

# THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE



Marriage is a unique relationship  
different from all others

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A Pastoral Statement of the  
Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference



IRISH CATHOLIC  
BISHOPS' CONFERENCE  
COMHDÁIL EASPAG CAITLICEACH ÉIREANN

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Married love is a unique form of love between a man and woman which has a special benefit for the whole of society.<sup>1</sup> The Catholic Church, with other Christians and those of no particular religious view, regard the family based on marriage between a woman and a man as the single most important institution in any society. To seek to re-define the nature of marriage would be to undermine it as the fundamental building block of our society. The Church seeks with others to reaffirm the rational basis for holding that marriage should be reserved for the unique and complementary relationship between a woman and a man from which the generation and upbringing of children is uniquely possible. This understanding of marriage is deeply rooted in all cultures: it is not intended to exclude or disadvantage anyone.

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1. Cf. *Relatio Synodi* of the Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops: 'Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelisation' (5-19 October 2014), 4.

## GOD'S PLAN FOR MARRIAGE

The Book of Genesis shows us that man and woman are created in the image and likeness of God; they recognise that they are made for each other (cf. Gen 1:24-31; 2:4b-25). Through procreation, man and woman collaborate with God in accepting and transmitting life: 'By transmitting human life to their descendants, man and woman as spouses and parents co-operate in a unique way in the Creator's work' (CCC, 372).<sup>2</sup> 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).<sup>3</sup> As Christians our primary commandment is to love. Love always demands that we respect the dignity of every human person. That is why the Catholic Church clearly teaches that people who are homosexual must always be treated with sensitivity, compassion and respect. It is not lacking in sensitivity or respect for people who are homosexual, however, to point out that same sex relationships are fundamentally and objectively different from opposite sex relationships and that society values the complementary roles of mothers and fathers in the generation and up-bringing of children.

The debate at the core of the call for 'same sex marriage' is not about equality or about the separation of a religious view of marriage from a civil view of marriage. It is about the very nature of marriage itself and the importance society places on the role of mothers and fathers in bringing up children. With others, the Catholic Church will continue to hold that the differences between a man and woman are not accidental to marriage but fundamental to it and children have a natural right to a mother and a father and that this is the best environment for them where possible. It is therefore deserving of special recognition and promotion by the State.

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2. Cf. *Instrumentum Laboris* of the Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops: 'Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelisation' (26 June 2014), 1.

3. *Why Marriage Matters*, Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference, 'God's plan for marriage', p. 1. Cf. also *Relatio Synodi* of the Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops: 'Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelisation' (5-19 October 2014), 15-16.

## THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE

**M**arriage is a unique relationship different from all others. An essential characteristic of marriage is the biological fact that a man and a woman can join together as male and female in a union that is orientated to the generation of 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.

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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 how precious is 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.

Marriage is not merely a private institution. The well-being of the family and its place in society is not simply a matter for the husband and wife but for society as a whole. It is given special recognition by society because it is the place where children learn what it means to be members of their family and of society.

## LEGISLATION RELATING TO MARRIAGE IN IRELAND

**A**s the Northern Catholic Bishops affirmed in an open letter on 28 April 2014 to all Members of the Legislative Assembly of Northern Ireland with regard to their debate on this issue, the ‘marriage of a woman and a man is a fundamental building block of society which makes a unique and irreplaceable contribution to the common good and to society as well. It is therefore deserving of special recognition and promotion by the State’.

The Constitution of Ireland regards the family ‘as the necessary basis of social order and as indispensable to the welfare of the Nation and the State’ (Art. 41.1.2°). ‘The State pledges itself to guard with special care the institution of Marriage, on which the Family is founded, and to protect it against attack (Art. 41.3.1°). Any attempt to change this protection would be a radical change in the meaning of marriage – the ‘foundation stone’ of society – in the document that expresses the foundational values of the Irish State.



## WHY IS MARRIAGE SO IMPORTANT?

In marriage, a woman and man promise love and fidelity to each other, for the rest of their lives. Not knowing what lies ahead they nevertheless make a commitment that they will continue to love each other whatever comes. While we know that their commitment may break down and know also the sorrow that this can bring, we also recognise that many couples live that marital commitment faithfully.

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.



