage as traditionally understood, it will be a serious injustice and undermine that common good for which the civil law exists.

“Surely there are other ways of honouring the friendships of same-sex attracted and other people without further deconstructing marriage and the family,” Archbishop Fisher said.

Media queries, please contact Aoife Connors on 0450 348 597

Resources: What is marriage ebrochure
A Pastoral Letter from the Catholic Bishops of Australia to all Australians on the ‘Same-sex Marriage’ Debate

Don’t Mess With Marriage
At this time in history there is much discussion about the meaning of marriage. Some suggest that it is unjustly discriminatory not to allow people with same-sex attraction to marry someone of the same sex. Others believe that marriage is an institution uniting a man and a woman. We wish by this pastoral letter to engage with this debate, present the Church’s teaching to the faithful, and explain the position of the Catholic faithful to the wider community.

The Catholic tradition teaches that every human being is a unique and irreplaceable person, created in the image of God and loved by Him.

Because of this, every man, woman and child has great dignity and worth which can never be taken away. This includes those who experience same-sex attraction. They must be treated with respect, sensitivity, and love.

The Catholic Church opposes all forms of unjust discrimination. We deplore injustices perpetrated upon people because of religion, sex, race, age etc. The Catechism of the Catholic Church calls for understanding for those with deep-seated homosexual tendencies for whom this may well be a real trial. “They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided.” (2358)

Christians believe that all people including those with same-sex attraction are called by God to live chastely and that, by God’s grace and the support of friends, they can and should grow in fulfilling God’s plan. Even those who take a different view to us about the place and meaning of sexual activity can appreciate the particular significance and importance of this institution. We now face a struggle for the very soul of marriage.

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Marriage equality & discrimination

Advocates for ‘same-sex marriage’ rarely focus on the real meaning and purpose of marriage. Instead they assume that equal dignity and the principle of non-discrimination demand the legal recognition of same-sex relationships as marriages.

This appeal to equality and non-discrimination gets things the wrong way around. Justice requires us to treat people fairly and therefore not to make arbitrary, groundless distinctions.

We must treat like cases alike and different cases differently.

Only women are admitted to women’s hospitals and only children to primary schools. We have programmes targeted at Aborigines, refugees, athletes, those with disabilities or reading difficulties, and so on.

Thus privileging or assisting particular people in relevant ways is not arbitrary but an entirely fair response. And if the union of a man and a woman is different from other unions – not the same as other unions – then justice demands that we treat that union accordingly. If marriage is an institution designed to support people of the opposite sex to be faithful to each other and to the children of their union it is not discrimination to reserve it to them.

Indeed, in this pastoral letter we argue that what is unjust – gravely unjust – is:

• to legitimise the false assertion that there is nothing distinctive about a man and a woman, a father or a mother;
• to ignore the particular values that real marriage serves;
• to ignore the importance for children of having, as far as possible, a mum and a dad, committed to them and to each other for the long haul;
• to destabilise marriage further at a time when it is already under considerable pressure; and
• to change retrospectively the basis upon which all existing married couples got married.

If we are right in this assertion and if the civil law ceases to define marriage as traditionally understood, it will be a serious injustice and undermine that common good for which the civil law exists.

Whether we are right depends upon what marriage really is...

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1. Although we use the language of “same-sex marriage” throughout this pastoral letter, we do not consider that same-sex relationships can ever amount to marriage. As we argue, the meaning of marriage is confined to relationships between a man and woman entered into voluntarily for life to the exclusion of all others and which is open to the procreation of children.
Emotional tie - v - Comprehensive one-flesh union

One view of marriage is that it is nothing more than a commitment to love. On this view, marriage is essentially an emotional tie, enhanced by public promises and consensual sexual activity. The marriage is valuable as long as the good emotions last. Proponents of this view of marriage argue that, given that men and women, men and men, and women and women, can have these sorts of emotional ties, all such unions should be recognised as marriages in law. (On this logic marriage could be further redefined to include various types of relationships.)

