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A Letter to the People of the Diocese

Dear Brothers & Sisters

Concerning Gay Marriage and Children

The Irish people have voted in a referendum to endorse what is termed gay marriage on a 62/38% vote. The Archbishop of Dublin, Diarmuid Martin has responded in part – “It’s very clear that if this referendum is an affirmation of the views of young people, then the Church has the huge task in front of it to find the language to be able to talk to and get its message across to young people, not just on this issue, but in general.” He also added, “We tend to think in black and white but most of us live in the area of grey, and if the Church has a harsh teaching, it seems to be condemning those who are not in line with it.” Part of the success of the “yes” campaign was, I believe, due to the shift in the debate from talking about the nature of marriage to focussing on the concept of equality. Not to be in favour of the vote was interpreted as being for discrimination and inequality among people. The vote of many may have been to endorse the concept of equality, rather than reflect more thoroughly on the nature of what marriage is. Now we hear politicians changing their views, saying that we must not be left behind in Australia in our attitudes. Behind what? About equality, or about marriage?

We need to look at the global picture. There is no movement for gay marriage in Islamic, Buddhist or Hindu societies, in Africa, in Asia or the Middle East. But in Western society the various pillars we have placed around the sacredness of life have been gradually weakened by our erosion of the sense of the sacred. Easy divorce, abortion, euthanasia, and now a radical reinterpretation of what marriage is have all in their own way in the West weakened our hold on the sacredness of life. The voice of the Church moreover has been weakened seriously and understandably by the various scandals that has beset us in recent times.

This means that there is perhaps an inevitability that the yes case for gay marriage will win the day here in Australia, sooner or later. How does a Catholic Christian respond? At one level a parliamentary yes vote does not disturb me profoundly. The State view of marriage, a secular contract that can be dissolved in divorce, is so different from the Catholic understanding that marriage is an indissoluble and sacramental and holy union. But the impact of the weakening of the family at the base of human society and the flow-on to the raising of children in a gay marriage context, does disturb greatly.

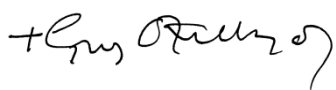
A pear is not an apple. Same-sex marriage is not the same as a marriage between a man and a woman. The opinions of media personalities, or politicians, or a parliamentary vote can do what they wish, but no matter how much they say it, a pear remains a pear and does not change into an apple. Equally same-sex marriage is not identical with a marriage between a man and a woman. In the Christian tradition marriage has the two aspects of the mutual support and love of a man and a woman, and the openness to procreation, to bearing life. That is what the word "parent" means in its Latin origin, a bearer, a creator, a life-giver. No matter how you use the word "marriage", a same-sex union does not have the fundamental possibility of parenting. True marriage remains a vowed union between a man and a woman, a commitment for life, to provide a context in which new life might be born. The nature of marriage cannot be altered by the vote of politicians; it is not their area, it is the plan of God for the natural order.

I do not deny that people of same-sex attraction can form a lasting bond of devotion and care for each other. I think most of us would know such couples. Not a few of us have families where a son or daughter or nephew or niece has declared themselves to be gay, and has entered into a partnership. Any such stable partnership should have certain rights protected. And if one's daughter brings her female partner to Christmas dinner they should be paid the signs of affection and dignity that is rightly theirs as people loved by God, and me. I do not need, however, to acknowledge their partnership as a true marriage, even if they have had a "ceremony", because it is not a true marriage. A pear is not an apple.

What causes me distress is what is becoming the next phase, following a gay marriage. It is the claim to having a right to children. No-one has a right to a child; a child is a gift from God. In the plan of God, a child is entrusted to a mother and father for its nurture, protection and growth. A child has a right to two parents, two life-givers, a father and a mother, and no one should deliberately take away that right. There are, of course, fatherless or motherless families, due to the tragedy of accident or fatal illness, or to the sorrow of a separation. Single parent families are to be encouraged in whatever way to help them in their raising of the children. A gay couple adopting a child, where otherwise the child would remain an orphan, can be defended, I believe, if that proviso is in place. What cannot be defended is the deliberate use of surrogacy or some other intervention in order to prevent the presence of a natural father or mother in the family of the child. I can see a generation in the future describing itself as something like another stolen generation. When bitterness occurs, they could say to their same-sex parents that they deliberately intervened in order to exclude what was the right of the child, to a father or mother as a parent. The natural process was stolen from them. By a deliberate and active intervention and disruption of the natural process they were deprived of a normal father or mother relationship, and that was a gross injustice. A same-sex couple cannot replace the father-mother couple which any child could claim as a right, granted that it is the normal and universal process of the human race.

To my mind the gay marriage debate is not just about what two adults do with each other, but it has a great deal to do with the future and the rights of any child. I offer these thoughts for your reflection, brothers and sisters and your contribution to the national discussion.

Yours in Christ



+ Gregory O'Kelly SJ
Bishop of the Diocese of Port Pirie