## CHALLENGES TO MARRIAGE TODAY

**W**e recognise that couples today face many challenges to building and sustaining a strong marriage.<sup>4</sup> A major challenge arises from any proposal which seeks to redefine the meaning and purpose of marriage on which the family is founded, changing the definition of marriage by enabling the relationship of a same sex couple to also become a marriage. To do this would mean that marriage, under civil law, would no longer be the committed gift of a man and a woman in a relationship ‘until death do us part’, in the kind of union which can bear fruit in new human lives. Any such proposal is based on the assumption that the institution of marriage on which the family is founded, which has always been recognised as ‘the natural, primary and fundamental unit group of Society’,<sup>5</sup> has nothing unique about it and on the assumption that marriage can be stripped of that social standing without obscuring its irreplaceable social role.

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4. Cf. *Relatio Synodi* of the Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops: ‘Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelisation’ (5–19 October 2014), 5–7.

5. Bunreacht na hÉireann, 41.1.1°.

Everyone in various kinds of committed relationships should have the assurance that they will be protected when their relationship ceases, whether by death or by a breakdown of the relationship. This is not a matter that concerns only same sex relationships.



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 are different to marriage. By introducing any amendment which presents homosexual partnerships as essentially equivalent to marriage, we would be saying that the permanent union of husband and wife and their generation of new life and their nurturing of it together is no longer to be seen as the foundation of society.



## PROTECTING MARRIAGE IS A MATTER OF JUSTICE

**M**arriage 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 marriage see 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 institution of marriage and family and the fundamental role they play in society. This is not about denying civil rights but protecting and upholding the meaning of marriage.

It is a grave injustice if the State ignores the uniqueness of the role of husbands and wives, the importance of mothers and fathers in our society. Children, as they grow and mature, deserve from society a clear understanding of the importance of marriage. Without protection and support for the unique place of marriage in society, the State could, in effect, deprive children of the right to a mother and father.

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Religious and non-religious people alike have long acknowledged and know from their experience that the family, based on the marriage of a woman and a man, is the best and ideal place for children. It is a fundamental building block of society which makes a unique and irreplaceable contribution to the common good. It is therefore deserving of special recognition and promotion by the State.

Proposals to change the meaning of marriage effectively say to parents, children and society that the State should not, and will not, promote any normative or ideal family environment for raising children. It therefore implies that the biological bond and natural ties between a child and its mother and father have no intrinsic value for the child or for society. As Pope Francis stated recently, 'We must reaffirm the right of children to grow up in a family with a father and a mother capable of creating a suitable environment for the child's development and emotional maturity'.<sup>6</sup>

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There will always be situations in which the best interests of a particular child can only be met in a different type of arrangement. It is important that the State provides for and gives practical support to these arrangements. This is different, however, from saying that having children raised by their biological parents in a life-long committed marriage is no

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6. Address of Pope Francis to members of BICE (International Catholic Child Bureau) at an audience in the Vatican, 16 April 2014.

longer essential to the common good and deserving of special recognition by the State. Even where a husband and wife cannot have children of their own, the nature of their marriage can still provide a mother and a father to a child in adoption or fostering. We believe that the State should urgently provide more and better services in support of marriage in which mothers and fathers can provide the optimum loving and stable environment for children to grow and flourish.

## THE SACRAMENT OF MARRIAGE

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**Marriage is a total communion of life and of love with God of the married couple in their family life**

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The love of husband and wife is recognised as a foundational social reality in societies and religions in every part of the world. Acknowledging and affirming the respect due to the institution of marriage, the Catholic understanding of marriage adds a new ‘dimension’; it is a special blessing because of Christ. Marriage is a sacrament, a sign of God’s love. It mirrors the love of Christ for his Church. Marriage is a total communion of life and of love with God of the married couple in their family life.

‘[T]hrough the help of the grace of the Sacrament, God consecrates the love of husband and wife and confirms the indissoluble character of their love, offering them assistance to live their faithfulness, mutual complementarity and openness to new life.’<sup>7</sup>

It is the vocation and mission of married couples to be a visible sign of God’s love, to one another, to their children and to the community through a faithful relationship which is open to life.

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7. Cf. *Relatio Synodi* of the Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops: ‘Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelisation’ (5–19 October 2014), 21.



*Icon © 2014 of the Marriage in Cana (cf. Jn 2:1-11) shows Jesus' desire to help the woman and man at the centre – the married couple – at Mary's encouragement.*

The love of God is eternally faithful and reliable. Married love seeks to reflect that love as a faithful, unbreakable relationship. Because it is a sacrament, marriage brings about and deepens the love it reflects. With the couple living the sacrament of marriage, their children are enriched by their sharing in God's love.

