

## **The Moral Issues of our Moment**

### **Reflection 5: Same-Sex Marriage**

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We turn now to the question of same sex marriage and the invitation of the government to share our opinion about it. Like the questions of pain, suffering and death involved in the issue of assisted voluntary termination of life, this too is a highly-charged issue. It is a particularly emotional issue, for there is hardly any of us who are not affected. We have sons and daughters who identify with same-sex attraction, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, friends, and work colleagues. We are also acutely aware of the pain of isolation that many who discover themselves with same-sex attraction experience; the ostracizing that many have endured, the confusion that young people suffer in accepting their sexual identity when it is different from the norm. We can appreciate the pain of any minority group that feels disenfranchised from dominant social paradigms.

Before these painful experiences, it is understandable when we hear the questions, "Why shouldn't everyone have the same rights as everyone else irrespective of their sexual orientation?" "Why shouldn't everyone have the same right to happiness?" - even if marriage itself has been no unmitigated pathway to happiness. Still, "is not love the same, no matter who it is between?" "Why should some be able to express their love openly and publicly, and others not?"

It is apparent that these are not simply viewpoints entertained in the media. Many Catholics, too, have now drawn a line between what they personally feel to be true - and even Christian - and the unbroken teaching authority of the Church which they regard, remarkably, as incidental to their personal faith. I have been amazed by the anxiety occasioned amongst Catholics themselves about public discussion in the Church community itself on such important questions. There are even some Catholics who are deeply resentful that those appointed to be our teachers in the Church should say anything at all about our long-held theology of marriage, as if its very articulation is offensive to an ideal aspiring for love, tolerance and acceptance, notwithstanding that these are quite modern concerns and are difficult to justify in the Scriptures themselves in the way that many would like to use them. Regretfully, many of us have constructed a Jesus to support our own causes, rather than placing ourselves before the One who resists our projections. It is, therefore, deeply surprising even to hear some Catholic voices publicly abandon an unmistakable Christian perspective in favour of adopting uncritically trends that have emerged so recently.

Clearly, in the face of the question about same sex marriage we are contending with strong emotion not only outside our community of faith but also within it, and for this reason it is my conviction that we must proceed with the most careful thoughtfulness and with a mature sense of responsibility.

There must always be a deep respect for persons. There can be no space for an attack on other persons, or an attack on groups of persons. There can be no space for demonizing minority groups whatever they might be, or for shrill and apocalyptic hyperbole. Even though there are genuine concerns about the full implications what a change to the Marriage Act might entail, campaigns primarily based on the generation of fear cannot be from the Spirit of God. Nor can there be room for a language which accuses or condemns. Such language alienates and divides, it demarcates between those who consider themselves 'righteous' and those that the same people consider "unrighteous." We would do well to reflect on how Jesus responds to the one who is flung before him with the expectation that she be stoned (John 8). He refuses to enter the logic of accusation, and instead opens a space that enables the person to see herself in the fullest way possible. We must stay attentive to the issues, and to principles.

Nor is it helpful to impose religious argument on those who do not share our religious conviction. Religious argument is for ourselves, not for others. Though we ourselves might be inspired by our own religious convictions, in the public debate we must search instead for the rational ground on which we can stand together with those who do not share the perspective of our beliefs. Therefore, in our engagement with our society at large about the issue of marriage before us, I simply ask a question: is it the case that disallowing

the definition of marriage as a particular relationship between a man and a woman truly respects the specific nature of same sex relationships? Indeed, one of the remarkable things I find in the current debate is the confusion between equality and sameness. As one astute newspaper letter writer expressed it, two things can be equal without being the same. A square and a circle are equally shapes. But a circle is not a square; a square is not a circle. If we demanded that the circle be a square, and vice versa, how would we know the difference of shapes? No, the difference between a circle and a square can stand without becoming concerned that one is less equal than the other. The paradox into which we have hurtled is that, as a society, on the one hand we have championed difference and otherness, but, on the other hand, we seem desperately afraid of allowing something to be different. We want to dissolve difference into sameness. This is very curious to me. We can become very anxious that definitions become discriminatory. However, without defining something we would have no identity. Every definition, *a priori*, has an exclusion about it. Every identity is, by its very nature, discriminatory to some extent. Otherwise, we would be simply endlessly floating osmotic amoeba. Even the terms 'same-sex attracted' and 'heterosexual' themselves are, to a certain degree, discriminatory, precisely by virtue of their attempt to offer people a definition of their experience which is one thing and not another.

