



The Irish Constitution regards the family “as the necessary basis of social order and as indispensable to the welfare of the Nation and the State” (Art. 41. 1.1°2°).

God’s plan for marriage.

God is author of marriage. God has endowed marriage with certain essential characteristics, without which marriage cannot exist as He intends.

God’s plan for marriage includes the biological fact that a man and a woman can come together as male and female in a union that has the potential to generate new life. The union of marriage provides for the continuation of the human race and the development of human society.

It is precisely the difference between man and woman that makes possible this unique communion of persons, the unique partnership of life and love which is marriage.

Jesus himself teaches that marriage is between a man and a woman: ‘Have you not read that from the beginning the Creator made them male and female... For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’ (Mt 19:4-6).

The Church has taught through the ages that marriage is an exclusive relationship between one man and one woman.

Male-female complementarity is intrinsic to marriage. It is naturally ordered toward sexual union in a faithful, committed relationship as the basis for the generation of new life. The true nature of marriage, lived in openness to life, bears witness to the preciousness of the gift of a child and to the unique roles of a mother and father.

A man and woman united in marriage, as husband and wife, witness to God’s plan for both life and love in a way that no other relationship of human persons can.

Challenges to marriage today.

We rejoice that so many couples today are living their marital commitment with fidelity. In their daily lives they bear witness to the beauty, goodness and truth of marriage.

We also recognise that couples today face many challenges to building and sustaining a strong marriage. Many couples struggle to balance home and work responsibilities; others struggle with serious economic and social burdens. Some feel isolated from wider family support or overwhelmed by the challenges of parenting.

Other challenges arise from developments in our society which undermine the very meaning and purpose of marriage. Lack of confidence in our ability to make long term commitments and a more casual approach to sexual relationships can make commitment to marriage and the family a more challenging prospect for couples today.

There is also a disturbing tendency today to see marriage as a purely private matter, something which is about the personal satisfaction of the individual rather than the mutual enrichment of the couple and of society.

Thankfully there are many people who work with the young and with engaged couples to establish strong marriages. Agencies like ACCORD, the Catholic Marriage Care Service, work to help married couples grow in love and strengthen their union, and help those in crisis to resolve their problems and bring healing to their lives.

Why is marriage so important?

Marriage is a unique union, a relationship different from all others.

In marriage, a woman and man promise love and fidelity to each other, for better, for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health as long as they both shall live. They declare that their commitment is stronger than any challenge which may face them in the future.

This committed, married love provides a stable and nurturing environment for children. It is here that children receive the most important and lasting education of all. They learn how to be a member of a family and of society.

Marriage is not merely a private institution. It is the intimate cradle of life and love where children learn the values and actions that will make them good Christians as well as good citizens.

Why is the Church concerned about the Civil Partnership Bill?

Changes in the law can also impact on our attitude to marriage. Today, advocacy for the legal recognition of same-sex relationships presents a new challenge to our understanding of marriage and its unique role in society.

Here in Ireland, Oireachtas Éireann is about to pass legislation that seeks to give same sex relationships a standing which will be as similar as possible to marriage. *The Civil Partnership Bill* will not permit adoption by same-sex couples. In most other respects, including tax and social welfare purposes, same-sex civil partnerships will be regarded as being equal to marriage.

This is not compatible with seeing the family based on marriage as the necessary basis of the social order and as indispensable to the welfare of the Nation and the State. Nor does it “guard with special care the institution of Marriage, on which the Family is founded” (Art. 41.3.2^o, *The Irish Constitution*).

The Bill will also mean that the phrase ‘Marital Status’ will no longer be employed in many legal and official documents. It will be replaced by “Civil Status”, which will equate marriage with the ‘Status’ of same-sex partnerships.

By making civil partnerships as like marriage as possible, the Bill is preparing a situation where, in the future, calling same sex unions ‘marriage’ will seem only a small step. Indeed it is likely that, in day to day language and in the media, civil partnerships will be referred to as ‘marriage’.

Laws have to be judged not only on what they permit or forbid citizens to do but also, and very importantly, on what they express about the attitude of society. Whatever the intentions of the drafters, this Bill says that there is nothing very

special about marriage because same-sex partnerships are virtually equivalent; and that it matters very little to the State whether men and women marry or not.

Same-sex unions, however, are incapable of realising the specific communion of persons that is marriage. Same-sex unions do not reflect the natural complementarity of man and woman through which the generation of new life becomes possible. Such unions are contrary to God’s plan for sexual love which is intended for the relationship between husband and wife in marriage.

The Church upholds the human dignity of homosexual persons and the duty to treat all persons with respect, compassion and sensitivity.