The traditional view of marriage, which the Church has always supported, is different. It sees marriage as about connecting the values and people in our lives which otherwise have a tendency to get fragmented: sex and love, male and female, sex and babies, parents and children. This view has long influenced our law, literature, art, philosophy, religion and social practices.

On this view, marriage includes an emotional union, but it goes further than that. It involves a substantial bodily and spiritual union of a man and a woman. As the Old Testament taught and Jesus and St Paul repeated, marriage is where man and woman truly become "one flesh" (Gen 2:24; Mt 19:5; Eph 5:31). It is a comprehensive union between a man and a woman grounded on heterosexual union.

This union is centred around and ordered not only to the wellbeing of the spouses but also towards the generation and wellbeing of children.

This is true even where one or both spouses are infertile: they still engage in exactly the same sort of marital acts as fertile couples, i.e. that naturally result in a child. Marriage for them as for other truly married couples is grounded on a total commitment: bodily and spiritual, sexual and reproductive, permanent and exclusive. It is in these senses that marriage is comprehensive.

On this traditional view what allows for this special kind of union between a man and a woman in marriage is precisely their difference and complementarity. Their physical, spiritual, psychological and sexual differences show they are meant for each other, their union makes them whole, and through their union ‘in one flesh’ they together beget children who are ‘flesh of their flesh’. They share the sameness of humanity but enjoy the difference of their masculinity and femininity, being husband and wife, paternity and maternity.

Same-sex friendships are of a very different kind: to treat them as the same does a grave injustice to both kinds of friendship and ignores the particular values that real marriages serve.

2. There have been examples of “throuples”, that is three people, being “married” in private ceremonies.
The importance of marriage and family

The Catholic Church cares deeply about marriage because it is a fundamental good in itself, a foundation of human existence and flourishing, and a blessing from God. The decision to commit permanently and exclusively to sharing the whole of one’s life with someone of the opposite sex and to raise any children that are the fruit, embodiment and extension of that union, is good in itself, even if no children are conceived. But because children are the natural result of marital life and are best reared within the commitment of marriage, this makes marriage also an essential part of the propagation and nurturing of the human family.

Marriage also joins distinct families to each other, fostering greater communion between people.

Each marriage, from its beginning, is the ‘foundation-in-waiting’ of a new family and each marriage-based family is a basic ‘cell’ of society.

Families also 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.

Governments normally stay out of relationships: it is none of their business to say who may be friends with whom and on what basis.

But because of the crucial role marriage plays as the nursery for the future of the community, and its responsibility always to act in the best interests of children governments everywhere recognise and regulate marriage.

Marriage also has a religious significance. The Catholic Church believes that God is the author of marriage and has “endowed marriage with various benefits and purposes” including “the good of the spouses and the procreation and upbringing of children”.

Christ raised the matrimonial covenant between baptised persons to the status of a sacrament “in which God helps the spouses live out the dignity and duties of their state” and so work out their salvation with Him.

For these reasons the Church can say that marriage is not only a natural institution but also ‘holy’.

Thus the Church, as well as the state, has an interest in the right understanding and support of authentic marriage.

The importance of mothers and fathers

Every child has a biological mother and father. But the importance of mothers and fathers goes far beyond reproduction.

Men and women bring unique gifts to the shared task of raising their children. Mothering and fathering are distinctly different. Only a woman can be a mother; only a man can be a father.

A mother and a father each contributes in a distinct way to the upbringing of a child. Respecting a child’s dignity means affirming his or her need and natural right to a mother and a father. And there are countless reliable studies that suggest that mothers and fathers enhance – and their absences impede – child development in different ways.  

The Church acknowledges the difficulties faced by single parents and seeks to support them in their often heroic response to the needs of their children.

There is a big difference, however, between dealing with the unintended reality of single parenthood and planning from the beginning artificially to create an ‘alternative family’ that deliberately deprives a child of a father or a mother.

Sometimes people claim that children do just fine with two mums or two dads and that there is “no difference” between households with same-sex parents and heterosexual parents. But sociological research, as well as the long experience of Church and society, attests to the importance for children of having, as far as possible, both a mother and a father.

