

Dear Parishioners and Parents of Catholic school students

I am writing this letter because I am concerned about some confusion in relation to possible consequences for Catholic schools of a YES vote in the current plebiscite about same-sex marriage. Currently, Australians basically are being asked whether two very different committed relationships should be called by the same term, 'marriage'.

One of these relationships is between a man and a woman who can conceive children: the other is between two people of the same sex who cannot.

Currently, there are those who suggest that there will be no consequences for schools and other organisations – or for parents and others with conscientious objections to calling same sex relationships 'marriage'. Perhaps they do not realise that Australia has no Bill of Right to provide protections such as New Zealand enjoys.

Those advocating same-sex marriage need to demonstrate that consequences elsewhere will not happen in Australia.

Consequences in other countries

In other countries, such as Canada, for example

- parents have been denied the right to withdraw their children from sex education classes because they found lessons related to homosexual practices objectionable
- Catholic schools have been compelled to host 'Gay-Straight Alliance' clubs as part of their school life.

There have been violations too of religious freedoms. For example

- religious organisations have been fined for not renting facilities for same-sex marriage relations

- a baker in Northern Ireland was fined for refusing to write ‘I support Gay Marriage’ on a cake
- Lutheran ministers in Denmark now are not permitted to refuse same sex marriages
- preachers in Canada have been subject to investigation by human rights tribunals for speaking about Christian teaching on marriage
- in Sweden, the Prime Minister has said priests should not be allowed to refuse requests for same-sex wedding ceremonies
- in Britain, the Speaker of the House of Commons says that ‘proper equal marriage’ will not happen until churches are forced by law to marry same-sex couples.

There are numerous other examples.

Threats already to freedom in Australia

In Australia, State laws and institutions have been used against basic freedoms and rights. They will be used further by activists. For example

- In Tasmania, Catholic Archbishop Julian Porteous was subject to a complaint for a booklet explaining Catholic teaching on marriage. This complaint was eventually withdrawn as people generally began to realise the implications for religious freedom and freedom of speech if same-sex marriage becomes law.
- in Victoria, the so called Safe Schools programme, which promotes the idea that gender identity is not from nature but from social attitudes and that a person’s sexuality can be fluid, has been made compulsory in State schools regardless of parental objections, and advocates are pushing for the programme to be made compulsory for all schools, including Catholic schools
- the Greens party is advocating the winding back of religious freedoms – such as those of religious schools to protect their ethos. One example is being able to select staff who support this ethos.

Across the world, complainants against organisations and individuals who promote Jesus’ teachings on marriage have been funded by State bodies, and this has disadvantaged those without the resources to fund legal defences. This has created an inequality.

Recognising differences is not unjust

Recognising difference is not unjust discrimination any more than it is unjust discrimination to call some vehicles trucks and others cars. Both have equal rights to the road – but they are not the same. Nor is the same word used for both these vehicles.

We do not see awarding gold medals to Olympic champions; the awarding of prizes to students who do well in their studies; or giving scholarships to some rather than others as unjust – and yet all are examples of discrimination. The same is true for women's and men's football and cricket competitions.

Not really about equality

According to Tanya Plibersek, Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the Commonwealth Parliament, all legal discrimination against gay people was removed by the Rudd Government in 2008, so we are not really talking about equality for gay people. After all, we do not consider the love between parents and children or brothers and sisters any less equal than that between a husband and wife: they are just different.

Conclusion

Legalising same-sex marriage will set the law of the land in conflict with the laws of most non-Christian and Christian religions in Australia. It will set the scene for societal conflict as activists use state laws and anti-discrimination bodies to try to force religious to change.

The same sex marriage debate is not about equality in any substantive sense. However, extending the word marriage to include same sex relationships has had major consequences, often unforeseen, elsewhere – and inevitably will do so in Australia.

The meaning of marriage for Catholics

For Catholics, the meaning of marriage in our Creator's plan for human nature – has been revealed by God and taught by Jesus Christ. The notion of same-sex marriage is not only different, but completely opposite to this. Jesus told us to live his commandments so no Christian church has the authority to change this teaching.

Christian teaching is also that all people's rights and dignity must be respected. But to have different terms for different relationships violates no one's dignity or rights. The term 'civil union' is used for committed same-sex couples in some countries – so why not here?

Thank you for reading this letter. I felt it important to offer considerations relevant to the present debate, characterised more by slogans than substance. I for one will be voting NO.

God bless you

+GJH