

# Don't Mess With Marriage



**A Pastoral Letter  
from the Catholic Bishops of Australia  
to all Australians on  
the 'Same-sex Marriage' Debate**



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# Respect for all

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.



# Marriage equality & discrimination

Advocates for ‘same-sex marriage’<sup>1</sup> 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 destabilize 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.

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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.



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...



# 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.)<sup>2</sup>

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

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2. There have been examples of “throuples”, that is three people, being ‘married’ in private ceremonies.



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.



# 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".<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

For these reasons the Church can say that marriage is not only a natural institution but also 'holy'.<sup>5</sup>

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

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3. Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* §48.

4. John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*.

5. E.g. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions between Homosexual Persons*, 3 June 2003.









# 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.<sup>6</sup>

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 father.<sup>7</sup>

'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.

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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 adoption agencies in Britain and some American states have been forced to close for not placing children with same-sex couples: for example, Evangelical Child Family Services in Illinois (US) was shut down for its refusal to do so
- Catholic organisations in some American states have been forced to extend spousal employment benefits to same-sex partners
- In New Jersey an online dating service was sued for failing to provide services to same-sex couples and a doctor in San Diego County was prosecuted after refusing personally to participate in the reproduction of a fatherless child through artificial insemination
- Parents in Canada and several European countries have been required to leave their children in sex-education classes that teach the goodness of homosexual activity and its equality with heterosexual marital activity; for example, David and Tanya Parker objected to their kindergarten son being taught about same-sex marriage after it was legalised by the Massachusetts Supreme Court, leading to David being handcuffed and arrested for trying to pull his son out of class for that lesson. They were told they had no right to do so
- The Law Society in England revoked permission for a group called 'Christian Concern' to use its premises because the group supported traditional marriage which the Law Society said was contrary to its 'diversity policy'
- In the US, Canada and Denmark pastors or religious organisations have been forced to allow same-sex marriages in their churches or halls: Ocean Grove Methodist Camp in New Jersey (US) had part of its tax-exempt status rescinded because they do not allow same-sex civil union ceremonies on their grounds
- British MPs have threatened to stop churches holding weddings if they do not agree to conduct same-sex ones

- The Chief Rabbi of Amsterdam and a Bishop in Spain have been threatened with prosecution for 'hate speech' merely for restating the position of their religious traditions
- The Deputy Chief Psychiatrist of the state of Victoria was pressured to resign his position on the Victorian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission after joining 150 doctors who told a Senate inquiry that children do better with a mum and dad; in several US states and in England psychologists have also lost positions for stating that they favour traditional marriage or families based thereon
- Having allowed 'same-sex marriages', polygamous marriages have been permitted in Brazil and pressure for their legalisation is strong in Canada and elsewhere
- Businessmen, athletes, commentators, teachers, doctors and nurses, religious leaders and others in several countries who have spoken in support of traditional marriage have been vilified in the media, denied employment or business contracts, and threatened with prosecution.

Thus a view of marriage – as between a man and a woman – which was previously common to believers and non-believers alike, across a whole variety of cultures and times, is increasingly becoming a truth which cannot be spoken. Redefining marriage has consequences for everyone.

## Additional References

6. See e.g. P Amato, "Research on Divorce: Continuing trends and new developments," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72 (2010): 650-666; S McLanahan and C Percheski, "Family Structure and the Reproduction of Inequalities," *Annual Review of Sociology* 34 (2008): 257-276; S McLanahan and G Sandefur, *Growing Up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994); B Ellis, et al., "Does Father Absence Place Daughters at Special Risk for Early Sexual Activity and Teenage Pregnancy?" *Child Development* 74 (2003): 801–21; W B Wilcox, et al., *Why Marriage Matters: Twenty-Six Conclusions from the Social Sciences*, 2nd ed. (New York: Institute for American Values, 2005); E Marquardt, *Family Structure and Children's Educational Outcomes* (New York: Institute for American Values, 2005); P Amato, "The Impact of Family Formation Change on the Cognitive, Social, and Emotional Well-Being of the Next Generation," *The Future of Children* 15 (2005): 75–96; C Harper and S McLanahan, "Father Absence and Youth Incarceration," *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 14 (2004): 369–97.
7. See, e.g.: S Brown, "Marriage and Child Well-Being: Research and policy perspectives" *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72 (2010): 1059-1077; D P Sullins, "Emotional Problems among Children with Same-Sex Parents: Difference by Definition," *British Journal of Education, Society and Behavioural Science* 7(2) (2015): 99-120; W B Wilcox, et al., *Why Marriage Matters*; W B Wilcox, "Reconcilable Differences: What Social Sciences Show about the Complementarity of the Sexes and Parenting," *Touchstone* 18, no. 9 (November 2005): 36; M Regnerus, "How Different Are the Adult Children of Parents Who Have Same-Sex Relationships? Findings from the New Family Structures Study," *Social Science Research* 41 (2012): 752–70; and L Marks, "Same-sex Parenting and Children's Outcomes: A Closer Examination of the American Psychological Association's Brief on Lesbian and Gay Parenting," *Social Science Research* 41 (2012): 735–51, 748.





## Time to act

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.

### Other resources

For those who wish to read more we recommend the publications of the Bishops' Commission for Pastoral Life, available at <http://tinyurl.com/pastorallife>

Other Church documents include John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* (1981) and Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions between Homosexual Persons* (2003), both available at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)



Australian Catholic Bishops Conference

Bishops Commission  
for Family, Youth and Life

PO Box 368  
Canberra ACT 2601  
Telephone: 02 6201 9845

[www.catholic.org.au](http://www.catholic.org.au)