

Opinion

SAME-SEX MARRIAGE: LET'S AVOID CONFUSION

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MARRIAGE is taking quite a beating right now. Many people are muddled about what marriage is, have lost confidence in its achievability, or have given up even trying.

Those who do take the plunge often feel unsupported as spouses and undermined as parents by our culture, politics and economy.

So what is marriage all about?

Is marriage about bringing -together two people of opposite sex so that, when they do what men and women do, any resulting children will have a mum and a dad for the long haul?

In other words, is marriage really about sexual complementarity, procreation and family structure?

Or is marriage just about two people who love each other, want to say so in a public ceremony, and want it registered by a government authority? In other words, is marriage really about romance, publicity and politics?

Both sides should first put on the table what they think marriage is. That's how a debate begins.

Of course, marriage is not lived in isolation. Sustaining marriages -requires a sound marital culture, forming people as good husbands and wives, as loving mothers and fathers, and helping them live marriage long-term. But our marital culture, as I said, has taken quite a battering of late.

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I believe that further messing with marriage won't help people -embrace and sustain real marriages and marriage-based families in the -future. That will be a loss for us all — people with same-sex attraction -included — because so much about our individual and common life -depends on the health of marriages and families.

Will there be other consequences of redefining marriage? Overseas -experience suggests there will be — for school curriculums, employment opportunities, freedoms of speech and religion, gender ideology in many contexts.

Commentators have highlighted cases of institutions such as church schools, hospitals and welfare agencies, or business operators and workers, or parents and ordinary people being bullied for supporting traditional marriage. Some of the same spirit is in the air here in Australia. Faithophobic slurs are now all too common.

Will we allow such space for -respectful differences into the future?

Now, for saying all this, I'll probably be tagged a hater. But the fact is many Christians know and love someone who is same-sex -attracted and we want only the best for them. We also love real marriages and want to keep supporting that special relationship.

We are being pressured to choose one or the other. But I'm determined to keep respecting both, to keep calling on Catholic Sydney to do the same, and to work to keep the debate civil.

Most people who believe in traditional marriage are not bigots. Nor are they clerics. Saying ministers of religion will be protected if the marriage law is changed is no consolation for the 99 per cent of believers who are not ministers of religion.

But they are being asked to vote "blind", or just trust their political leaders without having a people's vote, without knowing what protections there will be. That alarms believers and also troubles secular-minded people, who prize space for people of different views.

The facts remain: we all have a mum and a dad somewhere

Will we allow such space for -respectful differences into the future?

I think a great model for us here is Pope Francis. He highlights the need for the Church to be close to people, accompanying them through complex lives and helping heal their wounds. He is acutely aware many people with same-sex attraction are hurting and feel alienated from Church and society. He famously says he will not judge homosexuals who are genuinely searching for God and seeking to do the good.

But sensitive pastoral care of same-sex attracted people is consistent with upholding the truth of marriage. God's plan for marriage is clear enough in the Bible. But as the Pope points out, this is not some weird Catholic or Christian thing: for all the differences, every major civilisation, religion and legal system has held to the truth that marriage is "the lifelong union of man and woman" upon which families are founded.

No one should be ashamed of thinking marriage is special

That's because "it's a natural reality". The law may rename mothers as fathers, or call fathers "Parent Two", or abolish terms such as husband and wife, mum and dad, male and female altogether. Schools may ditch Father's Day for Special Person's Day.

But the facts remain: we all have a mum and a dad somewhere and, even if things don't work out, what we most wanted as a child was the complementary care of both. Changing the legal definition of marriage won't abolish the difference between the two understandings of marriage I have outlined. It will only add to the confusion and self-deception.

Which is why Pope Francis thinks redefining marriage would be bad for everyone; "a backwards step for -humanity". With him, I think we can find better ways of doing justice and demonstrating love to people with same-sex attraction.

No one should be ashamed of thinking marriage is special and that it's about opposite sexes, commitment and kids. And no one should be cowed into silence for such a view.

Anthony Fisher is the Catholic Archbishop of Sydney