

# **Teaching the Truth about Marriage**

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The recent decision of the majority of voters in this republic to change the definition of marriage was a watershed. Just recently Pope Francis said somewhere – “we live not so much in an era of change but in a change of era “. I think he was right. Many who voted in favour of ‘gay marriage’ may not realise it but it is true that the definition of marriage *per se* has been changed. I am sure there are many people who think that things are just the same except that marriage has been ‘extended’ to include two men or two women who love each other and wish to ‘tie the knot’. I see the decision as an "error" not because I want to demean any person but rather because of a concern for the common good and God’s revealed will.

I have been thinking a lot about the philosophical basis for the referendum result. When we get down to the bedrock of the decision of the majority of voters to allow for this radical change, it seems to me that a basic tenet of this philosophy is that human nature is fully good, it is not flawed. What human beings need is freedom to express themselves fully. This self-expression will lead to happiness. During the campaign there was a rejection of the notion that we human beings need any outside objective truth. We can know the truth on our own. Of course this attitude goes back to the Garden of Eden. In the Book of Genesis we read how the serpent said to Adam & Eve: “if you eat of the tree you will be like God.”

The human quest for freedom and happiness has so often rejected any divine reference and has a “go it alone” policy right throughout history. It has become stronger since the Enlightenment era with a clear exaltation of human reason without reference to faith or revelation. So, in our own country in the run-up to the May referendum of this year in order to find out

that the 'truth' of marriage can include the 'marriage' of two men or two women, it was decided to hold a referendum and take a vote. It is a strange way to go about finding truth. By far the most of the referenda we have had in my lifetime have been about - marriage and divorce and life in the womb. Why is it that mainly in these issues we feel it ok to hold referenda? There have been no referenda held on whether or not we should tell the truth in court or whether or not we have the right to be educated and so on.

But on marriage and the right to life there have been several referenda. It is strange also that in this vital area of life, marriage, today's topic, there is no State preparation for marriage. I was raised near a very well known golf course and know at least something about the game. Can you imagine giving a young boy or girl a 7 iron and telling them to swing it any way you want? You have to be taught. There is a correct way which one has to learn. Granted there are personal differences in each individual's swing but there are some basic things which one must do so that the ball travels in the right direction. The same is true for all decent human activity. There are basic rules. When applied the rules help the person to achieve his or her natural potential. This implies discipline. That is what we don't like. Freedom is the cry. To do what we want. That we can go it alone. So even for marriage no preparation is necessary. The Church at least has a marriage preparation course. Very inadequate in my view. A huge area of concern for me that will not be easy to deal with. But from the State's point of view how strange it is that we allow for no preparation as such for marriage which is of such vital importance. It takes years to become a doctor or an engineer but one can get married without preparation.

One could legitimately ask does the State really care about marriage or was the referendum a convenient and relatively cheap way of seeking popularity in order to be recognized as progressive and modern? Last May was it the 'truth' about marriage which was sought or simply allowing people to do what they wished in the area of marriage? And so it was put to the people that any loving arrangement between two people irrespective of sexual

identity should be (with certain exclusions –siblings, etc.) respected and should the couple wish they could enter into ‘marriage’. The ‘truth’ about marriage is something we can figure out for ourselves. We do not need Church or God or any talk of the common good.

Pope Francis reiterated in his discourse at Strasbourg: “Today there is a tendency to claim ever broader individual rights – I am tempted to say individualistic; underlying this is a conception of the human person as detached from all social and anthropological contexts, as if the person were a 'monad', increasingly unconcerned with other surrounding 'monads'. The equally essential and complementary concept of duty no longer seems to be linked to such a concept of rights. As a result, the rights of the individual are upheld, without regard for the fact that each human being is part of a social context wherein his or her rights and duties are bound up with those of others and with the common good of society itself.”

This is I believe true. We do live in an age of subjectivism and individualism. We should be allowed to do what we want and to do it on our own. This implies in turn a very definite view of the human person. We are individuals and we can be defined in isolation. We determine our own destiny. We are free to make up our own plan for life and change it if we so wish. We are not bound by convention or even now by nature itself. We can even be gender neutral. It was very ironic that after the result of the same-sex marriage result came out there was an immediate call to repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment! Why? What had abortion to do with the referendum? It seems to me that the referendum was really about the extension of the human ‘will to power’. That we want to have total freedom to do as we wish and to place our ‘rights’ above the common good and even God’s expressed will.

With the development of the natural sciences, new possibilities have appeared regarding the biological relationship between persons and cultures. Consumer society has separated sexuality and procreation. *Humanae Vitae*, the encyclical letter of Pope Paul VI way back in 1968, was

in fact prophetic. Contraception has done huge damage to the relationship between man and woman- separating sex from procreation. Once that essential link is broken sex becomes something which can be abused. Oral contraception was proposed as a solution to marital stress- to ease the burdens which are part of marital life which is often tough. But if contraception was to be used only within marriage it did not take people long to figure out that it could be used outside of marriage. How many of our people, young and not young, have been badly affected by casual sex and empty relationships?

There is also in the experience of life today a rejection of sacrifice where so often it seems that one's sole objective is to feel good in the moment. The modern liking for New Age therapies and religions and meditation practices are examples of this.

There is too the stated concentration of government energies on importance of the individual for the workforce. Some government statements seem to put the emphasis on the person as a worker first, and a family person second. It seems to me that this is a real danger. Regarding education, especially second and third level it is often the case that the goal of education comes across more as the securing of employment rather than educating of the person for life as such.

