

A Reflection by the Archbishop of Westminster on The Marriage Act



The Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act has changed the legal definition of marriage in this land. No longer does this definition assume or support the complementarity of male and female, or expect sexual fidelity between the married couple, or see marriage as oriented towards conceiving and nurturing of children. The titles ‘husband’ and ‘wife’ are now officially gender neutral. This is the deconstruction of marriage as it has been understood for millennia. In effect, this Act completes the privatisation of marriage, so that its central content is whatever the couple wish to construct. Marriage is no longer a truly public institution, at the basis of society.

In passing this Act, with widespread support among sections of our population, our society has taken a significant step away from its Judeo-Christian foundations. Differences between social norms and these great religions have always existed. Today they are to be found in business practices, social welfare provision, in bioethics, in the beginnings and endings of lives. This Act adds to that list and to a sense among people of faith that they are, in these regards, strangers in their own land.

The Act does not change our Catholic teaching about marriage. In contrast to the new law, Christian teaching holds that marriage is a life-long, faithful commitment between a man and a woman, ordained by nature and by God for the creation of the family and future generations. Marriage is the place where sexual relations find their proper place and God-given purpose. Both as a natural, human institution and as raised by the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament, marriage provides the best circumstances for the birth and nurture of children and forms the most reliable links and supports between the generations. The notion of marriage now shaping its legal redefinition no longer assumes or supports these values. It is clear that the Catholic Church cannot accept the validity in Church law of same sex marriages.

2. At this moment it is important to recall why the Church was, and is, opposed in principle even to same sex civil partnerships. The reasons given, most clearly in 2003, were that civil partnerships (or same sex unions) inevitably failed to recognise the uniqueness of marriage, its specific nature and its crucial role in human well-being; they promoted lifestyles with a presumption of sexual activity outside the teaching of the Church and they would lead to a redefinition of marriage, just as we have seen.

Difference and confusion over the understanding of human sexuality and the principles governing sexual behaviour ran through the recent debate. Even though most people still seek a faithful love, and aspire to a faithful and lasting marriage and family life, our society has, in effect, thoroughly abandoned the fundamental principle that sexual relations belong properly with the bonds of marriage between a woman and a man. In contrast to the Christian tradition and the Church's teaching, any sexual activity between consenting adults is now viewed as a matter of moral neutrality, to be decided upon by those involved, as long as no evident physical harm results. Also, the intrinsic link between sexual relations and the procreation of children has, in practice, long been abandoned.

It is easy to be carried along by these opinions and practices. They can have a great influence on our conscience and action. But this is not the way of the Catholic as a follower of Christ. We try to present and live by Catholic teaching as given by God for the ultimate good for each person. This may indeed lead us to feel, in these matters, out of step with popular culture. But that is our calling and not a matter for discouragement. Rather, with the confidence of faith, we stay resolute, encouraging one another and all who recognise the values we wish to uphold.

How should we conduct ourselves in these circumstances? There are many detailed points to be addressed in due course. But, in general, there are three principles which must guide our thinking and behaviour within our families, within the family of faith and in the roles we have in society. We must pay particular and respectful attention to those who experience same sex attraction, offering them consistent pastoral care in love and truth.

The first is that we try to live faithfully by the teaching we have received and to present it robustly and intelligently. Given to us in love by Christ our Lord and his Church, this teaching is no human construct but God's gift for our happiness. Nor is it an ideal to which we can but aspire. It is an invitation put before us in love. It is a goal towards which we positively strive on our pilgrimage. It is a goal we can attain because we are always accompanied by the loving friendship of Christ himself who constantly renews us in our efforts by his never failing forgiveness and grace. Failures neither surprise nor defeat us. Rather we press on knowing that in his invitation lies our true hope of stability in this life and happiness in the next. So we are willing to explain to each other the demands and coherence of Christ's invitation in every sphere of life and to offer each other encouragement for every challenge.

The second principle is that we are to make every effort to accompany one another through the difficulties and trials of life. We offer to others unfailing respect as they strive to do their best. We defend them from harshness and prejudice. Ready always to attribute the best of motives to others, we are slow to judge them in the particularity of their circumstances. Within our families and within the Church, in our parishes and groups, this loving support should never be withdrawn even in the times of confusion and disagreement about the right course of action to be taken. Together, with patience, we strive for that stability and peace for which we long. Most of all we remember that we are all engaged in a search for the loving presence of God in our lives, recognising that His presence comes to us most often through those who love us. We support each other in prayer, and find encouragement in the sacraments, especially in the Sacrament of Reconciliation where we receive God's mercy and the call to change our way of life. Each day we entrust ourselves to God's loving providence which goes beyond all that we can see for ourselves. The third principle is that we are always willing to engage in dialogue and conversation with those who see things differently. This lesson was taught to us with extraordinary grace by Pope Benedict XVI during his Visit to the United Kingdom in 2010. In his

manner and his words he engaged with the leaders of our society, offering both respect and challenge. He acknowledged the positive achievements of Parliament, yet challenged it regarding 'the objective norms governing right action.' Highlighting the 'worrying signs of a failure to appreciate... the rights of the believer to freedom of conscience and freedom of religion', he called on us all 'to seek ways to promote and encourage dialogue between faith and reason at every level of national life.' With respect and charity, then, we are always ready to present the reasons for the hope we have within us and to listen attentively to those who disagree.

This, then, is our mandate. We are to be energetic citizens and contributors to the common good of all. Crucial to this is our firm conviction of the truth and worthiness of our Catholic vision of life, and its moral principles and challenges. These we are always willing to present and to defend. We know the contentment that adherence to this way of life brings for at its heart is the love of Christ for all without exception and especially for those who are most burdened. In this we all have a part to play, keeping in mind the words of St Paul: 'Now there are a variety of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one. To each is given a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.' (1 Corinthians, 12.4-7)

Our place as followers of the Lord is not fashioned for our comfort. But nor is our discomfort something about which we should complain. From the outset until today, the Lord's call to follow him has meant standing apart, quite clearly in some times and places. However that apartness is neither separation from nor disdain for our society. St Paul, in his advice to Titus, to us, is quite clear. We are 'to be ready to do good at every opportunity; not to go slandering other people or picking quarrels but to be courteous and always polite to all' (Titus 3.1-2) This is how we carry out our mission, striving always to enter the Kingdom by the narrow gate.

Archbishop Vincent Nichols

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