To affirm that one specific form of relationship has a quality inherent in it that other forms of relationship do not, is first and foremost a statement about that relationship as it seeks to define its specific character. Subsequently, it seems to me that one of the most important considerations in the question is to distinguish the two realities of 'distinction' on the one hand, and 'discrimination' on the other. How do we negotiate providing distinction to a particular form of relationship, without then using this distinction to become discriminatory to other forms of relationship, defined and named, precisely in their difference? As a society, we do not seem to have been able to enter into this negotiation effectively, such that the result is any form of distinction is automatically seen as discriminatory. Intellectually, I am not convinced how this need to be the case.

In the engagement with our own Catholic community of faith, we unequivocally affirm that there is a potential inherent in marriage between a man and a woman, that is not possible in other forms of relationship. This perspective is not just what I think it should be, and least of all, what I feel it should be. It is a perspective forged by a 2000-year Tradition of community experience and reflection, and to which I am accountable if I am going to identify as being Catholic. The Catholic perspective about marriage is not a matter of individual conscience, even if the way I might participate in the postal survey is. It is a matter of Revelation: something objective, not subjective. As the followers of the Risen Lord who lives now in the body of the Church, we have received the understanding that there is a particular relationship that alone has the structure to be a means by which God's life fully inbreaks into our world. Notwithstanding that all genuine friendship and love reflect the invitation of God, there is one form of relationship we affirm as sacramental. This is the love between a man and a woman, freely, faithfully and permanently given and which by its structure is open to the possibility of generating life.

Now, this is not to introduce a bigoted divide between same-sex attracted and heterosexual, for our Catholic Tradition has always conveyed that not even every heterosexual union is sacramental. Therefore, our affirmation of the sacramentality of a particular love between a man and woman need not devalue other forms of love and relationship simply on the basis of attraction. Indeed, wherever two people express their mutual protection of each other, there we see something of the beauty and the dignity of human beings, a beauty and dignity for which we should be grateful. However, to affirm one particular form of relationship as sacramental is to celebrate what endows this same relationship with its uniqueness. There is only one form of relationship amongst all the many that make up human experience, be they heterosexual or same-sex attracted, that is sacramental. This is the faith of the Church and a matter for the Church itself to determine theologically, not politically. Our position is not changed on popular vote.

However, in the current debate the Catholic view of marriage is not really what is under question. Our most basic Australian religious freedoms will, at least, enable us to continue to practice our theological understanding of marriage, even if it is unclear whether those freedoms are strong enough to protect every

demonstration of the religious conscience. More precisely, the questions with which we are faced in the current debate are twofold:

1. To what extent can we impose our own theological viewpoint on a society that does not share our perspective?
2. If our society chooses not to assume our perspective, and elects in one way or another, an alternative position how do we retain our position alongside another?

To the first question the answer is quite simple: we can't. We can speak about our view; we can offer it as an invitation to others, believing that it represents what is most good for human flourishing in community. But in a democratic, pluralist and secular society, the population can choose an alternative position. I will vote no in the postal survey. Given our understanding of Revelation, of ecclesiology and of sacramentality I could not do otherwise. However, realistically, I also recognize that we may have to accept the inevitability of social change. For whatever our own theologically held views, there is no evidence that the issue will go away until it is resolved in the affirmative. If not now, next year or in three years. There is an inexorable social mood, whether we like it or not.

And so, we would come to the second question: how might we live with two different understandings of marriage: our own Catholic understanding and an entirely secular understanding?

The most important work that we have in front of us is teaching and holding our position about marriage, not in society at large, but within our own community of faith, so it is clear to ourselves, and those who associate with us, what we hold without apology. We should not be fearful of sustaining what we believe. This will be difficult, and too painful, for some. The gulf between the Tradition of the Church and their own social views will be too great. For them it will be a moment of deep personal choice as to whether they can continue to identify and associate with us.

With humility, we must accept this. But with humility we also accept our accountability to a framework of understanding that is not ours to construct, but to receive. Our Baptism brings with it an obligation, a responsibility and accountability. It is a duty not to what we feel, but to something not of my own making. If we are to be true and faithful to the story into which we have baptized, we must act not simply according to what feels right to us. To do so is to abandon our accountability to the Mystery which has called us into itself, and not which we have called into ourselves. This Mystery alone can be the genuine means of discernment in respect to the position that we might adopt about the current questions before us – yes, even if this takes us to a minority place of social discomfort. The strength of Christian faith, however, is not gauged by its popularity, but by its integrity and by its fidelity.