It is rightly said that marriage and the family are under great pressure today. There are economic pressures, worries about health, the pain of unemployment and emigration, the social pressures, especially on younger members. Every family has its problems.

But instead of beginning with the problems and challenges, we might begin by reflecting on the meaning of marriage as a sacrament and the blessing that it can be to the couple and to society.

Christians have always known that marriage is not easy. As the marriage begins, in the marriage ceremony, the bride and groom promise to be true to one another 'for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health'. The love of Christ for us, which marriage reflects, led him to betrayal, abandonment by friends and agonising death on a cross. But that was also the path that led him and leads us to the fulfilment where 'Death will be no more; mourning

and crying and pain will be no more' (Rev 21:4) and where God will make all things new. In this uncertain world, with all its pain, Christian marriage is lived in the promise of the 'great hope which can only be God'.<sup>8</sup> Faith in Christ, lived in the sacrament of marriage, opens up for the couple the truth that gives life meaning, the hope which can make sense when they face difficult challenges and poverty and sickness together.

Women and men find companionship in that relationship, where they complement each other, not because they are the same but because they are different, with different interests, perspectives, experiences and family backgrounds that each of them brings to the relationship. They are different because of all of those things, but they are different also because they are of different sexes. That difference means for most couples that their relationship can be fruitful in a unique way. Their love can bring forth new human life. In the child of their love they will see the qualities and experiences that each of them has flowering in a new human being. This little person is a member, like them, of the human family and, like them, a child of God who is beginning the journey that leads to where God makes all things new.

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Their marriage is not just for themselves or for the children they may have. The family is the church in the home. The bride and groom are consecrated, and as a married couple living their vocation, they enrich the whole community, building up the Church with their love as husband and wife. In procreating and rearing children, they live the

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8. Encyclical letter, *Spe Salvi*, Pope Benedict XVI (2007), 31.

beauty of love, fatherhood and motherhood and they have the dignity of participating in God's creative work. The 'true love between husband and wife' implies a mutual gift of self and includes and integrates the sexual and affective aspects, according to the divine plan.<sup>9</sup> Marriage is lived, as Saint John Paul II said, in the 'concrete demands' of everyday life.<sup>10</sup>

As Catholics, it is not sufficient for us to talk about the importance of family. We also have a responsibility to do all that we can do to offer practical support for marriage and family in our parish communities, in our liturgies and our pastoral action and as individual members of society, through our social and political actions.

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9. Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, Pope Paul VI (1965), 48–49.

10. Cf. Apostolic Exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio*, On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World, Pope John Paul II (1981), 51.

# GOD'S PLAN FOR OUR MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

**As we answer God's call  
in our vocation  
in the Sacrament of Marriage  
to follow Christ and to serve  
the kingdom of God in our married life,  
we ask, in and through the concreteness of  
events, problems, difficulties and circumstances  
of everyday life, that God will come to us,  
guiding us and enlightening us as we share  
Christ's love with one another, in our family life,  
at work, in our neighbourhood, in our  
contributions to society  
and in the life and worship of our parish.**

*Inspired by John Paul II, Familiaris Consortio (51),  
from The Family Prayer Book<sup>11</sup>*

In seeking to reaffirm the unique value to children and society of the mutual and complementary roles of a mother and father, we ask that the principle of equality not be undermined by applying it inappropriately to two fundamentally different types of relationship. Marriage is a unique relationship different from all others for a reason.

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11. *The Family Prayer Book*, Council for Marriage and the Family (Dublin: Veritas, 2013), p. 164.



**T**he family is experiencing a profound cultural crisis, as are all communities and social bonds. In the case of the family, the weakening of these bonds is particularly serious because the family is the fundamental cell of society, where we learn to live with others despite our differences and to belong to one another; it is also the place where parents pass on the faith to their children. Marriage now tends to be viewed as a form of mere emotional satisfaction that can be constructed in any way or modified at will. But the indispensable contribution of marriage to society transcends the feelings and momentary needs of the couple. As the French bishops have taught, it is not born 'of loving sentiment, ephemeral by definition, but from the depth of the obligation assumed by the spouses who accept to enter a total communion of life'.

POPE FRANCIS, *The Joy of the Gospel*, 66

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*Is gaolmhaireacht faoi leith an pósadh,  
difriúil ó gach eile gaolmhaireacht ar chúis*



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