

A Pastoral Letter from the Catholic Archbishop of Perth on the 'Same-sex Marriage' Debate

To the Catholic People of the Archdiocese of Perth



June 13/14, 2015

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

Once again, the issue of 'same-sex marriage' has emerged in our society in a contentious way. Specifically, there is a great deal of discussion about the merits or otherwise of changing the legal definition of marriage, which at present refers to a union between a woman and a man, to one which embraces same-sex relationships as well.

'Don't Mess with Marriage'

The Catholic Bishops of Australia have recently issued a combined pastoral letter on this matter called 'Don't Mess with Marriage'. The letter expresses clearly, and in some considerable depth, the reasons for the Catholic Church's view that the present legal definition of marriage should not be changed. I encourage all of you to read this letter carefully. It is freely available on the website of the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference (www.catholic.org.au) and can also be accessed through the archdiocesan website (www.perthcatholic.org.au). If you do not have access to a computer, or prefer a printed copy, please ask a family member or friend, or your parish priest, to make a copy available to you.

Respect, Compassion and Sensitivity

In writing my own letter on this matter, I simply want to raise some points which I believe are of special significance as we grapple with this issue. I use the word "grapple" deliberately. Many of us have family members and close friends who experience same-sex attraction. We know them to be loving people striving as we all do to live a good life and deeply loved by God. We are aware of the joy which their relationships, their deep friendships, bring into their lives. We naturally and rightly want to love and support them. We certainly do not want to condemn them or cut them off from their families and friends, and nor should we.

The question of "same-sex marriage" however is not about condemnation, discrimination or rejection. It is about the nature of marriage and the importance which the institution of marriage has in our society and has had for many centuries. It is also about the question of what is appropriate for governments to decide and what is, or should be, beyond the bounds of their competence.

Marriage and Family Link

Marriage, at least up until now, has been understood in our society to be an institution which formalises, supports and strengthens the relationship between a man and a woman who commit themselves to each other in mutual love and who, through that commitment, form a "community" in which their children, should they be so fortunate as to have them, can grow up. It is this fundamental link between marriage and the creation and sustaining of a family which makes the institution of marriage a fundamental building block of our society.

All human beings deserve to be created through the love of their parents, and to be nurtured in the family community formed by the love of their parents. A stable marriage and family life is the best environment in which to form each generation to be the best future stewards of our society and of our world. The greatest gift we can bequeath to our children is a society committed to promoting and defending the essential connection between marriage, family life, and the nurturing of each and every child within the community of love that created him or her.

Marriage is, therefore, about more than the mutual love and support which the two partners in the marriage ideally offer to one another. It is also, and equally, about any children who might form part of the family. It is about their fundamental right to grow up, if at all possible, with both their mother and their father. Hence, marriage is a very significant and very particular relationship. It deserves special recognition, special support and a unique status in our society.

Focus on Strengthening Marriage

We all know, of course, that the ideal of marriage is not always realised in practice. Often, marriages fail; many parents are left to bring up their children alone; and many marriages are, to the sorrow of the couples concerned, childless. It is because of these difficulties that we should be doing all we can to put our energy and attention into strengthening this vital institution rather than weakening it further by seeking to change its time-honoured nature.

This is what the introduction of 'same-sex marriage' would mean. To redefine marriage so that it covers other kinds of relationships, such as same-sex relationships, is to sever or, at best, relativise the essential link between marriage and the family. It is to focus exclusively on the emotional bond between the partners, which as we all know can be quite variable. It is to make the question of children, and their right to grow up with their mother and father, quite independent of the essential nature and purpose of marriage. It is to change the institution of marriage from what it is today to something very different.

Reject Unjust Discrimination

None of this suggests that there should be any unjust discrimination against same-sex couples; nor does it suggest that legal protections and government benefits should be denied to same-sex couples. It does suggest, however, that the government has a role to play in the regulation of marriage in our society, primarily because marriage is linked to the creation of a family. It is the importance of the family unit in society which justifies the government's role. Questions of personal relationships outside this area should not be subject to government regulation in the way that is being proposed.

There are many views on this complex issue. The way in which it is discussed, and the basis on which decisions are made, will be a measure of the maturity of our society. We can and we must distinguish between the strength of arguments about 'same-sex marriage' on the one hand and, on the other hand, the essential human dignity of those who may hold opposing views. It is entirely unfair and unjust to demonise or condemn anyone because he or she holds a different view about 'same-sex marriage'. Likewise, it is unworthy to suggest that those who argue against the proposed redefinition of marriage are homophobic, intolerant or in some way lacking in intellectual depth. It is unfair to suggest that they are trying to force their views on others. It is cruel to claim such people are devoid of love, compassion or understanding for those in same-sex relationships.

Propose with Respect and Concern

From our point of view, as Catholics, we seek, as Pope Benedict once expressed it, to propose and not to impose. We offer the Church's view as an important contribution to the discussion. We do so respectfully but with genuine concern that the well-being and common good of our society, and of our families in particular, is in play.

Let us, as the Catholic community of Perth, pray that the wisdom of God's Holy Spirit will be with all those who must make these decisions. May these decisions lead to a deeper flourishing of our society, our families, our children and the generations to come.

+ Timothy Costelloe SDB

+Archbishop Timothy Costelloe SDB
Archbishop of Perth