All members of the Christian community, including people of homosexual orientation, are called to holiness of life which includes the virtue of chastity. The Church encourages all persons to have chaste friendships. Whether it develops between persons of the same or opposite sex, friendship represents a great good for all.

For everyone in the Christian community, the mercy and love of God in the Sacraments and prayer are constantly available. Even when we fall short of our Christian ideals for sexual love in marriage they help to renew and strengthen us on the path of life and joy to which the Lord invites us in every moment.

Protecting marriage is a matter of justice.

Marriage means the union of a man and woman. A husband is a man who has a wife; a wife is a woman who has a husband. A same sex couple cannot be husband and wife. A same sex couple

cannot procreate a child through the sexual act which expresses married love.

Often those who call for legal recognition of same-sex partnerships present it as a matter of fairness, equality and civil rights. The Church holds that basic human rights must be afforded to all people. This can and should be done without sacrificing the bedrock of society that is marriage and the family and without violating the religious freedom of individuals and institutions.

To promote and protect the unique nature of marriage as the union of one man and one woman is itself a matter of justice. Same-sex relationships by their very nature cannot be considered equal or almost equal to marriage. By introducing legislation which presents marriage as essentially equivalent to homosexual partnerships, our society is saying that the permanent union of husband and wife and the generation of new life are now only of relative importance rather than fundamental to the very existence and well being of society as a whole.

In fact, it is a grave injustice if the state ignores the unique and proper place of husbands and wives, the place of mothers and fathers, and especially the rights of children, who deserve from society a clear understanding of marriage as they grow to sexual maturity. Indeed, without protection and support for the unique place of marriage in society the state would, in effect, intentionally deprive children of the right to a mother and father.

The Civil Partnership Bill represents a fundamental revolution in our understanding of marriage and the family which cannot go unchallenged.

Is this not simply discrimination?

There is a real issue here about how the law should protect people who are involved in long term mutually dependent relationships. One thinks, for example, of elderly siblings who have shared the family home all their lives or a man who continues to share a house with his wife's sisters after she dies. In such situations it is in the public interest to protect people who may be vulnerable.

What is clearly discriminatory about *The Civil Partnership Bill* is that it does not seek to protect people sharing a house in such situations but only those people who are in a sexual relationship – whether in a same-sex partnership, or an opposite sex relationship where the couple have freely chosen not to get married.

The objectionable aspect of this Bill therefore, is not that it proposes reasonable and just protections for people in mutually dependent relationships. It does more than that: it seeks to make their relationship as close to marriage as possible and it fails to provide such protection to other people who are deserving of it. This is real discrimination – choosing to help one vulnerable group over another when they are in similar circumstances.

How will this affect people who in conscience are opposed to the proposal?

One further very alarming aspect of *The Civil Partnership Bill* is that a civil Registrar who conscientiously refuses to carry out such a ceremony will face a fine and up to six months in prison.

Christians, Jews and Muslims or anyone else who refuses to make halls and other facilities available for a celebration or reception connected with a

same sex partnership will face prosecution and fines.

This Bill is an extraordinary and far reaching attack on freedom of conscience and the free practice of religion – which are guaranteed to every citizen under the Constitution (Art. 44.2.1).

Quite apart from the content of the Bill, the provisions which seek to coerce people under pain of criminal sanctions to cooperate with it constitute a new and dangerous expansion of State power. Conscientious Catholics, Protestants, Muslims or Jews are effectively being told by the Irish State that they need not apply for a position as a Civil Registrar. Churches and other faith groups are being forced to contravene their deeply held religious beliefs in terms of potential use of their property and services. This is inconsistent with the principle of legislating for a diverse and pluralist society.

Conclusion.

While marriage is a natural institution and a blessing for everyone in all times and cultures, it is a special blessing for Christians because of the grace of Christ. Marriage is a sacrament, a sign of God's love. It mirrors the love of Christ for his Church.

The love of God is eternally faithful and reliable. Married love seeks to reflect that love as a faithful and unbreakable relationship.

God's love is without limit. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit give themselves totally to each other. Married love seeks to grow into that self giving love. It is through that growth in love that it becomes the context for the procreation of a new human being. Sometimes, tragically, the growth fails; the relationship breaks up; this can be a

source of terrible suffering. We all have a responsibility to support those in such circumstances with compassion and active concern.

In marriage, a husband and wife face the unknown future with the confidence that what they are doing both reflects and is supported by God's strong and faithful love. As the foundation of society we all have a duty to promote and protect the valued and natural institution of marriage in our society.

What should I do?

Contact your TD or a member of the Seanad.

Write to, email or text your local media.

Debate the issue.

These are important matters about marriage and the family and about respect for freedom of conscience. These proposals should not go unchallenged.