The rise in individualism also manifests itself in the present day difficulty of having to assume responsibility. Commitment to marriage is decreasing.

I would like to see a study done on how family break-up is affecting the crisis of homelessness which is a huge problem in Ireland today. How many on our streets are there because of family disintegration?

These attitudes have mushroomed in the last 40 years or so. That is significant I think. These last 40-50 years have in the West been a time of relative affluence and freedom.

What may change this? Perhaps some of the realities we now face and are frightened by.

A Jesuit priest Fr. Alfred Delp Germany d. 1945 wrote that “Man cannot really know himself unless he has known the fear of what he can become?”

Today there is fear of global warming. Fear of terrorism. Fear of the future. The West is under threat. The places of modern freedoms have now become places of fear. It is opportune to mention in passing here Pope Benedict’s famous Regensburg address 10 years ago now. His predictions for Europe have come true.

Maybe these realities will help us come back to our senses. It will hopefully for some at least - even though Jesus did say that in Noah’s day people were living as usual right up to the day he went into the ark. When will we learn?

### **The Church’s View.**

The Catholic Church, in common with other faiths and indeed with people of no faith, holds that the union of man and woman is simply different to other types of ‘union’. Marriage in Ireland recognised this difference. Now it does not.

Jesus, with great love, taught unambiguously that from the beginning marriage is the lifelong union of one man and one woman. The Church, seeking to witness to Christ in every age, welcomes all and treats every person with equal dignity. We agree with those who seek change in the definition of marriage in one thing: that every person has equal dignity. We disagree about the nature of marriage.

'There are absolutely no grounds for considering homosexual unions to be in any way similar or even remotely analogous to God's plan for marriage and family.' Nevertheless, men and women with a homosexual tendency ought to be received with respect and sensitivity.' Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided'" (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons*, 4, Instrumentum Laboris 130).

We understand that marriage is a natural institution with a meaning that precedes both State and religion. From the beginning, the sexual complementarity of men and women is the basis of a unique communion that expresses something of the image and likeness of God who is a Triune communion of Persons.

We further believe that Christ raised marriage between a baptized woman and man to be a sacrament, an efficacious sign of and participation in the very mystery of Christ and the Church. The sacrament builds upon the natural reality of marriage — it does not erase it — and sexual difference is essential to both. Indeed, without this reciprocal relationship between the sexes, as Pope Francis has taught, we cannot understand "what it means to be a man and woman."

A solid family based on the marriage between a man and a woman is a real sign of real gospel for all to see. In my pastoral experience young children will go the house of a family where there is fun and joy and a lot of children playing together.

The family then has a vocation – to show to society the value of the individual. Where he or she is nurtured.

Children spell love – T I M E.

Oftentimes now parents do not have time for their children and the children are not able to see the example of adults, and are confronted mainly with

the example of their peers. So the affective maturity remains held back and is not given permission to develop. Of prime importance in this context is pornography and the commercialization of the body, helped by a distorted use of the *internet*. Do not forget, however, that this is more of a consequence than a cause of the current situation. Thus the crisis of couples destabilizes the family and weakens family links between generations. (cf *Instrumentum laboris* 33)

This project of God for marriage and the family offers the possibility of fullness for the life of the person, relevant still today, despite the difficulties encountered in maintaining commitments forever. The virtues of marital and family life are, for example: "... respect and mutual trust; mutual acceptance and gratitude; and patience and forgiveness" (*Instrumentum laboris* 43).

The Church recognizes marriages and families as the foundation of the Church and society. "Given that the family is "the first and vital cell of society". The permanent, faithful, and fruitful bond of marriage is the normative and beautiful structure God designed for how individuals are brought together into relationships of life-giving love. Who we are is tied to who we are with others. This first comes through our families. It is through mothers and fathers and children that each person most powerfully "learns to receive love and to give love" as Pope Francis has taught. As with God's other gifts, this design is for our good as individuals and as a society.

Finally, how do we respond to the present situation?

So I ask you to take the long view and remember that this is not the first — and unlikely to be the last — time the Church has been led by her beliefs to be counter-cultural.

First, be a good witness. Treat everyone with respect and dignity. Love everyone just as Christ has loved you. Be a joyful witness to the truths Christ has revealed and the Church has taught. And remember that God's

grace is greater than the chaos around us. I remember that line from St. Paul. “Where sin abounded grace abounded all the more.”

Second, together, let us speak this truth with love. Sometimes preaching the truth means speaking of sin, our own and that of society. But our faith is rooted in reconciliation; Christ constantly invites us out of the darkness and into the light of His merciful love. As Pope Francis reminds us, we are all sinners and every sinner deserves compassion. So, we will not abandon marriage and families and we also will not give up on witnessing to the truth and inviting others to join us. The work of the Iona Institute is a case in point.

A lot can be done by a few. Lobby politicians to implement more family-friendly policies, like for example, more benefits for parents who wish to stay at home to bring up children, longer maternity leave, etc.

Third, live as you believe. Continue to shape your life according to these truths, and urge others, by both your words and your example, to do the same. Continue to advocate for society to recognize that the permanent, fruitful, faithful union of one man and one woman makes a unique contribution to the common good, and so deserves — once again — unique protection and support in law. This will, in the short term, create more room for social tolerance of this venerable view of marriage, and in the long term, make the day come sooner when, inevitably, this decision will come undone. I know that I as bishop must teach the whole truth about marriage and nothing but the truth.

Jesus tells us our true human story is set. Some are trying desperately to unwrite it and replace it with another version. But he tells us who we really are.

We have a destiny not here but in eternity.

**ENDS**