‘Messing with marriage’, therefore, is also ‘messing with kids’. It is gravely unjust to them. We know that marriages and families are already under very considerable pressure today and that there is already much confusion about what they mean and how best to live marital and family life. The Church devotes much of her pastoral energy to supporting people to live married and family life well and to assisting the victims of marital and family breakdown. This convinces us that a further tearing away at the traditional understanding of marriage and family will only hurt more people – and especially more young people who, because of their vulnerability, demand particular care.

6. See references at the end of the document.
7. See references at the end of the document.
Consequences of redefining marriage

Beyond the effects on spouses and on children, redefining marriage to include same-sex relationships will have far reaching consequences for all of us.

The world around us influences the communities in which we live. Cultural and legal norms shape our idea of what the world is like, what’s valuable, and what are appropriate standards of conduct. And this in turn shapes individual choices. That’s one of the main purposes of marriage law: to enable and encourage individuals to form and keep commitments of a certain kind.

But if the civil definition of marriage were changed to include ‘same-sex marriage’ then our law and culture would teach that marriage is merely about emotional union of any two (or more?) people.

All marriages would come to be defined by intensity of emotion rather than a union founded on sexual complementarity and potential fertility.

Husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, will be seen to be wholly interchangeable social constructs as gender would no longer matter.

And people who adhere to the perennial and natural definition of marriage will be characterised as old-fashioned, even bigots, who must answer to social disapproval and the law. Even if certain exemptions were allowed at first for ministers of religion and places of worship, freedom of conscience, belief and worship will be curtailed in important ways.

Here are a few real life examples that have occurred recently:

• The City of Coeur d’Alene, Idaho, ordered Christian ministers to perform same-sex weddings under pain of 180 days’ imprisonment for each day the ceremony is not performed and fines of $1000 per day; some British MPs have threatened to remove the marriage licences from clergy who fail to conduct ‘same-sex marriages’

• Clergy in Holland, France, Spain, the US and Australia have been threatened with prosecution for ‘hate speech’ for upholding their faith tradition’s position on marriage; the City of Houston, Texas, has even subpoenaed pastors, compelling them to submit sermons to legal scrutiny when discussing sexuality

• In Colorado and Oregon, courts have fined bakers who refused on religious or conscientious grounds to bake wedding cakes for ‘same-sex weddings’; in New Mexico a wedding photographer was fined for refusing to do photography for such a ceremony; and in Illinois accommodation providers have been sued for not providing honeymoon packages after ‘same-sex weddings’

• Yeshiva University in New York City was prosecuted for not providing accommodation to ‘same-sex married couples’ and other Catholic university colleges have been threatened with similar actions

• Catholic organisations in some American states have been forced to extend spousal employment benefits to same-sex partners

• British MPs have threatened to stop churches holding weddings if they do not agree to conduct same-sex ones

Beyond the effects on spouses and on children, redefining marriage to include same-sex relationships will have far reaching consequences for all of us.
The word ‘marriage’ isn’t simply a label that can be attached and transferred to different types of relationships as the fashion of the day dictates. It has an intrinsic or natural meaning prior to anything we may invent or the state may legislate. It reflects God’s plan for humanity, our personal growth and that of our children and society. To say that other friendships are not marriages is not to demean those other friendships or the individuals concerned, but merely to recognise that...

...marriage is the covenant of a man and a woman to live as husband and wife, exclusively and for life, and open to the procreation of children.

We all know and love people with same-sex attraction. They are our brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, friends and neighbours. They need love and support like anyone else. But pretending that their relationships are ‘marriages’ is not fair or just to them. As Christians we must be willing to present the truth about marriage, family and sexuality and to do so charitably and lovingly.

We call upon all those of good will, to redouble their support for the institution of marriage in our community and for the laws and culture that sustain it. We particularly urge you to make your views known to your parliamentary representatives. At this moment in our nation’s history married people must give the testimony of their own lives in this matter. We especially pray for genuine friendship and love in every person’s life, married or unmarried; for a right understanding of the meaning of marriage and the requirements of justice; and for an increasing openness to the powerful witness of married couples in our world.

Additional References


